

## **Excerpts from *White Men Challenging Racism,* *35 Personal Stories***

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Included are

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### **Excerpts from the **Introduction** and **Preface****

White Men Challenging Racism is a book about the personal experiences of 35 white men who are trying to live a just life, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. To varying degrees, the white men in this book all think of what they do as simply what they must do, as if it is no longer a choice; they are just living their lives. And, the task of challenging racism and other forms of oppression is integrated into their day to day existence in such a way that their lives are permeated with questions of justice, personally and politically. Challenging racism is, for these men, just living. This book is an attempt to provide some space for the reflections of a group of white men who we believe are living just lives in many different ways.

The narratives include incidents from, and comments about, complex and rich lives, and reflections on anti-racist activity. Some of the narratives speak about critical events that led to a life of activism; some of the narratives speak about blind spots when it comes to racism or another form of oppression; some of the narratives speak about offenses in relationships and mistakes in strategy; some of the narratives speak about regrets of actions not taken. And there are expressions of pride in describing accomplishments and victories.

These narratives are like photographs. It is as if each of these white men is momentarily presenting themselves to us and you. These narratives are not comprehensive life histories. The white men profiled in this book made decisions about what they wanted to reveal about themselves and what they didn't want to reveal about themselves. We encouraged them and sometimes challenged them to reveal more about their most favorite and least favorite sides of themselves.

Early on in this project, we knew that we didn't want to write a book that critiques the lives of other white men. The three of us have been socialized quite well to study others, find their flaws, point out those flaws in a patronizing way, and proceed to tell them what they need to do differently. We decided instead to let other white men speak for themselves and place ourselves in the role of listeners and learners. The methodology we chose for doing this was to find white men who others describe, or who describe themselves, as challenging racism; interview them face to face; transcribe and edit parts of the interview so that it reads as a first person narrative, with an occasional question or comment from us; rewriting sections for clarity and arranging the material for dramatic emphasis; and lastly, review and edit the narrative with the interviewee so that it reflects

what he wants and is willing to say about himself. We were clear that we wanted this to be a collaborative process.

In looking for white men to interview, we wanted a diverse group in terms of age, place of residence, sexual orientation, class background and current class identity, spiritual tradition and practice, racial and ethnic identities of the people of color they see themselves in alliance with, and type of activities they do to challenge racism. We wanted “experts” who know that they are on a journey of learning about themselves and others and the world. We wanted white men who were willing to talk about their accomplishments and failures, who could be both proud and humble. We wanted white men who would be willing to be vulnerable in print. For the most part, we wanted to profile white men who are relatively unknown outside of their geographical communities or field of work. Notable exceptions are Herbert Aptheker, Stetson Kennedy, Si Kahn, and Richard Lapchick, although they are hardly household names.

Writing the book has been a labor of love. When we began this project six years ago, our primary interest was meeting other white men like ourselves. We wanted to reduce our own feelings of isolation and separation by being in the company of other anti-racist white men and learning from them. But as we continued to conduct interviews, and talked about the project to other white men and to people of color and white women, we were encouraged to publish the material. We were told again and again that the material we were collecting was unique and important. We came to realize that what we had learned could impact others’ lives and have significant political impact.

And so, we wrote this book for both personal and political reasons. We wanted to break the isolation we sometimes feel when we speak up and act against racism and inspire others to speak up and challenge racism. We wanted to find white men who could be mentors and teachers and supporters in our journey and others’ journeys. We wanted to learn how other white men conceptualize and go about the task of challenging racism and then share that information so that others can benefit. There were so many questions we had: Where do other white men find the sustenance to continue challenging racism over the long haul? What’s the role of spirituality in their lives and work? How do they manage their relationships with other white men? How do they build trust with people of color and navigate through the inevitable mistakes they make in those relationships? How do they make choices about what to do in the face of feeling overwhelmed by all that needs to be done?

We wanted to honor the white men who have come before us, the white men who are our peers, and the white men in the generations following us. Although some of the white men we interviewed had parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles to inspire them to challenge racism, the three of us have for the most part not had the benefit of growing up in a family where there were models for resisting racism. Nor have we, for the most part, known about the history of white men who have challenged racism in the United States. We saw this project as a way to address that void in our lives. We had a need to know that there were, and are, and will be white men challenging racism. James Loewen’s Foreword does a wonderful job of teaching us a little bit about the rich history of white male

resistance to racism in the United States. A few of the white men whose narratives appear in the book are old enough to be our fathers; some are our contemporaries and even friends; some are young enough to be our sons.

