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FEATURES

AUG 31, 2011

# Deeply Embarrassed White People Talk Awkwardly About Race

Please don't not read this just because you're not racist.

by [Jen Graves](#)



**Seattle's racism is unlike the racism anywhere else, because Seattleites act like they're above it.**

ART BY SEAN JOHNSON



One day in front of a class of art history students at Cornish College of the Arts, I say, "Raise your hand if you're a racist." I hadn't planned on this.

That class period I was focusing on James Baldwin and Glenn Ligon, both gay men, both African American, and it hit me that because there wasn't a black person in the room, things were getting abstract. This art is valuable and has to be taught—there really is no arguing against Baldwin, and Ligon's painting *Black Like Me #2* was one of the first President Obama brought to the White House—but how do you teach someone to have a relationship to it?

So I throw it out there: Raise your hand if you're a racist.

As my students do that thing where they sort of just look at you, perplexed, I raise my own hand. I am deeply embarrassed, but I feel I have to be honest if I am asking them to be.

"You've never had a negative thought based on racial bias?" I ask.

Very slowly, arms begin to rise. I understand their confusion. Theirs is a generation in which we have elected a mixed-race president, but affirmative action has been struck down for being racist.

It was white Seattle parents (and a few from Kentucky, too) who fought all the way to the United States Supreme Court in 2007 so that race would be eliminated from consideration as a tiebreaker in competitions for placements in public schools. Despite the fact that racial inequities remain steady year after "post-civil rights" year—across indexes of health, wealth, and education—racial balancing, according to the 2007 ruling, is no longer a "compelling state interest."

The racial tiebreaker in Seattle was originally instituted to end de facto educational racial segregation. But now segregation across Seattle schools is worse than it was in the 1980s. A few years ago, the *Seattle Times* published mind-blowing maps of the data; this same backslide has happened around the country.

"The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race," declared US Supreme Court chief justice John G. Roberts Jr., in 2007, siding with the Seattle parents whose kids didn't get into Ballard High because they were white. This is legal color blindness. It has dubious precedent: In 1883, 18 years after the abolition of slavery, US Supreme Court justice Joseph P. Bradley wrote a majority opinion that ended reconciliation laws because former slaves must "cease to be the special favorite of the law."

Today the same argument is made under the precious neologism that laws intended to redress racial inequity are themselves racist. "Racist is the new nigger," says Riz Rollins, the writer, DJ, and KEXP personality. "For white people, the only word that begins to approximate the emotional violence a person of color experiences being called a nigger from a white person is 'racist.' It's a trigger for white people that immediately conjures pain, anger, defensiveness—even for white people who are clearly racist. 'Racist' is now a conversation stopper almost like that device where you can skew a conversation by comparing someone to Hitler. It's an automatic slur. And only the sickest racists will own up to the description."

White people in Seattle are more likely to own rather than rent. White people are more likely to have health insurance and a job. White people are more likely to live longer. White people are less likely to be homeless. White people are less likely to hit the poverty level. White people are less likely to be in jail. White kids are *nine times* less likely than African Americans to be suspended *from elementary school* (in high school, it's four times higher; in middle school, it's five times, according to the district's data). Nonwhite high-school graduation rates in Seattle are significantly below white graduation rates—even if you're Asian, regardless of income level.

And then there's the white Seattle police officer beating "the Mexican piss" out of a guy. The white Seattle police officer punching a 17-year-old African American girl in the face. The Seattle Police Guild newspaper editorial that called race-and-social-justice training classes "the enemy," "socialist," and anti-American.

Not that racial experience is monolithic. It's not black and white. But it's *real*. And across all measurable strata, white people in Seattle have it better.

Yet nobody is racist.

The 2010 US Census data led to reports of Seattle being the fifth whitest city in the country—reinforcing the perception of this place as a white place. But if you look at the actual numbers, 66 percent of people in Seattle identify as white, which means that *one in three* people are not white. That's not a white city. It only seems like a white city when you're in, say, Ballard or Wallingford or Fremont. If you walk the street expecting every third person you see not to be white, well, then you'll see how weird it is to be in Ballard or Wallingford or Fremont, where almost everyone is white. If you walk the street in Rainier Valley, the opposite is true.

"In Seattle, there's really a small amount that you have to do to be labeled a hero of diversity," says Eddie Moore Jr., the Bush School's outgoing director of diversity, who describes Seattle as "a segregated pattern of existence."

