

Interviewee: JACOB LAWRENCE
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Location: Seattle, WA
Date: March 1, 1998
Media: Hi8 Cassette 1, Audiocassette 1
Interview no.: 191
Transcription: Ellen Dissanayake, August 12-13, 2004; corrected by Mary Emma Harris, January 2005. Converted from Word Perfect by Mary Emma Harris, March 2014.

[BEGINNING TAPE 1]

- MEH:** [GIVES IDENTIFICATION]. Mr. Lawrence, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?
- JL:** I was invited to visit Black Mountain, to teach there at the Summer Institute, by Josef Albers. Now – I imagine he made a decision, I would hope – well, I know he did because he was a very strong personality, and he felt– maybe felt I had something to offer. It was one of the highlights of my career when I accepted and spent about ten weeks at Black Mountain College.
- MEH:** Had you ever met Albers before you went down there?
- JL:** I had never met Albers. I had heard the name, but I had never met him.
- MEH:** You had had your exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art before that.
- JL:** Oh, 1940? I was in the service. 1944, I think that was. It was the Migration Series. That was a very important show for me. Very important, yeah.
- MEH:** Absolutely. I don't know if that's where he became familiar with your work or not, but he was always – he saw all the shows there, so he would have known your work.
- JL:** Well, around the forties – of course, I was with the Edith Halpert gallery, Downtown Gallery. I guess a man like Albers, especially when he's teaching also, he wanted to keep up with what was going on in the field. He was in New York. He was located in New York, so it's inevitable that he would not only see my work but the work of many other younger people coming along.
- MEH:** Had you ever heard of Black Mountain College before?
- JL:** I don't think so. I might have, but I don't think so, because it was a very prominent place and there would be no reason for me not to have heard of it. But if I heard of it, it wouldn't have meant – had the meaning – I wasn't in the field of – like many of the artists at that time – experimenting with nonfigurative works and so on, and there would be no reason for me to remember it, you know. People like – I knew many names associated with Black Mountain, but not intimately. I didn't know them. It was a big thing. Black Mountain was a very – So when I'm asked if I remember it, when I heard of it, I can't remember, but I must have. I must have. After all, I had come out of the service and like many artists at that time we frequented the Cedar Bar.
- MEH:** That early?

JL: That early. Yes. Right after the War. Let me see, the War ended in '45 and '46-'47 the Cedar Bar was in full swing. So, many of the people who went to Cedar Bar were people who would have been very familiar with Black Mountain College, even if they hadn't gone there themselves – like Franz Kline, de Kooning, names like George O'Neill and many others. So, I probably did hear of Black Mountain, but it didn't – I didn't know how important it would be to me.

MEH: Do you remember – Did you have any qualms about heading for the South to this small college?

JL: No, I didn't. I didn't. Maybe. When you're young and naïve, you know, it's only in retrospect that you go with certain apprehensions or they can be – you can think very positively something good is going to happen or something not good is going to happen. So I didn't have that. After all, I'd done the Migration Series, so I knew what the – Although I had never – Oh yes, yes we'd been in the South. In 1941 was my first trip to the Deep South. I'd been to Virginia. Of course, that's not the Deep, Deep South. But my first trip to the real Deep South was in New Orleans. We'd just gotten married in 1941. So, I wasn't naïve about the – I knew what the customs were, what the traditions were at that time, and I was willing to accept that. So, when I was invited to Black Mountain College, had I thought of it, I probably would have said, "Well, they wouldn't have invited me if it hadn't been a situation...not a good situation, I wouldn't have been invited." Had I thought of it, that would have been my reasoning. I've forgotten the communications that took place, so maybe that was telling me where it was located. It was isolated from the main community, which was Asheville, of course. It was some fifteen miles, I think, from Asheville, located in the rural, sort of a rural area at that time. So I didn't come with – Well, it started when I left – The train, when we left New York.

MEH: How did you get there?

