

“SIX NOTES”: HISTORY AND MEMORY IN POETIC AND MUSICAL
COMMEMORATIONS OF THE VIOLENCE IN BIRMINGHAM ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1963

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I. Introduction: The Turmoil of 1963

September of 1963 was by no means a calm month in the United States, and for the youths of Birmingham, fall came on the heels of a chaotic summer. Birmingham police had used dogs and fire hoses to break up gatherings of civil rights protestors all summer, and the Children's Crusade in May had allowed Birmingham youth to publically assume a collective role as activists. Medgar Evers, a prominent civil rights activist and the father of three young children, was assassinated outside his Mississippi home in June. George Wallace was serving as governor of Alabama and as a staunch segregationist, did everything in his power to preserve "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," including standing at the door of University of Alabama's Foster Auditorium in June of 1963 to physically prevent African-American students from entering the building. Wallace's resolve was such that President Kennedy sent federal troops to protect black students as they enrolled in classes at the University of Alabama. Ken Howard, a student in Washington DC who marched in Washington in 1963 and later went on to work in the DC Department of Education, remembers:

In May 1963, Bull Connor with the dogs and the fire hoses, turning them on people, front-page news. And then in June, that summer, you have Medgar Evers shot down in the South, and his body actually on view on 14th Street at a church in DC. So you had a group of individuals who had been not just oppressed, but discriminated against and killed because of their color.¹

September brought the start of school, and with it, the struggle for desegregation of Birmingham public schools. The fight over the school system brought protests and racially based violence into the classroom and other spaces occupied by Birmingham youth.

In the midst of this climate of racial violence, six black Birmingham youth were murdered on one day: September 15, 1963. An explosion at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

¹ Fletcher, "A Change is Gonna Come," 41.

² Herbers, "Birmingham Klansman Guilty in Dynamite Case; Two Other Defendants Face Trial

resulted in the deaths of four girls. Later that day, Birmingham police murdered one young man and, across town, another male youth was murdered by two white teenagers. Although the perpetrators of the homicides were not working together, the deaths of the six children are related in that they all were a result of the environment of hate, bigotry, and violence that was omnipresent in Birmingham, and throughout the South, in 1963. The title of this thesis, “Six Notes,” was taken from a line in Michael S. Harper’s poem “Here Where Coltrane Is,” written in response to the violence on September 15th, 1963 and John Coltrane’s song “Alabama.” The phrase “six notes” refers to the fact that there were six murder victims on September 15th, not just the four girls who died in the bombing.

September 15th was “Youth Day” at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and at 10:22 AM, five girls, Addie Mae and Sarah Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson, were in the basement bathroom before services began. At 10:22 AM, a dynamite bomb on a time delay exploded beneath the steps of the church. The bomb caused significant damage to the church, with the brunt of the blast falling on the women’s bathroom. Addie Mae Collins, McNair, Wesley, and Robertson were all killed in the explosion. Addie Mae Collins’ sister, Sarah Collins, was hospitalized after the bombing and is permanently blind in one eye due to injuries sustained in the bombing. It took three court trials to secure legal justice in the case of the Sixteenth Street Church bombing. In the first trial, KKK member Robert Chambliss was sentenced to six months in jail and a one hundred dollar fine for possessing dynamite without a permit after a witness claimed Chambliss placed the bomb beneath the steps of the church.² No further legal justice was sought or administered immediately after the bombing. The case of the church bombing was reopened in 1971, with Alabama Attorney General William Baxley

² Herbers, “Birmingham Klansman Guilty in Dynamite Case; Two Other Defendants Face Trial Today—Dr. King Gives City an Ultimatum on Jobs,” n.p.

committing to gathering further evidence and testimonies from witnesses who were too scared to testify in 1963. Baxley also secured access to the FBI files on the case, strengthening the argument of the prosecution.³ In a second trial in November 1977, Chambliss was found guilty for the church bombing and sentenced to life in jail. It wasn't until 2000 that the FBI announced that the bombing was perpetrated by four members of the Cahaba Boys, a subgroup of the Ku Klux Klan. Chambliss was one of the four men, and worked with Herman Cash, Thomas Blanton, and Bobby Cherry. Herman Cash had already died by 2000 but Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry were both tried and convicted for the bombing of the church and the murder of the four girls in a third trial in 2001, and both were sentenced to life in prison. Cherry died in prison in 2004 and Blanton is currently incarcerated in a prison near Birmingham.⁴

In the hours after the explosion at the church, many segregationists took advantage of the chaos to demonstrate in defense of racial segregation in the Birmingham school system. Johnny Robinson, a sixteen-year-old African-American Birmingham youth, along with several other friends, was at a gas station on the corner of 16th Street and 8th Avenue when a car full of white youths yelled racial slurs at them. At 4:00 PM, the Birmingham Police responded to a call that young African-American males were throwing rocks at cars with white drivers. As soon as the police arrived at the gas station, Robinson and his friends left the area. After living in Birmingham for the past four months, it was clear to all youths Robinson's age that the all-white Birmingham police officers were just as dangerous and vicious as perpetrators of violence and mayhem throughout the city. The narratives told by Robinson's friends and each of the police officers differ, but it is agreed upon by all that shortly after 4:00 PM, Officer P.C. Cheek pulled

³ McCann, *Terrorism on American Soil: a Concise History of Plots and Perpetrators from the Famous to the Forgotten*, 107.

⁴ Lamb, "Birmingham Bomber Bobby Frank Cherry Dies in Prison at 74," n.p.

his car between 8th and 9th Avenue in a way that trapped Robinson and his friends in the alley, and Officer Jack Parker brandished his police-issued shotgun. Parker released a shot, whether on purpose or by accident, and the bullet from his shotgun hit and killed Johnny Robinson, shooting him in the back. Although the case was sent to the Jefferson County Grand Jury, the police officers were never held legally responsible for Robinson's death. The FBI reopened an investigation into the case in 2009, but by that time Parker was dead and no criminal charges could be filed. Cheek initially said the shot was likely accidentally fired because of the movement of the car, but later police reports said that the shot was fired intentionally, either as a warning or in self-defense. Regardless, Cheek and Parker clearly were aiming to intimidate Robinson and his friends with unnecessary violence.

While Johnny Robinson and his friends were aware of the bombing that morning, brothers James and Virgil Ware were blissfully unaware of the violence unfolding in Birmingham that Sunday afternoon as they biked through their neighborhood in Docena, an African-American residential area in northwest Birmingham. Thirteen-year-old Virgil rode on his brother's handlebars as they headed home from their uncle's scrapyard, where they had been searching for a bicycle for Virgil. Virgil, James, and their brother, Melvin, had just been hired to deliver newspapers and the brothers were hoping to acquire an additional bicycle so they could split the route. Virgil Ware also had a job delivering coal; he hoped to save enough money to attend college and become a lawyer.

Also travelling through Docena were Larry Joe Sims and Michael Lee Farley, two white teenagers who had attended a segregationist rally earlier that afternoon. Sims, whose parents were sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement, had attended the rally with Farley's family. Farley's pastor spoke at the rally in defense of segregation although he did not endorse the

bombing of the church. At 5:00 PM, Farley and Sims rode a red motorbike along Docena-Sandusky Road, approaching the Ware brothers as James pedaled down the same road. Farley, who was driving, handed his new .22 revolver to Sims, who fired shots at the Ware brothers. His bullets hit Virgil in the heart and the cheek. Sims and Farley drove away as Virgil died in James' arms. Sims and Farley later claimed the shots were intended to "scare" the Ware brothers and accused Virgil and James of throwing rocks at cars, although a witness confirmed that neither of the Ware brothers was throwing rocks at cars that Sunday afternoon. Sims and Farley were both convicted of second-degree manslaughter, but Judge Wallace Gibson suspended their sentences and instead charged both boys with two years of probation. Both Sims and Farley went on to graduate high school and attend college. Sims claims to have always felt he "had something heavy to purge," and, after becoming a "more active civil rights advocate" as a student at Auburn University, chose to enlist in the Army and serve in Vietnam as a means of paying his "debt."⁵ Although Farley called James Ware in 1997 to apologize, he reportedly "twirl[ed] his fingers sarcastically and [said], 'Whoop-de-do!'" when reminded of the 40th anniversary of Ware's death in September of 2003.⁶

Media coverage and commemoration of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church have created martyrs out of the four female victims of the attack, painting them as angelic and innocent. Commemorations of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware have been few and far between, and place the deaths of the youths as events of isolated tragedy, rather than instances of racially based violence that are as relevant to the struggle for equality as the deaths of the four girls. Why aren't Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware regarded with the same

⁵ Padgett and Sikora, "The Legacy of Virgil Ware," n.p.

⁶ Ibid.

reverence as the four girls? Why has the story of the bombing gained significance over the past 50 years, while the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson have faded into obscurity? There are several demographic factors that may have elevated the deaths of Collins, McNair, Robertson, and Wesley over the deaths of Robinson and Ware in terms of historical significance, mainly the location of the children at the time of their death, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and the fact that they were young girls.

Today, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is a national historic site that sits diagonally across from the commemorative Kelly Ingram Park and across the street from the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Visitors to the church can tour the sanctuary, hear about the day of the bombing, and wander the basement to view a multitude of memorials to the four fatalities of the bombing, including a sand sculpture. The church is today a memorial to tragedy; yet prior to 1963, the church was a meeting place for elite professional African Americans and a hub for community activism.

Lynne Feldman writes that in Birmingham in the early 1900s, “The Baptist churches vied for recognition and aggressively recruited new members who held elevated positions in the community. The Sixteenth Street Baptist was *the* black church in Birmingham during the twentieth century.”⁷ The church was known for its middle class congregation, many of whom represented the black social elite of Birmingham. In addition to its social prominence, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had a history of activism. As early as 1903, the church pushed back against measures to restrict black access to public parks, appealing to the City Commission for the right to use Avondale Park for a one-day event. When the Avondale Civic League objected, the editor of *The Birmingham Reporter*, an African-American newspaper, brought up

⁷ Feldman, *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle-Class Community 1890-1930*, 140.

economic wealth as well as the collective action represented by the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, asserting that “the membership of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church pays more taxes than the members of the Avondale Civic League.”⁸ In 1919, the Birmingham NAACP used the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as the classroom for its Citizenship School in order to teach women how to register to vote and mark a ballot.⁹

The church was also a central meeting place for those planning civil rights protests in the 1950s and 1960s and was the training site for young activists participating in the Children’s Crusade in May of 1963. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference held its 1962 convention at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, solidifying the church as a hub of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁰ In the spring of 1963, Wyatt Walker, of the SCLC, and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent leader in the Birmingham community, used the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as their headquarters as they planned “Project C,” a series of boycotts and marches in Birmingham.¹¹ Observers of the Children’s Crusade remarked that on May 2nd, children emerged from the doors of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and into Kelly Ingram Park at a rate so great that the police were unable to reduce the size of the crowd, although they were arresting children as fast as they could.¹² Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech advocating nonviolence, even in the face of aggression, on May 3, 1963 at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.¹³ Located just across an intersection from Kelly Ingram Park, the site where Police

⁸ Feldman, *A Sense of Place*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: the Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, 520.

¹¹ Woods, “Lose Not Courage, Lose Not Faith, Go Forward”: *Selected Topics From the African American Experience, 1900-2000*, 158.

¹² Gaillard, *Alabama’s Civil Rights Trail: an Illustrated Guide to the Cradle of Freedom*, 56.

¹³ Towns, “We Want Our Freedom”: *Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement*, 147.

Commissioner ordered the use of water hoses and attack dogs on protestors, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was a staging ground and a sanctuary for activists.¹⁴

Popular commemorations of the bombing portray the violence as a random attack on the innocent. They describe Collins, Roberston, Wesley, and McNair as near angels, preparing in their white dresses to attend a Sunday School lesson on a “Love That Forgives.” The view of the church as a place of innocence, rather than a center for activism, leaves no room for a narrative in which the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was an act of domestic terrorism, working to set back the Civil Rights Movement and send a message to the entire black Birmingham community by targeting its most successful members. As Renee Romano points out, the narrative of the passive victim and martyr did not form by accident, but was carefully constructed by the white men who served as trial consultants in the Blanton and Cherry cases. Focused on seeking justice and nailing a perpetrator, the prosecutors were not concerned with creating an accurate historical narrative nor did they consider the commemorative implications of their case. Instead, they followed their consultants’ advice to “focus on the bombing only as the murder of four young girls rather than as an attack on the civil rights movement.”¹⁵

While the four girls were murdered while within the walls of the church, both Robinson and Ware were murdered out in the open, in public space. Their deaths could have been witnessed by anyone in the streets of Birmingham at the time of each of their murders. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is seen as a violent violation of a sacred space, yet the freedom to travel Birmingham unharmed is not regarded in American collective memory with the same reverence. The reluctance to portray Robinson and Ware as victims in the same

¹⁴ Snodgrass, *Religious Sites in America: a Dictionary*, 334.

