GRAAT On-Line Occasional Papers - August 2019

Story of a Life: A Conversation with William Melvin Kelley

Yannick Blec

Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis

In September 2011, I sent an interview request to William Melvin Kelley, a long-forgotten African American writer many had judged too progressive – or not radical enough[1]*. He was delighted that a French PhD candidate was dedicating his dissertation to his works. When I explained that my work was focusing on the existential and phenomenological stance in his writing, he, in turn, clarified the fact that he did not have these kinds of thoughts when he wrote, but that he had been writing out of the urgency of his blackness in the USA and so as to, since most of his books were published in the 1960s, obtain civil rights.*

In November 2018, his first novel, A Different Drummer, *was reissued by Riverrun in Great Britain and it has since been published in several countries and in different languages. This happened after Kathryn Schulz published her article "The Lost Giant of American Literature" in the January 29, 2018 issue of* The New Yorker. *Interest in this "lost" novelist was reaffirmed and the world has since then been rediscovering his mastery of forms and the power of his prose.*

The following interview is an eight-hour conversation that I had with Kelley in his home in Harlem, in February 2012, five years before he passed away at the age of 79. He highlights the link that exists between his stories and his life; a thin thread that is important to understand the contexts in which he wrote, and his state of mind on the black experience

in the USA. Here, he also tackles subjects such as the American society as a whole, race relations, some of his unpublished texts, as well as his writing methods.

Yannick Blec: How did your growing up influence your writing?

William Melvin Kelley: I sent you that piece, "SHADES"[2]. There's a lot of stuff in there about my growing up.

My father was recognizably and understandably an African American man from the South. The way I piece it together, I think he was about three-quarters African. His mother seems to have been pure African stock. They said, I think, and this is vague, some stuff is clearer than others, that she was brought from Africa as a baby, not as a slave, with returning missionaries. That she was born after slavery. His father, my father's father, was a mulatto. Half and half. He was half his owner, and his owner was his father. I always prefer owner to master. I never use master, I use owner because that was the situation, the owner. My grandfather was a slave for five years. I think he was born in 1858. The Emancipation Proclamation was 1863, so five years. He was really like a man, a young man, at the end of the Reconstruction Era. I've seen pictures of him, he looked like he was mixed. He looked like Dumas, père. So, my father, as I say, was maybe three-quarters African and one-quarter European. He totally identified as a Negro, an African American. My father left home, ran away from home when he was 15. He must have been a remarkable man. I didn't know him as well in life as I have gotten to know him after he died, because we didn't get along well. So sometime after he left home, he went to another city in Tennessee. He went from Chattanooga to Knoxville, and he left Chattanooga because they didn't have a high school for Negroes. He had a cousin in Knoxville, so he went to Knoxville where he could enroll in and graduate from high school. And his whole family was tied up with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). They all went to this college that was established in Ohio for African Americans by the Methodist Episcopal Church and the AME. The college was called Wilberforce, after the abolitionist. Two or

three of my father's sisters graduated from Wilberforce, but my father didn't have enough money to stay even half a year. One of the few times I ever saw him cry, except at my mother's funeral, was when he told about having to leave college; because it had hindered him in his later life. Anyway, he came home and he totally expunged his African American accent. He sounded like a white man. He had the same problem I had: he could call up on the phone and get through, and then, when we showed up at the place, suddenly they realized we were African, or African American. Because on the phone we could sound white.

I just finished writing a story about that actually. When I was at Harvard, they have this famous game called the Harvard-Yale game. It takes place every November. And it's a big deal. Harvard and Yale, these two great Ivy League colleges, have this football game. So, I call up on the phone and I make reservations for my girl and I. And at that time my accent was really more New York than it is even now. You know, I kind of had that Italian accent, I was running with Italian guys. But I *definitely* didn't sound like an African American. So I said, "We'll have to come down and leave a deposit," and they said, "No, no, Mr. Kelley, it's all right." So we go down there, and suddenly, "Oh, *sorry*, sir, we seem to have misplaced your reservation." And I was a dumbass, so I didn't know. I took the guy's word and left. Twenty years later I'm in Jamaica smoking, meditating, watching my kids play in the front lawn, when all of a sudden I realize. Twenty years later. "(*Raises voice*) Holy shit—on the phone they thought I was white!"

And that happened to my father all the time. He would call up in a very elegant voice. He trained his voice. I don't know how, there was no radio. I think he took pronunciation classes, which was something that people did. A wonderful voice. He could call up on the phone, everything would be all right, he would show up at the place, "Oh…oh, wow…um, we're awfully sorry that you had to come down here, but the job is filled now." That kind of thing. So now my father comes to New York and teaches himself how to write. He has a *very good* editorial English style, a very good newspaper writer. You know, I've analyzed, looked at his style. Really, almost Hemingway-like. He didn't go in for rhetoric. He was a

very down-to-earth, straightforward, news reporter, he didn't try and make it fancy. He had realized clarity is what it's about. Never use a big word when you can use a small word. And in 1922 he becomes the editor of the *Amsterdam News*, which is a paper that's still here, the black, the African American weekly newspaper for African American people. And there are newspapers all over the country, some of them are even dailies. *The Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier, Amsterdam News.* All these papers were very important about segregated society, so each had their own. And he even improved it. He brought in the new service, the Associated Press, news wire things, brought that in, trained a lot of young people, and did that.

So now we've come to my mother. A lot of this stuff is in the piece, you just read through it there. My grandmother's grandfather is a white guy who went to Yale and became a lawyer in Savannah, Georgia. He was a segregationist slave owner and he fought and died in the Civil War, for the Confederate Army. He knocks up this girl, Ouidette Badu, who I figure, as light as my grandmother was, she had to have been half-French and half-African. Ouidette wasn't totally African. She wasn't a dark-brown-skinned girl; she was a light-brown-skinned girl. And he knocks her up. She's 14, he's in his thirties. Probably close to being rape. But it was definitely a power thing. I can't conceive of his being in love with her, you know, not even as much as Jefferson. He's got two sisters who've never had any children. So, the sisters say to him, or somebody says to somebody, "Let's keep this baby but sell this girl from Haiti." So, they sell her, she's 14, she's sold to New Orleans and never heard of again. They keep the baby who they call Josephine Barto. He's killed in the war. Josephine's free but she stays with them. She's their servant, their niece, she's not their slave anymore, but you know, there's this weird, incestuous—not literally, but you know, a crazy relationship where she's a servant, but she's also a niece, you know. Complications of slavery, when you look at them, I mean, they were like... you had guys fucking a slave and then having a kid, fucking the kid and having a kid, and then fucking the kid. Really depraved.

Slavery's depraved! It depraves everybody. Makes everybody crazy. You've got to be constantly vigilant unless the slaves rebel, it's an awful situation.

So anyway, she grows up with them and they arrange for her to become the mistress, pretty much, the mistress of this man called Nicholas Marin. Nicholas Marin, we're still trying to find out about Nicholas Marin. It was probably Nicholas Ma*rín*, born in Barcelona, Spain. But for some reason, perhaps because he was a Jew, we're not sure, he ends up in the Alsace-Lorraine and becomes a gunsmith. Then he moves to Savannah, Georgia. We don't know whether or not he had a wife when he went to Savannah, but we assume that somewhere between Alsace and Savannah he had a wife. But then he gets to Savannah, he picks up this mistress, Josephine Barto. And he obviously falls in love with her, because he leaves his wife and he comes and lives with his mistress. He has ten children with her, and one of those children is my grandmother. So that's three generations from Ouidette Badu, to my grandmother. My grandmother, Nana Jessie, whose husband was a Latino from Ponce, Puerto Rico, produces my mother.

So, my grandmother and my mother are Creole, what they call Creole. In New Orleans they say Creoles are the French and Italian descendants who maybe had a little bit of color in them. Some didn't, some did. They had the Creole of color and then the Creole. And the difference between the Creole of color and the Creole is that the Creole is lighter than a brown paper bag. But the Creole of color is darker than a brown paper bag. Something like that. But *my* definition of Creole is somebody who's mostly European but has some African three or four generations back. And totally oriented toward Europe. My grandmother played piano, but she only played show tunes, popular white songs. They didn't know anything about the blues, you know, they didn't know anything about the majority black culture. They basically were oriented toward Europe. My mother loved Greta Garbo and people like that. And my father, because to a certain extent he was running from African American society, he didn't know anything about it either. And in fact, it was the same for the intellectual classes—Langston Hughes actually wrote a poem about this—the intellectual classes of Negro society in the

tens and twenties, thirties, forties. Their aspiration was to be European concert pianists, they wanted to play Bach, Beethoven. They wanted to sing opera. And out of that came people like Roland Hayes, Marion Henderson, Paul Robeson, to some extent. He sang opera but he wasn't really trained.

So, my grandmother, growing up, she's telling me about all this white ancestry. Barto and Marin and of course when I went out into the street and said, "Hey, I've got a general in my family!"… I think by that time there were maybe two African American generals in the army. But obviously before that there hadn't been any. And I go out and tell my friends, "Yeah, my great-great-great grandfather was a…" They'd say, "How can he be a general? There's no Negro generals." And I'd say, "Well, he wasn't a Negro." And they'd say, "Well, if he wasn't a Negro, how could he be related to you?" You know. So, I'm growing up there with these Italian guys, and they're great guys, I love them. I love them to this day. I'm still friendly with two or three of them. We're all in our seventies. Joey Deluca and an Irish kid named John Lolly, and Salvatore Canale. Italians weren't even quite considered white at that point. Italian Americans. 'Cause they were swarthy, they were Mediterranean. And really, racism defines white as being from Scotland, Ireland, England and Germany. When I was a kid the majority minority was German. There's a lot of German culture in American culture. Salvatore Canale wrote this recent piece, he was Sicilian. We all know that the Sicilians and the Spanish were conquered by the Moors, so there's a lot of African in southern Italy.

The first time I ever really realized there was any such thing as race, was Sally Canale, a Sicilian kid, had gotten as brown as me! And the one German kid on the block, and you don't want to say that racism runs in his blood, but he points out, he says, "Hey, Sally's as brown as Billy!" And Sally blushes. He's embarrassed. And I'm saying to myself, "Why is Sally blushing? Why is he embarrassed to be the same shade as me? Why is he the same shade as me? Why is he brown, and why am I brown, but why is he white and why am I black?" That's the first I'd ever realized. I could see people came in different shades, but I

didn't realize there was this thing called race. Which, by the way, comes from the Portuguese, *raça,* which means "breeds."[3] So that tells you how the Portuguese were thinking. They look around, they say, "Oh wow, we've got different breeds of cows, different breeds of cattle, different breeds of cats, different breeds of dogs, must be different breeds of humans." Then it gets to be a thing. So, you have the first slavery in 1444, and then by 1500, they're beginning to talk about a race with a little, a small *r*. And then by 1600, Race has become capitalized and has become a thing, with its own expectations. *That's* why you say there's no such thing as race. It's really just breeds. The DNA doesn't establish the distinction. You might have an African who has the same DNA as somebody in Yugoslavia. Although there's a guy here called Gates, he's trying to establish that you can use DNA to trace back tribes and stuff like that. Maybe you can use it that way, but it still doesn't establish race. No such thing. So, I'm growing up—oh! A final piece of the puzzle. I'm a little public-school kid, going to a New York City public school, PS 103. I go there for kindergarten, which is six years old. They didn't have pre-kindergarten. When I was a kid, you stayed home until you were six and then you went to kindergarten. I know my friend Joey Deluca, a story we tell and laugh about it, he was so mortified by being left at school by his grandmother the first day, he shat in his pants. And because I was his only friend, I had to sit next to him. So I had to spend all morning with the stench of shit. Joey Deluca, who was bawling his eyes out, the most unhappy child in the world. And I wanted to get to school a little bit, but Joey… and you know, the teacher had put us together, so my first day was memorable. And I go into second grade. In the meantime, my father had had a marriage before me. And out of the marriage had come my half-sister. She was twenty-one years older than me. Her mother's family is very interesting, but I won't go into it now. Now she was bright. Good student. Somehow or other, her mother had found this progressive private school that wanted to admit Negroes. So, she had gone to this school, my sister, called Fieldston School. They gave me an IQ test. And if I remember correctly, my IQ was 151. I was like one point over, into genius. Everybody agrees, whoever they were, "Let's send Billy to

Fieldston! Let's take him out of public school and put him into private school." If I can remember it clearly, my parents sent me all dressed up. But it turned out this was not a dress-up school. So I was overdressed. They were sending their kids to school in Dungarees and t-shirts, jeans and t-shirts. I was there in wool pants. So, I was all right. As I say, I was not a reader. I'd be tremendously embarrassed when I had to stand up and read out loud. But it was a very full school. They had a lot of art, I enjoyed playing with sculpture, I mean with clay. I loved it. I showed fabulous talent. I could draw. I loved drawing, that was my favorite art as a kid. *Loved* to draw. I still draw. Loved painting. When I'm in second grade, music—we had music twice a week—and we would go and sing songs. I had a little book with songs from all over the world. Folk songs, Negro spirituals, and everything. "Go Down, Moses" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." And my mother, she played the piano and we would go down to Macy's to the music department, where they had people there who had pianos and they would play the sheet music for you, you could see if you liked it. So we go down there and buy sheet music and I would stand up by the piano, my mother would play and I would sing my heart out. And I could sing, too. I've got a choir-quality voice, really good. And I learned all these songs. I learned a lot of writing from that, from these songs, 'cause songs have got a 32-bar construction. The first eight bars stay to the theme, the second eight bars repeated the theme, then you have what you call the bridge, the third eight bars, where the melody changed and, you know, like in a short story there was a point of change there, then you have the last eight bars. This progressive school, Earl Robinson had written this almost semi-, how I can say, almost operatic song, but it wasn't like a popular song, it was like… and of course, I love Frank Sinatra, because I grew up with Italians. And so I learn this song. A very complicated song. I learn this song. The music teacher says one day, "Would anybody like to sing a song?" And I get up with this beautiful voice, soprano voice, and sing this song right straight through. From then on, I was like the Louis Armstrong of the class. I didn't know whether or not I'd been marginalized, because I don't remember being marginalized or remember being really accepted. But from then on it was

like, “William, Billy, he’s got talent!”, “We need a Negro boy to sing a song in this show on Broadway!” and my parents would always say no. Because they wanted me to have an ordinary childhood. But anyway, I’ve got to be the most popular, or one of the most popular kids in the class, even though I was the only African American in the class. There were twenty of us, and I was the only one. By the time I went to high school, there were three of us in a class of 100. I was a good athlete, but really, I was a fraud. Because I couldn’t really read. They tried to teach me to read when I was three. I hated it! I wanted to draw and sing and paint. I didn’t want to read. So that’s a cliché that I just, you know how they say, “Oh, bright kids, I bet you wanted to read when you were a kid, voracious for learning.” Besides, the person that they took me to to learn how to read, I didn’t like the way she smelled. She was old and fat. You’re going to think of taking me to someone, think pretty girls. My cousins. They said, “Teach Billy how to read!” My cousins, you know, I had two curvy, pretty cousins, who I loved to be around. I had crushes on both of them. But no, they had to take me to see Miss Callis. Hated the way she smelled, hated the way her apartment smelled, rebelled against the whole idea; I wouldn’t do it. I avoided it whenever I could.

