

"Spike, Don't Mess Malcolm Up': Courting Controversy and Control in *Malcolm X*," in this volume.

4. Matthew S. Scott, "Are You Ready to Invest in the Film Industry?" *Black Enterprise*, December 1996.

5. See Watkins, *Representing*, 159–66.

6. Erich Leon Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks, Demystifying the Man," *MovieMaker* 24 (March 1997), available online at <http://www.moviemaker.com/magazine/editorial.php?id=297>.

7. Todd McCarthy, "Lee Back on Track in 'Bus,'" *Variety*, October 7–13, 1996.

8. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

9. Ibid.

10. See Toni Cade Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*," in this volume.

11. Andrew Hinds, "'Sleepers' in a Walk; 'Bus' Stalls," *Daily Variety*, October 21, 1996.

12. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

13. *Hollywood Reporter*, November 11, 1996.

14. Harris, "Spike Lee Speaks."

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We Shall Overcome: Preserving History and Memory in *4 Little Girls*

Perhaps more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history. We've fled the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of the national memory, and a great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at a cost of ignoring the process through which we've arrived at any given moment in our national existence.

—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

September 15, 1963, was Youth Day at the Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Carole Robertson were in the ladies' lounge in the basement of the building freshening up, knowing that, along with their friends, it was their responsibility to help with the services of the day. At a little past ten in the morning, dynamite exploded in the church, instantly killing the four young girls and injuring over twenty.¹ To those African Americans living in "Bombingham," Alabama, and all across the country, it was another tragic reminder of how little their lives meant to the racist white residents of their city and to apathetic Americans as a whole. Indeed, a week before the bombing, as the federal government ordered that schools desegregate, George Wallace, then governor of Alabama, said in an interview with the *New York Times* that a "few first-class funerals" would end integration in Alabama.²

Robert Chambliss, a.k.a. "Dynamite Bob," was arrested in 1963 for the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church and for having dynamite without a permit. However, on October 8, 1963, he was only fined \$100 and given a six-month sentence for possession of the dynamite. While a 1965 FBI memo to J. Edgar Hoover indicated that four Ku Klux Klan members—Robert Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash, and Thomas E. Blanton—were responsible for the bombing, no charges were filed. Indeed, in 1980, a Justice Department report indicated that Hoover had prevented the

prosecution of the men responsible for the bombing. It was not until 1977 that Bill Baxley, attorney general for the State of Alabama, reopened the case against Chambliss. Based on information from FBI files, Chambliss was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison, dying there in October 1985.³

The four girls were martyrs to the cause of desegregation and would never grow to see the changes that resulted from their sacrifice. It was a case that shocked many across the United States and is now considered a moment that changed the course of the Civil Rights Movement in the nation. Along with the televised images of Police Chief Bull Connor's attacks on civil-rights protesters in Birmingham, these incidents brought the reality of black people's plight home to white Americans unwilling to acknowledge their complicity in the U.S. racial dictatorship.⁴

The revelatory and shocking nature of these images led to repeated viewings throughout the country at large and within the African American community specifically, first to comprehend, then to instigate change and eventually to remember and pay tribute to those who lost their lives for black survival and to open doors for future generations in this country. Over time, these images have become an important part of the national memory. However, in a disturbing trend in the 1990s and in this new century, many people have become desensitized to the horrors of the civil-rights struggle, and these scenes and stories do not seem to evoke what one would think to be an appropriate response. Indeed, many people do not even know of some of these specific stories, such as that of the four little girls.

One day while teaching the class Black Popular Culture, I casually referred to Jesse Owens and noticed the blank looks on the faces of many in front of me. When I asked who knew who Jesse Owens was, only one or two students raised their hands. I mentioned a few other black historical figures—Stokely Carmichael, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till—and received the same reaction. I quickly realized that when I teach my African American studies classes, I shouldn't assume that African American stories, no matter how significant, are passed down. Unfortunately, while from the days of slavery oral histories were a given part of the African American life, in this highly mediated world, these important traditions have fallen by the wayside.

It has also become clear that some African American students in my classes, while enjoying the fruits of the civil-rights struggle, consider this ancient history and a topic that does not need to be addressed. Although a significant black underclass still exists, the successes gained in certain areas of American industry and politics, the high visibility in sports and music, the embrace of hip-hop by mainstream America seemingly negates the presence of underprivileged black people, the high rate of black incarceration, and the reversal of affirmative action. Many African Americans assert that to address

these issues and to keep this history alive is to stir up an ugly past. Forgetting is colluding with the forces that wish to overlook the nation's legacy of racism.