¹⁵ Romano, “Narratives of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Romano and Raiford, 105.

light as Collins, Wesley, McNair, and Robertson may stem from seeing the two male youths as guilty of being black men moving freely in a public space.

Aside from works that refer to all six victims on September 15th collectively as the “children of Birmingham,” most commemorations focus on the “four little girls.” The phrase focuses on the gender of the girls and their youth, while isolating their deaths from those of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. However, Ware and Robinson are not referred to collectively in American memory as the “two little boys.” Rather, the “four little girls” phenomenon has emphasized the deaths of Collins, Wesley, McNair, and Robertson while drawing attention away from the deaths of Ware and Robinson. Reflecting on gender, Romano writes that “perhaps the erasure of these two black boys from the nation’s collective historical memory suggests that it is easier to paint girls as uncomplicated victims. If four young black men, aged eleven to fourteen, had been killed in that church basement instead, would they be remembered and memorialized as ‘four little boys’?”¹⁶

Ultimately, the commemorations of the bombing reflect a greater national trend in collective American memory of the Civil Rights Movement wherein the incredible grassroots movement for justice and racial equality is reduced to a few key events and leaders. Rather than focus on the history of the church, the bombing is selected as a key event of violence against the black community and the four girls are commemorated as martyrs. In this same vein, the men responsible for the bombing are portrayed as members of an extremist faction of white supremacists, rather than as representatives and agents of an environment of bigotry and hatred that cultivated the conditions that led to the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. By focusing on key events and people, Americans are able to use the trials of the church bombing as

¹⁶ Ibid.

a means of reconstructing a narrative of justice and atonement. However, as Romano writes, “this narrative of redemption places no burden of responsibility for the bombing on city police or politicians from the crime, on the FBI, or on the larger political and social structure of the South and the nation. It thus reinforces [Birmingham mayor] Albert Boutwell’s picture of an innocent Birmingham tarnished by a few unusual racists and effectively erases Martin Luther King’s understanding of the church bombing as an expression of a much larger system of organized white supremacy.”¹⁷

This thesis will explore poetry and songs that commemorate the deaths of Collins, Robertson, McNair, Wesley, Ware, and Robinson between 1963 and 2013. Commemorations of the violence in Birmingham on September 16, 1963 include sculpture, songs, novels, and poetry; and they exist both in a mainstream American historical narrative and narratives of memory and history specific to African-American communities. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute contains an exhibition dedicated to the bombing, and the Newseum and the Smithsonian Museum of American History, both located in Washington, DC, curated a variety of exhibits to commemorate the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for the 50th anniversary of the event. The violence of September 15, 1963 has been commemorated in memoirs like Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and novels such as Sena Naslund’s *Four Spirits*, Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Anthony Grooms’s *Bombingham*, and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. Visual artists have memorialized the murders with endeavors such as decorative plaques installed in Birmingham City Hall, a stained glass window commissioned by a Welsh church and installed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist

¹⁷ Ibid., 100.

church, John Henry Waddell's sculpture, "That Which Might Have Been, Birmingham, 1963," and the recently installed "Four Spirits" statue in Kelly Ingram Park.

This thesis will focus on commemorations through poetry and song. Songs were a vital part of the Civil Rights Movement; marchers chanted protest songs and singers performed at gatherings such as the March on Washington. Poets wrote poems that preserved the memory of those who died in attacks of hate motivated violence, chronicled life in Jim Crow America, motivated protestors and called Americans to action. Songs and poems tend to take less time to produce than novels, and so better reflect changing trends in narratives and perspectives. While novels also have to pass the approval of a publishing company, the artist can disseminate songs and poems throughout a community, or a nation, themselves. The creation of the Broadside Press allowed activists to spread their message of revolution without adapting their work to pass through the filter of a corporate publishing company. Home publishing also provided a way for African-American poets to share their work, as many well-known and established publishing companies would only publish the work of white authors.¹⁸ Just as novels must pass through a certain degree of censorship, public visual commemoration through sculpture and memorial is political in nature and requires the artist to filter their work and bend to the desires of the commissioning agency or state. Because of the political and social limits placed on novels and sculpture, this thesis will focus on poetry and songs as a means of exploring the impact of commemoration on history and memory. The careful examination of these commemorations will hopefully lead to a greater understanding as to why there is a disparity between commemorations of these youths, and why the tragic stories of Johnny Robinson and Virgil

¹⁸ Bates, *Alice Walker: a Critical Companion*, 1.

Ware have faded from the mainstream American narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and American history.

II. Poetic Commemorations: Processing Tragedy and Advocating for Historical Transparency

American poetry of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to tie the events in Birmingham on September 15, 1963 to other moments in national history. The poems represent a movement to associate the bombing of the church and subsequent murders with the “bigger picture” of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as American history as a whole. Many of these writers were members of the Black Power/Black Arts Movement and were advocating for the inclusion of true and transparent American history, especially African-American history, in American education systems.¹⁹ Early poems written in response to the bombing echoed the sentiments of Martin Luther King Jr in his eulogy for the four girls, establishing the children as martyrs for the Civil Rights Movement and inducting them into a cultural sainthood of those who lost their lives for justice. As the victims’ generation aged, poets who grew up during the Civil Rights Movement reflected on the experience of coming of age during a time of revolution and tragedy. These poems retain the image of the victims as innocent martyrs, but represent a shift in focus on their deaths as an individual’s loss of future rather than a grand sacrifice to the Civil Rights Movement. This chapter organizes poems in chronological order according to the date the poem was first written, rather than the first date of publication, in order to trace the progression of poems of response to poems of reflection. As mentioned in the introduction, poems written immediately after the bombing and subsequent violence were often shared with the public through venues other than formal publication, through home publishing or readings at marches and protests, and then were later anthologized or published with an author’s more recent work. All the poems examined in this thesis reference the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist

¹⁹ Ryder, “‘As Shelters Against the Cold’: Women Poets of the Black Arts and Chicano Movements, 1965-1978,” 66.

Church and the four girls, while some also address the deaths of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware.

At the end of 1963 a body of literature emerged in which writers tried to make sense of the violent events that had occurred in the past year. Among these was John Beecher's poem "Escort for a President," in which he associates the assassination of President Kennedy with the deaths of Collins, Wesley, McNair, and Robertson, as well as Virgil Ware, Johnny Robinson, and Medgar Evers. Beecher closes the poem with the victims of Birmingham violence meeting the spirit of the dead president:

Now swarming up the air with cries like doves
or angels come black girls from Birmingham
with blood upon their Sunday finery
and faces blown away. Here also wheel
two black boys slain in cleaner wise by bullets
upon that Sabbath day. May they escort
a president upon his journey home? (30-36)²⁰

Jeffrey Lamar Coleman writes, "Beecher is intent on not allowing the African-American victims of 1963 to be forgotten or overshadowed by the assassination of President Kennedy."²¹ Beecher doesn't simply associate the deaths of the individuals, but also points to similarities between their legacies. He writes of President Kennedy being "assumed into a myth," (20)²² therefore taking on the same symbolic role of martyr as Evers and the children who died in Birmingham on September 15. Beecher is careful to describe all of the Birmingham victims as having spiritual innocence, comparing the girls to "doves or angels" (30-31) and writing that the boys were "slain..upon that Sabbath day" (34-35). In doing so, he implies that there was a clear relationship between the deaths of all six children as well as the assassinations of Medgar Evers

²⁰ Beecher, *One More River to Cross: the Selected Poetry of John Beecher*, 229.

²¹ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 60.

²² Beecher, *One More River to Cross*, 228.

and President Kennedy, and that each death holds weight and importance in America's national narrative. When writing about the victims of the church bombing, all of whom died wearing white dresses, Beecher mentions the "blood upon their Sunday finery," (32) which can also be seen as a nod to Jacqueline Kennedy, who continued to wear her blood stained pink suit in public after the assassination of her husband. The graphic public display of murdered bodies has roots in the Civil Rights Movement tracing back to the open casket holding Emmett Till's body, which thousands of mourners viewed and which was photographed by journalists, and also plays an integral role in collective memory of traumatic history.

Beecher was a white social activist, and his desire to draw a parallel between the deceased white President and black martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement may have stemmed from an effort to unite all supporters of the movement, regardless of race, gender, or age. During the McCarthy era, Beecher refused to sign a loyalty oath and lost his job as a result. He started writing poetry in his unemployment, but his poems were determined too risky to print by publishers. Beecher started printing and publishing his own poetry, and continued to produce controversial poems throughout the Civil Rights Movement, regardless of the political or social cost, claiming, "poetry can save your life."²³ He was friends with an elite group of "Southern troublemakers," who had put their careers and reputations on the line in pursuit of freedom and equality and included Cliff Durr, Myles Horton, and E.D. Nixon.²⁴ A freelance journalist who covered the Civil Rights Movement for a variety of publications, including the *San Francisco Journalist*, Beecher wrote poetry with a journalistic eye, aimed toward capturing and preserving the truth in historical narrative.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

Dudley Randall uses poetry as a call to arms in his “Ballad of Birmingham.” While other poets wrote about the bombing in a political setting, Randall chooses to approach the event from a more intimate, domestic setting.²⁶ In the poem, Randall imagines a conversation between one of the victims of the church bombing and her mother:

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?”(1-4)...

...“No, baby, no, you may not go,
For I fear those guns will fire.
But you may go to church instead
And sing in the children’s choir.” (13-16)²⁷

He then follows the mother to the church as she discovers her daughter has died in the attack.

His poem serves as a demonstration of the absence of a safe space for African Americans in the South.²⁸ The perceived innocence of the daughter is grounded in her location, the “sacred space” (22)²⁹ the mother “smiled” (21)³⁰ to know that she’d sent her daughter. The implication, then, is that if the church choir is just as dangerous as a freedom march, then the African-American community has a choice between doing all that they can to free themselves from oppression, knowing that their lives are in danger regardless, or to continue living in a constant state of fear. In fact, the bombing of the church and the poetry it inspired moved Randall to start the Broadside Press, where he published “The Ballad of Birmingham” as its first leaflet and provided an avenue for African-American writers who were often rejected by mainstream publishing houses to

²⁶ Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside*, 107.

²⁷ Randall, “Ballad of Birmingham,” in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 66.

²⁸ Coleman, “Michael S. Harper’s ‘Here Where Coltrane Is’ and Coltrane’s ‘Alabama’: The Social/Aesthetic Intersections of Civil Rights Movement Poetry,” n.p.

²⁹ Randall, “Ballad of Birmingham,” in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 66.

³⁰ Ibid.

distribute their work.³¹ The Broadside Press provided a nurturing and mentoring environment for emerging African-American writers like Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker, as well as allowed for the production and dissemination of an African-American literary narrative during the Civil Rights Movement. Ed Simpkins later said that Randall's "The Ballad of Birmingham" was an essential influence on the poets of the Black Arts Movement and their revolution as Randall's poem "took that energy to another generation."³²

Randall's mention of a child's shoe is a reference to the patent leather shoe discovered by Reverend John Cross and church leader M. W. Pippin mere minutes after the bombing, as they searched through the rubble for members of the congregation. Pippin recognized the shoe at once as belonging to his granddaughter, Denise McNair, although Cross remembers telling him, "that could be anybody's shoe. A lot of little girls wear shoes like that." Regardless of whom the shoe belonged to, both men recognized the lost shoe as a sobering indicator that children had been harmed, and perhaps even killed, in the explosion.³³ The image of the child's shoe in the rubble of the bombing remains compelling today, and as Randall wrote:

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
Then lifted out a shoe.
'O, here's the shoe my baby wore,
but, baby, where are you?'" (29-32)³⁴

to call the African-American community to action, many other writers were utilizing the same image.