I loved the radio, “The Lone Ranger” and the drama shows and the detective shows. They all had construction. And I had an eye for construction. I could see, “Oh it starts with, and then it’s got to have a change, and you know, and I could see that. I could see it in the songs, I could see it in the dramas, I could see it in the dramatizations of the fairy tales. So you know, you had to make up a skit, I could make it up fast. You give me two things, you know, a feather and a pencil. Thirty seconds I’ve got a whole plot I could build around a feather and a pencil. And throw in a lost boy and a history and I just had it there. I had it all in my head.

So you know, I’m growing up, I’m faking a lot of stuff. Somewhere in high school they gave us *Crime and Punishment* to read, which by the way, Richard Wright takes the plot of *Crime and Punishment* and turns it into *The Outsider*. So, *I* wrote a great paper, but I didn’t read the book, ’cause I couldn’t get the Russian

names. I went and got the comic book, the outline. You know, they had the college outline series where they synopsized all the books. I mined that. Any book they said, "OK, we're going to read this book in class," *boom*, right to the comic book, and I could write as good a paper from the comic book as they were writing from the book. So I was a fraud! But I was still pretty smart. 'Cause I could remember what people said.

And I had this great teacher. I don't know if you've ever heard of Dr. Spock; not from *Star Trek*. He was a famous baby doctor. To a certain extent many conservatives blamed the permissiveness of the sixties on people who had been influenced by Dr. Spock. And Dr. Spock was basically saying, "Hey, your children are human beings! Treat them like human beings! They're not just kids, just little savages that have got to be trained, they're little souls." His sister was my third-grade teacher. And I had basically what they call Attention Deficit Disorder. I couldn't pay attention. I squirmed; I could not sit still. Everybody was trying, my first-grade teacher, my second-grade teacher, were trying to confine me to this desk and make me pay attention. And I'm just using the desk kind of like an aerobic thing, I had my feet over the back, I'd lean on my arms, I just could *not*, you know? And if they had been the kind of school that punished kids for that, I would have been standing in the corner all the time, with the dunce cap on. 'Cause that's the way we punish kids in the west. One of the reasons why I took my kids out of school, 'cause they'd make you stand in the *corner*, on a *platform,* with a *dunce* cap on your head. Facing into the corner. This was really humiliating. I had nobody who did that to me. So finally, Ms. Spock said to me, "I'm going to put you in the back of the class, and it's not a punishment, but you distract the other kids by your squirming. And as long as you listen to me, you can squirm. And I guess that's when I developed my listening. And I went back there squirming. I'm using the desk, but I'm listening to her! Because I loved her because she understood me, and she saw through the position I had made for myself as this kind of star. You know, it was like I was a little movie star in this school. 'Cause I had this voice, I was a good athlete, I could hang upside down from the jungle

gym with my little legs, you know, hook my knees from the bar and hang down. I was a little older than they were because I had been in first grade in the public school, and then when I went to Fieldston, they put me in first grade again. That's my skills. But they never really did anything with my skills, so I really never learned how to study properly until I was in my thirties. Or read.

So when I went to high school, I realized that if you got to be the head of student government at Fieldston, you were going to go to Harvard. The last six student council presidents had gone to Harvard—and the one girl had gone to Radcliffe—best college in the country. So until then, I had been the kind of kid who made jokes, who made everybody laugh, it would say in my report card that I had been a clown, that I was a clown, I had to get over my clowning and be more serious and everything like that, but I had such a great personality, you know. I wasn't mean-spirited, I was just funny. So I said, "OK, in order to be president of the student council I've got to be real serious." But the voting system was weighted. So the kids in my class had three votes, the kids in the sixth form, senior year, had three points, the kids in the class behind me had two points of vote, and then I think everything from there down, from ninth grade down to seventh grade, they only had one point of vote. So being remarkably savvy, I cultivated all the little kids. And since I was kind of an athletic hero, not great athletics, but you know, a little private school, if I said hello to a kid in the seventh grade, whoa! You know.

I cultivated them all. Thus, when the vote came along, I had practically like 98% of the vote from freshmen, from ninth grade down. I had all the seventh graders, all the eighth graders, all the ninth graders. The class behind me, which would have been the tenth grade class kind of split between me and a guy who was obviously bright. My whole class voted against me, and I split the seniors.

I ended up winning the presidency. I wasn't interested in it, so I never called any meetings. In fact, one day I was told, "Billy, you're not calling any meetings." And I said, "We don't have any power. We don't have any budget. All we can do is we can debate whether or not we should ask for another garbage pail in the

lunchroom, you know, or to have another, maybe cookies instead of cake. You know, some bullshit. I called a few meetings, but you know, basically, I didn't do anything. But I had this credit now. So Harvard sends somebody to see *me!* The principal calls me up, he says, "Go home! Put on good clothes and come back." He thinks that's a simple thing. It took me an hour and a half to get a home and an hour and a half to get back. But I got back, the guy from Harvard came, he talked to me, was impressed with me, so basically, I get into Harvard. But I still can't read!

Now it gets to be serious. In Harvard, they give you a hundred pages to read in every class, every week. By the time November comes along, I'm hundreds of pages behind. *Hundreds*, literally! I make the promise that I'm trying to go to class, so at least whatever the guy says in class, I'll know that, I'll pick that up, and I actually didn't do half badly. I would get C's and B's just by going to class. But it's getting worse and worse and worse. And then finally, I take a writing course. I'm cultivating these other arts; I'm acting and I'm painting. I'm not thinking about writing too much, but I know it's something I can do. You know, I could always spin out a story. For me, coming up with a plot for anything is easy. Like I say, give me those gloves and give me this pair of eyeglasses, and I'll know—I'll write you a story. Easy.

So I said, "I'm going to take a writing course. There won't be a lot of reading, and there won't be a final." And now I can spend time on my other courses. At the same time, I got it into my head—I had a girlfriend, and she wanted me to be a professional lawyer. And I had been going to be a lawyer. No way I was going to get through law school not being able to read. Unless I said, "OK, I'm blind!" And somebody read everything to me. I'd walk outside, "Oh I'm sorry, I can't see! I've been struck blind! Hire me a girl, and she can read everything to me!" By the end of the freshman, middle of my sophomore year at Harvard, I realize, "You're not going to be a lawyer." In desperation I switch to architecture, I say maybe I can combine my art with architecture. And what do they give me? Math. Because you

have to be able to plot how heavy that thing is, and how much it'll hold, and whether or not it'll fall down. So, not interested in math.

Anyway, I take the writing course to make it easier on myself. And I basically fall in love with John Hawkes. I love him. He's tart, he's smart, his fiction is like, visionary. I didn't understand his fiction until I was in my thirties. Basically, he believed that a book could be sustained by the force of the language. You didn't have to have characters, you didn't have to have plot, you didn't have to have anything that was traditional. You just had to be able to spin silk. Most writing teachers say, "Write about what you know. Write about your life." Hawkes is saying, "Don't write about what you know! Make it up! If you make it up, you have total control of it." He's pulling me away from realism, naturalism.

So that's how I got the first idea for *A Different Drummer*, and which was the white people wake up and there are no Negroes. No black people. And they wonder, "What do we do? What happened?" And of course, if you're black, you totally realize why they leave. It's the South, it's segregated, it's all fucked up down there. It's a police state. So, of course you're going to leave! If you get a chance, you're going to leave. And then when I got into Hawkes, the last story I wrote for him was kind of like in *A Different Drummer*, the scene where he takes everything out of his house and burns his house down and shoots his animals and walks off into the South. I wrote that there. And I think maybe it was Hawkes, or maybe the next one says, "You've got a novel started here." So then I'm saying, "Oh, yeah, right."

But I had to write it from the white people's point of view, that was the interesting point, in terms of fiction. 'Cause one of the things that Hawkes would say is, if you want to write a story about a Nazi and a Jew, to write it from the Jew's point of view is cliché. To write it from the *Nazi's* point of view, there's other stuff in there. Because you're answering that question or at least dealing with that question: What is it in us human beings, that we can suddenly say, "You're not human, we're going to kill you!" Because we can all do that. We can all build up animosity to a certain person. So that's what's interesting. You can show a man

Saturday, show him tending his garden. Show him taking out his son and teaching him how to fly a kite, and on the way back to have some ice cream. And then the next day he wakes up, puts on the SS uniform, he goes off to work and he kills 5,000 Jews. *Then* you're getting something. The other way, from the Jews' point of view, it's suffering, poor me. So, Hawkes is giving me all of that. Now in the meantime, I've got all of this basically Civil War stuff. I got the same ancestry as some white kid from… you know, like at Harvard, I met guys from the South whose ancestors died in the Civil War. And I'm saying, "Oh yeah, I got ancestors that died in the Civil War." And they're looking at me like, "Wow, what are you talking about?" And I'm exploding the whole race thing.

Back at Fieldston, I was exploiting the whole race thing, but now it's different They're talking about "Go Down, Moses" and spirituals, and I'm saying, "Yeah, but, you know..." and everybody gets real quiet because I'm talking about this white man having fucked this black girl and then I'm talking about the next generation, and *this* white man fucking *this* black woman, and all these kids coming out of her, and one of them is my grandmother. They're *seeing* my grandmother, this white woman sitting in the car with my mother, and they come and pick me up from school every day. And they're seeing them, and other people are intrigued by them, and they invite them to the PTA meetings. You know how that goes, stuff like that. And they're saying, "Wow, what is this? Who is this kid, what is this about?"

By the end of that time, I was really into my writing. That would have been June '58. I had it bad. My mother died in June '57, at the end of my freshman year. I had bad fusses with my father because I didn't understand him at all. And he didn't understand me at all. And what he mostly didn't understand about me was that I wanted to be a creative artist. I loved Picasso, I loved painters. There used to be a French painter I loved called Raoul Dufy. He would say, "Put that in color! Or this building, put that as yellow." And then he'd draw them. He'd draw the windows *over* this wash of color. I *loved* that! And I loved art. And they exposed me to a lot of art at Fieldston. We went to museums and the Museum of Modern

Art and they were showing us Picasso and the impressionists and stuff like that. So I was into art. I was into art.

Then I took a half a year out. I didn't start my junior year… And I flunked a lot of stuff. And then my father dropped dead! He left me $17,000. The Harvard tuition was a thousand dollars, can you imagine? I mean, Sarah Lawrence's tuition is $50,000 now[4]. And Harvard's is like 30 or something like that. So, I paid off all my debts to the college. And I said to myself, "I'm going to try and get a Harvard degree, but I don't think I'm going to make it." And of course, I'm obsessed with writing by this time. I'm getting an A, two C's and a D. Then I'm getting an A, 'cause I got all A's, straight A's. And I won a prize. A prize called the Dana Reed Prize which was for the best piece of writing at any Harvard undergraduate publication, which included the *Harvard Crimson, The Advocate,* all kinds of things were considered. *The Lampoon,* all of that. And I wrote the best story.

I'm still in college. Agents are writing me! Publishers are writing me. I'm sitting in class toward the end of it, I got an agent, I got a publisher, and the teachers who were teaching me, they had no agent, no publisher. I was a better writer than my teachers. So, you know, I went into writing. I liked acting, but I hated the people. They were all as egotistical as me, and if they weren't as good as you were, they'd bring your performance down. You're saying something, then it depended on whether or not you got cast. I went to acting school. Guy cast me as Othello. But I had this Bronx accent. So Othello's like, you know, if it was Shakespeare, "to be or not to be, that is the question!" So he said, "Why don't you go to acting school and you know, improve your English?" And I loved it. They taught me phonetics, and suddenly I could *see* the way I sounded. Because I could write down the way I heard the word, and then they would show me the way Olivier said the words, or somebody like that. I could say, "Oh, yeah, OK, placement of the tongue, the teeth." I was loving it. But it had that drawback.

