
THE CENTER FOR BLACK LITERATURE AT MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE, CUNY, THE HARLEM
WRITERS GUILD, AND THE SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE



PRESENT
JOHN OLIVER KILLENS
at
100!
**A CENTENNIAL
CELEBRATION**

March 17, 2016

Medgar Evers College
of the City University
of New York

1650 Bedford Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11225



13TH NATIONAL BLACK WRITERS CONFERENCE

WRITING RACE, EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

THURSDAY, MARCH 31 –
SUNDAY, APRIL 3, 2016



Photo by Fred Viebahn

HONORARY CHAIR

RITA DOVE, FORMER POET LAUREATE
of the U.S.

2016 NBWC HONOREES

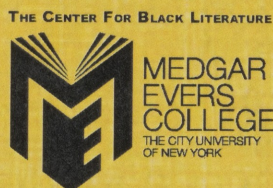
EDWIDGE DANTICAT, WOODIE KING JR.,
MICHAEL ERIC DYSON & CHARLES JOHNSON

OPENING NIGHT: POETS REFLECT ON THE STATE OF POETRY
FEATURING RITA DOVE AND SPECIAL GUESTS.

PANEL DISCUSSIONS, READINGS, WORKSHOPS

Invited panelists include: Chris Abani, M. K. Asante, Paul Beatty, Farai Chideya, Breena Clarke, Cora Daniels, Cornelius Eady, Meena Alexander, Charles Johnson, David Kirkland, Kiese Laymon, Joan Morgan, Marcyliena Morgan, ReShonda Tate Billingsley, Nnedi Okorafor, Coe Booth, Akiba Solomon, Victor LaValle, Regina Brooks, Keisha Gaye-Anderson, D. Watkins, Sheree Renée Thomas, Afaa Michael Weaver, Michael Datcher, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, Johnny Temple, Rowan Ricardo Phillips, and many more.

FOR REGISTRATION VISIT THE WEBSITE



www.CENTERFORBLACKLITERATURE.org
#NBWC2016 #NBWCWritingRace
The Center for Black Literature at
Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Phone: 718-804-8883
E-mail: writers@mec.cuny.edu
Like us: [f Center for Black Literature](https://www.facebook.com/CenterforBlackLiterature)
Follow us: [@Center4BlackLit](https://twitter.com/Center4BlackLit)



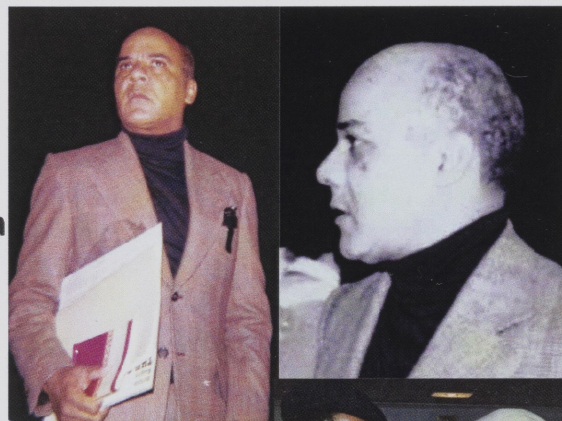
PLEASE JOIN OUR
MAILING LIST

An Epistolary Journal (Kwansaba-Style) Re: John Oliver Killens(1916-1987): Big Daddy of Black Writing & Black Writers Conferences

Eugene B. Redmond

I

Shining for eager scribes at CUNY Brooklyn's Black Writers Conference-'86, Margaret & Maya called you "John O"--while the *caged bird* crashed at your Crown Heights castle. Today, I still wear your words like ankhs, proudly shape-shiftin' them ntu agbadas that warm me on cold white nights.



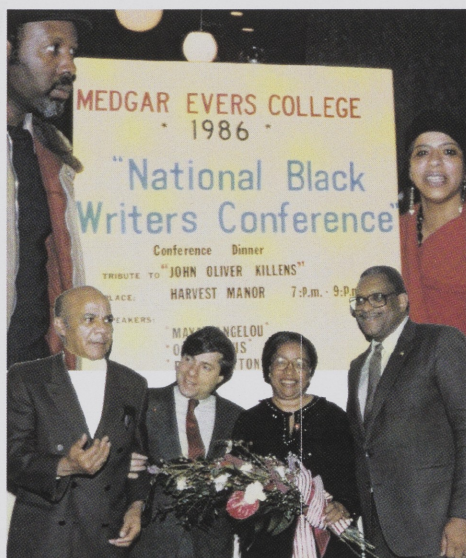
II

As a mid-50's to mid-80's mid-husband of "long-distance runners" (your '73 *Black Scholar* essay notes Troupe & me), you "distance"-wrote & noveled Black life matters: *Youngblood*-'54/*Thunder*-'64/*Cotillion*-'71. But despite three-for-three "nominations," Pulitzer would award no prizes those years.



III: 1986: What you said about Margaret Walker:

"For My People"--the greatest poem in the Anglo-Saxon Language!" Period.



IV

Georgia & The Great Migration had you on their minds a century ago. Fisk too. And Howard. Columbia. Soular-Sippi origins of Harlem Writers Guild & Medgar Evers College. DuBois. Robeson. Hueman strains of Zora-Richard-Billie's trio. Up above heads, "John O," long-distance "Thunder" hails "Stormy Weather."