JL: By train. We were – Of course, they had the segregated cars, bus, the trains, so I think you moment you got into – after you left Washington, D.C., the trains were – In fact, I think, I think Black Mountain gave me a – or gave us, I should say – a sleeper or a roomette, so we didn't come in contact. I know coming back we definitely had a roomette, and so we didn't come into contact. We knew the customs. We knew what they would be. Things were racially, I think at that time, beginning to soften up a little bit, right after the War.

MEH: Do you remember your first impression of the college? The setting?

JL: Well, I was curious. What was my first impression? No, it wasn't a new experience for me. I hadn't been to – That was my first teaching experience, by the way, except for Wo-Chi-Ca, the Workers Children's Camp. So I wasn't – it wasn't like I was plucked out of somewhere and put somewhere entirely into a new situation. It was not that. So – I was used to people. I was used to different kinds of people, you know, in the art world. After all I'd been associated with the – I was associated with the Downtown Gallery, with some of the biggest names of American art.

Stuart Davis, Sheila [Stella?], Ben Shahn, so these things, the new situation, what would be new, what would have been new for me say when I was ten years younger, or fifteen years younger, was not new. So I took it in stride. You know, it wasn't – My impression was I was not overawed, and I think I was looking toward the experience.

MEH: Where did you stay at the college?

JL: In one of the rooms on campus. What would they call them? One of the rooms that we had at the college, with the rest of the faculty.

MEH: Like one of the cabins?

JL: Yeah, yeah, the rest of the faculty. I think it was a house. There was a musician – it was not right next to us. He had a little room and I've forgotten his name. But he liked the three B's – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. In another room there was a Southerner. I think her name was Sarah Lee, a typically Southern name. She was not – she was a little hostile – not a little hostile. She was Southern. That's what she was. I remember she missed a piece of jewelry. I don't know whether it was a watch or a ring. It was some diamond. Somehow she got it across that we might have been responsible. Well, that didn't throw us because we knew the customs and things like that. So, really she was a naive person. I guess we were not. We were able to realize this kind of thinking, you see, and we accepted – We didn't go into town. We knew enough that we weren't encouraged to go into town, to go into Asheville, because after all that was a new experiment for that kind of – it was a different experiment for that part of the South. So we didn't want to ruffle any feathers or anything like that. It's not that we wanted to go into town. We just didn't go into town. Maybe we would have had the situation been different, but we had no reason to go in. We knew what the situation was.

MEH: How did you organize your class? Did you have a regular meeting time?

JL: No, we didn't. It was very very flexible. Well, there were no grades at Black Mountain, and we'd just see students. It was almost like a graduate school, although some of the kids were very very young. I think they had about three there who were like fifteen or sixteen. They probably had been screened. Most of the people were older. So there was no organization and we used to – There were no classes as such. We would talk to the students. We'd see the students, talk to them. They would talk to us, and that was it. Of course I went to the lectures of the various balcony (?) people. The Albers's lectures were fascinating. You know, Albers at that time did not have a strong command of the English language, but his demonstrations were so visual, like twisting a coat hanger to give you the feeling of space and so on, and movement. I think my philosophy of teaching sort of grew out of that. It was Bauhaus – of color and texture and line and shape. It was Bauhaus rather than thinking in terms of, let's see, a reportorial kind of a thing. Not thinking in those terms, but thinking in terms of pure design and color. Maybe that's why he asked me down there. I know, you know, when they'd ask an artist to come down they would – as many play (?) schools do – they

want you to have a show at the school. I had a show organized by – it was organized through the Downtown Gallery. I've forgotten how many works. It was a small, relatively small show. I don't think there were more than fifteen works. We had a porch, the school, but we didn't have a gallery. Like all the other exhibiting artists there – or had been invited to do art, my works were hung on the porch. Albers – every meal would sit at a different table and look at the works. They did this to all the artists. So we didn't – No, we didn't have classes as such.

MEH: Varda was also teaching that summer.

JL: Oh, god, yeah. He was quite a person.

