



AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR KEVIN BOYLE

Author of *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*

*Anne Becker, Cathie Breidenbach, Alice Horning,
Kasia Kietlinska, and Jeanie Robertson*

Introduction

Each year, Oakland University faculty chooses a campus-wide book in conjunction with the College of Arts and Sciences theme for the year. For the 2007–2008 academic year, the theme is Revolution, and the book selected was Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). The book won the National Book Award in 2004 for its compelling discussion of the story of Dr. Ossian Sweet, an African American physician in Detroit who, along with his family, moved into a white neighborhood on the east side of Detroit in the 1920s. The book recounts the subsequent events and their impact on the doctor, against the backdrop of the history of race relations in the United States and in metro Detroit. Professor Boyle's visit to Oakland University provided a most useful opportunity to explore the issues raised in *Arc of Justice*. His thoughtful analysis of Detroit's racial history and the revolutionary changes that are on-going in metro Detroit and the country as a whole con-

tributed much to our discussion of this year's theme. His public talk was well attended by both students and members of the community. In addition to meeting with the Honors College students both in the class mentioned above and informally, Boyle had other opportunities to meet and talk with Oakland University students and faculty.

Professor Boyle, a historian at Ohio State University, grew up in the Detroit metropolitan area. He visited campus on September 26 and 27, 2007. In addition to visiting classes, talking with students, and giving a public lecture on the book, Kevin Boyle (KB) sat down with five members of the Rhetoric faculty, Anne Becker (AB), Cathie Breidenbach (CB), Alice Horning (AH), Kasia Kietlinska (KK), and Jeanie Robertson (JR), for the interview that follows. Our questions addressed how the book fits the Revolution theme, probed Boyle's experience in researching and writing the story, and examined the key issues it raised.

Questions about the relationship of the book to the theme of revolution

KK: Your book has been chosen as the community book this year in conjunction with the theme of Revolution. I am wondering if you think the book fits the theme and how.

KB: I am honored that the book was chosen. It depends on how you want to define Revolution. I think that the book captures a moment in American history and in the history of Detroit that was transformative in all sorts of ways, and I do think that race relations is *the* pivotal issue of American society, the great challenge of American society. The struggle to define American race relations is America's revolutionary story, at least in the twentieth century.

AB: A follow-up question. You start when Detroit was blossoming. Have you thought of doing follow-up research on how Detroit is doing now?

KB: I have thought about this matter. I wrote an essay this past summer on the 40th anniversary of the Detroit riots that ran in

the *Washington Post*. That essay did follow the history up to the present. It made me think a lot about the need for an honest take on what has happened here and in the country as a whole. It was America's boom town in the early 20th century, and now a great symbol of the American industrial capitalism, and a great symbol of urban crisis. The article ran in the Sunday op-ed section, with my email address which I had given them permission to publish. When I turned on my computer early Sunday morning, there were already seven responses to the article, with six of them berating me for it. Hundreds of messages came in, and the emotions run deep on race and poverty.

AH: Question from student in a Rhetoric class. Why has the book struck a chord? And if there were a media project, what would that look like and who would do it?

KB: Chord: there's an enormous power in story telling. This book is a 300 page lecture. People catch the story and the characters are strong. Second question is a movie? I'd be all for it. The movie rights have been sold. The book was hard because I could not see it as tragedy. You want to write a civil rights story as a story of triumph, and that's not what AJ is. It took me a long, long time to reconcile to myself that this is a tragedy. If this were to be made into a movie, I would hope the tragedy to be preserved. My one fear is that the tragedy would not be preserved. It is a dark story and that needs to be kept.

AH: A follow-up question. In a project on the FUTURE of Detroit . . . ?

KB: This is a harder question to answer. Detroit will never be what it was. When Kwame Kilpatrick said this recently, he was right. It will never be what it was in '40 or '50. It will never be a million or two million people. What can it be? I don't know. It's an odd question to try to answer just today with the UAW contract being signed. Where the city will end up, I don't know. Detroit must grapple with its race problem. It was a product of a particular time and where it will end up, I don't know. It's never going to become the city that it could be if it

doesn't confront the race issue. If you grow up in Detroit, if you live in Detroit all your life, you think the race relations in this city are normal. Then you go somewhere else and realize that it is not normal, not like this everywhere else. The economic problems are profound. How do you draw people to the city? These are very difficult questions to which I do not have good answers.

