

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on November 3, 2020,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Martin Luther
Kilson, Jr., was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

MARTIN L. KILSON, JR.

BORN: February 14, 1931

DIED: April 24, 2019

Martin Luther Kilson, Jr., a pioneering scholar of African and African American politics, was born in East Rutherford, New Jersey, and grew up in Ambler, a small town in Pennsylvania. He entered Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) in 1949 and became class valedictorian, receiving his B.A. *magna cum laude* in 1953. Always proud of his small-town origins, he spent the second half of the twentieth century at Harvard. He arrived in 1953 as a graduate student and completed his Ph.D. dissertation under Rupert Emerson in 1959. In August 1959, he married Marion Dusser de Barenne, who became an anthropologist and with whom he had three children. After a brief period in West Africa with the Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Program, Kilson returned to the Government Department as tutor, lecturer, and then assistant professor, before becoming in 1969 the first Black tenured professor to teach in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. That same year, he served on what has become known as the Rosovsky Committee, exploring the creation of Black Studies at Harvard at a time of upheaval in the country and on campus. Outspoken in urging the fledgling department of (then) Afro-American Studies to prioritize academic excellence and embrace a cosmopolitan spirit within the broader University, Kilson went on to become a key member of the advisory board that helped to establish the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard in 1975. In 1979 he was reprimanded for sexual harassment. At his death he was the Frank G. Thomson Professor of Government, *Emeritus*.

He described “the number of Afro-American students [at Harvard before the late 1960s as] never enough to constitute a critical mass.” He was always critical of the wish for “establishment-pretender” status he saw as common among his fellow students, but from which his deep roots in the “Black variant of small-town . . . skepticism” protected him. He came from a long line of free Black people, several of whom were founders and leaders of (and in one case literally a builder of) AME (African Methodist Episcopal), AUMP (African Union First Colored Methodist), and Methodist churches in the mid-Atlantic region. Kilson believed the function of leaders was to be social organizers and institution builders, to offer guidance and goals for a community. He owed these ideas to Du Bois, whom he heard speak when a freshman at Lincoln and revered ever after.

Kilson accumulated various grants, consultancies, board or similar memberships, and was a fellow of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. His many writings addressed issues of class and power and the socioeconomic foundations and intellectual requisites of effective political and intellectual leadership. He had been publishing articles on Africa for ten years by the time his first book, *Political Change in a West African State* (1966), appeared. This study of political development in Sierra Leone was praised by various reviewers as “illuminating,” “rich in new ideas,” even “brilliant” and “masterly,” particularly for the attention paid to both traditional authorities and masses. With Nathan I. Huggins, who later chaired Harvard’s Afro-American Studies Department, and Daniel M. Fox, Kilson coedited *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* (1971), which for many years served as a popular textbook in the field. Another co-author and colleague, Robert Rotberg, recalled that they “happily co-edited *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (HUP, 1976) . . . that leaned considerably on Kilson’s sense of African-American academic needs.” In later years Kilson became more interested in how Black intellectuals viewed Africa and ultimately in the evolution of the African American intelligentsia, either in terms of what they were thinking or what they were (and should be) doing. Rotberg again: “Creative and iconoclastic thinking is a hallmark of the best scholarship. Martin Kilson never shied away from controversial and provocative ideas, in the best and fullest sense. Political correctness was anathema to him. And so Kilson spurred his colleagues and students to test sometimes wild, often very productive avenues of intellectual endeavor.”

Insightful and extremely knowledgeable on Africa, he was rigorous as an adviser and trained and mentored many generations of undergraduate and graduate students. He was also a genial professor who, wearing a widely visible big hat, might shout out a student’s or colleague’s surname on the street and then walk up with a broad smile and twinkle in his eyes and engage the person in a long dialogue, carried on with a voice both melodious and hoarse. Jerry Watts, who entered Harvard College in 1971, wrote that he could not remember “whether it was Kilson’s unique way of thinking or his obtrusive deviancy, rhetorical and sartorial, that first attracted” him to this “larger-than-life person.” He considered his own intellectual approach “decidedly Kilsonian.” Cornel West, who later became a University Professor at Harvard, similarly testified that Kilson “took me in as pupil and student—exposed me to a cosmopolitan world, the life of the mind, to an international dialogue about justice and power, about structures and institutions.” West added that he is still “Martin’s student” and commented, “I am so blessed to have had him in my life.”

After retiring in 1999, Kilson reorganized many decades of his own scholarship into *The Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia 1880–2012*, delivered in 2010 as W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures at the Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research and published by Harvard University Press in 2014. The book won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 2015. Appropriately, his first book was

also reissued at this time. He died just months before he was to receive an honorary degree from his alma mater, Lincoln University, at a commencement ceremony where the lead speaker was to be John Lewis, another of his heroes from the “civil rights generation” with which Kilson identified. His daughter Hannah L. Kilson accepted the degree on his behalf. Martin Kilson is survived by his wife, Marion Kilson; three children; six grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

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