

*“There Is No White Culture in This Country”:
An Interview with James Alan McPherson*

I was a freshman in college in 1987, when I did the interview that follows as an assignment. The class was “The Literature of Social Reflection,” taught by Robert Coles. We read George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Walker Evans and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and other similar books. Less intent on the analysis of literature than on the nurturing of moral sensibilities, Coles left his final assignment open-ended. It was not meant to be a conventional research paper or literary analysis; some students slept on the streets to experience what it was like to be homeless. I interviewed Jim. It was a long, digressive conversation. I had done some research, reread his essays, and came prepared with a list of questions. But Jim led the conversation. He’d known me since I was twelve, and both my youth and my naive questions may have allowed him to lower his guard. The tone is different from the banter of his published interview with Bob Shacochis in the *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, from 1983. Here, Jim was educating me, telling me how it was.

I’d grown up around the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (my mother has worked there since 1974), going to readings and dinners, and I knew plenty of interesting people and good talkers. Jim was like an inverse mirror of the gregarious writers I knew. He was never capable of small talk, and everything he said cut to the heart of the matter. He could be cryptic, wise, subversively funny, or say nothing at all. At Workshop parties, he often sat in a corner, and I would come talk to him.

A few things strike me about the interview, rereading it decades later. Iowa seems to have been almost the first place where Jim felt he could trust his neighbors and friends. His political and moral perceptions pervaded everything he said, from his vision of his own history to his view of the present world. His constant preoccupations, which run through both his fiction and essays, were the intersections of race, class, history, politics, and what it is to be an American. Our conversation took place during Reagan’s second term, and Jim’s preoccupations were rooted in that political moment; a number of these have new resonances today. Some of his concerns, which at the time seemed

Photograph courtesy of Rachel McPherson

eccentric—following the activities of white supremacists, for example, subscribing to their newsletters—now seem prescient.

Jim's friends will remember that his answering machine and one of his business cards said, "Mr. Jefferson is not at home, he's down at the cabins making contradictions." Jim's humor was often like this, quietly outrageous. The editor of TIR and I discussed whether, in publishing the interview years after it was conducted, we should update his language (words like "mulatto") to reflect the current terms in use. We decided not to, because Jim's language, like his humor, deliberately skirted the niceties of polite society.

Our conversation preceded Jim's publication of his two volumes of personal essays, *Crabcakes* (1998) and *A Region Not Home: Reflections from Exile* (2000), and anticipates some of the themes he would take up there. It builds on aspects of his biography. James Alan McPherson was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1943. His father was the only qualified black master electrician in the state and was continually being denied a license. The family often had to move from apartment to apartment. When he was eighteen, he got a scholarship to Morris Brown College in Atlanta. He then went to Harvard Law School and got his degree in 1968. He put himself through law school by working as a janitor for an apartment building on Massachusetts Avenue. He began writing while in law school, publishing articles and stories in *The Atlantic Monthly*. After graduating, he attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts degree. He started teaching at the University of California at Santa Cruz, then at the University of Virginia, before joining the faculty of the Workshop in 1981. He worked as a grocery store boy, a janitor, a railroad waiter, a contributing editor to *The Atlantic Monthly*, and a professor. Along the way, he wrote important essays for *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times Magazine*, including an interview with Ralph Ellison (who would become his mentor), a profile of Richard Pryor, essays on housing discrimination and gangs in Chicago, two books of short stories, *Hue and Cry* (1969) and *Elbow Room* (1977), and three nonfiction books, earning him a Guggenheim Award (1972), the Pulitzer Prize (1978), and the MacArthur Award (1981).

Cammy Brothers: I'd like to start out talking about your childhood and what it was like growing up in Savannah. Could you describe the racial climate? Was it acceptable to be overtly racist?