AB: The other positive thread that I found interesting but that might not appear in a movie is about the NAACP and how this case helped it establish itself enough for the more serious cases that came later on which as a Detroiter, and grew up here, and when you think about this case and the people involved, it is a phenomenal kind of story and the story does really show how innovative Detroit was at the time. This makes the book fit in well with our Revolution theme. It was really revolutionary for a group like that.

KB: There are two parts that are very important here. For the NAACP, this is fundamentally important. Inside the NAACP leadership, to this day, they know that. I had great luck one day; I ran a seminar, and it was the first time I had shown a large group a substantial portion of the book, Chapter 1. It was a group of mostly African-American academics. I was terrified. There was an older man who sat in at the institute where this session took place, Robert Carter. He was the head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund after Thurgood Marshall. He said that from the point of view of the NAACP the Sweet case was really important, but it is not seen this way in the wider world. So it is fundamental to them. But the other thing that struck me as you were talking is that it is really important that every white person in this book is not a racist. There is a very important white liberal block here and Frank Murphy is probably the perfect example of this point. He is a very complicated character, but that's the great white liberal tradition right there. So it does not become a book of good black people versus bad white people. Nothing is that simple.

Questions on the research and writing of the book

JR: How did you get involved with Ossian Sweet's story?

KB: An intellectual answer and a personal answer. Intellectual ans: the book and the interest came out of teaching a course on civil rights in 1997, in Ireland. The class was very exciting. I came home wanting to write a book on civil rights, but not a book that fit the civil rights "story"—not in south, not in 50s or 60s, but centered on a form of discrimination that has not gone away. I knew the Sweet story, like most Detroiters, and thought it would be a good vehicle for this discussion. Personal ans: I was living in MA with two small children, and this book had a limited beginning, middle, and end, and was centered in Detroit, where my parents live. So I could come to Detroit to do research and have my mother mind the children. It turned out that the book did take me traveling, but the plan was a good one. So I had both intellectual and practical reasons for getting into this story.

JR: When did you start the project and how long did it take?

KB: We came home from Ireland in summer of 1998, and I started the research in September of that year. The research took four years, between teaching and family time. The writing was two solid years with fellowships for release from teaching, so I wrote all day every day for two years.

JR: Do you feel you have captured the full essence of the African American perspective in *AJ*, in what happened to the Sweets? Students in a Basic Writing course assumed that you were African American, so this is part of the reason for this question.

KB: There is my picture on the back of the book! There was a group of African American women in Cleveland in a book group that read the book and I talked to them by phone. Apparently they debated whether or not I was black, even with the book and the picture. And you know, you never know, since the picture is small and it's hard to tell till you see me in person. I really don't know if I've captured the full picture. I've

had African Americans tell me that it reads right to them, which I take as an enormous compliment. But I still don't know. People are very polite so if they didn't like the book, they generally don't tell me, which I am really in favor of. But I've never had an African American say, I read your book and you really don't get it, do you? And I really do appreciate that. I've been asked before if this would be a different book if I were African American. And I suspect perhaps it would be.

AH: On the other hand, on the second reading, just the opening section paints a very sympathetic picture of Ossian Sweet. As you give his background and his wife's background and how different each was, in terms of their respective family lives and upbringing. An early chapter traces the stark contrast between his beginning and her beginning.

KB: I am definitely sympathetic to his position. I'm not always sympathetic to *him*. He's a difficult personality, which I am actually thrilled about, because one of the things I dislike about a lot of academic history is that we have a tendency as historians to reduce people to social categories: he's a representative of the black race or the white race or the working class. And people are more complicated than that. I think the beauty of this story is that everyone is very complicated and I loved that about this project and the way the story unfolds. I tried to be true to how I read these characters, but I did not want to make them into representatives of anything. The story captures the dynamics, but I wanted them to be who I thought they really were. Ossian Sweet's got his faults.