LETTER from DR. BRENDA M. GREENE

Killens's life's work and art embody his belief in the role of the artist to raise the consciousness of the people, a belief also embraced by the late poet and activist Amiri Baraka. I didn't have an opportunity to meet John Oliver Killens until late in his life, after he had become writer-in-residence at Medgar Evers College. He left an indelible impression; his quiet manner, gentle and assertive spirit, and his ability to inspire confidence in all would-be writers reflect his special attributes, qualities that remain etched in my mind.

After initially meeting and coming to know him, I was motivated to become a creative writer. Thirty years later, I have not become the creative writer I had hoped to be, but in the essays and reviews I write, I have come to value the power of the written word. I am also committed to supporting established and emerging Black writers and to embracing John's

“The artist's role is to raise the consciousness of the people. To make them understand life, the world and themselves more completely. That's how I see it. Otherwise, I don't know why you do it.”
—AMIRI BARAKA

vision to live a life informed by purpose and activism. This commitment is manifested through my work as Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature and Director of the National Black Writers Conference.

In his book of essays, *Black Man's Burden*, Killens notes that “Every time I sit down to the typewriter, every line I put on paper, I'm out to change the world, to capture reality, to melt it down and to forge it into something different.” I thank John Oliver Killens for these words; they are a testament to his legacy and vision for writers, activists and artists. He inspires us to do our work and to continue the struggle, albeit a beautiful struggle.

Brenda M. Greene

—Dr. Brenda M. Greene is Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature, Director of the National Black Writers Conference, and Chair of the English Department at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York.

LETTER from DIANE RICHARDS

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

If we attempt to go back into the mind and heart of John Oliver Killens in 1916 when he was born in the Deep South of Macon, Georgia, 53 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and compare it to where we find ourselves today, we must acknowledge that we continue to live under the threat of what could have been done to him and his family only because of the color of their skin.

That same virulent hatred and victimization of Black people his parents and grandparents continued to live under, even though proclaimed free, has gained momentum in 2016...Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown...and the numbers continue to rise across this country and world in outrageous beats toward thinly disguised genocide.

Despite racism and brutality, Killens developed survival skills that allowed him to dodge the demand that he be less than who he was, deny reality and assume a false self. Although castrating and murderous of the human spirit, the South was the birth canal in which Killens's literary mind developed. However, needless to say, not only did John Oliver Killens leave the South, he transcended the fearful mind of a slave. He stated, "We must decolonize the minds of Black people."

While writing Pulitzer-nominated literature, *Youngblood*, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, and pursuing his active struggle for civil and human rights, Killens

became whole and extracted his true self—a proud Black man with something to say and do about the state of affairs of Black and brown people. He joined forces with other activist Black writers, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, Walter Christmas, Rosa Guy, and Willard Moore and dared to step

Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce and destroy them.

—TA-NEHISI COATES

away from established, white-controlled publishing circles with enough esteem and self-efficacy to collectively proclaim, "We define ourselves and we create our own," and in 1950 established the Harlem Writers Guild.

Today, we, the Harlem Writers Guild, promote Killens's passionate philosophy: "There is no such thing as art for art's sake. All art is propaganda, although there is much propaganda that is not art. We must join a crusade to decolonize the minds of Black people. No one else will do this work, so we must."

John Oliver Killens's passionate directive is the mission of the Harlem Writers Guild.

Diane Richards
Executive Director
Harlem Writers Guild



BIOGRAPHY of JOHN OLIVER KILLENS

(b. 1916–d. 1987)

Author. Activist. Educator. Mentor. Social Critic. The invaluable contributions of John Oliver Killens remain foundational to the continued growth of African-American letters. Author of novels, essays, articles, short stories, plays, and screenplays, his writing has been translated into more than a dozen languages. His first novel, *Youngblood*, considered a classic of social protest fiction on par with *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, was met with critical acclaim and thrust him onto the national stage. That the novel was published the same month in 1954 of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling

“Ever since I can remember, I have always been a sucker for a well-told tale, and the more outlandish and outrageous, the better, as far as I was concerned.”

aptly contextualizes his career. Killens considered it his duty as an artist to disrupt the sociopolitical landscape of racist America. He had a strong and committed “belief in the revolutionary power of writing and the need for people of color to bring their stories to light.”

Forwarding the ideas of W. E. B. Du Bois, whom he considered his philosophical grandfather, Killens proclaimed, “There is no such thing as art for art’s sake.

All art is propaganda, although there is much propaganda that is not art. We must join a crusade to decolonize the minds of Black people. No one else will do this work, so we must.”

Born in Macon, Georgia, on January 14, 1916, Killens’s encounters with racism in the Deep South largely served as inspiration for his writings. Killens attended Edward Waters College and Morris Brown College and graduated from Howard University. He also studied law at the Terrell Law School and enrolled in writing classes at Columbia University and the New York University Writing Center. He worked at the National Labor Relations Board, where he became its first African-American employee, in 1936. In 1942, Killens was inducted to the U.S. Army and served for three years; Sergeant Killens was released from military service in 1945.

In 1943, Killens married Grace Ward Jones, who would become not only a devoted wife but also a supporter of his writing and his sociopolitical activities.

