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The Deconstruction of the Cartesian Dichotomy of Black and White in William Blake's *The Little Black Boy*¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses English Romantic Poet William Blake's anti-racial views in his poem *The Little Black Boy*. In so doing, it focuses upon how Blake attempts to deconstruct the Cartesian dichotomy of Western world view, a dichotomy which has usually been based on "the theory that the universe has been ruled from its origins by two conflicting powers, one good and one evil, both existing as equally ultimate first causes." In this binary and hierarchal relationship, there are two essential terms in which one term is absolutely regarded as primary or fundamental in its essence, whereas the other term is considered secondary or something that lacks originality and presence. Once this equation is applied to the relationship between black and white people, it will easily be seen in the Western world that white people are always primary or fundamental to black-skinned people, and thus the perception behind this binary and hierarchal relationship seems the root of all the racial problems between black and white. This paper argues that Blake strives to deconstruct radically in *The Little Black Boy* the basis of this binary and hierarchal relationship which has been carried out for centuries in the Western world to segregate and then control the lives of black people. Finally, the paper maintains that Blake also shows a strong aspiration for creating an egalitarian society free of discrimination and injustices at a time when anti-slavery campaigns hit the top on both sides of Atlantic.

Keywords: French Revolution, Blackness, Whiteness, racism, liberty, and equality

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Racism is actually as old as human history, and it has taken various forms and meanings for ages in accordance with the interest and perception of researchers, policy-makers and activist such as anti-Semitism, gender disputes, white-black conflicts, xenophobia, more recently Islamophobia and so on (Fredrickson, 1988; Fredrickson, 2003; Eberhardt et al, 1998; Reily et al, 2003; Pfeifer, 2009; Newman, 2012). Of these forms and meanings, a special stress will be placed upon the racial conflict between black and white throughout this paper, the conflict which started centuries ago and still continues today as in Ferguson and Baltimore, the USA. As for the black-white racial criticism, George M. Fredrickson considers “the color-coded” conflict between white and black “modern Racism” (2003, p. 26), which he argues started taking its root in the Middle Ages when European came into increasing contact with the people of colour in Africa and Asia, particularly as a result of geographical discoveries. As Fredrickson continues to state, “the common presumption that dark [or brown skins] inspired instant revulsion on the part of light-skinned Europeans, *if not completely false*, at least highly misleading” (p. 26; emphasis added). But the view of “*if not completely false*” later gradually turned not only into a relationship of power and subordination between “dark” skinned non-European people and “light-skinned Europeans” particularly after the start of slave trade in the sixteenth century but also into what Frantz Fanon (1952/1986) writes in *Black Skins, White Masks* a disturbing psychological relationship of the “superiority” and “inferiority complexes” between black and white (p. 18):

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actionable person. The goal of his behaviour will be the other (in the guise of the white man), for the other alone can give him worth (p. 154).

As for this troubled “sensitizing” relationship, Fanon continues to writes: “To come back to psychopathology, let us say that the Negro lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic.” This is Fanon’s finding about the disturbing psychological impact of racism inflicted on blacks. He also maintains, “In the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality. In other words, he is Negro who is immoral. If I order my life like that of a moral man, I simply am not a Negro” (p. 192). Within this oriental perception argued by Edward Said (1978) in his book *Orientalism*, Europeans have regarded the people of colour as sub-human, uncivilised, and inferior in every possible way. Moreover, English people had also associated blackness or brown skin with “devils”, which “were sometimes pictured as having

dark skins and what may appear to be African features, and the executioners of martyrs were often portrayed as black men” (Fredrickson, 2003, p. 26). For Fredrickson, “The symbolic association of blackness with evil and death and whiteness with goodness and purity unquestionably had some effect in predisposing light-skinned people against those with darker pigmentation” (p. 26. See also Jordan, 1968, pp. 4-11). In addition, these perspectives and many other stories from travellers in English literature have given rise to the construction of the stereotype of the Africans as being “barbarous, prone to excessive sexual desire, lazy, untrustworthy and even cannibalistic” (Racist Ideas, n.d). From the seventeenth century onward, moreover, the development of science in Europe caused racism or the axis of “inferior” and “superior” to be ‘proved’ scientifically by scientists and philosophers. In this respect, for instance, David Hume stated that “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (qtd. in Garrett, 2000, pp. 171-2). Furthermore, it was widely alleged that Africans and Europeans had developed separately. Many people, like Sir Thomas Herbert, writing in the seventeenth century, believed that “Africans must be descended from apes and were part of a separate and inferior race” (Racist Ideas, n.d). Finally, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant is also believed to have added that “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples” (Enlightenment Racism, 2006, Para. 25).