CB: You said earlier you saw the book as a tragedy. How do you interpret the suicide?

KB: That's a tricky thing to answer. I guess what I see in that ending, and it is why the last line is the last line (partly because my wife told me it was supposed to be). I actually wanted to keep going, but she said, "no! Are you crazy?" and she was right. Partly, she just wanted me to be done. But she was right. Partly, though, from the point where the trial ends, he spirals down.

There's no greater loss than the loss of a child. So, to lose his wife, to lose his daughter, and then to never really be able to build a private life, a successful private life again, despite marrying two more times, lose the house, you can only imagine what that did to him. And he did basically lose the house; he sold it because it was about to be re-possessioned because he had not paid the taxes for years. And to lose your practice, essentially, as he did. He had run these small hospitals and in some ways, he was a victim of integration because the hospitals in Detroit were finally integrated and then these small hospitals that catered only to African Americans could not survive. He had some health problems, including arthritis, which must be a devastating thing for a doctor. So he spiraled downward. So I see this as part of the tragedy. Here you see a man of enormous promise and enormous pride, who gets to his mid 60s, and then to see everything gone. It must have been overwhelming.

I met his baby brother which is a relative term because the man told me he was eighty-nine. I went to Bartow when I was working on the book and met him, Sherman Sweet. I spent the afternoon with him and talked about the family. A lot of the information about his parents comes from my conversation with Sherman Sweet. He talked about the family dinners and the time spent working in the fields. And he was very cautious at the start about talking to me, since I was just this guy who showed up. But once he grew more comfortable with me and realized that I wasn't trying to do anything to reflect badly on the family. . . . I said to him at one point, what effect did this have on your brother. It destroyed him. There is a triumph to it, since he did win, after all, but I think his life never recovered from the consequences of this event. And that's a horrendous thing. I do link it, though not explicitly of course, to the larger tragedy that the social tragedy of the issues he confronts and risks everything for, the integration of neighborhoods also never has changed. It's gotten better, of course, but not dramatically, and that is the larger social point that I really wanted to drive home to people. I didn't want to hit them over the head with it. But if you are not reading carefully at the end,

and it is 2 am and you want to go to bed, it's easy to say that segregation of cities remains today. So there are two sides to the tragedy of the story.

AH: This brings me to a question from another faculty member. I did ask faculty to ask their students to pose questions for this interview. So this is from a student. Parts of your book are very powerful—the opening narrative centered on the racial events around Ossian Sweet's home, the dramatic exposition of the first trial. Both were very compelling, but both sections were interrupted by long stretches going back in time to earlier events. Is this structure based on some rhetorical principle or on just your desire to make a longer book?

KB: It's a good question, and we actually talked about this a bit before the class earlier today (HC 202, Exploring the Roots of Urban Fiction, taught by Professor Eddie Allen). I'm a historian, and what I wanted to do was to weave together, as much as I could, the particulars of this story and the context. That's what makes for history. I did want, and I hope that it worked, to have the story drive the reader forward, and not, ok, now we are stopping to get the lecture. At times that was a tricky thing to try to pull off. I've had people, including one of my colleagues, say that they didn't want all that family history. They didn't want the whole chapter about going back to slavery. That was the part I was proudest of, to tell you the truth, at least on the research side, because one of the goals of the book is to say that there's this massive continuity, from slavery to Reconstruction forward. We have kind of divided this up into the post-war period, the 1920s, and so on, but history and family history doesn't work that way. But this is the great challenge of trying to write both popular history and something that has a narrative drive to it. Trying to strike that balance is a tricky thing to do. But that was my goal, to say it is an individual story and a story about a society and the contexts matter.

JR: The thing for students is that you start with the story and they get into it. I had the students make a time line. One line

is the story and what is happening with that and the historical events. If you start with 1820, then it's only one hundred years to the time of the story.

