

## RACISM AS A LIFESTYLE CHOICE

by *Racialicious* Special Correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



Listening to people rationalize their racism is both hilarious and infuriating.

This week, Carmen posted a link to a RaceWire posting about an article that explored one white woman's journey into racism.

Initially I viewed the post with skepticism. My neighbors made me racist? Are you kidding? I perused the article, made a comment, and thought that would be the end of that. However, the rationalization of racist behavior continued with [TAN](#) pointing me toward a Washington City Paper article I had skipped last week, once again featuring a white woman spinning the same “woe-is-me, I-turned-into-a-racist completely by accident” spiel.

Okay, so now there are two white women, taking their “Oops, I did it (racism) again” moments to the press. Is this indicative of a trend? I decided to re-examine the two pieces with a more objective eye. After all, life experiences do contribute to the development of character - the idea that adverse life experience could influence feelings of racism is not so far-fetched.

The article in the [St. Petersburg Times](#) introduces the article with Cathy Salustri typing out:

I'm a white woman living in a black neighborhood, and I'm turning into a racist because of it.

The article goes on to detail her transition into racism:

As she wrote, she realized that the journey from tolerance to prejudice began two years ago when she moved to St. Petersburg's Bartlett Park. Her Realtor, her parents, even her black friends told her that moving there was a mistake.

She didn't listen. One of her white friends lived nearby and had no problems. She figured her experience would be no different. She took all the precautions Realtors suggest. She researched the neighborhood. Most of the crimes there were minor. She drove through at night and never saw any strange activity.

It was affordable; she could pay the mortgage with her income as a freelance writer. After multiple visits to the 1925 bungalow, she paid \$72, 500. She closed June 10, 2005.

The first six months, things were good. [...]

The thefts started in December 2005. First a ladder. Then, a folding chair, a weed whacker, a Volkswagen carburetor. This past April, a scooter. When a suspect - who is black - was found with the scooter, something in Salustri switched.

Stereotypes ricocheted through her head.

He'll be dead before he's 30.

The slur she won't say out loud blared in her brain. [...]

Last month, she went to court, where the scooter suspect appeared on drug charges. She needed to see his face, she said. "If I saw him on the street, I wanted to know the guy who stole my scooter." In court, he smiled and waved at the people sitting on the right side of the gallery. Most of them were black.

That's when Salustri lost it.

It was bigger than the suspect. She was disgusted with every black person in the courtroom. She didn't know their stories and didn't care.

F- - - - - lowlifes.

Okay, let's recap.

This woman moved to a cheap, affordable neighborhood in a not-so-great area. She was aware of minor crime issues in the neighborhood. And yet, she is shocked when her personal items were stolen.

The article does not indicate an armed robbery.

The article does not indicate forced entry into her home.

The article summarizes the missing items as follows: a ladder, a folding chair, a weed whacker, a Volkswagen carburetor and a scooter.

I am going to make a reasonable assumption - these items were left either outside of the house, or in a garage.

So, in sum, Cathy Salustri decided all black people are "fucking lowlifes" because she was the victim of petty property theft.

Maybe it is just me, but I was expecting a little something more to her story. A dramatic account of sexual assault, prolonged street harassment, an armed robbery.

Hell, I would have even taken a “stringy headed ho” insult.

But none of these things occurred. Cathy Salustri took a minor situation (which would probably be rectified with a shed and a padlock) and used it to justify her inherently racist thoughts.

As a student, I go to school to learn. I expect the environment to be safe. However, I should note that I have lost about \$200 in electronics to theft since I have attended middle school, high school, and college. Three portable CD players, a cassette player, and two CD cases have walked away from me. Does this mean I stop going to school because I’ve been robbed? Does this mean all my fellow students are “fucking lowlifes?”

I interpreted all the theft to mean I needed to stop leaving my things unattended - even well concealed inside a backpack.

I live in a “safe” building in a “safe” neighborhood in an affluent suburb. My building is secured, my neighborhood is well-lit, and I can walk home from the metro at 3 AM and not feel afraid.

