Oral History with Houston A. Baker

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Biography

Born in March of 1943, Houston Alfred Baker Jr. grew up in segregated Louisville. His mother was a schoolteacher; his father served as chief administrator of the city’s African-American hospital, the Red Cross Hospital, and had earned a master’s degree in hospital administration from Northwestern University on a Rockefeller fellowship. When Baker was a child, his family lived on Virginia Avenue, where Baker attended Virginia Avenue Elementary School. After his family moved to Broadway Street, Baker attended Western Elementary, later Western Junior High School, and then Male High School before leaving for Howard University in 1961. The family attended Grace Presbyterian Church in Smoketown.

Baker began using the Western Colored Branch Library at age 12. His strong interest in literature led to a distinguished career in scholarship. After completing his B.A. in English at Howard University, Baker earned a M.A. and a PhD in Victorian literature at UCLA, writing his dissertation abroad at the University of Edinburgh. After teaching at Yale University, Baker joined the University of Virginia’s Center for Advanced Studies in 1970. In 1974 he moved to the University of Pennsylvania to direct their African-American Studies Program, where in 1987 he founded the university’s Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture and served as its director until 1999. Baker also served as President of the Modern Language Association in 1992-93. From 1999 until 2006, Baker held the Susan Fox and George D. Beischer Professorship at Duke University, where he also served as editor of the journal American Literature.

Civil Rights Era, published by the Columbia University Press, was honored with an American Book Award.

Transcript

Griffis: This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Dr. Houston A. Baker on February 27th, 2017. I'm in Hattiesburg Mississippi, in my office at the University; [Dr. Baker] resides in [Nashville, TN]. Because of the distance we are conducting this interview over the phone. This is an oral history interview for the Roots of Community Project. I'll be asking Dr. Baker questions about his recollections using the library known as the Western Branch library in Louisville [KY]—or, the “Western Colored Branch” as it was once known—which was a segregated public library built with funds from Andrew Carnegie’s library building program of the early 20th century. The library first opened in 1905 and then moved into its new Carnegie building, built in the Russell neighborhood on the corner of Tenth and Chestnut Streets, in 1908. Another segregated branch, the Eastern Colored Branch, opened several years later in the Smoketown neighborhood but closed in 1975. The Western Branch, of course, remains open today as part of the Louisville Free Public Library.

So, thank you once again, Dr. Baker, for donating this interview and participating in the project. My first question: Were you born there [in Louisville]? Did you grow up there?

Baker: I was born in Louisville and lived there until high school graduation from Male High in 1961, and went on to Howard University in Washington, D.C. So, that's sort of the early trajectory.

Griffis: And so, your younger life was spent in Louisville. Where, specifically, in Louisville did you live?

Baker: I was first resident, after birth, on Virginia Avenue, which is down south in Louisville—it's not the south side exactly, as one would talk about Boston; but that's just the geographical coordinates—and then moved within that area until—I think it was after the second grade—and then my mom and dad bought a home on Broadway—which is a main street that runs north and south in Louisville—and in what was then—I think this is right... Yeah, it is right—it was a predominantly mixed neighborhood. Maybe whites were still in the majority. So, that was, when... What would I have been? Eight or nine years old, I suppose. So, that was my Louisville bearing until I went off to college.

Griffis: Around what age did you begin using the library?
Baker: I began using the library… Probably—let me try to get this together—the fifth grade, I think, would have been the time I started using the library. It was before junior high school, which usually is at twelve years of age. So, it was safe to walk from 22nd and Broadway up to 10th and Chestnut. So, yeah. That's about the time I began using it. Fifth or sixth grade.

Griffis: And so you lived within walking distance, of the library?

Baker: I did. But of course, “walking distance” at that age has a very different connotation from now, in my seventies. [laughs]

Griffis: True. And what do you remember about Louisville at that time as a place to live? How would you describe it?

Baker: I think I would describe it immediately—what comes immediately to mind—is as living in a circle environment, almost total African American people: men, women, and children. The white world was sort of not part of one’s everyday coming and going. At the time I began using the library, the schools were segregated; everything was segregated, as a matter of fact. What was not? Oh, right, there was no riding on the back of the bus. But, other than that, it was a pretty “Blacks here, whites there,” kind of city. And it was pretty peaceful, actually—in the community, the black community. My mother and father were both of the African American professional class. They belonged to organizations, social and cultural. Life was okay, within the black community.