Most notably was Eugene Patterson, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, who wrote a column entitled "A Flower for the Graves" that was published in the paper on September 16, 1963 as well as broadcast to the nation via the "CBS Evening News" with Walter Cronkite. In

³¹ Bates, *Alice Walker: a Critical Companion*, 1.

³² Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*, 122.

³³ Gaillard, *Alabama's Civil Rights Trail: an Illustrated Guide to the Cradle of Freedom*, 79-80.

³⁴ Randall, "Ballad of Birmingham," in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 66..

his column, Patterson writes of the same mother Randall depicts in his poem, “In her hand she held a shoe, one shoe, from the foot of her dead child...Every one of us in the white South holds that small shoe in his hand.”³⁵ Patterson’s column is a wake-up call to the white South—he writes that white apathy is just, if not more, dangerous than hate-motivated violence like the bombing of the church. Just as Patterson uses the image of the shoe to motivate white Southerners to action, Randall uses the image to compel African Americans, especially writers, to activism.

Randall was eager to reach out to other African-American poets and writers depicting the tragedies of 1963 and his poem, in the ballad form, demonstrates his interest in the music of the Civil Rights Movement. Randall had a great interest in the spirituals and ballads that served as the soundtrack to the Civil Rights Movement and other activist movements of the 1960s.³⁶ The haunting quality of the ballad form lends itself well to the narrative Randall tells in “The Ballad of Birmingham”:

The mother smiled to know her child
Was in the sacred place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild.
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
Calling for her child. (21-28)³⁷

Indeed, in both form and perspective, “The Ballad of Birmingham” is very similar to Joan Baez’s “Birmingham Sunday,” written by Richard Farina in the same year that Randall wrote “The

³⁵ Patterson, “A Flower for the Graves,” n.p.

³⁶ Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*, 107.

³⁷ Randall, “Ballad of Birmingham,” in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 66.

Ballad of Birmingham.”³⁸ Randall later wrote that he wanted to publish “Ballad of Birmingham” because folk singer Josh Moore had set the words to music and Randall wanted to copyright his poem before it was recorded as a song.³⁹

While many Americans felt sorrow and grief over the bombing of the church and subsequent violence, others responded with rage and even suggested militant action against the murderers. Harry Edwards’ poem “How to Change the U.S.A.” reflects the emotional reactions of Americans who weren’t as calm in their grief as those who advocated for nonviolence. “How to Change the U.S.A.” connects the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to the murders of Medgar Evers, Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney:

For openers, the Federal Government
the honkies, the pigs in blue
must go down South
and take those crackers out of bed,
the crackers who blew up,
those four little girls
in the Birmingham church,
those crackers who murdered
Medgar Evers and killed
the three civil rights workers—
they must pull them out of bed
and kill them with axes
in the middle of the street. (1-17)⁴⁰

“How to Change the U.S.A.” was first published in a *New York Times* interview with Edwards on May 12, 1968.⁴¹ Written a month after the assassination of President Kennedy, the poem is not an account of maudlin mourning, like other poetic portrayals of the victims as martyrs, but

³⁸ Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*, 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁰ Edwards, “How to Change the U.S.A.,” in *Tygers of Wrath: Poems of Hate, Anger, and Invective*, ed. Kennedy, 263-264.

⁴¹ Major, *The New Black Poetry*, 48.

comes from a place of anger-fueled plans for retaliation.⁴² Edwards views the murderers as remorseless, able to sleep soundly in their beds without being plagued by guilt. He refers to the separate sets of murderers as one united set of “crackers,” finding them all equally deserving of the death penalty. The message of the poem, combined with the title, suggests that discussions about “changing America” should be centered around eliminating discrimination, segregation, and violence and that only a select group of Americans need to change their attitudes in order for the nation to move forward. Edwards uses hyperbole to create a revenge fantasy; the poem isn’t meant to be a realistic suggestion for dealing with racial violence. However, Edwards does give voice to Americans who were frustrated by the delayed or nonexistent government response to hate-motivated violence.⁴³ Edwards questions the role of the federal government in preventing and addressing instances of violence. When viewing the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as an instance of domestic terrorism, Edwards’s call to action of the federal government isn’t just understandable; it is the most rational channel for justice. Edwards asserts that the bombing incident is not a problem that should fall on the Birmingham black community, or even on Governor Wallace and the Alabama state government, but should be considered an egregious crime only worthy of the attention of and investigation by the federal government. However, Edwards’s anger over the deaths of Medgar Evers, Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney makes his omission of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson from the count of the dead notable. Edwards is not relying on the church setting to prove the innocence of the murder victims, and instead maintains that African-American men, women, and children all deserve to be able to actively campaign for their rights in public without worrying that their life is in danger.

⁴² Coleman, “The Social/Aesthetic Intersections of Civil Rights Movement Poetry,” n.p.

⁴³ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 217.

Poet and theorist Audre Lorde was a college student during the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. In her reflections on the violence of the Civil Rights Movement, Lorde views the events through a lens of her own activism. Unlike Edwards, however, Lorde doesn't react with anger but rather a wistful grief for the future the child victims have lost:

He is forever trapped
who suffers his own waste.
Rain leaching the earth for lack
of roots to hold it
and children who are murdered
before their lives begin (1-6)⁴⁴ ...

...But who shall disinter these girls
to love the women they were to become
or read the legends written beneath their skin? (11-13)⁴⁵

Lorde dedicated her poem "Suffer the Children" to Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley, purposefully singling out only two of the girls who died in the bombing. The poem was published in *Negro Digest* in 1964, the year after the bombing. Like Harper, Lorde cautions against allowing the deaths to be forgotten. She also addresses the "indifference and callousness" of the murderers towards the deaths they caused:⁴⁶

We who love them remember their child's laughter
But he whose hate robs him of their gold
has yet to weep at night about their graves. (14-16)⁴⁷

Within the poem, Lorde is not patient with those apathetic to racially motivated violence, an attitude that may have been influenced by Betty Friedman's *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published in 1963 and examined the apathy of American housewives. In 1964, Alice Walker had not yet coined the term "womanism" but the idea that separate feminist and racial civil rights

⁴⁴ Lorde, *Undersong: Chosen Poems, Old and New*, 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 59.

⁴⁷ Lorde, *Undersong*, 33.

movements weren't effectively combatting the intersecting racial and gender oppression of African-American women was forming through works of writers like Lorde. Lorde used gender, as well as race, to invoke ancestry throughout her writing career, and this pattern of writing her experiences through her perspective as a black woman into a larger racial history explains her decision to focus on female victims of violence rather than Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson.⁴⁸

Just as Eugene Patterson called white Americans to action after the violence in Birmingham, several white poets used their writing as a platform to speak to their white audiences about racial violence. Jean Valentine is a white American woman whose poem "September 1963" is similar to other poems about the bombing that juxtapose innocent play of children and the tragedy of the bombing and subsequent murders. The experience of motherhood is reflected in the form of the poem, with the rhythmic repetition of long phrases that resemble lullabies.⁴⁹ In the poem, Valentine takes her daughter to her first day of school, feeling separation anxiety from the child she has formed a "kingdom" (2)⁵⁰ with for the past four years:

Tears, stay with me, stay with me, tears
Dearest, go: this is what
School is, what the world is.
Have I sewed my hands to yours? (9-12)⁵¹

Valentine watches her daughter in her new classroom like a ghost-like figure,⁵² "I hover at the door." (6)⁵³ Valentine presenting herself as a supernatural specter, coupled with her grief over

⁴⁸ Melvin Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Fabre and O'Meally, 26.

⁴⁹ Ali, *Orange Alert: Essays on Poetry, Art and the Architecture of Silence*, 75.

⁵⁰ Valentine, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003*, 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁵² Benbow-Pfalzgraf, *American Women Writers: a Critical Reference Guide: from Colonial Times to the Present*, 169.

⁵³ Valentine, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003*, 56.

the end of her daughter's toddler years, sets the poem up for the ending scene of Valentine on a park bench, crying over the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Earlier in the poem, Valentine shed tears while leaving her daughter at a school, secure in the knowledge that she would be kept safe. Valentine realizes on the park bench that the parents of the children in Birmingham previously saw the church as a sanctuary, but now don't even see schools as safe spaces to leave their children.⁵⁴ Due to racial violence, black parents know that their children are no safer with them in private than they are out in the public sphere, whether in school, church, or a park. While other poets used the juxtaposition of childhood joys and violent tragedy to highlight the innocence of the bomb's victims and portray them as martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement, Valentine uses the contrast to demonstrate the stark divide between black and white spheres in the 1960s:

Glad, derelict, I find a park bench, read
Birmingham. Birmingham. Birmingham.
White tears on a white ground,
White world going on, white hand in hand,
World without end. (15-19)⁵⁵

The poem establishes separate worlds, and, even more sobering, is Valentine's implication that the white world is unaware of the tragedy in the black world, and when aware, indifferent.⁵⁶ As this thesis will later examine in Michael S. Harper's "Here Where Coltrane Is," Valentine views the murders of Birmingham children through the lens of her own experience as a parent.

Langston Hughes takes a more political than personal approach in his poem "Birmingham Sunday," drawing comparisons not to his own life or even America's domestic

⁵⁴ Ali and Hoppenhaler, *Jean Valentine: This-world Company*, 135.

⁵⁵ Valentine, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003*, 57.

⁵⁶ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 59.

history, but invoking the United States' relationship with communist China. He utilizes spiritual imagery within the context of both cultures, especially in the third stanza:

The dynamite that might ignite
The fuse of centuries of Dragon Kings
Whose tomorrow sings a hymn
The missionaries never taught Chinese
In Christian Sunday School
To implement the Golden Rule (18-23)⁵⁷

Christian phrases and references to the church serve to convey anger and frustration that arose from the bombing of the Baptist church.⁵⁸ He repeats the phrases “four tiny girls” (15) and “four little girls” (1, 24) to emphasize the innocence of the girls. Hughes doesn't mention the race of the bomb victims within his poem, but rather continually refers to the race of the Chinese people. He draws connections between China and the bombing of the Birmingham church through references to dynamite, the color red, and spiritual songs and imagery:

Their blood upon the wall
With spattered flesh
And bloodied Sunday dresses
Torn to shreds by dynamite
That China made aeons ago—
Did not know
That what China made
Before China was ever Red at all
Would redden with their blood
This Birmingham-on-Sunday wall (5-14)⁵⁹

In 1963 Mao was in power and orchestrating revolutions throughout China with campaigns such as the Hundred Flower Campaign and the Great Leap Forward. Hughes saw China as an example of a successful social revolution, and he invokes the Chinese in “Birmingham Sunday”

⁵⁷ Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 557.

⁵⁸ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 59.

⁵⁹ Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 557.

as an example of oppressed people who united against violence in pursuit of freedom.⁶⁰ Hughes sought to draw a connection between the comradeship of communism and the brotherhood of the African-American race, and he wanted his poem to frame the bombing of the church as a call to action. As Hazel Carby discusses, Hughes favored the structure of the blues in his poetry, using form to “reproduce social meaning rather than individual subjectivity.”⁶¹ He refers to the people of China as “the Chinese,” not specifying peasant or political elite. Hughes may have intentionally not focused on the race of the bomb victims in an effort to frame the poem within the context of a post-racial future where all Americans are concerned with the tragedies that affect any American. He admits that the spirit of revolution is “yet unfelt” (27)⁶² in the American South but sees in the success of the Chinese the possibility “might be awakened someday soon” (25)⁶³ for understanding and revolutionary equity for African Americans. The decision not to include the deaths of Virgil Ware or Johnny Robinson in the poem, then, can be attributed to the fact that their murders were not caused by dynamite and might have detracted from the connection between African-American people and Chinese people Hughes was trying to form within the poem.

For writers like Dudley Randall and Langston Hughes, African-American writers who were prominent social activists, the absence of the deaths of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson from commemorative poetry has to be seen as an intentional decision, because they were certainly aware of all six murders. One reason why poets like Randall and Hughes may have focused on the four girls is an issue of proven innocence. While Ware and Robinson’s murderers

⁶⁰ Lianggong, “China and the Political Imagination in Langston Hughes’s Poetry,” n.p.

⁶¹ Hazel Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Fabre and O’Meally, 32.

⁶² Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 557.

