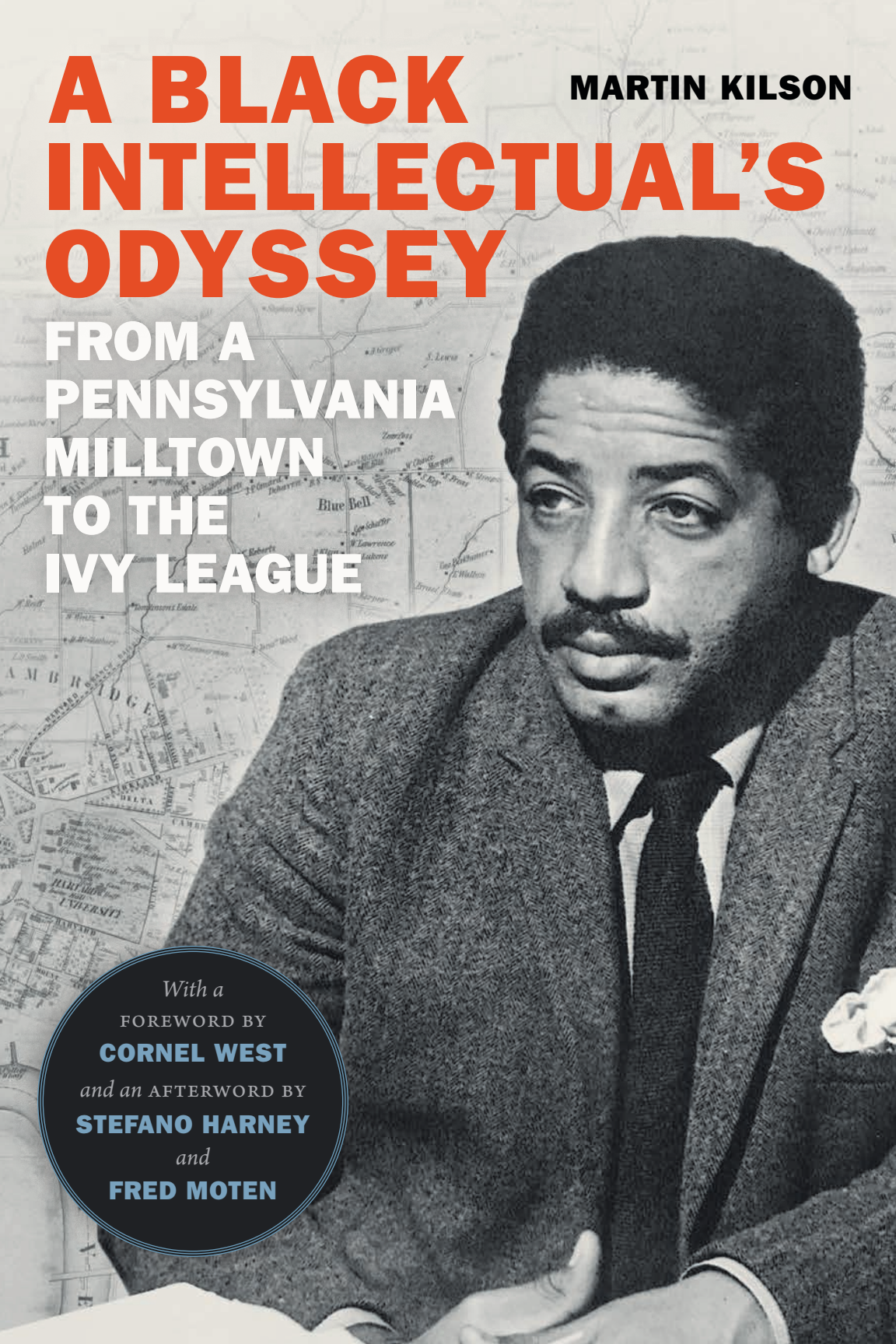
A BLACK INTELLECTUAL'S ODYSSEY

FROM A PENNSYLVANIA MILLTOWN TO THE IVY LEAGUE

MARTIN KILSON



With a FOREWORD BY **CORNEL WEST** *and an* AFTERWORD BY **STEFANO HARNEY** *and* **FRED MOTEN**

Martin Kilson, 1969

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Cover art: Photograph of Martin Kilson, 1969.

