

Everyday
White
People
Confront
Racial
& Social
Injustice

WARREN J. BLUMENFELD WARREN J. BLUMENFELD WARREN J. BLUMENFELD

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15 Stories

Edited by Eddie Moore, Jr., Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, and Ali Michael



STERLING, VIRGINIA



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Introduction

Eddie Moore Jr., Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, and Ali Michael

The original title for this book was *Polished Gems* because we felt it aptly framed the people and the content in the book. The people are activists and academics who contributed to the very foundation of antiracism and social justice action that any of us stands on today. The knowledge and ideas generated by these contributors over years of challenging and complicated work are replete with gems that will inspire and guide readers. But the contributors featured here do not think of themselves as jewels and do not want others to do so either.

On the contrary, they are everyday white people; they are just folks. They started out in different places, including New York City during the Great Depression; Waco, Texas, in the 1950s; Las Vegas, Nevada, in the 1960s. They started out in homes like many White peoples. Some were exposed to the subtle racist jokes of neighbors and their parents' friends; others were encouraged to stay in their places, not to make waves; some witnessed the overt and violent racism targeting loved ones and caregivers; and others knew little of racism as young children, so concerned were they with their own survival. Few of the people in this book started out knowing a thing or two about racism. Like many white people in the United States, it was something they had to learn by recognizing and admitting their ignorance and then

putting themselves in positions of apprentice, protégé, and student. It was a personal and long-term journey that continues to this day.

In this book the contributors lend their unique gifts to our mutual struggle to fight White supremacy, White privilege, and other forms of racial oppression. We wanted to capture their voices in a way that made their personal life experiences and knowledge accessible to everyone. Too often the world of academia takes control of our stories, putting them physically and intellectually out of reach. Sometimes we need to stop and take a moment to look beyond the theory, lecture halls, and textbooks to listen to the stories of our fellow human beings, no matter their titles or accolades. As one contributor said to an editor when presented with the idea for the book, “Stories are sacred.” Each story shares who the contributors are and how they came to be a part of the social justice world. Through their stories we see different paths, different challenges, and different roles. But throughout their stories we also see one common cause—the struggle to create a world in which all people have the opportunity to be whomever they choose to be.

The idea for this book arose from years of listening to the very people featured in it, in workshops, caucuses, and coffeehouses at the White Privilege Conference (WPC), a space where even keynote speakers show up as learners, eager to learn from others and to consider their own blind spots. The conference is grounded in Dr. Eddie Moore Jr.’s collaborative relationship model that demands that everyone is a learner, and everyone has something to teach. When the WPC started in 1999 at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, with 150–200 participants, no one anticipated it would explode into the national and international conference it has become, a place of collaboration and idea generation, a central location for building a movement in pursuit of equity and justice. It is our hope that the vision of the conference Moore has—a vision of how to address issues of power, privilege, white supremacy, race, and systemic inequalities—will also be realized through the collaboration manifested in this book. In 2014 more than 2,400 people who recognize that collaborative action comes from the ground up attended WPC 16. And in the 16 years of these conferences each of these contributors has been side by side with other everyday participants advocating for peace, equity, and justice.

The folks in this book have become well known because they have found a way to speak and write about racism and oppression in a way that resonates and leads to real change and action. But while we know their academic work and we read their theoretical works, very rarely do they have the opportunity to share what personally drives them in this work. As one contributor put it,

My role in this work is made possible because of my privilege, and it took me a long time to acknowledge that. But once I acknowledged that, I was able to realize the flipside of that: that without whites in this fight, it continues to be a fight about the other, never a fight about us.

Or as another contributor writes, confronting racism as a White person requires becoming an *antiracist racist*. Becoming antiracist doesn't make anyone less White or less a holder of racial privilege. But these contributors demonstrate how to use one's whiteness and one's privilege strategically to work against oppression.

Multicultural educators and historians have routinely called for the inclusion of White antiracists in the teaching of multicultural history. White students often do not see a role for themselves in the work because they do not have access to the stories of White people who came before them. While there are numerous recognized role models of color who have confronted racism in politics and throughout history, White antiracists are not well known. Geneva Gay, Beverly Daniel Tatum, and Gloria Ladson-Billings have all written about the need for White students to have White antiracist role models they can relate to, and yet there are very few resources teachers can use to meet that need. We created this book to help fill that void.

