

January 19, 2020

## A Poem by Eli Siegel about Martin Luther King & What Humanity Hopes For

By Alice Bernstein

As we observe the federal holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King's courageous life with his opposition to racism, poverty, and war, I am moved to look anew at a poem about justice and the hopes of humanity by Eli Siegel, the great American poet and founder of the education Aesthetic Realism.

### Something Else Should Die:

#### A Poem with Rhymes

By Eli Siegel

In April 1865

Abraham Lincoln died.

In April 1968

Martin Luther King died.

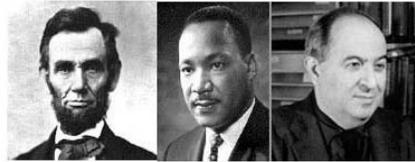
Their purpose was to have  
 us say, some day:

Injustice died.

With enormous respect, Mr. Siegel sees two men of different races, living in different centuries, as united in opposition to injustice. And the music of this poem, with the names given such meaningful weight, has us feel the reality of both men—we feel they are alive, warm, near.

Abraham Lincoln, as Dr. King himself recognized, wanted slavery to end, and considered the Emancipation Proclamation “the central act of my administration and the great event of the 19th century.” His assassination by John Wilkes Booth, a man who hated equality for anyone with skin different from his own. Mr. Siegel wrote in his note to this poem: “[T]he killing of Lincoln made for a while an ugly individual attitude supreme. It was so with the killing of Martin Luther King.”

Dr. King is loved for his bravery, sincerity, and enormous energy in fighting for justice to people of all



Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Eli Siegel

races including in the Civil Rights movement, the Poor People's Campaign to end poverty, and his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

In 1968 in Memphis, he was murdered after standing up for striking sanitation workers. Soon after the news broke, Eli Siegel, in an Aesthetic Realism class, read the poem he had just written. I had the immense privilege of being in that class, and will always remember the great emotion Mr. Siegel had as he spoke of Dr. King's large meaning.



Dr. King Marching with Memphis Strikers  
 Photo credit: AFSCME

Eli Siegel's passion against injustice is the most beautiful thing I know. He explained that *contempt*—the desire in every person to “think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world” is the cause of all human injustice, including the racism and economic exploitation Dr. King spent his life fighting against. And Mr. Siegel explained that the alternative—honest respect for the world—is something people are

longing for more deeply than they know.

In *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss explains:

Racism won't be effectively done away with unless it is replaced with something that has terrific power. What needs to replace it is not the feeling that the difference of another person is somehow tolerable. What is necessary is the seeing and feeling that the relation of sameness and difference between ourselves and that other person is beautiful. People need to feel, with feeling both intimately personal and large, that difference of race is like the difference to be found in music: two notes are different, but they are in behalf of the same melody; they complete each other; each needs the other to be expressed richly, to be fully itself.

I am grateful to have learned from Aesthetic Realism that my mind—and that of every person—was made to like the world, see meaning in it, not to feel important by despising it. As I began to see the feelings of others as real—including people who were very different from me—my life became happier, more expressed, and my individuality was heightened. This led to work I treasure as a civil rights historian, journalist, and co-author—with 23 diverse men and women—of the book: *Aesthetic Realism and the Answer to Racism*.

### Allan Michael & Elijah Cummings & an Historic Event

I tell now of two important men who, with others, have seen the immense value of Eli Siegel's understanding of the cause of racism and what can end it!

August 16, 2002, the centenary of the birth of Eli Siegel, was declared “Eli Siegel Day” in Baltimore, the city where he grew up, in proclamations by the Mayor and by Maryland’s Governor.

The celebration in Druid Hill Park, included an address by Ellen Reiss, who spoke about Mr. Siegel’s life, his magnificent scholarship, integrity, and kindness. *See link to the entire program with speakers’ comments.* \*



**Allan Michael**, one of the first African American Maritime Captains in the New York Harbor, is a photographer and an Aesthetic Realism Associate. He was one of the speakers at this event, and said:

”It is hard to be black in this country and feel that justice is going to come your way, because black people have endured horrific injustice for years, from slavery to racial profiling. This has made for tremendous anger in our nation. For example, I was angry and humiliated being stopped on Route 80 by a state trooper for no apparent reason, as my private belongings were systematically strewn out on the roadside. I join my...fellow speakers in saying I know that Aesthetic Realism is the means to end racism. In fact, the Aesthetic Realism education is living proof that through what Mr. Siegel explained, people of one background not only can be fair to others, but can understand them.

It was through the thought of Eli Siegel, a white man, that I was able to understand the deepest things in myself; and this points to a fundamental hope for all races. In beautiful prose, Mr. Siegel stated:

It will be found that black and white man have the same goodnesses, the same temptations, and can be criticized in the same way. The skin may be different, but the aorta is quite the same.

Humanity will thank him as I do for teaching in Aesthetic Realism how all people can honestly see each other with depth, kindness, and respect.”



**Elijah E. Cummings** (1951–2019), who served in the U.S. House of Representatives for Maryland’s 7th District from 1996 until his death last October, was a lifelong civil rights advocate known for his integrity and courage, including in his last days as Chair of the House Oversight Committee. On July 26, 2002, Congressman Cummings gave a tribute to Eli Siegel on the floor of Congress, in which he read the poem “Something Else Should Die.” His tribute, which includes extended remarks and writings by Eli Siegel and Ellen Reiss, is published in the U.S. Congressional Record (#E1445) and begins:

“I rise today to honor a great Baltimorean poet, educator, and founder of Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel.”

And he continued:

“A teaching method, based on Aesthetic Realism, has been tremendously successful...as an effective tool to stop racism and promote tolerance; because it enables people of all races to see others with respect and kindness. His poetry and the education of Aesthetic Realism will be studied in every English, literature, and art

classroom across the nation for years to come.”

These two men, Allan Michael and Elijah Cummings, both of whom benefitted from and were inspired by the life and work of Martin Luther King, represent the hopes of America, an America that needs to know and study the powerful, ethical education that understands the source of racism and can have it end at last.

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*“Racism Can End” Speakers at Eli Siegel Day celebration in Druid Hill Park, Baltimore (l-r) Captain Allan Michael, Dr. Jaime R. Torres, early childhood educator Monique Michael, Dr. Arnold Perey.*

Elijah Cummings Tribute to Eli Siegel in the Congressional Record  
<http://bit.ly/2QQH7RI>

Link to [Eli Siegel Day Speakers](#)

Notes: “Something Else Should Die: A Poem with Rhymes,” appears in Eli Siegel’s second volume of poetry, *Hail, American Development* (Definition Press).

*Alice Bernstein is a journalist, Aesthetic Realism Associate, and editor/co-author of the books, Aesthetic Realism & the Answer to Racism, and “The People of Clarendon County”—A Play by Ossie Davis & the Answer to Racism.*

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