⁶³ Ibid.

claimed that the young men provoked them into violence, the four girls preparing for Sunday School were undoubtedly innocent victims of the bombing. The deaths of the girls were unique in that they could invoke pity even from white segregationists who were inherently racists but wouldn't have aligned themselves with the vigilante violence of the KKK and other militant white supremacist groups. Additionally, the four girls serve as angelic protagonists, and it is far easier for a writer to describe the girls in the church with a feminine softness than it is for a writer to use similar imagery to describe Johnny Robinson at a gas station or Virgil Ware on his bike. Literature written in subsequent decades that doesn't mention Ware or Robinson, though, can potentially attribute this omission to a, certainly unintentional, reshaping of the national narrative of September 15, 1963 by the early poems of response.

As years went by, other poets began to write about the violence in Birmingham in 1963, now reflecting on the impact the events had on the Civil Rights Movement and American culture in addition to responding emotionally to the bombing and subsequent murders. Edith Segal, like Jean Valentine, was also a white American woman who wrote about the violence in Birmingham in 1963. A Jewish-American choreographer and dancer, Segal was known for her dance performances that addressed racial themes relating to the Civil Rights Movement. In her 1969 poem "Ballad for Four Children and a President," Segal connects religious ideals to the Civil Rights Movement. She begins the poem with a quote from the Talmud, "For the stones will cry from the wall,/and the limbs of the trees will testify," and aligns herself as a Jewish ally for Christian participants who lost their lives in the Civil Rights Movement, addressing the girls who died in the bombing with her support. Like Beecher, Segal draws a connection between the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the assassination of President Kennedy,

“November came—*death struck again! / Behold! Our President was slain!*” (25-26)⁶⁴ Segal, after establishing her own religious convictions and the beliefs of those she mourns, then frames the American ideal and tradition as a religion of sorts, one that regards liberty and freedom with a religious fervor. She describes Lincoln, represented by his altar at the Lincoln Memorial, as an almost demi-god, representative of freedom. It is with a religious hope that Segal closes her poem with the lines, “*We shall not ask again ‘Oh When?’ / Our freedom time is now! Amen!*” (47-48)⁶⁵ Segal asks continually throughout the poem, “how long can free world freedom wait?” implying that America, the self-proclaimed “Land of the Free,” is not practicing the ideals of liberty and equality it has preached since its inception in 1776.⁶⁶ Segal’s poem seeks to expose the hypocrisy of a nation that claims to have been founded on the pretense that all humans are created equal and possess certain unalienable rights yet continues to oppress its citizens on the basis of race. Additionally, her poem serves to highlight the divide between the legal rights guaranteed to African Americans via the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments and the reality of restriction and fear in their daily lives. Perhaps Segal sees a fractioning in the Civil Rights Movement as a result of religious conviction, and her poem is meant to serve as a warning that real progress and freedom won’t be achieved until people of all backgrounds and religions unite in pursuit of establishing a “sweet land of liberty.” (68)⁶⁷

Raymond Patterson’s poem “Birmingham 1963” is similar to Langston Hughes’ “Birmingham Sunday” in that it imagines the interactions between an unspecified mother and daughter the morning of the bombing. While Hughes’ poem focuses on the experiences of the

⁶⁴ Segal, “Ballad for Four Children and a President,” in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 67.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁶ Coleman, *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, 59.

⁶⁷ Segal, “Ballad for Four Children and a President,” in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 68.

mother, Patterson writes from the emotional perspective of the daughter and soon-to-be-victim of the bombing:

Sunday morning and her mother's hands
Weaving the two thick braids of her springing hair,
Pulling her sharply by one bell-rope when she would
Not sit still, setting her ringing, (1-4)⁶⁸

While other works, such as Alice Walker's poem "Winking at a Funeral," discussed later in this thesis, depict a lightness in being a youth during a time of revolution, finding frivolity in even the most somber of events, Patterson portrays the church as a sacred sanctuary for youth troubled by the tragedy of the times. As noted earlier, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church served as a hub for activism during the Civil Rights Movement, but for Patterson's protagonist it is a harbor of safety:

There was some pull which hurried her out to Sunday School
Toward the lesson and the parable's good news,
The quiet escape from the warring country of her feelings,
The confused landscape of grave issues and people. (11-14)⁶⁹

Thus, while the church was in fact an easily identified target for politically motivated violence, Patterson presents a view of the church as a place of clarity completely removed from the Civil Rights Movement and its destruction as a grave sin against "the people/Who perish, being innocent." (23-24)⁷⁰ This is in stark contrast to the public streets where Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson were murdered, and Patterson's focus on setting may have been why he chose to omit their murders from his narrative. In addition to an emphasis on the church as a setting, Patterson also references biblical scripture in his poem:

But now we see
Now we see though the class of her mother's wide screaming

⁶⁸ Patterson, "Birmingham 1963," in *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom*, ed. Coleman, 64.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Eyes into the room down where her daughter had gone (15-17)⁷¹

As Whitney Bell notes, the lines are reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”⁷² Patterson is implying that the violence of the bombing is inexplicable, but that God will somehow use the tragedy in order to achieve some greater purpose, even though it is difficult for mere mortals like Patterson to grasp how good can emerge in the midst of sorrow over terrible injustice.

Among the poets committed to preserving the memory of the victims of the bombing was Michael S. Harper, whose poem “American History” draws a connection between the oppression of African people during the Middle Passage and the oppression of African Americans during the 1960s. Inspired by *Oresteia* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Harper aimed to capture the “cyclic history of a new nation repeating the breaking of ancient codes of incest and miscegenation”⁷³ by connecting the murder of the girls to the drowning of five hundred Africans in Charleston Harbor during the American Revolution. The poem is only nine lines long, but in one simple stanza Harper delivers a heavy message about repetition of history:

Those four black girls blown up
in that Alabama church
remind me of five hundred
middle passage blacks,
in a net, under water
in Charleston harbor
so *redcoats* wouldn’t find them.
Can’t find what you can’t see
can you? (1-9)⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Bell, “Reflecting on Raymond R. Patterson’s ‘Birmingham 1963,’” n.p.

⁷³ Harper, *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems*, 376.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 19.

Both acts of violence were perpetrated by white people with little concern for their victims as humans, viewing them rather as lost or damaged property in the face of political gain. In addition, as Robert Stepto points out, in both the instance of the church and the harbor, a traditional source of safety and sanctuary is transformed into a dangerous site of tragedy, demonstrating the specific threats faced by black people in public spaces, regardless of the security traditionally associated with those places.⁷⁵ By drawing the comparison, Harper emphasizes a view of the bombing as a targeted terrorist attack on the Civil Rights Movement rather than a random instance of racial violence. In doing so, his omission of the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson seems to have been an intentional decision because their murderers intended to kill them with no clear political gain. Harper's concern that such instances of politically aimed violence would disappear from America's national narrative, especially in the education of youth, is clear in his final lines, "Can't find what you can't see/ can you?" (8-9)⁷⁶

In her analysis of the poem, Ulli Kira Ryder suggests that Harper included the colonial era event in Charleston because he knew that few of his African-American readers would be aware of the event:

thus, those who don't 'see' are not just the British, but also his black audience—an audience that was educated in US schools that have notoriously neglected the history of black people (and other non-whites). And if his black audience can't see/find their own history, how are they to build a future?⁷⁷

Ryder writes that Americans are taught to view early colonists as heroes who endured great sacrifice for the greater good of their new nation. To sustain this story, violent and brutal acts

⁷⁵ Stepto, "Michael S. Harper, Poet as Kinsman: The Family Sequences," 479.

⁷⁶ Harper, *Songlines in Michaeltree*, 19.

⁷⁷ Ryder, "'As Shelters Against the Cold': Women Poets of the Black Arts and Chicano Movements, 1965-1978," 66.

like the Charleston Harbor drownings have been quietly submerged from the national narrative of the American Revolution. Harper's poem warns his readers that such a restructuring of American history is not only possible in 1963, but will happen if they allow events like the church bombing to fade from public memory. "American History" was originally published in Harper's first book, *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, which was selected for publication by Gwendolyn Brooks, an act to which Harper attributes his entire career and writes, "the cost of that bravery in social and political terms is still being calculated, but the price willingly paid was an attention to the pressure of artmaking and an allegiance to ancestry as a covenant."⁷⁸ In his piece "Pull-ups at PS 25," Harper says of the poem "American History," "history, badly reported or unrecorded, and therefore primal...is transformed from momentous event into art. Art always celebrates the victory."⁷⁹ Harper acknowledges that history is a fluid concept, not rigid and entrenched in strict fact, but quite malleable and susceptible to tricks of memory and forgetfulness. He sees literature as a tool to recall, and uses his poetry as his own form of historic art, celebrating a victory of truth in American history.

Nikki Giovanni uses literature not just as a platform for her beliefs but also as a tool for activism. Giovanni's "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis," was written to help raise money for the "Free Angela" movement after Angela Davis was arrested in October of 1970 for involvement in the murders committed by Jonathan Jackson at Marin County Courthouse, despite a complete absence of evidence linking Davis to the crime. "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis" was published in a broadside that was sold to raise money to help pay Angela Davis's legal fees.⁸⁰ One of the

⁷⁸ Harper, *Songlines in Michaeltree*, 370.

⁷⁹ Harper, "Pull-ups at PS 25," 129.

⁸⁰ Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998*, 433.

first poets of the Black Arts movement to achieve financial and popular success, Giovanni's contribution to the broadside brought Davis both fiscal and social capital.⁸¹

Giovanni's poem opens with a reference to the children killed in Birmingham on September 15, 1963: "but the men who killed the children in Birmingham aren't on the most wanted list." (8)⁸² Davis was placed on the FBI's most wanted list in August of 1970⁸³ so Giovanni is comparing Davis not to the victims of the murders, but to the perpetrators. Davis grew up in Birmingham and knew Collins, Robertson, Wesley, and McNair. Giovanni doesn't specify whether she is referring just to Davis's four deceased friends or all six victims of violence on September 15, 1963. While it was public knowledge that Davis knew Collins, Robertson, Wesley, and McNair, Ware and Robinson's murderers were not considered violent threats to the community and so the reference to "children in Birmingham" is also applicable to their deaths. Although the opening lines of "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis" compare Davis and the murderers, Giovanni is using the innocence of Davis's young peers to demonstrate Davis's own innocence as an adult. At the time that the poem was written, Davis was charged with kidnapping, conspiracy, and murder even though there was no evidence to prove she had committed a single crime.⁸⁴ Giovanni ventures that the crimes committed in Birmingham were truly heinous and yet the men that law enforcement officers had proof were guilty were not treated with the same fear and potential for danger as Angela Davis. She also uses the violence that Davis observed as a child as an explanation for her activism as an adult, "and i wanted to be

⁸¹ Armstrong, *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation*, 249.

⁸² Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998*, 433.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

harriet tubman who was the first/ WANTED Black woman/and i wanted to bring myself and us out of the fear and into the Dark” (118-121).⁸⁵

Giovanni’s poem, unlike poems of reaction written immediately after the violence of 1963, serve to demonstrate the effect the violence had on children growing up in the South in the early 1960s. In addition to the six Birmingham children who lost their lives on September 15, 1963, thousands of black Birmingham children watched coverage of the events and saw themselves in the faces of Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Virgil Ware, and Johnny Robinson. “Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis” speaks of a deep-seated appreciation for the value of one’s own life, once seeing how easily one can have that taken away. While familiarity with the fragility of life pushed many civil rights activists towards policies of nonviolence, Giovanni advocated for a militant approach against racial oppression.⁸⁶ Opal Moore writes that Giovanni represents a transition from the radical Black poets of the 1960s to a “socially conscious Black woman’s voice” that features “a Black woman commenting on the world around her, and its effect upon her inner world, the world of her Black woman self.”⁸⁷ Similar to memoirist Anne Moody’s rage over and reflection on the bombing through the lens of her own activist work and experiences as a protestor in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Giovanni is writing not just of Davis’s experience as a child in Birmingham in 1963, but of her own experience as a young person during the Civil Rights Movement, and of an entire generation of people coming of age during a time of racially-based hate-motivated violence.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Armstrong, *The Civil Rights Reader*, 249.

⁸⁷ Moore, “Danger: Giovanni at Work: Disturbing the Safety of an Illusion,” n.p.