As seen in the debates above, the skin colour - black or brown – has been considered by the white people and white civilization disadvantages for the people of colour as being a sign of inferiority and inequity once compared to the white people. Thus, the dichotomy of “black” and “white” has often divided people into “us” and “them”, fostering not only daily abuses, attacks and anger but also political segregation and exclusion, along with negativity and handicap, particularly in the countries such as the USA and the UK, where multicultural or multi-ethnic groups strive to find space for themselves within the indigenous white culture as Theresa H. Pfeiffer (2009) also argues: “the colours white and black function as deeply metaphors, binary oppositions, for a plethora of sociocultural diving lines in contemporary society (p. 528). Besides, what is of more importance is that this dichotomy between black and white has turned into a racial segregation ideology in that the white might have aimed at achieving the following purposes. The first one is the physical colonization in Africa and Asia

through the European form of science, so-called advanced intellectual level and culture. Then the second stage is to cripple psychologically the black identity through the assertion of “superiority” of science, advancement and intellectuality and later on to make them what Fanon calls above “neurotic”, make them feel “inferior” and crippled in their lives: an attempt to enslave psychologically the soul of the black. The result is easy to guess: to control and have the black serve the success of the overall ideological projects and progress of the white Europeans across the world. To some extent, the white Europeans seem to have achieved these purposes one way or another.

However, there have also been intellectual, writers and poets who challenged this binary opposition of blackness and whiteness (Denney, 1992; Bonnett, 1993; Penketh, 2000; Lentin, 2004). For example, Richard Ligon (1657/2011) disparaged the popular view of prejudice towards the black and argued firmly “that there are as honest, faithful, and conscionable people amongst them, as amongst those of Europe” (p. 105). Such anti-racial view was accelerated by the French Revolution which not only promoted vigorously the ideas of “liberty,” “equality” and “fraternity”, but it also influenced many intellectuals, writers and poets in different ways in that they strongly stood up against slavery, injustices and discrimination of black people due to their skin-colour. One of these poets was obviously the English Romantic Poet William Blake, who rejected powerfully the racially dividing notion of “us” and “them” and conducted vigorously anti-slave campaigns. This paper debates Blake’s anti-racial views in his poem *The Little Black Boy* (1789). In so doing, it focuses upon how he attempts to deconstruct and get rid of what Theresa H. Pfeifer (2009) argues “densely woven dualisms from the fabric of linguistic common sense of and, in particular, to wrestle blackness from the treacherous snare of Western ocular centricism and its Paltonic/Cartesian origins” (p. 528). Through the life and views of the little black boy in the poem, Blake strives to show us not only how strong there is an aspiration for undermining the crippling effect of the dividing line of “skin colour” but also the ways of how to accomplish in his poem a perception of equity between black and white: “when I [the little black boy] from black and he [the white English boy] from white cloud free/ And round the tent of God like lambs we enjoy” ourselves because once the “cloud”[skin-colour] is removed, it will clearly be seen that what the black and white have beneath is the same. In the poem, Blake employs religious images, which give a perception that it is actually a religious poem, yet the paper argues that it is correct to some extent that everybody is absolutely equal before God, and Blake, though not-religious in his own view and art, uses religious images not only to exhibit his frustration and disagreement about racism but also to deconstruct the black-white binary in a way that it

is possible for the people of both colours to live together in a peaceful, just world without being exposed to racial discrimination due to the “skin colour.”

The Little Black Boy was published in 1789 and included in *Songs of Innocence*.³ Narrated by a little black boy, the poem focuses upon his search for social identity and justice in the Western world where he faces social injustices and discrimination. In this respect, this poem becomes a social documentary, powerful political platform to discuss and illuminate the pejorative lives of black people towards the end of the eighteenth century, so that Blake plays in the poem with the colour of dichotomy – black and white – to stress his dissatisfaction and anti-racial political points. As soon as the poem opens, there seems at one a sense of conflict and disturbance in the speech and consciousness of the little black boy.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O my soul is white!
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black, as if bereaved of light (Yeats, 2002, p. 49).