For this book we asked the contributors to explore the following questions: (a) How did you get into this work? (b) What have you learned? and (c) What do you recommend for future generations? We ask how they started in this work because it is critical for Whites to see a variety of paths into the social justice field. There is no right way to come to this path; as you will see in these stories, no one was born into it. Yet one by one, in their own unique ways, these contributors found their way. We ask them what they learned, knowing that this learning has been hard won. Many of them have received hate mail, been publicly criticized, and their work has been demeaned. Whites who enter this field need to recognize the link between privilege and supremacy and be willing to speak for what is right, enduring the criticism and vitriol reserved for those who challenge the status quo.

All the contributors to this book have been in the field of social justice for 25 years or more. One of the book's goals is to let readers know that people really don't know what they are doing when they enter this field. And no one is mistake free. The contributors share their stories so others can be inspired, not by academic words but by personal experiences. They do not see themselves as special, but they represent generations of everyday White people who choose to make confronting racial and social injustice a part of who they are. The following paragraphs introduces the contributors and their stories. Just as each contributor found his or her own path into this work, each story is unique. We hope

that in the many and varied stories you read here, you find people and moments that inspire you and connect you to a movement that belongs to us all.

Foreword. In his richly critical foreword, Paul C. Gorski steps back from this volume and questions what it means to publish a book of stories from White people, each of whom already has space in the public sphere to tell his or her story. With clairvoyance and zest, he reminds us of all the ways that privilege makes a book like this possible and of the many voices of people of color that merit, but do not have access to, such a platform. Using himself as an example, Paul charts a new accounting of White privileges, the privileges of the White antiracist activist who benefits from what he calls *institutional likeability*. With humility and a keen awareness of power dynamics, Paul models the critical self-reflection that antiracist action requires of White people. Finally, in an endorsement made all the more powerful by his critique, he reminds us that White people need to do their own work, and in that respect, there's a lot to be learned from those who came before.

Gorski is the founder of EdChange and is an associate professor at George Mason University, where he led the development of the new social justice and human rights program. He is a longtime activist, educator, and writer, focusing on social justice issues ranging from poverty and racism to animal rights and environmental justice. He lives in Falls Church, Virginia, with his cats, Unity and Buster.

Chapter 1: "Real-izing Personal and Systemic Privilege: Reflection Becoming Action." One's earliest education in racism often happens in childhood. It is a lesson so rooted in and supported by social norms that it can crystallize in a moment and take a lifetime to unlearn. Because so much of this early training happens in childhood, adults attempting to live an antiracist life have to be willing to grapple with subconscious messages they absorbed early. Peggy McIntosh shares the earliest racist messages she received as a child. In the rest of the chapter, she demonstrates how quiet, self-reflection, and meditation can be a form of action, as it helped her recognize and root out those early messages. By asking herself probing questions, and being open to the answers that arose when she did, she developed her framework for the concept of White privilege that has transformed how race is talked about in the 21st century. She shares her process of learning, which took place internally and externally, a process she continues to this day.

McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women and founder of the SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) project on Inclusive Curriculum, which she codirected with Emily Style for its first 25 years. She is author of more than 40 articles including "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (McIntosh, 1989), one of the earliest and best-known works that challenges White people to recognize White privilege.

Chapter 2: “The Joy of Antiracism.” This chapter gives readers the unique opportunity to know James W. Loewen personally before and after he went to Mississippi, where so much of his worldview became what it is today. We walk in his shoes as he struggles internally with the question of how to demonstrate to an elderly black man that he means no harm, even though in Mississippi in the 1960s, his whiteness would say otherwise. He offers sage advice that stays, including the personal note that he never regrets a time he spoke up, only the times he didn’t speak. From a lifetime of battling white supremacy, overtly in Mississippi and more covertly in Vermont, he has learned countless lessons that remain critical today.

Loewen won the first annual Sydney S. Spivack Award of the American Sociological Association for sociological research applied to intergroup relations and was the first white person to win its Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award, named for three famous black sociologists. He taught at perhaps the blackest college in America, Tougaloo, and perhaps the whitest, the University of Vermont. He has been an expert witness in more than 50 civil rights, civil liberties, and employment discrimination cases. His book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Loewen, 2007) is the best-selling work by a living sociologist. *Sundown Towns* (Loewen, 2005) showed that entire cities and counties across the United States, especially in the North, kept out African Americans and sometimes other groups; some still do. Loewen continues to work to “out” all these places and help them transcend their racist past.