I had the typewriter my sister had given me, the typewriter I had to have. It was all in my head, I had all these Civil War stories in my head. I had the ability to make up fiction. I didn't have to write about my own life. I've never written

about my own life. Maybe… yeah, a little bit, some of the teaching part, but I never wrote about my grandmother. I'm just now starting to write about my grandmother. So '59, I think it was the same year Fidel came to power, I said to myself, "OK, I'm going to be a writer." Yeah, right, that's right. I was out the fall of '58, and then I went back to Harvard the spring of '59. And I said, "OK, I'm not going to act anymore, I'm not going to paint anymore, I'm going to write." And I had this idea for *A Different Drummer*, and I just went along and wrote it. But my marks were so bad. By that time, I think my last marks were an A in writing, and then something like a D in Elizabethan Drama, because everybody did Shakespeare, and all that. Of course, I didn't do any reading. And then two other courses, and I can't even remember what they were, I flunked them. So, they called me in, and they said, "Bill, we, here at Harvard, think you should take a leave of absence. You have to leave the Harvard community, and you can come back after a year. And you can get your priorities straight." So technically, I'm still on a leave of absence from Harvard. I never went back. But I'm a tenured professor at Sarah Lawrence College *(laughs*).

Back in the sixties they were hiring writers, because they didn't know how to teach writing. They didn't mind if you didn't have degrees, you know, they could hire you. So I began to teach, and then finally, I had a mentor who had been a mentor all the way from high school. It was an Italian guy, *great* writer. It was just like The Godfather; he just took me under his wing. He taught at Sarah Lawrence for thirty years. He taught me in high school, but then he went to Sarah Lawrence, where I am now, he taught for thirty years, and then he was about to retire. He said, "I'm not going to retire unless you hire William Melvin Kelley." A real godfather. He got me in, and I've been there for twenty-two years. He's dead now. Great man. Wonderful writer.

He was a very simple, Hemingway kind of writer. He had me read Hemingway. And then yeah, I think he taught a story called "A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner. It's a very wonderful story. So that introduced me to Faulkner. They talk about Faulkner writing novels, but really the thing about Faulkner is he

doesn't write novels, really. He writes long stories that he puts together as novels. And then when I took it with Hawkes, he had me read *Heart of Darkness*. And I actually read it. Because it was short. I have a tendency to like short writers. You know, brief; a hundred pages. I loved *Heart of Darkness.* I got it, I really got it. I liked the construction of it. Somewhere along the line I think he probably introduced me to *Metamorphosis* by Kafka, too. I loved that.

Then I was a writer and I had really good success. I was into it and I came to love it. I came to love the challenge of taking a three-dimensional world and putting it into two dimensions, or one. And I loved the storytelling. It was to let the story tell what it was you were trying to say. And not just the simplest way, which is to have somebody represent you, but to create a situation where the reader has to think about a particular situation, and then at a certain point the reader would say, "Oh, OK, I see." There was insight in there, even if it was simple, like, "Oh, we have to take care of each other as people." Like that story, called "Not Exactly Lena Horne." It was a story in the book *Dancers*. I was at this writer's conference, Bread Loaf, the summer after *A Different Drummer* came out, and writers were talking, and I asked, "What is a story, how do you know what it is?" and somebody answered, "E.M. Forster says to present a conflict and resolve it." And I said to myself, "Well, a conflict is an argument." So, I have those two old guys arguing. And that was the first thing, and then of course that moment comes when I realize, this one has to threaten this other one, this one can't talk about sports and this one can't talk about politics, and the only thing they really have to talk about are these license plates and if that's taken away, they sit there in silence with nothing to say. And it's not a matter of whether one or the other is right or wrong, it's, "What is communication? How do people communicate?" So that was the first one, and then after that I knew.

And then from Faulkner I stole the idea that everything should be connected. Because the thing I didn't like about Hemingway's writing was that he'd write *Fiesta: The Sun also Rises* and then he'd go and he'd write another story with a whole bunch of different people and different characters, and yet, the

people in the second book were pretty much like the people in the first book. So why didn't he just continue with Jake Barnes? What happens to him? Ok, the guy's impotent, can't get a boner. Maybe he doesn't *have* a boner. We're not sure physically what's wrong with him, except we know something exploded and he was not the same after that. But then what happens to him? Why just drop him? Why go on to the next and the next and the next and *The Old Man and the Sea* and the next, all these new characters. There's Faulkner saying, "Hey, establish a place, establish a bunch of people, you write about them as they get older." There used to be a cartoon in American newspapers called *Gasoline Alley*, and unlike most cartoons, people aged. In other words, Dick Tracy, he was always Dick Tracy, you never see him as a kid, you never see him as an old man, he was always Dick Tracy. And all the others. Mickey Mouse, you know, is the same mouse. But they've got a character on there that was born when I was a little kid and he's *still* in it there. He's an old man, he's 70 years old. And over the years the artist aged him and aged him and aged him. I said, "Yeah, that's right, that's good, I like that, I like that," So he's still there. And Faulkner too.

That's what I did with Carlyle, Carlyle Bedlow. I wrote the first story about him, "Brother Carlyle", when they're kids. And then, you know, the last thing I published was this story in *Dunfords*, and he's in *Dunfords*, you know, he's fighting the devil in *Dunfords* and he's getting a divorce. And now I just wrote a story that I published in the *New Yorker* in the nineties, and he's like 50. Let me show you a book that I have here…

YB: Chig Dunford… oh, you've got the whole genealogy. All your characters' lives!

WMK: Yeah. All the people. When they were born, what stories they appeared in. Because I always tell my students, when you're establishing a character, give them a birthday. Know how old they are, and have in mind how tall they are, and what kind of education, and then that can determine, say, if you're writing in first

person, what kind of accent they have or what kind of education have they had. You make them real for yourself. Distinguishing features, the color of their eyes, color of their hair. Make sure you know all that, and kind of build it from the outside in. Like Olivier said whenever he was going to get a character, he would go someplace and find out, you know, kind of establish what kind of walk that character had. So when he was studying for Othello he'd go down to the African and Caribbean parts of London and look at people walk, and then he'd pick out a walk, and then he would imitate the walk, and then from there he'd build the character.

YB: So, with this technique of construction of characters, how much time do you spend on your novels when you write?

WMK: When I'm teaching, I can't spend as much time writing. When I'm not teaching, like in the summer, and things are going good, I could work maybe three hours a day. I always try to stop when I know where I'm going. I think I got that from Hemingway. He said never write yourself empty; always have something left to come back to tomorrow and keep on going so you don't get bogged down; so you don't get writer's block. You know, suddenly you're looking at an empty page. I mean, the pressure of it becomes so great you can't put a word on it.

When I was using paper, I would always go on to the next page. I would always start, you know, go on, and write maybe a couple of sentences on the next page, so that when I came back I never looked at an empty page. I would look, "Oh, I've got a couple of sentences," and keep on going. Sometimes I would even stop in the middle of the sentence. Because I knew I could come back and finish that sentence and then I'm on my way. So, you never write yourself out. When I was younger, I'd write—well, I never wrote more than three or four hours a day. I'd just get tired, you know, mentally. I would say on average, it takes me two years to write two hundred pages. Basically that. I would try to write every day, and I've had periods where I've written every day. I did some very good writing

in Paris. But my thing has always been, I'm a sucker for any young person who comes to see me. I had an office in Jamaica. It was actually the maid's room, you know. You must have a sense of those houses where you've got the big house, and in the back, you've got where you wash the clothes, there's a little bathroom back there and then there's an office, it's usually the maid's room. I took over the maid's room when we went to Jamaica. But if any little fist came and knocked on the door, "Papi, can we go to the—" I was out of there. I'm always a sucker. My commitment is to say, "God, family, writing." They say that Hemingway was a tyrant in his house. The kids couldn't make any noise at *all* until he was finished writing. I don't care. I've developed the ability to be able to work in the house. But you know, sometimes I reach my limit. If there are two kids in here having a conversation, I can't really write. I used to be able to write to music. But I can't even write to music anymore. I find, OK, I might start, I might be listening to some music, usually never anything with words. But then after a while I just turn off the music and I get into the silence.

But there have been periods of time, the eighties and nineties, where I just didn't have the time at all. When I got poor, because I went through a poor period, say from 1970 really until I started working at Sarah Lawrence. We were poor. We didn't have electricity; we didn't have utilities. We were cooking on what would have been a camp stove. And I couldn't even afford to buy the proper gas, which is a very high-octane, clean-burning gas, and so I'd just go to a gas station and get some gas. So huge black smoke, and we had to just open up the windows wide, in no matter what weather, to cook everything. And during that time, I didn't do much writing.

Actually, you know, I would start something. I wrote a very long story. I would always have something going. And I usually always knew where I was going, so if I got a couple of days or a couple of weeks, I could sit down and just start writing from where I'd left off six months before. If somebody collected them all, I'd have a book of essays. Then I have this—what you know as *Death Fall*, that I'm calling *Disintegration* now [this book has not been published yet]. Then I have

this new thing that I'm writing on, which is about sex. And I was sitting here, like, about two years ago, or last year, I don't know, whatever it was. It went fast—and I started to fret about the fact that I had no life insurance. You know, I almost died two times since 1998, and I said, if I die, Aiki [Karen "Aiki" Kelley, his wife] won't have anything. So I said, "Now, what is guaranteed to make money?" Some kind of way, somehow. And it came as if a bolt from heaven: pornography! So I finished one pornographic novel and I'm working on the second now.

YB: And are you going to try to publish them?

WMK: Well, then I began to think about it. Because I was thinking, OK, she'll go through my things, she'll find these two pornographic novels, she'll publish them and they'll make some money. And then I began to think about writing about sex. And one thing I kind of came to was that…why is it all right for a writer to try to manipulate your emotions and make you cry, manipulate your emotions and make you laugh, but why isn't it all right for me to give you a boner? You know? What's wrong about a writer giving his readers an erection?

YB: What were your conclusions?

WMK: That it's right! You should! You should have that right to do that. And it's funny, because, it goes against all my teaching, because I think it's very difficult. I'm finding it's so hard to write about sex. It's hard.

YB: What about the link that could be made with your previous works, that were about race relations?

WMK: Well, I mean it's a Dunford story. I'm writing about the younger brother Peter. And the kernel of the idea was that I have a friend who committed suicide, who *might* have had an affair with one of our teachers. And he only told me that

after we got out of high school and we were in college. He said, "You know, I had an affair with So-and-So, and I fell in love with her but there was no future for it." And I've thought about that too. It definitely is abuse when an older man has an affair with some teenage girl. But as a man, I don't think about it the other way. I would have *loved* to have had an affair with, say a particular teacher—I never had any really beautiful teachers—but my fifth-grade teacher was very nice looking. She had a nice body, nice legs, as I remember. And she was the one who told us about sex. And they separated the boys and the girls. And I guess for no reason except the milieu, they took us to the science room and they told us about erections and vaginas and penises, you know, and it's like this relatively pretty woman with blond hair, and I'm thinking, "Is she going to show us? Is she going to let us try?" You know, we've had a couple of these cases. And they're not the same as the real abuse cases.

YB: All right. Well, back to the 1960s, and the 1970s, could you explain the reason why you worked on black people almost exclusively, and especially the question of race relationships?

WMK: Well, I didn't write exclusively about black people.

YB: Almost exclusively.

WMK: No. Well, I wrote *A Different Drummer*. That came out in '62. It's like, black people—the hidden story was back there. The black people would know. White people would ask me, "Why did they leave?" And I'm saying, "Do you know anything about the last hundred years? Do you know anything about all the lynchings, do you know anything about all the houses that were burned down? Do you know anything about that? Do you know anything about people sitting in the back of the bus? How could you ask me, why did they leave?" But you had these white people dutifully trying to figure out, "Well, why? Why did Tucker

Caliban do this and do that?" So when I finished that, I said, OK, this is white people. I wrote about white people, now I want to write about black people. And then I wrote *A Drop of Patience*, the jazz novel. And that's pretty much all about black people, except for the white woman who comes in at the last and causes problems, which is kind of autobiographical. I had a white girlfriend who *really* betrayed me, so I put that in there.

YB: Could we find other autobiographical elements, for example, in "The Only Man on Liberty Street"?

WMK: That's my grandmother's story.

YB: That's what I figured.

WMK: Except at the end, they drive him and make him go home. But in reality, the guy stayed. And I think it was probably because he was a European guy. And yeah, you're right there. They were mostly about African American people there. And then when I came to *dəm*, then in a way it was the same kind of thing. It was like… here's a story. There was a very famous white concert classical pianist named Vladimir Horowitz. Russian. Played all the classics, great piano player. They took him to see a jazz musician named Bud Powell. Bud Powell actually ended up dying in Paris. After he'd heard Bud Powell, they said, "Wasn't Bud Powell wonderful? Did you notice the way his right hand flew over the keyboard and made this melody?" And Vladimir Horowitz said, "It's not his right hand I was looking at, it was his *left* hand." The thing about Bud Powell was he could make the most intricate and wonderful, innovative chords with his left hand. When jazz musicians are playing, they go *(imitates low jazz chords)* with their left hand, and their right hand maybe goes *(imitates much higher jazz melody)* and Bud, first of all, his stuff was deep. Because when a pianist plays with his two hands

pretty close together, you know, it's within a range. But he would get way down, like Basie.

I don't know if you know anything about jazz musicians, but—work way deep in the bass, like not just the octave below mid C, but two octaves below mid C, *three* octaves, and so it sounds like this wonderful rumble. And to a certain extent, that's what *dəm* is like. Because *dəm* is very much based on the idea of jazz musicians and jazz and (*thinking)*…well, not that much is done from *Dunford*, really. But you've got the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of the white people in the foreground, but in the back, you've got Cooley and Carlyle and all these guys operating, you know. At a certain point, if you follow the names, if you're black and you follow the names carefully, and you realize that this guy's name is Calvin, but at a certain point his full name has been established as Calvin Coolidge Johnson. And then you get Cooley. You realize, "Oh, wow, he's been back there all the time." And then at the end, of course, Mitchell Pierce realizes.