MEH: [LAUGHING] How do you remember him?

JL: Oh, he was so flamboyant. He was very entertaining. He told such wonderful stories. I don't know how that man could, could fantasize, and the stories he would tell. I wouldn't even try to [UNINTELL WORD] him. He would take just a little something – and the students loved him. He was much older than the students, of course, but he liked them. He especially liked the – I think the older, the few older students who were there – The women didn't take to Varda too much because he was always giving his attention to the youngsters, young girls. He wasn't obnoxious or hurt them in any way, but they could tell. That happens in many schools, by the way, where the instructors – I think they may do it subconsciously – they sort of give their attention to the youngest girls, the coeds among the students. So Albers was very much like this, and I think he associated with these young people.

MEH: You mean Varda.

JL: I mean, Varda, yeah, Varda. So I didn't – By the way, what did I say, Albers? I heard some things about Albers, too. But – light pinches. Now I've never seen that, but I could imagine because he was not a young man either. But that's beside the point. So where – we left off with Varda. Oh, the stories he would tell. The very, very fanciful kinds of things. He loved to tell stories and to make up stories. I'm sure he'd make them up. I think his stories were sort of – came out of a mythology. You know, he was Greek. So I don't know if that had anything – if that was a Greek tradition or not, but he told wonderful stories.

MEH: Would he tell these like at mealtime?

JL: Anytime. Anytime. Since we didn't have classes as such, anytime when the students – they were always around and he was a very entertaining. So anytime he had one, two, or three students, he would tell these stories, and he loved it. His teaching, if you'd call it that. That was what was so wonderful about Black Mountain. It was not teaching in a traditional sense, but just like we're talking here. It would be two or three people talking and that was your teaching. Then maybe another time, you would see another two or three. Then, of course, the important thing was when you'd have the meetings and you'd discuss the various students without the students being there and talk about the students and how they were doing and so on.

MEH: Was this all of the faculty or just you and Varda?

- JL:** Oh, no. No, it was – Well, it could be. We didn't meet as a group. It's hard for me to explain this. Oh, the meetings that took place. Yeah, the entire faculty was expected to be there. But the entire faculty didn't consist of too many people. It was the Summer Institute, and I doubt if there were more than six people, five or six people, at these meetings that would take place. Let's see there was Varda, me, Albers, of course, Leo Lionni – he was with the Fortune. I can remember, yeah, where did we leave off now?
- MEH:** We had been talking about – You were talking about meeting to evaluate students.
- JL:** Evaluation, evaluation. We'd just discuss. There were no grades, with no – you'd get a feel of what the students were doing, and if they were motivated and how much they were motivated, or if they're not motivated, what could we do to motivate them. That was it. I do think we were assigned to see students, but that was very flexible and very loose. That is, you knew that you would go around and you'd see the students in their various cubicles or where they were working, but that was the extent of that. Wonderful. It was a wonderful experience.
- MEH:** Do you remember other faculty who were there? The Newhalls?
- JL:** Yes. I remember Nancy and Beaumont Newhall. I remember his lecture. Let's see, who else do I remember? Leo Lionni. He was a design person, I think, Fortune magazine. It wasn't just the visual people. There were a few musicians that I can't remember. There were writers. This was the Summer Institute. I don't remember. I know that a Mexican was there, but he must have been there during the winter session. This Shellay – what was his name?
- MEH:** Charlot? [MEH: Charlot was not there that summer.]
- JL:** Charlot.
- MEH:** Oh, did he visit that summer?
- JL:** Yeah. I didn't see him. He may not have been there at that time. But there was a mural on campus that he did. I have a feeling he might have been there. Well, he wasn't there for Summer Institute because I would have seen him. That was about ten weeks. So maybe he was there sometime during the year, was a Visiting Artist or something like that.
- MEH:** Yeah, he was there for an earlier summer.
- JL:** He was? See, I didn't know that. Let's see, who else was there now. I can't – Oh, Leo Lionni. I mentioned that. Amino, the Japanese fellow.
- MEH:** Did you know any of these people before you went down?
- JL:** No. I didn't know anyone. Leo Amino, he's since died, and Gwen loved working with him. He was a wonderful man. Everybody was wonderful there. It was just a wonderful experience. I learned more there about design or how to communicate ideas, visual ideas, the communication, which my entire teaching career has been built on these principles.
- MEH:** Was this through Albers's classes or Lionni's?
- JL:** No, I think the general philosophy of the school. But Albers, I would say, was the staff (?) because naturally he invited people who would be