Griffis: What can you recall about—or, what’s your earliest memory using the Western branch library?

Baker: My earliest memory actually features my mom, who was a school teacher. And she took me to the library, where, of course, she knew—and I can't remember their names, but—the librarian and assistant and so forth, because my mom was a school teacher. And she sat with me through a story hour, and I remember a very energetic and radiant African American woman reading a story. I can't tell you what that story was right now, but she was vivid in her voicings and I think there may have been seven or eight of us children there. I don't know which ones were with their moms. But that's my first memory. And I also remember—oh yes, this is true—it was the greatest assembly that I think I had ever seen, and I felt happy among all of those books. And it was a bright place, it was brightly lit. So, it was an imprinting, obviously, as I describe it now, experience. And then I was able to go to story hour on my own, after I was registered with the library. And my mom knew the personnel and so forth. But that's the original one.

Griffis: And you spoke about the collection being the biggest collection of books, the biggest assembly you’d seen yet. What schools did you attend growing up in Louisville and what were their libraries like?

Baker: I went to Virginia Avenue Elementary School—that was my first school. I don’t remember a library at Virginia Avenue Elementary School. Maybe it was because I was too young, or maybe there wasn’t one. I just don’t remember
one. And then I went to Western Elementary, which was near the Broadway relocation. And I don’t remember a library there either, to tell you the truth. I wonder when I actually registered [at] a library… Probably, when in the eighth grade, I went to Western Junior High School, which was indeed within walking distance of the Broadway house. And that was after Brown vs Board of Education, when the schools integrated. So, there was—yes, there was definitely was a library there, because I remember that one could coordinate student social presentations and so forth. Again, I can’t remember a librarian. But that really is my first memory of a library in school.

Griffis: You mentioned that you can’t recall the names of the librarians or library staff at the Western Colored Branch, but you do remember the storytime as being a vivid experience. What other memories do you have of the librarians working there? Perhaps going up and asking them for help, those kinds of things?

Baker: They were always seriously—and I would say now, studiously—helpful. There of course is a factor of self-imposed intimidation: when you’re that young and height alone presents that differential. But they seemed to know everything about the books in the library and correlatively to know everything about me. I just felt that they knew who I was, who my parents were. And so, I can say that with the actual librarians I never felt totally at ease but I felt completely at ease in the library. Does that make sense?

Griffis: Oh, yeah. I can relate to that on personal experience. That’s kind of how I remember the library when I was younger. The librarians were authority figures, but, you know, I found my own space and felt totally comfortable there.

Baker: Absolutely, yes. That’s good.

Griffis: Can you recall… Obviously, one goes to the library to borrow books. First I’ll ask can you recall what kinds of books you borrowed from the library?

Baker: I was absolutely, overwhelmingly, enchanted by adventure books of American heroes: Zebulon Pike, and the Western settlers, and the migrations across the country. I think I read all that they had. And I thought, “You can’t be out of those books. I need more books.” And it was patiently explained to me that I had done the children’s section. There was a clear division: they were across a—not a large hallway—they were across from each other, the adult’s and the children’s section. So, I turned from that to sports. And I learned about sports that, save for television, I guess I never would have seen in my life. Like hockey, for example—ice hockey. And I learned about prep schools because, as you know, the books were not race-directed, particularly. Generally, they weren’t. So, I read about spring training at prep schools. Anything I could get my hands on. I read through both those sections all together, and I don’t know where I turned next. But it was great to read in the library, and it was also great to get your—whatever the allotment was, five or
six books—and walk home with them. And I was an avid, avid reader. I love still to read, and loved to read then.

Griffis: And you became eventually a professor of literature.

Baker: I did. [laughs]

Griffis: You mentioned going to storytime earlier. Were there any other kinds of programs or events—not directly related to borrowing books—but anything else like that, that you remember going to the library to participate in or see?

Baker: Actually I think, at some point along the way in Louisville, the library became a meeting space. This would have been after—or maybe at the same time as—junior high school. So, I think it became, I want to say, a social-community gathering space. And I do remember several meetings there with classmates or age-group peers. But beyond that, no, I can’t think of other activities.