And then *Dunfords*, I would say that's mostly about African American people, but in a strange kind of way. Because you have Dunford and his life with white people, so that's autobiographical, in that I've lived most of my working life—well, I lived all of my childhood, and then most of my working life—with white people. But, from the time I left college, I always lived in a black neighborhood. I always lived with black people, I always wanted to be with black people. And then I went to Jamaica and I stayed there. I actually went to Jamaica because I wanted these little buttons to grow up in a black country. In other words, I didn't want to have them growing up in a place where their difference was always being seen. Now, they turned out to be different for other reasons. Like I cut their hair off and made it short. They had you know, quote, "good hair" and it was prized, and people always wanted to know why I didn't let it grow long because they had such good hair. We had them in shorts, in Dungarees, in jeans and t-shirts and stuff like that. And with the short hair you couldn't tell half the time whether they were boys or not. And then we went to the beach, there's a picture I think I sent you, we let them go bare breasted. They didn't even have

breasts, they had chests. And long before they developed breasts, they wanted tops. And we didn't say, "No tops!" They wore tops after that, on their bathing suits and stuff like that. But still, in all, it was a good thing. It changed them. They don't have any of what we call "nigger mentality," which is a propensity to feel that they *must* fail.

Jesi Kelley [*one of William Melvin Kelley's daughters, who came in during the conversation*]: Or that we must succeed to overcome the expectation of failure, which I think is even more important.

WMK: What is that? Say that again?

JK: That you must succeed to overcome the expectation of failure. I find that to be true for a lot of people my age. Failure is not an option because you're expected to fail. So they work that much harder, they're driven that much more.

WMK: Oh, yeah. That was always true. You have to work twice as hard to get half as far. That was always true, yeah. And I liked the fact that they were seeing the policemen were brown-skinned and the doctors were brown-skinned, and the plumber was brown-skinned, everybody was brown-skinned, you know.

YB: The first time I actually had the feeling of failure was when I came to Paris. Before that, I had good grades in my studies. And when I arrived in Paris, my grades were just low. And I was like, "Am I going to succeed here?" I decided to come here, and finally I just did it, because of my master thesis. That's the thing that helped me out. If it were not for that, I would have failed. And you know, that's something that never bothered me, failure. I just strive to succeed, and if I don't, I just say, well, all right…

JK: And it doesn't make you wonder. You don't wonder, well, why? I always say that growing up that way without racism and being in a brown country because I think more like West Indian than I do American, even though I'm American. But racism is more than, "Is it because I'm black?" Racism is not what happens to you or what people do to you, it's like, well, why? Am I failing because they don't like me? I know what I *did*. And that's odd, when you don't grow up with that, to come up here and think, wait a minute…

WMK: Well, there's this assumption that you *are* going to fail.

JK: Right. Because I have other friends from other West Indian countries, and we've been saying the same thing—because this month is Black History Month, so a lot of people talk about it this month—and most of my friends who grew up in Trinidad for example are like, "We didn't have that." You either failed because you didn't do your work, but it wasn't an option. It was like a level playing field, but here it's definitely different. And then the thing that everybody identifies a certain way here. I would imagine if you're from Martinique, you're *all* Martinique. It doesn't matter the shade that you are, like that's what it was in Jamaica.

YB: No, in Martinique it matters. You're black, all right, but the shade that you are—

JK: Well, shade yeah. Shade is one thing. But not necessarily whether or not you're… here, it's like you're either African American or you're white or you're Hispanic. But in Jamaica, growing up, I mean yeah, the light-skinned people are always up here, always, always, but you're still Jamaican. If you're Lebanese because you're Lebanese Jamaican, you're still Jamaican.

WMK: And the point I always make is Jamaican slaves got paid. At the end of it, they got paid. Whereas the ones up here, it's been a continual struggle for them to control us, to make us do what they want us to do and be the way they want us to be.

YB: You say that Malcolm X and Mao Tse Tung had an influence on you. However, you don't seem to represent them in your books. You don't seem to have a leader, a mass leader.

WMK: Oh, no, I'm against that. Because if you base everything on a leader, then they kill the leader and you're rootless, you've got nothing. I was always in favor of an ideology. One of the things I admire about the Jews is it's based on the book. It isn't about worshipping Moses. It isn't about worshipping Abraham. They are respected and they're listened to, but the book is what's important. That's why in Judaism you don't even really have priests in the way you have them in Catholicism and stuff. You know, they're guys. They got wives and they studied the Torah and they try to give guidance, but nobody goes to a particular—well, I guess they do. They must go to a synagogue because they like this guy as opposed to liking another guy. But he doesn't have the importance in the belief system that he would have in a Christian church or an Islamic church. That's why in *A Different Drummer* there's no leader. That's why when Bradshaw goes down to try and find out what's happening there, he can't understand it because there's no leader. Tucker Caliban is an *example*, maybe. People see him leaving and they say, "Oh, yeah, right. We can do it. We're not tied here, we can go. We don't have to take this stuff." That, I think, has always been a deficiency of ours. I think that Malcolm was always pushing us toward Elijah Muhammad. In other words, he was not being the leader. He was saying Elijah Muhammad is the prophet. *He's* the one telling all these things. So, he himself was not even taking that mantle. They saw it, the original Muslims, they saw him as maybe trying to take power from them, but I don't think that was his motive. And then after he converted to real Islam,

then his motive was, "Hey, convert to Islam." And also, *don't* convert to Islam, but let's do this, you know, an economic plan. So, I'm opposed to the charismatic leader kind of thing.

YB: You say that, talking about Malcolm X, his death made you leave the country. What made Chig Dunford leave the country?

WMK: Well, in my fiction, he leaves the country because he has become obsessed with an Afro-European writer. Well, to back up, when I came back to America I wanted to write about my European experience. One of the things I hate in fiction is when all of a sudden you encounter some foreign language in fiction. Like for instance, you're reading along in a book and here comes some German. For me, German is like, I couldn't understand a word of it. And as a matter of fact, I even admire… Ernest Hemingway will have a whole conversation in Spanish, but it's not in Spanish, it's in English. But he tells you, they're talking in Spanish here now. Every once in a while, he'll throw in a little Spanish word, so that you know they're talking in Spanish. But he doesn't burden you with having to know Spanish to understand what the people are saying. I like that as a technique, because I myself was always very frustrated when I was reading along in a book and, all of a sudden, they went into Spanish, or French, or German.

And then I didn't want to write specifically about Italy or France. But there were things that I found in common between European countries. To a certain extent, the lack of innovation in Europe, the lack of streamlining. We used to go down to wait for a visa in Italy, it would take us two or three days, in the old days. I'm sure it's a little different now. But you could go down to the passport office and fill out the papers, and you'd either come out of there with a passport or two weeks later they'd send you a passport. If something happened, there wasn't a lot of red tape. Europe, and Jamaica too, had all these traditional ways of doing things. And if you suggested that they do it another way, they just adamantly wouldn't do it! Even though it was *shown*, you could *show* them the other way was a better

way. Like for instance, the Japanese came to Jamaica and they were going to teach Jamaicans how to terrace.

In Japan, you go, you look, and they've got these terraces, so they cut these kinds of horizontal things into the hills and the water doesn't run off, and they've got these terraces going on over there. In Jamaica (*imitating a Jamaican accent)* you take a banana, you take a *soka*, as they used to call it, you dig a hole, you put it in the ground! *(stops imitating)* Right on the slant. The water comes down, *ffftt*, washes everything away, right? The whole thing is gone. The topsoil's gone, the banana's gone, everything's gone, down into the gulley right out to sea. And the Japanese come, "You know, you wouldn't have that problem if you terraced." Do you think they would terrace? They wouldn't terrace! I bet you couldn't go and find five plots of land in Jamaica that were terraced to keep the water from running off. *(Jamaican accent again)* Well, we always did it this way! Yes, man, my grandfather did it this way, so I must do it the same way! *(stops accent)* They're having trouble with rice in Jamaica. They grew a little rice and they imported some rice, and China sent them some rice. *(Accent)* You think the Jamaicans will eat short rice? We want long-grained rice, man! This is not rice! You see it in the cup, it looks like cereal, man! We're not eating short grains. *(Stops accent*) It's *food*, you know? But that's the same as Europe. That's why I made up that whole business about the blue and the yellow, and the red and the yellow, and you choose one then and then you've got to segregate yourself, and nobody ever says, "Why are we doing this this way? What is the origin of this?" It goes back into time, you know. You see that in France, things went back a thousand years. And you go to Italy, you go back two thousand years. People pissing on stones that are two thousand years old, a column from some beautiful thing.

So then I say, OK, as Hawkes would say, make it up. So, I said, OK, I'm going to make up a country. And it's going to embody everything that I've learned *out* of America. I took the word "Europe" and I rearranged it, and I called the country Reupeo. R-E-U-P-E-O. So Europe, rearranged, becomes Reupeo. And the capital of Europe is Smiperroa, which is a combination of Paris and Rome. But I'm

digressing. This country, Reupeo, in the nineteenth century, was the home, birthplace, of the great European-African writer named Alexander Dupushamin, which is a combination of Dumas and Pushkin. They're all in that same time, basically at the beginning of the 1800s, nineteenth century. In Russia you had Pushkin growing up, and in France you had Dumas growing up, and in Reupeo, you have Dupushamin. So Chig Dunford goes to Europe to study Dupushamin, that's his obsession. And he's grown up to be a literary, a comparative literature, historian. And his expertise is in European literature and Reupean literature and especially Dupushamin, so that's why he went. Because you had Alexander Pushkin and you had Alexander Dumas in France.

My wife and I went for the first time in 1963. I got a prize. It was only a thousand dollars, but you know, that was a lot of money then. I was basically willing to sit in New York and write another book, I didn't have a lot of wanderlust, you know. But Aiki wanted to go to Europe. She said, you know, if you're going to sit and spend the money in New York, why not sit and spend it in Europe someplace. She wanted to go to Greece, because she'd already been to Paris. I'd never been anywhere. I kind of wanted to go to Paris, but I didn't mind going to Italy because I'd grown up with Italians, and it was kind of like me going home, in a strange kind of way. So we went there and we liked it. That was that era when African American people were considered to be these wonderful creative people. Wherever I went in the sixties, people would say, "Oh, sing us the blues!" And I could always knock out a blues if I had to, because I had that voice. We began to like it there, just because it seemed like, wow. It's a revelation when you go out someplace and they suddenly treat you like a human being, and you don't have this burden to carry around, to *prove.* That was why. But then we came back to have Jesi because we didn't trust European doctors. Italian doctors specifically. Whereas her sister, who's three years younger, was born in Paris. She has a whole French birth certificate and everything like that.

So that's why he goes. And then that first story in *Dunfords* is about the day, we were in Italy at the time, when Kennedy was assassinated. Kennedy had been

our president. This young guy from Harvard, he looked good, he had this pretty wife, he was intelligent, he wasn't like a regular politician. He had a lot of money, so he wasn't going to rob the cookies out of the jar. Then, boom! Suddenly we were walking down the Via Condotti, something like that. It was eight o'clock at night, which was one o'clock or two o'clock in Texas. They said, you know, "*Kennedy assassinato*!" We were like, whoa. All the Americans gathered on the Spanish Steps where the American embassy was. We'd say, "What's going to happen?" We were afraid whether or not there was going to be a revolution. We didn't know what was going to go on. So that's what that first story is about. At the end of which, Chig, who is a very placid kind of guy, the white guy annoys him and he says, "Motherfucker," because, you know, we had different feelings about that. I remember I didn't know what kind of president Johnson would be. He turned out to be pretty good.

YB: Earlier, you talked about the segregation of clothes. Is it just about the European ways of always sticking to the tradition, or is it, could we see—

WMK: That's all it's about. It's just one of those silly, stupid traditions that people stick to just because it's been that way and they can't envision that it would be any other way.

YB: Can we see another symbol of something else, for example, a chosen segregation?

WMK: Well, yeah. I mean, sure. But see, that's the thing about European thought. We contrast with African thought or improvisational thought or jazz thought. "It's this way, it's always been this way." You know, like the French Academy. "This is French, this is not French." I admire that to a certain extent, because in America we have a tendency to throw out everything. When we decide we're going to reform something, we throw out everything. We don't just say, "OK this was

working, but this isn't working, so get rid of this and bring something new in here, but let's keep that," and stuff like that. It's nice to have traditions. I also found it was very nice to have a culture that wasn't its government. In other words, that's all Americans have, the government. Whereas the French, until De Gaulle came along—and I was there—and gave them, the French, a government that could stand and has continued to stand, they didn't care. They could have five or six governments a year, and this guy would come in and he would screw up, and then they'd bring in somebody else and he would screw up. You know. Two months, three months, four months. When Kennedy came to Italy, we were there, in '63 before he got shot, they didn't even *have* a government. They had to quickly form a government so they could go down to the airport to meet him. And the Italians didn't care whether or not they had a government. One of the things I liked about the Italians was they knew their best days were two thousand years back, and they didn't even want to bring them back. Too much responsibility. "Why are we spending all this money on an army? For what?" The only day they would ever parade would be Armistice Day, November 11, because that was the only war they'd been on the right side of for two or three hundred years, the only war they'd had any piece of victory. But when you're sitting in a café, you're looking at pretty girls go by, why do you want to have an army, when you've got something like that going, you know? You've got good wine, good cheese, good bread. You're looking at pretty people. They come across the cobblestones in their sling back pumps, they get them caught in the cobblestones, and then they've got to writhe around and wriggle around and then they finally take off the shoe and they ask for somebody to help them, and come on, that's life, that's good. I admired that about them, that they weren't power hungry. The French, they're a little more power hungry, but it's no big deal. They're not thinking about going and invading anybody. It's awful, but you know, they're not going to go anymore and sit in some country, they're not going to bring back any kind of colonialism.