He adds, "It's just that there's really no real challenge to how the structure in Seattle continues to assist whiteness and white male dominance in particular. When you say 'white supremacy' or 'white privilege' in Seattle, people still think you're talking about the Klan. There's really no skills being developed to shift the conversation. How can we be acknowledged to be so progressive, yet be identified to be so white? I wish that's the question more Seattleites were asking themselves."

**B**ack at Cornish, a week after that awkward classroom moment, the vice provost has called me into her office. My classroom was in the basement; this office is on the top floor, beyond a waiting room that doubles as a gallery of finely framed alumni art and behind a wing of administrative assistants typing quietly in cubicles. I've never been here before, I've been teaching only two years, and I am scared. I'm invited into a closed office where the blinds are partially drawn to block out bright sun, to sit at a table across from the vice provost's desk. A third white person in the room, the director of student affairs, pushes a piece of paper across the desk to me.

A student from my class—white, male—has asked for my head. His charge is that by admitting to racism, even though I described it as a problem that had to be named in order to be solved, like any other problem, I could only have been trying to recruit white supremacists. In his letter, he compares me to Hitler. I spend the next hour rehashing, in detail, the tone and content of my lecture. I am trying to be honest and I am trying to wrap my head around the accusation. I am trying to admit to being a racist while at the same time defend my ability to teach about black art history. It is, to say the least, a tortured conversation.

The charges are dismissed; the other students didn't share his theory.

But it suddenly hits me how alien it has become just to try to define racism, and admit to it.

**E**very conversation about race is tortured—palpably awkward, loaded with triggers, marked by the blind spots of perception and presumption—but that doesn't mean you're doing it wrong or should stop doing it, says Scott Winn. That means you have to keep on.

"Once I realized I was racist, it was, well, what am I going to do about it?" says Winn, a mild-mannered white guy in his 30s. "That shifts the defensiveness."

Ten years ago, Winn cofounded CARW (you say "Car W"), or the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites. For him, getting involved in antiracism "ultimately was not a moral shift but a strategic one." He already knew the world was racially fucked. He just had to figure out what to do next, and he began by examining whiteness as the invisible structure that defines everything—that needs to be explored and then exploded.

"Whiteness is the center that goes unnamed and unstudied, which is one way that keeps us as white folks centered, normal, that which everything else is compared to—like the way we name race only when we're talking about a person of color," Winn says. "We can name how some acts hurt people of color, but it's harder to talk about how they privilege white folks."

CARW holds an open meeting every month at the downtown Y, one of those early-20th-century brick buildings whose architecture is especially, absurdly on this occasion, Anglo. More than 20 people show up usually, sometimes up to 50. They're young and old, male and female, straight and gay. The only thing that would tip you off from the outside that this isn't, like, a giant poker tournament is that participants ask each other to share which gender pronoun they prefer during introductions. There's plenty of overlap between antiracist and LGBT activists in Seattle—Others know from Othering—and the message of these intros is simply that people are not necessarily what you think they are, whatever that is.

The radical thing about CARW is that its purpose is to force awkwardness into the open. It could just as well be called Deeply Embarrassed White People Talk Awkwardly About Privilege. The first half of every meeting is devoted to group discussion of a theme. The second half is spent in committees, each attached to a separate racial-justice organization run by people of color. CARW is fueled by the philosophy that white people need to follow the lead of people of color on matters of race. (It sounds simple; what's surprising is how seldom it occurs.) One concrete result of that idea is that CARW members volunteer as support staff—waiters, babysitters, whatever—for the activities and events of groups in the Duwamish, African American, Latino, and Filipino communities.

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How have I lived in Seattle for more than five years and never heard of CARW until a year ago?

After the first meeting I go to, I describe to CARW member Esther Handy my sense that this is a conversion experience, that everything around me has begun in recent years to look different, with a totality that feels spiritual—waking up to white privilege. (For me, embarrassingly, the real awakening began late, with a 2008 story about transracial adoptees that I wrote in *The Stranger*, and it continues, propelled selfishly by the fact that I am marrying into a family of color. I come late, and I mean to come humbly.) Gently bringing me down to earth and shifting the focus away from me, Handy says, "Our coming around to figuring out that we should be thinking about and talking about and doing work

around racial justice is great and it can be spiritual, as you mentioned. But it is in service and in honor to the awesome organizations and leaders of people of color who have been doing this work for decades... The truth is that communities of color are thinking about racial justice all the time. They're living it and breathing it, and there's a group of white folks supporting that work, but it's only a small fraction of the white community at this point."

