By Alice Bernstein

NASHVILLE, TN — Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, educator, activist, and leader in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, was the guest speaker on March 2nd at Harvard University’s Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations. At age 97, Dr. Williams is a vibrant, contemporary woman who has fought for equality in education and civil rights. The diverse audience of young and old included teenage freshmen, graduates, faculty, and guests, and the distinguished educator Dr. McDonald Williams (age 98), who is her husband. Hearing her speak, I thought of these words written by the great philosopher and poet, Eli Siegel, founder of Aesthetic Realism:

“[A person] will not be fully human until he [or she] is interested in justice with great intensity and with the comprehensiveness which does not wish to miss any of its forms.... Where something is wrong in the outside world, we should oppose it not only because it has affected us inconveniently, but because the idea of not opposing injustice, the sense of personal shame in permitting what is evil anywhere, makes one not like oneself.”

Dr. Williams’ rich life has been spent opposing injustice in many important ways. In her talk she discussed her work 1) as an educator for over 48 years in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); 2) as a civil rights activist in the 1950s-60s; and 3) in the AME Church.

She was introduced by Dr. S. Allen Counter, one of her earliest students, now a professor of neurobiology at Harvard. He described how crucial HBCUs were before the civil rights movement—and beyond—as the only opportunity for higher education accessible to black students. And, in the rare instances where black men and women were able to attend white colleges, they were denied jobs as teachers there when they graduated. Meanwhile, he noted that ironically, this in-justice led to the employment of these highly educated and dedicated black teachers at HBCUs.

Dr. Counter expressed his gratitude for having been a student at an HBCU—Tennessee State A&I (now TSU)—and he was clearly moved to host his dear professor as guest speaker.

Education & the AME Church—Then and Now

Dr. Williams began her talk by asking young scholars to commit themselves “to careers in academe, which truly, sure enough needs you.” While telling further of her talk, I’ll also add some instances of what she has said elsewhere, including conversations we have had because of my work as a journalist and civil rights historian, work informed by my study of Aesthetic Realism. She makes clear throughout her talk that her interest in justice isn’t over; and that she continues to ask for more from herself—and others. There is a maxim by Eli Siegel that I believe expresses the large way every person should be seen: “Every person now alive is a culmination of history.” It is certainly true about Dr. Williams, whose life
has been deeply affected in particular by events in American history as far back as the 1700s and the brutality of slavery, as well as events in the 20th and 21st centuries that she witnessed and participated in. She was born in 1918 in Louisville, Kentucky, and later earned a B.A. with honors in English from her beloved alma mater Wilberforce University in Ohio. Later she lived and taught in Tennessee and Georgia. And because the AME church is one of the big forces in her life—her father and brother were AME ministers—she told of its history and its unflagging activism for higher education and economic justice for over 200 years.

The AME church is the oldest African American religious denomination in America. It arose from the Free African Society organized in 1787 by freemen protesting against slavery and racial segregation in houses of worship. In 1816, the AME was formally organized in Philadelphia, largely through the work of a former slave who bought his freedom, Rev. Richard Allen. In 1856, just before the Civil War, the AME church established its first college—Wilberforce, in Ohio—and has stood firmly ever since for education as the key to equal opportunity. Dr. Williams pointed out to her audience that one of the teachers at Wilberforce was W.E.B. DuBois, the first black awarded a PhD., by Harvard University.

She expressed pride in having taught the humanities to thousands of students at five Historically Black Colleges and Universities, four of which are AME colleges and being part of their educational experience.

Among her many students who would later become notable in their fields are: opera singer Leontyne Price, Grammy-winning gospel singer Bobby Jones, Olympic gold medalist Wilma Rudolph; and, in addition, eight students of hers became AME bishops, three became college presidents, two became seminary presidents, and others went on to careers in medicine, engineering, government, and law. She is fervent about the need for HBCUs to survive, against the odds today, when “soaring budgets and diminishing resources,” make it hard for black colleges to withstand the “brain drain” caused by recruitment of promising black students by well endowed colleges. In 2010 she spoke on the theme, “Education Determines Our Dreams and Destiny,” to an interdenominational gathering of ministers, educators and leaders, to celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King and the 28th anniversary of the national holiday in his name. Calling it “a sad time,” when poverty, unemployment, and rising college costs severely threaten HBCUs, she stressed with great intensity that equality of educational opportunity is a crucial
“avenue for our youth [to] realize their dream and destiny” when “more of our young men are in prison than in college.”