YB: You make a lot of references to Chig Dunford. Do you think you yourself can be linked to him?

WMK: Let me tell you a story about Chig Dunford. I had a very good friend. We went to high school together. He's the one that may have had the affair with the teacher. I think he did. He committed suicide when we were 23 years old. We were coming back from Rome, then Spain, we stayed in Spain for a month, then we came back and we met my sister in Paris. And she said, "Did you hear about Channing?" His name was Channing. I said, "No." And she said, "He jumped off the George Washington Bridge. And nobody can figure out why." And I tell you, I've been thinking about that for, it must've been '63, so it's coming up to '13, so fifty years I've been pondering that question. Why did he commit suicide? Three possible answers. He was in love with the teacher, and there was no way it could go. Because you know, she was 50 or 40 and he was 20. His mother was exerting a lot of pressure on him to be a shopkeeper, was willing to put up the money for him to have a gift shop. She knew gift shop. She had run gift shops, so she knew it. He had no desire whatever to be commercial in any kind of way. I always felt kind of like his sin, his problem was that he had the soul of an artist—he was a very smart guy—but he had no art. He hadn't been able to find his art. Maybe he could have been a writer, but he hadn't thought of it yet. He was just tremendously smart. His father had been an economist. His father had committed suicide because he was upset about the fact that they had given him the job of getting Somalia's economy in shape. Here, fifty years later, it's *still* not in shape. Obviously, he had failed, and he took the failure personally and killed himself. Or he might have been gay. And he didn't come out. You know, if he had lived for ten more years, in either case, he could have married the teacher in ten more years after the sixties, or he could have been gay and nobody would have cared anything about it. But at that time, back then, coming out in the fifties and sixties, you might as well go shoot yourself if you were gay. So, for one of those three reasons…

But anyway, I began to write stories about Chig Dunford. And Chig Dunford is not me. I didn't become a college teacher until I was 50 and the Godfather got me in there. But I began to write about this guy, this college professor. I created the characters in that family. The first one had been very autobiographical. The story "St. Paul and the Monkeys" had been about my engagement to this girl. Back in the fifties and sixties, it was a big deal, more profound than it is now, about whether or not you were going to be middle-class, and, middle-class morality, you were going to have a middle-class job, have a house and two cars, and televisions, and then have a country house. You were supposed to have that, all that. There were people like me kind of renouncing that. I had been left a house, as a matter of fact. My parents died, they left me a house. I went up and tried to collect rent one time, and the people started to give me their excuse, why they didn't have the rent, and this check and that. And I couldn't harden my heart. I couldn't say, "You better have that rent in two weeks or you're out of here!" That was not me. I just basically gave the house away. And my socialism was developing too, and I was kind of against private property and all that kind of stuff. So here I am writing about Chig Dunford. First, I write Dunford a story of his, and then I write a story about him in Europe. And then I write a couple of other stories about him. And then I realized that Chig Dunford and Channing Dean have the same initials. And I said to myself, "I'm giving Channing a life!" I realized, "Oh, that's who he is. This is what he would've been." Maybe he would have gotten married. He did get married, but it didn't seem to matter that much to him. It wasn't like he was, I don't know what it was, there was always something very roommate-ish about it. It was more like they were roommates than they were husband and wife. It's funny, she never got married again. So I said, "Ohhh! OK, I'm giving a Channing a life. He would have been a college professor; he would have been a great college professor." He was a tremendous student. He'd gone to a very prestigious prep school called Exeter in Massachusetts. So that was why I wrote a lot about him. Because I wasn't particularly living that kind of life. When I finally began to teach in college, then it kind of finished. Then I wrote

a few more stories about him. But I couldn't get off of him! But in a way, he was true to my life, because I'm not really working-class, but I'm a working-class aspirant. I aspire to the working class. I grew up with working-class people. I think their culture's much more interesting.

YB: Do you get inspired by real life people to create your characters, then?

WMK: Sometimes yes and sometimes no. But in *A Different Drummer* that family, that is the white family basically of my ancestor. From the Civil War. There's one character, I don't know if you've read anything of him, but there's a couple stories about him in *Dancers on the Shore*. But I only wrote a few stories about him. His name was Thomas Carey, and the story "Poker Party" was about him, and the story "Enemy Territory" is about him. He was designed to be a straight autobiographical character. Those two stories are about my childhood. And then when I had him grow up, first he became a high-powered messenger for an advertising agency. His thing was he could get a message to anybody. If you said, "Take this package and deliver it to this guy in the Arctic," he would go there and get it done. I don't know why I saw myself as that. And then later on I saw him as a photographer. But then I began to use parts of my life in other characters, so in a way he became, I don't know, un-useful. He wasn't useful to me anymore.

YB: So the grandmother is your grandmother?

WMK: Yes, the grandmother is definitely my grandmother.

YB: And the grandfather is your grandfather?

WMK: Which one?

YB: Who went into "Enemy territory."

WMK: Oh, yeah, yeah. Nassi Sovasi. Yeah, yeah. That was him. He was called Hector something. He was Latino. In my fiction, I have him as Cuban. But he was really from Puerto Rico.

YB: As you said, your teacher, John Hawkes, said "create everything." Is that the principle you always applied or would you, for example, stroll in the street and find a situation interesting?

WMK: Well yeah, that always happens. But I wouldn't call myself a naturalistic or realistic writer. But my fiction is based on real life, on the real world, to some extent.

YB: The African in *A Different Drummer*, for example. Where is he from?

WMK: I hooked up with Edmund Wilson, the critic from the thirties, forties, fifties, for a little while at Harvard, and he made me aware of a folk hero from Louisiana called Bran Coop, who was an African, a wild African. But I basically made that up. I mean, there were always people running away and living in the wild, you know; much more in the West Indies. And occasionally there were maroons in Georgia and maroons in Louisiana, the deep South. Probably not in Alabama or Mississippi because that was the harshest slavery. *(Pauses)* Even like the people in Suriname, you know. They came and hit the shore, were slaves for two weeks, then, "Forget about this!" and they went into the jungles and built up African villages again and they just never lost it.

So I was thinking about people like that. Even though I'd only heard vague rumors. But they had the same thing in Brazil. Slaves that ran away, that fought, there were slave villages and kings. "We're just not going to take this anymore." It's strong in the Caribbean. That was one of the things I liked about the Jamaicans. I'll tell you a story about Jamaica. I always tell this story if you want to know about

Jamaica. I got into a car, a taxi one time, and I don't know what it is about the cars that they send out there to the Caribbean, but they have no insulation in them. When you slam an American car, it goes *shoomp*. When you slam a Jamaican car, because it has no insulation, it goes *crank*! So, I got into a taxi and slammed the door, not hard or angry or anything like that. The guy refused to drive me! He goes *(imitating Jamaican accent),* "Come out me car, man! Me not drive you, man! You disrespect my car, man! Go out the car!" and I'm sitting thinking, "Wait, I want you to take me here or there, I want to go." "No, man, me not drive you, me not drive you!" And I had to get out, get another cab. The guy, you know… I pissed him off! And his desire to get my money was not as great as him having his sense of respect. And every so often we feel that. I think that's what we felt when the Civil Rights Movement began. They killed this kid Emmett Till. I always say the Civil Rights Movement began with Rosa Parks, but the reason why Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat was because they had killed Emmett Till a couple of months before. And the body, his mother made us look at the body. And it was a sight. They killed him about four or five different ways. They hung him, they shot him, they beat him, they dragged him, they drowned him. It was like overkill. And that kid, 14 years old, from Chicago, not knowing what's going on down there in the South. And I really saw myself in him too. Because I was him. I could've been going down there and said, "Hey baby!" to some white girl because she looked cute. "Hey, what's your name? *(speaking in exaggerated African American English)* Can I walk with you? Can I have a talk with you, shorty?" But say if I had done that when I went down there in '52, I wouldn't be here talking to you now! You know what I mean? So, I related to that. And that's what I'm saying, that every so often they do something to us, that "kills" us. We're very placid. We're not like my Spanish ancestors. You do something like that to them—imagine if they killed a Spanish kid like that! God, you would have bombs, you would have pickets, you would have rioting. You would have Latinos gathering from all over the country to protest. They kill us like that all the time. They shot a kid in his bedroom, because they thought he was selling pot. The cop said, "Oh, I thought he was

armed, I thought he was armed," and they shot him dead. And we're not saying, "You can't do that to us!" We just accept that stuff. But every so often you push us too far, and we'll get angry. But I mean, New York City cops for example, they do that all the time. They shot an old lady named Eleanor Bumpurs one time. Clearly insane, waving a knife at them. They shot her with a shot gun. You know, an old lady, sixty. What is she going to do with a knife? All kinds of stuff like that. It comes right down to these kids, Sean Bell, who was killed outside of some bar on the night before his wedding. They shot him down, filled him with 50 bullets. Diallo, the African guy, they shot him down. Innocent people, you know. Not doing anything.

YB: And this placidity that you were talking about, do you think it's a result of slavery, because they made black people, so *"gentle?"*

WMK: They sweep it under the cover, but they treated us pretty bad. We were afraid. I can't imagine that you wouldn't be afraid. You had to watch what you said. I had a friend of mine, Hudson, who told me this story. He said he didn't know what race was until he was about 7 or 8 years old. He went to town with his uncle, and some white man made his uncle get off the sidewalk. My friend looked at him and said, "Uncle, why did you do that?" in front of the white man. He said, "Shut up, boy," and hustled him home and said, "Look, we're in this situation. They'll kill us."

It gets back to, I think, the economic tools. My vision is that African Americans boycott Christmas. We'll get everything we want if we boycott Christmas. If we say, "Forget about you, we're going to keep our millions of dollars at Christmas," we'll get something. We'll get something out of that. But the picketing? I don't believe in that; that's why I didn't go on the March on Washington in '63. I couldn't see it. I grew up with Italians. I don't turn the other cheek. I may not hit you right back, but I'll wait two or three weeks, and you might be coming home to your house and I might be on the roof with a big brick. "Oh, I

was just on the roof… really, somebody dropped a brick off the roof? I wish I'd seen it, I would've stopped them!" But we were outnumbered, you see. In Jamaica, they could do that. In Jamaica they staged a sit-down strike in 1839, which is about twenty-five years before we were free. And the English had the example of Haiti. The English were sitting there saying, "Wait a minute, they outnumber us 10 to 1, 9 to 1. We don't want them to kill everybody and make us leave, so let's go to colonialism. Let's go *bam, bam*, you're free now!

YB: In your interview with Marième Sy in 1980[5] you expressed the idea of writing cycles. I quote, "Bedlow was a minor character in *A Different Drummer*, then I wrote a story about him in 'Cry for Me'. Carlyle Bedlow was a little boy in the stories, and then he grew up he appeared in *dəm* and *Dunfords Travels Everywhere*. So finally I decided what I wanted to do was bring it together. Because I made a chain, and the chain was incomplete because the Dunfords never met the Bedlows. Not only was *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* conceived as a novel in circle, but it also brings together the circle in my writing." How do you consider your circle now? Do you consider it completed, or would you like to extend it?

WMK: Well, in terms of that book, first of all, what I was trying to show was that the middle-class Chig and the working-class hustler Carlyle, were having the same dream, and that the dream was a dream of freedom. But the reason why they could never attain it in reality was because everywhere people are divided in two ways that make us incapable of function. Chairman Mao says that the internal conflict is the conflict that defeats you. It isn't the enemy that defeats you. It's because you have the internal conflict. So, we have two profound conflicts in Africamericans. We have conflicts between our men and our women, which I say goes all the way back to—the women can't understand why we need to protect them—all the way back to slavery. And the men can't understand and can't stand the fact that the women seem to be able to get along better in slavery than them. And that was conscious. The slave owner knew that he had to suppress the man or he would

rebel, so the punishments were harsh. You could be beaten near to death with a whip, or you could have limbs removed or have brands on your face. You know, they were going to do anything that they could to keep the men… and yet the women seemed to be able to move on, and then you add the fact that the slave owner likes to have sex with the women, and out of that they seem to get little perks and things like that.

So coming on down, and the society has actually, the major society, has actually encouraged that. In the sixties and seventies when they began the new welfare programs, they would only give the woman money if she didn't have a man. They weren't trying to preserve families. It was one of the reasons why most of us were born in wedlock, in, say, the forties and fifties. 75% of us were born within a marriage, and now 75% of us are born out of marriage, where there's more, if you want to call it illegitimacy. So they're not promoting marriage for us. They're not promoting it. They say they are, but they're not, because they're not backing it up with money. In the eighties when I was poor and I tried to get on welfare, I couldn't get on welfare. They weren't going to let a man on welfare. They were sure it was a scam somehow or other. Whereas I saw women going in and getting welfare. So, that's one division, between the men and the women. And then the other division is between the classes, the middle class and the working class. The middle class is supposed to supply the leadership. But as soon as they said, "Integrate, you can integrate," all the middle-class people left. So now you're left with the charlatans and the working class. And they have no leadership, they don't know what to do. So now when anything happens all they say is, "Oh, that's a shame, they shouldn't have shot that poor girl," "Oh, that's a shame, they shouldn't have shot that woman," but the Civil Rights Movement did have middle-class leadership. Thurgood Marshall became a Supreme Court Justice, for instance. All those guys were very smart. And they were saying, "OK, we can run this game this way, through the Constitution and stuff." And thus, they got us thinking. And in the period of segregation, when we all had to live with each other, one of the good things was that the working-class father could see the doctor, and

he could say to his kids, "See, that's Dr. Delaney. He's a very prominent man. He's making good money and he's very intelligent, and I want you to go to school so you can be like Dr. Delaney." Or the bishop, or whoever, this educated person. But then when they separated us, since they're educated, basically that meant if you had a job and good money, then you could leave! And you left, and you went to Westchester and you thought you were white. You're living a white life and you're not thinking about the people back here.