Although we have had, and continue to have, women and men of color and white women in our lives who willingly and enthusiastically serve as mentors and teachers and supporters, we have realized that we need the support and mentorship of white men. So, in many ways, this book is for white men. But many people of color and white women have told us that they found value in these narratives. Our wish is that all readers use these stories for self reflection, dialogue, and action.

We are pleased to be able to share this work with you.

*Cooper Thompson, Emmett Schaefer, and Harry Brod, April 2002*

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### **Movement Elders**

Herbert Aptheker, 86, radical historian, San Jose, CA

*You have to inform yourself of the realities of history, of what slavery was, of what Black people, especially Black women, went through. And you have to learn about the post-slavery, so-called freedom. ... And knowing that we white people are responsible for the horror. Therefore, if we have some conscience, we should be very important in eliminating the horror. That's my life.*

Stetson Kennedy, 85, journalist and Klan infiltrator, Jacksonville, FL

*In the 1940's ... I was infiltrating the Klan and feeding the minutes to both Drew Pearson and to the producers of the radio show Superman, who were doing a series, "Superman versus the Grand Dragon. As fast as the Klan would change its passwords for entrance to its meetings, I'd send 'em on up to the radio producers, and kids all over the country would all have them the following week. In the minutes of the meetings I included the names of the businessmen and the politicians and the judges and lawmen who were in attendance. After their names were broadcast, they never showed up again at the meetings.*

Art Branscombe, 81, fought for a racially integrated neighborhood, Denver, CO

*We had to make it possible for Blacks to live where ever they wanted to live, for Christ's sake. This was just a matter of ordinary humanity and justice and whatnot. That's what did it for me. That's changed me from just another middle class white guy trying to preserve property values into an increasingly militant housing integrationist.*

Horace Seldon, 77, coalition builder, Boston, MA

*The Sunday after Dr. King's assassination in 1968. . . when I walked into the kitchen, Grandma Lushbough was ironing. I said to her, "I know what I must do with my life. I must work on the white problem." . . . You don't rush in, eager to help, eager to find the role – that wanting to rush in with the answer is sort of built into the psyche of a lot of us white men. You have to just let the relationship develop, you listen, and there comes a chance to say, "I can do that task." And you do it well, and eventually they'll begin to ask and trust you.*

Pat Cusick, 70, community organizer, Boston, MA

*The other two kids picked up rocks, threw them at the kid on the bicycle, and called him "nigger." . . . But the kid on the bike, who was smaller than us, he had guts. He stopped, got off his bike, and gave us a tongue lashing. . . The actions of that Black kid certainly affected my life, piercing through my white privilege and the whole historical consciousness of growing up white in Alabama. . . When I was sent to the chain gang in prison . . . I told the Captain of the chain gang, using my best University manner, "Segregation is evil and I can't participate in it. You have a segregated camp. I just want to inform you of this. I'm not going to work and I'm not going to eat while I'm here."*

Nat Yalowitz, 70, social worker and organizer, New York City, NY

*Growing up meant living hard poverty, being a witness to racial segregation, war and social conflict. Fighting racial injustice and social class conflict became an essential part of my living. Being a left wing Jewish man meant participation in the movement to free oppressed people. Picket lines, marches on Washington – they were as essential as playing stickball as a kid.*

### **Grassroots Organizing**

Jesse Wimberley, 43, organizes working class white men, West End, NC

*What fool would go up to a white male and say, "You ought to quit your good-paying job and try to do social change and ruin your family?" . . . Where are white men going to get support for change?*

Jim Hansen, 42, Executive Director of United Vision for Idaho, Boise, ID

*I joined the Chamber of Commerce in Boise. I have access to people in power because of my privilege. I wanted to exercise that privilege in a way that opens up greater opportunities for both learning and power for people of color and white women. . . I'm in a Rotary Club, too. The question is whether and how you raise issues. . . My role is to back up people of color and white women as they stick their necks out.*

Chip Berlet, 52, researches right wing groups, Cambridge, MA

*I learned two things from this experience. One, hate groups victimize communities that are in crisis and turn them towards white supremacy by building an identity among the young men. . . Two, you can organize essentially prejudiced people to fight this hate and that's a victory, even if on a very tiny level. You can't go in and eradicate white privilege overnight. If it means ten years to take a neighborhood from violence to peace, leaving unresolved lots of issues of prejudice, that's still worth it.*