Preserving, remembering, and recuperating black stories has been the work of African American documentary-film makers from the earliest days of the medium. Whether it was reporting on life at the Tuskegee institute in *A Day at Tuskegee* (1910), black military recruits in *The Negro Soldier* (1944), or the black freedom movement in *Eyes on the Prize* (parts I and II; 1987, 1990), black filmmakers and screenwriters have considered documentary film a political and social tool.⁵ In their book *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler argue that black documentary-film making follows a tradition within African American society by creating historical narratives that address white American representations of black culture:

Many socially and politically committed film/videomakers view documentary as a tool with which to interrogate and reinvent history; their work fills gaps, corrects errors, and exposes distortions in order to provide counter-narratives of African American experience.⁶

While the authors acknowledge that documentary theory challenges that idealistic nature of documentary production as a whole, they alternately argue that within black society, documentary has been and continues to be a mode of political and social agency. Following within this tradition is the genesis of Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* (1997).

Moved by an article he read while in film school at New York University, Lee wrote to Chris McNair, father of the bombing victim Denise McNair, in hope of getting permission to make a film about the incident. Although McNair knew and respected Lee's father and aunts, he did not trust Lee with the story. McNair reveals:

Spike was still in school when he sent me a letter asking me if I'd be willing to participate in a documentary. It wasn't as though I didn't want to talk about it. . . . [I]t's cathartic for me. But I don't guess I was ready to talk about it on film, and at that time Spike wasn't ready to make the film.⁷

McNair, who became a politician in Birmingham in 1973, also did not want anyone to think that he would use the case to advance his own career and protected the girls' legacy fiercely.⁸ Years later, Lee approached him again and met with both Chris and his wife, Maxine, who agreed to have their story told. In 1995, McNair met two Birmingham women who were almost thirty

years old and had never heard of the bombing.⁹ As he stated, "I realized it was stupid to forget. I want people to know who the four little girls were, and to understand that this could have happened anywhere in the United States. Those girls . . . my daughter should not have died."¹⁰

Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* succeeds in shaking both black and white viewers out of their contemporary apathy to U.S. racial history. Lee moves the viewer between the personal history of the families of the victims and the more recognized, public, political history of Birmingham. Focusing on the individual puts a face on the atrocities of the civil-rights struggle. In doing so, Lee nuances the viewers' memory of civil rights, which is typically enmeshed with larger-than-life symbols of the movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. A unique part of the film is that it attempts not to portray the girls as symbols but as flesh and blood, which in turn forces the viewer to become reconnected to the past and to have a renewed appreciation for civil-rights struggles. Released in 1997, in the midst of the bombings of black churches across the United States, the film also reminds viewers that without vigilance we are forced to repeat our past.

Personal and Public History and the Structure of *4 Little Girls*

African Americans are far too quick to want to forget. We don't want to remember. It's always: "Let's forget about slavery, Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers. Why you wanna go back and bring that up—dredge up that stuff?" Consequently, we have a generation of black kids who think this is the way it always was—that we could always live where we wanted, eat where we wanted, have church where we wanted. We need to remember.