When we were first here thirty years ago, sometimes they would bring their kids here for holidays, something like that. And you'd see all these kinds of middle-class private school kids wandering around, looking at black people like they didn't know them, and they didn't *know* them! Now they don't even bring them. Because we have the division between the men and the women, and we have the division between the classes. We're just divided all up. We can never get anything together; we can never do the same thing. And then you have American individualism coming into it. Nobody wants to support community. One of the things about my socialism, what I say is, "Hey, I'm willing to give some talent to this thing. I don't have to be paid everything that I'm worth, if that's what it takes. If I have to sacrifice a little bit of money, if I have to sacrifice my kids' private school education, I'll do it." I didn't want them to be these kids wandering around here not knowing what the real deal was. I didn't want to take them out to Westchester someplace and put them in exclusive schools and have them forget their roots, everything that they came from. That was a choice I made. Most people say, "No, forget about that. That's the old time. This is about money now." Because that's the great allure about America. There's nothing more important than money. The Italians have honor and family, that's what's important. Your family's important and your honor's important. I'll tell you a joke that I heard in Italy.

This kid grows up in Sicily and he's going to college in Rome. You know, the big city. And his father gives him a shotgun and says, "Here, take this to Rome, in case you run into some problems." He comes up to the big city, bright lights, pretty girls, everything. Sells the gun. What does he need a gun for? He gets a

watch. Trades it for a watch. Goes back to Sicily, his father says, "How are you?" "I love it, Pop, it's great." "And how's the shotgun?" And he says, "Pop, I traded the shotgun for a watch." His father says to him, "Very smart. Now when they call you a son of a bitch, you can say, 'It's two o'clock.'" So that's all about honor! But there's nothing more important than money, is there?

Even now, I'm a Democratic Socialist. I like Europe. Maybe Europe doesn't like itself anymore. You know, I like the fact that the French are saying, "I want my August holiday! And I want my daycare, and I want my health thing. And if they make too much money, take it from them!" I mean, how much money do you need? A million dollars would do me great. What would I do with a hundred million dollars? What would I do with a billion dollars? At least one of the things about Bill Gates is that he's trying to give some of it away. Some Americans, I think, are feeling like—and maybe you could call it a socialist yearning—but, "Yeah, maybe I've got too much money here, let me see if I can't do something for society." Most of them are not thinking that way. That's why I always say, when they say, "Well, if we lower taxes, then the rich people will create jobs." They don't create jobs anymore. You lower taxes on them now, and they're going to go out and buy a better car, or a fourteenth car. Like Jay Leno, an American celebrity who's got thirty cars. What do you need thirty cars for? The basketball players. Five, six cars. A big mansion. I mean, come on, you can't even come here and buy a brownstone as your home? And give some money, they want to keep it from their cousins. Why not support your cousins? Why not support your cousins who can't do anything? What's wrong with that? Why not set them up in a little business? Why not buy them a little house?

There's an old Tolstoy story about this entitled "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" And basically, it's saying what you finally get is your grave, that's the point of the story. And all the rest of it, you're not taking it with you. The Bible says, "He heapeth up riches and knoweth not who shall gather them." You're lucky, you try, you leave a will and all that stuff, but if they want to take it from you, it's gone. You take Joe Louis, our great fighter. He gave money to the

government, and still they said, "Well, you didn't pay taxes on it." Now the taxes built up and built up, and he died in poverty. And he *gave* money to the government to help the war. It's awful. My wife's father was pretty rich, but he was too important. He helped to integrate the army. So they hooked him up with some charge and bled him and bled him, he had to pay lawyers and this and that. He ended up a poor man. He had his dignity, but you can't count on that.

I always ask, "Do you think that Oprah will get poor?" Most people say, "No, no she'll never be poor." I'm not sure. I'm seeing athletes and basketball players and people like that, making millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the next thing you see they're driving a cab. What happened to all that money that they were supposed to have? But we play our part in that. Not one of those guys will go and get their degree. If they came out of high school, they will come out playing basketball and making millions of dollars like Lebron James. He's not going to go back to college and get his degree. You ever seen Michael Jackson's handwriting? He could hardly write. He had the handwriting of a fifth grader. He'd been singing since he was a little kid and never got an education. Now Brandy is an example of the other side. She quit her career basically, went back to college and got her degree. That guy who played Urkel, he quit show business and went back and got his degree. I think he wants to produce and stuff like that. I mean, we play our part. We go for the bling-bling. But we don't share our money, we don't help our people. Only Magic Johnson has been able to do a little bit. He supported some business, has supported the Starbucks here, I think… he owns that, he owns movie theaters. But the rest of them, you never see them. Politicians, they come through around election time. You never see them. That's one of my things. I think our middle class has betrayed our working class. That's why we can't progress.

YB: One of the things that struck me most is that you rename, you give a new name to African American people. In *Dunfords*, you call them "Blafringo-Arumericans."

WMK: Well, that's only in dream language. But I call them Africamericans, that's my thing.

YB: Can you explain this? Why?

WMK: Well, I think it's very important what we call ourselves. I don't think we would have called ourselves black. I think "black" was imposed upon us, and with it carries two, three thousand years of anti-blackness that's embedded in European culture. Black as a witch's heart, the Black Sabbath, the Black Death, all the connotations of black, boom! Suddenly that's on our shoulders. We're carrying that weight. Take Irish people. Suppose we said, "OK we're going to talk about Irish people and call them the greenies. The green people." Or, "You're a green." Malcolm used to say that. He'd say, "Where's black land? Where's colored land?" This man has come from a country, he's Italian American. Or he's Irish American. Like our president. He's a Kenyan American. He's not what I would call an African American. His mother's white and his father's from Kenya. He has, in his family, no legacy of slavery. He doesn't know what that was about. He's picked up basically his black culture from his wife, and it's a good thing, too. But he's like me, he can't dance. I didn't grow up with African American people, so I can't dance. Obama, he didn't grow up with African American people. You see him, he's all stiff. He can sing, though. He can sing. But dance, he can't. Basketball, he can play. So, OK, what do I call us? I call us African Americans. I like the fact that the Africa comes first, and it's capitalized. And then the America is an afterthought. So it's the same thing as Irish American, but it's African. It's an acknowledgement of our history there. In the old days, the progressive people liked Afro-American. And that worked for a while. But there again, white people called us colored. They called us colored basically because they weren't just thinking about Africans. They were thinking about Filipino; they were thinking about anybody who was colored, who was brown. Killens, John Oliver Killens, turned it and said we should say colored and non-colored. Put ourselves at the top

and then make them the negative. So when it came together as a word, I could say, "OK, Africa begins and ends with an A, and then add American to it and it's one word. It's a good size, so I figured, you know, it would be like that. A lot of people call it African American. But that seemed to be too long, I liked it shorter. But that was basically the reason. I think we need a name for ourselves; one that is not the name they gave us. Because I don't like the black thing! Negro was only black in Spanish. I object to all connotations of blackness. The negative connotations of blackness. As I said, it is associated with death and vampires…

However, there's no black and white! So right away there, we're accepting a fiction. We're accepting an abstraction. You are not black. You're a beautiful shade of brown. I got my shade of brown. We're brown! So why are we telling our kids to look at a culture and say, "No, that's not brown, that's black." When we got them in Jamaica, we raised them on brown and pink. Because brown people were brown, and white people were pink. Because when they go to Jamaica, they all got flaming sunburns. They turned out pink. And they could understand as little kids, "Oh, yeah, they are pink." But if I said, "Those are white people," they would say, "Well, wait, they're not white, are they?" It's as much of an abstraction for white people to call themselves white as it is for black people to call themselves black. And if you start by naming yourself an abstraction that isn't true, then you have an untrue picture of yourself. You have defined yourself in an abstract and absurd way. I look at my grandson, Joshua. Am I really going to say that he's a light-skinned black, because he's got a drop of African blood in him? That's absurd. So, we start with that.

I would say we should call ourselves gold, because that's what we were. We were money! That's more true about what we were. We were money. If you have 500 slaves, you could go to the bank and put up the 500 slaves as collateral, and they'd give you money. And I don't think we ever really redefined ourselves. We're still a market. "Well, what would the blacks want?" "Let's put some gold on it, the blacks will buy it." There's a famous line in *The Godfather*. They're talking about drugs. And one of the old Italian guys says to the other, "I don't want it near

schools! I don't want it sold to children. That is an infamita. In my city I would try to keep the traffic in the dark people, the colored. They are the best customers, the least troublesome, and they are animals anyway. They have no respect for their wives or their families or themselves. Let them lose their souls with drugs." So that's the way they feel about us. We have no souls, and we're money. And at the end of *Dunfords*, as a matter of fact I wrote: "MAN! BE! GOLD! BE," and then you come back to the front, "Boy." So, Africans were Africans. Then they were turned into gold. Man be gold. And then you humiliate them, and you make them a boy. So that's what happens there. Man be gold be boy. And we've never gotten over that. We've never been free, basically. We were on the plantation, and then instead of like Jamaica, where we refused to work on the plantation, we ended up working for the same people who had been our owners before, in the sharecropping system.

Anytime we showed any kind of entrepreneurial spirit, anytime we showed any desire to build a business, own a business, they cut it out from under us. And then now, we ended up on welfare. So there again, we're being supplied.

What is slavery? You're being supplied food, you're being supplied shelter, you're being supplied clothes. And that's your deal. There's no freedom in there. That's why when the Black Muslims came along, they said, "OK, we've got to own our own businesses, we're going to buy land, we're going to grow our own food." Even to this day, if you're a farmer in the South and you go to the United States Department of Agriculture and try to get money, they're going to do everything they can to keep you from getting money. Because they basically want you to sell that land to some white person. They don't want you to own that land. Because Malcolm said, "Land is the basis of all freedom, justice, and equality." And they don't want us to own anything. I turned it around and say, "Whatever they to do us, turn it around and make it positive." The most far-fetched idea that I ever had is about what we should do is that we should all go to RV's. That we shouldn't even have any houses or apartments anymore. We should all live in vans. And we say: "Hey, let's go to Florida for the winter!" Boom, five million people show up in Florida. "It's getting hot now, let's go to Seattle!" Five million people show up

in Seattle. That's what the native people did. Yeah! They'd get in cars and drive all over. I love that stuff.

But I am digressing. Naming is the most important thing. In the Bible, the Creator gives Adam the chore of naming everybody. That's, you know, symbolic. It's very important. And we've never gotten it straight. We've never gotten a name that we all like. Some people like "colored." There are still some people who like "Negro." I accept Negro because it has some historical basis. But the thing I don't like about it is the whole thing about blackness. But you've got to be able to name yourself. Define yourself. We're always reacting to what somebody else says about us. We're not secure enough in what we are to be able to say, "No. That's not us." So, when Muslims came along, Malcolm and Elijah Mohammed, it scared them. That's why they didn't like Malcolm. Because he was saying, "We're going to define ourselves. We're going to have our own businesses, our own way of doing things." But freedom's hard. Freedom's hard. I remember Jerry Aiken said to me one time, talking about somebody, "He's the kind of man who'd sell out his brother for a meal." And that's what he was saying. We've got no sense of loyalty and honesty anymore. We used to. I think we're languishing the way we are.

YB: Do you think that instead of getting better, the lives of African American people are getting worse and worse, that they didn't improve their living conditions?

WMK: Not really. They gave us more junk within that framework. It's because of credit now, layaway that you don't have to pay for that TV, really. You can get that TV. In the old days you had to save for the TV, and they gave you kind of fiscal discipline. You couldn't just go out there and buy the TV, you had to save for a year and a half, two years, twenty dollars a week, and then you finally have whatever it is, and you can go out and buy the TV. And it was really yours. Now they give it to you, and we have it. But it's not ours, really. You wanted equal education? We don't have equal education. See, I think the problem is our degree

of self-hatred is such that we didn't like to be with each other, because we saw it as an improvement to be away, to live with the white man. But it was based on a lie, because it was saying, "You people are not able to educate yourselves." But we had been! We created colleges. We created Howard. We did it with white help, but it was ours. We created teachers. We improved and we got up to that point. And then, once we reached those kinds of minimal goals, we abandoned the whole thing.

YB: So it didn't really improve?

WMK: I don't think so. And then of course they control us by the large amount of virile young men they put into prison. That's slavery too, because they're working for pennies. They're making things. They're making furniture for all the government offices. All those chairs and tables and desks are being made in prison, for which they're getting two dollars a month or something. Same thing. Room, you get your clothes, they give you a uniform, you have your place to sleep, you have your little bit of labor, and you know, you can't progress out of it. One of the things I learned in Jamaica is Jamaicans feel like no matter what kind of job you got, you might be sweeping the floors at General Motors where they're making cars, you might just be sweeping, but it's *your* job. And it's your job to use it to progress and make your life better, and to save. Whereas African Americans, I think slavery ruined labor. We have this idea that you work for the Man and then you party. That job is just something you do, to pay the little bills and stuff like that, and you don't think about it being your job. It's his job, and he lets you do it. But it's really *his* job as opposed to being *your* job that you can use to improve yourself. That's what I hoped my kids would get, and they got it. And there's no job that's worth so much that it's worth your honor. If somebody's harassing you and treating you like a slave or a dog, you protest, and if you have to, you quit. You go get another job. You only take so much abuse from somebody who's

supposed to be your boss. You're out of slavery now. You're a free man. And if it comes to it and you've got to quit, you quit.