sensitive to this philosophy and how he thought. So you'd say that was the philosophy of the entire school.

MEH: How would you define what you felt the philosophy of the school was?

JL: You know, the more I think about the answer to that question, the more difficult it is because I would be inclined to say, "Well, there's always the search going on in your field. A purist kind of – you're looking for a purity. But then you can apply that to any art, to Renaissance, any period. How would I define that? Well, maybe I can't define that in so few words, but maybe if I use many words I can define it. It's like an appreciation – if you're a visual artist – the appreciation of what goes on around you, what you're looking at, what you come in contact with, and how you might use this in developing your own style. It can be very figurative, nonfigurative or in between. How you use this, what do you call it? Matière. Albers' wife taught that. Looking out the window and seeing the buildings but not being in terms of buildings as much as thinking in terms of movement, form, shape, and color, which you can apply to anything that you're doing. If I was asked how would I define Black Mountain, I guess that's the best that I can do. It just opened my eyes to the whole experience, as I say, coming into contact with people like Albers.

MEH: Had you ever been in that type of community before?

JL: No, the closest I came to that was at the Pratt Institute, where you had people like Lindner and people like George, was it O'Neill? Richard Lindner. But that was a more formalized atmosphere, formalized school. No, I'd never been to any – I'd been to Wo-Chi-Ka, which is the Workmen's Children's Camp. That was just the opposite. That was a very, I guess you'd call it leftist camp, and you made a statement – a statement and a certain kind of statement that –

MEH: In, through your art?

JL: In your art, yes, whatever your art was. It could have been – Wo-Chi-Ca was not just a visual artist's camp. It was – They took the youngsters – it was like a camp. You may have been involved in meals, plays, dramas, things like that, but always the idea was on a social statement. That's what I'm trying to say. That was my first teaching, really.

MEH: Where was that located?

JL: Hackensack, New Jersey. Was that Hackensack? I'm sure it was. It was not far from New York. Wo-Chi-Ca. Do you know Wo-Chi-Ca means? Workers Children's Camp.

MEH: Spell it.

JL: Wo, W-O, and then –

MEH: C-H-I

JL: C-H-I, C-A. Wo-Chi-Ca.

MEH: At Black Mountain, do you remember the Greek party?

JL: [AFFIRMATIVE]

MEH: Do you remember how you dressed?

JL: No, I don't remember how I dressed. I probably didn't. It wasn't very elaborate, because I've never been very demonstrative in that way. But it was a very – It was a very fun. It was a lot of fun. It was a fun party. I