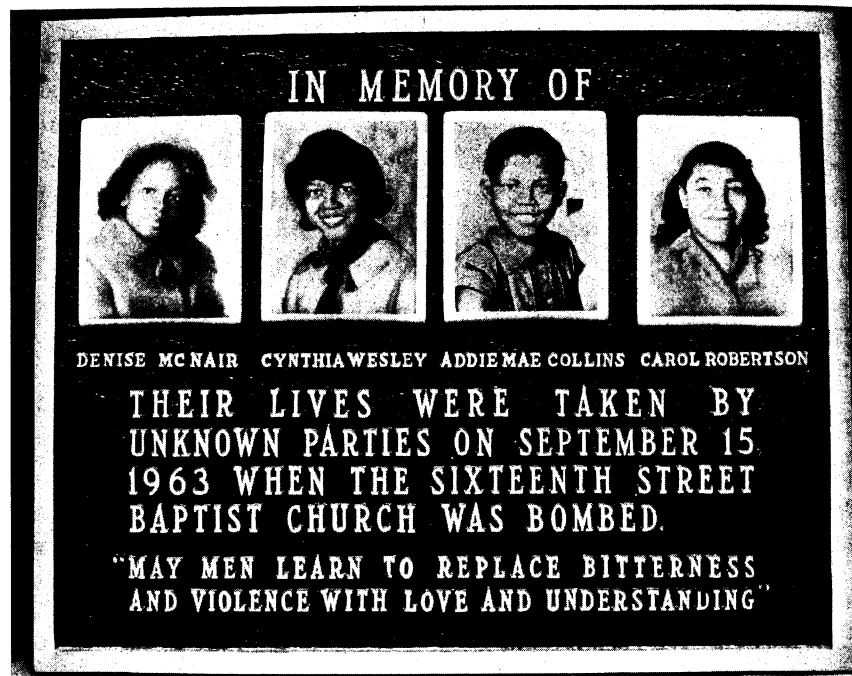
—Spike Lee¹¹

If you ask the average American what he or she knows about the Civil Rights Movement, more often than not the first thing the person will say is that he or she knows about Martin Luther King. King, like Rosa Parks, has become a standard part of school curriculum in primary through secondary (and post-secondary) education. He is a "Think Different" Macintosh computer advertisement. He is a public holiday. Unfortunately, this familiarity with a figure who represents a movement can also lead to apathy. Why choose to discuss a topic we all know so well? The structure of *4 Little Girls* works against this indifference as it associates the personal stories with the larger political movement, encouraging empathy and understanding, if not outrage.

Lee's opening-credit sequences have often stood out as metanarratives that comment on the films. For example, the encapsulated African American history lesson at the beginning of *School Daze* places dilemmas inherent in black educational institutions within the context of African American history. Lee also addresses larger contemporary societal issues, such as police brutality with the inclusion of the Rodney King footage during the opening credits of *Malcolm X*. The opening sequence of *4 Little Girls* reveals the film's overall structure, which shifts between the personal history of the four families whose girls died in the bombing and the more recognizable public history of civil rights in Alabama. In doing so, Lee creates a bridge between the personal and the political in black history.

The film begins with a black-and-white tracking shot of what is revealed to be a cemetery. Joan Baez's "Birmingham Sunday" (1964), written to pay tribute to the four girls, provides the soundtrack. Images that have come to be almost instantly, perhaps naturally, tied to the Civil Rights Movement follow: Black people are attacked by police dogs and assaulted by policemen, and young children march in protest. The film reverts back to color footage of the cemetery to indicate the shift from the historical to the contemporary time period, and the camera zooms in on individual gravestones of the four girls, making the audience more than aware of how young the victims were when that bomb took their lives.

The lyrics of Baez's song introduce the viewer to the four girls. "And Addie Mae Collins, her number was one." Collins's black-and-white photograph is superimposed on the left side of her headstone, which reads, "Civil Rights Martyr Addie Mae Collins Apr. 18, 1949–Sept. 15, 1963." The film then cuts to images of anonymous youth associated with the movement. Rather than showing images of major civil-rights figures to mark the era, Lee makes this a story of everyday people caught up in the struggle. The black-and-white image of Denise McNair follows, juxtaposed, again, with her headstone. The subsequent footage focuses on children marching and school desegregation. The gravestone of the Wesley family represents Cynthia and is followed by images of black children blasted by fire hoses. Finally, Carole Rosamond Robertson's gravestone bears the dates of her short existence while the historical footage that follows becomes more specific to the topic at hand: images of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church, the funeral of three of the girls, and the mourners. These are interspersed with contemporary images of a memorial sculpture and a plaque that displays school pictures of the four girls. By juxtaposing the gravestones and photos of the young victims with the public history, *4 Little Girls* encourages the audience to meditate upon this specific tragedy within the wider context of the Civil Rights Movement and, by doing so, personalizes an era whose relevance is becoming diminished. As Lee suggests, "I want the audience, especially the parents, to think about



4 Little Girls (1997). In Memoriam.

what they might have done had their child been taken away from them like that. I want the audience to come to know and love those four little girls."¹²

This concern for its subjects and subject matter provides the emotional impact of *4 Little Girls*. It is clear that Lee was able to build trust with his subjects in the documentary that allowed him access not only to information, but also to their interior personal worlds. By introducing the viewer to the girls and their families, Lee hopes that his film will not only make them a permanent part of the audience's memory but also create a link between the past and the present. One of Lee's stated concerns is the loss of connection between African Americans and the struggles of their ancestors. Lee's secondary task is therefore to re-engage the viewer with the civil-rights past.

