

"Raise your hand if you're a racist"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

October 11, 2011

"White people don't make it easy for each other to talk about race," [says writer Eula Biss](#). Instead, "we punish each other and police each other."

One white person who tries to improve this state of things is Jen Graves, who covers art for Seattle alt-weekly the *Stranger*. Graves also teaches art history, and in a recent [article](#) she begins with an anecdote from class:

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.

[Read it all.](#)