"Under the Umbrella of Black Civilization": A Conversation with Reginald McKnight

Bertram D. Ashe
University of Richmond, bashe@richmond.edu

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Talking to Reginald McKnight is like scanning an imaginary worldwide radio dial. At any given moment he can transform his pleasant speaking voice into a raspy, aged, Middle Eastern-by-way-of-New York accent—or a deep Southern drawl. In an instant he can switch from a precise West African dialect to hip, urban street lingo, and then effortlessly segue back to his normal voice. McKnight says he “hit the ground running” as a mimic, and his talent was broadened as he lived all over the United States as the son of an Air Force sergeant. His time spent on the road—including a year-long visit to Senegal as a young man—brought him into contact with many different voices, and those voices erupt occasionally to illustrate his conversations. While many people are able to imitate orally the voices they hear, McKnight also translates these voices into narrative. He allows these voices to tell their own stories, stories that explore race in the United States as well as race in Africa. In McKnight’s fiction, “multiculturalism” is as likely to mean a clash of cultures between black people as it is between black and white people.

Moustapha’s Eclipse (1988), McKnight’s prize-winning collection of short stories, demonstrates his expansive view of black culture; it includes voices that tell stories set in the sixties-era South, the contemporary American west, the Old West . . . and West Africa. The range of these stories represents McKnight’s belief that, as he once wrote, “We are, from the bottom to the top, as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva.” His subsequent books, the novel I Get on the Bus (1990), the short stories in The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas (1992), his book of stories White Boys (1998), his new novel He Sleeps (2001), even the collection of quotations and sayings in African American Wisdom (1994), contain a multiplicity of voices—expressing a variety of viewpoints—that nod to McKnight’s desire that black-skinned people worldwide consider themselves “a civilization, a collection of cultures, societies, nations, individuals, ‘races.’ ” In large part, McKnight’s racialist perspective has to do with his coming of age in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. He writes fiction that is a part of a growing sub-genre of black literature which often announces itself in book titles: Besides White Boys, by McKnight, there is The White Boy Shuffle, by Paul Beatty; Negrophobia, by Darius James; The Last Integrationist, by Jake Lamar; and Caucasia, by Danzy Senna, just to name a few. Trey Ellis has argued that these texts are indicative of a “New Black Aesthetic”—Greg Tate prefers “post-liberated aesthetic”—that discusses the reality of the “cultural mulatto” (or “cultural chameleon,” to use Paul Beatty’s term)—that black, post-Civil Rights Movement peculiarity whose existence traverses both black and white worlds. I sat down to

Bertram D. Ashe is Assistant Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, and a past contributor to African American Review. His book From Within the Frame: Storytelling in African-American Fiction is forthcoming from Rutledge.
talk with McKnight about his contribution to this genre, his fictional body of work that explores race in order to, as he puts it below, "elbow a space" for himself in black culture.

We talked twice. After a long session in his small, unassuming apartment in College Park, where he taught creative writing at the University of Maryland (he is currently teaching at the University of Michigan), we finished late in the evening after a reading at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. When McKnight said he didn’t truly consider himself a writer until he went to Africa, we began talking about how long it takes for some persons to call themselves “writers.” I wondered what happened in Africa that allowed him finally to identify himself as a writer.

McKnight: When I went to Africa I wrote every day, eight to sixteen hours a day. You think, “How the hell could you have seen Africa if you wrote that often?” (Laughs.) Well, the sixteen-hour days were . . . I wrote probably a quarter of a million words or more while I was there. Most of it I knew was just, you know, the crucible; it was the place I went inwardly to make myself write. I knew that that experience would make me or break me. Could I write every day, could I write with that kind of intensity every day? All of the work I have written since then has grown out of that period, excepting two or three short stories. Now, I’d written maybe fifteen short stories before I went to Africa, and some of them were pretty good, but when I left that place I had done something to myself in a really profound way—imprinted myself with the written word in ways that I hadn’t prior to that. I mean, there I was, 6,000 or 7,000 miles from all my friends, all my family, in a place where I didn’t speak either French or Wolof very well, the two principal languages spoken in Senegal. So I did have a lot of time to spend alone because socially it was so hard to really feel a part of things. And I had an insomnia problem. So I spent a great deal of time writing.