Joe Fahey, 44, union official and labor organizer, Watsonville, CA

*I know that there are times when I act racist and am perceived as racist. But it doesn't work for me to second guess myself. It paralyzes me. So I just throw myself at things, sometimes without thinking about it much, sometimes without much planning. Sometimes it works, sometimes it's a mistake. I guess I've always trusted that if my mistakes are big enough, then somebody will see them and stop me, or I'll realize it myself. And I try not to blame myself too much for my own racism. I try just noticing it more.*

Mike McMahon, 60, community organizer with Central American immigrants, Houston, TX

*Probably people think that I have some affinity for Hispanics or immigrants. I definitely have developed that, but it wasn't something that motivated me to get involved. It was just that this was my community. . . A couple of years ago, I decided that I had to make a commitment to turning power over to the community. It's not going to happen by itself. If you just say, "Well, we invited them, but they didn't show up," it will never happen.... I've learned to respect the leadership abilities of the people in the community.*

## ***Art and Politics***

David Attyah, 34, graphic artist and founder of THINK AGAIN, San Francisco, CA

*Being a queer man has really helped me understand the "near to our bodies" effects of oppression and to imagine how people of color or women feel oppression rub against their skin. . . It's about who's following you through grocery stores, how you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning, and whether you believe there's any hope for you surviving in your life. . . I'm an Arab American. Culturally and ethnically and personally, I feel very alienated from white culture. Americans are simultaneously raced and not raced.*

Si Kahn, 57, singer/songwriter and Executive Director of Grassroots Leadership, Charlotte, NC

*Being Jewish centers me in history. I claim a white identity because, functionally, I enjoy white privilege. But in conversations with white men who do not have an ethnic self-identification, I find a difference in being Jewish. . . It includes a responsibility to stand with people who are being pushed around, to speak up, to try to be useful. . . Every religion teaches these values. But my container is Jewishness.*

Steve Bailey, 43, Executive Director of Jump-Start Theatre, San Antonio, TX

*Sometimes people of color see me as one of the few "good white men," even though I do things that are racist. And even though I want to be accepted as a good white man, I don't like the dichotomy that gets set up about who is the better white person. . . Sometimes I think to myself, "There are a*

*few good white people I happen to know in this town and the rest are bad.” Even though I know that is really dangerous thinking, I do it. ... I hate demonizing straight white men and I still do it!*

Tim Wise, 33, writer, lecturer, social critic, and activist, Nashville, TN

*I'm not fighting racism for black and brown folks: they can and will, as always, save themselves. My role is in the white community. . . I am beginning to think that whites are so dependent on people of color that we wouldn't know what to do without them... If there were no Black and Brown folks around then whites would have no one to blame but themselves for the crime that occurred; no one to blame but themselves when they didn't get the job they wanted; no one to blame but themselves when their lives turned out to be less than they expected.*

Billy Yalowitz, 42, Community-based Performance Director and Choreographer, Philadelphia, PA

*We know very little about humility, the loss of community, and how isolated we are from each other. That's a cost of whiteness, and of being middle class, as we construct it, that you're special, that your knowledge separates you. You think you're smarter than other people. What a disability, to think that you're smarter.*

### ***Challenging the System from Within***

John Allocca, 39, bilingual Spanish teacher, Boston, MA

*I say very honestly (to my students), “You have every right to have doubts about me and a lot of other white folks, because we, as a people in general, have done you and your people wrong” . . . but there have been important allies. Schools don't teach about John Brown to white kids or kids of color. . . I tell my students that I grew up in a racist society, and that I've changed because of my experiences living and working with people from different communities. When I was their age, I was a scared, confused, young white boy who would never want to hang out with any of them.*

Bill Johnston, 60, former Boston, MA, police officer, Emerald Island, NC

*I have a vision that when we arrive at the Pearly Gates, we're going to find out that God is everything that we're not. If God made us all, then he is all of us. At my moment of death, the God who comes to judge me will be young, gay, Jewish, African American. And she is going to say, “How the hell did you treat me?”*

A.T. Miller, 43, teacher and director of multiculturalism at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

*When I was director of Africana Studies at Union, I took it as my responsibility to teach and lead in an African centered style. . . There is no ebony tower, this will always be community linked, always accessible, knowledge and research will always be shared. . . I'm very uncomfortable in an all white environment . . . It makes me wonder if this is a hostile environment. Why would this be all white?*

Ken Kimerling, 56, lawyer for Puerto Rican and Asian American civil rights, New York City, NY

*I do see myself as supportive; I'm more involved in supporting things that are happening than leading them. I've just sort of figured out what I can do, and do well, and I'm not interested in leading something. I know what my strengths are, and that's not necessarily one of them. I feel I'm a better team player than the captain of the team. ... I certainly live my job – most of my waking hours, like everyone else, are spent working. But this work is not something that I woke up one day and said, “I've got to go out and change the conditions of garment workers in Chinatown.”*