can't say what my reaction is, because Gwen was more involved than I was, in a certain way. So, what I would say? I don't know how much was influenced by hearing Gwen over a period of years talk about Black Mountain. But I remember that party. It was a fabulous party, and like the people were very creative. That's one thing that Black Mountain really encouraged you to be creative, to do the new, to go out and make discoveries, to find things. This was very evident in the party. Like a person like Varda came as one of the faculty, and he came pulling an old car, [UNINTEL] car, and he had on a red sweater. He was doing Leo Lionni, and Leo Lionni dressed that way and had the car. [It was Lionni imitating Varda.] But – Then some people came as Greek clothes and so on like that. But it was a fun party, very exciting. I guess a few of the young people had too much to drink, you know, like young people do, and they looked very shy the next day for a while. Oh, yes, that was quite a party. I don't know if you have that kind of thing now, if you have that kind of involvement. People are so sophisticated, students, and so maybe they have something else just as violent, just as interesting. But then there was an opening-up. Maybe it was a result of the War, too, you know, and all the Europeans coming over. Like you had the New School and things like that. So many – with the new ideas. The Bauhaus, things like that. It's hard to replace. Everybody did not agree with the Bauhaus, of course. Even today people would say it was very stifling, and it wasn't as dynamic. Even Anni Albers says this, you know. She was – I guess that's how she and Albers met, I imagine, because they both were part of the Bauhaus. She said that Bauhaus was not as romantic or dynamic as you hear. In other words, it was very much like an academy, very tight academy. Of course, the longer and further you get away from these things in time the more romantic they become. These are Anni Albers words. Not me. Because I never had any contact with the Bauhaus. So Black Mountain – Well, I guess this was part of the split between Moholy-Nagy and Albers. I think they had a split. Albers stayed and developed Black Mountain, and I think Moholy-Nagy went to Chicago, and I think – I don't know all of the finer points of why they split, but they did split, and as many times happens in a very, not such a nice way, you know. Because they were very close at one time.

MEH: Speaking of Black Mountain, at times Black Mountain had many splits. Was it a peaceable kingdom that summer? Was there a lot of tension or were people basically in accord?

JL: I got a – Very peaceable. If there was any dissension or any kind of problems like that, it didn't happen during that summer. Or if it did happen, I didn't know. I guess – See, Albers had built Black Mountain around his own personality. He was a very strong personality, though that kind of tension did not develop. You can say, "Well this is good or that's bad or what." But it didn't develop because here you have a very strong personality, and he's so strong that he's the only philosophy that seems to be evident at this particular place. Very strong man, and very – I remember me and Gwen had this talk once, which is what they

encourage you to talk. Albers' theory I think – I know – was that there are no accidents in the creative work. Everything must have a meaning. It must be very – That's a lot of the academy, coming out of the Bauhaus. Everything must have a meaning. If you put down a color – it's just the opposite of the Abstract Expressionists or something of that sort. Of course, Gwen's idea – I guess we've been around enough to know that there is such a thing as building on accidents, building on chances, but Albers didn't accept that. [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: What did you do at the college for entertainment?

JL: Oh, we had sessions in the evening. You made your own entertainment. Like Gwen had a little dance group there and so did Varda and they had a sort of competitive kind of a thing. Or they would work. The students or the faculty would work. They were all working artists. Or you'd hear – somebody was able to play on an instrument and they would entertain in the evening. So that's what we did. But I think mainly work. I think the students and the faculty were mainly involved in their work.

MEH: Did you have a studio at the college? Do you remember?

JL: You know, I don't remember that. I don't remember about a studio, but there must have been a place to work. I don't know if that place was where we lived, the room where we lived, or if it was someplace on campus but away from our living quarters. I cannot remember that. We were so close to the students. That's another thing too. Maybe we worked right along with the students. We were so close to them. That was the advantage of being there, too. Not that the students were here, and you were here, but we were all working together so there was no, no reason for a separate studio. If you were invited there and if you couldn't work in that kind of an atmosphere, you just left. You see. But I think being invited to that kind of situation, advantage to the students. We were all students in a way. Although there was a faculty and there was the student body, the positive thing about that is the work that went on. Just the work and the talk, the discussions. You talked when you were eating the meals. Or you didn't talk. Just all kinds of things poured out there. There were no class hours or anything like that. But in that ten weeks I've gotten something that I've carried throughout my lifetime.

MEH: And what is that?

JL: Well, a philosophy of seeing, of having a wonderful appreciation of form and texture and color and value, the abstract elements irregardless of what your style is. So, I've been teaching a number of years, and I was able to carry this philosophy to my students where I was teaching.

MEH: Do you think Albers accepted you, your art, even though it wasn't abstract?