I think I was really trying to . . . recreate myself. I was dissatisfied with myself as a human being. I wanted to make myself into a better human being, and the only way I could think to do it was through writing. You do so much exploration of the self in writing, and sometimes you don’t even know what you think or feel until it’s in written form. It was beyond therapy. It was like revising my soul the way you’d revise a text. When I got back from Africa I thought the revision of my personality was a complete failure. However, I knew I had done things in my writing that I had never been able to touch before. I really extended myself. I think about that period of John Coltrane’s apprenticeship when he had things in his head that he couldn’t get out through his horn and he was laughed off the stage, booed off the stage, and then locked himself away for months and months and months. That was his apprenticeship; he went back and stunned people. Well, I have yet to stun people, but I know that a lot of the things that are in my head I do get on the page. And that’s a good feeling.

Ashe: Was it a change that was particular to Africa? Could this have happened some place else? Or was it important that you, as an African American, were in Africa in order to execute this transformation, this “revision of the soul”?

McKnight: It couldn’t have happened in any other place but Africa, I’m sure. The reason I think so is that I had a really strong desire to go to a lot of other places as a young man. I wanted to go to South America, I wanted to go to Spain, I wanted to go to Australia. But here I was in a place that really forced me to look at myself. I was in a place where it’s very likely that my relatives had lived. I got a sense of history that I wouldn’t have gotten any place else. As a black person, here I was at sort of the pregenerative site of every-
thing my ancestors, my forbears came from. I was in a place that really made me look at myself as a self that was individually unique, but also part of this enormous historical process. That couldn’t have happened, I think, in any other place but Africa, particularly West Africa, where most of us from the U.S. are derived. And as much as I was interested in Africa from the intellectual point of view and in terms of literature, I really wasn’t sure if I even wanted to go. Matter of fact, there were times before I got the fellowship that I dreaded going.

Ashe: Because you weren’t sure that you wanted to explore some of the things that you felt it would draw out?

McKnight: Yeah, I really thought it would make me—maybe it was some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, but I really had a feeling that if I went I would have to take a good hard look at myself as a black man, a deracinated black man, someone who hadn’t grown up with the benefit of day-to-day, year-after-year living in a Black American culture. And I knew it would also be a test in terms of whether I would be able to leave the place with not only a strong sense of myself, but just the project itself, of academic work. I was very intimidated by that because it seemed more big-league than sitting in a library and tranquilly reading Wole Soyinka or Amos Tutuola or Kofi Awoonor or someone like that. And I also realized that, as Gregory Bateson puts it, “The map is not the territory.” I had become fully acquainted with the map as a student. Not that this is saying much, because I did go to Colorado College after all, which doesn’t have an African Studies program. They have an aspect of their curriculum which permits trustworthy students to study independently under their own auspices, but there are no Africans on the campus with respect to literature. So I was pretty much on my own. I studied some with Moses Nkondo, who is from South Africa. I was given a small grant to go to the University of Oklahoma, at Norman, to work with him, and he gave me a lot of stuff to read. Reading all those books was a great thing, I suppose, and it taught me a lot about the world, but, again, the map is not the territory. I knew that I would be at the very bottom rung of those who understand what Africa is like, because I hadn’t lived there. So the time in Senegal felt like a really intense freshman year, where you’re the only admitted freshman in the program of a university full of advanced graduate students. I didn’t know any more about Africa, it turns out, than . . . I felt, after about four or five months there, I was on par with the average three or four year old in terms of understanding the culture, and in many respects I understood less.