Killens had joined the battles against racism and segregation during his college years. Later as an activist and cultural figure, he aligned himself with several civil rights and humanitarian organizations such as the Council on African

Mike Wallace interviewing
John O. Killens on CBS Radio,
"Mike And Buff's Mailbag"



Photo courtesy of the Killens family.

“The black writer’s vision for society is basically anti-status quo. He is out to change the status quo, to create a new vision for mankind, because the status quo has ever been the bane of his and his people’s existence.”

Affairs, Freedomways journal, and the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

Killens has been hailed by many people as a brilliant and passionate writer and a superb storyteller, whose stories combine rich characterizations, folktales, humor, and social commentary. Killens is probably best recognized for his groundbreaking novels *Youngblood*, which was described as “a work of great optimism,” and *And Then We Heard Thunder*, his second novel, published in 1963, that chronicles the struggles of a law school student who leaves school to serve in an all-Black amphibious regiment in World War II. The protagonist, a reluctant officer, becomes disillusioned by the emasculating, racist stance of his white counterparts and decides to document the hardships that he and his

Black comrades face. Much of the story is autobiographical as Killens served in the South Pacific during World War II from 1942 to 1945 in an amphibious unit, similar to the one portrayed in the novel. It is widely considered “the best treatment we have in fiction of the African-American military experience,” notes his biographer Keith Gilyard. The novel was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize a year after its publication.

While his writing continued to garner acclaim, much of Killens’s life was devoted to activism, which was well documented in an FBI file that was maintained on him for five decades. Twice, he rebuffed offers for professorships at Harvard University. He also

declined a Broadway adaptation of his novel *The Cotillion*, or *One Good Bull Is Half the Herd*, published in 1971, due to proposed changes that would undermine the work’s satirical force.

Killens was less interested in celebrity than the establishment of cultural institutions to support “all Black writers, literarily, politically, and economically.” To this end, he became the cofounding chairman of the Harlem Writers Guild in 1950, where he shepherded writing workshops and events that resulted in the publication of hundreds of books.

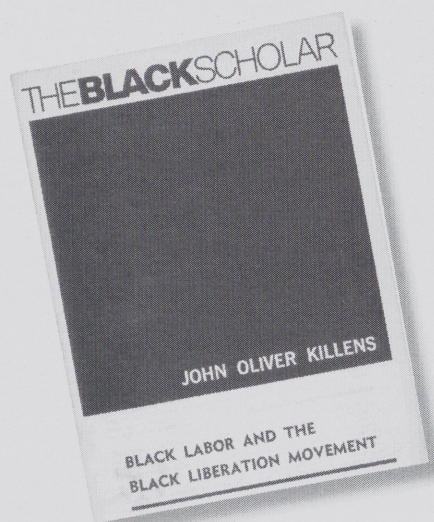
Killens maintained appointments at various schools, including Bronx Community College, Columbia University, Fisk University, Howard University, Medgar Evers College, the New School for Social Research, and Trinity College. In March 1986, he cofounded the National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College, where he was a writer-in-residence. A list of those he tutored includes Tina McElroy Ansa, Bebe Moore Campbell, Arthur Flowers, Grace Edwards, Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Nunez, Terry McMillian, Richard Perry, Wesley Brown, Barbara Sommers, Sarah Wright, and Askia Toure. A list of guild members is equally impressive and includes John Henrik Clarke, Maya Angelou,



Photo from Emory University

J. Killens, D. Graham, President Lawson, R. Fair, R. Millner at Fisk University Black Writers Conference, 1967.

John O. Killens with Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Leroone Bennett; standing is John Henrik Clarke and Ron Milner. Photo from Emory University



“There is no such thing as art for art’s sake. All art is propaganda, although there is much propaganda that is not art. We must join a crusade to decolonize the minds of black people. No one else will do this work, so we must.”

Lonne Elder III, Douglas Turner Ward, Ossie Davis, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, and Sarah Wright. To further encourage young writers, he established the John Oliver Killens Writers Workshop at his home in Brooklyn, New York.

Killens maintained a recurrent theme of Black nationalism and heroism throughout his writing, and his other works include: *Black Man's Burden* (1966), essays on race in America; *'Sippi* (1967), the story of a Black family in Mississippi; *Great Gittin' Up Morning: A Biography of Denmark Vesey* (1972); *A Man Ain't Nothin but a Man: The Adventures of John Henry* (1975), a children's book; and *The Great Black Russian: The Life and Times of Alexander Pushkin* (1989), a biography of the poet Alexander Pushkin. He also wrote two screenplays, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), starring Harry Belafonte, and *Slaves* (1969), starring Ossie Davis. Killens was the first African-American to receive solo screenplay credit for a Hollywood movie with the production of *Odds Against Tomorrow*.

Killens received many honors, which include the vice presidency of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Distinguished Writer Award from the Middle Atlantic Writers Association, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from The Before Columbus Foundation, which sponsored the American Book Awards. Recognition of his legacy has continued even after his death. In 1998, he was inducted into the inaugural

class of the Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, founded by Haki Madhubuti, Bennett Johnson, and B. J. Bolden and housed at Chicago State University. Other honorees included W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Margaret Walker Alexander. In 2000, he was named a charter member of the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame at the University of Georgia, joining Erskine Caldwell, James

Dickey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Joel Chandler Harris, Martin Luther King Jr., Sidney Lannier, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Carson McCullers, Margaret Mitchell, Flannery O'Connor, and Lillian Smith.