Monte Piliawsky, 57, teacher and historian, Detroit, MI

*When I explain racism to a class and they begin to see for the first time that they have been victimized and how race is used to divide whites and Blacks for the benefit of capitalism and for*

*their disadvantage, I feel alive. . . I think that whites want to be challenged. Deep down, most of us don't think much of ourselves. We don't think we're very good people. But we want to be better. We want some redemption. So we like someone to confront us ourselves and maybe, in this way, we will find a way to work through our insecurities.*

Lonnie Lusardo, 54, consultant and community organizer, Seattle, WA

*I don't go around singing "We are the world" -- I get pissed off at people, I'm human -- but I often think, "Wouldn't it be great if everybody at an organization felt as though they owned the company, truly owned the company, and enjoyed it?" If everybody who worked at an organization truly loved their job, what would the productivity be like? What would the profit be like?*

Lee Formwalt, 51, historian and Dean at an historically Black college, Albany, GA

*At that time I wasn't yet aware of my own racism and missed the obvious irony of changing my position because of what a young white Englishman said when I had been discounting the same thing when local Black people had been telling it to me....As my kids got older, I began to hear more about the fact that they were unhappy with my lack of sensitivity to their needs. They thought that I was more concerned with racial sensitivity than their particular concerns. That was a tough issue for me to deal with, and still is today.*

Nibs Stroupe, 55, minister of a multiracial congregation, Decatur, GA

*This work is a calling for me on a theological level... The people who taught me about God were strong, racist people. But they also taught me that God is the power of love.... My calling is to share that kind of love.*

## ***Challenging the System from the Margins***

John Cole Vodicka, 53, founder of the Prison and Jail Project, Americus, Georgia

*Victories are few and far between, but sometimes we have a victory in the sense that something changes. A sheriff is run out of office, and for an instant, something is better for those who are in that jailhouse.... Even if those folks aren't run out of town or office, we can shake things up and get people asking questions.... That is a big part of what keeps me going.*

Richard Lapchick, 56, advocates racial and gender justice in sports and in society, Orlando, FL

*(My Dad) had brought Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton onto the New York Knicks basketball team – that's what the hanging and picketing and calls were all about. 28 years later, in 1978, my own son, who was five years old and named after my Dad, came to me one day. He asked me, "Daddy, are you a nigger lover?" I stepped back, paused for a few seconds, and asked him, "Joey, what do you think that is?" "I don't know, but some mean man just called me on the phone and told me you were one." . . . They attacked me and caused liver damage, kidney damage, a hernia, and concussion. And they carved the word "nigger" on my stomach with a pair of office scissors.*

Chris Shuey, 46, environmental health specialist, Albuquerque, NM

*As a middle aged guy, looking back on my life, I often wonder if it was a good decision to leave Ohio as a young man. Whether it was good or not, it's the choice I made and have lived with. But sometimes I feel like maybe there's part of my life that's now missing because I'm not connected to the land where I was raised.... As a result of living here, and being with the Navajo, I've been able to appreciate what it means to be a land based people.*

Terry Kupers, 58, psychiatrist, prison activist, and author, Oakland, CA

*Black people were saying, "You know, we're not saying we don't want you. We're just saying that we want you to go organize white folks. We need you to do that, and you need to listen to us." I thought that was perfectly reasonable. . . The Panthers asked me to work at their clinic. . . I taught a class to Movement activists on health and how to handle any emergency.*

Rick Whaley, 51, Native American treaty rights advocate, Milwaukee, WI

*I think about skills I have from raising a family and how that's connected to building a political organization. Or skills I learned in building a marriage that are helpful when I'm facilitating a meeting. . . . Being an interracial family is connected to my getting involved up north with the Witness for Nonviolence for Treaty and Rural Rights in Northern Wisconsin. It was a way to pay back what I owed to the Southern Civil Rights Movement for making it possible for interracial families like ours to live in relative safety.*

Jim Murphy, 54, firefighter and advocate for children's rights in Southeast Asia, Boston, MA

*One of the other fire fighters figured out that I was gay. . . . It evolved into harassment. My gear was sabotaged. . . . "One of the reasons I'm sitting down with you [Congressman Joe Moakley told East Timor Action Network activists] is because that fire fighter over there has been writing me and contacting my office for several years about East Timor." . . . I'm very concerned about the tentacles of the child sex trade. On my trips to East Timor, I speak with religious activists, NGO's, women activists, community leaders.*