KB: That's very interesting. I've never taught this book and I don't think I will for several reasons. First, conversation will die because no one will say, "man, this book sucks!" And the students have a tendency to say, "well, he's just doing that for the royalties." So it is very interesting to hear how you teach it. It was a book that came out of teaching, but I never really thought of it that way.

JR: These students are not the strongest readers, and if they don't understand who he (Ossian Sweet) is by where he came from, that's so much of the content.

KB: Right, and part of our job as university teachers is to teach students how to read something a little more complicated. That is part of our job.

AB: I had one question. You had the one interview, and interviewing can be so helpful in recreating what happened a long time ago. Did you do more than the one interview?

KB: It was overwhelmingly looking at documents. And honestly, going around to places was helpful. It made a huge difference to go to Bartow and to go to Dr. Sweet's house and to go into the house and all that sort of stuff. This was a tricky thing, because I interviewed Mr. Sweet, obviously, which was kind of lucky, because I just stumbled into that. And I can give you the long story about how I found Mr. Sweet. But I will give you the quick version. I didn't know if there were any relatives alive. So I went online and looked up Sweet in Bartow, Florida. And there were like six or seven of them. So I thought, this is great. So I called them all and said, "are you related to Dr. Sweet from Detroit?" One day, I got this call back from Vicky Sweet and she said, "I have one question: is this man black?" I said "yes," and she said, "well, we're not related then. But my insurance agent is black and he knows everyone in the black part of town," and she gave me his name and number.

So I called him up and he's the town insurance agent. I

explained what I was up to and he said, sure, that's Sherman Sweet and he's Dr. Sweet's brother. So that's how I found him. And I talked to a couple of people who had relatives whose grandparents were white and had lived in that neighborhood. But since the book has been published, I have heard from more people connected with this story. Shortly after the book was published, I got a letter from the grandson of the prosecutor, saying that he really liked the book and wanted to give a copy to his mother, the daughter of the prosecutor, so would I autograph one? I asked, "are you sure you want to do that?" And he did. And I heard from Josephine Goldman and met her grandchildren. They were great; they said, "I never knew Grandma was so exciting!" I met a man whose father was on the jury.

And the coolest one of all: I heard from Leon Breiner's (the man who was killed) grandson. And that was amazing. I tried to track down the family but could not. When he was killed, he had two teen-aged daughters and that's almost impossible to track because they are going to get married and change their names. In Michigan, the marriage records are simply chronological, so there's no index or alphabetical listing, so you can't look up Breiner. All you can do is guess what year they might have married and go through the thousands of people who married then, but only in Michigan. So that was a dead end. I would have liked to have his story be much fuller, but I just couldn't do it. And then, three or four months after the book was published, I got an email from Breiner's grandson. I don't know how old he was, late 50s or early 60s, so he was born long after Leon Breiner died and it was something the family didn't talk much about. He knew something had happened, but they didn't talk about it much. His grandmother, Leon Breiner's wife, Leona, remarried twice, actually, and lost the house. The house they lived in was down the block, on Garland. They were evicted because Leon was the breadwinner and he was gone, so they were evicted in the Depression and lost the house. So it was a tragedy for them as much as it was for anyone else. This was all fascinating.

KK: I wondered where the store was. I went to the area, and I wasn't able to get in.

KB: No, it's a little awkward. The people who live there are wonderful people. But again, that was a blind luck thing, too. I didn't call them up. About the store: it's a one way street now. So you have to come down toward it from Jefferson. You have to go around the block. And so you come down the block and the Sweets' house is right on the corner and right across the street now is an empty lot. And it used to be that the store was there. But the store fronted Charlevoix. The school is there. They've actually torn down the school and re-built it, so there's a new school there, three years ago. It's new and it's ugly. It was old and ugly. It was an old, 1915 school.

