



A Newsletter for Employees of the University of Louisville Libraries  
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# The Owl

*“The Owl of Minerva takes flight only as the dusk begins to fall.” — Hegel*

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## J. Blaine Hudson

Civil Rights Activist, Scholar, Teacher

Dr. J. Blaine Hudson (1949 - 2013) served as Dean of UofL’s College of Arts & Sciences from 2004 until his death, setting the standard for ethical, compassionate, and visionary leadership. Many of us who knew and worked with Dean Hudson considered him not only a great scholar and a wonderful teacher, but truly the moral compass of the university. When he passed away in early 2013, he left an incomparable legacy of leadership and activism.

Dr. Hudson, who chaired UofL’s Department of Pan-African Studies from 1998–2003, was a beloved teacher who inspired students and colleagues alike. His teaching and writing concentrated on people of African ancestry throughout the world, as well as the history and social psychology of race. His best-known works include: *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (2002), *Encyclopedia of the Underground Railroad* (2006), and *Two Centuries of Black Louisville: A Photographic History* (2011).

Dean Hudson was also a great supporter of the Libraries. In 2007, when asked to write an article for the Black History Month issue of *The Owl*, he somehow found the time to write one of the most thoughtful pieces *The Owl* has ever published, “Economic Justice and Social Responsibility.”

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to expose the inequities in American society, and the ongoing national and local racial justice protests, *The Owl* presents Dr. Hudson’s article from the February 2007 issue. Today the article resonates, as it did then. Think for a moment how different Louisville might be today, had people heeded his eloquent call for change.

*The Owl* Board dedicates this special issue to the legacy and memory of Dr. J. Blaine Hudson.

**BLACK LIVES MATTER**

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# Economic Justice and Social Responsibility

Dr. J. Blaine Hudson  
Department of Pan-African Studies  
University of Louisville



**I**N 1853, FREDERICK DOUGLASS STATED IN A LETTER TO HARRIETT BEECHER STOWE that, “next to slavery, poverty is the greatest evil afflicting humankind.” As in Douglass’ time, poverty as a manifestation of economic injustice remains institutionalized in American society and in the larger world. What does this mean?

Poverty is both relative and absolute. Billions of people have less than their “fair share” of the wealth, power and privilege available in their societies. A great many have more than their “fair share”—and a few have far, far more. Further, regardless of whether economic inequality is a cause or any effect of racial, gender or other forms of inequality—in American society, people of color are far more likely to be poor, women are more likely to be poor, and the double burden of racial and gender discrimination virtually guarantees the widespread impoverishment of women of color and, inevitably, of their children as well. Thus, we might neither comprehend nor address economic injustice as a factor separate or separable from race, primarily, and gender, secondarily—considering, first, the extent to which income and wealth are maldistributed in general and, second, the extent to which people of color and women are over-represented among the poor.

Because terms such as “injustice” and “inequality” are often bandied about as casual abstractions, it is crucial to understand their substantive meaning. A few objective examples may prove illuminating.

In recent years, the United Nations has published a Human Development Index. This Index quantifies economic and social indicators such as income, educational attainment, mortality rates, crime rates, et al., to rate the quality of life enjoyed (or endured) by citizens in each nation. These ratings are then translated into rankings and, in the 1990s—a relative “good” economic period compared to post-911 America—the “quality of life” in the United States ranked between fifth and seventh in the world, surpassed only by a few Scandinavian countries and Japan. However, when the Index data were disaggregated by race, white Americans, if treated as a separate “nation”, enjoyed by far the highest standard of living in the world. In contrast, African Americans and Latinos, if treated as separate “nations”, ranked thirty-first and thirty-fifth, respectively. As a useful standard of comparison, the small Caribbean nation of Barbados—one of the few true success stories of the post-colonial era—ranked twentieth. Thus, viewed from a global perspective, the United States is actually three (or more) racially defined “nations” under one government and within one set of geographic boundaries—and two of those “nations” have economic profiles of Third World countries.