Similar to Giovanni, Alice Walker's "Winking at a Funeral," written ten years after the bombing, in 1973, speaks to the unique experience of being young and coming of age in a time of great tragedy. In its opening lines:

Those were the days
Of winking at a
Funeral
Romance blossomed
In the pews
Love signaled
Through the
Hymns (1-8)⁸⁸

Walker's poem demonstrates the juxtaposition of innocent frivolity and grievous calamity in the lives of American youth throughout the 1960s.⁸⁹ Due to circumstances beyond their control, black youth were thrown into the fearful role of potential victims, but also had to establish a normalcy amidst the catastrophic chaos. Walker's poem also humanizes the child victims of racial violence in Birmingham—rather than portray them as angelic martyrs, she uses the experiences of their mourning peers to remind readers that the victims were young people simultaneously navigating both a national civil rights revolution and their own personal journeys through puberty. At the close of the poem, Walker acknowledges that while Birmingham youth had to establish a sense of stability within a time of revolution, they could not escape from their reality:

What did we know?

Who smelled the flowers
Slowly fading?
Knew the arsonist
Of the church? (9-13)⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Walker, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965-1990 Complete*, 158.

⁸⁹ Coleman, "The Social/Aesthetic Intersections of Civil Rights Movement Poetry," n.p.

⁹⁰ Walker, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, 158.

Coleman writes that the structural codes of Walker's poem are "copacetic with the innocent act" of Collins, McNair, Wesley, and Robertson attending a Sunday school lunch and then dying in the explosion.⁹¹

⁹¹ Coleman, "Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement," 160.

III. Musical Commemoration: New Narratives and a Call to Action

The relationship between poetry and song in activist movements of the 60s often moved from the former to the latter, with musicians putting music to lines of already existing poems and then performing them. However, poets were also inspired by the music of the 60s. As discussed earlier, Dudley Randall's poem "Ballad of Birmingham" was modeled after other ballads addressing the tragedies of the Civil Rights Movement. Alice Walker said of her own poetry, "I am trying to arrive at that place where black music already is; to arrive at that unselfconscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace."⁹² A proponent of the Black Aesthetic principle that poetry and song are indelibly intertwined in African-American tradition, Nikki Giovanni made several albums of her poetry read over musical accompaniment.⁹³

There is no clearer intersection of inspiration between song and poetry than John Coltrane's "Alabama" and Michael S. Harper's "Here Where Coltrane Is." Inspired by the eulogies and commemorative speeches that emerged immediately after the violence in Birmingham, especially Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s eulogy for the four girls, Coltrane wrote "Alabama" as a requiem for the four female victims of the bombing. Coltrane's song was one in an emerging pattern of jazz musicians composing music with a mission of social justice.⁹⁴ In an interview with Edward Hirsch, Michael S. Harper said he found "an exact coordination" between Coltrane's melody and the "rhetoric of Martin Luther King's eulogy."⁹⁵ Craig Werner notes patterns in the cadences of "Alabama" that support Harper's findings, adding:

⁹² Lenz, *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, 281.

⁹³ Armstrong, *The Civil Rights Reader*, 249.

⁹⁴ Coleman, "The Social/Aesthetic Intersections of Civil Rights Movement Poetry," n.p.

⁹⁵ Hirsch, *Gulf Coast*, 11.

Midway through the song, mirroring the part of the sermon where King transforms mourning into a statement of renewed determination, Elvin Jones's drums rise up from a whisper to a tumult of directed anger. Propelled by the rhythms, Coltrane's sax summons the people to what can only be understood as a unified assault on Pharaoh's palace.⁹⁶

The song begins with an “ominous rumbling” on a piano before launching into the main melodic theme, perhaps symbolizing the bombing of the church.⁹⁷ Jazz historian Eric Nisenson wrote that “Alabama” is not just notable as a piece of music, but as a “profound mediation on the death of innocence and the seemingly endless tragedy of inhumanity...Sidestepping any didacticism or preachiness, Coltrane approaches the subject with the insight of a true artist, and by so doing makes us feel the tragedy and, even deeper, the hope.”⁹⁸ Cornel West saw “Alabama” as a natural source of inspiration, as it was able to “probe the depths of a black sense of the tragic and absurd which yields a subversive joy and sublime melancholia unknown” to most Americans in an “intellectual response” to the bombing of the Birmingham church and ensuing violence.⁹⁹ West points to Coltrane's “Alabama” as one of few “peaks of the black cultural iceberg—towering examples of soul-making and spiritual wrestling which crystallize the most powerful interpretations of the human condition in black life.”¹⁰⁰ He goes on to assert that it is the ability to capture the tragedy of events like the bombing of Birmingham in a way that is both “profound and poignant” that solidified Coltrane as a legend and pioneer of the jazz genre as well as the African-American musical tradition.¹⁰¹ In his liner notes for the live recording of “Alabama” at Birdland, LeRoi Jones wrote that he “never realized how beautiful the word ‘Alabama’ was”

⁹⁶ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America*, 130.

⁹⁷ Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, 143.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Gates and West, *The Future of the Race*, 77.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

until he listened to Coltrane’s song.¹⁰² “Alabama” ends with a musical expression that “simulates a human cry” in an effort to convey the tragedy of September 15, 1963.¹⁰³ While the tone of “Alabama” is certainly elegiac, it can also be seen as a call to action. In his writings on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal states that Coltrane’s music contains “an energy that demands to be heard, and which no one can ignore. Energy to shake us out of our lethargy and free our bodies and minds, opening us to unrealized possibilities.”¹⁰⁴ Neal writes that Coleman draws from African traditions and slave culture to inform his musical depictions of African-American history, and infuse his music with an energy that urges his listeners to work towards justice and equality.¹⁰⁵

Michael S. Harper responded to Coltrane’s song with his poem “Here Where Coltrane Is.” Written in 1971, the poem is only one link in the creative chain between Harper and Coltrane—Harper’s first collection was called *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* and he wrote several poems in Coltrane’s honor, naming him as a muse.¹⁰⁶ “Here Where Coltrane Is” was published in Harper’s second book of poetry, *History Is Your Own Heartbeat*, a volume that aims to connect the ideals of kinship and kin by drawing “a relationship between a single historical story and the stories which are modulated on their own heartbeats.”¹⁰⁷ In the case of “Here Where Coltrane Is,” Harper connects the violence in Birmingham with his own experiences as a black man and a father of black children. “Here Where Coltrane Is” is a reflection on Coltrane’s work,

¹⁰² Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, 143.

¹⁰³ Lenz, *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, 299.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 278-279.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁰⁶ Coleman, “Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement,” 170.

¹⁰⁷ Lenz, *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, 297.

and also echoes Coltrane’s music in tone and form—Harper claims that Coltrane’s music taught him how to write modal poems:

By modality I mean the creation of an environment so intense by its life and for as to revivify and regenerate, spiritually, man and community; modality assumes contact, touch, between human beings, one to one, and an environment of the spirit that revitalizes man, individually and culturally.¹⁰⁸

In writing “Here Where Coltrane Is,” Harper aims to write about the violence of September 15, 1963 in a way that connects and unites readers to the community immediately affected by the violence.

Harper begins his poem by declaring “Soul and race/are private dominions” (1-2).¹⁰⁹ The word “dominion” is historically associated with spirituality and religious spheres in biblical literature,¹¹⁰ and Harper draws a connection between race and religion, locating the poem both geographically and philosophically within the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The connection between Coltrane and the church continues with a reference to “*a love supreme*,” the title of an album Coltrane released in 1964 that represented Coltrane’s own spiritual awakening.¹¹¹ Harper connects the church, the Civil Rights Movement, and music in the poem not just as a coincidental collision on September 15, 1963, but as a “continuity of the black cultural and communal tradition.”¹¹² Harper’s description of the experience of listening to “Alabama,” makes it clear that his memory of the bombing is now intrinsically integrated with Coltrane’s music:

I play “Alabama”
on a warped record player
skipping the scratches
on your faces over the fibrous

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 294.

¹⁰⁹ Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat: Poems*, 32.

¹¹⁰ Coleman, “Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement,” 179.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 185.

¹¹² Dorsey, *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality: Blues, Jazz, and Rap as Music and Poetry*, 239.

conical hairs of plastic
under the wooden floors. (16-21)¹¹³

The lines “skipping the scratches/on your faces over the fibrous/conical hairs of plastic/under the wooden floors” (18-21) conflate images of the actual vinyl record playing in Harper’s home with an imagining of the bodies of the four girls in the church basement.¹¹⁴ While the images are gruesome, the tone of the poem is meant to convey that Coltrane’s music plays a key role in Harper’s healing process.¹¹⁵

Harper ends his poem with a rather cryptic reference to “six notes” (23-24),¹¹⁶ a phrase that Coleman admits has been difficult to interpret in the past:

Dreaming on a train from New York
to Philly, you had out six
notes which become an anthem
to our memories of you;
oak, birch, maple,
apple, cocoa, rubber.
For this reason Martin is dead;
for this reason Malcolm is dead;
for this reason Coltrane is dead;
in the eyes of my first son are the browns
of these men and their music. (22-32)¹¹⁷

However, Coleman believes that the six notes, “oak, birch, maple/apple, cocoa, rubber” (26-27)¹¹⁸ are clearly divided, first into a group of four flowering plants, and then a group of two more bitter plants with “indigenous” roots.¹¹⁹ While Coleman takes the interpretation to one of

¹¹³ Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat: Poems*, 32.

¹¹⁴ Coleman, “Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement,” 192.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹⁶ Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat: Poems*, 32.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Coleman, “Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement,” 195.

Coltrane's life as a whole, the reference to six notes could also be interpreted as Harper's decision to include Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson in a poem focused on September 15, 1963. In this case, the six notes would also be literal notes in Coltrane's song, "Alabama," with oak, birch, maple, and apple representing the lives of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson and cocoa and rubber representing the lives of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. This interpretation lends itself well to the ending lines of the poem, a repetition that "for this reason" Martin, Malcolm, and Coltrane are "dead" followed by the closing lines, "in the eyes of my first son are the browns/of these men and their music." (31-32)¹²⁰ If the six notes are meant to represent six victims of racial violence, then it follows that the murders of Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X are related. Although Coltrane died from liver cancer, his death here can be seen as less literal and perhaps the loss through forgetting, in the absence of memory, of his music and what it symbolized.¹²¹ In the closing lines, Harper brings the experience back to the deaths of the Birmingham youth in 1963 and its implications for future generations, represented in the eyes of his son. Harper's son is an African-American boy growing up in "a well-knit family" (10)¹²² who plays with "a special mist of clear white/children who love my children" (14-15).¹²³ This experience is particularly notable to Harper, who grew up under the constant threat of racial violence in Los Angeles and had to live in segregated housing at the University of Iowa.¹²⁴ And yet, his son's peaceful childhood can't save him from a "traditionally white supremacist culture" just as "talent or achievement" couldn't save Martin,

¹²⁰ Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat: Poems*, 32.

¹²¹ Coleman, "Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement," 201.

¹²² Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat: Poems*, 32.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, *The Civil Rights Reader*, 245.

Malcolm, or Coltrane,¹²⁵ and innocence couldn't save Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Virgil Ware, or Johnny Robinson.

As noted earlier, poems and songs played an integral role in the Civil Rights Movement and there is a distinct creative relationship between poetry and songwriting. As a result, the songs written in response to the violence on September 15th, 1963 are similar in lyrical content and narrative construction to many of the poems written after the bombing and subsequent violence. While the victims of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church were black, both Phil Ochs and Richard Farina, white folk singers, connect the event to the common American experience within their songs, pulling the tragedy into the national narrative, rather than an exclusively African-American experience. Ochs wrote "On Her Hand a Golden Ring" in 1963 in response to the events that unfolded on September 15 of that year. Although he was part of a greater community of folk singers who wrote topical songs and used their music to further their activist efforts, Ochs was among the first songwriters to focus on the Civil Rights Movement, beginning with his 1962 song "The Ballad of Oxford, Mississippi."¹²⁶ Ochs studied journalism at Ohio State and spent his college years writing political prose.¹²⁷ Ochs's collegiate experiences as a journalist also influenced his music in that he wrote songs with distinct messages focused around specific events that were soon outdated, unlike his peers, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, whose songs are retained as activist anthems today. Ochs wrote "On Her Hand a Golden Ring" in 1963 and performed it at demonstrations and benefit shows. A

¹²⁵ Coleman, "Transforming words/revolutionizing verses: four poets of the American civil rights movement," 201.