JL: Well, I would think so. I hope so. Yes, I was working hard, which I always have, and I always work with more or less what we call pure color, even then more than now. Primary, secondary colors plus black and white. This all has to do with the Bauhaus, and I don't think he stressed the content but he was more interested in how I defined the content, what form I used to define it.

MEH: Did you all talk about this, do you recall?

JL: Not personally. I think he talked to Gwen and he may have talked to some other students. But I never remember having a conversation. But I imagine I felt very much at ease with Albers because after all he invited me there. Oh, you know, now that you've mentioned it, you know, we stressed – you would take paper and pen, like different colored papers, what should you do with this and how are you going to manipulate it in space and that type of thing. Well, you ask well what did I get from Black Mountain? All these concepts, these ideas.

MEH; What were the students like? Were they just typical summer college students?

JL: Well there were only about 35 students, by the way. I don't know if there were 35 students during the year or 35 students – the students doing the Summer Institute might have been less. What were they like? Well, I guess you can say this about any students: they were experimental, they were very highly motivated, but you could apply this to any – They were more inclined to be, to accept the new things, different things than I would say the average student. These students were more inclined to – Because they were all seeking something new, something – [UNINTEL], as I said before. I don't know how the students were selected. That I don't know. I don't know if they presented a portfolio or what, but I was sure that there were no problems. There might have been problems with some of the young students. They may have – a few of them left because they had a different idea of what summer school is like. They thought it was all play, maybe, or recreation, or their parents [UNINTEL] that, and they found out when they got there it's just work, work, work. But you'd have a good time doing it. So I would say the students were – Again, I don't think students vary from one period to the other. It's been my experience they're all the same. They're very anxious to learn what you have to offer or what you don't have to offer. It doesn't mean that they accept you. But I think the students there were more open to ideas than students, the average student. I think they were more, more open to ideas, were seeking ideas, trying to grasp new ideas, and so on. So I think back, if you ask what were the students like, they were very stimulating and rewarding to work with because of this, and they wanted to pull out of you what you had to offer. Why are you here? What do you have to say? So that's what they – They were stimulating, a rewarding experience to work with these students.

MEH: Did you feel comfortable at the college? Besides this woman living in your house, did you feel any discrimination at the college?

JL: No. I wouldn't have known this if it happened, because since – You have a [UNINTEL] expression here. There were no classes. In some places you would teach and you'd notice when you'd have your class roll and you wouldn't see certain students for a while, then you begin to realize what was happening, they didn't want to work with you for one reason or the other. But no, I never felt that at Black Mountain. I'm sure it must have existed.

MEH: If it did, I haven't heard of it.

JL: No. I think Black Mountain, its philosophy was smart enough to also associate itself or somehow have some contact with the community. Most schools will do this, you know, because they – Skowhegan's the same way. You've got people on your board who are people from the community, so that sort of softens any hostility that might have existed otherwise. So I guess. I don't know this for a fact but in retrospect that might have occurred there through the trustees or whoever they were, I'm sure someone from the community or so. Because maybe they wouldn't have tolerated [UNINTEL], because after all, we were there, the two of us and they had two black students there – Mary Park and –

MEH: Ora Williams.

JL: Ora – was it Williams? Yeah. Sure, at that time, that was quite a – That would always impress me with Albers too. He was a German and he wasn't stupid by any means. He knew what our social traditions were in this country, and especially in the South. But he had the -- whatever you might call it -- the strength to invite and have these four black people associated with the college. Well, you can't count Gwen as an instructor, although they accepted her as that. You know, she didn't get paid anything. There were two students. I think they were from Atlanta, Dale Woodruff [PH] recommended them. Black – and I was a black instructor. So it was a very very fruitful, very exciting experience.

MEH: Are there memories you have of the college or the people or anecdotes or events that we haven't talked about? I'm asking you to remember things that happened fifty years ago. So sometimes I just sort of drag things out because suddenly something will float.