James Alan McPherson: It was acceptable to be overtly racist, but it's more complex than that. I think that if you study the first generation of slaves out of slavery, you find that they were artisans, they were brick

masons, they built all the plantation houses in the South. They weren't just field hands, they were architects. That threatened the power structure, and so from 1896 until the early '50s, there was an attempt to suppress any evidence of black intelligence. It was aimed at making sure black laborers never competed with white laborers. That accounted for the mass wave of migration out of the South. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there's a segment called "Golden Day." Those guys are old professionals. The whites feel threatened by them and the black people feel threatened by the whites.

CB: In "Going Up to Atlanta" (published in 1987 in *A World Unsuspected: Portraits of Southern Childhood*) you wrote that your father gambled and drank with other older blacks who were all disillusioned with society and were frustrated. Was that an accurate picture of the scene your father was a part of?

JM: Yeah. My neighbor next door tells me that you see the same groups of men gathered around the open fire in South Africa. Castrated black men who commiserate together around an open fire. I was surprised to hear that it's the same system. It's just that it's a bit more naked in South Africa than it is now in this country.

CB: But when you were growing up?

JM: It was brutal. I remember I used to work bagging potatoes for a man named Norton. There was a restaurant across the street where, of course, black people couldn't go to eat, but you couldn't even go beyond the counter. Norton used to spend time at the restaurant talking business deals. His mother used to say, "James, go over there, and tell Norton this and that." So I'd go over there and Norton was highly ironic, he knew what he was doing. He'd sit way back beyond the counter, and I'd stand where I was supposed to stand, and he'd say, "Come on, James, come on James." So he was eroding the thing in his own way, and he'd look at me.

CB: Would you come back?

JM: Yeah, but I had to have his permission. The other man that worked for Norton was Mr. Sikes. He was an Anglo-Saxon redneck. He hated Norton.

CB: Because he was able to observe that kind of subversive behavior, and it grated on him?

JM: No, it wasn't that. It was just that Norton was Jewish, and he hated to have to work for a Jew. He would be cleaning up the frozen food racks, and if he was frustrated with Norton, he'd pass by me and hit me on the head. As a matter, of course, he could do that, because I was trapped. I couldn't quit the job, because it was all that I could get, and my sister had a baby, and I had to take care of that. But I'm saying that it's such a naked thing; Sikes knew that I was trapped.

CB: He just hit you?

JM: Sure, yes.

CB: And you couldn't respond at all? Would you do anything, or would you just take it?

JM: Well, I took it. The idea is that I was wise enough to see that Sikes was in no better position than I was. In a way, he was worse off, because he was a white man. The only option that he had was to beat up on the black help.

CB: How do you view the difference between the climate when you were growing up and today? Have the attitudes really progressed or have they just gone underground?

JM: The black American's position has been so well institutionalized that even if the people want to change, the institutions still follow their own logic. They're not geared toward the exclusion of Asians or Spanish speaking people.

CB: I can see how that's very much so in the South, and how, if it does change at all, it'll take generations. But do you think that in the North there is hope for change?

JM: You're too young to remember this, but the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s, for a brief period, did transform certain attitudes in the South. And that transformation I think derived from a lingering value structure that said if I subscribe to a Judeo-Christian ethic and its teachings say this thing is wrong, then it's wrong for me to practice this thing. A friend of mine told me about a man in Columbia, South Carolina,

named Maurice. In the '60s he was an immigrant who internalized all the biblical prohibitions against integration that he had learned from the whites. So when they tried to integrate the restaurant he owned he said, "No, never, never." And he quoted the Bible and the parts that he'd learned from the Anglo-Saxons. So they took him to court, and he quoted the Bible to the Anglo-Saxon judge and he said, "That won't do, Maurice. I'm gonna shut you down." So they shut down his restaurant. Then he had a vision that God appeared to him and said it was okay to integrate his restaurant, and he went to a black church to express this vision. When I was in Columbia, my friend took me around and he said, "Hey, there's Maurice. 'Hey, Maurice. God, I love you brother!'" It's a sense that he learned a new act. That act became what psychologists call cognitive dissonance. You learn to reconcile the distance between your behavior and your professed beliefs and you assume that new persona. That kind of thing is what happened in the South during the Civil Rights Movement, but it got stalled. It was supposed to spread to the North, but when King moved North, he couldn't locate the same core of values. The ethnicity of the North made it difficult for him to practice that kind of moral appeal. So the movement began to falter.