¹²⁶ Cohen, Place, and Seeger, Liner notes to *The Best of Broadside 1962-1988: Anthems of the American Underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*, 76.

¹²⁷ Cohen, *Phil Ochs: a Bio-bibliography*, 6.

recording of the song was included on *Sings for Broadside*, released in 1976.¹²⁸ The song begins similarly to response poems written in 1963, focusing on a young girl, presumably a future victim of the bombing, preparing for church, “Another Sunday morning, another time to pray/ A brand new dress to wear and a doll to put away/And on her hand a golden ring.”¹²⁹ The song follows the girl with the gold ring as she goes to church and then dies in the explosion:

The crackle and that clatter and the crinkle of the glass
Fell upon the people from the power of blast
The face of Jesus was crumbled into sand
Nearby the gold ring on her hand¹³⁰

Ochs then describes the demonstrations of anger and grief that occurred in the hours following the bombing:

Rage tore the hearts of men who leaped up to their feet
Old men grew hard and the young men grew cold
And on her hand a ring of gold.
Then the speeches of the sorrow flowed into the town¹³¹

Although the lyrics have not yet identified the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as the place of worship, Ochs clarifies the setting as Birmingham on September 15, 1963 by referencing the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson, “And while the men were talking two more children were shot down/For that’s the way when the law don’t mean a thing”.¹³² While he writes about the bombing of the church as a tragedy that transgressed the reverence reserved for a church building, Ochs portrays the murder of the two boys as the result of a systemic social failure to hold white perpetrators of violence against black victims criminally responsible for

¹²⁸ Liner notes to *Broadside Ballads, Vol. 10: Phil Ochs Sings For Broadside*, n.p.

¹²⁹ Ochs, “On Her Hand a Golden Ring.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

their actions, thereby enabling racially motivated hate crimes. Ochs ends his song by remarking on the effect of the events of September 15 on the surviving Birmingham youth:

More than pity, more than anger, can you feel what has been done
When hate can reach inside a church and mark the very young
The young will bear the scars when they're growing in the land
Rememberin' the gold ring on her hand¹³³

Ochs implies that the hate crimes not only resulted in the murders of six children, but also could incite hate and harden the hearts of the children who watched their peers die. “More than pity, more than anger,” the emotional response of the youth is important because it could cultivate a future generation of violence, bigotry, and hatred, rather than working towards a peaceful future. In a 1964 interview Ochs said the goal of his songs was to “crystallize the thoughts of young people who have stopped accepting things the way they are,” and that he did so by capitalizing on the already inherent disillusionment of youth to motivate them to act “out of a real concern for what’s happening—or not happening.”¹³⁴

Richard Farina, Ochs’s peer and fellow folksinger, was one of the early influential writers of *Broadsides*, known for both his abilities as a songwriter and his instrument of choice, the traditional Appalachian dulcimer.¹³⁵ Moved by the tragedy of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, he wrote and recorded “Birmingham Sunday,” but it was his sister-in-law, Joan Baez, who turned the song into a haunting folk anthem. Joan Baez’s rendition of “Birmingham Sunday” was one of the most popular tracks off her successful 1964 album *5* and was later featured as the theme song of Spike Lee’s *Four Little Girls*. In the piece he wrote for Baez’s liner notes, Langston Hughes describes the song as “beautifully understated..a quiet

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Rollin, “A New Beat: Topical Folk Singers, Their Songs,” 130.

¹³⁵ Cohen, Place, and Seeger. Liner notes to *The Best of Broadside 1962-1988: Anthems of the American underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*, 82.

protest song.”¹³⁶ The song is a narrative telling of the bombing that refers to each of the victims by name. Farina frames the girls as innocent martyrs, writing that Cynthia Wesley’s “prayers and her feelings would shame you and me” and Carol Robertson “asked for a blessing but asked for no more.”¹³⁷ Farina gives each girl a name and a number, keeping a running death toll throughout the song. He does not include, however, any mention of Virgil Ware or Johnny Robinson, numbers five and six of the death tally by the evening of September 15. He repeats the line “and the choir kept singing of Freedom” seven times throughout the song, referring to both the heavenly freedom of the hymn, and a freedom from racial violence and discrimination championed by the Civil Rights Movement. The repetition of the lyric is reminiscent of African-American gospel spirituals and, along with the rest of the song’s religious framework, serves to ground the song in both a moral context and African-American tradition.¹³⁸ Although the song is rooted in the religious promise of freedom, Farina writes “in an old Baptist Church there was no need to run,”¹³⁹ implying that while the church provided an ideological haven for African Americans, no physical space was considered sacred enough to offer protection from hate-motivated violence. For a white audience, the line invokes a sense of pity and injustice: a place of worship ought to be immune from such violent attacks and provide at least a temporary sense of security.¹⁴⁰ Farina writes of the bombing as the result of cowardice on behalf of the culprits, who weren’t brave enough to communicate their feelings through less violent, less anonymous means: “On Birmingham Sunday a noise shook the ground/And people all over the earth turn

¹³⁶ Baez, “Birmingham Sunday.”

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Baumann, “Chords of Discord: Songs of Dissonance, Violence, and Faith in the Civil Rights Movement,” 22.

¹³⁹ Baez, “Birmingham Sunday.”

¹⁴⁰ Baumann, “Chords of Discord,” 30.

around/ For no one recalled a more cowardly sound.”¹⁴¹ The reference to “people all over the earth” implies that Farina finds the behaviors of white supremacists a global embarrassment to the United States. Like Ochs, Farina was a white man who wrote a narrative song about the bombing, a pattern of songwriters “giving an account of an exclusively black experience” that Daniel Gonczy describes as the intersection of “commitment of white, urban sensibility, the necessity for social action and the principles of human rights.”¹⁴² Gonczy is correct in asserting that white folk singers like Ochs and Farina gave “experiential” accounts of the event, constructing narratives for the listeners containing the characters involved and specific plot details. In contrast, Gonczy writes, black singers wrote from a more “ideological” mindset, describing their emotional reaction to an event that they don’t describe in detail to their listeners, and working from an emotion-based experience rather than an event-based experience.¹⁴³ Regardless of whether Gonczy’s distinction is valid, Baez, as a white folk singer, was known for her ability to motivate white youth to action through lyrical social commentary. Craig Werner writes that Baez provided white students with an emotional and personal connection to the Civil Rights Movement that differed from accounts of racial violence on the evening news or activist movements garnered towards an African-American demographic.¹⁴⁴

Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” serves as the musical foil to Baez’s cover of “Birmingham Sunday.” While both women were close friends with Langston Hughes and active in the *Broadside* community,¹⁴⁵ their approaches to protest songs are radically different. While “Birmingham Sunday” is a hauntingly powerful and heartfelt ballad, Simone belts out an upbeat

¹⁴¹ Baez, “Birmingham Sunday.”

¹⁴² Gonczy, “The Folk Music of the 1960s: Its Rise and Fall,” 26.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America*, 47.

¹⁴⁵ Cohen, Place, and Seeger. Liner notes to *The Best of Broadside 1962-1988: Anthems of the American underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*, 74.

self-proclaimed “show tune.”¹⁴⁶ She recognizes the dissonance between her lyrical content and musical style, remarking “Bet you thought I was kiddin’”¹⁴⁷ before launching into a tirade against those trying to suppress a movement towards equality. Simone recognizes that protest songs can exist in more than one genre, just as there are multiple approaches to combatting systemic oppression. “Mississippi Goddam” was written as a direct response to the bombing of the Sixteenth Baptist Church; yet the song does not mention any of the four girls, Virgil Ware or Johnny Robinson, or any of the events of September 15th. Simone simply sings, “everyone knows about Alabama”¹⁴⁸ in reference to that day. She doesn’t need to provide a narrative because the events have already been reported in the news and woven into the national narrative of racial violence. Rather, Simone provides a response to the pattern of hate-motivated violence, calling for swift and sustainable change and equality. In her autobiography, however, Simone cites the bombing of the church as well as the murders of Medgar Evers, Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson as inspirations for her song, so the phrase “everyone knows about Alabama,” is meant to encompass all six murders on September 15, 1963, as well as the death of Medgar Evers.¹⁴⁹ Her call for action to her audience reflects her personal life; Simone was a one-time member of the Black Panther Party.¹⁵⁰ In fact, Simone’s initial response to the assassination of Medgar Evers and the violence in Alabama was to build a zip-gun and seek justice for the murders as a vigilante. Eventually, her husband convinced her that a song might be a more powerful weapon

¹⁴⁶ Simone, “Mississippi Goddam.”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Simone, *I Put a Spell On You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 89.

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, Place, and Seeger. Liner notes to *The Best of Broadside 1962-1988: Anthems of the American underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*, 74.

than a gun.¹⁵¹ In her autobiography, Simone says that the bombing of the Baptist church was the impetus for her personal epiphany:

I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn't an intellectual connection...it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination...["Mississippi Goddam"] was my first civil rights song and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down.¹⁵²

Simone points to the song as the beginning of her activism and as a commitment to the Civil Rights Movement. She enters the movement with a strong criticism of gradualism,¹⁵³ asserting through her lyrics that current solutions weren't achieving the goals of the movement quickly enough with a stanza that lists goals like "desegregation," "mass participation," and "reunification," each followed by the phrase "go slow," a term used by white and black moderates alike.¹⁵⁴ Simone also speaks out against Southern whites who tried to convince activists to "go slow" in creating change:

Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more
You keep on saying "Go slow!"¹⁵⁵

While some critics interpret Simone's frustration with slow movement as a denouncement of non-violent protests and the political and religious leaders who championed a pacifist movement, the lines can also be seen as a general exasperation with an apathetic America that wasn't actively pursuing change.¹⁵⁶ Like Harry Edwards in "How to Change the U.S.A.," Simone is providing a voice for Americans who are frustrated with continual hate-motivated violence and

¹⁵¹ Baumann, "Chords of Discord," 48.

¹⁵² Simone, *I Put a Spell On You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 89-90.

¹⁵³ Baumann, "Chords of Discord," 50.

¹⁵⁴ Simone, "Mississippi Goddam."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Baumann, "Chords of Discord," 51.

want to see action, conviction, and prevention of racial violence. Simone conveys her discontent, and disbelief, of passivity by asking, “why don’t you see it/why don’t you feel it?”¹⁵⁷

After the response songs of 1963 and 1964, there is a gap in songs that address the violence that occurred on September 15, 1963. The bombing and subsequent violence don’t reemerge in musical lyrics until 2001, when three different musicians released songs commemorating the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The 2001 tracks from the Drive-By Truckers, Kate Campbell, and Saul Williams are the start of a resurgence of musical commemoration of the bombing that has lasted for at least a decade. The recent attention to the bombing can partially be attributed the 50th anniversary of the bombing of the church and the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson in 2013. With 50th anniversaries of other pivotal events of the Civil Rights Movement falling before 2013, it follows that artists of the 2000s may have been reminded of the violence of September 15, 1963 by a renewed national interest in the history of the Civil Rights Movement and a return to commemoration. However, 2001 seems a bit early to attribute a renewed interest in the bombing to the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. Many of the songs attempt to capture the experience of living in a time when violence wasn’t just prevalent but expected. As Nina Simone sings in “Mississippi Goddam,” “I think every day’s gonna be my last.”¹⁵⁸ It is possible that the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th inspired musicians to reflect back on a time when an act of domestic terrorism by way of a church bombing moved a nation to action. 2001 also marked the United States’ military involvement in Afghanistan, sparking peace protests similar in nature to those in the 60s.

¹⁵⁷ Simone, “Mississippi Goddam.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

In addition, Timothy McVeigh was executed in 2001 for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. The bombing resulted in 168 fatalities and hundreds of serious injuries and remains one of the most serious instances of domestic terrorism in American history.¹⁵⁹ The resurfacing of the Oklahoma City bombing in the news could also have caused musical artists to reflect back on domestic terrorism in the United States.

