

In Memoriam John Hope Franklin

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John Hope Franklin died on March 25, 2009. I had known him as a colleague and friend for the last thirty years, and I will always remember him as a man of spirited intellect, enthusiasm, courage, curiosity, grace and last but not least – honor.

I am certain that many of the commemorations and celebrations of his life and work will describe the wide field of his accomplishments in the worlds of scholarship and politico-legal activity. My memorial remarks this afternoon, however, will concentrate on Professor Franklin's enduring loyalty to this institution: Brooklyn College and The City University of New York.

***In Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin*, published in 2005, John Hope Franklin provides an account of his appointment as Chair of the Department of History at Brooklyn College**

in 1956. He discusses in great detail the signal importance of this appointment not only for him but to many African American scholars who like him had until then been denied full access to the American academic world.

***The New York Times* on February 15, 1956 published on its front page an article with a full photograph of John Hope Franklin with this headline: “Negro Educator Chosen to Head Department at Brooklyn College. Howard University Professor Will be First of Race to Hold that Rank Here.” The first paragraph stated that “For the first time, a municipal college is to have a Negro educator as chairman of an academic department” and continued: “As far as can be determined, no other college in the city – or in the state for that matter – has ever appointed a Negro chairman.”**

In later years, Professor Franklin repeatedly singled out Brooklyn College and its Department of History for taking this pioneering step long before other academic institutions had begun to regularly appoint African American scholars and academicians to higher rank and professorial positions. His acknowledgment of Brooklyn College’s

historic step is repeated again in his autobiography when he recounts a reception of an offer from the University of Hawaii three years after he had come to Brooklyn College.

He had received “a cordial letter from the dean at the University of Hawaii inquiring of my availability and assuring me that they were prepared to offer me a professorship.” Among the reasons why he sent “the dean his regrets” was his reflection that “I remembered too how in 1956 Brooklyn had pioneered in offering me the position as chairman of the department. I had been in Brooklyn only three years, and I did not wish to be seen deserting one place just because another seemed more attractive.” -- There was also another important reason: Hawaii, as beautiful as it was, “was too far from the center of the fight that I continued to wage from within the academy and without.” [182f]

John Hope did leave Brooklyn College in 1964, responding to an offer from the University of Chicago. The occasion coincided with a function held in celebration of the “twenty-fifth anniversary of Harry Gideonse’s presidency” of the college. He recalls that “as the president responded to various expressions of esteem for all he had accomplished on behalf

of the school, he asked me to come to the platform. I was dumb-founded and utterly unprepared. (116) He thanked me for my years of service to the college and wished – [us] well as we departed for Chicago. He then presented me with the Brooklyn College Medal of Honor, describing it as a rare recognition conferred only on persons who had made extraordinary contributions to the college. Happily, I was not required to make a response to this surprise honor, for it was one of the few instances when emotions robbed me of my senses.” (117)

After his departure for the University of Chicago and still later in life to Duke University, Professor Franklin kept up his connections with Brooklyn College. In 1981, he was the Commencement speaker at Brooklyn College. And it was in 1990 that graciously agreed to deliver the Second Charles R. Lawrence II Memorial Lecture of the Department of Sociology and the President’s Office of Brooklyn College. This lecture series had been initiated to honor Professor Charles R. Lawrence II, the African American chair of many years of the department of sociology. However, it was John Hope Franklin, who by agreeing to deliver this Memorial Lecture with the title “Whither American Brotherhood? “ ensured that the lecture series would be

firmly established as a central event in our Department of Sociology and Brooklyn College that honor an African American scholar. John Hope's lecture was followed in the years to come by formal addresses delivered by such distinguished figures from the academy including Hylan Lewis. William Julius Wilson, Barbara Fields, Robert K. Merton, Eugene Genovese and others. The lecture itself "Whither American Brotherhood" reminded all of us in 1990 how far we all still had to go to overcome racial barriers. One memorable part of the evening however, occurred when Professor Franklin delivered some informal after-dinner remarks following the dinner given in his honor by the Brooklyn College President. He recounted what it was like for a young accomplished African American scholar like him to experience prejudice and discrimination. I shall never forget his description of the situation he and many of his contemporary African-American colleagues found themselves in at Fisk University in the early fifties:

"There we were: All dressed up and nowhere to go!

In April 2006, Professor Franklin returned to The City University of New York and agreed to deliver the Keynote Address at the Inaugural Conference of the Black Male Initiative of The City University of New

York. It was a particular honor for me to have been instrumental in bringing Professor Franklin back to Brooklyn College in 1990 and again to The City University of New York in 2006.

In all the years that I have had the privilege to know John Hope Franklin, I am certain that he never mellowed or made what he would have considered compromises of principles with whatever established powers that he confronted. His purposeful and steely resoluteness in open opposition to racial inequities in our society was unremitting. This extraordinary amalgam of profound scholarship and the “fight” he had to “wage both within the academy and without” – this special and intimate connection was portrayed in exemplary fashion at the “John Hope Franklin In Memoriam” celebration at the National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle Park of North Carolina by John Hope Franklin’s colleague and friend, Professor Steven Marcus, on April 17, 2009.¹

Here is the important excerpt from Professor Marcus’ characterization of Professor Franklin life and work:

¹ The subsequent excerpt from “John Hope Franklin: In Memoriam” is quoted with the kind permission of the author. The entire eulogy has been distributed by the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

It became clear early on in his academic career that he was able to fuse expert, distinctive and exact historical narrative and learning with impassioned sympathy for the subjects of his research and bitter anger at their oppression which, he repeatedly observed, made up a surprisingly underacknowledged major theme and organic expression, if not of the American spirit then at least of American history and society. Moreover, he had the uncommon capacity to combine public service to the nation and even to the national government without sacrifice of principle or subordination of critical independence and insistence. The integrity of his protestations against injustice and racial inequities was not to be compromised by rewards, honorary degrees, public ceremonies or cultural celebrityhood, although all of these came his way, in superabundance. Increasingly, I came to think of him in terms of Emerson's American Scholar, as a modern embodiment of that exalted conception. "Action," Emerson writes, "is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind... the transition though which ... [thought] passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not." The American Scholar is not in this context to be dissociated from the African American scholar and historian. They do not compose distinct, rival identities, but entail one another. One is not sunk or subsumed or transcended into the other. They exist as complementarities, now one now the other, in mutually supported and sustained interanimation. The complexities of their embroiled "interindebtedness" (to use Melville's apt and ironic coinage) is one of the warrants of their integrity.

I cannot think of a better analysis and description of who John Hope Franklin was and what he represented. I will always remember him, and I miss him.