Toward the end of his life, Killens served in various capacities in the New York State NAACP and was the founding chairman, along with Harry Belafonte, of its National Cultural Committee. He also helped Malcolm X set up the Organization for Afro-American Unity. Among his other commitments, Killens was a founding member and served on the Board of Directors of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, the Institute of the Black World, the Black Drama Production Company, the National Center of Afro-American Artists, and Third World Cinema Productions.

Killens's most significant contribution may have been his stewardship of a series of writers' conferences between 1965 and 1986. These conferences serve as the hallmarks of his career, and the legacy of his community-building spirit continues today in the annual National Black Writers Conference held at Medgar Evers College, the site of his last professorship before his death on October 27, 1987.

— IRVIN WEATHERSBY

“Life is a short walk. There is so little time and so much living to achieve.”



From left: Baron James Ashanti, Brenda Connor-Bey, John Killens, Doris Jean Austin, Arthur Flowers, and Joan Cofer.

Photo courtesy of the Killens family.

“My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life, culturally, socially, psychologically, philosophically.”

TRIBUTES for JOHN OLIVER KILLENS

John O's essay "Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners" (The Black Scholar, 1973) was required reading at the Institute of the Black World, where I worked from the mid-1970s through the early '80s. I also worked part time for the Atlanta Public Library Cable 5 TV station. Toni Cade Bambara phoned me up one day, saying that John was in town and I had to get him into the studio for an interview. I wrote scripts, produced shows and was on-camera talent because we had no budget, but were allowed to pretty much do what we wanted to fill the hours of the network not taken up by city council meetings and other government proceedings.

I let the senior librarians in the African-American collection know. So, they, of course, brought his books to the station for him to sign before the long interview. That's how I met the man. When I moved to Brooklyn in 1984, I became a regular in his weekly writing workshops. I got an editorial assistant job at New American Library (NAL) with his editor there, Carole Hall; and many times when he came to Manhattan on publishing and other business, he would take the time to treat me to lunch at Luchow's on the ground floor of the office building at 1633 Broadway. He was married to an extraordinary woman, Ms. Grace, who like John, welcomed me and the whole Black political/cultural community into their home as a matter of course. The family has a permanent place in my heart and made an undeniably rich impact on my life.

—Malaika Adero

John Oliver Killens: Literary Artist, Activist and Advocate

"My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life, culturally, socially, psychologically, and philosophically."

This significant quote from John Oliver Killens uncompromisingly and clearly states his commitment to enhancing Black pride and empowerment, social justice, and literary equality. We greatly appreciated his advocacy and unceasing work that informed, influenced, and supported a generation of Black writers and publishing professionals.

The resultant effect is evident in his legacy, which can be seen in the rich treasury of literary works authored by the exceptional writers who attended and participated in the workshops and programs of the Harlem Writers Guild, the Killens's writers workshops (in his home), and the Medgar Evers College Writers Conference.

Throughout his lifetime, John Oliver Killens's cultural and political activism was the platinum standard when it came to showing us how to be uncompromised cultural activists. He publicly spoke truth to power and actively engaged in civil rights and justice movements that fought against racism while initiating literary programs that celebrated our Black experience. Our community of readers and writers continue to be the beneficiaries of his brilliance and generosity of spirit.

—Marie Dutton Brown

Followed Babajohn Killens, Great Griot Master of Brooklyn, from school to school for 13 years. Until he died 1987. He not only taught me how to write, he taught me how to be a writer, how to be a visionary. What he called being a long distance runner. What I call the longgame. In my youth I aspired to be a hard man, a man of power. This was reflected in my work. One day Babajohn pulled me aside and said — Art, you a brilliant writer but with a little compassion you could be profound.

All I heard was brilliant. Wasn't till many years later I realize what Babajohn was trying to do. Trying to ensure that my legacy, as his student, would not be hard and cold but warm and loving. The old tribal shaman trying to take care of the tribal soul. Now I maintain the Compassion of O Killens in everything I do. To this day when I'm making craft, ethical, professional and strategic choices, I can hear Babajohn in my head. Still showing me the way.

—Arthur Flowers

Picketing With John

If John were still here, he and I would find a way to get to London, meeting Jimmie Baldwin at the studio and we'd picket Downton Abbey. Why? Because the Fisk Singers had been invited to sing for Queen Victoria and the family, including the Dowager, would have, should have, traveled to London to hear this latest sensation. They probably would have made the cover of Edith's magazine and there should have been some discussion of slavery and the ending of The Civil War. Of course, these are going to be WWI people so we will get jazz. We also need the Black writers who migrated or stayed on after the war. John wrote *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, which powerfully portrayed the soldiers' experience.

We were fortunate at Fisk that we were awarded a grant by either the Ford or Rockefeller Foundation to invite a visiting writer to stay with us for a year. I was fortunate enough to be on that committee and we invited John, who with his wife, Grace, and daughter, Barbara, graced the Fisk campus. John knew everybody and they came to visit. It's where we met Margaret Walker, Gwen Brooks, even LeRoi Jones all came when John asked. How lucky were we. Fisk certainly needs that vision and love that he offered. We miss his voice.