Chapter 3: “Knapsacks and Baggage: Why the World Needs This Book.” If you ever felt confused about the term *intersectionality*, read this chapter. In a uniquely succinct and personal description of intersectionality, Abby L. Ferber shows how a critical lens on gender and religion supported her to acknowledge and work against racial privilege, which she benefited from. Sharing personal stories to demonstrate the violence of oppression she experienced directly, Abby clearly demonstrates how the intersectionality of oppressions does damage to everyone. She also shows the converse, how her personal work fighting oppression has been liberating to her on a very personal level with regard to sexism and anti-Semitism.

Ferber is professor of sociology and women’s and ethnic studies and director of the Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She is the author of *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Ferber, 1999).

Chapter 4: “The Political Is Personal.” Contextualizing his life in key moments of political history, Kevin Jennings demonstrates how the personal is political, and the political is personal. Through family battles on his White brother’s over marriage to a Black woman, his mother’s struggles with sexism, and his uncle’s battle to live as a gay man in a homophobic society, Jennings

learned about in justice firsthand and was inspired to fight it. He uses his life experiences as a White gay man to show how personal and familial relationships inspire and sustain him to work for social and racial justice. He describes how he became an activist in spite of his upbringing in a family that opposed integration and equal rights.

Jennings is executive director of the Arcus Foundation, which is dedicated to the idea that people can live in harmony with one another and the natural world. He has worked as a high school history teacher; was founding executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a national education organization focused on making schools safe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, staff, and families; and was assistant deputy secretary for Safe and Drug Free Schools in the Obama administration. He is the author of six books.

Chapter 5: "Calling out the Wizard." With honesty and humor, Heather W. Hackman describes the painful process of unlearning racism during a college experience where ideas that she took for granted as true were clearly unwelcome. She does not mince words as she describes the coercive pressure she felt early in life to collude with racism to minimize the abuse she experienced at home. In addition to sharing powerful examples that are rooted in her own life, Hackman explains complicated concepts like privilege, whiteness, and the idea of living a racially just life in succinct and incisive ways. Her story demonstrates the expansive possibilities for unlearning oppression and using early experiences of racist training to better know and fight injustice.

Hackman is the founder and president of Hackman Consulting Group. She has taught in higher education for 19 years; consulted nationally and internationally on social justice issues for more than a decade; and has published in the areas of social justice education, racial justice, and climate change and climate justice. Her most current research, writing, and training addresses climate change adaptation and mitigation through a race, class, and gender justice lens.

Chapter 6: "Love, Social Justice, Careers, and Philanthropy." At 87 years old, inspired by the New Deal spirit of their youth, Andrea and Alan Rabinowitz have lived a life dedicated to an ethos of using one's privilege to better the lives of others. Longtime supporters of the WPC, this dynamic couple has worked for incremental change in the United States by supporting small grassroots organizations with money and know-how. Having grown up in a national context that is unfamiliar at best and completely foreign at worst to most readers, they use their chapter to explain the historical influences of the early 1920s and 1930s on their social activism. They learned early that no matter what they do, whether early childhood education or urban planning, people from the communities they plan to have an impact on must

be consulted and involved. This wisdom translated into making Alan and Andrea effective philanthropists who learned how to make small contributions enormously effective for grassroots groups trying to fundamentally change our society. They also share incredibly valuable—and hard to come by—words of wisdom on managing money in social change organizations.

Andrea and Alan Rabinowitz were both born in Manhattan just before the Great Depression, went to progressive schools and liberal colleges, met after World War II, and married in 1951. Andrea's career has always involved children in her work as teacher, clinical social worker, and child therapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, after 1971, in Seattle, Washington. Alan moved from the world of finance and economic development to become a university professor, teaching and writing about urban economics. All through these years they have been involved, sometimes individually and sometimes together, with social justice organizations and activities.