## **The Next Generation**

Sean Cahill, 38, researcher with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, New York City, NY

*The most important mission I have is challenging racism within the gay community. . . . I believe that race is a part of everything. It's part of the way we talk about "safety:" is this a "good" neighborhood or a "bad" neighborhood? There's all sorts of code language. Race really permeates so much of the way we live, but it's this 800 pound gorilla that never gets addressed head on.*

Tobin Miller Shearer, 36, director of a Mennonite anti-racism initiative, Akron, PA

*I can't talk about doing this work without talking about my spirituality. . . . I don't know how other folks do this work without having a spiritual core.... My own journey in taking deliberate, proactive, public stances on anti-racism in my own community has only been made possible out of my spiritual journey.*

Jason Wallach, 32, grassroots coordinator for the Mexico Solidarity Network, Chicago, IL

*When I was 17, we were doing punk percussion protests against apartheid at the South African Embassy in Washington DC. It was a concrete way for those of us doing anti-racism work to get in the streets and manifest how we felt. . . . The Zapatistas have always said, "Before you help me, go back to your own community, organize there, and do the work of liberation in your own community." If my liberation has been linked to my ability to "get real," the function with other white people is to help them achieve that, to "get real."*

Bill Vandenberg, 31, co-Executive Director of the Colorado Progressive Coalition, Denver, CO

*I'm proud about being a co-director who is always asking "What are we doing about the racism in our own institution? What are we doing to challenge white privilege in this supposedly progressive organization?" . . . I don't like the way that whiteness has manifested itself in our society. I am profoundly displeased with what my culture has perpetuated in the United States . . . And so I see my role as especially important in being what someone on a right wing talk show called me, a race traitor. In some ways, I wear that as a badge of honor, that he thinks of me a race traitor.*

Matt Reese, 26, community activist, Louisville, KY

*I'd never been face to face with the Klan members like that. . . . They see themselves as fighting for the white race, but they don't speak for me, and I'm part of the white race. You carry everybody that you know with you when you're there. I speak for all these people when I go there -- my mom, my dad, my family, my friends and their beliefs -- I'm speaking for every organization I represent. . . . There's a rush to that because I know I have them behind me in spirit.*

## Profile of **Billy Yalowitz**

*Billy's background is as a performing artist in dance and theater. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He teaches community based arts at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University and has been a teacher of Re-evaluation Counseling for many years. In the summer of 2001, he was a delegate to the United Nations World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa. He's 42.*

*He grew up in a neighborhood of New York City called Chelsea in Lower Manhattan where there was a rich mix of cultures: African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Jewish, Greek, and Irish Catholic. Billy moved to Philadelphia in 1990 to the neighborhood of Mt. Airy. Intrigued by its racial diversity, he developed a theatrical production based on interviews with residents, Joshua's Wall, which was performed in June, 1995. At the time, he described Joshua's Wall as an opportunity to learn the story of the neighborhood. "People took very courageous stands in building an integrated community. To inherit such a community is a gift, but it needs to be rebuilt continually in terms of building relationships. Once relationships are built, you can use that as a base to tackle the ongoing struggles. There is a quote from the Passover Haggadah, that '...in every generation we ought to regard ourselves as though we had personally been liberated from slavery.' We have a chance to build that kind of life for ourselves. Each new generation has the chance to take that on."*

The University of Pennsylvania hired me to teach a course about theater and community. I knew I wanted to create a performance like I'd done in other Philadelphia neighborhoods that would be based on oral histories. A faculty member at the University told me about a neighborhood called the Black Bottom that used to be adjacent to the University, just north of the campus. It was a thriving working class African American neighborhood, like many neighborhoods in northern cities, that really began to take shape in the 1920's and 30's with the migration from the south. By 1969 the neighborhood was flattened, demolished by urban renewal. Some of my African American friends from the Black Bottom have sardonically called that process "Negro removal."

The Black Bottom is now a community in exile. As a Jew, I know about exile. My background is left wing Jewish from New York City – that's also a community that had, in a sense, gone into exile. The story of my anti-racism work begins there. Some of the really important anti-racist work in the United States was pioneered by left wing Jews in the 1920's and 30's as part of the labor movement and an early wave of Civil Rights Movement. I was born in 1959 and grew up with this legacy of anti-racism work. I inherited that.

Folks who lived in the Black Bottom now live all over the Philadelphia area and beyond. After 30 or 40 years, they're still in close contact with each other, elders now, in their 60's and 70's and 80's. They've wanted their story told for a long time. They're remarkably generous while trying to figure out what restitution might mean for them.