The way I got into the Sweets' house . . . Like I said, I was living in Massachusetts, teaching at UMass then and one day I got an email from a man named Daniel Baxter who is about my age or a little younger. He wrote to me and said I heard you are writing a book about the Sweet house. Do you want to see it? I grew up there. And I wrote back and said I'd love to. I was coming into Detroit a month later for another reason and we made arrangements. He was taking an African American history grad class at Wayne, and I knew the instructor. They had been talking in class and Baxter said I grew up there and my friend put him in touch with me. So he met me there; he doesn't live there, but his parents lived there at the time. His father has since passed on but his mother still lived there.

We went down on a Saturday. He met me there and showed me all around the house. We spent all morning, and I talked with Mrs. Baxter. They were really the next family that lived there, so they were there from practically the time that Dr. Sweet moved out. And they are wonderful people. Mrs. Baxter is just a great person. I've kept in touch. Mrs. Baxter is about eighty and she is a wonderful, very nice woman. She and my mom have taken to calling each other; my mother is also about eighty. They've never met, but they call each other every so often. I have this wonderful image of this. Mrs. Baxter is originally from Alabama, and she's got a good southern ac-

cent. My mother is from Ireland, and she has a good Irish accent. And if those two women can understand each other, I think it is a miracle. But they like to call each other ever so often.

CB: You said earlier that one of your goals was to establish the continuity and not to chop up history. What were your other goals?

KB: The book changed over time, honestly. I gave you the answer earlier about the intellectual basis. Dr. Sweet took over the book so that it became his book. I really wanted to tell his story, a story. I wanted it to be a book people would want to read. I wanted it to be a book that could reach beyond an academic audience. There's nothing wrong with writing for an academic audience; I do plenty of that myself. But I wanted this book to be something that a non-academic audience might want to read. Although it sounds like a cliché, I thought of this as a book I was writing for my father. My father is a very smart man and a great reader. He loves to read and graduated from high school but did not go to college. And when I wrote my first book, a very academic book, a revised dissertation, I gave the book to my parents. My parents are nice people. They said they were proud of me and put the book on the shelf. So you can go into my parents' house today and see the bookmark in the book, in chapter 1. I didn't want that; I wanted a book my father would read and want to read, not out of a sense of family duty. That was really important to me as a goal. I wanted to push myself as a writer and see if I could write a book that people besides my fellow historians would read. I didn't mind if other historians read it, but my major goal was to reach a general audience. It was important to me to try that. So there were intellectual goals, personal goals, and storytelling goals.

Questions on the issues raised by the book

CB: Do you have an answer to why Detroit is one of the most segregated cities in the nation?

KB: I have grappled with this question a lot. I don't have a sure

answer, not sure there is one answer. Partly it is tied to the fact that Detroit was such a boom town. In this it was unlike other cities. It grew very, very fast and people came for money. That's what a boomtown is. Detroit has been a city about making money. People do not come to root themselves deeply. People don't say my family has lived here for five generations. There are some people for whom that is true, of course, but very few. But it is mostly a transitory city. And the way that white Detroit linked racism and the real estate market has never been pulled apart. So to this day, I guarantee you that if an African-American family moves into, just pick a city at random, say, Livonia, whites on that block will say, "I have nothing against black people, some of my best friends are black people," but it's going to ruin property values. That's what they are going to say. Until you pull that apart, Detroit, because it is about making money, and because race and the real estate market are linked, you are not going to end the segregation problem. So it is in some sense a victim of timing, because the link between race and real estate happened all over. But right now, real estate values are key.

CB: When I ask myself that question about how is Detroit different from other cities, part of it is the lack of really good mass transit. What role do you think that plays?

KB: It's a big factor. It's not just the lack of really good mass transit. It's that Detroit has two systems, one inside the city and one in the suburbs. When you are on the east side, at least, this is how it used to be, and I suspect it is still the same way, if you went to get the bus downtown, say, the Jefferson bus in Grosse Pointe, you could get on, and it would let you off, but no one else could get on. It hits Alter Road and then goes straight down Jefferson and it would not pick up anyone. All these people would be at the bus stop, watching the bus go by, because the Detroit system was separate from the suburban system. That's insane. And then, the way Detroit has sprawled is part of it too. A young woman I talked to said my town, at 33 Mile and Gratiot . . . I call that Port Huron! But Detroit keeps sprawling