An example of this structure can be seen in the first segment of *4 Little Girls*. The film begins by introducing the audience to the McNair family. A jazz score by Terence Blanchard plays on the soundtrack as a yearbook opens and focuses on a college photograph of Christopher McNair. As he explains, he went to school at Tuskegee and met his wife. The shots switch between McNair and his wife, Maxine, as they discuss their courtship, marriage, and the birth of their child. Like many traditional American wives of the 1940s

and '50s, what Maxine wanted in life was the American dream—a husband, a house, and children—and chose to have Denise in Birmingham to be near her mother. As Denise's parents, aunts, friends, and neighbors discuss their memories of the girl in voiceover, photos of Denise as a baby and a young girl appear on-screen. The effect of this audiovisual combination encourages audience identification with the girl.

The film fluidly moves between the personal and public history of Jim Crow by calling on the families to recall their memories of living in Alabama during the era of segregation. Chris McNair discusses how difficult it was for a black man with an education to find a job in the blue-collar town. His reminiscences are set in opposition to the comments of Circuit Court Judge Arthur Hanes Jr., who was also the defense attorney for Bob Chambliss. Hanes calls Birmingham the Magic City and describes the early 1960s as "a time of quiet, a wonderful place to live and raise a family." In the film Hanes represents the idealized, white version of the Birmingham of the past. While Hanes describes the city in voiceover, Lee ironically inserts photographs of various lynchings and KKK marches, including footage of a young child in a KKK uniform. The effect is to support McNair's observations while also questioning the validity of Hanes's comments. A larger and perhaps more compelling result of the juxtaposition is to remind viewers that historical memory is not only subjective but subject to revisions over time.

The McNair family and neighbors present a black perspective on segregated life in Alabama—for example, a neighbor of the McNairs' remembers, "It was an awful time, an awful time for young people to grow up in this city." Chris McNair describes shopping at a local store with Denise, who, after using the bathroom, smelled the onions cooking at the lunch counter and asked to have a sandwich. It can be assumed that the audience has heard the stories or seen pictures of civil-rights sit-ins at restaurants. However, this very personal story of a man having to explain segregation to his child brings home the reality of the situation to an audience who may have either become desensitized over time or may not have a true understanding of how dehumanizing or emasculating it was for a man not to have the power to give his child what she wanted. Reinforcing the depth of the hurt that this caused him, McNair explains, "That night I knew I had to tell her she couldn't have that sandwich because she was black. That couldn't have been any less painful than seeing her with a rock smashed into her head."

A similar connection with each of the girls in the film personalizes many of these well-known indignities of segregation in the South. For example, during a subsequent segment, Carole Robertson's older sister Dianne Braddock remembers going to the movies with Carole and having to sit in the segregated balcony. Braddock recalls venting her frustration by throwing ice and popcorn

on the white patrons below. Dr. Freeman Hrabowski III, one of Cynthia Wesley's friends, discusses the time that Bull Conner spit on him, as well as his fear during his incarceration with the other children arrested for marching in Birmingham.

These everyday individuals are given the power as witnesses on the level of the "icons." Whereas the majority of public histories of the movement rely on the stories, testimony, or recollections of the better-known participants of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Rosa Parks or Andrew Young, the film allows these "ordinary" citizens a voice in their history. The Civil Rights Movement was always a grassroots movement; over time, the concentration on figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. has diminished the power of the movement that came in the sheer numbers of black people who sustained it. The film *4 Little Girls* balances the picture for a young, contemporary audience who, if taught about the movement in a public-education setting, is told the stories of icons and not necessarily of the power of the individual within the movement.

Ethics and Memory in *4 Little Girls*

It's not easy because we had put so much of this behind us, and we don't remember, we don't remember anymore. You know what I am saying? But you know how you felt. You may not remember details, or what step-by-step of what I had to go through. But I do know that it affected me so bad.

—Junie Collins on being asked to remember her sister Addie Mae

By choosing to make *4 Little Girls* a documentary, Lee entered a different world of filmmaking from his previous fiction projects.¹³ While he made *Malcolm X* as a dramatic adaptation, based in part on others' scripts, Lee felt differently about this topic and thought, "The best treatment of the story would be to let people who were there tell it. There is no way I can write dialogue that can describe the pain of a parent losing a daughter at a young age."¹⁴ To this end, he choose to let the subjects speak for themselves, often setting up the camera and holding the shot for long moments to capture a situation's nuances.