At Harvard, she urged the students, so fortunate in their access to knowledge, to “combat the obstacles to parity in education for African Americans.” When Jamye Williams says “Thank God for the black college,” it is a statement that takes in her whole life, and it is meant!

Civil Rights: The Fight Between Contempt and Respect

My work as an historian of civil rights led to my knowing Dr. Williams and attending her talk. We were introduced by two of our mutual friends, retired AME Bishop Frederick C. James of South Carolina, and Mrs. Rosetta Miller Perry, publisher of The Tennessee Tribune. They—and now Dr. Williams—are among the 200 men and women nationwide whom I’ve interviewed for “The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights” oral history project. The project aims to preserve little known history of the struggle for justice, and to meet the urgent need in America to understand the cause and answer to racism, explained by Aesthetic Realism.

The moment-to-moment ethical fight in every human being, Eli Siegel taught, is between contempt—“the addition to self through the lessening of something else” and respect—wanting to know and be fair to the world and people. It is the desire for contempt, that is the cause of racism and every human injustice. In The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known, Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss wrote:
“[T]he fight, Shall I see the world and people with contempt or respect? is the fight within every individual right now; it is our constant, inward, personal civil war.”

The persons interviewed for “The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights” are distinguished by the fact that in difficult, dangerous, and sometimes life-threatening situations, they chose to fight for justice and made America better, stronger, more ethical. Their lives are evidence that the desire to know and be fair to others—to be ethical—has power and makes for the greatest self-respect.

In her talk, Dr. Williams spoke of her civil rights activism—and gave what she called “dramatic snapshots,” of working for 40 years on the Executive Committee of the NAACP (her husband McDonald was vice president) and with local youth councils in colleges, fighting injustice that threatened not only their own but others’ lives. She worked with well-known leaders, including Martin Luther King, John Lewis, James Lawson, and Thurgood Marshall—and others hardly known now. Some of them were lawyers representing victims of racist violence, students arrested at sit-ins to desegregate eating places, and anyone whose stand against Jim Crow led to attempts to discredit, bankrupt, destroy their livelihoods, and even end their lives.

One such person was Z. Alexander Looby, the Nashville Movement’s leading lawyer. She vividly
April 19, 1960

"And the people shouted with a great shout; so that the wall fell down."

Joshua 6:20

On the 19th of April 1960, Nashville proclaimed itself a beacon of civility, common sense and reconciliation.

Following months of civil rights sit-ins, the home of black City Councilman Z. Alexander Looby was bombed in the early hours of the morning, and several thousand marchers walked to this courthouse in protest.

In the charged atmosphere of that afternoon, Mayor Ben West broke the impasse as he told the crowd that he believed it morally wrong for store owners to sell to blacks while denying them service at lunch counters. He made this statement in a public exchange with Fisk student Diane Nash.

And in Nashville, the walls of segregation crumbled.

This memorial commemorates the civility of those demonstrators, Mayor Ben West and our community on that day. May we continue to live together as one God-fearing community forever.

Philip Bredesen, Mayor April 19, 1995

described “an event that solidified the black community, on April 19, 1960,” when his home was bombed. The blast, felt several miles away, broke 140 windows at nearby Meharry Medical College (HBCU) injuring some students. (Thankfully, the Looby’s were unharmed, having been warned of the bomb threat.) A spontaneous protest march began at TSU with several hundred and grew to 3,000 with students in schools and colleges joining along the way, including Jamye Williams, her husband, and their daughter Donna. The march, conducted in complete silence, reached the courthouse steps—and was about to change history.

She gave a riveting eyewitness account of the historic confrontation with Nashville’s Mayor Ben West and one of the student leaders, Diane Nash. The bombing protest, and so many events in the years leading up to it, made for that the lunch counters be desegregated an ethical breakthrough. Ms. Nash regaled?!” and the Mayor answered courageously asked the Mayor the clearly, ever so surprisingly, "Yes!"