The Drive-By Truckers, a Southern rock group with members from Georgia and Alabama, wrote “Ronnie and Neil” in 2001 as a tribute to the feud and friendship between Neil Young and Ronnie Van Zant of Lynyrd Skynyrd. While popular opinion sometimes warps the Lynyrd Skynyrd song “Sweet Home Alabama” into a nostalgic anthem of the South and an attack on Neil Young for his songs “Southern Man” and “Alabama,” “Ronnie and Neil” praises both men for writing truth from their experiences in the South and compares them to contemporary writers: “Rock stars today ain’t half as real/speaking their minds on how they feel.”¹⁶⁰ The song starts with an account of the church bombing:

Church blew up in Birmingham
Four little black girls killed for no goddamn good reason
All this hate and violence can’t come to no good end
A stain on the good name.
A whole lot of good people dragged through the blood and glass
Blood stains on their good names and all of us take the blame¹⁶¹

The song appears on the Drive-By Truckers’ album *Southern Rock Opera*, which guitarist and songwriter Patterson Hood says they created because “we wanted to examine people’s misconceptions about the South and study some modern-day Southern mythology.”¹⁶² While the band does address the myth of the “Sweet Home Alabama” feud, it in some ways reinforces

¹⁵⁹ Associated Press, “Victims of the Oklahoma City bombing,” n.p.

¹⁶⁰ Drive-By Truckers, “Ronnie and Neil.”

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Foyston, “Drive-By Truckers Resurrect Skynyrd Legend,” n.p.

misconceptions of September 15, 1963. Their account of the church bombing doesn't mention the violence that emerged later that day, including the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. They also view the bombing as a random act of senseless violence, rather than an attack of domestic terrorism targeted at a key location of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, the line "Blood stains on their good names and all of us take the blame" is meant to address a "simplification of racist history that's laid the white man's burden squarely on the doorstep of the Youngian Southern Man."¹⁶³ Although the argument seems to be less nuanced or informed, the intention still seems to be aligned at least in sentiment with Romano and other scholars' frustration with a simplification and generalization of the history of the Civil Rights Movement that reduces a grassroots movement against oppression and a systemic social failure to address rampant violence, hatred, and bigotry to a few key leaders and events working against an isolated group of white supremacists. However, to suggest that apathetic white southerners aren't to blame for violence like the bombing of the church and the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson is to ignore the role bystanders have in reducing violence and to turn a blind eye to history, where real change isn't made until those with privilege learn to leverage their power to work with an oppressed group to achieve equality. Through their discography, Drive-By Truckers seeks to construct cultural scapegoats, like George Wallace, to carry the guilt of an entire white generation.¹⁶⁴ The ultimate goal of "Ronnie and Neil," though, seems to be to

¹⁶³ Masley, "For the Record," n.p.

¹⁶⁴ Harrison, "'Mean Like Liquor' and 'Some Real Fine People': Enactments of the Progressive Southern White Man in the Drive-By Truckers' Albums *Southern Rock Album* and *Dirty South*," 34.

explore the relationship of present day rural white southerners to racial violence from the 1960s as well as a currently racially divided South further complicated by stereotypes.¹⁶⁵

In contrast, Saul Williams' and Kate Campbell's songs released in 2001 are similar in lyrical content to the songs Nina Simone and Phil Ochs wrote immediately after the bombing. Saul Williams' "Coded Language" further complicates the relationship between poetry and song in the rendering of the Birmingham murders. Williams, an African-American poet and hip hop artist, wrote "Coded Language" for *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-Hop*, a book he began in 1995 and published in 2006. The book examines the cultural influence of hip-hop and the genre's relationship with history.¹⁶⁶ Although the poem wasn't published in print until 2006, Williams released it as a rap song with instrumental backing on his 2001 LP *Amethyst Rock Star* and later performed the song as a slam poem on *Def Poetry Jam* in 2004. Similar to Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam," the song is an expression of frustration with injustice and a call for action. Williams' song does not focus solely on racial violence, but rather oppression based on any aspect of a person's identity. He references the "four little girls" in a list of people whose names he invokes in order to reclaim creative expression as a form of activism and healing. The list includes many deities, activists, victims of violence, poets, artists, political figures, writers, and musicians, such as Richard Wright, Audre Lorde, Rumi, Bob Marley, W.E.B. DuBois, William Shakespeare, and Billie Holiday, and ends with "those still aflame, and the countless unnamed."¹⁶⁷ The connection between the listed names seems to be those who were once "aflame," in that they suffered or were murdered for their identities or the expression of their emotions and identities in art. Williams ends the song by imploring that every person

¹⁶⁵ Albrecht, "Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The Performative Nature of Authenticity in Contemporary Popular Music," n.p.

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, "Coded Language."

“acknowledge their responsibility to/uplift the consciousness of the entire fucking World.”¹⁶⁸

Unlike The Drive-By Truckers, Williams thinks that everyone has a role to play as “channelers of these changing frequencies”¹⁶⁹ and that shirking that responsibility not only holds that person responsible for further oppression in the world, but represents a shirking of the basic duties of a human. “Coded Language” serves as a reminder that humans have a finite amount of time on earth and Williams believes that time should be used to harness creativity and encourage harmony. The final lines of “Coded Language” reference “two rappers slain,” because “any utterance will be un-aimed, will be disclaimed, will be maimed.”¹⁷⁰ Williams wrote the song between 1995 and 2001 and so it is likely that the two rap artists he is referencing are Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, both of whom were murdered in the late 1990s. The lines thus convey that, in pursuit of spreading truth and equality, people may be persecuted for their words and their art. Williams’ song includes the four victims of the Birmingham bombing as an example of the tragedies of hate-motivated violence throughout history, and his meditation on violence since 1963 illustrates his message that the work to achieve safety and quality for all is not yet completed.

According to Kate Campbell’s personal website, her “formative years were spent in the very core of the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, and the indelible experiences of those years have shaped her heart, character and convictions ever since.”¹⁷¹ Campbell is a white folk artist who grew up in Sledge, Mississippi where her father was a Baptist preacher. Her 2001 song “Bear It Away” is a narrative of the events of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963. Campbell’s slow acoustic song describes the four girls at church:

¹⁶⁸ Williams, “Coded Language.”

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “Kate Campbell.”

Dreaming of freedom
Across the land
And all God's children
Walking hand in hand¹⁷²

She places the goals and values of the Civil Rights Movement in the minds and mouths of the victims, transforming four girls attending Sunday School into both martyrs for and spokespeople of the Civil Rights Movement. Campbell goes on to provide a narrative of the bombing:

One deadly blast
Shattered the peace
Making for a dark
Sunday morning
On Sixteenth Street¹⁷³

The short song ends with a religious appeal, a plea to “Merciful Jesus” to “Lift up our sorrow/Upon your shoulder/And bear it away.”¹⁷⁴ The song is reminiscent of folk songs that emerged after the bombing in 1963 and 1964, and, for a song written in 2001, shows no reflection on the impact of the event and violence on the next four decades, except for a line wondering what the girls “could have been.”¹⁷⁵ Campbell does state that the events of the Civil Rights Movement shaped her spiritual life and so the song might have been written as a personal experience of learning to process grief and tragedy from a religious perspective.

Like Saul Williams, Ursula Rucker is a spoken word poet and hip-hop artist who addresses the bombing of the Baptist Church in her work. Rucker recorded “For Women” on her 2006 album *Ma' at Mama*. The song, which addresses racial and gender stereotypes, devotes a verse to the four girls:

My skin was young, so young
It burned and tore

¹⁷² Campbell, “Bear It Away.”

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

My hair was pressed and curled
And tied with ribbons that Sunday morn'
September 15, 1963
I screamed
In the basement of the church, I screamed
The last day I would ever see
Ma and Pa would never know the woman I would grow up to be
I was an involuntary offering for humanity
Why did they hate me?
Why they hate me, so, so, so
What did they call me?
Four little girls
Four little girls¹⁷⁶

While Rucker's lyrics are a narrative account of the bombing, albeit an impassioned one, her song is modeled after Nina Simone, one of her greatest inspirations.¹⁷⁷ Simone's "Four Women," recorded in 1966, presents four stereotypical representations of black women and demonstrates the impact of slavery and Jim Crow era discrimination on African Americans through the portrayal of archetypes. Rucker's song also uses four female stereotypes to not only demonstrate the intersectionality of oppression but also to demonstrate the liberation and empowerment of black women. Her four female characters are a girl from an urban neighborhood whose aspiration is to star in a music video, one of the four victims of the Sixteenth Street Church Bombing, a single working mother, and an abstract black goddess. Rucker's song about black American women demonstrates the influence of three major movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black is Beautiful cultural movement, which aimed to empower African Americans and encourage black people in all world cultures to embrace their natural physical attributes, and the Women's Movement.¹⁷⁸ Her emphasis on the gender and appearance of the bombing victim is not because of her vulnerability

¹⁷⁶ Rucker, "For Women."

¹⁷⁷ Markovic and Parezanovic, "Where Are the Romantics to Feed Me My Pill: The Poetic Voice of Ursula Rucker," n.p.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

as a female victim of violence, but is meant to be a commemoration to the loss of potential womanhood. While Rucker imitates Simone as an emotive, hard-hitting songwriter who calls others to action and empowerment, she reinforces the idea of the victims of the church bombing as members of a cultural sainthood, referring to them as an “involuntary offering for humanity”¹⁷⁹ and therefore portraying them as martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement.

Similar to the Drive-By Truckers, the North Carolinian bluegrass band, Chatham County Line, released a song about the violence of 1963 that begins with a narrative account of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church:

Four little girls tying their sash in the basement room that day
Poking fun and making jokes before getting on their knees to pray
Just so young with all their dreams and years to their end
Strewn away in the rubble by the hatred of scared white men¹⁸⁰

Chatham County Line is a traditional four-piece bluegrass band, down to their one microphone performance style. Like the Drive-By Truckers, they are a group of white Southern males reexamining the events of the Civil Rights Movement; however, Chatham County Line’s approach reflects more on the experience of living in America in 1963 than assigning and resolving guilt or blame for the events that occurred. Introducing the song to an audience in December of 2013, the band’s guitarist and lead singer, David Wilson, said that they perform the song in memory of the four girls as well as anyone else who lost their life in the movement. He explained that the song was written from the band’s feeling of overwhelming disbelief that Americans were able to process the daily violence and tragedy in 1963 and that the environment of constant fear and terror made America today pale in comparison.¹⁸¹ When asked about “Birmingham Jail” in a 2008 interview, Wilson said that using history as inspiration was a

¹⁷⁹ Rucker, “For Women.”

¹⁸⁰ Chatham County Line, “Birmingham Jail.”

¹⁸¹ Chatham County Line, *Electric Holiday Tour*.

learning opportunity for him and the audience, adding, “a big part of folk music is teaching through song. You tell people how screwed up things were at certain times and hopefully they can take that in and change it.”¹⁸²

Also familiar with the teaching power of mass media, journalist-turned-hip-hop-artist Rocky Rivera includes the names of all four victims of the church bombing in her song “Heart,” off her 2010 self-titled first album. “Heart” consists of three long verses, each told from the perspective of a different revolutionary woman of color. The song begins with the story of Gabriela Silang, who led Filipino rebellions in 1763, continues with the story of Angela Davis, and ends with the story of Delores Huerta, leader of the United Farm Workers. The girls feature in Angela Davis’ verse, as her inspiration to return to the United States and begin her career as an activist:

Studying overseas when I heard about the blast
And I knew the little girls who were killed in Alabama
It was Carole, Addie Mae, Cynthia, and Denise
And the Klan got away in cahoots with the police¹⁸³

Rocky Rivera has her narrative of Angela list each of the girls by name to demonstrate Davis’ connection to the bombing, and to show on a personal level how the event sparked a revolution at a national level. Rivera draws a link between the violent actions of white supremacists and the corruption of the police, stating that both were complicit in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the lack of justice that transpired. Rivera later states that Davis “used my education to combat the injustice/It was more than Malcolm X and Martin Luther in the trenches.”¹⁸⁴ This assertion serves to demonstrate the way memory of the Civil Rights Movement has changed to silence the voices of many individuals who assisted in the grassroots

¹⁸² Stallard, “Profile—Chatham County Line,” n.p.

¹⁸³ Rivera, “Heart.”

