



James Arthur Miller (1944–2015)

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James Arthur Miller (1944 - 2015)¹

Which roles have literature, music, art, and film played in the struggle for equality and social justice, and what are the political roles they should be playing? What does it mean for Humanists to say that race is a social construction, and can one imagine a flexible, non-essential definition of race that also acknowledges the continued American obsession with it? How can a sense of modest irony make college and university teachers recognize that there is enormous variety in students' often-unpredictable responses to aesthetic works? How can a specifically local focus in American Studies generate new knowledge and motivate students at the same time? What is the mission of African American Studies now, in the academy as well as in the public arena, in national as well as international contexts? These are among the many questions that Jim Miller addressed in his life's work, his scholarly publications, his teaching, his book-reviewing, his televised public appearances, and his academic lecturing in the United States as well as in many other places—for his career took him to Barbados, Trinidad, Ireland, Great Britain, Holland, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Turkey, South Africa, India, Japan, and Korea.

Two central points of orientation through which he sought answers to his questions were the writer Richard Wright and the case of the Scottsboro trial. Having tackled with Wright and the issue of identity in his 1976 State University of New York at Buffalo dissertation, written under the direction of Bruce Jackson, Jim kept returning to Wright at several points in his career, during which he always kept teaching Wright's [important and famous novel](#), *Native Son*, set in Chicago of the 1930s. He registered carefully how this novel [as well as its protagonist, the African American chauffeur Bigger Thomas, who first accidentally kills his employer's daughter Mary and, as a hunted man, rapes and kills his girl friend Bessie](#), has remained provocative for students over the years—even though the nature of the provocation changed. [Jim](#) described the tense climate that surrounded it in 1968, around “the question of who had the right to teach it . . . , to criticize it.” Jim found, when he came to class, that his white students “had been expelled by a militant faction of black nationalists.” Two white students had remained in the class, however: a Jewish student who identified with [Bigger's](#) lawyer Boris Max, and a working-class Italian-American who saw himself in Jan Erlone, [a young communist who was Mary's boyfriend but forgives Bigger](#). Jim's assessment was: “We never did discuss *Native Son*, but I did learn a great deal about the ways in which this novel polarizes its readers.” Later student generations were less divided on matters of identity but more on the issue of whether Bigger Thomas was a victim or a rebel, a hero or a criminal, some regarding him as a “touchstone of moral and political commitment,” while others “called for his immediate execution.” Later on the focus [of class discussions](#) shifted again, from the social and political concerns implied by the novel to the issue of gender, most especially in Wright's treatment of [Bigger's victim](#) Bessie, which now appeared as an indication of Wright's supposed misogyny. Wright thus served as a literary-historical-political litmus test, for he kept (and keeps) making students uncomfortable. As Heather Hathaway, one of Jim's former students wrote, Jim enjoyed such moments in class and did not bridge any spell of awkward silence, but rather loved

¹ Obituary, written for *History Workshop Journal* (2017)

to extend it. Until students themselves would be able to break the spell, Jim would remain silent or simply say, with a bemused smile on his face, “isn’t discomfort a wonderful thing?” Made curious about how other teachers were experiencing Wright in their various classroom settings, Jim edited the collection [*Approaches to Teaching Wright’s Native Son*](#) for the Modern Language Association (1997). Jim spoke at conferences on Richard Wright and expatriates (at one of which we first met), wrote essays on him, and retained a life-long interest in Wright as one of the writers who, as Ta-Nehisi Coates put it, “grabbed the pen, not out of leisure but to break the chain.”

Literary and aesthetic work intended literally to “break the chain” was also what Jim examined in his major work on [*Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial*](#), (Princeton 2009), dedicated to his late parents, Elsie Jones Miller and John Wesley Miller, who had come to Rhode Island from Georgia. Jim’s father had been riding the rails in the 1930s, so that Scottsboro had that connection. The book begins with the facts of the 1931 case, the spurious rape charge leveled in Alabama against nine “Scottsboro boys” who were found hoboing on a freight train with two white women. The quick trials and harsh sentences that were meted out—eight were sentenced to death—caused an international uproar and a political campaign. Jim’s book shows most fully the whole array of aesthetic productions that the campaign to “free the Scottsboro boys” generated, for the patent injustice of the case was another ethical litmus test for artists in all media and genres. Jim offers close readings of a UPI photograph of the nine youngsters, of cover art of the *Labor Defender*, and of portraits by the African-American artist Aaron Douglas; he examines a wide variety of writers who rose to the occasion, among them Countée Cullen, Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Nancy Cunard, and Kay Boyle in poetry, John Wexley, Paul Peters, and Hughes in drama, and Grace Lumpkin, Guy Endore, Arna Bontemps, William Gardner Smith, and William Demby in fiction. Almost one entire chapter is devoted to the many direct references and allusions to the Scottsboro case in Richard Wright’s writing—and in Jim’s assessment of Wright’s lifelong “obsession with the peculiar convergence of race, sexuality, and racism that was at the root of the Scottsboro case” the two points of orientation converged. He employed effective close readings and a graceful, clear style while never losing sight of the political and ethical contexts. That he also passed his method on to others is confirmed by his former teaching assistant and colleague Farah Jasmine Griffin, who remembers Jim’s maxims as “*Historically grounded, close readings were valuable and necessary. Formal analysis could still yield great insight. Theory was an important tool but not to be reified . . . Writing with clarity was a necessity. And politics mattered, and not only textual politics or politics of representation.*”