In the stanza, the first thing which appears is that the little black boy, the narrator of the poem, seems angry and feels a strong need to ratify his birth place - the southern wild (Africa), put forward the whiteness of his soul the same as the white English boy and then proclaim his identity – his blackness. As implied in the stanzas to come, why the black boy is angry may result from a dialogue with the white English boy, in which it seems that the white English boy might have humiliated him due to his birth place and skin colour. Immediately Blake puts us into the hierarchal worlds of the dichotomy of blackness and whiteness in the Saussurian sense, in which the identity of black and white is obviously constructed in relational way: that is, the black learns what he is not. Within this binary opposition, however, the black boy, not the white English boy, vigorously needs to assert his identity, giving an impression that he has been exposed to humiliation and injustice by the white English boy. But what is important is that this conflict leads him to awaken to the reality of his own identity: that is, he is from Africa and has the black skin, which locates him at once into a position in the Western world where he finds himself disadvantaged and inferior, even though his soul beneath the black

³William Blake published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, which included original 19 poems. In these poems, he strove to represent life without experience. Five years later Blake added new poems to the first collection and published this new collection in 1794 under the title of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* with 26 poems, in which he aimed at showing two contradictory states of the human soul – innocence and experience.

skin, he believes, is the same as that of the white English Boy. This is the binary opposition between black and white which causes the crisis of identity in the black boy's consciousness.

As for the binary opposition between black and white, moreover, Blake also employs the imagery of black and "light", in which blackvisibly seems to be associated with lack, negativity and disadvantages, whereas "light" is related to something positive. As seen in the stanza, for example, once the black boy says, "I am black, as if bereaved of light", he gives us an impression of something he misses when compared to the white English boy: that is, there seems at once a relationship between black and lack (light). He is brave enough to declare his blackness and identity, yet there is something which still annoys his psyche – lack of "light". As implied in the stanza above, not having "light" means for the black boy a kind of absence and negativity which he feels puts him into a disadvantaged position beside the white English boy; on the contrary, having "light", as suggested in the stanza, appears to be associated with something positive and advantage as for the identity of the white English boy. The question, what does "light" possibly mean in the poem? There could be different answers to this question. First, since the black boy was born "in the southern wild", which is most probably Africa, and the white English was born in England, so that there may be a kind of comparison and contrast between Africa and the West, in which it is obvious from the discourse of the black boy that the West is identified with "light", which has positive consequence for the West. The West, as Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* (1978) and Joseph Conrad artistically writes in his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) culturally constructs a patronizing and fictional picture of the East - the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East – in that the East in general is apparently represented as being underdeveloped, uneducated, uncivilized, and inferior missing "light" - the "light" which is purity, goodness, rationality, reason, science, civilization, superiority and happiness in the Western cultural perception. "In the Eurocentric ideology of oppositional pairs of categories", as Theresa H. Pfeifer argues, "the undialectical[Sic.] opposition of white-black, light-dark, good-bad, clean-dirty results in the colour *white* being perceived as good and *black* as evil" (2009, p. 533). Pfeifer continues to state:

Skin colour is a key signifier and the primary marker of difference articulated within European language systems. Western color-coded society has created the conditions for the enshrinement of a pale complexion (e.g., her skin is milky white or lily-white, a flawless porcelain beauty, peaches-and- cream complexion, creamy thighs, flour-white powder applied to the faces of medieval gentry, fair as a synonym for beauty, and so

on) in opposition to a dark complexion (swarthy, greasy, unwashed, unkempt, and unshaven) (p. 533. For a similar view, see also Hartigan, 1997).

Once Pfeifer's views as well as Blake's representation of the black boy in the poem are taken into consideration, it is certainly noticeable to see how the Western way of skin-colour ideology runs, and it is definitely based upon the idea of categorization. In this cataloguing of skin-colour, the black boy in Blake's poem is actually underprivileged because he lacks what the white boy has – purity, civilization, advancement, superiority, and thus he seems disturbed and angry. It is this feeling which throws him into the safe hands of his mother.

The black boy's mother, who, in fact, represents religious voice in Blake's *The Little Black Boy*, seems very innocent and naïve in her views and endeavours to soothe the disturbed feeling of her son by telling him the status of both black and white in the sight of God; she strives to teach and give hope to her son in the sense that the point is actually different from how he views himself physically and spiritually. Mother is like a priest in the church educating her audience about racism and its place beside God. It is true that what she says to her son is essentially at the centre of the creation story not only in Christianity but also in all other revealed religions such as Islam that all races are welcomed in heaven:

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And, sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissèd me,
And, pointing to the East, began to say:

“Look on the rising sun: there God does live,
And gives His light, and gives His heat away,
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

“And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
Are but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

“For, when our souls have learned the heat to bear,

The cloud will vanish, we shall hear His voice,
Saying, 'Come out from the grove, my love and care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice' (Yeats, 2002, p. 50).

