

Two books I've read recently may interest visitors to this web-site who are drawn by a concern for Darfur.

One is Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, the intimate account of a young black man's efforts to find a place in white society. The other is Robert Jensen's *The Heart of Whiteness*, a tough look at white privilege – a phenomenon least visible to whites themselves.

*Dreams from My Father* (Three Rivers Press (Random House), 1994; 457 pp.) was written before Obama had started his Senate career, and takes risks one would not expect from a candidate for office. This memoir envelopes us in the psyche of a young man of mixed parentage who is struggling to make a place for himself – first in Hawaii and Indonesia, and then in America.

Obama's candor gives him license to talk about black anger and fear, his early use of drugs and alcohol, his confusion in relation to his flamboyant but absent Kenyan father, his diffidence toward his white mother and her parents, who raised the boy lovingly but within the confines of their own experience; finally he takes us on a journey to Kenya to come to terms with his father's legacy.

Despite its candor, *Dreams from My Father* strikes me as written with a national political stage in mind. It is grandly and convincingly inclusive, paying homage to Latinos and Asians, to heartland values, and to the torn social fabric of the urban poor. Its glimpse into Africa is a loving but critical embrace of extended family, but also a global analysis of the impact of white colonialism on traditional values.

*Dreams from My Father* is a self-portrait, but it is also a profile of the sensibility needed for a transformative presidency.

*The Heart of Whiteness* (City Lights, 2005; 96 pp.) is in some ways the mirror opposite of Obama's book. The author, Robert Jensen, teaches journalism at the University of Texas. Jensen is white. He uses personal anecdotes to illustrate his exploration of an elusive subject. This incisive, highly portable little book is designed to help white readers navigate the very thing they do not need to know, but need to know if they are to be whole: the fact of white privilege.

If Obama's memoir is about growing up black in a world where prejudice is painfully visible and felt, *The Heart of Whiteness* is about growing up white in a world where prejudice is largely unfelt, unseen, and unacknowledged.

One by one, Jensen demolishes our defenses. He punctures our complacent sense of American benevolence by pointing to the genocides that underlie the American experience, beginning with the Indians. He cites recent statistics that show black-white gaps defined by such measures as income – inequities that are widening or closing so slowly that parity won't be achieved for 500 years. He confronts the excuses made for marginally racist humor. He attacks white guilt, white paralysis, the assumption that anybody can pretend to be "not political" when everything we do is inescapably political.

Most tellingly, perhaps, in a world that is becoming increasingly “brown,” like our president, Jensen addresses “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?” (p. 54).

No book can correct society’s wrongs. But books can open the heart, and that’s where change begins. I purchased three copies of *The Heart of Whiteness*; one for myself, one for my local Quaker meeting, and one for a loved one – for so many loved ones who live insulated by their whiteness.

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