CB: Do you think that American subcultures, which are kind of on the fringe themselves, are more likely to be prejudiced toward blacks than mainstream Anglo-Saxons? It often strikes me as odd that different oppressed groups don't see that the problems they face are similar.

JM: Well, I look at in a much different way. I think that if you look at the society in terms of an ongoing social drama, then you see that certain groups have been assigned certain roles. Black Americans have been assigned the roles of being perpetually needy. The ones who have a moral claim on white man's compassion. The ones that they always trot out to show you how far you've got to go. And so, I can imagine all these ethnic groups saying, "Look at this. I had to break my balls to get this little house here. They don't give a damn about me." Reagan built a coalition of ethnics because he said, "I feel sorry for you." They say, "The system treats me like a nigger, but I don't get any kind of compassion for it." And so, here's some guy that's going to say he understands the pain. Well, Reagan fooled all of them. But that was the appeal I think.

CB: Is the fact that ethnic minorities are treated in the same way as blacks but don't get the same kind of either government or charity response a source of resentment toward the government or toward blacks?

JM: It's resentment toward black Americans. The social problem is this: you've got a class system, but the fact of race obscures that. It is not a democracy, it's a class-bound system. We're talking about taste, we're talking about money, and if you've got money you can buy class. You can buy it. You can always tell an upwardly mobile proletarian, because in his house, he has usually a new Persian rug, English antiques, and in his freshman year he has a decal of the college on the back of his car. But he'll get to a certain point where he begins to refine his manners, when he begins to speak English impeccably. He's into a power structure, but it's not called a class system, because you've got race as a sort of buffer. And those who can't get meat and bread on the table are always frustrated.

CB: How is the position of an upwardly mobile black American different from that of an Arab or Chinese American?

JM: It's complex. Sociologically, black Americans are born into the myth of rugged individualism that Reagan promoted. That is, you get yours and to hell with the next guy. So a lot of us have abandoned our links to our communal traditions. That won't happen with Arabs, Chinese, Jews, or others. And, too, a black American has no linkage with any group outside of his own in this country. There is a romanticized link with Africa, but that's not even for real.

CB: It's so far removed.

JM: Every other group has some homeland. Some place of respite where he can go and get his spirit renewed. Black Americans ceased being African after the first or second generation. But the most important difference is that black Americans are Americans. They are more American than anybody. And the irony is that no matter what is done to us or said about us, the white Southerner has to come to us to find out who he is.

CB: He has to define his own role and his own sense of culture through you. Another interesting thing I remember you pointing out at a different time was how many idioms of black culture have been adopted by white culture at large under other names. Speech patterns and music, for example.

JM: There is no white culture in this country. It's all mulatto culture. The foundations of American culture are a mixture of African, European, and Indian. I think that when those three elements come together, things begin to happen. I always try to make the distinction

between race and culture. I see that biologically black Americans are not African, they're not European, they're not Indian. They are composite people and whatever culture they create is composite.

CB: How do you see blacks within the American literary tradition?

JM: People say, "Imagine a black teaching a writers' workshop." I say, "I'm not black, can't you see I'm passing into another hue?" That's supposed to be funny, but it's not. There's an assumption that somehow the world of books, reading, and other things are beyond the comprehension of black Americans. That's not true. The first generation out of slavery was writing about the so-called Negro spirituals. Those people were so far removed from the actual condition when they wrote those songs that they never once mentioned the fact that they were slaves. And so those songs are universal; they have nothing to do with the immediate condition.

CB: I want to go back to Savannah for a minute. How had you been prepared for being slapped in the head and not being able to do anything about it? Was there a time when you were shocked and really became angry?