I ask her how to talk about racism with people who don't want to see it. I'm not talking about Tea Partyers; I'm talking about people like some of my friends and family, lefties who care, people who are on my team. Attempts to bring up race in editorial meetings at *The Stranger* have been as klutzy as anywhere. Even for perfectly decent, well-meaning, progressive people, it can be hard to see the connection between unintended acts of racism and actual racial injustice.

"I start with the facts," Handy says. "It's clear these injustices exist. I say I'm trying to understand the systems that create these inequities, and what's my role in working to change things. Reaching out and sharing these concepts with families and friends is absolutely part of the work, it's just not all of the work. Getting our racist uncle to stop saying bigoted things is not going to change the system. But we're not going to change the system without talking to our friends and family about it. While it benefits us not to talk about race, let's look at these disparities that just don't seem right."

I ask how often she encounters resistance to conversations about race among white people in Seattle who consider themselves progressive.

"I'd say every day," she says. "We're confused about it and we've been taught to be defensive about it. I don't think we should be too surprised about that."

Winn says, "Exposure is often the key thing that trips people into awareness." The old "black friend" routine. Yes, it helps to seek out friends who are racial minorities if you want to understand racial injustice. Yes, this is weird. But so is the history of judging people based on something as arbitrary as skin color; we have to work with what we've got.

"After that, I think many white people are integrationists in that 'beloved community' way, but integration usually means assimilation," Winn says. "As in, you've gotta act like us for this to work. So exposure *on the terms of people of color* is important. At CARW, we create a space that's not a PC space. If you say something that's not cool, we say here's why language matters. That talking about it is a skill."

At the two CARW meetings I attend, nobody tells anybody that anything's not cool. But people vary in how much experience they have in talking and thinking about race. A very experienced turquoise-eyed lady who lives on Beacon Hill tells a story from her neighborhood: She'd been looking forward to meeting her nonwhite neighbors at a block

party, but only the white neighbors showed up, talking about how they wished a Trader Joe's would move in. "Not a Trader Joe's!" she gasped as she told the story, laughing. "That is the definition of gentrification in *Stuff White People Like*."

There's a quiet, older woman at the meeting who comes across as a little more awkward, endearingly so. She mentions a cousin who went on a medical tourism trip to Costa Rica and returned with some choice racist remarks written in a family e-mail. She's struggling to find a way to talk to him about it, and this isn't the first time. "I tend to start out a little soft," she says, gently, "and it never goes anywhere. I just need some opening lines." Other CARW members help her figure out how to begin.

"The test of how racist you are is not how many people of color you can count as friends," I recall someone telling me—I can't remember who now. "It's how many white people you're willing to talk to about racism."

Through CARW, I find out about WEACT, or Work of European Americans as Cultural Teachers, a group of educators who give presentations on white antiracism in Seattle schools. The reception to these presentations varies widely depending on the school. Like, at Ballard High School, the reception tends to be disbelief and defensiveness (i.e., "What are you talking about?"), whereas at Franklin High School, students go, "Yeah, duh."

The antiracist white movement in Seattle is growing.

**I**f you're white and you tell a white friend you're going to a community meeting about zoning or bike lanes or homelessness, that seems normal—like you might even make a difference in your little way. But try saying you're going to a meeting of white antiracists.

"Jen, people won't get it," said a white friend, an art scholar and lifelong radical whose first serious boyfriend in the 1970s was an organizer for the African Liberation Support Committee and the Black Action Society. Her father didn't know that; he already wouldn't let the guy in the house just because he was black. (My father would have done the same; my dad's attitude to the black men I've dated over the years has changed from "I forbid you" in college to "Why?" to, finally, "He's going to make a great son-in-law.") Years later, when my friend and her white partner were living in Seward Park, a white man came to their door canvassing for the NAACP.

"On some level, I felt funny that a white person was doing it," she said. "Not funny, but surprised. Or suspicious. I don't know, but I was suspicious. I guess I wondered, do you really care, or are you just paid to canvas?"

She wishes she'd asked him directly.

White people saving trees: check. Ending poverty: check. Improving racial equity: What's the catch? If you're white and talking about race, or working for the NAACP, people will ask you to explain yourself.

Doing it isn't pretty. I've made a fool of myself. I've been accused of being a race traitor. A comment on a recent Slog post I wrote reads, "You've got some issues of your own, there, sweetie, and it's not the first time you've used 'white' as a pejorative. Let go of just a tiny bit of your guilt complex, and you just might find that white people can be wonderful, too."