Griffis: When you say “meeting space,” what kinds of meetings? Meeting with peers or friends from school?

Baker: I think these were probably introductory-level gatherings to talk about race and education. I don’t remember particularly a visiting writer’s program, but I do think that people who were significant to Louisville enterprise—like the Louisville Defender, which was the black newspaper—and to… I’m trying to think of the connection… So, there were newspapers and churches of course. It was an activist time in Louisville. So, possibly these had to do with civil rights and the sort of coordinated campaign to produce equity in black and white in Louisville. So, that seems like a reasonable speculation at this point.

Griffis: And whereabouts in the building did those kinds of meetings take place?

Baker: As I remember the library, I think that the story hour was done off the main room. And the other meetings—that are really ghostly, and coming back up now—were in the larger space of the library, which, I guess would have been the central reading room? Yeah.

Griffis: Did you ever recall going into the lower level, the basement? Do you remember what was down there?

Baker: It does not come to me at all. That’s interesting, isn’t it? Yeah.

Griffis: What do you recall about the other library users? You mentioned being there and that you remember friends and people from school. Do you remember seeing a lot of people your own age at the time? Or a lot of people older? Were there any patterns to the other kinds of folks you noticed there at the library?

Baker: There really is not something that I can point to. I think that probably my library presence reflected my general presence, which was pretty solipsistic, I would say [laughs]. Not in a negative way. But I was never, and still am not, a
group person. So I went on my own, I read on my own, and I came home on my own.

Griffis: Do you remember ever recall using or visiting the Eastern Colored Branch that opened in the Smoketown neighborhood?

Baker: As I heard your introduction, I was informed. I don’t think I even knew there was another branch of the library. That was news to me. Which is strange because my father grew up in Smoketown. And our church, Grace Presbyterian Church, was in that neighborhood. And my paternal grandfather lived there. But I don’t remember there being a library or ever going to it.

Griffis: That’s interesting. Because that actually kind of corroborates the pattern as far as the historical record goes: I have found so much information about the Western Branch… And of course, the collections down in their basement—they have an archives room in the basement—that has a lot of—

Baker: Wow.

Griffis: … a lot of original papers from the original librarians, and a lot of documentation about the activities in the life of the library since it opened. But there’s very little down there about what was called the Eastern Colored Branch.

Baker: Wow.

Griffis: And so, I’m trying to dig up more from the documentary record about that.

Baker: Do you think—just speculatively, again—if it had to do with—and I’m no expert on Louisville—but with class and economic situation? As my father described his growing up experience in Smoketown, it was not an easy day-to-day existence. And I know that by the time people moved—this is a gross generalization—to Southwestern Parkway, down near Chickasaw Park, and the river and so forth. That was considered really a class move. So, I associate the lower income with Smoketown and sort of moving on towards Southwestern Parkway as, sort of, moving into the bourgeoisie. I am just speculating, again. I don’t know if that’s true. But it would be perhaps a reason for the disconnect between the two, in terms of detail and other things.

Griffis: I’m figuring that it also probably had to do with when the library closed. It’s quite possible that they were amassing their own collection, similar to the way the Western Branch did. But for some reason once the library closed there just wasn’t good stewardship of getting those materials in proper hands in time—

Baker: True.

Griffis: Did you ever use, or attempt to use, any of the white-only libraries in Louisville?

Baker: I first went to the white-only library—I think it was when I was in high school. Not before, to the best of my memory. I’m trying to think when I had that
freedom of independence... It may have been, actually, in junior high, when I
went up. I remember going there consistently once I was in high school
because the high school was within walking distance. So, I would go to
school, go through the classes, and then I had a job that was on Chestnut
Street. I can’t remember exactly where it was, but all of this was kind of a big
walk. And I would go to the library, the main public library, and study and
begin homework before going off to my job, and do that. I was cleaning
offices, actually. And then I would either walk the rest of the way home to 22nd
and Broadway, or catch the bus. So, that was regular usage throughout high
school, which was like 10th, 11th, and 12th grade. So, for three years there
before college, that became the principal library for me, actually. When I
needed reference sources and a place to do interim between school and
work. And I’ve written somewhere about the vastness... It was like, “Oh my
goodness! This is huge!” The Western Branch was wonderful, and I was
never shunted aside; I never encountered any big disheartening or
disconcerting events there. It was pleasant. But the first time up the stairs of
the general public library, and entering, was quite an adventure.