Ashe: By my calculations, you coined the term cultural mulatto shortly before Trey Ellis used it to such good effect in his essay “The New Black Aesthetic,” but both of you seem to be headed in the same direction as far as a black aesthetic is concerned. When Evan, in I Get on the Bus, remembers moving to Colorado, he says, “. . . my brother, my sister and I developed new accents going to school with white kids. Listened to and liked Elvis, the Beatles, the Beach Boys and the Animals as much as we liked Aretha, James Brown, The Four Tops and Marvin Gaye, but we knew black music better than we knew black people. The black people we did know were not like us.” And in the short story “The Honey Boys,” in Moustapha’s Eclipse, Spider says, “Black was nothing more than a color to me. I was a cultural mulatto, born and raised without the benefits of Watts, chop shops, Motown street corners, or deepdown Smithville fishing holes and chinaberry trees. . . . I was too black to be white, too white to be black.” Both narrators sound as if they’re searching for cultural balance up on a fence of blackness that is pretty high up and not very wide at all. Would you say that part of your mis-
sion in your fiction is to widen that cultural space? Perhaps by raising and discussing the whole notion of “Am I black enough for you?”

McKnight: Unquestionably. And I’m a writer who doesn’t really think of himself with many overt political agendas. I’m not necessarily trying to make the world a better place to live, although that wouldn’t be bad, I suppose. Yeah, I’ve been trying with my fiction to elbow a space for me in black culture that I haven’t seen. For example, I speak a kind of idiolect that to an untrained ear resembles white speech, but to a trained ear, to an aware ear, it might be a combination of things. Certainly there’s a clear African strain in the way I speak. There’s no doubt about it to me. I think that it’s easy to see, like, what the media did to O.J.—O.J. and his parade of white women, O.J. taking diction courses to learn how to speak “white.” I find that sort of thing irritating. White speech—so-called white speech—doesn’t belong to anybody; it belongs to whoever possesses it. O.J. speaks black speech, so does Bryant Gumbel, so does Greg Gumbel, so does the guy who did that variety program, that talk show—what’s his name, Byron Allen? People make fun of him. They say he’s not black. And I ask again and again, you define black. Give me a concrete script; I’ll act it for you if I can. We should not be pushing for a kind of narrowness, we should be pushing for more expansiveness. This is the way cultures survive and grow and change and learn and live. To be narrow, from a cultural point of view, a biological point of view... I’ve often said, and this disturbs people for some reason, that we should be like the mafia: We should have our hand in everything. We should be everywhere. And we are. That’s the reality. But a lot of people think that, unless you adhere to a certain set of rules... I grew up in the ’60s and ’70s when these demands were made unthinkingly. “Unless you adhere to these rules you’re not being black enough, you’re harming your people, you’re imitating whitey.” And unlike this speaker in I Get on the Bus, I recall very early, when I was about four, when my accent actually started to fade. My accent, of course, came from my mother. I was born in Germany, lived in New York, lived in California, and my mother’s accent, a Texas accent, wasn’t terribly Texas to begin with. So I became more... Californicated. (Laughs.)

There are a myriad of ways to express blackness. Ashe: “Californicated.” (Laughs.) I hadn’t heard that one—and I’m from California.

McKnight: I guess not! We try to hide that stuff from you guys. (More laughter.) All children speak the so-called mother tongue: Your language is often acquired from your mother—or both parents, and then later on your peer group. So I went to school without a so-called Southern accent, which a lot of people immediately say is black. This is an important issue for me because I grew up feeling elbowed out. I have an essay on the subject [“Confessions of a Wannabe Negro”] in a book called Lure and Loathing, edited by Gerald Early. I talk about it at length. My speech first of all is American; it’s overlayered with African American, Midwestern, Californian, maybe a little Eastern— I’ve lived all over the place. What you get is more layered. It’s the “Princess and the Pea” thing all over again. The pea is still there, it’s always there, it’s the driving force, but it might be overlayered in the minds of some, with other cultural aspects, accoutrements, borrowings, influences. And there are those like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who will argue that, and he’s right, there’s no essential blackness—people think they see it all the time, but they go to put their finger on it and it disappears. It’s like when someone asked Fats
Waller what rhythm was and Waller’s reply was, “If you’ve gotta ask, you ain’t got it.” There might be an essence, but you can’t get at it through a recipe. We insist we’re not all alike; we don’t all look alike, we don’t all act alike.

“Honky, quit putting this pressure on us—why’re you always trying to say we’re this way or that?” And yet these same blacks turn around and look at other black people and say, “That behavior is not ‘black’….”