—Nikki Giovanni, Poet

I met John Oliver Killens in 1963, when I wrote a book review for his novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder*. Already an antiwar activist, John and his novel strengthened my resolve and I became lifelong friends with him and his family. Today, I am writing an antiwar novel still remembering his influence. Live on John Oliver Killens. Peace and love.

—Louise Meriwether

With gratitude, I contemplate John O. Killens at 100 and the myriad ways he shared his gifts with us. What did I learn from him? The importance of having a community of writers whom one can share one's writing and more importantly develop, shape, and get it published. Because of John's tutelage, I can write in any form and teach any form of writing.

Writing is an apprenticeship form. I learned what love and dedication looked like in the presence of a great long-distance runner. John showed up every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. for years without fail. He listened to writing in various stages of the creation process; writing that encompassed "the good, the bad and the impossible" and everything in between. John kept an open door at his workshop table in a way I never seen done then or now. He did not differentiate the paying students from the nonpaying students.

I also learned what it meant to be a writer and activist at any age. John was 70 when he envisioned and inaugurated the first National Black Writers Conference. It was a joy to witness that first conference and see what is possible in our lifetime. Over the years, at least 30 books have been published by those who attended John's workshop at Medgar Evers College. Here is a praise poem I wrote in his honor:

"ORIKI FOR JOHN OLIVER KILLENS"

You with the brass map of Africa.
Owner of ancient wisdom of Oshogbo.
Word warrior from Ouagadougou, via
Macon, Georgia.
Clever trickster from the dog gone dogon.
Nkisi of the village of Brooklyn.
Oba of Medgar Evers College.
Keeper of Youngblood clan.
Swiftest of the long-distance runners.
Owner of a "Black Man's Burden."
Oh you of Ki-Kongo mask.
Yoruba's benevolent one.
Oh you, a grandmother's freedom dance.
Oh you, carrying green bag of fresh
thoughts.
John who "Heard the Thunder."
John who saw the lightning.
This is the morning of your dreams.
This is the morning of our dreams.
—Jacqueline Johnson

The mettle of John Oliver Killens is always around us. It is found in the volumes of his writings nestled on bookshelves of countless homes, libraries, and stores. His name inevitably pops up on school required reading lists; not only here, but in foreign countries where his work has been translated.

His concern for social and judicial integrity led him to create workshops and think sessions to motivate folks into writing Black literature with a positive impact upon the world. He braced the backbones of many writers and producers who then shared his amazing philosophy.

Having visited his home countless times during the past dozen years, there is always that unique Spiritual presence. It permeates the entire house. Particularly, the living room where they all gathered to discuss the state of Black affairs and strategies. In the quiet, you can almost hear faint hums of all those folks who honed their skills in that uplifting setting.

In this centennial year of the birth of John Oliver Killens, we applaud him once again. We also remind the Killens family and friends: we vow to hold his lifework and philosophy close to heart.
—Tony Mitchelson and Layding Kaliba, The Linyak Project

John was a writer's writer and a fierce warrior for Black writers. He was greatly admired. I remain eternally grateful to him for his guidance. I loved him dearly.

—Elizabeth Nunez, Cofounder of the National Black Writers Conference.

That the spirit of John Oliver Killens lives on is a testament to the power of his art, his love, and his dedication to activism. My generation of writers is indebted to Killens and the members of the Harlem Writers Guild who uphold his legacy and put their own spins on it.

Through them we have spaces to write in, gather in, nurture one another in, and challenge each other in. Through them we received the message that we could write and that if we worked at it we might make our art and lives useful to our communities.

—Best, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie

New to Georgia in 1986 and in my first university job, I was selected to chauffeur John and Grace Killens to the talks and dinners planned during a literary residency in his native Macon, his return after nearly three decades. The owner of a ramshackle Rambler, the honor had as much to do with my availability as it did with my aspirations to write novels. In any case, the three weeks I spent with the Killenses impacted the way I imagined my personal life as much as it did my literary life.

In one speech, Mr. Killens quoted the French adage “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” “If I believed that,” he said, “I would have never written a word.” I recalled that the year before he had raised grumbles from a mostly white audience at the University of Georgia by declaring that there was no such thing as a “kind slave master”: The very act of owning a person was immeasurably cruel. I admired his courage and understood that his power came from his positive and loving approach to activism; that writing our own stories could change the world. One evening, my fiancée and I, passing the window of one of Macon's few fine restaurants, were surprised to see a distinguished Black couple enjoying a meal. To our greater surprise, it was the Killenses. They knew Pamela was visiting and had taxied to dinner rather than to bother me to drive them. We admired them for a few moments, imagining that we, too, in coming years, could be like them. They looked up, recognized us, and waved.

—Tony Grooms, Professor of Creative Writing, Kennesaw State University

John Oliver Killens's profound influence on American literature manifests itself in a myriad of ways: as novelist, essayist, activist, cultural worker, scholar, and creative writing professor at Medgar Evers College where he held court in a writer's workshop open to the community. It was at Medgar Evers College where he mentored a new post-Black Arts generation of poets and fictionists such as Arthur Flowers, B. J. Ashanti, Brenda Connor Bey, Doris Jean Austin, Terry McMillan, Jacqueline Johnson, Elizabeth Nunez, Malaika Adero, and a host of other brilliant and powerful word warriors, activists, and cultural workers.