But how would the conversation be different if Seattle were as progressive on race as it is on the environment? This city isn't as green as it should be, but at least *we'd like it to be*—nobody proposes color blindness when the color in question is green. And opportunities find us on a daily basis should we want to help make Seattle greener.

At my first CARW meeting, I shared a story from when I lived in the Central District. Driving the narrow streets, I'd notice that young black men would sometimes walk in the middle of the street and refuse to move for cars. They'd downright lope, slow like the South, where African American families coming to work at Boeing in the 1950s hailed from when they moved to this neighborhood—the only area of the city where they were allowed to live until the middle 1960s. To me, this loping was a form of historical communication, intentional or not: *This is our street*.

But the reason this communication was happening was the opposite: Clearly, this was no longer their street, as the neighborhood steadily homogenized, growing whiter as well as wealthier by the year. I would drive slowly behind them, as in a funeral dirge. We were getting nowhere. But I noticed that often, white drivers would honk at the men to move aside. It seemed to me the reason they honked was that they were irritated at having an experience that people of color know well: that you're not just entitled to live anywhere you please, that there might be consequences. Honking was an attempt to reassert privilege.

The United States was started by white people, for white people. That's the premise of the White Privilege Conference, founded in 1999 by Eddie Moore Jr., the former Bush School diversity director quoted earlier. Today, the conference is held in a different city each year, and where it used to bring maybe a couple hundred people, now more than 1,500 attend.

"It is not a conference designed to attack, degrade, or beat up on white folks," its website reads.

"There's some pancakes I'm not gonna be able to flip over," Moore says. "But what I say up front is that what whiteness does, as a structure, is to limit your ability to listen to people of color, to hear people of color, to *believe* people of color. I would encourage people to embrace that as true, and then start to work through it—and to use me as a resource. I'm not trying to villainize anybody."

So one answer to the question *What can I do?* is simple: Listen. Believe.

"I had to stop talking to white people about race, because I kept getting retraumatized," an African American friend told me about her days as a diversity trainer. "They just wanted to talk about why they weren't racist."

As Moore argues, segregation—whether enforced or voluntary—teaches us to disbelieve racism. I grew up in a middle-class white suburban neighborhood. Although we never had a black family over for dinner, every house on our street hosted black men doing perp walks through our living rooms on the news. I didn't realize the contradiction until much later—that our seemingly all-white existence was predicated on keeping other people *other*.

"It's really important to recognize that race affects everything you do—and that to act otherwise is just naive," says Julie Nelson, the director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights (she's white; her predecessor was an African American woman).

Every city has one of these Offices for Civil Rights, to deal with legal antidiscrimination claims, but Seattle has an additional arm of government (only two and a half full-time positions, but supported by a small army of volunteers) devoted to racial justice, called the Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI). It began in 2006—it was the first of its kind in the nation—in response to an anti-affirmative action initiative sponsored by Tim Eyman. (Thank you, Tim Eyman.)

At least in Seattle, racial balancing is a compelling goddamn state interest. The RSJI is officially anti-color-blind. Not finding a racially equal world, it does not pretend at one. The city worked around the fact that Eyman's initiative specifically disallowed "quotas" or "set asides"—rather, the city strengthened the conditions of eligibility for getting city contracts by using the terms that are allowed in order to do the same thing: "good faith efforts" and "aspirational goals." The result has been a rise in contracts to minority-owned firms. Based on statistics that show that racial minorities in Seattle are still less likely than whites to hold diplomas and college degrees, the RSJI worked to remove unnecessary degree requirements from city jobs, which earned the RSJI a mocking on the local Fox News (a sign you're doing a good job). The RSJI reaches into every department. It influenced Seattle City Light to change its streetlights policy, which used to be replaced on a call-and-complain basis—a system that works fine in affluent, native-English-speaking communities where people know to look on a light pole, call the provided number, and trust that the city will come out to fix the problem. Now streetlights are changed on a fixed rotation that begins in the South End.

None of this is perfect—and more people of color still work in lower-paying jobs in the city's own 10,000-strong workforce, Nelson says—but at least the City of Seattle acts like it recognizes the existence of racism.

Nelson's office high up in the municipal building is full—really, *full*—of paintings by the African American street artist Darryl, who for years has been sitting on corners throughout the city, selling his scrawled paintings on cardboard. They say things like "What in the hell WRONG with my ass." (My fiancé bought one that sits in our living room and reads, "100 YEARS OF BLUE MOONS.") I didn't imagine I'd see the phrase "What in the hell WRONG with my ass" scrawled across anyone's office in this tower high above the city, but the sound of Darryl's voice way up here emphasizes the distance down to the street.