Ashe: Wanda, as Evan puts it, is to “blame” for his questioning his blackness. Both get a chance to talk, at length, about their conceptions of blackness in I Get on the Bus, and I was impressed with the balance that you gave their respective positions. When, late in the book, Wanda explains her views on a black “Us” versus a white “Them,” it seemed as if even if you disagreed with her—and I have no idea whether you do or not based on my reading of the book—that you respected her point of view. Was it a struggle making her position sound valid?

McKnight: No, actually, it wasn’t, because if I didn’t do that it would belie everything I try to do as an artist. I think she makes some really good points. I also think that there are some so-called black conservatives who make some very good points. If we shut our ears to them they’re of no value to us whatsoever. Now, believe me, it does get on my nerves when I see fucking George F. Will always saying, “Hey, I read this great book by Shelby Steele!” You know? “Hey, you gotta read this book! This is the way it oughta be!” But I think the core idea of blackness is not to agree and hold hands and sing “Kumbaya” with all our fellow black people, but to listen to them and allow them their space and their room to express themselves as individuals. As Julius Lester says, you cannot have a society without individuals. You have to be able to allow them the space to express themselves and grow and believe that people can change if need be. And so you always engage in this dialogue, this polylog; you have to engage in this longish discourse over the centuries. Selfhood is a process, it’s not static. It’s ever growing, ever changing.

Ashe: African American Wisdom, the collection of sayings and quotations you edited, seems to strike a similar balance. You appear to be negotiating the maze of different oppositions that your blackness calls to mind: integration versus nationalism, non-violence versus self-defense, and so on. Does the mediating stance of this book continue what appears to be an ongoing theme in your work?

McKnight: I’m afraid so. I guess I’m one-note after all. (Laughs.) One of the things I love about a city like, say, San Francisco is that not only are there a variety of cultures, but you have the opportunity to explore. There are few closed cultures in that city. One thing I don’t like about Pittsburgh is you don’t have your ass up on German Hill at a certain time, at night—don’t be black and be there—because they don’t want you there. Even if there’s a jazz club where a black person might be performing, there are tacit barriers. And that’s one of the reasons I have trouble with the term African American. It excludes Africans who don’t have that specific tradition, who live in America. I remember once Terry Gross on NPR asked me whether I preferred African American or black. I said I use both of them, depending on the context, but I prefer to keep black around because it’s inclusive; it forms an umbrella for a broad variety of black people—Canadians, Haitians, anyone in this hemisphere, and anyone in the other hemisphere. I have a friend who’s from Panama. Is he supposed to refer to himself as “South African American”? “South American African”? (Laughs.) I like black. I believe in as catholic an approach to our selfhood as possible. I don’t look at us even as a race because for one thing, race has little value as a word. Not that racism doesn’t exist, but I think of blacks—I think I say this.
in the essay—as an aggregate and as a civilization, because civilization implies exchange. Yes, there’s a huge, a vast variety. But if selfhood is under the umbrella of a single civilization, that leaves me open to access. I have a friend, Muhammad Ali, he’s a writer, and he wrote an article that appeared in Essence magazine a few years back where he talks about the way Africans are often mistreated by African Americans. I’ve seen and heard many accounts of this myself. And when I was in Africa there was a small contingent of black Americans who went to Africa and played the same colonialist game the French did.

**Ashe:** There are some examples of that in the novel.

**McKnight:** Yeah, that’s why I write about it. Goddamn right I’ve seen that. And Ali’s gotten death threats, but he’s right. Now if someone calls him up and says, “Talking that way is going to get your ass kicked,” that’s wrong. And no amount of relativism is going to make it right. But if someone calls him up and says, “You know, that might be your experience, but I can offer a certain amount of alternative experience,” that’s all right. The one thing I love about Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God is that section where they’re in Florida, I think, doing all that grunt work, but there’s a community that gathers at Tea Cake’s and Janie’s house, and they’re all sort of exchanging and sharing, and they find out their commonalities. They don’t agree on everything, but they’re under the umbrella of black civilization again. And I find that heartening. I just love that.