JM: No, no. This is the thing you learn growing up in the South. You see whites as not part of your world. They did not exist except as enemies. I used to walk home from school with my best friend, Willie Joe Michaels. He was a scholar, and he wore glasses. Walking home, there was a white boy that was always on the playground. He'd say, "Hold my glasses for me a minute," and he'd start beating up on this guy. He and this white guy had a rivalry. If you didn't assert yourself, then they'd run over you. Just a given.

CB: When you were talking about Sikes hitting you, you said it was also a given that you couldn't do anything. But were there times when you felt you had to hold your own to maintain self-respect or just so they wouldn't go too far?

JM: I remember one Christmas, Sikes was the manager. I think I was the best worker Norton had, and so they wanted to switch me from being a bag boy to stocking produce, while paying me the bag boy's wages. I had promised to give my sister's little girl a gift for Christmas, and I was depending on my tips, so they switched James to produce. Only the bag boys got tips. Christmas Eve, they gave me the bag boy's wages. I went

to Norton and said, “Mr. Norton, I worked all day in produce. They steal my Christmas tips, and I can’t take the bag boy’s wages.” He just paid me what I should have gotten in the first place. That’s been a pattern in my life, I was always withdrawn. I’m trying to change it now, but I never was able to assert myself. I remember when I was on the railroad, this was in my late teens, all the cooks and the dishwashers were white, and all the waiters were black. They used to banter back and forth across the pantry—racial stuff. But when the pressure came on, and it was time to serve the meals, they had to work together. So the dishwasher must have seen that I was not willing to fight back, so he kept riding me, kept pushing. Then the other waiters called me aside and said, “Look, you let that white boy degrade you, and through you he’s degrading us. Now if you don’t tell him off, we will, and we’re going to kick you off this crew because we don’t want you.” And so, I went to him and I said, “I don’t care what you say to me, but these others waiters care. So please don’t say anything more.” Well, that was a major step for me.

CB: What has stopped you from being assertive? Just that the abuse wasn’t affecting you too much? Or was it affecting you, but you thought saying something would be futile? Or was it a reluctance to actively change the situation? Do you know which it was?

JM: I don’t know. I honestly don’t know, Cammy. I think that probably I let it switch in my own head. I never expected anything from the world one way or another, and so I tended to take things. Whatever happened, I tended to take it. I remember when I was in Cambridge at a building I showed you.

CB: You were the janitor.

JM: Uh huh. I was taking my garbage out one night and right across the street was a private club called the A.D. It was a Friday night, and I was taking the garbage out. Somebody said, “Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger.” Every time I pulled the can out, somebody said that. So then another man who worked in the building came out and sat on this stoop right next to Grolier’s Book Shop. I brought some more stuff out, and they said, “Nigger, nigger, nigger,” so he heard it. He said, “James McPherson, I heard that.” He said, “You’re too nice.” He told me that he wanted me to go over to the A.D. Club and demand nothing less than a personal letter of apology from the president. He said that if I didn’t do it he would. I said, “Oh I won’t do that,” so I didn’t do it. But about the middle of the next week, I got a letter from a little kid in one of those

houses that said, “Dear Sir; It has been called to my attention that you were highly upset about some chance remarks I made from behind the fence at the A.D. club. I want you to know that I was totally inebriated when I made the remarks, and I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. But if you want a personal apology, please feel free to call on me at my suite in Lowell House at about six thirty. P.S. I am not a member of the club, I was only a guest there.” Now that really made me mad. And I think the problem is that I have not been able in my life to express anger when it happened. I brooded about it. I didn’t get mad at the insult, I got mad at the insult in the letter. He was saying in essence, I’m dying to let you call on me in my house at a certain time, and I will apologize, not to you, but to save the reputation of the club. His condescension. I could accept the remark because I’d heard it before, but I couldn’t accept that. I think it’s something in me. It’s not passive, it’s just resigned. That’s why I call it fatalism. You assume certain things.