I remember meeting some of Killens's many disciples, first through poet-activist Layding Kaliba (who I met at Amiri Baraka's Kimako's Blues People), who invited me to the Harlem Writers Guild workshop at the Schomburg. And before that I was introduced to Killens's work by my late, great professor, Addison Gayle Jr., an architect of the Black Aesthetic Movement, as an undergrad at Baruch College, CUNY. I devoured 'Sippi in the subways and on the streets at night while working for the NYC Transit

Authority. I was also fortunate enough to meet Killens's daughter, Barbara, and work with her husband, the great Louis Reyes Rivera, on a poetry anthology, *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. Of course, as we worked on the book in my Harlem apartment, I probed Louis's mind for memories of Killens.

As I contemplate John O. Killens's son-in-law's stories and consider his work, Pulitzer Prize-nominated novels such as *Youngblood*, *The Cotillion*, and equally powerful fiction such as *And Then We Heard the Thunder* and the essay collection *Black Man's Burden*, Killens is undoubtedly a world-class man of letters and a literary lion whose work should be celebrated and lauded—not ignored. Left to the literary establishment, John O. Killens's magnificent work would languish in libraries, or go out of print. It is thrilling to witness Dr. Brenda Greene and the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College to continue to reclaim and exclaim the name and work of such a vocal visionary of the Black Radical tradition.

—Tony Medina

I met John O. Killens in Washington, D.C., around 1973. The early 1970s is a time I wish someone would define as the "Golden Era" on the campus of Howard University. How else can one describe a space in time occupied by Killens, Haki Madhubuti, Leon Damas, C. L. R. James, Julian Mayfield, Stephen Henderson, and Sterling A. Brown? It was Killens who was at the center of organizing the National African American Writer's Conference in 1974. Because of his contacts and reputation almost every major African-American writer attended.

John O. Killens was not just a writer, he was also an organizer who understood the importance of community and Black empowerment. Positive images in our culture he viewed as being essential to Black survival. When I look around at the state of our culture today, I wonder if we will ever hear the thunder again.

I can still see him entering an auditorium at Howard with Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier. It was a night when a large audience sat in the dark watching the movie *Buck and the Preacher*. John Oliver Killens always belonged among the stars. May his legacy continue to shine bright and point us in the direction of our glorious freedom.

—E. Ethelbert Miller, Board Chair, Institute for Policy Studies

New Federal Theatre produced *Cotillion (or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd)* in our 1975/76 season at 240 East Third Street-The Ellen Stewart Theatre and later restaged it in Harlem at Harlem Performance Center. It was directed by Allie Woods, who is a founding member of the historic Negro Ensemble Company. "I had seldom worked on a show with a playwright present. And considering Killens's literary stature at the time, the directing assignment was an appreciated opportunity and creative challenge," stated Allie Woods. *Cotillion* starred Joyce Griffith as Yourba, Taurean Blacque as Lumumba; also Zaida Coles and Hank Frazier as the mother and father, respectively. The great costume designer, the late Judy Dearing designed the stunning costumes.

The *Cotillion* production resulted in overflow crowds at New Federal Theatre and again at Harlem Performance Center. Once the reviews came out, we witnessed the overflow audiences. Killens's and Woods's production received an AUDELCO Award nomination as best production of the year.

I reached out to Motown Records to assist me to produce the play as a musical on Broadway. Motown Records (Robert Gordy) suggested I get

"The black writer's vision for society is basically anti-status quo. He is out to change the status quo, to create a new vision for mankind, because the status quo has ever been the bane of his and his people's existence."

a playwright with Broadway experience to cowrite *Cotillion* as a musical. Motown gave me financing to hire Richard Wesley (with Killens's approval). On July 22, 1980, John's agent Stephen Sultan of ICM sent the third draft to Motown. Motown approved the Killens and Wesley script. Motown hired their hitmakers Smokey Robinson and Willie Hutch

for music and lyrics. John did not approve Smokey's music and Willie Hutch's lyrics. So when neither Motown nor I could get a satisfactory answer from John, Motown cut further funding of the *Cotillion* project. We never could find John's reason for disapproving of Smokey Robinson's music.

—Woodie King Jr., Producing Director, New Federal Theatre

John Oliver Killens: Forerunner of the Black Arts Movement

John Oliver Killens played a pivotal and significant role in my maturation as a Black man, poet, writer, activist, and institution builder. He and writers like W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Margaret Burroughs, Hoyt W. Fuller, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ossie Davis, and Dudley Randall laid the groundwork for the Black Arts Movement. Their work provided an unbreakable foundation that created the literary consciousness for Black writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond. John O. Killens was a trailblazing novelist, literary nonfiction writer, and one of the first to lead in the institutionalization of Black writings and Black thought.

Killens and the others endured and fought against the open brutality of white supremacy, unencumbered by “laws” of a white governing nation that cared little about the well-being of its former enslaved African population. Their duel and often triple identities forced them to be artists and create art in the most arduous and challenging of times. When we read their work, even in today’s climate of “political correctness,” what confronts us as readers is their undefeatable love for Black people.