**Ashe:** I’m intrigued by the way that the Senegalese characters in White Boys seem to love to hear Bertrand “speak American noir” in “He Sleeps” and “Palm Wine.” It seems to echo, ironically, white American fascination with black style and black speech. Does it, really? Do you see it demonstrating how Africa is, for Bertrand, both foreign and familiar at the same time?

**McKnight:** Yeah, yeah. What I really loved about being there was when I could discover correspondences between the sort of vestigial Africanness that we carry here and the real article there. And they were delighted with it, too. One thing I was struck by when I lived in the villages, when I lived in N’gor Village and briefly in Yoff Village, this little triumvirate of villages populated by the Lebou people—and I don’t know if it was just me; other blacks would claim that they didn’t feel the same way, or have the same perceptions—the children there would be fascinated with this “otherness” that they perceived, and they called me toubob. The adults would say, “Oh, don’t worry about that.” And I said, “But toubob means white man doesn’t it? A white person.” And they said, “Well, it really means foreigner.” But they taught me a phrase in my first month there: “Douma toubob; Nitcou Noula.” Which means, “I’m not a white man, I’m a black man.” So after I learned the phrase I said, “Well, am I saying ‘I’m not a foreigner, I’m a black man’; or am I saying ‘I’m not a white man, I’m a black man’?” Either way suggests a certain kind of foreignness that really suggests, to many Africans, whiteness. And they couldn’t answer that question to my satisfaction; you know, to the satisfaction of my ego.

But it was pretty clear to me that there was delight whenever anything that seemed African was coming through us; people would speak a kind of expletive, they would say, “Shuuu-tut-tut-tut.” Which often sounds like our “My, my, my, my, my,” that sort of thing. And yet, at the same time, they would often ask me, “How do you guys say such-and-such,” and I would say it—and it was kind of for their entertainment. And after awhile I began to resist it because I felt like I was back on the track team in Colorado Springs and someone’s
saying, you know, “Can you do your imitation of Bill Cosby? or Nipsy Russell? or . . . ?” (Laughs.) Something like that. You know, where the idea is to sort of “perform blackness” for people. And it was pretty clear to me that it’s always going to be a problematic and complicated issue for Africans with respect to African Americans. I don’t really believe they saw me and other Americans—black Americans—as fully legitimate. Our blackness was far too diffused and evaporated in certain ways.

Ashe: That puts me in mind of the DouDou character in “Palm Wine,” who instantly dislikes Bertrand and perceives his “diffuse blackness” immediately, before he gets to know him. What struck me was that it was an example of classic prejudice. I mean literal, doctrinaire prejudice: “I am prejudging you before I know anything about you.” He actually says to his partners, pointing to Bertrand, “What’s this thing?” and he says it before he has any conception of who Bertrand, the person, really is. Was that a common occurrence there? When you say that the African has a troubled or a difficult reconciliation with African Americans, is that sort of behavior specific to African Americans? or is the behavior already there and sometimes African Americans get run into this cultural buzz-saw, in much the same way that they can run into racist whites here who have a pre-existing sense of how they must be?

McKnight: It’s the latter. There is a preconception. Right after Alex Haley’s book and the film Roots became popularized, there was an explosion of African American tourism to West Africa and to some degree East Africa. And there was some disappointment with Haley himself in Africa. Some Africans felt he was connected to family. For them it isn’t so much racial, but do you have a name, what’s your family name? And they were upset with Haley personally. I don’t want to disparage a guy who’s been long dead, but they had felt that since he had come back to his family that he should behave as a family member. They felt exploited. They felt that he was just there for self-aggrandizement, that he should have helped his family members to get an education, that he should have helped put electricity in some of the houses in his family village, that he should have been one of the leaders. I’m sure that many of them thought that he should have spent a great deal more time in the Gambia. But he didn’t. In the opinion of some of the locals, he went there for photo-ops and to shake hands. I’m sure he felt it was a moving experience, but for some of them it wasn’t enough. So even people in Senegal who weren’t directly connected to his family took it very personally. Many of them took it very, very personally. I thought it gave them the sense that we’re all carrying the same kind of shallowness that often white Americans are accused of having, that Africa for us is only a concept, a kind of intellectual bailiwick, that if we really insisted on going through the work of re-connecting with family that we should engage with them as family: learn the language, convert if necessary to the correct religion. But going around and taking pictures and staying in hotels . . .