Griffis: You were overwhelmed with the size of the library. Do you recall how people
acted to your being there? Whenabouts specifically was this? Would it have
been the early 60’s or...

Baker: Yeah. It would have been late 50s, early 60’s. Because I went off to college in
’61. So, ’58 or so through ’61. Yeah, those would be the years. I, you know,
am tempted—I think we all are—to say, “You know, it was Louisville, and
Louisville was a segregated place and there were all of the uglinesses of the
American world for its years of existence.” But I really think that, essentially,
people ignored me altogether! [laughs] I mean, I don’t have any traumatic,
Richard Wright kind of events to talk about. I went up the—and this may be
nostalgia erasing actual events... But there were white women librarians—I
don’t remember seeing any white men librarians at the main library—and they
were perfectly pleasant. I don’t remember any episodes. It was the spatial
vastness—comparative, of course—that made it seem grand. And I suppose
that was also a kind of introduction into when things really get good, this is
what they look like.

Griffis: What other places do you recall—where you were living, in Louisville—would
you say were community living places for African Americans at that time?

Baker: Always, always churches. Churches. And you know, it’s always rivalry
between Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, etcetera. But the church was both
sanctuary and public. And because the conditions of segregation produced a
kind of bonding, closeness, common cause—the sort of ecumenical and
religious differences disappeared when people came together to meet on
urgent issues. So, churches were the main sites. There was a settlement
house on—I think it was Walnut Street. And it was connected to, I believe, the
Methodist church there. And that was a site of both meetings, performances,
and the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. So, that was an extension... I’m trying
to think of other than youths that served that purpose... Those are the main ones, as I think about it.

**Griffis:** You said earlier that you went off to college in about the early sixties, in ’61. Was that when you, I assume, stopped using the library, as a regular user? Obviously, you were no longer a resident of Louisville.

**Baker:** Right, exactly. Yeah.

**Griffis:** Have you been back to the library to visit it since then at all?

**Baker:** I think I went there actually with my son… I know I did, when he graduated from college… Would that have been right? Yes, that would have been right. And he graduated from college in the 1990s—’89 was high school, so probably ’93 or so. We did the tour. You know, dad walking son through sites of youth. And I don’t actually remember… What was the state of the library at that time? Had it been renovated?

**Griffis:** In the early 90’s? That would have been just before its renovation, which took place around ’94 or ’95.

**Baker:** Okay, yeah. We went there; we went to my old high school, Male High; we traveled across the Ohio [River] as friends of mine and I did on bikes when I was young. We stayed at the Brown Hotel, which though named the Brown Hotel was not about to admit brown people. When I left Louisville for college—and several of us went to Howard [University], caught the same train—Louisville was still rigidly segregated. And so, I never went to the Brown Theatre during my youth and up to 18. And it was known that black people were not welcomed into the hotel. And so, it was great to go back to Louisville with my son and do the Brown Hotel and the Seelbach [Hotel], and so forth. That whole area—which is called “downtown,” even though it’s 4th Street—was a place where you could not try on clothes in department stores. You were just generally unwelcome, save for money that you could pay to merchants. One of the effective moves toward desegregation was the boycott that black Louisville engaged in with that whole territory. And that was an effective mechanism. But yeah, going back to Louisville was strange. I mean, there was a whole new generation of course of young people who had been active in the progress of folks. And I actually went on a date to the Brown Theatre with a younger woman—she was only 16. And she was so jolly and happy and at ease. And I thought “Anything can happen here. This is really weird.” And saw, in fact, *The Guns of Navarone*—I remember the movie that I saw. And she suggested that we go somewhere on 4th Street to have a bite to eat afterwards, and I was like, “Really? Seriously?” It’s quite an imprinting, an amazing experience. And I was able to recount much of that to my son, who was, needless to say, fascinated by it all.

**Griffis:** Yes, I’m sure. I’d like to thank you once again. Dr. Baker, for your time and your participation in this project. Your contribution is invaluable. So, thank you so much again.

**Baker:** It’s been a joy, thank you.