

# John Hope, the Prince Who Refused the Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

*For decades, John Hope Franklin railed against the often segregated academic field of "black studies," deriding it as intellectual Jim Crow. But there would be no black studies without him, and for that, I am eternally grateful.*

When I was 20, I decided to hitchhike across the African continent, more or less following the line of the equator, from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. I packed only one pair of sandals and one pair of jeans to make room for the three hefty books I had decided to read from cover to cover: Don Quixote, Moby Dick and From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans. I read the latter - the black-and-white-bound third edition of John Hope Franklin's 1947 book - while sailing down the Congo River and recovering from a nasty bout of dysentery. It became such a valued reference for me that I kept it, for years, in the bookcase at my bedside.

Like just about every black student at Yale in 1969, I enrolled in the Introduction to Afro-American History survey course, taught quite ably by William McFeely, who would later receive a Pulitzer Prize. At the end of each class, someone would find a way to bring up the fact that while our subject matter was black, McFeely was quite white, and hadn't he better find a way to remedy that fact? With the patience of Job, McFeely would graciously grant his accuser the point and add that he hoped to put himself out of a job just as soon as a black historian could be found to take his place. He would then remind us that the textbook

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around which our course was structured, *From Slavery to Freedom*, had been written by a black man, a black man who had been trained at Harvard.

John Hope Franklin was the last of the great generation of black historians to follow in W.E.B. Du Bois' footsteps and earn their Ph.D.s from Harvard in the first half of the 20th century. After Du Bois came Carter G. Woodson (the father of Black History Month) in 1912; Charles Wesley in 1925; Rayford W. Logan in 1936; and Franklin in 1941. Both because Franklin was the youngest member of this academic royal family and because he was lean and elegant, poised and cosmopolitan, many of us in the younger generation came to refer to him as "the Prince."

Despite all of the important work done by his four predecessors at Harvard, Franklin was the first to publish a comprehensive and popular story of the Negro's place in American life. *From Slavery to Freedom* was not just the first of its genre; it was canon-forming. It gave to the black historical tradition a self-contained form through which it could be institutionalized - parsed, divided into 15 weeks, packaged and taught - from Harlem to Harvard, and even, or especially, in those places where almost no black people actually lived. Every scholar of my generation studied Franklin's book; in this sense, we are all his godchildren.

But Franklin's relationship with Harvard was a complicated and tense one. Because Harvard had trained him as a historian, Franklin aspired to become the college's first black history professor. By the late 1960s, that dream certainly seemed to be within his grasp, especially after he had integrated the history department at Brooklyn College in 1956, then moved to the Midwest in 1964 to integrate the history department at the University of Chicago, just a year after Dr. King's March on Washington.

While my classmates and I down in New Haven were busy busting William McFeely's chops for being white, Harvard had the good sense to invite John Hope Franklin to become the first chairman of its Afro-American studies department, which it started in 1969 along with Yale and most other research universities.

But Franklin had an understandably principled opposition to academic segregation or "ghettoization" of any kind. He was suspicious about the uneven and troubled origins and stated intentions of the nascent field of Afro-American studies. He agreed to hold his nose if the faculty hired to teach in the new department were jointly appointed in the departments in which they had taken their degrees. With Franklin's pedigree, a joint appointment should have been a natural.

But the tenured faculty of history at Harvard, including some who were his classmates while he pursued the Ph.D., refused. His appointment, were he to accept the offer of chairman, would be solely in the Department of Afro-American Studies. Franklin angrily rejected the offer, calling it the most egregious insult of his academic career. Although he would accept an honorary doctorate from Harvard in 1981, in large part as a snub to the history department, Franklin never forgave his professional colleagues for the insult. In fact, he took a certain perverse pleasure in talking black scholars out of accepting tenured professorships at Harvard, including most famously William Julius Wilson and Cornel West in the 1980s. When Drew Faust was inaugurated two years ago, one of the few featured speakers was John Hope, who spoke "on behalf of the history profession." This painful

history, of which only a few of us were aware, made President Faust's gesture inviting him to speak all the more poignant.

The experience with Harvard's history department also deepened Franklin's initial skepticism about the entire field of black studies, making him, until the '90s, an ardent foe if it was a subject area set apart from and not integrated with the traditional disciplines. I once heard a black nationalist assistant professor at Yale in the late '70s refer to him derogatorily as "John Hopeless Franklin." But for Franklin, there could be no black history without "history," as it were, and on this point he was unequivocal. For most of his career, Franklin saw black studies as the unfortunate correlative of Jim Crow segregation, self-imposed by well-meaning but naive black students and complicit black professors eager to get lucrative jobs at historically white institutions.