outward and outward and the jobs keep going outward and outward and without a mass transit system, if you live at 33 Mile and Gratiot and want a job in Detroit, this is a problem. The situation is compounded by the collapse of the Detroit Public School System, by the lack of a mass transit system, by the geographic dispersion of the city. When I went to the University of Michigan, not that long ago, Detroiters thought of Ann Arbor as a separate entity. You left Detroit and drove in the country for a while and then you came to Ypsilanti. It's not true any more. That sprawl is driven partly by white flight as people move farther and farther out from the city. So there are a lot of factors that contribute to the segregation of the city.

CB: I think you do a remarkable job of striking a balance between the two sides of Sweet's character, one flat and one rather heroic, and both are there. He's ambitious, proud and wants to live in a nice neighborhood and ride in a chauffeur driven car. He's out to better himself. But he also does dangerous things and takes a stand when called upon and became a hero. Was he a hero inside himself or did the way the African American public responded to what he did make him see himself as a hero?

KB: I think the latter. The night of the shooting, he's lying on the bed, terrified, as I would be. I have been in that room on a visit to the house, and it is a tiny, claustrophobic room, and that's a human response. Then, as he becomes a public figure, I think he sees himself growing into a bigger role. But in that moment, he's what a lot of us would be: scared to death of what is going to happen next. I think he is actually really interesting because he does heroic things for less than heroic reasons. And that's the way human beings often are. The figure that comes to mind is Rosa Parks, because she did something for very ordinary reasons. Yes, she had a whole political background, and in that sense she's very different from Dr. Sweet. However, what we have done with Rosa Parks since she became this iconic figure is that she has become this saint. And in some ways, this is not a good thing.

AB: Even Rosa Parks' funeral shows this. The funeral ran for hours and it impacted the election for mayor in Detroit.

KB: It definitely impacted the election. It elected the mayor, no doubt about it.

AB: This makes me think about Sweet's character and the sense of entitlement that did not exist at his time. He really represented any person trying to get ahead.

KB: Yes, his is the great American story.

AB: He went to the best school he could get into, he worked hard, and he hoped for the best but he wasn't this ambitious, I'm going to go out and show the world kind of person. And when you think of the later race riots, it wasn't white on black, it was black on black, particularly in 1967. How much did the sense of entitlement or lack of it play a role? Did you consider this? Have you had any reaction from African American readers on this issue?

KB: This is a very interesting point. I hadn't really thought about that. I do think of him as a kind of classic American figure. This is the American Dream story, really, but there wouldn't be books about it if you were white. They wouldn't have moved into that neighborhood, and the neighborhood would have been thrilled to have him because he was from the class above. The transformation by the 1960s is so profound, and is in some ways a consequence of what happens in the 1920s. You cut off opportunity and you create this ghetto, and then why are we surprised that there is this explosion that comes out of the ghetto? The surprising thing, really, is that there's only been one. Why hasn't this happened again and again? And in some ways the violence that pervades the inner cities is a kind of perpetual riot. So I don't know if I would term it entitlement so much as the pent-up rage of the dispossessed in the world of great wealth.

KK: There is also a conflict of elites in the book that I hear about in students' reactions. There are hierarchies of both

blacks and whites. Dr. Sweet, who is highly educated, goes to Europe, listens to Madame Curie and then he gets smoked out by the white working class. It's really a criss-crossing in a lot of interesting ways. There is the Goethe incident that serves as a marker, and then this goes against the race. I asked students in the reading class (RHT 140, College Reading and Critical Thinking) to read two passages from the "Migration" chapter on education: one by DuBois and one by Washington. Students recognized that there was something wrong with the idea of vocational training as presented by Washington, but they revolted equally strongly against DuBois' ideas about the "Talented Tenth." They weren't concerned that he saw it as a way to move the race up as a medium to gain equality. They saw it as elitist. Are the students right, do you think? Or are they guilty of a-historicism, not being able to see things in historical context?