With the kidnapping of Africans and their loss of home, the one way to pass on stories of the past was through an oral tradition. This cultural, social, and political act is at the core of African American society and African American aesthetics. As times changed and access to education increased, some of these stories were written down to preserve them for future generations. The first-person retelling of these stories through documentary film closely replicates this form of history keeping, allowing for the continuation of this black tradition. However, the use of this filmic form brings a distinct level of respon-

sibility to the filmmaker. The issue of film ethics takes on a new meaning when one is dealing no longer with characters, but with people. As the documentary theorist Bill Nichols suggests, "Ethical considerations attempt to minimize harmful effects. Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the relationship between filmmaker and subject have consequences for subjects and viewers alike."¹⁵ In creating the level of emotional realism for his audience, Lee had to consider the impact on the lives of those he has chosen to represent.¹⁶ Through his decisions about what types of questions to ask (or to avoid) during the interview process, as well as his choice to shoot many interviews with long takes, Lee pushes the degree to which the film expresses the psychological reality of the families. The result is the film's emotional impact.

The interviews focusing on the aftermath of the bombing and the funerals are perhaps the most difficult to witness because family members and friends who at one point in the film joyfully remember the girls now begin to confront their painful memories. Far from his better-known and dynamic cinematography, in these scenes the camera remains static, and the image is often held for several seconds more than is comfortable to the viewer. Cynthia's sister, Shirley Wesley King, reads her mother's description of the last conversation she had with Cynthia. On the day of the bombing, Cynthia's slip was showing, and her mother made her come back inside and fix herself, telling her, "You never know how you're coming back." As she reads from her mother's memoirs, Shirley begins to cry on camera and must pause on several occasions, but the camera steadily holds its position. Lee says, "What was difficult on my part was to ask probing questions knowing that on several occasions it was going to make people break down and cry on camera."¹⁷ He admits that he "had no qualms about keeping the camera running at intense moments. However, in respect to his subjects, he suggests that 'it was just a question of when you cut. I didn't want anyone onscreen crying for a great length of time.'"¹⁸ The length of these scenes creates a strong sense of empathy with the families, revealing the contemporary reality of those living with this historical tragedy.

In another example, the film focuses on the aftermath of the bombing by returning to the McNairs' memories of the events. Chris McNair remembers seeing his daughter's body, and Maxine recalls going to her mother's and just crying, "hollering and screaming." Lee's use of extreme close-ups and long takes intensifies the viewer's connection with the families: The audience sees Maxine McNair relive the event on camera up close and personal. At first she cannot look at the camera; then the audience sees the pain in her tear-filled eyes and her rigid and trembling body and hears the anguish in her cracking, shaky voice. The camera zooms in slowly to a close-up as her story concludes and her emotional intensity is at a high point. Janie, Addie's sister, says that

although she assumes that her parents identified the body, her older sister Junie also did, and it had a major impact on her. Lee again zooms into a close-up that reveals a numb, almost static, Junie Collins, who discusses her panic attacks since the event and reveals that she was afraid to be inside or outside, as she had assumed that the church should have been safe.

Brief still images taken of the bodies at the morgue are intercut sporadically during these interviews with the families. Lee found the photos unexpectedly at a public library in Birmingham. As he describes:

You can't imagine what 20 sticks of dynamite can do. But when you see the results, it literally brings tears to the eyes. I have to be honest with you, I was not 100 percent sure whether I should include those shots. The postmortem photographs. But I decided I would not linger on them, it would be tasteful. They reinforce the horror and the crime that was committed.¹⁹

His choice to include images of the girls' mangled bodies was important because the brutality of the moment might have been lost without some sort of verification of its horrors. As Lee noted previously, the contemporary viewing audience has become desensitized to violence, as we are surrounded by it everyday through all aspects of the media.²⁰ Seeing these images, even for the briefest of moments, is something not easily forgotten. While he felt that it was important for the audience to see this, the decision was difficult for Lee to make, as he was primarily concerned with the impact on the victims' families.²¹ Chris McNair discusses the morgue photos "as the hardest part to look at." Although he says that he understands the importance of including the images, his eyes tear up when he admits, "It wasn't a pleasant thing."²² Clearly, the relationships that Lee created with families resulted in a level of openness and trust. This was also reciprocal, as Lee's ultimate concern for the families determined many of his choices. "I didn't care about the critics," he said, "but I wanted the participants' approval. It really mattered to me that Chris McNair and Maxine and the other parents would love the film. No one else lost their daughter when the bomb went off."²³