So, I decided to create a performance about the Black Bottom. The project is a three way partnership between the University, the Black Bottom community, and a local high

school -- University City High School -- that was built on the ground where the Black Bottom used to be. The goal has been to give voice to that story, and in doing that, to create a vehicle where Penn students could learn about building relationships and listening to people, and then creating a performance that's based on the people's stories. This project has transformed the students' lives. It's very clear to me and to them that this has been a very powerful part of their education. I think we've done well with the project. I mean, here they are paying my salary, raising money for me to tell a story about how the University has been perpetuating institutional racism in the neighborhoods around it.

Penn students and faculty, and the students and teachers at the high school, were for the most part entirely unaware of what happened to the Black Bottom. The Penn students are primarily middle and owning class white, some students of color, but they've been actively taught to fear the neighborhood that they live in. The University has acted like many urban universities act, as a kind of colonial power in that neighborhood.

My advisors on the project are always cautioning me when I speak about this. Stanley Edwards, one of the men from the Black Bottom, once said to me, "Now don't go getting yourself in trouble over us, Billy." He told me about being in the Korean War and how some Black soldiers wanted to challenge decisions about not getting to go on leave and other privileges that white soldiers had. A guy who wanted to advocate for them was a Jewish sergeant. Stanley's telling me this story as a cautionary tale. He said, "We told the sergeant, 'Let us fight this battle.'" Stanley understood that a Jew sticking his neck out in that way in a gentile military institution would put him in a tough position.

So here I am, I'm adjunct faculty in the arts at Penn, one of the most marginal characters on the faculty. When I walk over to the University City High School to introduce this project, I'm a Penn professor. I have this "great idea" about the Black Bottom. I've come to work with the African American teachers. They come on board, almost in spite of themselves, because the work is driven by a story that's very familiar to them.

But, boy, I'm this professor, "expert," coming in with an agenda instead of coming in to ask, "What do you want to have happen around here? What have you been hoping for? What are some of your ideas?" I don't come in with that at all! I come with a full blown project that is accurate enough so that I can repair some of the damage that I've already caused, but some of the Black teachers won't even look at me.

What I think I understand now on a deeper level is that we come in with some kind of resource, there has to be an exchange of expertise and knowledge. I know how to get a theater performance up on its feet, and you know first hand the history of your neighborhood, and how institutional racism has made your life so difficult. We have an exchange to make there. At that point, if the agendas are compatible in some way, then it's workable.

In my case, doing anti-racism work through the arts has been very effective. It's a cultural resource that I have access to and training in. There I am at Penn, and I can get grant money, so that people in the community, without any specialized academic training in theatre, can have their voices heard through the arts. I'm interested in a lot of different levels of people who have formal academic or conservatory training working with people who have another kind of training, where there is another kind of virtuosity and esthetic or skill. For example, in my productions there's often double dutch or drill team, which

are African American street games and dance forms respectively. Or the night before the opening performance of Black Bottom, a man who grew up in the Black Bottom and became a city planner gave me a poem he'd written for the performance. He hadn't been involved at all in the performance up until then, but told me, "I heard that there's this performance and wrote a poem." It was called "Round the Way." And we included it in the performance that night.

In general, my feeling about working on racism with people of color is that it makes no sense to work directly at it, especially at first. If you can find a project to do together, the issues come up. Race can be talked about very comfortably once you prepare the white people, including myself, to build relationships. I had a seder here, and I invited many of the people from the Black Bottom. That was lovely. They came to my house because they know me. It wasn't, "Let's do a Black-Jewish thing." I don't want to disparage that too much, but finding another way to build the relationship has been much more effective for me.

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There are some scary things about doing this as a white male leader. I still don't like having Black people angry at me. At the opening night of the Black Bottom performance, every one was nervous and really wanted it to go well. I was tense, I wanted it to go well, and people were getting pissed at me. Boy, that was hard.

And now I look back on it and say to myself, "That was all right, even though it scared the shit out of me to do that." Anytime that you're working hard to produce something like that, and when there is something at stake, people are going to have all sorts of feelings come up. You're the leader and it comes out at you.

I had one high school guy, Darnell (*a pseudonym*), who had missed the rehearsal and come to the performance late. So we had assigned the understudy role to one of his classmates who got on stage. The other guy was up there, doing his lines, and Darnell was cursing in the audience, "He's fucking up my lines." So the whole audience is hearing this.