FOR MARION

and

JENNIFER, PETER, AND HANNAH

and

JACOB, RHIANA, MAYA, CAILA, ZURI, AND CIARAN

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FOREWORD

The One and Only Martin Kilson

CORNEL WEST

This historic memoir provides a rich and riveting glimpse into the life of an unprecedented figure in the American academy, modern scholarship, and Black intellectual history. Like his great predecessor W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Kilson tells his story within the contexts of communities and institutions, families and civic associations, persons and social movements. From the heartfelt dedication to his intellectual companion and loving wife, Marion, his marvelous and mature children, and his blessed grandchildren and great-grandchild, to his analytical reflections on Barack Obama's history-making election, Kilson takes us on a fascinating journey from a small northern company town in Pennsylvania to the heights of Harvard University. His style is quintessentially Kilsonesque.

Kilson's thick descriptions of the complex ways in which social structures shaped his lived experiences and those of his friends and family give us a vital sense of his mid-twentieth-century upbringing in Ambler. From his free Negro roots, Black church foundations, and lower-middle-class sensibilities, Kilson brings us into his ever-changing world, which enabled his own maturation yet fell short of any collective liberation (especially of poor people). His "we" consciousness—a "we" that is democratic in content and cosmopolitan in character as he matures—is aided by multicultural solidarities (on the Mattison school playground and as part of the Ambler Tigers athletic team) and abetted by multiracial alliances (under the auspices of "WASP acceptability" and "liberal civic activism"). He is deeply shaped by the "helping-hand ethos" of the best of Black culture and forever harsh on the "status climbing" of the worst of middle-class culture.

Needless to say, Kilson never loses sight of white paternalism—in its benevolent or dictatorial forms—nor the open-mindedness of the best of white fellow citizens. In short, Kilson is a consummate humanist in his

shaping and in how he shapes others. Yet this sentence of modesty echoes throughout his memoir: "But enough about me."

An authentic intellectual humility and curiosity drive this text. He dares to embark on adventures and uncharted territories—in mind, heart, soul, and body. But he does not flaunt his courage nor applaud his brilliance. The painful divorce of his devoted parents is handled with gentle care. And the joy of his beloved mother, Louisa, wedded to his incredible success is briefly mentioned and then poignantly left to linger on the page. The prophetic words of his father, the Reverend Martin Luther Kilson Sr., loom large: "Young Martin is going to be somebody someday!" Though said about the young Martin who sits on his shoeshine box, to the chagrin of his father's church congregants, the sense of self-respect and self-confidence of father and son is deep.

Kilson's treatment of his pivotal years at Lincoln University is classic and resonates with the best novel of Black college life, *Sundial* (1986) by L. C. Morse (my dear brother and fellow Princeton PhD, who also attended Howard University and the London School of Economics). Kilson's letter of defiance and disappointment in the relative lack of intellectual awakening and political consciousness—primarily due to fraternity-centered frivolous hedonism and cruel hazing—remains on the door of the library for months. Yet the grand example of President Horace Mann Bond (who is abruptly fired with no advance notice in 1957) is a counterweight. And Kilson candidly acknowledges that many of these same fraternity men matured and became serious professionals and citizens. We should add that many of Kilson's heroes were Alpha Phi Alpha men, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King Jr., John Hope Franklin, and Thurgood Marshall. Kilson's stellar record and brilliant achievements at Lincoln—first in his class and acceptance to Harvard—launch him even further into the upper echelons of American society.

It is revealing that Kilson spends more time on his small-town formation than on his Harvard education. He is aware of his history-making breakthroughs in graduate school and on the faculty. But he downplays his PhD and monumental professorship at Harvard. Such firsts are meaningful to him, but what is more significant to him is how he uses his success and preserves his personal integrity and tenacity. Kilson exemplifies the wise insights of his fellow Harvardian William James, who noted in his 1903 lecture "The True Harvard" that integrity is found not in the status-climbing of clever people who worship popular idols or pursue vulgar ends but rather in those who find joy in *Veritas*-seeking and independent thinking

to better our world. Kilson was never a naive utopian thinker, yet he also never lost his zeal for truth and justice. He never ever sold his soul for a mess of Harvard pottage.