Chapter 7: "Learning to Become an Antiracist Racist." Believing that White people will always benefit from racism, no matter how much they work against it, Christine E. Sleeter shares her journey of learning to be an "anti-racist racist" (Katz, 2003). She writes of a segregated childhood and life in her early 20s, demonstrating how race affected every aspect of her life, even though she didn't know it at the time. She shares the different pathways to growth in her life, including her work designing multicultural curricula in multiracial teams. With humility and wisdom, she describes the lessons that antiracist racists might need to be effective allies and collaborators on multiracial teams as well as as allies to other Whites working for racial justice.

Sleeter is professor emerita in the College of Professional Studies at California State University Monterey Bay, where she was a founding faculty member. Her research focuses on antiracist multicultural education, ethnic studies, and teacher education. She has published more than 100 articles and 19 books, including *Power, Teaching, and Teacher Education* (Sleeter, 2013) and *Diversifying the Teacher Workforce* (Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2015).

Chapter 8: "What's a Nice White Girl to Do in an Unjust World Like This? Guideposts on My Social Justice Journey." In this chapter, Diane J. Goodman shares five guideposts for living an antiracist life, providing powerful examples from her life, including her involvement with an anti-incarceration group in her community. In the midst of discussing her guideposts Goodman demonstrates the joy that living an antiracist life can bring, sharing with readers that the path, while joyful, clearly is not well traveled or straightforward. Her guideposts make the road less traveled more navigable for those coming behind her.

Goodman has been addressing issues of diversity and social justice for more than 30 years as a trainer, consultant, facilitator, professor, speaker,

author, and activist. As a trainer and consultant, she has worked with a wide range of organizations, community groups, schools, and universities. Diane has been a professor at several universities in education, psychology, social work, and women's studies. She is the author of *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People From Privileged Groups* (Goodman, 2001) and other publications. Her website can be found at <http://www.dianegoodman.com>.

Chapter 9: "White Water." Using the metaphor of white water, Gary R. Howard takes us through his journey from a *Leave It to Beaver* childhood to a college transformation in which he lived in a Black community and actively participated in the local civil rights movement. He traces his personal transformation from ignorance to a missionary mentality desiring to help the less fortunate to investment in empowering individuals to, finally, the realization that as a White man, he needs to work with White folks. His life experience is replete with powerful lessons that emerge from the risks he took and the relationships he built, which he relates with humility and candor.

Howard has 35 years of experience working on issues of civil rights, social justice, equity, education, and diversity, including 30 years as the founder of the REACH (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage) Center for Multicultural Education. His book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (Howard, 2006) is considered a groundbreaking work examining issues of privilege, power, and the role of White leaders and educators in a multicultural society. His current work centers on conducting Deep Equity Leadership Institutes, which support schools, universities, and other organizations in strengthening the cultural responsiveness of their practices and building the internal capacity to implement long-term systemic change strategies for achieving greater equity and social justice in their outcomes. This work is documented in his book *We Can't Lead Where We Won't Go: An Educator's Guide to Equity* (Howard, 2014).

Chapter 10: "Looking Back and Moving Forward." Frances E. Kendall paints an intimate and honest portrait of the racism she learned at her family's knees as a child and the process she went through to re-learn and challenge it as she grew up, learning other ways of seeing the world. She describes the resistance she encountered in challenging the racism that mainstream society had come to take for granted, including that of the beloved classic children's book author Roald Dahl. The lessons she shares are clearly borne of a life intimately familiar with the overt racism of the Deep South and the more insidious and normalized aspects of racism that manifests in the North. She provides lessons for tackling both.

Kendall is one of the best-known advocates for racial justice and equity. Her workshops are always standing room only. She is the author of

Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race (Kendall, 2012) and *Diversity in the Classroom* (Kendall, 1996).

Chapter 11: “Working Within the System to Change the System.” When she was a young girl, Julie O’Mara’s family had few professional aspirations for her, which motivated her to be successful in her career while also changing the field of business to be more accessible to women and people of color. She comes to the field of racial and social justice through business and uses this chapter to describe the myriad possibilities for creating change in the for-profit sector. O’Mara’s contribution is especially valuable to this volume as she demonstrates alternative routes to social change outside academia and the nonprofit world. She gives advice for readers who might not otherwise consider business or politics, two arenas in which White antiracists are very much needed.

O’Mara is president of O’Mara and Associates, an organizational development consulting firm specializing in leadership, facilitation, and the managing diversity process. She is coauthor of *Managing Workforce 2000: Gaining the Diversity Advantage* (Jamieson & O’Mara, 1991) and author of *Diversity Activities and Training Designs* (O’Mara, 1994).