YB: In "Concerning Ebonics,"[6] you seem to be making a severe criticism of the fact that African Americans are not well-educated because nobody has made the effort. Is it in contradiction with your defense of the African Americans' way of talking and expressing the creole they invented, because in the same text you explain that they can't speak proper English, but at the same time—

WMK: I was really talking about teachers. Teachers stigmatize the kids. The kids come, they speak this language, despite the fact that they've looked at the TV and they've been hearing Standard English, it doesn't somehow register. The kids are speaking this language, and then when they get to school, basically they're punished because they don't speak Standard English. And they're accused of being dumb because they don't speak Standard English. Because their language is considered to be a language of ignorance. I was only writing that piece in that language. To show that, even if I spoke this language, I can still be intelligent, I can still express ideas, and I can still demonstrate the fact that I'm a thinking person. See, I think the basis of white supremacy is that we can't think. That's you, too. If you have African roots, you can't think. Europeans think, Chinese think, Indians think sometimes. But Africans, they don't think. They react to everything spontaneously, emotionally. Because that's the way they have us, that's the way they defined us, that's the way we are. That's what I was saying about when they killed Martin Luther King. They were ready. They knew, somebody will kill Martin Luther King, and the people will come into the streets and they will riot, and they will burn, and they will express their anger that way. Whereas I'm always contrary, so when that happened, I prayed. I was in Paris at the time. I prayed. Let's be quiet. Let's respond to this with silence. That was one of Malcolm's tools. There was some kid who had been arrested during his time. He gathered five hundred black men to stand silently in front of the police station. No protesting,

no violence, and no banners and no signs, just silence. And, of course, they were all dressed. They wore suits, they all wore little bowties. That was the uniform. They had a thousand—however many—Africamerican men standing silently outside of the police station. They let those guys go. Malcolm went in, talked to the police people, and those people came out. So, when they killed King, that's what we had to do. We had to be silent. We had to say, "OK, here's a threat." Because we can scare them. Psychologically, we can scare them. By doing the contrary to the stereotype. I always said like, if the Palestinians dressed in white and just quietly walked into Israel, there would be nothing they could do. No guns. They're not going to stand there at the border and shoot them down. And if they did that, the world would condemn them. Therefore, to a certain extent, I've come around to King's position. I couldn't tolerate it as a young man, but I can see it now. There are times when you've just got to put your body out there and be quiet and let things happen. Because the violence doesn't work, you know, you've got to be outpowered. Or, you know, I've studied Chairman Mao and all that. You've got to be willing to fight for ten years. Twenty years.

YB: Yes, but still. Do you think this language, Ebonics, could be a weapon?

WMK: Remember I told you yesterday, I wrote one of the Diops in Senegal, and said, "You know, I think we should go to phonetics." You know, go to the phonetic alphabet and change that. Because it's like what Joyce was saying about English. He says, "My soul frets in the shadow of his language." And he was trying to say basically, you took our language away from us. You took Gaelic away from us. You took our Celtic languages away from us, and now you've imposed English on us and it's always yours. It's your English. That was what I was trying to do in *Dunfords*. I was trying to create a language that wasn't English but that could possibly be understood by brown-skinned people. Based on their principles.

YB: Let's come back to something you tackled earlier. You represent African Americans as people who sometimes live in different social classes. And you seem to oppose them. What's the purpose?

WMK: Well, that's what I was trying to show between Dunford and Bedlow. You know, that we had these two classes, and if we could unify them, we could progress. But we don't. The middle-class people are cut off, so to a certain extent they're disempowered by the fact that they're fewer numbers, and the working-class people are disenfranchised because they have no leisure. We can't get together until we have some certain basis. That's what I love about the Torah. That's something that unifies all Jews. It doesn't matter how much money you've got, how little money you've got, you go to the synagogue and you read the Torah, and that unifies you all. And you know, within that framework, the rich Jews, one of the reasons why they formed Fieldston, the school I went to, they called it the working-class school, and they wanted to help to educate working-class Jews, poor Jews. They knew a good education was the way, after a while the school got so good they began to send their own kids there. Then it became a rich school, but it still has that basic idea.

YB: So basically, by saying that, you related to a certain extent to what Malcolm suggests in "The Ballot or the Bullet," when he says, "All right, let's put religion aside and let's all be black together."

WMK: Yes, right! That's what he liked about Islam. When he went to Mecca, you know, you had black people, white people, rich people, poor people, you didn't know what. All those social distinctions are taken out by the fact that everybody's all wearing a robe or something like that. You know, you're all equal before the Creator, and you all acknowledge that you're equal before the Creator. Even if you're rich, you're saying, "Well, I may be rich, but I'm going to die, too. I'm not going to be saved from death." Like Senator Kennedy's son, who recently died.

The father, one of his sons got cancer. Money doesn't help. Maybe you get better medical care, but when it's time to cut your leg off, it's coming off. So money's not going to help you there. And you have to acknowledge it, because of that. You got a certain amount of humanity. He can look and he can say, "I may be rich and everything, I'm a powerful man, but when it comes time for my kid to have cancer and I've got to cut his leg off, I'm just an ordinary guy." I think that's what we need. Now the only thing, unfortunately, that could unify us would be some horrendous thing.

That's what Emmett Till was. It didn't matter where you were, whether you were rich or poor or something like that. When your kid, one of your children, gets treated that way, it brings a throb to your throat. When one of your kids gets treated like that, you say, "OK. That's enough. That's enough. We're not going to take this anymore. I'm not going to give up my seat to them. I'm just not going to do it, no matter what." And of course, I think they planned that, too. They always want to make it seem as if that was very spontaneous, but they had gotten together and planned that.

I think they chose Rosa Parks because she was not the stereotype. But it was certainly a little screenplayed. Because they were all behind it, and they knew she was going to do it, and then they could start the boycott. And it took them one year…

But after a while, that's where you use the fact that American culture worships money. If you can find a way to hit their pocketbook, you're going to get much more. If you've got a beef with somebody, if you write Coca-Cola, you're going to get more action than if you write a congressman. You know, Oprah was talking about mad cow disease and the fact that she wouldn't eat beef. They sued her! And she won it. She won the case. But the point was that she hurt them. She hurt them in their pocketbook. People were not going to buy beef now, because of mad cow disease, because Oprah had featured that thing. So, you find a way. I mean, that's what we should have, a think tank, and figure out ways that we can attack this thing economically, whatever it is we have to do. Make our demands

very specific. The thing about it was that it was supposed to be separate but equal. It was never equal.

I couldn't think about it as a kid, but as I look back and I say, "Suppose we'd gone for the money?" Suppose we'd said, "We don't want to be together with you. We still want to be separate. We want the same money." That would've been profound. If suddenly now we get eighteen dollars spent on us, on each one of our kids, to pay teachers' salaries, equipment and all of that, you're going to get an education. And then the answer being, "Well, then we should send them to white schools." And that was the false premise. The false premise was that we could not educate ourselves, that we had to go to school with white people in order to be educated. But that was a false premise, because we had educated ourselves. We had created universities, schools. Proverbial stories about various black teachers, who, you know, "She really made me straighten up." All this kind of stuff, you hear them all over, especially when they retire. "Ms. Johnson, I was going nowhere, and then I got into your class and you made me see I could learn." So that was a false premise, but OK. That's one of the things I always feel, kind of like Cassandra. You try to tell the truth, and nobody listens. That's how I feel sometimes. But we're constantly being bombarded here by propaganda. All kinds of propaganda. It's coming at us all the time, going on the Internet, and it's all designed to make us feel as if we are not equal, we are inferior. We don't speak properly, all this kind of stuff. Because I always say, our kids are bright. You take a bunch of three-year-old Africamerican kids and you've got the brightest kids in the world. Bright, beautiful kids. Why is it that after five years in school they're all dumb? It must be something in the school.

It might be different in France. They were committed to some kind of equality. When I was there, they said that all over the francophone world, every kid was learning the same thing at the same time, and that you could take your kid out of school in Paris and go to Montpellier and put them in school, and they would be studying the same thing. The same little Alliance book that I used to get. I think the French realized somewhere along the way that they had to educate the

population like that. In America we don't educate our people because we're so sure that somebody's going to come from afar and fill that place. Because of my leg and various things, I'm involved with the hospital[7]—there are no Americans in the hospital! All the attendants are Filipinos and Africans and West Indians and maybe one or two African Americans. Even the doctors, they're all Indians. Once in a while, you get a white doctor. It's a rarity. Because the American schools are so bad, the kids can't get into med school. A foreigner is more apt to be able to get into med school than an American-born person because the education is so bad. But they don't want to give the money, because they figure, "Eh, let them come from afar and fill those jobs." It's the same with the Mexicans. They got the Mexicans to come in and be the carpenters and the plumbers and do all that stuff, grow the foods and so on. And the cost of education is tied to the property taxes. So the government just doesn't say, "OK, here's a couple billion dollars so everybody can get the same education." It still depends on where you live.

YB: In the preface to *Dancers on the Shore*, you wrote, I quote, "A writer, I think, should ask questions."

WMK: I was a kid. 21, 22 years old.

YB: You don't believe it anymore?

WMK: Not really. Well, what my socialism gave me was a sense of responsibility to people. For instance, I hear gunfire going off. I read about people getting shot and stuff like that. I could write about that. I'm trying to give people hope. I'm trying to show them ways, you know, like Carlyle and the Devil. I'm trying to say that even if you've got the devil himself against you, you can stand up to him. You can outsmart him. Make them dream. Or try. We have no hope. Very little hope. Those boys walking around with their pants down, they got no hope. The only

thing that'll happen to them is maybe they'll go to prison. Then they won't have to worry about food, clothing, and shelter. Or women.

And then you have whole counties upstate that are built around their prison. All the white people who are working in that prison or delivering food to that prison or supplying that prison with this or that, they ask them, they say, "Would you rather have a college here or a prison?" They say prison. Give us a prison. We can employ more people. You know, the kids make a lot of problems. They get drunk, they drive fast, all this stuff. Give us a prison. We can maintain this group. So it's African American men basically supplying all this labor for all these other people.

YB: That reminds me of Mitchell's attitude in *dəm*.

WMK: When Mitchell arrives in the ghetto, he's welcomed by a little girl singing a song about a polar bear that clearly is a white man. The song mirrors the story; you know what I mean? So that's what that was about. I don't think I see that the little girl is singing the song because of him, specifically.

YB: No, not because of him. He fails to recognize that they are talking about him.

WMK: Well, that's part of what I was trying to show African American people. White people have their things they won't allow themselves to see. And so, you can be invisible behind what they won't see. Because I found out in my life, sometimes if I want to pretend to be dumb, I'll be dumb. And it gives me a lot of control, because I'm not dumb. Like Cooley. He's not dumb, but he can pretend to be just ordinary, not very smart, because it disarms the oppressor. To a certain extent for him, you can live up to the stereotype. I mean, that's what slavery was all about. People living up to the stereotype but at night planning rebellion. And they were never caught. They were only betrayed. It was only usually some African American, some slave, who would overhear about a slave plot and go to

the owner, thinking he would get some perk. You know, that he could get some reward for betraying his people. Generally, they didn't get a reward, but sometimes they probably did.

YB: All right. In "My Next To Last Hit, by C.C. Johnson," you show that Cooley's behavior to Mitchell Pierce is—in *dəm* when it talks about an old score to settle—is in fact a question of education as well as of personal experience. So that's it, really. Is it really education and personal experience that made him who he is?

WMK: Well, the deep thing about that story, is that I grew up with Italians. They were usually very fair to me, and in fact, you know, my godfather was an Italian. And if they didn't like you, they really didn't like you. They'd let you know you weren't with them. If they did like you, they liked you, they were loyal. Africamerican people are oriented toward the English. They feel that as English descendants we have to show something to the politicians, the presidents. Basically, we aspire to be like the white people. Like English people, like Scottish people, like German people. We have to aspire to be like them. The Mediterranean people, it's either engineered or perhaps in some cases real—we're taught as African Americans to not trust the Italians, to not trust the Latinos. There's always been, since after slavery, when poor black people showed any sign of coming together and economically fighting the battle, they were always trying to create conflict between them. And I guess at a certain point I was thinking, "If I'm going to form an alliance, I'm going to form an alliance with the people who've been good to me. I'm not going to go for the whole idea of you know, the true white man is the English or the German and try to curry favor with him. I'm going to curry favor with the people who are good to me, and who like the things I like. In my case, that was Italians, and Latinos. Now they try to create a lot of problems between us, but basically, they're trying to create those problems between us so we won't come together and really share and come together.

So, Cooley is given the job. First, he's got this background. When he's a kid he goes into the bakery and he asks Mr. Capeurtao to give him a job. Mr. Capeurtao says, "Yeah, come here, yeah, sure, kid." You know, he likes him. He treats him fairly, which is my experience. So then when the Daon comes in—this kid he's grown up with who is now the head of this criminal organization—and says, "Hey, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to go kill this cracker, this Englishman, English-American." And so, he goes there, and he has this conversation with this man, and they have all this education and everything in common, and he, the leader, has said, "You've got the choice. If you don't want to kill him, I'll get somebody else to do it. But I want you to do it because you're smart, you'll be able to do it." So Cooley gets in there, and he starts to get nostalgic about Harvard, and the Ivy League, and all this society, Shakespeare and all this stuff. It's supposed to be what he aspires to, what he's supposed to want to become. After he has this conversation—this actually happened to me. I didn't kill the guy, but I killed him in fiction—after a while, the guy just dismisses him. White people are like that. They'll talk to you, talk to you, talk to you, talk to you, you think you're friends, and then they go, "Well, I have to go now!" and you never hear from them again. Leave you in the lurch. I went and talked to an editor, a big-time guy. We're talking, we're talking, I'm thinking, "I'm going to get an assignment out of this." Then he just says, "Well, OK, Bill, I have to get back to my work." Never heard from the guy. Never got an assignment, never did anything like that. So that's what happens to Cooley. The guy brushes him off, and he gets pissed off. He says, "Hey, if I'm going to choose an ally, I'm going to choose these mafia guys. They've been good to me."