JL: Well, of course, there were the usual romances. Things like that and stories I heard of – they weren't a part of my time. You probably heard them too. They had one story that I can't even remember how to tell it, but it had something to do with some of the founders, founders of Black Mountain, a very intriguing story. One of these stories that goes on and on and on. Then, of course, there's the students who form alliances and they may be a little more mature than some of the others. Every once in a while we might come in contact with one of them, or we remember their names. I don't remember the names. A few of the students I remember their names. There was Schwartz. Schwartz thought that Albers was anti-Semitic, and I don't know. He thought that. Or maybe he wasn't, but maybe out of the – maybe he was argumentative in his philosophy, Schwartz, and of course Albers did not accept that and he would fire back. I guess with Schwartz being sensitive thought he was anti-Semitic, in that situation. Let's see. As I remember, there was one very good – at least I thought she was, maybe some people didn't think so – violinist. Cole? Do you know that name?

MEH: A student?

JL: She used to play the violin, and we saw her – we've seen her [UNINTEL] later, many years ago, but I still remember her, and she married an artist. I'm trying to think of that artist's name. Out of that came – and there's

Jimmy Tite. He was interested – I don't know if you know the name. He was interested in journalism, I think, in writing. There was –

MEH: Did he play the piano? Do you remember?

JL: I think he did. I think he was interested in music. Yes, he used to play the piano. Then there's a student who lives in Atlanta. She was a part of that community, and she went to Black Mountain. So you see Black Mountain always built with sort of acceptance and a contact with the community. I can't think of her name. She's a jeweler. She works in jewelry. I can't think of it. Gwen would know it. I can't think of it. But see these are some of the students I remember. Schwartz. Dorothy Cole I think her name was, a violinist. I call her a violinist but –

MEH: There was a Dorothy Cole there.

JL: Well, maybe, that must have been the same person. Was that at that time? Then it must have been the same thing. She was very serious about her music. That's one thing, too. I don't think everybody, all the students who attended Black Mountain, were oriented toward the visual arts at that time, although I think the school at that time was very much involved in the visual arts at the Summer Institute. I think every other summer it would change back and forth. I don't know what the other disciplines are. Music or theater or literature, I don't know. But the next year it would not have been visual art. It might have been some – yes, Dorothy Cole. Of course the big name there was the architect.

MEH: Walter Gropius.

JL: Oh yes. He was very close, friends to the Albers. He was a very important person. I think she died, didn't she? No, Beaumont Newhall – Nancy Newhall died.

MEH: Yeah, they're both dead now.

JL: Yeah. Boating accident? I think I heard, yeah. But it was a very exciting experience for me. I can't remember details because it's been so long.

MEH: You remember quite a bit. What about – Do you have any particular memory of how mealtimes were organized?

JL: Yeah, there was a time for meals, and they were organized in – That was the only organization you felt, really. Everybody ate together. You didn't straggle in and one person eat here and one person there, but there were mealtimes. I mentioned this porch. When I guess it was raining you ate inside. But there was a definite structure to the meeting time. I think we had three – I don't know about breakfast. Maybe that was more or less continental but we had lunch and we had – I can't remember the breakfast. So maybe the breakfast was more like a sweet bread or coffee or orange juice or something like that. But –

MEH: Any other memories of the college.

JL: I'm trying to think.

MEH: [IRRELEVANT REMARKS]

JL: Oh, yes, leaving the college. Something we'll always remember. We were put into a Jim Crow car, Jim Crow section, the two of us. Well, you know, after the train started – it started up – many of the students from Black Mountain came back to join us, which was some gesture. Although

it was a private – Was that a private car? Well anyway, it was a Jim Crow situation. What they were saying, of course, was “We’re supporting you.” That’s one thing I remember. We had lectures. I can’t remember the visiting lecturers. They had two people there I guess every summer institute. I guess lecturers throughout the year or visiting artists, what they called visiting, like a man like – there was ten weeks, or a man like Leo Lionni would only be there five weeks, and then another person from Fortune magazine, I’ve forgotten his name, he was chairman –

MEH: Will Burton.