What Nelson says is this: If you're white, you have to own it. None of this I'm-not-white, I'm-beyond-it-and-I'm-Norwegian stuff. White people have to see race according to the terms they actually benefit from. Not that whiteness is a monolith, any more than nonwhiteness is. As Mab Segrest writes: "Women are less white than men, gay people are less white than straight people, poor people less white than rich people, Jews than Christians, and so forth." But what might matter, what *should* matter, is that whiteness is a real force that you've personally benefited from in one way or another if you're white.

The work of art that illustrates this story you're reading, by Seattle sculptor Sean Johnson, is two halves of two couches, one painted white and one painted black (the couch started out brown), sawed from their wholes and set next to each other. They don't balance right, so you can't sit on them, and there's a gaping hole between them. The title is *False Identity*. Johnson is half black, half white, and originally from Columbus, Ohio. He says Seattle's racism is unlike the racism anywhere else, because Seattleites act like they're above it.

"I've had a conversation [about privilege with someone] like once a week for a while now," Johnson says. "It's a denial that's almost more offensive than somebody just coming out and saying a racist word to us. I've been arguing about this in a bar and been thrown against the coals like I don't know what I'm talking about—that there's no way Seattle's racist, there's no way Seattle's segregated—yet I'm the only black person in the room. Yeah, it is."

He goes on, "I have this friend from Mississippi, and we were both saying that we've never encountered anything like it before. There's a collective thought that it's a progressive place, so that everything has been done to make things equal, and any form of 'No, it's not enough' is either greeted with passive-aggressiveness or 'No, you don't know what you're talking about.'"

"Remember: Seattle doesn't have a race issue," Tali Hairston says, laughing, during a pause in a heated public conversation about race at Taproot Theatre in June. Hairston, a Rainier Valley native who directs Seattle Pacific University's John Perkins Center for

Reconciliation, Leadership Training, and Community Development, is descended from white plantation owners and black slaves. His family was the subject of the 2000 book *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*.

The production at Taproot, *Brownie Points*, concerned an African American woman, a Jewish woman, and a white woman who go on a camping trip and end up debating race, religion, and motherhood. The director of the play had organized this public talk about race because the same audience that had flocked to an anti-Nazi play before this one now was telling her race issues seemed passé (and not buying tickets).

Backstage during rehearsals for *Brownie Points*, Hairston had asked each cast member how important race had been for them growing up. Their rankings, on a scale of 1 to 10, ranged from 2 (a white actress) to 10 (an African American actress).

"Your life story produces a racial filter," he explains in a conversation after the panel. "It might be a lens so thick that everything gets drawn into looking like it's about race, or so thin that when someone says something is racial, you go, oh hell no, it's not. As a white person, you have to own the development of your own racial lens. Because whether you're aware of it or not, you have one."

It reminds me of something said by the white man sitting on the other end of the panel, Ron Ruthruff, a close friend and neighbor of Hairston's.

"The number 7 bus tells me things about myself," Ruthruff had said.

"Seattle people, we are really nice on the outside," he said. "The problem, I would argue, is that many of the things we struggle with regarding race in Seattle are covert. What do I see? I'll be really honest. I see two school districts in Seattle, one in the north end, one in the south end. You know what kids in the community call Garfield? They call it the slave ship, because the white kids are on the top two floors and the black kids are on the bottom two floors. I see my son walk into a classroom with his [African American] best friend [Hairston's son], one receiving the benefit of the doubt, the other being questioned—same thing in a movie theater."

Ruthruff pointed over to Hairston, wearing a suit; Ruthruff wore jeans. "He can't wear jeans and get taken seriously," Ruthruff said. "Tali can't carry no plastic bag on an airplane. In our neighborhood, I'm affirmed for living in the Rainier Valley. Meanwhile, people look at Tali and say, 'You're still in the Rainier Valley? We thought you were moving on up.'"

(Ruthruff's mention of Hairston's formal dress reminded me of the time recently when NPR's Michele Norris, an African American woman, tried to explain to Steve Scher, KUOW's white morning-talk-show host, that her parents felt they always had to make sure

their kids were dressed better than the white kids in the mostly white neighborhood where they grew up. Scher—perhaps the archetype of the unaccountable Seattle white liberal—asked Norris if she saw that as an opportunity.)