Unfortunately, the situation in our own local “backyard” is even more troubling. For example, the ratio of African American to white family income in Louisville rose from .59 in 1959 to .67 in 1969, but dropped to only .52 by 1989. Moreover, in Jefferson County but outside the city limits of Louisville itself, median African American family income in 1989 was only 43 percent of white family income. Both groups gained and the mean family income gap narrowed during the Clinton era—only to widen again as African Americans lost ground more rapidly than other groups in the weak economy of post-911 America. Few residents of our community are aware of these statistics. However, only by understanding the implications of such massive inequality—and the unemployment, underemployment and family instability it produces—can we begin to understand the conditions that prevail in many of our local neighborhoods, particularly those in which the black poor are concentrated.

When we give these statistics a “human face”, the magnitude of economic inequality in the United States becomes truly staggering. In very rough numbers, nearly 30 million white Americans and nearly 25 million Americans of color have annual family incomes below the federal poverty threshold. A majority of the poor of all races are women and children—and, contrary to popular stereotypes, the vast majority of the poor are employed.

What are we to make of these facts? Whether we know it or not—and, if we know it, whether we like it or not—the stability of the political economy and social structure of the United States depends on the effectiveness of a strategy to maintain economic inequality within the following broad tolerance limits:

- The white middle class must remain a sufficiently large and sufficiently comfortable segment of the population that its members continue to support the social and economic status quo—and, at worst, advocate limited reforms that do not disturb the existing distribution of power.
- The proportion of persons of color (principally African Americans and Latinos, but increasingly Asian Americans) in the middle income range or above must be sufficiently large to create distinct and significant intra-racial class divisions, but sufficiently small—with respect to the national population—to pose no threat to the white middle or more privileged classes.
- Economic inequality by gender must be maintained as a support for male dominance, but the privileges of being white, for white women, must balance or outweigh the disadvantages of being female.
- The illusion of upward social mobility and economic mobility, based on opportunity and merit, are possible without the need for radical changes in the political, social and economic order must be “sold” to each new generation of Americans—and must be “bought” particularly by a majority of the poor and working class who accept the conclusion that their real or relative poverty result from their personal inadequacies and not from larger social forces.

As is obvious from these propositions, the balance that holds this country together requires not only the acceptance of economic inequality, but also the acceptance of the belief that such inequality is just. This belief, of course, stands or falls based on whether one can demonstrate that human groups—as opposed to individuals—are unequal in ability and character. If groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class or religion differ so fundamentally, then the types of inequality described herein simply reflect the “natural order” and, as such, are inherently just. Extending this logic, efforts to eliminate injustice or to ameliorate unjust conditions can themselves be condemned as wasteful and unjust, e.g., a stigma often attached to affirmative action and other “liberal” social policies and programs. These are the arguments advanced by racists, sexists, class elitists and the like—the arguments of the Ku Klux Klan. However, they are also the arguments developed so tediously and fraudulently in *The Bell Curve* (1994) and *The End of Racism* (1995), and by politicians in the Bush II era, arguments given an unwarranted degree of respectability as core assumptions of the contemporary neo-conservative or New Right movement. These arguments have been refuted countless times, but they persist, woven into the fabric of American culture, because they serve the purpose of rationalizing inequality and injustice.

If, on the other hand, human groups are viewed as being essentially the same, then group inequalities are not natural, but, rather, are the result of the oppression and exploitation of some groups by others. This is the truth of history, social science and science—the simple truth that we are, after all, one species and that our differences are either superficial or learned. This truth also means that people—not genes or supernatural forces—are responsible for the plight of other people.