JL: Will Burton and his wife, he was there for five weeks. You have more information than I do.

MEH: I know names.

JL: So, by the way, before you leave I’d like for you to autograph the book, your book for me. So they joined us, which was a very very wonderful thing, gesture.

MEH: In the car, on the way home.

JL: Yeah, or wherever we – Yeah. Most of us came from either Asheville or East Coast, New York, and they joined us which I thought was very [INAUDIBLE], the young people. But it was one of the highlights of my career, Black Mountain.

MEH: Now I’ll ask just one other question, and it’s sort of broad. What do you think was the importance of Black Mountain at that period in art history, in, you know, the post-War period that you were experiencing? You know, this type of school.

JL: Oh, I think it was – It’s importance? It’s importance was it opened up your thinking. So many – Or my thinking. I guess that’s true of others too. About things – See, and I think – I’m speaking in general terms now. You go to art school, a traditional art school, and you’d maybe work from the model or you’d work from a still life. You work from a model because it was a figure, either male or female, nude or semi-nude. Or if you worked from a still life, your apples, your oranges, your bananas, and things like that. Now Black Mountain philosophy was the content – irregardless of the content, you would see these various elements in terms of form, in terms of value, in terms of texture, irregardless of what you were painting. For instance, if I did this with my two hands, and before going to Black Mountain – the idea of Black Mountain, you’d see this hand, you would see this hand, but maybe you wouldn’t see what’s in the middle and around it. So Black Mountain, it expanded your vision if you were in the visual arts. I imagine in other disciplines it did the same thing, whatever the discipline might have been. But I know in the visual arts, this is what it did so you not only could see four fingers and a thumb but what’s between becomes very important. There are no negatives and positives like that – what’s between these things. So I think it, I think your question was what influence it might have had?

MEH: What the importance of the college at the period, this type of learning situation.

JL: What was the importance of it? Just an opening up. This is has lasted. There are people who are influenced by Black Mountain who weren't even born yet of the people who went to Black Mountain. It was such a – many of the people would not agree with the philosophy, but they don't know where the philosophy came from, including so much clothing, styles, furniture, architecture, a way of seeing – out of this experience. So it was an opening up, a broadening, a vision for many of us. For me I know it was. I think that was its importance. I think prior to that, of course my history, my personal history does not go much further back, but the form of expression or self-expression, however you might put it, was very tight, very inbred. You'd say, "Well, this is a building." Or I hold my hand up: This is this hand. This is this hand. What do you see between the buildings? What's around them? What's moving? The cars, the people, and so on, moving around the space. Or I'll tell you an analogy I give to my – when I was teaching, I would say to my class – these are beginning students – I would say: "Let's take this. This is what we're going to put an emphasis on." I'd say "You walk across campus day in and day out, day in and day out, every day, every week, every month. Then all of a sudden you stop. Why did you stop? Because you noticed that there's a bush, and all at once it's there." Of course, the bush has been there all the time, but what's enabled you to see the bush is this opening up, this vision. So I use that. That's what I think this, the philosophy and this kind of – It was a very very, you'd say "abstract" – not abstract in the sense of being non-figurative, but seeing abstractly. Because you see abstractly, you have a greater feeling for your environment, for people – I guess it extends beyond you to the people in general, to your living, your environment, to everything you do – becomes so, so important. You get as a result of that, it adds so much – what's the term I'm trying to use – quality. To life in general. So if you look again here in your photograph, your camera, I not only see the camera, I see you, how you put your hand up. I wouldn't notice this, you know, if I hadn't been a student in these times and appreciating these concepts. So, I not only see you. So you can almost – When you leave, because I've noticed these other things, I can almost do a portrait of you, not being there. See, you can put it that way.

MEH: Do you have any work that you can identify that you actually did at Black Mountain?

JL: No, I don't. I don't. Maybe I didn't do much there. I don't know why.

[END OF INTERVIEW]
[END OF TRANSCRIPT]