I was one of the few black Americans who even lived in a village, and a lot of Africans admired me for living in a village. I’ve made reference in some of my work to black Americans who pridefully say, “Well, I’ve never set foot in one of those villages,” and “Those people sort of take you for all you have,” and yada yada yada. A lot of Africans felt African Americans, black Americans were acting like neo-colonialists. So in certain ways, I think many Africans had hopes and expectations of a closer, more genuinely filial connection. But let’s face it, three, four hundred years is a pretty significant gap. Whenever they found even miniscule evidence of what they consider “Africanity,” they embraced it. But there’s so much about all of us
that gave them pause. At the very end of my time there I was quite certain that there was little love and respect because we had become too Euro-American.

There were many instances where my Africanness was sort of on trial. They wanted to see how much was still left. I think it was really important for them to see if I measured up. There’s this old saying, I think it’s from the Congo region: “Black will blacken you.” And in Egypt or some place, there’s a saying that “The black man has one cup more blood and one more rib than the white man.” So there’s this whole thing of the heartiness of blacks, the toughness, the strength, character. But in this respect it wasn’t physical, but moral and spiritual and cultural (and in some cases even intellectual) strength. In certain ways none of us really measured up. But if you were willing to try, if you learned the language, wore the clothing, ate the meals—if you married an African woman, or an African man—then you could be adopted in a certain sense. But it was never about color, never about color; and this is what people in our country are very confused about. There was a woman who had been a former Peace Corps volunteer who married a Senegalese man. She was blonde and blue-eyed, but she wore her hair in the same kind of weave as the black women. She dressed in African clothing. And when I first heard her speak in the bank, I couldn’t tell the difference between her Wolof and anybody else’s. I was stunned. I turned around, and she was this perfectly pink-colored, golden-colored woman. I turned to my friend Medoune and I said, “Jesus! Is she American?” He said, “Yeah, she was born American. But she’s blacker than you.”

Ashe: Wow.

McKnight: (Laughs.) So I think they wanted for those returning to Africa not just to be tourists, not just to go and snap pictures but to become somehow reunited, and it happened so rarely. Then of course there were a lot of the Americans who, whenever I would dress in African clothing—a kaftan, or chayas, or a boubou—would tease me. And it was the kind of teasing that really pointed out their discomfort, because there’s an insistence that we hang onto our difference, our Africanness. So they’d say, “Are you getting ready for El-Hajj?” (Laughs.) “Are you going to celebrate Ramadan with the gang?” That sort of thing. I got a lot of flack for living in the village. I stood more on the interstices of the cultures than a lot of the Americans did. And some of the Americans who have lived in villages found that after awhile that they couldn’t continue to live there. I sort of left very precipitously after seven months of living in the village. It just occurred to me, quite abruptly, that it would take a long, long time to feel I belonged there.

Ashe: The narrator of “He Sleeps” and “Palm Wine” in White Boys seems somewhat, well, Evanesque, could we say? (Laughs.) You know, shaky girl-back-home situation, somewhat indecisive, much cultural confusion. Is Bertrand an extension of Evan Norris, who himself seems an evolution of the Bertrand in Moustapha’s Eclipse? What’s driving your exploration of these characters?

McKnight: Are they extensions of one another? Yes, there are similarities. I found quite a few of the Evan Norris and Bertrand types when I was in Senegal. I’m sure I was one of them myself: people who came to Africa for a longish period of time to sort of legitimize their blackness and then return with this boon. Amos Tutuola’s Palm Wine Drinkard never brings his tapster back from Deadstown, but he does bring the egg. And with the egg he’s like many heroes who go on these journeys—they don’t always come back with what they seek, but they always bring something back that they can share with others. Now with the Palm Wine Drinkard, it ends up being a dis-
aster. The egg breaks when people start getting a little too frisky, and all these whips come out, and everyone is punished. One of the problems in the U.S. is that blackness is this predicated culture as opposed to poverty. So down-home bedrock blackness is closely associated with being poor, and this slave background and simple virtues and values. To step outside of that community of the poor means to step out of blackness. So it’s sort of an intractable, insoluble dilemma, if we can put it in those terms. Characters such as Evan Norris and Bertrand want to overarch trouble by going all the way back to the source of blackness, and coming back with something to legitimate it in certain ways. So you can say, “Well, buddy, I might not live in the ’hood, but man, I lived in Africa for a few years. And boy, I’ll tell ya, I know what real blackness is.”