On the number 7 bus, which runs from Rainier Beach to downtown, a woman once scolded Ruthruff for calling a young African American kid a boy. He *was* a boy, and Ruthruff almost ignored the woman because she was drunk. But he was feeling open, and instead he asked her to tell him more. She explained that masters used the term "boy" to belittle slaves; it's still a charged word for black males of all ages. That was 25 years ago, and Ruthruff is still riding that bus in the same spirit. "I think for many of us, we have to just keep listening," he said. "Could we as white people be willing to be wrong? Could that just be okay?"

After talking to Hairston, I approach a young African American man I'm overhearing. "I'd love to interview you; you're so eloquent," I tell him, immediately hearing myself sound like one of those people who said candidate Obama was so well-behaved (well-groomed, polite, pick your nice adjective) for a black man.

"I can't believe I just called you eloquent," I say. He gives me a knowing look, we both laugh, and start talking.

"Three hundred years of affirmative action for white people," is how author and activist Sharon Martin sums up American history.

The original "whites"—well-bred, high-class people, not those dirty Irish or Italians—were based on someone's dim memory of the beauty of women from Georgia, on the Black Sea, historian Nell Irvin Painter writes in her new book, *The History of White People*. (The word "Caucasian" might have been "Georgian," except that the German man who coined it knew there was an area called "Georgia" in the nascent United States, and didn't want to confuse people!) Layers of ridiculousness piled up, like a lie compounding. Science was pushed and pulled. Tomes full of charts and graphs demonstrate that the race scientist's most sophisticated tool for centuries was—wait for it—measuring human heads with a ruler. True.

African American scholar Cornel West suggested in 2008 that the somewhat more wounded, struggling Americans of the 2000s rather than the Americans of, say, the 1950s, are well-positioned to *feel* race. After 9/11, "for the first time in the whole nation, my fellow citizens had the blues across the board: they felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, hated for who they are. It's a new experience for a lot of Americans."

He continued, "It's a very American thing, in many ways, to be sentimental, to create your little world of make-believe, live in your bubble. And then sooner or later—like Wall Street—boom! Here comes reality. Boom, here comes history. Boom, here comes mortality."

Right around September 11 was when a handful of white people began the current movement of white antiracism in Seattle—and not too soon. I can't help but think that in many ways, the natural white allies for the needed next generation of racial justice work—progressives who still may not have heard of CARW or antiracism—are instead unwittingly playing into the hands of race-baiting right-wingers simply by remaining silent.

"Diversity, at least in the short run, seems to bring out the turtle in all of us," Rich Benjamin writes in his 2009 book *Searching for Whitopia*, in which he spent a year in the growing, increasingly white neighborhoods that are creepily cropping up all over the country. A 2008 study from the Pew Research Center showed that racial segregation in this country is worse than income-level segregation.

Is Seattle in danger of becoming a whitopia? The largest swaths of racial minorities are now living far north and far south, keeping racial separations alive, for various reasons, economic and otherwise. In some ways, we don't seem to *want* to live in racially mixed neighborhoods. Instead, we consume polarizing simplifications. In May, a study by Harvard and Tufts researchers made headlines around the world. The study was called "Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing," and came to the stunning conclusion that white people believe they are the real victims of contemporary racism (reverse racism). But look closer at the study—it surveyed 417 people *total*. You can fit more people than that on some buses. The sample was not even close to statistically significant. Yet like the idea of Seattle as a "white city," word about it spread fast.

"Our racial thinking needs a truly twenty-first-century upgrade," Benjamin writes. "Identity politics is letting America down, on the one hand. Race and structural racism still matter, on the other."

"Rather than thoughtfully discussing race," he writes, "Americans love to reduce racial politics to feelings and etiquette. It's the personal and dramatic aspects of race that obsess us, not the deeply rooted and currently active political inequalities. That's our predicament: Racial debate, in public and private, is trapped in the sinkhole of therapeutics."

There's a riddle at the heart of our racial lives, he writes: "It's common to have racism without racists." He means the redneck, *Deliverance*-style kind—easy to identify, easy to marginalize.

How else to explain a generation of people who voted for Obama, and who cried tears of happiness at what his election meant, but are doing nothing to eliminate racial inequality where we live?

"Awash in its racial conundrum, America has delightful people who are perfectly comfortable with widening segregation and yawning socioeconomic inequality that often breaks along racial lines," Benjamin writes. "Let's call that a problem." ★

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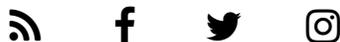
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