So I go over to him, say, "Darnell, we'll get you in tomorrow night when we have another performance." This is probably the one thing he's cared about in his high school year. So I tried to get him out of the auditorium, put my hand on his back. And he just about swung at me. "Take your hand off my back, Billy." Stanley saw that this was happening, came over to us, and took Darnell outside and talked to him for about 45 minutes. Darnell came back into the auditorium with Stanley to watch the performance.

Stanley wanted to tell me afterwards what had happened. He told me, "You know what I did is, I explained to him that you're a good man, that you were not trying to fuck him over. I told him, 'If you blow this thing, the police will come, and you don't want that kind of scene. Or the other thing that's going to happen, is if you keep wanting to make this kind of scene here, there's plenty of guys from the Black Bottom neighborhood whose story is being told right now, they don't want your little ass interrupting it.' Billy, when you see Darnell tomorrow, I want you to talk with him and put your arms around him." I talked it through with Darnell. The next night, Darnell performed and was pleased with himself.

Where that circles back to is the importance of building relationships and then something happens that transcends the racial divide. The elder in that case was helping keep that relationship going and helping Darnell understand that I wasn't being this oppressive white guy in this case.

*You've mentioned how Stanley has twice intervened on your behalf, once by giving you the cautionary tale and now by protecting you. What do you make of that?*

We've become friends, it's nothing more than that. I'm part of his crew now. I've listened to him and I've gained his trust. We have each other's respect. He would do that for anybody. They understand that in his neighborhood. They understand loyalty, that when you go out on a limb you need people backing you.

I think part of the damage of being white and middle class, and the individualism of your career track, is that you don't stand with other people. You don't have a union and that kind of solidarity with anybody, really. I've crafted this unique career, I've kind of figured out this unique little niche as a director. But it's really led me back into working in communities where I become part of the group and share the resources I have.

That's a lot of what I try to communicate with my students from Penn, that we know very little about humility, the loss of community, and how isolated we are from each other. That's a cost of whiteness, and of being middle class, as we construct it, that you're special, that your knowledge separates you. You think you're smarter than other people. What a disability, to think that you're smarter.

I think that, for many of us white people, the kind of learning we usually get in school is backwards. You theorize and then you try to get out and do something with it. It's not very useful. Maybe it's male, maybe it's white, maybe it's US and middle class. I think it is probably some of all those things. It's a disadvantage. It's a kind of cultural deprivation.

I was lucky. My dad was a working class Jewish guy. I walked around the streets of New York with him. He would talk with everybody. He talked to the hot dog vendors, he talked to the guys who were pumping gas. I'd ask him, "Do you know that guy?" I think I learned a sense of community from my dad, that you belong to the world.

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One of my African American high school students in the performance, Dawn, was doing well. She's very talented. She wanted to be in a scene. And I said, "No!" I don't do that much, but I snapped at her. She had been coming to all the rehearsals. One of my white students, Maggie, who has a nice relationship with Dawn, came up to me afterwards, and said to me, "You lost Dawn on that one." What I did was, within Maggie's earshot, I went over to Dawn and I said, "Dawn, that was my mistake. I'm sorry, I was worried about getting the work done. There isn't really a reason for you not to be in that scene." Making mistakes and copping to them is really important.

I can get defensive and tense about being correct. But I'm learning that I can have a life where I get to make mistakes, and that's expected, and people will back me. That's a tough one, learning that people will back you if you make mistakes.

Getting criticized when you do this work is inevitable. What equips us to go out and take these risks is that we have a place where we can go and recover from the mistakes we make. I have a support base in Re-evaluation Counseling. I have a network of people who are doing this work all over the world in different ways. So I go to these rehearsals, and I make these mistakes, and I do these things that I'm pleased with. I have a place I can go several times a week and be scared about it, or cry about it, or be very proud about it. As a result, I can actually think better about my work.

In terms of being a white male, having the capacity to notice and be able to heal from when you're terrified, that's a big deal. That's a big deal! I don't think we're going to be able to do this work very well until part of the practice of doing it is to notice how scared we are. Otherwise, I don't think you can make mistakes and really recover from them and learn from them.

Walter Palmer has been another of my advisors. He's very different from Stanley. He teaches courses in racism at the School of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania. He grew up in the Black Bottom. At first, he didn't trust me, but we continued to work together. He performed in the Black Bottom piece, ending the show with a stream of consciousness monologue and tap dance about the neighborhood. It was very powerful.

He's about 65, a huge guy, tap dancing, saying, "Billy Yalowitz, a white guy, he came into my office two years ago." All this anger was pouring out of his legs, and I'm thinking, "What's he going to say about me?" He's tapping and saying, "He came into my office, I don't trust white people, I want to see what he wanted." And then there's more anger pouring out of his legs. He left it with an ellipsis. He didn't close it at all.