John Hope and I had met at Yale in the early '80s, over a small dinner attended by the great historians David Brion Davis and John W. Blassingame, after a lecture Franklin had given on campus. Davis turned to me during dinner and asked if I had ever discovered how I had been selected in the first group of MacArthur Fellows. As I attempted to say no, John Hope, from the far end of the table, thundered out that he knew precisely how I had been selected, because he had done the selecting! It was a bit like winning the fellowship all over again. Blinking back tears, I told him how influenced I had been by *From Slavery to Freedom*, and that I had carried a copy of the third edition, published in 1967, with me across the Continent, reading every word. (I didn't tell him that I felt that edition was his best, and that subsequent editions - when the subtitle was changed to "A History of African Americans" - perhaps responding to the pressures from publishers to make textbooks more "readable," more accessible, seemed dumbed down, a long way in style from the densely rich narrative blend of documented facts with philosophical speculation and musings that characterized the black-and-white edition.) We stayed in touch after that, mostly by phone. One day in 1988 he called to ask me to accept an offer that had just been extended by Stanley Fish, the chairman of Duke's English department. In 1982, Franklin had become the first black professor to hold an endowed chair at Duke.

My tenure at the university was regrettably brief. Still, it gave me time to get to know John Hope better, to listen to his stories about school and segregation, about the academic life before *Brown v. Board of Education* and his role in and perceptions of the civil rights movement. Best of all, I loved his anecdotes. His favorite story was about the day in the spring of 1939 when he met W.E.B. Du Bois. Franklin - who, by the way, was named for John Hope, who taught his parents at Roger Williams University in Nashville before serving 25 years as the president of Morehouse College, then Atlanta University - was a graduate student at Harvard, doing research in North Carolina for his thesis on the Free Negro in North Carolina before the Civil War. He was taking his evening meal in the segregated Arcade Hotel when he spotted the great Du Bois dining alone in a corner. Cautiously, tentatively, he approached his hero. Du Bois' gaze was riveted on a book. In his autobiography, *Mirror to America*, Franklin described what happened next:

Seeing Dr. Du Bois dining alone and reading, I decided that this was an opportunity that I would not less pass. Crossing the dining room, I approached his table and spoke to him, giving him my full name. Surely he would recognize the fact that I was named for one of his

closest friends and hearing it would embrace me. He did not even look up. Then I told him that I was a graduate of Fisk University, class of 1935. That, I assumed, would bring him to his feet singing 'Gold and Blue.' Again, he continued to read and eat, without looking up. Finally, as a last resort, I told him that I was a graduate student in history at Harvard and was in Raleigh doing research for my dissertation. Without looking up from his book or plate, he said, 'How do you do.' Dejected, I retreated, completed my dinner, and withdrew from the dining room.

John Hope loved to tell that story, always ending it with "Of course we became close friends later, when he and his wife, Shirley, lived in Brooklyn and I was teaching at the College." He told the story as a way of explaining why he was so very generous with younger colleagues. Myself included.

Two years ago, Butler University invited us both to campus for a dialogue. I agreed, but only if I could play the role of interviewer and if we could talk with no strict time limit attached. John Hope regaled a standing-room-only crowd for over two hours with stories about his family, his education, his political beliefs, his triumphs and disappointments. And then we dined together, sharing a bottle of Margaux, followed by a cognac.

He congratulated me on recruiting Bill Wilson and Cornel West to Harvard despite his best efforts to dissuade them from coming. I congratulated him on receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom; he returned the compliment about my receipt of the National Humanities Medal. I congratulated him on Duke's creation of the John Hope Franklin Research Center and the forthcoming edition of *From Slavery to Freedom*, being revised by my colleague Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the first black professor ever to receive tenure in Harvard's history department. I told him how much I valued the old third edition, the one with the black-and-white cover, and that I deeply regretted that it had gotten misplaced somehow. He told me he was proud of what my colleagues and I had created at Harvard. I shared with him the faculty's decision to co-name the library at the Du Bois Institute in his honor. He promised to visit, which he did after his speech at Drew Faust's inauguration. He seemed touched by the gesture.

A few days later, a FedEx envelope arrived at my house in Cambridge. Inside was another package, carefully wrapped in brown paper, the way antiquarians in England wrap books that they mail. When I give books as Christmas presents, I wrap them the same way. There is something wonderful about that brown wrapping paper. Inside the paper was a signed copy of *From Slavery to Freedom*, the black-and-white paperback edition, dated 1967, the same one that Professor McFeely had assigned us back at Yale. It was signed, "With affectionate best wishes." It sits in the bookshelf by my bedside.

**Links:**

[1] [www.theroot.com/views/john-hope-franklin-1915-2009](http://www.theroot.com/views/john-hope-franklin-1915-2009)

[2] [www.theroot.com/views/john-hope-franklin-obama-presidency](http://www.theroot.com/views/john-hope-franklin-obama-presidency)

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