

THE ANTI-WHITE ASCETIC-IN-RESIDENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

Heart of Whiteness

Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege

Robert Jensen

San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2005

Reviewed by David Wilson

Unserious treatments of race can still be worth examining, if not for their internal merits (or lack thereof), then for the mindsets revealed. *Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege*, is one such example. There is almost nothing in this book that need be taken seriously by the thoughtful student of race, whether an advocate for whites or even an academically-minded supporter of multiracialism. It might even embarrass the latter.

Heart of Whiteness does not pretend to be a scholarly work. It does not pretend to be a historical work. It does not contain policy prescriptions, policy critiques, statistical studies, or regression analysis. It is a screed, plain and simple.

But as a specimen of the grotesque, it fascinates. Throughout the tour, the larger thought occurs: how did the author, himself white, come to this trance? Robert Jensen has transferred glaze-eyed psychosis to print, with confessions fit for suburban whites to mouth during orientation week at Brown. Here are some examples, from the introduction alone:

I am a white-bred, white bread white boy.

My life has been lived white in white-supremacist society.

. . . I don't think white people should love their whiteness. Better for everyone, I think, that we take a shot first at hating it.

I want to live in a world where I can at least imagine that someday I will be able to stop being white.

To the extent that Jensen's message can be distilled, it is that whites are uniquely bad people. They are so bad, in fact, that they may not be able to rid themselves of taint, no matter how keenly they aspire to virtue. To the extent that a plan of action can be distilled, it is that whites must embark upon a journey of self-flagellation, eschewing "whiteness" as vigorously as possible. Whites must, in Jensen's words, begin by facing the truth: "Whiteness—that whole constellation of practices, beliefs, attitudes, emotions that are mixed up with being white—is the problem."

Jensen himself volunteers for the hairshirt. "Whiteness is degraded and depraved, an insane belief that one can find meaning in life simply by virtue of being on top of a racial hierarchy. To the degree that we accept any of the meaning that dominant society gives to whites, we white people are degraded and depraved. To the degree those illusions of superiority linger in me, I am degraded and depraved."

One wonders why, given such a thorough indictment of the white race, the author doesn't simply conclude that we must all gather in the desert for a giant self-immolation. Maybe because Jensen, after perishing in the flames, would then be deprived of his role as high priest of self-degradation, doling out sermons of racial self-hatred and absolutions for the truly penitent. Indeed, the prospect of something to feel guilty about seems to excite any number of whites.

Jensen, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin,¹ is in some ways that comedic stereotype of a militant leftist so paralyzed by political correctness that he can't bear to emerge from his bed in the morning because to do so would be to perpetrate any number of racist, sexist, or capitalist systems.² In addition to being "anti-racist," or anti-white, he also identifies as being "on the correct side in gender politics," a feminist, supportive of anti-war causes, and, in what might seem an odd twist, writes against pornography. As one might expect, he joins the Andrea Dworkin-style feminist critique of

¹ Students pursuing a journalism degree have no choice but to sit for Jensen's media and the law class, a core curriculum course for which he was in 2007 the only instructor.

² In a footnote, he agonizes over use of the word "holocaust" to describe white treatment of American Indians during colonization, black Africans in the slave trade, and non-white populations abroad today. Whom to risk offending? He settles on use of the word for other-than-Jews, "to honor the memory of all these victims, and to try to prevent such events in the future. . . ."

pornography, but in an article for AlerNet, inexplicably links pornography with “white supremacy.”³ Ah, yes, that Jewish-dominated, multi-billion dollar, Simi Valley export routinely featuring white females being degraded by black males should be at the top of anyone’s list of examples of “white supremacy.”

But in another sense, Jensen brings a religious zeal to his mission that, if employed by others for different purposes, might be condemned as rigid “fundamentalism.”⁴ A self-described North Dakotan, he approaches the subject of whites with Calvinist determination: his constant use of “depravity” and “depraved” to describe whites, “whiteness,” or the “sin of racism” conjures an image of a grim-faced preacher well-versed in the five points. No matter how well-intentioned your thoughts and actions might be, white congregants, they are surely insufficient in the eyes of the Lord. Saith Jensen: “Being not-racist is not enough. *To be a fully moral person*, one must find some way to be anti-racist as well” (emphasis added).