Even still, theft happens. Two of my neighbors were robbed this month. Management sent out a memo, reminding residents to *use their locks* - apparently, both of the burglarized residents failed to use their deadbolts, preferring to leave their doors open.

While it may be convenient to chalk a theft up to the loose moral codes of the individuals involved, isn't there some measure of common sense that must be employed? In our society, people steal.

Protect your stuff!

It really is just that simple.

Unfortunately, for people like Cathy Salustri, it is easier to just be racist. She seems to have no problem telling her black friends about her newfound racism, openly lamenting her newfound fate, and skillfully avoiding the reality that people get robbed every day. Luckily, Salustri's friends (as well of the author of the article) quietly call bullshit on her false sense of powerlessness:

A few weeks ago, Salustri told a friend about the article she'd written. Her friend is black, and Salustri told her that if all this had happened before they met, the new Salustri might not have given their relationship a try.

“I don't like feeling this way,” she told the woman.

“It's very simple,” the friend said.

“Don't.”

[Side Note: One other thing I noticed in the story was Salustri's upbringing. Her mother noted "She really didn't have an idea of black and white... It was never brought up."

A lack of race consciousness does not translate into an anti-racist world view. Just saying.]

Moving on, I revisited the Assimilated Negro's [posting on Kimberly Klinger's article about being objectified on a regular basis.](#)

Klinger's article also upset me, but for a different reason than expected.

The truth is, I totally understand her ugly feelings in response to excessive catcalls. I have them too.

Let me confess to the world that I profile like hell. If I see a group of men between the ages of 18-50 standing on a street corner/against a wall/on park benches/waiting for the bus with no immediate identifiers (metro uniforms/congressional aide badges/school passes) I will *cross the fucking street*.

Street harassment is a bitch. Unfortunately, men of color tend to do it more than white men. (However, it is also worth noting that men of color [are more likely to give up their seats on the subway/metro to pregnant women.](#))

I'll go into why street harassment is a horrible experience for women in my second post (check out [Catcalling is a Cross Cultural Annoyance](#)).

However, what annoys me about Klinger's piece isn't that she attributes her racism to a specific triggering event. What annoys me is that she, like Salustri, openly embraces her racism. The defiant declarations seem almost prideful: No, I didn't choose this, but I am a racist.

Reading both of their pieces, I was struck by the idea that this may be a new form of privilege - two women who openly proclaimed their racism and benefited from it with exposure, media attention, and a sympathetic ear from other whites. Other whites who have the best of intentions, but damn it, these brown people make it so hard NOT to be racist.

Or maybe I am struggling with my racist thoughts because I am unable to muster up sympathy for white people struggling with their inner racism. Maybe I'm just weary of dealing with people who missed the point of Michael Richards' rant - it wasn't about the n-word, it was about the noose and fork reference. Maybe I am tired of listening to white people [talk about how much they hate themselves](#) or their past deeds, but ultimately have nothing come from the conversation besides a slight lessening of white guilt.

Or maybe I'm just racist because I generalize white people.

Salustri's [blog](#) continues to document her struggles with the concepts and ideas surrounding race and racism. After reading her blog, I feel like she is trying to work through her issues, but in the wider context of society.

I still think she should have more perspective, but I admire the fact that she is thinking more about the issue of race in society, beyond simply justifying her own experiences.

Klinger's piece makes a few more points about race, but does not address her core issues - specifically because she admits she does not understand what action to take.

I will concede that overcoming internalized racism is a difficult task, particularly considering that race is such a personal and provocative topic.

Still, I take issue with the fact that one has no control over their own thoughts.

Racist thoughts may enter your mind unbidden - but it is ultimately your responsibility to confront these thoughts, analyze them, reject them, and expel them from your mind. As many times as necessary.

It is your responsibility to shape yourself into the person you want to become. And sometimes, that means confronting yourself, instead of attributing your behavior to the actions of others.