Ashe: It’s a kind of hyper-essentialism, instead of going in the opposite direction . . .

McKnight: Yes. But what most of these guys find and what I found was . . . I went back there with the hopes of legitimating myself, because as a boy I was the integrator in the schools I’d gone to in the Deep South or West, one of only one or two black kids. And I really, really felt—like Evan feels, like Bertrand feels—that I wasn’t two-fistedly black. And this has been an issue for all of us: Are you “black”? And of course, there is no . . . I’m not going to say there’s absolutely no essential blackness. But I haven’t seen any evidence. I haven’t seen it. I’ve seen these things debated between Africans. You know, you’re not being “black.” I once sat with a friend, watching the news on television. And he was saying, “Why can’t they speak French like the black person, why do they have to speak French like the white people? What’s wrong with these people? They are not black enough.” As far as the black world is concerned, it’s fairly universal. But part of being black is the search for blackness. And as long as you’re engaged in the search, as long as it’s important to you, as long as it’s being questioned, then that’s probably all you can . . . you’re as black as you can be.

Ashe: Many of the stories in White Boys continue your examination of cultural dissonances. “The More I Like Flies” is similar to “Palm Wine” and “He Sleeps”; it’s just that this time it’s whites and blacks (and Koreans, for that matter) trying to live together. But “The More I Like Flies” (and I’m reminded of “Peaches” and “The Honey Boys” from Moustapha’s Eclipse, and maybe “Peacetime” from The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas) seems to both call for multiculturalist cohabitation, multiracial cohabitation, and yet reveal the difficulties of that cohabitation at the same time. Can we live together? You’re certainly not calling for separation, but you’re also not backing away from exploring the problems of the relationships either. How does that work?

McKnight: Well, you know—it’s sort of like marriage. (Laughs.)

Ashe: Yeah. (Laughs.)

McKnight: The end of the struggle has to be worth it, but the struggle is always going to be there. Let’s not kid ourselves. These problems are not going to go away. There’s going to be no fucking Starship Enterprise where you don’t notice or make reference to somebody’s big forehead (laughs), or three purple eyes, or their black skin. That’s an unnecessary future to imagine. The idea is not to ignore blackness from whiteness, pretend it doesn’t exist—“Oh, I don’t see colors”—which I really find a detestable position to take, totally insincere. But we don’t really have a whole lot of choice; we have to get along. As much as people have mocked, reviled, and teased Rodney King for having said “Can’t we all get along?” it’s probably going to be as important a remark, comment, or question as Martin Luther King’s “I
Have a Dream” speech, because it’s the final frontier for all of humanity. It’s how we treat one another. It is hard for me to walk into a room full of white people with absolutely no assumptions. That’s kind of what my work is about. That’s what it tries to do. People have to be able to talk about these things, and sometimes the talk is good and sometimes not. The frankness is good enough.

Ashe: What’s interesting, though, is that your characters don’t talk to each other! I mean, take Casper and Spider, in “The Honey Boys,” for instance. They’re walking down the street, and Spider wants to tell him everything that’s bothering him—and he doesn’t tell him! (Laughs.) We hear—as readers—but Casper doesn’t hear.

McKnight: (Laughs.) But doesn’t it kill you? Doesn’t it kill you that they can’t talk?

Ashe: It is bothersome. The same thing happens in “The More I Like Flies,” where the narrator wants to talk to Kelly, and he can’t do it. The same sort of tension is going on in a different way in “Boot,” and in “Palm Wine,” too, where Bertrand opens the story by saying, “I’ve never talked about this with anyone.” But what I noticed when I started to go through some of the stories was that, while you’re right that we need to talk about it, in so many instances in your fiction the characters are struggling trying to talk about it, aren’t able to talk about it, want to talk about it, don’t talk about it.