CB: Through your descriptions of your mother in “Going Up to Atlanta,” I sensed that she also had a resigned attitude. She seemed to have great integrity but also some pride in not wanting to accept charity. How do you interpret that?

JM: Well, it took me a long time to figure out. I know that when she was a girl, she studied to be what she called a perfect Christian, that was her goal in life. She studied with holiness people in Florida, very strict people. And so, I don’t think she ever once focused on this world as anything meaningful. She was focused on Heaven. But it caused her a great deal of pain. She never once fought back at anything. She always took it. And she passed it on to us to take it. That’s not real Christianity. That’s masochism, so to speak. It takes you a long time to realize you’ve been tricked.

CB: Your father didn’t share that attitude. Even though he became frustrated, he did everything he could to work within the system and to get what he could out of it. And he was still able to laugh when your brother was called a nigger.

JM: Sure, because he was intelligent enough to see that the man wouldn’t call him that unless he was feeling threatened by my brother’s competence. This is what I was saying about the guy that called me a nigger at the A.D. Club in Cambridge. I was making it. I was getting my law degree. I was writing at the same time. It’s a waste of energy to

react. I told Ellison about it, and he said, “Jim, sometimes to respond to that is a learning experience for most people.”

CB: When the incident with the A.D. Club took place, you were being a janitor. Did you ever have the desire to let this snob who wrote the condescending letter know that you were a law student? Did that ever seem important to you?

JM: No, no.

CB: Or do you think he would have treated you differently had he known?

JM: But you don't want that.

CB: Right, because the racism is still there. If the fact that you're a law student makes him treat you with more respect, then that's not real respect, it's not the kind you want.

JM: In the building where I worked, there was an MIT professor. He was a sadist. He would always wait until after I had mopped and waxed his section of the hall, and then he'd sweep his garbage out onto the floor. I watched him, and so he did it on purpose. Then, the night that King was killed in '68, the Boston police put a barricade around Roxbury. The professor knocked on all the doors in the building wanting people to sign a petition to have the barricades taken down. Now that's a liberal gesture, but my philosophy is that you treat the person in front of you always the way you want to be treated, and his status doesn't matter. Then you don't have any temptation to genuflect before the upper class or to condescend before the lower class. That makes me safer. I can always see people saying, “What's your status? Who does he know? What can he do for me?” That turns you into some kind of schizophrenic. This whole society is geared toward that. I don't fight very often, but when I fight I fight.

CB: But what that means the rest of the time is taking it, I suppose.

JM: Well, not taking it but watching it all the time. Watching it, and then when they touch your soul, when they touch where it matters to you, then you fight back. But why fight every instance?

CB: Well, one reason is Ellison's hope that maybe you'll change someone's attitude or make them do a little brooding themselves. But maybe that's naive. Maybe it is just a waste of energy, and it's too difficult to fight every time.

JM: I'll put it this way: I have an outlet. I can write. If you spend your time responding to every little thing, you never get the writing done. I've learned to fight only over issues that are important to me. So I can endure racial insults. It took me a long time to get over my mother's passivity and acceptance of this old Negro spiritual that says Jesus will fix it after a while, in the sweet by-and-by.

CB: Do you think your mother's attitude was unusual in Savannah? What was the black community like there? Was there a sense of passivity all around, or were there young groups who were wanting to fight back?

JM: Oh, no, the Civil Rights thing didn't start when King began marching. It was already going on, but it was unorganized. You had teachers who refused to compel the students to salute the American flag. It was a spontaneous movement, and King just happened to appear, but the thing would have gone on anyway.

CB: What kind of equality were blacks seeking during the Civil Rights Movement?

JM: I was talking to a friend who grew up in the Midwest. He believes equality means getting the same concrete goods and status that the whites around you have, whereas in the South, you're taught that you have to go beyond. That is not a good enough model. Here in the Midwest, what's held out as the good life is seen as an indicator of equality.

CB: You don't mean to go beyond in a material sense.

JM: No, in a human sense.

CB: Because you're generous and tolerant in ways that white Southerners aren't?