And that's the way I feel. I think we should form alliances with other people who are good to us. The people that are fair to us. We can't be sucking after the English all the time, because they're not loyal. They'll be fine to you for a while, and then when you do something that they don't want you to do, then all of a sudden you find yourself outside. "Wow, what happened?" Just like a revolving door. Suddenly, like, "Poof!" Like magic. All of a sudden, you're outside. You

thought you were really in. You thought you were really getting in. They say, "Oh, yeah, we love you Bill, blah blah blah," then something happens, you do the wrong thing, you do something that displeases them, and you're out! At least my Italian guys, if you did something to them and you pissed them off, they gave you a beating! And you had a right to fight. But there's this kind of double-handed… so that's why he does that. The guy brushes him off, and he says, "After all this talk, I'm still a nigger to this guy." And so, he kills him. He decides, rather than all the Harvard experience and all that stuff—and that's the way I feel.

I feel with the Albanians now, when they were having trouble in Kosovo, because of my grandson's father. They're my people now. I even had a song in my head whose words I wrote down. A friend of mine put it to music. I didn't know what they thought about it. I think I gave it to my son-in-law. I say, "I'll go with you. Because somehow or other our blood is mixed and I'm with your kind of guys." And I feel the same way about the Italians. "You were good to me when I was a kid, and one of your kind *really* took me under his wing and *really* set me up for the end of my life, set me up in apartments over the years, gave me good tips, taught me about Italian culture and wine and bread, stuff like that, really treated me as somebody that he respected, he admired my talent. There wasn't any hidden agenda. "I'm going to go with you." That's rare, I guess. But I think there are a lot of African American people that feel that way about Latin people. They keep trying to separate us and put us into conflict with each other, but we like their music, we like their dancing, we like their girls. They intermarry with us. They don't have a lot of racism in that society. Yeah, there's some light-skinned Latino people who would never deal with dark-skinned Latino people or African Americans or anything like that, but then there are a bunch— you go into a Latino family and Papi is light, and Mami is dark, and half the kids are brown, and then there's one who looks real white, and then one who looks almost African. That's why they all came to the north. That's why Latino people, until Cuba, didn't go down south. They didn't want to be separated all out because of their law. They wanted to have their multi-colored families. They liked that.

My mother's father called her La Nikita. He *loved* her, *loved* her being brown. He was a light-skinned guy. He thought she was pretty and cute and bright. Took her everywhere. And color, he didn't let color get in the way of that. And she was darker than both of them. The African came popping out after two or three generations. Because all the kids were mostly light, and then my mother came in a little brown. You could see she wasn't that dark, but she was browner than my grandmother and she was browner than my grandfather. But it didn't make any difference to them.

And especially in jazz now, I mean, the Latino players have taken up jazz from the way it was, which is basically a dancing music, and continued it there. They've taken songs that have been written by Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk and the great jazz guys and putting them to a Latin beat. So, it's been that cross-cultural thing going on for a long time. But the English are awful. You know, when you think about them. Their colonialism, the way they treated people; they're really awful. That was what that story "My Next To Last Hit, by C.C. Johnson" was about. That choice he has, whether he's going to go with the ethnics—what we call the ethnics here, the non-English white people—or whether or not he's going to go with the English and Harvard and all of that. He says, "I'm going to stay with these people. They were good to me. They gave me a job, taught me a trade—you know, baking—if he wants me to go kill somebody, I'll go and do it."

YB: Women don't seem to be very active in your novels, or if they are, it is that underlying role?

WMK: Well, I call myself a feminist. I'm kind of in awe of women. My wife and my daughters have taught me all about women. But I would guess it's true. I would have to plead guilty to that. I haven't made a lot of women characters. Because I guess I'm dealing with men's troubles more. But that's what I tried to show in that story, "Moses Mama," which really comes out of the Bible. Most

people think that she put him in a little basket and sent him down the river, but when you read the Bible you can see that she plotted something there, she planned something there, because when he is rescued by the pharaoh's daughter, his sister is right there. And the sister says, "I know a woman who will take care of this baby." So what she's basically done is engineered for him to come right back home, but now he's sponsored by the pharaoh's daughter. And I'm impressed by the ingeniousness of that plan. That's not the kind of plan that a man would come up with. And that's what she says. And the Bible, you know, since my religious conversion in the 70s, the Bible is full of these instances where women break the rules, but they turn out to be right. They turn out to be the bravest. I mean, Eve is the brave one in that situation. Even though she's breaking the law of God, she's still brave to do it: her curiosity to find out whether it was true, whether or not you had the knowledge of good and evil. And, of course, it's an ironic thing.

The Creator says, "You eat that fruit and you're going to die," but he doesn't mean you're going to be struck down that day. He means that death will now come into your life. Presumably in the Garden of Eden you didn't die. But I think it's mythical. And the reason *why* death comes into it is that, as he says at the end of it, the Creator saying, "Now that he's eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will be equal to me. So, I have to drive him out of the garden so that he won't eat of the tree of everlasting life. Because if he knows what I know and he lives without death, he is equal to me and therefore he will overthrow me," or something like that. So that's one instance.

Then you have Jacob and Esau's mother, I think it's Rebekah. The law of man says if you're the oldest son, you get everything. But she knows her older son. She knows he likes women. She knows he likes to go hunt and hang out and he's not serious. She knows that the younger one is the serious one. She engineers to pass off the younger one as the older one so he'll get the blessing, and Jacob turns out to be the one who fathers all these children and something like that. So that's another instance where she's breaking God's rule, or the rule of man I guess, and

it turns out to be the right thing to do. There are all kinds of things like that in the Bible.

Indeed, women don't necessarily think like us. When we first got married, my wife and I, we'd have arguments. I'd make my point, and then she'd start out, and it seemed like a digression. I'd say, "Make your point! Make your point!" But after a while I found out if I was quiet, and I let her finish, she was going to get to the same place I was, but she was going to come another route. So that's when I began to really kind of listen. Then I was in a situation where I was the only man. It was a writing group. I wanted to get in touch with some writers, so I went and joined this group and they were all women. And the natural tendency of a man in that situation is to try to dominate that situation. But my grandmother and my mother were creative women. My grandmother's a seamstress and the examples that I got from her was, the raw materials for something would come into the house and two weeks later it was a wedding dress. That was my introduction, basically, to the creative process. You take raw materials of some kind, whether it's memories, life, or material or painting, and then it comes out. And that's what I learned there and then of course on top of all this family history that I was getting.

When I started to write I had a lot to write about, I knew I had all this stuff to write about. I didn't have to make up anything. But I liked making up stuff; that was fun. All along I had a lot of respect for women. And my wife and I live very separate lives, which we found, I think, you find actually that that helps in marriages. If a man has his circle and a woman has her circle, then when you come together you and the wife have something to talk about. Whereas if you have this phony American pattern of, "My other half, we do everything together, we go everywhere together," you have nothing to talk about because you all experience the same thing. You're only living one life instead of two. But I had a bias. It's like in that piece, I said I had a good education, so I was biased against women. Because that's what the education will give you. The education is not telling you that there's some woman behind Napoleon or whoever was really important to them. Now we know it was Josephine. And every great man you look at, there's a woman

back there someplace. Sometimes it's his wife, sometimes it's his sister, sometimes it's his mother, and they're as influential in creating that man and making him who he is as anybody. And that's true of me.

My mother and my grandmother are probably, I would say 60%. My father, I would give him 40%—because he was a writer. So even though he wasn't obsessive about it, if I ran my papers by him, he would correct the punctuation and say, "Hey, maybe you can say this better," or something like that. But in terms of creativity, he was an editorial writer, a newspaper writer. In terms of creativity it was my mother and grandmother who were creative and enjoyed my creativity. They were always ready to buy me some crayons or some paper, or help me some way to be artistic, to be creative. My mother played piano and I sang. So, I was getting a lot of creativity from them.

I can see it's very different now because my students are very different. They basically wear the same clothes, they're androgynous. The girls basically all wear jeans, a lot of them are not wearing bras anymore. But in my generation, there was a clear demarcation between women and men, they had different things. One of the things I think about feminism is that in a way, women have not gotten acceptance as women, they've only gotten acceptance because they've made themselves into men. They didn't assert themselves and say, "We're important to raising these children." They all want to leave the home and go work in some office. I don't know if that's an improvement. I think the French still have that idea, somehow or other, that there are things that women do better than men. For instance, needlecraft. I mean, that's been lost. Women can't sew anymore. I sew, I love it. They taught me how to sew, and I love it. It's something that I use to cool out. People might think it's strange to be sewing. I love it. Sometimes I think I'll make a show. It's great because you can sit down, three hours later you can get up and you have something. Whereas a book might take you two years to write. Here in an afternoon you can make yourself a doll.

I'm interested in African American culture, and I'm interested generally in working-class cultures. Middle-class cultures, I don't know; they're boring. I

didn't want to live a middle-class life. Once I became a writer, I just didn't want to live a middle-class life. I didn't want to wear a necktie. I didn't want to—I resisted teaching for a long time. For me it's all about culture. And culture for me is what your mother teaches you. Oh, here's something about women: women teach you language. Women transmit culture. It's what you learn from your mother and your grandmother that's really the most important knowledge you get. They teach you how to be a nice guy. What I'm writing about to a certain extent is how do we navigate that culture. It's not our culture. We have a lot of things we don't agree with about, but yet we have to navigate it, and we can. But as I say, I like us to pick and choose.

I think a lot of middle-class African Americans have just abandoned being African American. Maybe they'll have some what they consider to be soul food or something like that, but they'd rather go to a restaurant and eat French food or something like that. They don't see anything beautiful or wonderful in our culture. My favorite African American writer is Langston Hughes, and what he's always reiterating is the beauty of our culture, the beauty of our people, our wonderful humanity, and, you know, just the way we are. I think I've taken up that banner, and I don't want to see that part of us lost. But unfortunately, I think our culture is disintegrating. I also feel kind of like I'm one of those last prophets saying, "Here, we're still here, we're beautiful." Because when we came here, we came back from the West Indies, we stayed downtown for a while and didn't like it. We could have lived on the Lower East Side or downtown and been part of the avant-garde movement. But I wanted to step out and see brown people. I love brown people. So, it was a cultural thing. And because I grew up working-class, or in a working-class environment, I liked that. They have better parties. Poor people have much better parties. You can have a thousand-dollar party, it'll be a bad party. Everybody's sitting there with a sour face and a drink in their hand. You go down to a working-class bar, it doesn't matter whether they're white or black. They've got some great music on, everybody's dancing, jigging around, and the

potato salad comes out, the fried chicken comes out, the spaghetti or whatever it is, and it's great.

Karen "Aiki" Kelley [*entering and interrupting*]: My love. I love you.

WMK: Wait a minute. I'm almost finished. So that's the way it goes!

YB: All right, just a final word about *Dunfords Travels Everywheres*, your last published novel. What can you say about its complexity and the link with James's *Finnegans Wake*?

AK: I can answer that. I don't understand all of it *(laughs*).

WMK: It was fueled by James Joyce and a lot of hashish.

AK: But a lot of James Joyce. *Finnegans Wake.*

YB: I found an article by Grace Eckley making the connection. It's called "The Awakening of Mr. Afrinnegan: Kelley's *Dunford's Travels Everywheres* and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*."

AK: Look at that! That's interesting, because that was exactly what happened.

YB: I found it on the Internet. Well, I found her name in another article, I couldn't find the article, I googled her name, found her email address, and basically wrote, "Can you save me?" And she scanned it and she emailed it to me *(all laugh)*.

AK: That's great! He never saw this. I don't think he's ever seen anything that they've written about—

WMK: Only Marième Sy.

AK: Marième Sy who wrote about *Finnegans Wake*. I mean, about *Dunfords Travels Everywheres*. Interesting, interesting. So, I think he's about thirty or forty years ahead of his time, so maybe now he'll catch up to people. People will understand.

WMK: Well, it's funny, I totally miscalculated the audience. I thought they would enjoy puzzling over it. But people would get angry. In fact, I *was* compared to Joyce, and then they condemned us both.

NOTES

[1] The contrast originates from the fact that, on the one hand, some critics considered that Kelley's writing did not follow the advice of Black Arts Movement leaders, such as Amiri Baraka or Larry Neal, to stick to a Black Aesthetics and stop using the codes of White arts. On the other hand, other critics thought that his narratives, and particularly his last published book, had gone too far in their forms and their ideas—hence a certain rejection of this author and his books.

[2] Kelley, William Melvin. « SHADES: What I Learned about Slavery and Racism at 4060 Carpenter Avenue, The Bronx ». In *Transforming Anthropology*, 2005, Vol. 13, n°1, pp. 47-54.

[3] The origin of the word is contested. Other etymological theories argue that it comes from Old and Middle French by way of Italian and/or Spanish.

[4] Sarah Lawrence College is a private institution in Yonkers, New York where Kelley taught until his death.

[5] This interview can be found in Marième Sy's PhD dissertation: SY/SIDIBE, Marième. *William Melvin Kelley : l'homme et l'oeuvre*. 547 p. Thèse de doctorat, Paris 3, 1989.

[6] « Concerning Ebonics » is a short unpublished text in which Kelley advocates the use of African American vernacular, Ebonics, and shows that its use does not mean the user cannot think. He shows that it is not just pidgin, but really a language.

[7] William Melvin Kelley suffered from kidney troubles for many years until his death. He had one of his legs amputated.