As Klotman and Cutler discuss, "African American documentarians tend to express an identification with their subjects and a sense of shared concerns. [The films] illuminate communal values and subjectivities . . . the reciprocal relationship between creative agents and their subjects."²⁴ Three particular interactions with the parents reinforce this relationship. While learning that Carole was a part of the Girl Scouts, played clarinet, and was scheduled to perform with the school band at her first sporting event on the day after the bombing, we also experience a touching and disturbing moment

when Mrs. Alpha Robertson not only shows Lee Carole's last Girl Scout sash, but also the Bible that she had with her on the day of the bombing. Mrs. Robertson states that she kept it with her for a long time. This is clearly a very personal artifact for Mrs. Robinson, something that she has kept close, not placed in some museum for the viewing public. That she shared such a personal piece of history suggests the closeness of her relationship with Lee and the sense of trust he managed to develop between his subjects and himself over the course of the shoot.

Maxine McNair shows Lee her collection of Denise's old dolls, toys, pictures, piggy banks, and school projects. She leans over and opens a red cloth that she describes as the "strange brick that penetrated her [Denise's] skull, that a friend of mine at the cemetery saved and gave to my mother, and my mother some years later gave it to me." Like the scene with Mrs. Robinson, this is something that viewers might not have witnessed had Lee not formed such a close relationship with the family. In a final interaction, Alpha Robertson says, "I worked hard not to feel anger and hatred. The hating of people wasn't going to do me any good. It would hurt me worse than it would hurt them." She does admit the reality to Lee, though, that her anger still comes out at times. These moments allow for empathy with parents who have opened the most personal and painful parts of their lives in the hope of sustaining the memories of their children.

Both Lee and Chris McNair further emphasize the importance of the reciprocal relationship between black documentarian and his subject. Lee understood that he needed to gain the trust of McNair for the project to work and for others in the Birmingham community to open up and trust him. McNair stated:

During the process I had the chance to evaluate him, to find out what his philosophy was. I trusted his ability because I knew he took that very, very, very seriously. But I wanted to know about his [dedication to] accuracy. . . . Thank God for Spike Lee, whom I could trust to do this.²⁵

The film *4 Little Girls* was a result of this collaboration. McNair's trust provided Lee with the keys to the doors of the families and friends on whom this incident had an impact. In turn, the contemporary viewing audience is given access to this painful but historically critical moment in black history.

In comparison with his treatment of the families of the victims are Spike Lee's ethical decisions about the interview with George Wallace, former governor of Alabama. Lee was at first surprised that Wallace agreed to the interview, but the director believed that Wallace and his advisers were "trying to do some revisionist shenanigans, trying to undo some stuff that he did in the

past which was responsible for people dying."²⁶ Wallace is introduced to the audience with the historical footage of his infamous gubernatorial inaugural speech of 1963 in which he declared, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever." Wallace used his opposition to integration as the cornerstone of his political platform, and the image of Wallace symbolically standing in the door of the University of Alabama to prevent integration is an iconic image of the civil-rights era.

The film cuts between historical footage of Wallace and interviews with local black citizens who comment on his role in Alabama. One man claims that "George Wallace was the cause of many peoples' deaths and certainly much suffering." Another states, "George Wallace was a dynamic expression of the mental derangement of white people." The film immediately cuts to an extreme close-up of a present day Wallace, whose image is somewhat blurred. This is followed by a black-and-white image of Wallace, from the 1960s, in a similar close-up. The voiceover continues, "In that people who are afraid of change. . . . George Wallace expressed that mental illness, he was the best in the business." The editing of this sequence calls on the audience to interrogate these images and voiceover, which go far to suggest Wallace's "mental derangement."

News footage of Wallace's speech at the University of Alabama follow, then the film returns to the contemporary image of Wallace at his desk, reading a typed question from Lee. In his now stilted speech (the film is subtitled because Wallace was suffering from Parkinson's disease at the time of the shoot), he explains that segregation was all that he knew and that he had understood that it was the best for both races. Wallace clearly wants the audience to believe that he is not racist, and he resorts to clichés when he says that his best friend is black: "Over there is my black friend." Wallace says that this friend, Eddie Holcey, went all over the world with him, and he gestures to the individual to come onto camera. Holcey is actually the nurse who had taken care of Wallace over the years. Ed, as Wallace refers to his aide, looks incredibly uncomfortable in front of the camera.

When he calls him over . . . we were all amazed. I was biting my lip to keep from laughing. When you watch the film, you should watch [Holcey's] face. He was really being put on the spot. That's what makes the scene poignant—that he is being led out like he is in a circus.²⁷

This scene is followed by historical footage that clearly overrides the contemporary Wallace's claims. For example, it shows Wallace as he makes his stand at the University of Alabama. This juxtaposition reminds the viewer of the many black domestics who toiled to provide care for white families. Many of

those same white people, who often referred to their black employees as one of the family, albeit a subjugated member of the family, worked to uphold Jim Crow and keep black people repressed in the South.