JM: No, it's just that you say this isn't an inadequate representation of what a full human life should be. And you're not doing it out of spite,

you just think, “I can’t live that way.” And then you try to find a way you can live, that incorporates those values that are important to you.

When I was a professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, they said, “We’re going to take you in, make you one of us.” Well, I don’t want to go to your dinner parties. I don’t feel like you. I don’t want to be a part of that kind of stuff. It’s like, then you have to learn to condescend to people. That’s not my style.

CB: When you were invited to dinner parties, did you feel your colleagues were being condescending to you, or that you were being invited to be condescending to others?

JM: It’s a complex thing. A community like Charlottesville has been racist for so long that they’ve chased out all the good meat, so to speak. There’s no black middle class there.

There was a man named Shannon who saw himself as a liberal, because he had resigned from one club which excluded Jews and blacks and joined another club which would accept Jews and blacks there to have a meal. So one time, Shannon asked Ellison and I to go to lunch with him. So all the time we’re eating, I’m watching the waiters and the other guests in the club. They’re giving us hate stares. So Ellison is a Southwesterner, and he’s into this equality. If I get in, it doesn’t matter to me, I’ve got the symbol.

CB: So Ellison would prefer to be in and be getting the hate stares than to be excluded.

JM: I think so. With me, if I see that you don’t want me there, I don’t want to be there. I want to be where I’m comfortable.

CB: Do you think your difference with Ellison on that is a function of the fact that he grew up in Oklahoma, and you grew up in Savannah? Or do you think it’s just a difference in the way you perceive?

JM: It’s the way we perceive things. I heard that Ellison said he learned as a kid that there was one world where you wore your Sunday clothes on Sunday and another world where you wore your Sunday clothes every day. And he wanted that world. Well that’s simple, isn’t it? Equality means that you get the chance to wear your Sunday clothes every day.

CB: That you have all the symbols of material prosperity.

JM: Maybe it's not adequate. Maybe it can get better. While I was glad that Shannon invited me to his club for lunch, I could not feel comfortable there. Maybe it was because I'd been a waiter, and so when I go out to eat, I always watch the waiters. I don't know if Ellison's been a waiter or not. But he's in the Century Club in New York, and he's got a whole list of awards and stuff like that. That's nice, except I'd rather go to the Hamburg Inn and have the waitress say, "Well, where's your little girl? Is she still here?"

CB: When you go to the Hamburg Inn they treat you like a person.

JM: That's all you want, that's all you want. I can trust people in Iowa City. It is an unreal world. It is. But if you've seen enough reality, you prefer it. The longer you are here, you become naive and trusting. On the other hand, if you never had the luxury of being able to trust, this is the best place in the world for you.

CB: What about Cambridge? What was the situation in the classroom? How were you treated by other students? Or another question is, how were you treated as a law student as opposed to as a janitor?

JM: There were about nine blacks in my class at Harvard Law School and about four or five in the class before that, and in the third-year class, there were three mulattoes. So they were just beginning to think, "Well maybe they're not so dumb. We'll start bringing in the dark-skinned ones." At the welcome address to all the law students, the black students got a letter saying there would be a meeting for certain people after dinner. At the meeting, old George Strait, who was a puppet, said, "Now to make sure that you stay in law school, we're going to give you all tutors." So my friend and I walked out. Not that we didn't know that we didn't have the background the white guys had, it was that they were not giving us a goddamn chance. So we walked out. That night I swore that I would finish Harvard Law School and that I would go on and do something else for myself. The assumption of your inferiority was institutionalized, but it was a great secret.

CB: A meeting for "certain people."

