

“John Hope Franklin, Reparations, and Making Black Lives Better”

A Response to Drew Gilpin Faust’s “John Hope Franklin: Race and the Meaning of America” in *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2015 for the National African American Reparations Commission.

by

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The article “John Hope Franklin: Race and the Meaning of America” by Harvard University’s Drew Gilpin Faust in the 17 December 2015 issue of the *New York Review of Books* is a thoughtful rendering of the great historian’s career and scholarship. The essay offers an overview of Franklin’s upbringing, education, and contributions to the documenting of the nation’s history. However, there are several important aspects of Franklin’s professional and personal life missing from Faust’s account.

Unlike many of his fellow historians, John Hope Franklin viewed himself as a "scholar-activist," which is a key aspect of the African American intellectual tradition that has no counterpart in the (white) American scholarly tradition. Franklin made this clear in his 2005 autobiography *Mirror to America* when he discussed his work with the NAACP on the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which Faust alludes to in her article.

In addition, Franklin emphasized his scholarly activism even more in the two chapters in *Mirror to America* devoted to his work as chair of President Bill Clinton’s “Initiative on Race,” announced in June 1997. However, this important undertaking was not mentioned in the Faust article. Franklin and the other commissioners held hearings throughout the country on racial conditions, and released their report in September 1998. "One America in the 21st Century" described the “clear evidence of active forms of discrimination in employment, pay, housing, and consumer and credit markets between whites and racial minorities.”

There were significant “racial disparities” in access high quality education, health care, and treatment in the criminal justice system. “Examples of this phenomenon can be found in the use of racial profiling in law enforcement and the differences in the rates of arrest, conviction, and sentencing of whites and minorities and people of color.” There was a recommendation to “reduce or eliminate drug sentencing disparities” and to “promote comprehensive efforts to keep young people out of the criminal justice system.” The main conclusion was the need for a “long-term strategy” to pursue “policies designed to increase opportunity and eliminate racial disparities.”

At the same time, John Hope Franklin was outspoken in calling for reparations payments to African Americans collectively to address these “racial disparities.” “People are running around apologizing for slavery,” declared Franklin. “What about the awful period since slavery – Reconstruction, Jim Crow and all the rest? What about the enormous wealth that was built up by black labor?” Franklin sought reparations for the losses his father, attorney Buck Franklin, suffered from the notorious Tulsa Race Riot in 1921 when the prosperous black business area was destroyed by whites. Franklin and other survivors of the violence testified before the Oklahoma legislature’s commission set up to investigate the incident, and while the commission recommended “direct payment of reparations to the survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot,” none were authorized by Oklahoma legislators.

It is on the basis of the findings and recommendations of the “President’s Initiative on Race” that the Institute for the Black World and National African American Reparations Commission in June 2015 called on President Barack Obama to issue an Executive Order establishing the “John Hope Franklin Commission on Reparatory Justice” to put forward solutions to the “racial disparities” documented over seventeen years ago by Franklin and his fellow members of President Clinton’s “Initiative on Race.”

One of the most glaring omissions in the Drew Faust article is the failure to mention “The Case for Reparations” put forward by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and published in the June 2014 issue of the *Atlantic*, bringing the young journalist national and international recognition. Faust discusses, at length, Coates’ award-winning book *Between the World and Me* (2015), and even quotes him as pointing out that “white Americans have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs.” But Drew Faust makes no mention of Coates’ outspoken support for reparations for the theft, damage, exploitation, and on-going racial discrimination against African-descended people in the United States.

Drew Faust believes that the *New York Times* editorial of 4 September 2015, “The Truth of ‘Black Lives Matter,’” echoes the words of John Hope Franklin, agreeing that “the lives of black citizens of this country historically have not mattered, and have been discounted and devalued.” The National African American Reparations Commission agrees with John Hope Franklin and Drew Faust that "History Matters" and "Black Lives Matter," but the goal of the reparations movement is to *Make Black Lives Better!*

Let Drew Gilpin Faust and others, interested in ending the on-going “racial disparities” identified in the “President’s Initiative on Race,” join with the National African American Reparations Commission in urging President Obama to issue an executive order establishing the “John Hope Franklin Commission on Reparatory Justice.” It is time to move beyond dialogue and recommendations to formulating solutions to the economic and social problems created by the “racial brutality and degradation,” identified by John Hope Franklin and others, in the yet unfinished history of the United States.