Kilson's integrity and tenacity in the life of the mind are what struck me most deeply when I met him my freshman year at Harvard in the fall of 1970. I enrolled in his legendary Social Science 132 course on Black politics; spent countless hours in his office at Apley Court, 16 Holyoke Street; reveled with his precious family in Lexington, Massachusetts, and Dublin, New Hampshire; learned to eat Chinese food and enjoyed their home cooking; and, most importantly, was enriched by a love from him and them that was and is sublime and supreme. Kilson taught me by example for nearly fifty years what it is to be a serious intellectual with one's own voice, style, and temperament. My own odyssey is unimaginable without his odyssey—just as we both are flawed yet fighting figures who find joy in our commitment to Black honor and American democracy. This means keeping alive the best of the great traditions of grand peoples, of everyday peoples of varying excellences, who with imagination, intelligence, and courage try to leave the world a little better than we found it. He did!

Martin Luther Kilson Jr. was sui generis. We shall never see the likes of him again!

PREFACE

The idea of writing an autobiographical account of my life—starting with my growing-up years and taking me all the way to where I find myself now, in a position to look back on it all—occurred to me quite soon after I retired from my teaching and research obligations at Harvard University in 2003. I quickly realized I didn't want to focus only on the strictly personal features of my background; I wanted to relate something much greater, in fact, than my own life. To achieve this, I decided to examine the societal agencies through which I evolved as a Black citizen in an oppressive, oligarchical, white-supremacist twentieth-century nation-state society; I endeavored to use the context of my memoir to relate the broader history that was unique to the small African American community in the Northeast that was my home during the 1930s and 1940s.

Thus, in the following pages, I have also written a biography, essentially, of the two Black communities nestled in eastern Pennsylvania most familiar to me: the factory town of Ambler in which I spent my childhood and the neighboring rural village town of Penllyn, both of which arose in the nineteenth century and progressed in special ways in the twentieth. While portraying facets of the social, civic, cultural, educational, and political patterns of these communities, I have simultaneously related my metamorphosis out of those patterns—which was largely dependent on my leaving them. In the pages spanning my childhood years in the 1930s until 1949, the year I entered college, the reader receives a twin portrait of the personal and institutional parameters of my memoir. The remainder of the book relates the tale of my professional maturation, from my undergraduate years at Lincoln University, a Black college, to my years at Harvard University, first as a graduate student and then as a professor.

As I write this preface, a basic observation comes to mind, one that defines the sort of African American community in which I grew up and which laid the groundwork for my outlook and my education: that African Americans such as my ancestors, who lived in the post–Civil War and Reconstruction-era American society outside the South, were fortunate

to have had access to some degree of "democratic space" during the first half of the twentieth century, space that their southern brethren were deprived of. For them and for me during my youth, this meant freedom from the cruelest, most pernicious features of American racism that restricted the social life of Black people in the South during the Jim Crow era, a deadly and devastating period that spanned nearly three-quarters of a century, from the late 1800s to the 1950s. For that 40 percent of Black folks who resided in the North and elsewhere across the country by 1950, racism was by no means absent, but they enjoyed—or, I should say, we enjoyed—a small measure of opportunity to participate in American society that was almost totally denied southern Blacks because of the systematic implementation and execution of racist practices and white-supremacist ideas. I was fortunate to be born into a family and in a place that allowed me to pursue a path on which so many other African Americans of my generation, and even of today's generation, have sadly never set foot.

Call this memoir idiosyncratic, original, or what you will; my hope is that readers will find within these pages a useful tale of one African American intellectual's odyssey from the racist margins of twentieth-century America to a rich and vital participatory presence in that same nation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since Martin Kilson's death in the spring of 2019, many helping hands have assisted in transforming his manuscript into the book you hold. Although Martin had the opportunity to review many of Julie Wolf's editorial suggestions, she completed her work on the manuscript during the summer of 2019, always taking care to retain Martin's voice. Cornel West with his introduction and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten with their afterword made distinctive contributions to their former professor's story. In addition, Fred and Stefano introduced the manuscript to Elizabeth Ault at Duke University Press. After the press's acceptance of the manuscript for publication, I have had the privilege of working with many of its staff members, especially Elizabeth Ault during the acquisitions process and Ellen Goldlust during the production process. I am so grateful to each of these individuals for their essential roles in the creation of *A Black Intellectual's Odyssey*. I know how much Martin Kilson wanted his story to be published and how very pleased he would have been with this volume.

MARION D. DE B. KILSON
SPRING 2021

Rev. Martin Luther Kilson Sr. and Louisa Laws Kilson with their children, 1933. Martin Kilson is standing on the lowest step.