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John Oliver Killens: A Tribute

Samuel F. Yette

John Oliver Killens

A Tribute

By Samuel F. Yette

My friend John was a friend of us all.

He was too big, too universal, too special to be measured in a few words, no matter how well chosen. And yet, he was too simple, too direct, too honest, too loving — yes, that's the word — too loving to be ignored, too loving for his impact not to have reached us all in some highly personal or existential manner.

But let us try to get a glimpse of the meaning of the man.

Two words keep coming to me: Love and Struggle. And were we limited to one lasting understanding of John Oliver Killens, it should be of his love for his people. And his love for his people signified no lack of love for any other people. This is important to an understanding of him as a man of struggle. For where his love led him was to a burning, insatiable, long-distance-running desire for freedom and justice for his people. While allowing for many other important aspects of the man, this, I believe, was the essence of John Oliver Killens, and in large part, the meaning of a great man's life.

It loomed large in every aspect of the man's life that I came to know — this love for his people, and its concomitant commitment to struggle.

In his literature, it separated him from his predecessors, even from one of the literary giants whose talents he admired most — Richard Wright.

Without attempting any deprecation of the work of Richard Wright, too often his work evidenced the author's absence of deep love for and confidence in Black people. Not so with John Oliver Killens. His love was so evident in his work. His deep love for and confidence in his people set him apart. Killens, himself, discussed this matter with clarity in *Amistad 2*, "Rappin' with Myself."

To his own question of why he admired Richard Wright, Killens responded:

". . . because of the awesome unadulterated power of his writing, his word power, his righteous anger, his indignation, his great success, his impact on the Western world. He made me believe that a Black writer could make the literate world sit up and take notice. He taught me through his writing that you don't have to be a timid writer. You can be bold, you can say what you have to say without holding anything back. Actually though, my favorite Richard Wright books are not *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. My favorites are *Uncle Tom's Children* and *12 Million Black Voices*. There were some Black and beautiful people in those two books. 'Bright and Morning Star' (one of the stories in the *Uncle Tom's Children* collection) is one of the most powerful and inspiring short stories of all times. He loved Black people when he wrote those two books. He believed in their ultimate salvation in his time. He believed in the possibility and the inevitability of Black liberation. The people he depicted were people I had known, blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, experiences out of my experiences. But I have always thought that *Native Son* was a best-seller and a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection because Bigger Thomas vindicated all the racist images white America had created about the Black man.

"It is up to the writer to create a new vision for mankind. He must be forever asking questions. He must ask the unaskable."

— John Killens

"Bigger lusted after Miss Anne, as we know all Black men do, according to the white mythmakers. He killed her, accidentally. But the killing of his Black woman was not by accident. He was the 'big burly Black beast that ran amuck amongst white civilization.' Nevertheless, even as they rejoiced over the revelation that the 'Bigger Thomases' of the world were not merely figments of their sick imaginations, they shivered at the fact of his existence."

John professed a belief in "the ancient adage, 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.'"

In his book of essays, *Black Man's Burden*, he gave us an extended view of his writing philosophy and its relationship to struggle:

"In a far deeper sense even than men of the cloth, writers must be searchers for the truth; men and women whose life's mission is to explore the truth of man's relationship to man. And I, for one, believe the basic truth of what my grandmother used to say, 'Aah Lord, honey, the half ain't never been told.' There is nothing in the world that I believe more than the wisdom of that statement. If I believed, as some Western men continually assert, that everything has already been said and it's just a question now of how differently you say it, that all is semantics from now on, I would put the cover on my typewriter and never uncover it again. As a writer, I must believe that most of what has already been said is a pack of lies, or, in some instances, mistakes, to be more charitable to makers of the myths. It is up to the writer to create a new vision for mankind. He must be forever asking questions. He must ask the unaskable. Was 'Plato's Republic' a Republic? Was Jefferson democrat or slaveholder? This world can't possibly be man's best effort, or we're all doomed to destruction or the madhouse. Life must make more sense than it has up to this point . . .

"I am a writer, first of all, and precisely because the world stinks and I want to change it. Yes, I mean it, and any writer worth his salt is up to the same subversive business. This is the way things always were, the eternal confrontation between the artist and society. Every time I sit down to the typewriter, with every line I put on paper, I am out to change the world, to capture reality, to melt it down and forge it into something entirely different. The portrait of the artist as a human being is one of profound frustration, because although he knows that 'change' is one of the inevitable

laws of the universe in the context of time and space, change in human nature is imperceptible. That is why the French have a saying: 'The more things change the more they remain the same.' But the earth *does* move and things *do* change."