JM: Uh huh. I remember a class with a professor known to have contempt for blacks, Jews, and women. He used to have what he called "Women's Day" in his class one day a year. He would call on the females in the class. But he never called on black students. I can take anything,

except you must never tell me that I'm inferior. I'll fight that. So the professor had a seating chart with your picture and he would say, "Mr. . . .," and his hand would move, and you knew he had gotten to a black face. Then he'd call on a white person. I remember every morning, I'd get to class early and I'd stand by the door. Whenever he came in, I'd say, "Good morning, Professor," and he wouldn't speak to me. Every morning, I'd just say, "Good morning, Professor." Every morning I did that. And then he started nodding. I just wanted him to recognize that face. Because one day in class he said, "Mr. McPherson." When he said it, the whole class of five hundred people got still. It was the first time he'd called on a black student. And then he asked me a two-part question. I got the first part right. He asked me the second part, and I hesitated, and you could just feel the tension in the room. Then I got that. It was like a watershed. But to bring you there and to tell you when you got there that you were inferior made me say that I won't learn. I'll get the degree, but I will not honor it. You cannot live your life proving yourself over and over and over again. There's just not enough life for that.

CB: We've talked a little about your parents' attitudes and how you later had to think about them and try to explain them to yourself. In terms of Rachel [your daughter], living in Charlottesville as she does, what kind of feeling are you trying to give her about her racial identity and how to view the incidences of petty discrimination she'll experience or that she has already?

JM: Well, way before Rachel was born, in the early '70s, I began consciously to try to put together what I call a multi-racial extended family unit. There has never been a time in this house that Rachel has felt she was exclusively black. I've tried to help her internalize what I call an omni-American point of view, which is based on having the best of available humanity in her library, so she remains whole and comfortable. Her uncles, aunts, and godparents are Japanese, Puerto Rican, Jewish, Anglo-Saxon, black, all that, so that she never goes to a city in this country without feeling that she knows somebody there who cares about her. That's the only hope I see. That's all I can do for her. Now I know that she's black, and she will appear that way, but I want her to be able to transcend that in her own opinion. That's what I've been working on. It doesn't make a difference to me what I've written, what matters to me is that my inner life and my outer professions are one.

CB: And that's something that the avowed liberal in the Cambridge apartment building can't say.

JM: No, he's schizophrenic. What I'm saying is that if you don't live the life you think about, you can't shake a finger; you have no right to shake a finger. If you can't practice it, then you have no moral authority at all.

CB: What does this mean on a broader, societal level?

JM: Somehow, the country had a serious mission, a serious purpose, and now people just want to forget it. And then they get cynical, and they're going to beat up on the folks that reminded them. What I've learned is that the assumption is that the guy who is ruthless and daring can go as high as he can go building skyscrapers, and he assumes an obligation to take care of people less strong or fortunate than he is. But at the same time, they're inferior to him. Equality is a fiction, freedom is the real thing. Because you always want to allow that man to build, to go as high as he can go. So the country vacillates between periods when rugged individualism is unleashed and periods when there's a need for the communal.

CB: Are you thinking of the '60s and its idealism?

JM: I think up until Carter, because it was the remnants of that idealism that got rid of Nixon. Now, you're dealing with a shortness of memory, citizens not interested in the problems, not being able to see the future. To put it bluntly, there's not a Ford in your future, there are Chinese people, black people, Spanish, Arabs. That's hard news for some people. That's the problem. If you transport Africans here who have no business here, it's done, and it can't be reversed.

CB: So how can we think about it?

JM: I can show you my family tree, and my ancestor names are Campbell, McPherson. I'm not puffing any ancestry, but my ancestors are Scotch-Irish, African, and Indian. I didn't do that. The Anglo-Saxon did it, he did it. So I've got cousins in the South whose flesh is white, and so the South is one place in the country where those kind of relationships, even under oppression, did take place; those relationships, mostly by white males and black females, did take place. There's a blood bond there.

CB: No one's pure.

JM: Nobody's pure, but I'm saying that you want to see the South as a place that's better prepared to deal with the complexity just because it's had to deal with it for four or five centuries. But it's not there.

CB: Do you know much about these neo-Nazi groups—Aryan Nation is one of them in Iowa—that are trying to get farmers and store clerks and students to join?