In this spirit, we can understand clearly why “evil” prospers when “good” people fail to act. If we wish to act, we can begin, I believe, by working to replace “bad” information with the simple, demonstrable truth, i.e., by deconstructing and unlearning the racial, gender and class stereotypes of the American past and present. We may not achieve consensus on all questions, but we may at least outgrow much of the nonsense that passes for truth and “common sense” in our society. However, beyond knowledge, we must become change-agents, both in our personal lives (by setting good examples for others) and in concert with others. To do so, those of us who may be privileged must be willing to sacrifice and must be sufficiently enlightened to understand that our sacrifices are in the larger and longer-term interests of humankind. As W. E. B. DuBois noted so presciently in 1930: “Moderate poverty is

the only responsible ideal for civilized people”—an idea as old as the ancient Egyptian and Biblical injunction to “Do unto others . . .”, which is still unsurpassed as the foundation of all human ethics.

Perhaps, the most important challenge confronting men and women of conscience, compassion and conviction is the need to envision an alternative basis for social relations, a new and different type of society. It is necessary, but too easy simply to be “against” injustice, simply to identify and act against what is “wrong.” Knowing what is “wrong” does not necessarily mean that we have discovered or chosen what is “right.” Thus, we must also conceptualize what a truly just society would “look like”, how it would function, how wealth and power would be distributed, what racial and cultural pluralism would mean in practice, how gendered identities and sexuality would be redefined. This task demands imagination and a firm belief in the human future. Then we must work to realize that vision.

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*Dr. Owen’s feature, The Owl, 29:1, February 2013*

## J. Blaine Hudson: A Remembrance

By Tom Owen  
Archives & Special Collections

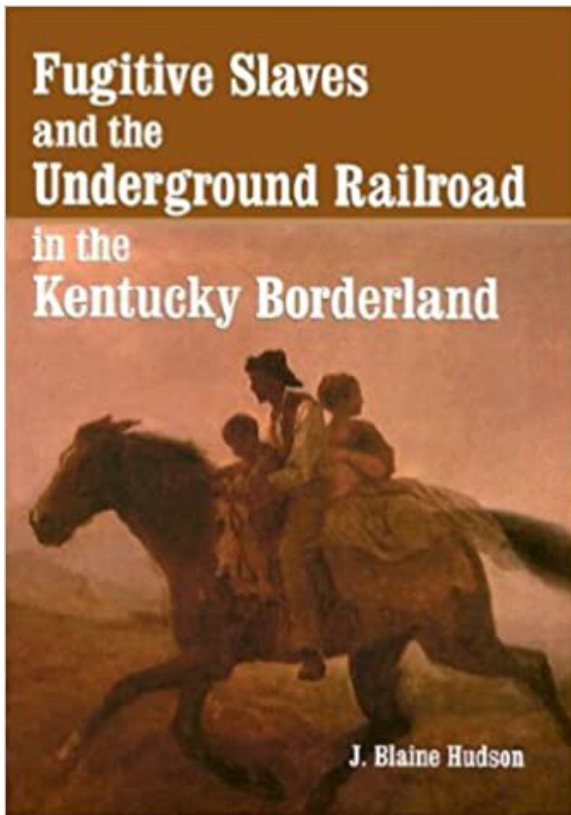
I got to know Blaine Hudson well in the late 1970s when he was a PhD student doing research at the University Archives in our collections related to the history of the Louisville Municipal College, 1931-1951, an undergraduate college for Blacks run by UofL. (In 1981, he finished his dissertation at the University of Kentucky on the closing of that college.) As a researcher, Blaine was friendly, focused and determined.

In fact, our paths had unknowingly crisscrossed at UofL a decade earlier when I was an MA grad student and later full-time Instructor in the History Department and Blaine was an undergraduate activist organizing protests with the Black Student Union. I am confident I followed him, as he and other Black protestors in 1969 occupied University President Woodrow Strickler’s office, calling for the recognition of the African American experience in the University curriculum. The next year Blaine and I ALMOST passed one another in the hallway of the brand new Office of Black Affairs; he was a tutor there in the Spring of 1970, and just months later I began teaching a course in Black History through that same office.