For these stanzas above, as for the remaining two stanzas below, Blake's *The Little Black Boy* has drawn a lot of criticism concerning the Christian or religious idealism in which everybody occupies an equal place in the sight of God within the philosophy of creation, and thus in which there is no racial segregation according to the skin colour (Adler, 1957; Adams, 1963; Gleckner, 1982 and Ryan, 2004). For example, Joseph H. Wicksteed (1928) argues that the way mother speaks to her son is not a negative view but a gift of God which avails the boy of opportunity to see how to "bear the beams of love" of God, because once all the souls "learn to bear the beams of love" of God, they will "hear [God's] voice" and "come out from a shady grove" and enjoy "the golden tent [of God] like lambs", so that there will no longer be black and white segregation in such an heaven-like world (pp. 112-3). Besides, as Abby Laigh Vaughn (2015) illuminates:

Blake [also] alludes to several Christian images – direct mention of God aside – to further connects his commentary with religion. The black boy's mother teaches him "underneath a tree," hinting at the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the book of Genesis. In the Bible, this where Eve loses her innocence and falls from grace. Within "The Little Black Boy," the tree is where innocence and naivety are preserved through knowledge and instruction. Blake mentions lambs twice in his poem, comparing the black boy to this innocent creature once he accepts God's love. Within the Bible, Jesus is a Lamb of God who is ultimately sacrificed – just as the black boy sacrifices a life of suffering and oppression for innocence and naivety (Blake's Religious Commentary in "The Little Black Boy," para. 5).

In her teaching in *The Little Black Boy*, the black boy's mother is like a religious teacher, and she sits her son on her lap, the most secure place for a child, and kisses him with a motherly tenderness. She strangely points to the East and asks him, "Look on the rising sun: there God does live." As seen in the poem, mother turns her son's attention to God at once and tells him how "His light" is reflected on "flowers and trees and beasts and men receive / Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday." In these lines, the black boy's mother actually instructs her son the philosophy of God's law and tells him that God does not make any

discrimination among his creatures whether black or white, whether plants and animals. For mother, there seems obviously an equal chance for everybody to get equally “God’s light” and eventually reward. However, there is a condition that we should “learn to bear the beams of love” if we wish to get the equal “light.” In this line, instead of “I”, Blake uses “we” to include all races without racial discrimination in his world view. Yes, God does not make any discrimination against any of His creatures, yet through the views of the black boy’s mother, Blake shows us how identities are socially, culturally and politically constructed and polarized in life, so that “these black bodies and this sunburnt face / Are but a cloud, and like a shady grove.” As seen in the first stanza above, what takes place beneath the skin, whether it is black or white, is the same: humanity, so that what makes us different is what we have on our face – the skin colour. How is this difference constructed? “These black bodies” and “this sunburnt face” metaphorically become “cloud”...“like a shady grove”, which first cover up the essential truth – the truth of the sameness and equality beneath “black bodies” and “sunburnt face” - giving rise to the segregation of black from white according to the relationship between power and subordination. As a metaphor, the “cloud” becomes culturally and ideologically cover-up, costume, mask or barrier to prevent us from perceiving the essence of humanity or what we have indispensable beneath the skin which visibly bans the racial segregation in the creation philosophy. Through the views of the black boy’s mother, Blake illuminates the fact that what polarizes black and white in the Cartesian sense is not biological but culturally, socially and ideologically constructed categorical or hierarchical way of thinking.

How could this “cloud” or hierarchical way of thinking be removed so as to see what is essential beneath? The black boy’s mother gives a religious answer: “For, when our souls have learned the heat to bear, / The cloud will vanish, we shall hear His voice, / Saying, ‘Come out from the grove, my love and care.’” In these lines, the possible interpretation could be the view that if we properly discern the fact that what we have on our face is just sign or mark to form our facial shape and that what we have beneath is more important in the sight of God, it will be very easy to cross the borderline of “cloud”; then it “will vanish”, and we will hear God’s “voice” which tells us what exactly the Holy Qur’an tells: “O Mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. *Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous of you*” (Qur’an 49:13; emphasis added). In fact, these are the deeply embedded ideals of all the revealed religions across the world, advocating the equity of all the creation, and the criterion for the superiority does not depend on the skin colour but on the

“righteous” acts in the sight of God. This is actually what changed the heart of a racist Malcolm X when he performed Hajj in Makkah in 1964, and this is the power that brought Muhammad Ali, an American former professional boxer, to Islam in 1975.