My long association with this great writer began in 1963, while I was serving in the United States Army. I was a voracious reader and had acquired a copy of *And Then We Heard the Thunder* by Killens. I immediately connected with *Thunder* because of its protagonist Solomon Saunders Jr., known as Solly, a soldier enduring the pot-holes of military life as a Black man in a white supremacist organization. A few years later, now out of the military in college and losing a great deal of sleep trying to become a poet, I found a copy of Killens’s *Black Man’s Burden*, a selection of essays on race in America. This book was critical in my early writing because in it he gave me definition and content for my young, angry, and questioning life.

Prior to reading *Black Man’s Burden*, I had read W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson. They had each covered the same landscape, but from differ-

ent historical moments. Hughes, for example, affirmed the complexity and importance of an authentic Negro voice in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” an essay published in *The Nation* in 1926. However, it was Killens, in his landmark essay “The Black Writer Vis-a-Vis His Country,” who gave me a firm, unambiguous and unconditional definition of the role of Black writers. Killens writes:

The Negro was invented in America. Only in America. In the main, his has been a culture of revolt, of protest and revolution; a culture that is expressed very clearly in the Negro spirituals... From all sides pressure is put upon the Negro artist to deny his culture, his roots, his selfhood. How many black writers have you heard engage in this abject self-denial: “I am not a Negro writer. I am a writer who happens to be a Negro.” But the truth of the matter is that we black Americans are all Negroes (African-American, if you prefer) who happen to have become writers, painters, lawyers, subway motormen, doctors, teachers, ditch-diggers, pickpockets, hustlers, or whatever. We see life from the vantage point of being Negro. A creative writer writes out of his particular frame of reference, which is the sum total of his life’s experience, and he has better come to terms with it as hurriedly as possible.

My first official meeting of Killens was facilitated by the brilliant poet Gwendolyn Brooks. In 1967, She had been invited along with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Lerone Bennett, Jr., and others to the major Black writer’s conference in the nation at Fisk University hosted by John O. Killens, who at the time was Fisk’s writer-in-residence. Ms. Brooks, who had become an essential part of part of my extended family, strongly suggested to Killens that he consider me (I was then Don L. Lee) for the next

conference. I was invited in 1968 and my national presence as a poet emerged.

At the conference, my poetry readings and literary presentations were greeted with great enthusiasm and energy from the large student body. While at the conference some of my evenings were spent talking with Killens, which helped me to ground my own ideas and aspirations. His advice that has stayed with me all of my life is, "Do not be taken in and overly influenced by public receptions to your readings. That which will count in the long run will be your production as a poet and essayist." He was right. This reception and the content of my poetry and lectures earned me invitations from two other institutions for possible faculty positions: Talladega College and Cornell University. I ended up taking the position as Black poet-in-residence at Cornell University (1968–1969), a first for the Ivy League university.

My second and most lasting relationship with Killens was at Howard University's Institute of Arts and Humanities (1970–78) under the able and careful direction of Dr. Stephen A. Henderson, supported by the highly respected Provost Dr. Andrew Billingsley. John Oliver Killens served as the fiction writer-in-residence and I was the poet-in-residence. Killens brought his ideas of an annual gathering of Black writers to Howard where we were able to duplicate and build upon his past conferences due to Howard's greater resources, location, and the Institute's large staff.

In our now-weekly meetings, he often talked of "long-distance runners" developing a "political and revolutionary consciousness." He always emphasized history noting that, if you don't know where you come from, that is the "somewhere" in one's past, then and only then can we create a future. What I added to this jewel of wisdom is that, "if you do not know who you are, anybody can name you, and they will."

By this time, Killens had published his masterwork *Youngblood* (1966), and two other novels that helped to define the Black American

experience, *Sippi* (1967) and *The Cotillion, or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971). The knowledge I gained as a result of my friendship with John between 1970 and 1978 has stayed with me as I transfix the political, cultural and economic landmines of the twenty-first century. To re-read his fiction and essays easily confirms the visionary nature of his awesome talent. The literary scholar Dr. Keith Gilyard in his authoritative 2010 biography *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism* states it best, "Taken as whole, Killens's fiction corpus is analogous to the drama of August Wilson." However, it was the work of Killens that help set the receptive climate for Wilson and others, which begs the question, why is Killens's work out of print and August is being studied internationally? I leave you with the last stanza of a poem I composed for John on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday that we celebrated at Howard University on January 14, 1976:

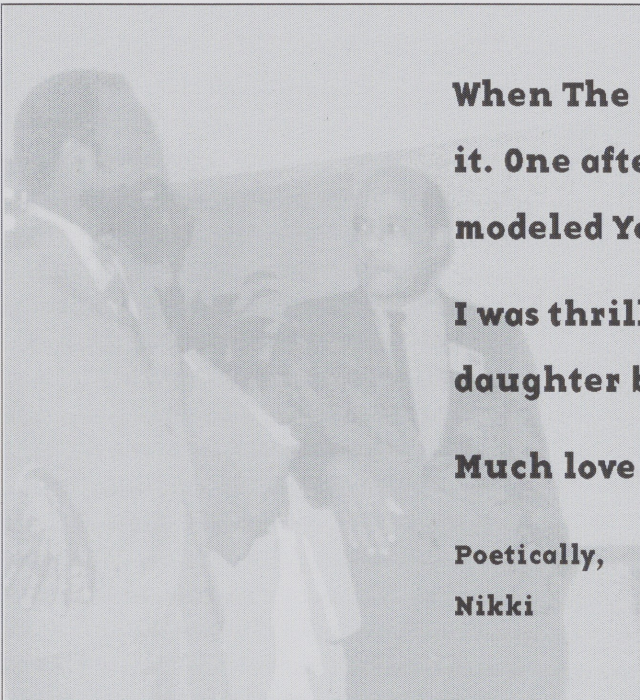
listen now listen
open yr ears we got a number for you
listen, somebody is trying to tell us something, listen, somebody is trying to pull our minds. it ain't magic we be better if it will listen let the words seek greater levels of meaning split in there words be beat it beat it words beat it now

it ain't gypsy tales or trails
or false eyes frontin for the devil
it ain't about the happy ending of the west unless you are reading the future wrong.

He read the future correctly. He is missed now more than we can comprehend.

—Haki R. Madhubuti

Poet, Founder, and Publisher of Third World Press



When The Cotillion was published we all loved it. One afternoon John said to me “You know, I modeled Yoruba on you. Her attitude and all.”

I was thrilled. Barbara may be his biological daughter but I was his literary one.

Much love to you, John, from your Yoruba.

**Poetically,
Nikki**



Photo courtesy Killens family

John Oliver Killens with Julie and Harry Belafonte at NAACP “Night of Stars,” 1957.

“The writer should involve himself or herself wherever his or her people are struggling so that he or she can understand the meaning of struggle and interpret the struggle in his or her work.”

JOHN OLIVER KILLENS AT 100! CELEBRATION
AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CO-PRESENTERS, PARTNERS, AND SPONSORS

CO-PRESENTERS

Brenda M. Greene, Maeshay k. Lewis, Clarence V. Reynolds, and Bernadette Sandy
Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College, CUNY

Grace Edwards, Diane Richards, and K. C. Washington
Harlem Writers Guild

Ladi'Sasha Jones and Kahlil G. Muhammad
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL

JOHN OLIVER KILLENS LEGACY CIRCLE

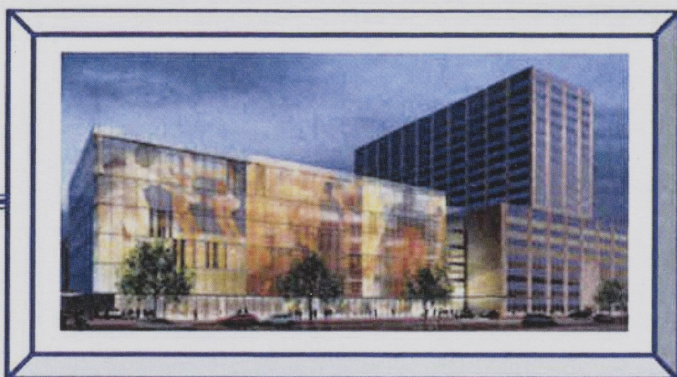
Marie Dutton Brown
Jeff and Michelle Feig
Nikki Giovanni
Tony Mitchelson and Layding Kaliba, The Linyak Project
Eugene Redmond
Sylvia L. White, Chief of Staff, NYC Health & Hospitals, Harlem

SPECIAL THANKS

AKILA WORKSONGS INC.

W. Paul Coates, Black Classic Press/ BCP Digital Printing
Daniel Costoso, Office of Communications, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives & Rare Book Library
Beverly Davis, Office of Space Reservations, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Department of English, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Sowonee Duworko, Office of Space Reservations, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Keith Gilyard
Richard A. Joseph, Office of Communications, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Barbara Killens-Rivera
Medgar Evers College Campus Security
Terry McMillan
James McNeil, Office of Communications, Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Gilda N. Squire, Squire Media & Management Inc.
Tara Regist-Tomlinson, Office of Development and Alumni Relations,
Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Carl Van Vechten Photograph Collection, Library of Congress
Michele Y. Washington, Washington Design
Irvin Weathersby
Marcia Wilson, WideVision Photography

This program is supported with funding from the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Council for the Humanities



NYC Health + Hospitals | Harlem
Celebrates with
The Center for Black Literature at
Medgar Evers College,
Harlem Writers Guild
&
The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

In the occasion of honoring
the centennial of the birth of
John Oliver Killens,
Author, Activist & Educator

Sylvia L. White, Chief of Staff
NYC Health + Hospitals | Harlem

NYC
HEALTH+
HOSPITALS

| Harlem



**DR. RUDOLPH F. CREW
PRESIDENT, MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE,**

CONGRATULATES THE

CENTER FOR BLACK LITERATURE, THE HARLEM WRITERS GUILD,

AND

THE SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE

ON THE OCCASION OF

**JOHN OLIVER KILLENS AT 100!
AUTHOR. LITERARY ACTIVIST. EDUCATOR. MENTOR.**



COURAGE. STRENGTH. FORTITUDE.
1650 Bedford Avenue • Brooklyn, NY 11225
(718) 270-4900 • www.mec.cuny.edu