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

movement, resulting in what Raiford and Romano call “consensus memory.”¹⁸⁵ By naming Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Rivera shows that a movement that depended on the actions of hundreds of thousands of people is now attributed to just a few key heroic figures. As Raiford and Romano wrote:

The dominant narratives about King and Parks do not focus on how people worked together to achieve social change; they tell the story of singular, extraordinary individuals who made history by acting in ways that are consistent with longstanding American values.¹⁸⁶

By contrasting the figures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. with the persona of Angela Davis, Rivera demonstrates how the silenced voices in the construction of Civil Rights Movement memory are disproportionately female.

Most recently, Bruce Springsteen references victims of the violence in Birmingham on September 15, 1963 in his song “We Are Alive” on his 2012 album *Wrecking Ball*. The song is an activist anthem that references several groups of people throughout history who have lost their lives in the face of injustice. Springsteen sings from each person’s perspective and, in doing so, never directly names any character in his song. When Springsteen sings, “I was killed in 1963/ One Sunday morning in Birmingham,”¹⁸⁷ he does not specify whether he is referring to one of the four girls killed in the church bombing, Virgil Ware, or Johnny Robinson. Following the pattern of contemporary commemoration, it would be easy to assume that Springsteen is referring to one of the four girls. However, Springsteen makes no specific reference to the church or the bombing as a cause of death, and so it is plausible that the song is referencing the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. The chorus of the song implies that the memory of martyrs motivates surviving activists in their work:

¹⁸⁵ Raiford and Romano, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, xvii.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁸⁷ Springsteen, “We Are Alive.”

We are alive
And though we lie alone here in the dark
Our souls will rise
To carry the fire and light the spark
To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart¹⁸⁸

Wrecking Ball addresses the “conjoined happiness and grim reality of today’s working class Americans,”¹⁸⁹ and in “We Are Alive,” Springsteen pays homage to the working class of America’s past while also providing an explanation for the drive and call to action for today’s working class. In an endorsement of President Obama, shortly after the release of *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen wrote, “We’re still living through very hard times but justice, equality, and real freedom are not always a tide rushing in. They are more often a slow march, inch by inch, day after long day.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Harde, “‘Living in your American skin’: Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics,” 141.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 141.

IV. Conclusion: 50th Anniversary and the Failures of Art and History

September 15, 2013 was the 50th anniversary of the violence that took the lives of Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Johnny Robinson, and Virgil Ware. The city of Birmingham marked the anniversary with an “Empowerment Week” celebration that featured several celebrity guests, as well as services at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Attorney General Eric Holder was in attendance and spoke about the violence as a “seminal and tragic moment” that was followed by gains such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. While Holder acknowledged that there had been progress made in racial reconciliation, he spoke about the recent Supreme Court decision to eliminate part of the Voting Rights Act, stating, “this is a fight that we will continue,” in regards to civil rights in America.¹⁹¹ The commemorative event, like many of the poems and songs discussed in this thesis, reflected on the violence in Birmingham through a lens of religious belief. Addie Mae Collins’ sister, Sarah Collins Rudolph, a survivor of the bombing, spoke about her decision to testify in the bombing trial, “God spared me to live and tell just what happened on that day.”¹⁹² Reverend Julius Scruggs, current president of the National Baptist Convention USA, delivered a sermon at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church during which he said, “God said you may murder four little girls, but you won’t murder the dream of justice and liberty for all.”¹⁹³ Scruggs echoes the sentiments of Raymond Patterson in his poem, “Birmingham 1963,” implying that the violence was part of a greater mission of equality that we may now “see more clearly.”

The 50th anniversary created an opportunity to re-introduce the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson to the national narrative of September 15th, 1963. Just as W.E.B. DuBois

¹⁹¹ Associated Press, “A Love That Forgives,” n.p.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

sought to recover African-American history from the “structural amnesia” created by white supremacy’s voice and power in documenting American history,¹⁹⁴ the commemorative event was a time to include voices that had previously been silenced in recounting Birmingham history. However, most major news sources chose to focus on the bombing of the church over the murders later that day. While many media sources chose to include the later murders, the way they did so was telling of current American attitudes towards murders like those of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. A Virginia newspaper started their article on the 50th anniversary with a retelling of the Birmingham violence in 1963 in a way that was exemplary of news sources across the country:

Fifty years ago today, four African-American girls, dressed in white, gathered in the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley—all 14—and Denise McNair, 11, chatted about the first week of school as they prepared to participate in the morning’s service. Suddenly, an explosion blew a gaping hole in the sanctuary wall. The girls were crushed to death beneath the rubble; more than 20 other people were injured in the blast. Later in the day, two black teenage boys were shot and killed as violence convulsed Birmingham.¹⁹⁵

While the inclusion of the murders is preferable to their exclusion, there is still a marked difference between the description of the girls’ murders and the murders that happened outside of the church bombing. The bombing victims are each identified by their name and age, and the author makes a concerted effort to humanize them. In contrast, neither Ware nor Robinson is identified by name. Their murders are lumped together, even though they happened miles away from each other, at different times of the day, and in different situations. Even the description that they were murdered “as violence convulsed Birmingham,” implies that they might have been

¹⁹⁴ David Blight, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory,” *History and Memory in African- American Culture*, ed. Fabre and O’Meally, 63.

¹⁹⁵ Smith, “Attack on Desegregation,” n.p.

somehow responsible for the circumstances of their murders, as opposed to the clear innocence of the bomb victims.

The narratives of the 50th anniversary commemorative events pose the question—are these commemorations achieving anything productive? Diane McWhorter wrote a response to the “Empowerment Week,” asking similar questions:

...why is it so difficult to extend the notion of empowerment to include the powerless? We are more comfortable devoting civic resources to media events and monuments, like the life-size sculpture of the girls unveiled in Birmingham this week, than addressing the persistent casualties of the history being commemorated.¹⁹⁶

McWhorter suggests that commemorative gestures are not worthwhile unless they have actions behind them that confirm a movement towards equality and reconciliation. Artists have the opportunity, and some may venture, the responsibility, to incorporate previously suppressed voices into cultural memory through commemoration. History fails these silenced voices because their stories are missing from traditional historical records, such as court transcripts and newspaper articles. Artistic expressions of suppressed narratives like poems and songs, however, create a space for alternative narratives of historical events by either preserving marginalized reactions to an event, like the poetry of Dudley Randall and Alice Walker, or giving voice to suppressed narratives by crafting an imagined retelling of an event by the oppressed party, like the music of Ursula Rucker and Rocky Rivera. Commemorations have succeeded in at least bringing the story of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church into America’s national historical narrative. Ken Howard, a student at the time of the bombing, reflects:

After the march, you had the feeling that things will change—and then these little girls were killed. As they said about the walk on the moon, it was a “small step,” but it was a step nonetheless that people heard. The loss of those girls was sad, but it was another step, because individuals began to see there was an injustice being done.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ McWhorter, “Civil Rights Justice on the Cheap,” n.p.

¹⁹⁷ Fletcher, “A Change is Gonna Come,” 49.

McWhorter argues that, “it was indeed their murder, in the defense of segregation, that kept the brutal truths of Jim Crow before the public.”¹⁹⁸ The murders in Birmingham all resulted in a delay or an absence in seeking and obtaining justice; and 50 years later, their individual cases are framed in a national storyline of injustice in the American court system, in which black victims of crime are still not able to obtain legal justice, and yet black alleged perpetrators of crime are incarcerated at alarming rates. This storyline is now reflected in America’s classic 20th century literature as well, including the writings of Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, and Harper Lee.¹⁹⁹ Bill Baxley, the lawyer who reopened the Sixteenth Street Church bombing case in 1976 in order to seek justice for the victims, believes that commemorations of the bombing helped to bring about change in America’s legal system:

I remember the 1960s in Alabama. Sometimes you would have a confession by whites who had done violence against blacks. And the jury would still come back with acquittals! Sometimes the police would do a great job, but the jury would turn them loose.²⁰⁰

Baxley sees a marked change in the legal system since 1963, one for the better. Additionally, changes in jury behavior don’t just reflect systemic change in the legal system, but changes in prevailing American attitudes.

Honoring the contributions of the tragedies of September 15, 1963 to these changes, however, is difficult. Most of the poems and songs examined in this thesis create martyrs and heroes out of the victims, even though the children weren’t active contributors to the Civil Rights Movement while they were alive. Congress voted unanimously in 2013 to award the four victims of the church bombing Congressional Gold Medals, the highest civilian honor in the

¹⁹⁸ McWhorter, “Civil Rights Justice on the Cheap,” n.p.

¹⁹⁹ Haygood, “Echoes of the Past,” n.p.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

United States. Sarah Collins Rudolph initially turned down the invitation to accept the award on her sister's behalf, stating: "I'm letting the world know, my sister didn't die for freedom. My sister died because they put a bomb in that church and they murdered her."²⁰¹ The distinction is important because it highlights the difference between treating the church bombing as an event of the Civil Rights Movement over treating the bombing as an act of domestic terrorism. It would be unusual, for instance, for Congress to award Congressional Gold Medals to the victims of the attack on the Boston Marathon in the spring of 2013 or the World Trade Center in 2001, even though the victims and survivors of those attacks are regarded with respect.

There have been no mentions, let alone a vote by Congress, of awarding medals to or formally recognizing the losses of the families of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. The lack of commemoration in the past fifty years of the deaths of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson raises another question—what could more, or, at least, more effective, commemoration have achieved? It is not difficult to see similarities between the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson and the murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. Doug Jones, the attorney who prosecuted the two additional bombers of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Tommy Blanton and Bobby Cherry, has publicly stated that he believes there were implications of racial profiling and discrimination at play in Trayvon Martin's case.²⁰² Martin's and Davis's cases reveal that America still perceives a young black male in public space as a threat. This perception is solidified by legislation like New York City's stop-and-frisk law, which allows police to racially profile citizens in the street, and Florida's infamous "stand-your-ground" law. Larry Joe Sims, who became a born-again Christian as an adult, stated in a 2003 interview that, "Virgil knows in heaven that positive consequences came from this...he knows that his death helped change

²⁰¹ McWhorter, "Civil Rights Justice on the Cheap," n.p.

²⁰² Haygood, "Echoes of the Past," n.p.

society—that it changed me.”²⁰³ While it is true that Sims has not murdered another person since 1963, it is hard to see how Ware’s death has brought about substantial societal change.

However, organizations like the youth-led Dream Defenders are working to uncover silenced voices while protesting discriminatory legislation. The Dream Defenders’ primary goal is to eliminate systems that incarcerate disproportionate amounts of black youth, as well as repeal legislation that enables hate-motivated violence, like Florida’s stand-your-ground law. The group also launched a “Blacked Out History” campaign in February of 2014 that partnered with a variety of activist organizations to circulate narratives and histories of people who were silenced in the past due to oppression. While commemorations of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson remain lacking, the Dream Defenders and other organizations are working towards preventing future cases like Ware’s and Robinson’s.

While commemoration has preserved the memory of Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Denise McNair, it has failed Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson. Artistic endeavors, most notably poetry and song, have created a legacy for the four girls and pushed their story to the forefront of American cultural memory. In contrast, history has left Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson mere footnotes in the story of racial violence and the Civil Rights Movement, and what little artistic commemoration of their lives that exists has failed to lift them into the national narrative of American history. While the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church figures prominently in American educational curriculum and curated exhibits of American history in public and private museums, the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson are rarely mentioned within discussions of discrimination and racial violence in America. The significance of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson’s murders extends beyond

²⁰³ Padgett and Sikora, “The Legacy of Virgil Ware,” n.p.

their families and communities, however. Silencing the stories of their deaths endangers all young black men in America by perpetuating the perceived threatening presence of black men in public and reinforcing the discriminatory and unjust response of violent preemptive self-defense to that perceived threat. Erasing the murders of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson from America's national narrative has greater implications: it sends a message that the lives of young African-American men are not only unimportant, but irrelevant; that these youths are so disposable as to not deserve legal justice or commemorative memorialization. A lack of effective or prominent commemoration of Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson paves the way to more contemporary instances of racially based hate-motivated violence such as the murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. While art has changed attitudes and perceptions of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, art and history have not only failed Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson's legacies, but they have failed subsequent generations of young black children who are guilty only of driving to a gas station with friends, riding bikes with their brothers, and pursuing the American childhood their white peers enjoy without threat. Until artists step forward and amplify the voices of young victims of racial violence, the terrorization of black American children by white adults will continue without significant public protest or legal ramifications.

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