John Oliver Killens: A Tribute

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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.

"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."

—John Killens
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 deprecate 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.