McKnight: Yeah, that’s absolutely true. They are a reticent bunch in their own way. But my hope is that in the reader it touches off a kind of anxiety or discomfort that points to the problem without making the problem terribly explicit. I have a real aversion toward political didacticism. And as much as I admire what Spike Lee has done on film, there’s something for me un aesthetically appealing when in the pizza parlor scene in Do the Right Thing Mookie and the Italian kid are talking and the guy is talking about Michael Jordan, and Michael Jackson, and the guy’s saying, “They’re not ‘black.’ ” I’ve never had a conversation like that before; I’ve never known anyone who didn’t see Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson as blacks. They were just acceptable blacks. I’ve had people say some interesting and startling things to me. For some reason or another, in the work place, in particular, people will say things to me that they would never admit in a real context or if other black people were there.

Ashe: Really? Like what?

McKnight: Well, one guy said to me, “My dad said never to talk to you people because we used to own you.” Now, this is a kid whose parentage is clearly not from a race-owning class, the black-owning class. They never owned blacks, they never owned anybody; they were probably indentured servants themselves—some Okie kid. But he said that to me. And I said, “Well, my dad isn’t always fond of white people, either.” And there’s sort of nowhere to go after that, so we started talking about work-related things. When I worked at Safeway, as a stock boy, as a bag boy, as a stocker of shelves, sweeper of floors, a guy said to me (and I was a virgin at the time so I couldn’t answer him truthfully so I lied), he says, “I’m told that you’re not really a man until you’ve had sex with a black woman.” I said, “Yeah that’s true.” (Laughs.) And I’m thinking, You big dumb fucking dope. You should have sex with yourself. (More laughter.) But I admire the frankness. And it’s my hope that the vacuum of silence that’s at the center of a lot of stories and a lot of my characters will prompt others to speak, readers to speak, and say, “Well, gee, what is the problem? What is this guy saying? How, in fact, do they feel? What would they say if they were frank with each other?” But I feel to try to be instructive and to teach people how to talk about race is part of our problem. Because we have concocted a lot of this terminology where we
try to formalize things by referring to a blind man as . . .

**Ashe:** “Visually challenged.”

**McKnight:** (Laughs.) Yeah. I mean, please—it’s insulting. That’s not language at all. It really isn’t. I’m always hopeful that the stories will linger for the readers, and they will be disturbed and unsettled by the silence, and they’ll try to alleviate it in speaking about these things themselves. That’s my hope, anyway.

**Ashe:** We were talking earlier about “Evanesque” characters in your fiction. Does the novel that you’re working on [the recently published *He Sleeps*] have an Evanesque character at its center?

**McKnight:** Extremely! (Laughs.) Extreme Evanesquosity! He’s probably more deracinated. He’s the character in “He Sleeps.” But I’ve expanded it not only into the intrigues that go on in the story—I don’t want to give too much away—but also a kind of sexual intrigue that this guy carries. And the reason I keep going back to these places and these characters again and again is partly just to get things right. And partly I guess, in the ultimate sense, what I want to be understood—these characters often don’t realize it themselves—is that they’re as black as they’re going to be, and they’re as legitimately black as James Brown, or Stokely Carmichael, or anyone else, that they make up this huge picture. When you’re always relating one thing to another, something is always going to seem blacker, seem excessive. But when you stand back from it there’s this gorgeous, complex picture of what “blackness” is. White folks often have the disadvantage—which is often seen as a privilege—of racelessness. “Oh, I never think about my color,” that sort of thing. You’re missing a lot when you don’t have that, when you don’t want that, because you lose the impetus for refashioning yourself, for shaping yourself in a very conscious way. You’re not being responsible for who you are, and how you engage the world. And this is one thing black people, and I think a lot of Hispanics, in our country have always been engaged in, and always held on to. It’s what makes us most interesting and distinct. And of course there are a myriad of ways to express blackness. It’s a process. And if you consciously, willfully engage in this process, wonderful things begin to happen.