KB: This is a very interesting point, very complex. There's no doubt that the "Talented Tenth" idea is explicitly elitist. People have no problem seeing this; Dr. Sweet was striving to this ideal of elitism. So it is elitist and people at the time recognized it as such as well. At the same time, I think people in general in the 1920s did not have a revulsion of elitism. I think there's a kind of American cultural phenomenon of a kind of mindless leveling.

KK: This is also true of the European academic community. You need healthy elite groups because this creates a healthy, striving society. You need a meritocracy of writers, public intellectuals and so forth. But when you say this out loud, it's almost as though . . . when I admit to being an elitist, I get odd looks from people.

KB: Americans don't believe in meritocracy. They think they do, but they really don't. Here's my classic example, and it is a politically charged response, I realize. In the last fifty years, the classic example of the American meritocracy at work is Bill Clinton. Here is a guy who comes from a dysfunctional, relatively poor family, who has incredible intellectual abilities, who

goes to the right schools, who accomplishes tremendous things. He is a classic example of American meritocracy. People hated him for it. People feel much more comfortable with someone like a George Bush, who comes to wealth. We are comfortable with that idea. It's a classic American thing: he's born on second base and thinks he's hit a double. Americans are comfortable with that. People hated Clinton for the intelligence he had and his willingness to display it, which he did. And there were other reasons to hate him. But a lot of what people resented about Bill Clinton is that he came from places like they are in and showed that he could do more. And people hate that.

In Dr. Sweet's case, most people in the neighborhood did not know he was a doctor. They didn't know who he was. They knew he was a black guy. So they had no clue when they were driving him out that they were driving out a doctor. It's not like anyone went by with a cake to ask who he was. No one said welcome to the neighborhood, and he was only there a day and a half. So that wasn't an example of that dynamic. It's more of an example of the dynamic of what happens when African Americans move into a white neighborhood, and this is true across the board; they are generally of a higher class standing and must be, because they have to pay a premium for the house. This was true then and more common, and is still true now; African Americans will have to pay more. They won't have to pay as much as Dr. Sweet did; he paid a 50% premium for that house, a rip-off. And then there's the whole weird dynamic of who happened to be ripping him off, someone else who was also African American.

AH: One last question. This came from yet another student: My political science teacher at U of M Dearborn says he sees the potential for another race riot in Detroit. What are your thoughts about this—especially considering the recent racial incidents in this country?

KB: I hope this political science professor is wrong. Nothing good came of the Detroit riot. I know that to this day; people

try to spin it that there was some positive energy. There was nothing good that came of that week. You can call it the rebellion, you can call it the uprising. No one benefitted from it. The African American community was devastated. White Detroit simply fled and took the capital with them. I mentioned to this class I met earlier (HC 202, Exploring the Roots of Urban Fiction) that the year after the Detroit riot, in 1968, eighty thousand white people left the city of Detroit. They took the jobs and they took the money with them. There is no romance to the violence of that week, none. The circumstances were very particular. I don't know if there is a chance of that kind of thing happening again. I hope not. In the same way, nothing positive came of the LA riot in 1992. Is south central LA a better place because of that? Is America a better place because of that? Simply not.

That's not to say, in terms of my goals, there's a strong sense in a very large part of white America that there is no racial problem. There was, and white America is willing to say we had a very bad racial past, but it is in the past. And in some ways, of course, they are right. At UMass, which is a much more liberal school than Ohio State, when I would teach civil rights courses, students would say that the civil rights movement accomplished nothing. I want to throttle those people! America is a better place than it was thirty or forty years ago, way better. We are a more tolerant and just society, way better. But it's not done, and that may be at the heart of that student's question. White America needs to recognize in a way that I don't think it does that the racial problem is still there in a very big way. That's why housing segregation is so important in my mind, because it is the bedrock of the current racial problem in America. Thirty percent of the population of the city of Detroit lives below the poverty line, and fifty percent of the children. The infant mortality rate in Detroit is about comparable to that of the West Bank.

The interview ended at this point, and Professor Boyle took up additional topics informally with Rhetoric faculty.