Chapter 12: “Inside and Outside: How Being an Ashkenazi Jew Illuminates and Complicates the Binary of Racial Privilege.” “Off White” is how Warren J. Blumenfeld finds himself racialized, not by choice, necessarily, but by all the ways he is seen and responded to as a Jew of European heritage in the United States and in Eastern Europe. In this chapter, Blumenfeld traces the personal and collective experience of being an Ashkenazi Jew in the United States and comes to the conclusion that he is White, but not quite.

Blumenfeld is coeditor of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams et al., 2013), and coeditor of *Investigating Christian Privilege and Religious Oppression in the United States* (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2008). He also serves as an editorial blogger for the *Huffington Post*, the Good Men Project, and *Tikkun Daily*.

Chapter 13: “Of White and Hearing Privilege.” Growing up deaf in a mixed deaf and hearing family led to a unique identity for Jane K. Fernandes and positioned her as an outsider in both the hearing world and the deaf world. In what she calls “crashing intersectionality,” she demonstrates how hearing privilege and White privilege collide in painful and sometimes devastating ways. She teaches hearing people about hearing privilege but doesn’t stop there. She challenges the deaf community to see and be responsible for the racism and White privilege that does not stop existing simply because a community is affected by other oppressions. She demonstrates the dangerous ramifications of having a single lens on oppression and the difficult importance of honoring and challenging all oppressions simultaneously.

Fernandes was selected by the board of trustees to serve as the ninth president of Gallaudet University, the second deaf president and the first woman in this role. A national and international protest ensued around deaf identity issues that intersected with race and gender—creating complex dynamics encapsulated in a rallying cry that she was “not deaf enough.” As a result of the protest, the board of trustees rescinded her contract before she took office. The next year she began a successful six-year term as provost at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. On July 1, 2014, she became the ninth president of Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She is the first woman and first deaf person to serve in this role. Her life’s work focuses on creating inclusive academic excellence.

Chapter 14: “Hands-On Activism.” A master of naming, simplifying, and explaining the complex layers of oppression in U.S. society, Paul Kivel offers wisdom on how to sustain a life focused on activism and change, drawing from his life, which focused on just that. He shows us the process he went through with multiple different projects as he refined his own misconceptions and dug more deeply into webs of intersecting oppressions to address violence and abuse at its very roots. In this last chapter of the book, just as you find yourself asking what you can do to fight racism and how, Paul demonstrates what action can look like and how to stay involved so that one’s engagement continually deepens and becomes more informed and more effective over time. He demonstrates how a person might take action simultaneously on the individual, group, and system levels in a way that is not theoretical or abstract.

Kivel has been a social justice educator, activist, and writer for more than 40 years. His work provides people with the understanding to become involved in social justice work and the tools to become more effective allies in community struggles to end oppression and injustice and to transform organizations and institutions. Kivel is the author of numerous curricula and books, including *Uprooting Racism* (Kivel, 2011) and *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony* (Kivel, 2013). His website can be found at www.paulkivel.com.

Afterword: “Resisting Whiteness/Bearing Witness.” The book ends with searing, image-rich, illuminating stories—vignette after vignette—of whiteness from Michelle Fine. Using stories from her life, her family, and her research, she paints a complicated picture of the many sides of whiteness. From Ellis Island to Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, to Morningside Park, New York, from Wedowie, Alabama, to Brooklyn Family Court, she traces the value, power, audacity, and farce of whiteness. She asks again why the world needs this book and answers, “We do,” counting herself among the needy, because “it is a self-help manual for recidivist Whites” (p. 172); because “we need to

work through all the White muscle memory that has attached to our personal biographies” (p. 167); because “when the question, What do you like about being White? is raised, we have no words” (p. 167); and because we “are repeat offenders of privilege, eager to break the habit, and hungry to engage in antiracist justice movements” (p. 167).

Fine is a founding faculty member of the Public Science Project and professor of critical psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, which produces critical scholarship for use in social policy debates and for organizing movements for educational equity and human rights. She is well known for her work in community development with an emphasis on urban youth. Her voice is prominent in classrooms across the country as students delve into her honest yet challenging work.

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