Jim’s *Remembering Scottsboro* traces echoes long after the 1930s, into the Cold War, and ends with an epilogue that connects Scottsboro with contemporary cases that seem to echo it, among them that of the 1989 Central Park jogger whose rape led to a public frenzy, in which five teenagers were sentenced to prison terms from five to fifteen years, although in 2002 a serial rapist and murderer gave a confession, confirmed by DNA evidence. Jim reminds the reader of an infamous full-page ad that real estate developer Donald J. Trump took out in all New York daily papers at the peak of the hysteria against the teenagers, on May 1, 1989, headlined “BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY” and asking such rhetorical questions as: “At what point did we cross the line from the fine and noble pursuit of genuine civil liberties to the reckless and dangerously

permissive atmosphere which allows criminals of every age to beat and rape a helpless woman and then laugh at her family's anguish?" Could Jim have foreseen how timely his reminder of this ad would become in our days?

In his other writings Jim cast a wide net, focusing on a broad array of writers from Mark Twain to Ralph Ellison and George Schuyler to William Styron; on photographers from African American community photographers Morgan and Marvin Smith to the Jewish Communist 1930s veteran Joe Schwartz; and on critics from Matthew Jacobson to Cornel West and Ken Warren to Amy Kaplan. His abiding interest in black music extended from inviting [jazz saxophonist](#) Archie Shepp to Buffalo and examining the jazz history of Hartford, where he worked alongside saxophonist Jackie McLean to build the youth music and arts programs and fostered the city's Artists Collective, to analytical engagements with such South African musicians as composer Todd Matshikiza and jazz pianist and band leader Chris McGregor. Jim took the opportunity of an essay on black independent filmmaking to comment on artists from Melvin Van Peebles to Lionel N'gakane and suggested an approach that places U.S. creativity into the context of work from other parts of the world, for "we need a much more elastic definition of race, as well as a more complex understanding of the relationship among race, culture, and cultural production than the monolithic and essentialist definitions which often shape our perceptions in the United States." Reviewing the history of African American Studies and the changing paradigms governing the field, he stressed the continued need for such programs and departments.

His interest in modern African American writers was particularly far-ranging, as his writings covered the whole spectrum of modern African American literature: William Attaway, Toni Cade Bambara, Amiri Baraka, Arna Bontemps, Wesley Brown, Lucille Clifton, Frank Marshall Davis, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Leon Forrest, Dick Gregory, Ted Joans, Gayl Jones, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Albert Murray, Ann Petry, Margaret Randall, Ishmael Reed, George Schuyler, Michele Wallace, and John Edgar Wideman. He paid attention to children's literature, to books about athletes, he liked to return to discussions of literature of the 1930s, arguing that the notion of a renaissance should be extended beyond the 1920s, [and he always retained](#) a strong interest in the Black Arts Movement. He was keenly attuned to the pedagogic significance of local history and of writing from and about the regions where he was teaching. Hence he urged students to explore Connecticut history and included writers like Ann Petry when he was at Hartford and co-founded the Hartford Studies Project in documentary studies. When at George Washington University, he worked, and inspired work, on literary Washington from Jean Toomer and Alain Locke to Georgia Douglas Johnson and Langston Hughes. Viewing the city as a "symbolic space," Jim highlighted the sharp contrast both Toomer and Hughes drew between the satirized black bourgeois world and the "raw, unrepressed energy of Seventh Street" where people "played the blues, ate watermelon, barbecue, and fish sandwiches, shot pool, told tall tales, looked at the dome of the Capitol and laughed out loud."

Laughter, yes, laughter. We already heard from a former student who remembers Jim's bemused smile. He did have a deep sense of irony that he held in a delicate balance with his abiding social concerns. It was almost as if the shadow of racial injustice and inequality needed to be removed so as to set free a more full-throated laughter. Jim loved *Tristram Shandy*. The reader who has never met Jim may want to turn to the introduction

to his edition of George S. Schuyler's *Black No More* in order to hear Jim's gleeful tone as he gives a detailed account of a great satirical novel that yet leaves space "for the emergence of alliances and human relationships based on shared values and experiences." At the end, Jim praises "Schuyler's iconoclasm, his highly developed sense of irony, and his scathing indictment of the absurdities of American racism."

Who was the [man in the impeccable outfit](#), sometimes wearing striking neckties, whose televised lectures and comments still charm viewers and make them notice a smile even as Jim may express a sharp critique yet also reveal a vulnerability that invites the viewer all the more to adopt his point of view? Born August 27, 1944, in Providence, Rhode Island, he attended Hope High School and graduated from Brown University in 1966. The writer John Barth encouraged him to apply to the State University of New York at Buffalo, and that is where Jim received his Ph.D. and had his first teaching experience. Jim then taught at New York's Medgar Evers College before becoming Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and Director of African American Studies at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Since 1998 he served as Professor of English and American Studies at George Washington University, where he also chaired Africana Studies (1998-2006) and American Studies (2006-2010), and was Director of the Center for the Study of Public History and Culture (2010-2013). He served on more than 40 Ph.D. dissertation committees on wide-ranging topics, including nativist discourse in the early *New Masses*, Black nationalist comedians, and Jazz, Leftist Politics, and the Counter-Minstrel Narrative. Among his many honors two stand out: In 2002 he became the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, D.C., Professor of the Year, and in 2008 he received the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Award from George Washington University.

James A. Miller succumbed to cancer on June 19, 2015, at his home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. [He will be missed.](#)

[2,170 words]

Werner Sollors