JM: As a matter of fact, I've been trying to arrange to debate or talk with [Richard Girnt] Butler, the head of the Aryan Nation. They're right in that they see the American nation state as spinning from Northern European values and they feel threatened by what's here. Butler's telling the truth for white people. Suddenly, it's not your world anymore, what do you do? Do you give up? Or do you try to recreate a smaller version of how everything was? What do you do?

CB: Are you worried they are gaining adherents among the farmers?

JM: They are gaining in enough areas to cause trouble. There is not one place in the world left like thirteenth-century Britain or Gaul where there is a group isolated and left to maintain its purity. That's what Butler is trying to create, an Aryan Nation, because he wants that clarity of values. You can't blame him for it, it's like he has no alternative. The alternative is unthinkable for him. It's to join the pot and melt.

CB: I want to return to your parents' generation for a minute. You said that your mother was passive but that among many blacks in Savannah there was a rebellious spirit. Besides the religious, out of what sort of tradition did your mother arise?

JM: I'll put it this way. In the pre-Civil Rights, black American world, there's a sense of black people accepting their lot.

CB: I think that's true in South Africa too. A lot of the fighting among blacks occurs because there is a group who are either employed by the white government as policemen or who have learned to accept their place and feel comfortable in it. They feel threatened by the blacks who are struggling to improve their status. The rebellion represents upheaval, and it is frightening.

JM: The people are so beaten down that they could not even conceive of an alternative. I'm trying to write now and trying to understand the

whole thing. I've seen things that I'll never forget. And the hardest thing is to have sympathy and pity for that kind of person.

I see the rise of the masses and a confusion over what constitutes nobility. True nobility is not based on blood or money or ancestry, it's based on a willingness to do more than most people. To serve more than most people. It's not based on amassing power but on empowering people. The hardest thing that I tell my students is that as writers, they are the natural nobility. And they have an obligation.

CB: Do you think the obligations of a black writer are distinct?

JM: I don't know, I don't know. When I think back on the people that I've met whom I consider great... one time I was in Ralph Ellison's living room and it was New Year's 1978. Donald Barthelme was there, pumping Ellison about Louis Armstrong. You could tell that he was ripping off Ellison for his own fiction. Ellison was saying that you know beneath Armstrong's polished exterior, there's a warrior, because what you hear in his trumpet is the ram's horn, and the ram's horn is the sound of a warrior. Barthelme was just taking notes. "Ralph," I said, "why are you giving your stuff away like that?" He said, "Well, in a democracy greatness is defined by what you give." It took me years to understand that. And it took me years to understand the ego that would allow him to say that. He was great. And I understand that he was right. He says that you always try to raise up people who are willing to do more than others without any compensation from the ones they give to and not any recognition.

CB: Robert Coles is trying to encourage that same instinct. To care about other people and be willing to help them without any reward. At a place like Harvard which does seem to be very much directed toward individual achievement and which tends to foster self-absorption, his voice is a really important one to have around.

JM: Yeah. He's a rare man. I remember the first time I met him. His book *Children of Crisis* had just come out, and I was suspicious. "What are you doing studying my people? Why don't you go study yourself?"

It's just that it takes you a long time to understand some people who don't mean any harm. It means that you live the kind of life that's not really grounded in true trust. It's always the daring and withdrawing, daring and withdrawing. That's a hell of a way to live. The alternative is to go back in the black community and never have any daring at all.

CB: You see it as a black and white issue. It seems to me that anyone has to assess to what extent he or she will trust people and to what extent protect him or herself from being hurt. I can see in the South how it would be more of a dichotomy, and you choose either to guard yourself and live in a white world or to be open and live among blacks. But here in the Midwest, I don't see why it has to be a compromise.

JM: No, it doesn't. There's something about being responsible to your neighbors and to your friends. You try your best to be in your private life what you profess to be in your public life, all because you're part of a communal world. In Iowa, there is a sense of decency and communal responsibility. It comes out of a frontier tradition of helping your neighbor and not letting anybody fall too far.