At one point in the book, Jensen discusses an ABC “Primetime” special about disparate treatment of black taxi-hailers, something one might expect him to cheer. But he noticed that host Diane Sawyer signed off with a flip “we’re going to motor on off ourselves.” Said Jensen, “Isn’t there something sick about a white person delivering an indictment of white supremacy and smiling? That’s white privilege, too.” What might have pleased Jensen? Diane Sawyer breaking down in tears? The immediate call-up of federal marshals to ride shotgun in every taxi in America to ensure that any black hailer is picked up? Never mind that it has been a long time since you could find a white cabbie in New York, in any event. White advocates are often chided for the impossibility of what others imagine to be their goals, say, a “white homeland” in the Pacific Northwest. Yet to the extent this is a goal of white advocates, it is at least imaginable. One struggles to imagine a concrete vision of what Jensen seeks that does not involve miles-long re-education camps for the recalcitrant and summary executions for the defiant.

It is not entirely clear who fills the role of the sovereign God in Jensen’s scheme. (Jensen? Non-whites? Whites who have achieved total enlightenment?) But the role of the sinners, the fallen, the

³ <http://www.alternet.org/story/47677/>

⁴ Jensen may be attempting to add résumé legitimacy here as a member of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. See <http://staopen.com/>

unsaved but for the grace of God, is clear—it is whites, and whites alone. Nowhere in the book are blacks, Hispanics, Asians, or any other group singled out or discussed generally as needing to take any action whatsoever or to change their mindsets. The critique here is easy enough for the mainstream conservative who is today tuned into the “double standard” line of racial argument: Jensen is merely perpetrating a different strain of white supremacy, by investing whites with total moral agency and regarding non-whites as objects whose existence provides us with handy tests of that morality. Conrad’s theme of savagery covered by a thin veneer of morality is, for Jensen, the unique sin of “whiteness.”

Jensen, as expected, declares race as a biological concept to be a “fiction.” While acknowledging that recent work on the human genome “reveals some biological patterns that correlate with one’s continent of origin,” there is to Jensen “one human race,” with minor physical differences. Yet the people who make up this evil white power construct “continue to be white people.” I have yet to see this Alice-in-Wonderland formulation adequately defended or explained by its proponents, and Jensen is no exception. If race is a fiction, than surely its constituent parts (white, black) are also fictions, and how can a fiction oppress or be oppressed? But give him credit for at least setting up the contradiction plainly: “Race is a fiction we must never accept. Race is a fact we must never forget. Both those statements are true.” The contradiction is easier to take when restated for honesty: “Race is a fiction when envisioned or employed for the benefit of whites. Race is a fact when envisioned or employed for the benefit of non-whites.”

Likewise for that weakest item in the anti-white left’s concept bin: “white privilege,” or “institutionalized racism,” a frequent discussion point for Jensen. That a white person might receive better reception in a predominantly white society is as natural a proposition as to say that a penguin will thrive in icy waters or a palm tree in a tropical climate. To accept it as morally deficient requires a belief that the group existence of whites itself is morally deficient or in need of obliteration. Jensen does not address this, but one wonders why he doesn’t.

In a chapter attempting to explain the phenomenon of “white supremacy,” Jensen begins by announcing that it is promoted because we receive “material and psychological gains” from it. We fear, he

tells us, "facing the fact that some of what we white people have is unearned," always a good laugh line for a working-class white person. And if white supremacy disappeared, we would have fewer resources, he says. "The redistribution of wealth would be fairer and more just." With such statements, Jensen invites us not to take him seriously: who would do this "distributing"? A multiracial Comintern with global authority? Have the Yanomamo people of the Amazon even heard of Karl Marx? Where would they plug in the laptops "distributed" to them? In all seriousness, if these are all such intractable problems, why not a move toward racial separation? Who could begrudge it, if we evil whites were to be deprived of our ill-gotten gains and the twisted psychological gain of thinking we're better than everyone else?

However bizarre his book and the mindset it reveals, the larger concern is that when it comes to "fringe" ideas and thinking, Robert Jensen is hardly "fringe." Compared to the "fringe" of white advocacy or race realism, his basic precepts are firmly entrenched, accepted by courts of law and the near entirety of the political spectrum, and preached *ad nauseam* in the academy. However much it may motivate Jensen to style himself a rebel, he could not be better squared with acceptable discourse on race today. Therein lies the real horror.

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