This is the message which the black boy wants to deliver to the White English boy - the message for getting rid of the superiority complex and then for seeing what is vital beneath the skin. This message is a blow to the hierarchal thinking of the Western world as to the relationship between black and white, yet it is irony that it is not the white English boy but the black boy who struggles to make sense of this message and then take to the white English boy. It may be because of the fact that it is the black boy, not the white English boy, who suffers seriously from the discrimination. The message is, in fact, a universal message to the humanity or all the races that what we form in our mind about the others is not inborn or natural but the construction which we desire to create for locating ourselves into a noticeable status through the “cloud” of the skin colour:

Thus did my mother say, and kissèd me,
And thus I say to little English boy.
*When I from black, and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,*

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me (Yeats, 2002, p. 50; emphasis added).

In the lines, “When I from black, and he from white cloud free, / And round the tent of God like lambs we joy”, Blake apparently deconstructs “the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato” as Jacques Derrida argued in his paper “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human science” at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 (Selden et al, 2005, p. 164). Raman Selden and her colleagues (2005) argue that “the notion of ‘structure’” in Derrida’s view presupposes a “‘centre’ of meaning of some sort” (p. 164). Whether it is religious or a kind of protest, Blake, like Derrida, powerfully questions and reverses the hierarchal “centre of meaning” in which the white Western people have always seen themselves at the “centre” of presence as being rational and superior to the people of colour. What Blake offers is a radical and political criticism of the Western way of thinking,

and he advocates both black and white that what you have on your faces is just a mask, so that they both must discard the notions of inferiority and superiority to enjoy the beauty of the life:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me

In *The Little Black Boy*, Blake Employs religious symbols and images to draw attention to the injustice inflicted on the people of colour at a time when the anti-slavery campaigns peaked in the first half of the nineteenth century. Robert Ryan argues that “Blake’s usual religious posture, then, is not submission but *protest*; his poetry is a sustained prophetic denunciation of the cruelties, mental and corporeal, everywhere perpetrated in the name of God by those who claim to be doing his will” (p. 150). For him, “In a time of intense political agitation he came to believe that a radical transformation of the nation’s religious consciousness was the first prerequisite to serious political or economic reform” (p. 150). As for Blake’s religious view, Ryan continues to state:

In the originality, comprehensiveness, and sheer energy of his analysis of the religious dimension of human experience, William Blake’s artistic achievement is matched in Western literature only by that of Dante and Milton. Religion was, arguably, the primary theme and motive of all his art, poetic and pictorial. But to compare Blake’s art with the work of other poets and painters soon makes clear that his own artistic program and vision differed strikingly from what is commonly understood to be the purpose of religious art. His poetry, and the illuminations that enrich it, only rarely are expressions of devotion. Although one catches glimpses of personal piety in his letters, and senses it in his more conventional pictorial art, Blake’s illuminated verse is primarily social in its concerns, focusing on the historic and psychic origins of religious faith and on religion’s influence on human behaviour (p. 150).

I agree with Ryan that Blake’s is a kind of “protest” towards both religion and ideologically formed hierarchal way of thinking, which resulted in the injustices, exploitation and enslavement of the people of colour. Had religion carried out its responsibility and delivered its message properly, there would not have been such injustices and segregation between

black and white. Secondly, Blake strives not only to bring to the agenda the social injustice caused by the white racial prejudices, as well as by the notion of superiority towards the people of colour but also to deconstruct the essential “centre” of meaning based on the Cartesian dichotomy of black and white. In this respect, Blake offers a world of idealism free of racial discrimination and conflict, free of the notions of inferiority and superiority complexes, and free of negative and positive perceptions attributed to black and white and so on. Simply, Blake, like Derrida, tries to undermine the basis of what the white Western world-view has tried to show as natural and normal the dichotomy of black and white skins. This idealism or the heaven-like world is very much similar to what Martin Luther King, Jr., an American black activist and leader in the African-American Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s said:

I have a dream that *my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character* [...] I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of “interposition” and “nullification,” *one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers*. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (qtd. in Sundquist, 2009, pp. 15-6; emphasis added).

I strongly believe that one day “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers” as long as we are sincere and vigorous enough in our faith and struggle. This message will definitely find its correspond day by day.

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