This led to what Jamye Williams called “a death knell to the continued white opposition to the desegregation of public accommodations.” Nashville had led the way to desegregation in the South. And, in 1995,” Dr. Williams said, “exactly thirty-five years after Diane Nash posed that crucial question on the morality of segregation, another Mayor—Philip Bredesen—on the same spot in front of the courthouse, in the presence of civil rights activists, including an older Diane Nash, dedicated a plaque commemorating that historic day with the words from the Old Testament prophet Joshua: “And the people shouted with a great shout so that the walls fell down.”
Dr. Harris Gibson, Donna Williams and David Evans  Photo by Rachel J. Bernstein, Alliance of Ethics and Art

Ellen Lehman and Dr. Harris Gibson with Harvard students and guests  Photo by Rachel J. Bernstein, Alliance of Ethics & Art

Ohio Historical Marker - Wilberforce University's Distinguished Wilberforceans
Writing about Jamye Williams’ life and work, I’ve thought often about this principle, central in Aesthetic Realism, “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” I respect the way she is trying to put together the opposites of erudition and passion, bravery and caution, courage and sympathy. In Eli Siegel’s essay, “A Woman Is a Oneness of Aesthetic Opposites,” a beautiful and true understanding of all women that can be seen as commenting on her life, he wrote this about the opposites of Hard and Soft:

“Often a determination comes to women which can hold its own with that of Napoleon or a boulder in a city park. And women are also pitying, sympathetic, moved to give up their notions because of the plight of another.”

The AME Church Today

Her talk ended with a discussion of what Dr. Mc-Donald Williams has proudly described as his wife’s “fierce advocacy for women in ministry, particularly in the bishopry.”

In a discussion after her talk, two women students, Cary Williams and Doni Lehman, asked about challenges Dr. Williams faced particularly as a woman and her experience with the challenges faced by other women.

Replied, she reflected on her efforts, which led to the election in 2000 of the first female bishop of the AME Church after 187 years:

“In our church, the majority of members and the majority of seminary enrollees are women. So it is not fair to deny them full inclusion. It’s sort of like the civil rights battle…. People just don’t want to relinquish power without a fight.

“We decided it was time to have a female bishop. It was not easy and it was not pretty…. I had taught 8 of the bishops, and I would go to each one and say, ‘It’s time for us to elect a woman to the bishopry and I need your help.’ They would tell me, ‘I’ll pray over it.’ So I wrote a resolution … to include a woman to be elected. As you can imagine, there was pandemonium…. But this propelled the organization to finally elect a woman bishop, Vashti Murphy McKenzie. (Note: Two other women were elected in following years.)

And she continued with undiminished determination about her future work:

“In 2016 [the church] will be 200 years old as a formal organization. We’re going to Philadelphia in July. Right now the AME church has one woman bishop —one of the women died and the other is retired. So if we don’t elect someone in 2016, when 2020 comes and Bishop McKenzie retires, we will have a bench of male bishops. Now that is unacceptable in 2016."

The evening concluded with a surprise as Dr. Counter presented an award of appreciation to Jamye Coleman Williams for her innumerable contributions to education, social involvement of the AME Church, and intercultural relations.

It was moving to see students rising to surround her and to express their appreciation—many eager to have pictures taken with her.

Dr. Williams once told me she had taught the poetry of Eli Siegel in classes on contemporary American poets, and mentioned having recently bought his second volume of poetry, Hail, American Development. I told her of a poem in it about Martin Luther King, which I love and have written about, and asked if she’d like me to recite it. She eagerly said yes:

Something Else Should Die:
A Poem with Rhymes
by Eli Siegel

In April 1865
Abraham Lincoln died.
In April 1968
Martin Luther King died.
Their purpose was to have us say,
some day:
Injustice died.

“Beautiful--how beautiful, and moving,” she said. I agree. And I know the study of Aesthetic Realism will bring us closer to that day described in the final lines of this poem.

Alice Bernstein is a journalist, Aesthetic Realism Associate, and historian for “The Force of Ethics in Civil Rights,” the oral history project of the not-for-profit Alliance of Ethics and Art.