



# The Fears of White People

by Robert Jensen

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It may seem self-indulgent to talk about the fears of white people in a white-supremacist society. After all, what do white people really have to be afraid of in a world structured on white privilege? It may be self-indulgent, but it's critical to understand because these fears are part of what keeps many white people from confronting ourselves and the system.

The first, and perhaps most crucial, fear is that of facing the fact that some of what we white people have is unearned. It's a truism that we don't really make it on our own; we all have plenty of help to achieve whatever we achieve. That means that some of what we have is the product of the work of others, distributed unevenly across society, over which we may have little or no control individually. No matter how hard we work or how smart we are, we all know -- when we are honest with ourselves -- that we did not get where we are by merit alone. And many white people are afraid of that fact.

A second fear is crasser: White people's fear of losing what we have -- literally the fear of losing things we own if at some point the economic, political, and social systems in which we live become more just and equitable. That fear is not completely irrational; if white privilege -- along with the other kinds of privilege many of us have living in the middle class and above in an imperialist country that dominates much of the rest of the world -- were to evaporate, the distribution of resources in the United States and in the world would change, and that would be a good thing. We would have less. That redistribution of wealth would be fairer and more just. But in a world in which people have become used to affluence and material comfort, that possibility can be scary.

A third fear involves a slightly different scenario -- a world in which non-white people might someday gain the kind of power over whites that whites have long monopolized. One hears this constantly in the conversation about immigration, the lingering fear that somehow "they" (meaning not just Mexican-Americans and Latinos more generally, but any non-white immigrants) are going to keep moving to this country and at some point become the majority demographically. Even though whites likely can maintain a disproportionate share of wealth, those numbers will eventually translate into political, economic, and cultural power. And then what? Many whites fear that the result won't be a system that is more just, but a system in which white people become the minority and could be treated as whites have long treated non-whites. This is perhaps the deepest fear that lives in the heart of whiteness. It is not really a fear of non-white people. It's a fear of the depravity that lives in our own hearts: Are non-white people capable of doing to us the barbaric things we have done to them?

A final fear has probably always haunted white people but has become more powerful since the society has formally rejected overt racism: The fear of

being seen, and seen-through, by non-white people. Virtually every white person I know, including white people fighting for racial justice and including myself, carries some level of racism in our minds and hearts and bodies. In our heads, we can pretend to eliminate it, but most of us know it is there. And because we are all supposed to be appropriately anti-racist, we carry that lingering racism with a new kind of fear: What if non-white people look at us and can see it? What if they can see through us? What if they can look past our anti-racist vocabulary and sense that we still don't really know how to treat them as equals? What if they know about us what we don't dare know about ourselves? What if they can see what we can't even voice?

I work in a large university with a stated commitment to racial justice. All of my faculty colleagues, even the most reactionary, have a stated commitment to racial justice. And yet the fear is palpable.

It is a fear I have struggled with, and I remember the first time I ever articulated that fear in public. I was on a panel with several other professors at the University of Texas discussing race and politics in the O.J. Simpson case. Next to me was an African American professor. I was talking about media; he was talking about the culture's treatment of the sexuality of black men. As we talked, I paid attention to what was happening in me as I sat next to him. I felt uneasy. I had no reason to be uncomfortable around him, but I wasn't completely comfortable. During the question-and-answer period -- I don't remember what question sparked my comment -- I turned to him and said something like, "It's important to talk about what really goes on between black and white people in this country. For instance, why am I feeling afraid of you? I know I have no reason to be afraid, but I am. Why is that?"

My reaction wasn't a crude physical fear, not some remnant of being taught that black men are dangerous (though I have had such reactions to black men on the street in certain circumstances). Instead, I think it was that fear of being seen through by non-white people, especially when we are talking about race. In that particular moment, for a white academic on an O.J. panel, my fear was of being exposed as a fraud or some kind of closet racist. Even if I thought I knew what I was talking about and was being appropriately anti-racist in my analysis, I was afraid that some lingering trace of racism would show through, and that my black colleague would identify it for all in the room to see. After I publicly recognized the fear, I think I started to let go of some of it. Like anything, it's a struggle. I can see ways in which I have made progress. I can see that in many situations I speak more freely and honestly as I let go of the fear. I make mistakes, but as I become less terrified of making mistakes I find that I can trust my instincts more and be more open to critique when my instincts are wrong.

This essay is excerpted from *The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege* (City Lights, September 2005). More information at: <http://www.citylights.com/CLpub4th.html#4499>  
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