As the families continue to comment on Wallace, he appears in a medium shot so we can see him behind his desk with a nameplate identifying him as "George C. Wallace, Governor," in the foreground and the state seal of Alabama hanging on a wall in the background. At this point, the film cuts between black-and-white and color footage in these images of the contemporary Wallace, a distinct difference in style from the film's more common use of black-and-white and color to demarcate a change between past and present. The blending of footage in this scene acts as a metacommentary by suggesting a lack of change in Wallace's character, despite the effects of Parkinson's disease and his paralysis from a 1972 assassination attempt.

The segment concludes as Wallace again calls on Holcey as visual proof of his nonracist ways. But the structure of the scene suggests that Holcey is actually proof of everything Wallace represents: He calls this man his best friend, but Holcey is clearly in a position of servitude. He stands in the far-left corner, off-screen at first; is dressed casually; and cares for Wallace's physical needs (almost like a modern-day mammy). Holcey's clear discomfort is evidence of his awareness of being used by Wallace as visible evidence of the man's supposedly changed relationship with black people. That Wallace perceives or claims that his relationship with Holcey is one of friendship instead of a working relationship reinforces the old white myth that the black caretaker's relationship with the white employer is more important to him or her than the needs of his or her own family.

As Lee remembers, "He called Eddie twice in front of the camera to show his love for black people. You saw his face. I felt sorry pulling him into this."²⁸ Clearly, Lee's subjectivity is visible in this moment. While particularly careful about his treatment of his African American interviewees, he leaves an obviously uncomfortable Holcey in the film. However, his decision to shoot the interview in this manner goes far to reinforce Wallace's continued legacy of bigotry.

Conclusion

The FBI reopened its investigation of the bombing in 1993 after meeting with local Birmingham black leaders and ironically made the official announcement in July 1997, a month following the release of *4 Little Girls*. Herman Frank Cash, one of the accused, died in 1994 before charges could be brought against him, but in May 2000 both Bobby Frank Cherry and Thomas E. Blanton surrendered after murder indictments were handed down by a

grand jury in Alabama. Blanton was convicted in May 2001 and sentenced to life in prison.²⁹ Cherry went to trial and was convicted and sentenced to life a year later.³⁰

In 1996, civil-rights leaders and ministers met with Attorney General Janet Reno to discuss the spate of church fires that had occurred in Southern, primarily black, churches over the previous year and half. Believing that these were racially based, the group requested federal protection for the churches and more deliberate investigation into the fires. As a result, the National Arson Taskforce was created in June 1996.³¹ The inclusion of footage of these contemporary fires at the conclusion of *4 Little Girls* reminds the viewer that racial hostility is far from over within this country and that forgetting is not an option.

Lee's *4 Little Girls* illustrates that it is the responsibility of all to keep these memories alive—not to engender bitterness, but to honor those who paved the way for black progress. Black political, social, and economic success, while certainly viable, is still a struggle, and the conservative politics of the country constantly attempt to reverse the advances made by our predecessors. We must not allow ourselves to be lulled into the belief that racism is a thing of the past. While acts of racism may not appear as frequent or as visceral as those in Birmingham during the 1960s, racism continues to exist. It has just taken on a different but still insidious visage, the fact of which *4 Little Girls* seeks to remind us and a point that is reinforced by *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Lee's Home Box Office (HBO) documentary project. Through an impressive collection of interviews with the everyday citizens of New Orleans, victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), politicians, artists, news reporters, and cultural critics, Lee again interweaves tales of the personal and the political, reminding the viewer that issues of race and class still matter in this country.

NOTES

Epigraph: Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

1. For information on the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

2. Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 115.

3. For information on the Chambliss case, see McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*.

4. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 53–76.

5. *A Day at Tuskegee* was commissioned by Booker T. Washington and shot by George W. Broome. *The Negro Soldier* is not normally considered an African American film, yet its script was written by Carlton Moss, perhaps better known for his role in Oscar Micheaux's *Harlem after Midnight* (1934). Parts I and II of *Eyes on the Prize* were produced by Henry Hampton's Blackside Inc., one of the oldest minority-owned production companies in the country (est. 1968).

6. Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler, *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvii.