He told me later that some of the Black students came up to him after the performance and told him how important it was for them that he talked about not trusting white people. He said to me, "It's a defense mechanism, because you don't know when you're going to get burned." For these young Black college students, it was important to have that acknowledged, that you get to figure out how to trust white people, and figure out what agenda is coming at you.

I was surprisingly fairly relaxed about whatever he was going to say about me. He could say whatever he wanted to, and it would be okay with me. To that extent, I knew that I had done pretty well with this agenda that I had.

*Does it bother you to know that Walter doesn't trust you?*

Yeah. I did feel a little hurt. With some of the other folks from the Black Bottom, I really have their heart, and they have my heart. I don't have Walter's heart. I'd like him to say to an audience of white and Black people, "Billy Yalowitz is a good white man."

We can't go to people of color with the hope that they will tell us that we're good. It's a kind of racism to look for that reassurance. I need to know that I'm good as a white person regardless of what people of color tell me.

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I played the saxophone when I was a kid. One of the ways that I learned how to play jazz was to play transcriptions of Miles Davis's solos. So I have the headphones on and I'm reading the transcriptions and playing my saxophone. I'm being Miles Davis.

Many years later, when I was at Temple University studying the history of Black performance in the United States, I learned about black-face minstrelsy (2). I asked myself, "What's the difference between my trying to be Miles Davis and putting on black face?" I noticed that the minstrels were white men, primarily Irish immigrants, the "black Irish," the "Irish need not apply" guys. This is in the 1840's and 50's and all the way up to the middle part of this century. The Irish figured that the burnt cork they put on their face was their passport to America. They put on the burnt cork and became white because they weren't really Black.

I did a performance about this called "Minstrel Shows." The piece looked dead center at what we as whites take from Black culture. The performance started with me playing a Miles Davis solo, and then there was a journey back in time to my becoming a minstrel. The cast was me and a white woman traveling back in time and three African American performers witnessing and commenting on our journey. The piece ended with white bluegrass guys who learned their picking style from Black bluesmen and never acknowledged them. Boy, that was a scary one, too. I'm putting this black face on, and thinking, "Why am I putting myself through this?"

One thing I learned from "Minstrel Shows" is that mainstream US white culture is fed richly by African American culture. The ways that we relax, express ourselves, play sports and the dances we do – all of those things come from African American culture. We enjoy it. We appropriate it. We profit from it. New Kids on the Block and Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger are modern day minstrels who have taken Black cultural styles and profited from them and not acknowledged that. Now, it's a very complex mix, but it's a little like, you go out to dance to Black music on Saturday night and then you go to your very white corporate office on Monday morning. In a very separate part of our minds, the racism we carry stays intact.

Another thing I learned from "Minstrel Shows" is that the things I love and value about Black people have separated me from white people. My heroes growing up were primarily Black musicians, Black basketball players, and the Black Panthers. I styled myself as cool, because I had some facility as a basketball player, I could play some jazz, and I was interested in left wing politics. What sense do you make of that, and not have it be that I'm different from the other whites? Many of us whites who are interested in eliminating racism feel that we're the only white person who "gets it." It separates us from whites, because we're ashamed of the other whites who don't "get it." We end up feeling better – even cooler -- than the other whites.

There was one last thing I learned from doing "Minstrel Shows:" the minstrels in this century were primarily Jewish, Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor and others. That's one way that Jews became white in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US. The irony in that. I think there is some connection with my being a Jew and trying to assimilate and become included. That's the experience of many urban Jewish boys of my generation. I went out into the street and really wanted to be accepted by the gentile boys in the neighborhood.

*Toni Morrison's book Sula starts, "There was once a neighborhood called 'the Bottoms.'" It's about a neighborhood that's not there anymore. So here you're doing*

*this project about the Black Bottom and helping people reclaim their home. And, in effect, you're also saying about your own background, "Once there was a left wing Jewish community and it's not there anymore." You live in Mt. Airy, a neighborhood that defines itself as a community that's very rare in this contemporary United States. In all the work you do, is there a sense of coming home and redemption from exile?*

Yeah, it's got to be that. In a very real sense, it's what we all had, not only my particular Jewish left wing background, but you want to be friends with everybody. It's just ridiculous not to. So home, in the biggest sense, is the way that I watched my dad make friends with everyone.

That's what's really in it for me as a white person, to get everybody back. That's the biggest reason to do this work. The most trustworthy motivation is that you just want to be friends with the people that you haven't been able to be close to.