In literature, John Oliver Killens was a point of departure. He understood, like no one else I have known, the importance of the *positive* Black hero, one who suffered (like Black heroes had to do in literature as in life), but who suffered unjustly, and won a modicum of victory for himself and his people — not the Black anti-hero, who suffered justly, whose sins and barbarism were such that even Black readers who identified with him were relieved when the jailer marched him off to the gas chamber. And, thus, in 1954, *Youngblood* was a genuine point of departure in Black literature — a point that urgently needs the benefit of rediscovery at this time of the great *negative* Black hero.

In 1982, upon the republication of his classic, *Youngblood*, John inscribed a copy for me that said: "For Sam, fellow writer, and for peace and liberation to a comrade in the struggle."

Again, John's love for his people meant struggle against the injustices heaped against them. Seldom in private conversation, and never in public, do I recall him speaking at any length without quoting his favorite lines from his hero in struggle, Frederick Douglass. He quoted them at my retirement reception a year ago, as he did upon receiving an honorary degree at the State University of New York last May. We would not do justice to John's memory if [in this tribute] we failed to quote John's favorite lines from Frederick Douglass:

"Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reforms. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions, yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will. Find out just what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them; and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

"In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North, and held and flogged at the South, so long as they submit to those devilish outrages, and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from all the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and, if needs be, by our lives, and the lives of others."

John, like all artists, was a teacher, but more than some, he knew it and did not shrink from the task.

John, like all artists, was a teacher, but more than some, he knew it and did not shrink from the task. In a debate, I once sought to make my point by insisting that the persons in question were "serious."

"They may well be serious," John said, "but the question is whether they are *sincere.*"

He went on to make a most valid distinction, sharing the understanding that sincerity has a moral base — a sense of truth, love and justice. The Klan, he explained, no doubt is serious, but is it sincere?

John's love for his people and for humanity empowered him with a confidence in people and the future of mankind. It kept him an optimist, although he never minimized the need for endurance — the ability for long distance in the struggle.

John and I first met at a television studio in Philadelphia, where the host of a call-in interview show had sought to promote a fight between us, based on his publication of his new book, *The Cotillion* — a delightful, yet instructive comedy — and publication of my first book, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America.*

The station staff succeeded in keeping us apart until the opening bell — that is, the red light of the TV camera.

"Surely," the host said, "you must disagree with this awful book Sam Yette has written saying that Black people in America are in jeopardy of their survival."

"Wrong," John told her. He thought it was truthful and a truly great work.

Then she turned to me. "Surely, you *must* be outraged with a perfidious book like *The Cotillion,*" she said, depicting Black people struggling up the social ladder, and having fun at it?

"Wrong," I told her. "Indeed, one of the points he makes is the same point I make on page such-and-such." And so it went for the first five minutes. That prompted a station break, after which, John and I simply took over the show and had a ball. It was he who later nominated *The Choice* for the coveted non-fiction award of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, which it won.

When *The Choice* was republished in 1982, John, the teacher for us all, regardless of race, wrote in his new foreword: "And finally, even as we struggle for survival and for our own self-fulfillment, we must struggle for a coalition with and for a time of clarity for the white masses in this country, a struggle with them for their ultimate understanding that what is good for Black people is good for the entire masses of this nation."

This I share with everyone who ever knew John Killens: He had a special ability for friendship. He was no mere sunshine friend. When you had him for a friend, you knew that you had been befriended forever. And he knew how to make you feel like a champ.

Yes, John was big and simple, universal and local, existential and direct. I had the great honor of knowing him in all these ways. □

Samuel F. Yette is publisher of Cottage Books and former professor of journalism at the Howard University School of Communications. The above was excerpted from a presentation at a memorial tribute to Killens last November 30 at Howard University, following his death on October 27. It was sponsored by the Afro-American Writers Guild and the Afro-American Resource Center. Killens (1917-1987) taught at Howard University as writer-in-residence from 1971 to 1977. His major literary works include his 1954 classic, YOUNGBLOOD; AND THEN WE HEARD THE THUNDER, 1963; BLACK MAN'S BURDEN, 1966; 'SIPPI, 1967; SLAVES, 1970; THE COTILLION, 1971; GREAT GITTIN' UP MORNING, 1972. A major book on the Afro-Russian writer Alexander Pushkin, which Killens completed long ago, is being readied for publication. For more on this, see "The Resurrection of Alexander Pushkin," an essay by Killens, in the January 1978 edition of New Directions.

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