7. Henry Cabot Beck, "Edgy Spike Lee Shifts Gears to the Factual," *St. Louis Post Dispatch, Everyday Magazine*, July 13, 1997, 3C.

8. Bruce Kirkland, "Dad Watches over 4 Little Girls," *Toronto Sun*, March 12, 1998, 56.

9. Peter Howell, "Spike Lee's Learning How to Listen," *Toronto Star*, September 12, 1997, D3.

10. Denene Millner, "A New Documentary Finally Puts a Face on the Racial Terrorism That Claimed the Lives of Four Little Girls," *New York Daily News, Sunday Extra*, July 13, 1997, 2.

11. Lee, quoted in *ibid.*, 2.

12. *Ibid.*

13. The director subsequently made other documentaries, most of them, like *4 Little Girls*, in collaboration with HBO Films. Other titles include *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001), *Jim Brown: All American* (2002), and, most recently, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in New Orleans. Lee also directed *Freak* (1998), a performance film starring John Leguizamo, for the network.

14. Lee, quoted in Ruthe Stein, "Lee Explores Lingering Grief from Killing of '4 Girls,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 7, 1997, B1. This was also the first time that Lee worked with the HBO cable network.

15. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

16. In *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols suggests that documentary films are built around different elements of realism, two of which are emotional and psychological realism. Emotional realism deals with the impact on the viewer, while psychological realism deals with how the film represents the emotional world of the subject of the film.

17. Spike Lee, "Special Features: Making the Documentary," *4 Little Girls*, dir. and prod. Spike Lee (40 Acres & A Mule, 1997), 102 min., DVD.

18. Lee, quoted in Stein, "Lee Explores Lingering Grief."

19. Brandon Jundell, "An Interview with Spike Lee, Director of '4 Little Girls,'" IndieWire: People Archives, 1997, available online at http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Lee_Spike_971212.html.

20. Two years earlier, Lee had explored the issue of audience desensitization to violence in the opening sequence of *Clockers*, which includes reenacted images of actual crime scenes. The images self-consciously reminded viewers of the voyeuristic pleasure attached to violent spectacle, a pleasure often used by films focusing on inner-city youth and black-on-black violence. For more on *Clockers*, see Keith M. Harris "Clockers

(Spike Lee 1995): Adaptation in Black," in this volume, and Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 175–205.

21. Lee, "Special Features."
22. Ibid.
23. Steve Murray, "Movies: Time Is Finally Right to Revisit the Bombing," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 24, 1997, 10P.
24. Klotman and Cutler, *Struggles for Representation*, xix.
25. Kirkland, "Dad Watches over 4 Little Girls," 56.
26. Stein, "Lee Explores Lingering Grief," B1
27. Ibid.
28. Lee, quoted in Marty Rosen, "Film's techniques Evoke Emotions, Controversy," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 23, 1998, 2B.
29. Angie Cannon, "Church Bomber's Conviction May Aid Other Cases." *U.S. News and World Report*, May 14, 2001, 24.
30. Ellie Cose, "A Reckoning in Birmingham," *Newsweek*, June 3, 2002, 31.
31. Tom Morganthou, "Fires in the Night," *Newsweek*, June 24, 1996, 28.

Spike Lee Meets Aaron Copland

At the beginning of *He Got Game* (1998), written and directed by Spike Lee, the credit sequence contains an unusual juxtaposition. In consecutive title cards the American composer Aaron Copland (1900–90) is credited with "Music," and the rap group Public Enemy is listed for "Songs." These credits link a composer widely associated, perhaps inaccurately, with the American heartland to an urban, highly political rap group. A correspondingly diverse set of images appears behind the credit sequence. Usually in balletic slow motion, young Americans play basketball in a variety of locations, including pastoral landscapes in the Midwest and concrete playgrounds in the inner city. Behind the title card with Copland's name a young black man dribbles a ball along the Brooklyn Bridge, perhaps an acknowledgment that both Copland and Spike Lee grew up in Brooklyn and that they may have more in common than audiences expect. Throughout the credit sequence the audience hears the steel-driving clangor of Copland's *John Henry*. Although this composition is among Copland's more dissonant works, it has an appropriately portentous quality, not unlike the beginnings of many big-budget American films. Copland in fact specialized in the auspicious, often opening his compositions with grand gestures, even fanfares. He was also familiar with the conventions of film music. He wrote the soundtrack score for

Krin Gabbard, "Spike Lee Meets Aaron Copland," in *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004). Reprinted with permission of Rutgers University Press.