After Blaine returned to campus permanently in 1974, he came back to the University Archives to do research on his book, *Fugitive Slaves and the Kentucky Borderland*, and more recently *Two Centuries of Black Louisville*, which he co-authored



Blaine Hudson gives a historical review during the Granville Buntton African American collection opening, Ekstrom Library October 1997. Photo by Tom Fougrousse.



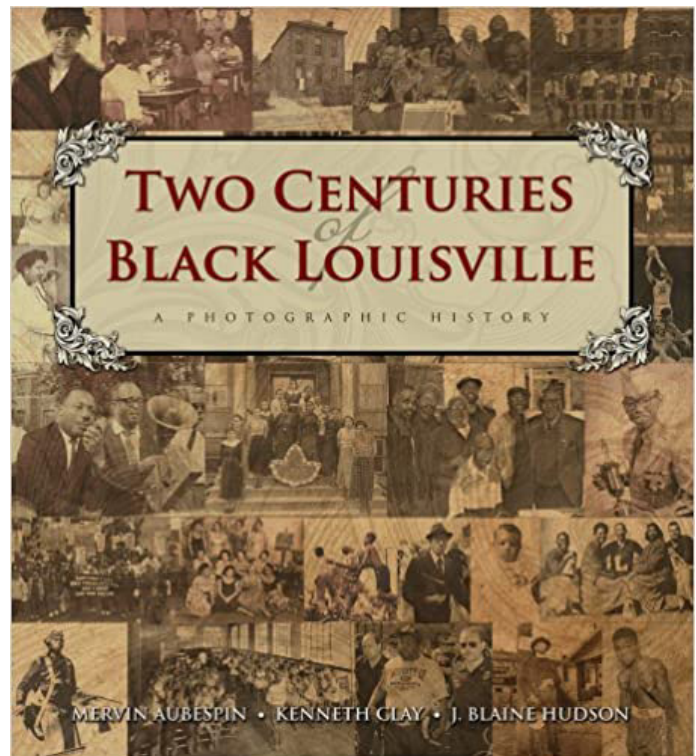
with Ken Clay and Merv Aubespin. Over the same decades, when I was paired on the same local history program with Dr. Hudson, I always learned new facts, but even more importantly came to view the topic from his fresh perspective. Without histrionics, his manner effused scholarship, directness, and a love for his community and the university. Blaine Hudson believed that THE TRUTH truly would set you free!

The past several years I served on the UofL College of Arts and Science’s Hall of Fame award selection committee, where I watched Dean Hudson (our chair) navigate disagreements, nudge us toward consensus, and sometimes steer us where he wanted to go without the appearance of a heavy hand. His low-key manner, slow speech, and melliferous voice kept anyone from bunkering-in on a position early in the deliberations.

My most cherished memory of Blaine Hudson occurred just last May when the UofL Alumni Office paired the two of us on a Sunday afternoon historical boat tour on the Ohio River. As we cruised along from Harrods Creek down to the basin in front of downtown and return, we seasoned Louisville natives and local historians without notes or rehearsal talked of the river and its

banks from our unique perspectives. While there isn’t a “white” history and a “black” history, it became clear that OUR Ohio River history was much richer because the narrators were shaped by our different racial experience. The tour I believe is a classic example where one plus one equaled much more than TWO! Eight months ago, if I had known that Blaine Hudson would be gone by January, I would have insisted that our Ohio River history “rap” be preserved on tape!

J. Blaine Hudson’s contributions to our university, community and scholarly guild are multi-layered and enduring. He was a hard-nosed communicator of sometimes uncomfortable history truths, a skilled administrator, a poet, a careful researcher, and always an activist conspiring to make sure we never overlook the story of the African Diaspora. While I was in no way his close friend, I’m privileged and blessed to have crossed-paths with him for almost forty-five years.



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