Introduction

“They broke me teetotally up. I left my things and they would not allow me to go back there, and I had to slip back and get my wife and children the best I could. They took everything I had, and all my wife had, and broke us teetotally up. I had to come away with nothing.” This was the proclamation that James Hicks, a formerly enslaved man of Caledonia, Mississippi, made to the Joint Select Committee of the Forty-First Congress that was investigating the “Affairs of the Late Insurrectionary States” in 1871–1872. Hicks was one of several million emancipated Americans living throughout the former slaveholding states who were working to establish authority and autonomy over their lives, which they believed was essential to their fate as a liberated people. For Hicks this meant reuniting family members separated by slave sales and the Civil War; establishing an independent household and acting as its head; negotiating a contract with a planter named Bill Darden that included land to farm, shelter, seeds, and farm equipment; voting in elections; harvesting his share of the crop; providing for his family’s well being; and working with other blacks to establish institutions that were independent of white people’s influence.

Hicks accomplished a number of the goals that African Americans had for life after slavery, until he ran afoul of Darden in a series of disputes in 1870. Hicks believed that Darden was trying to steal his crop by driving him from the land that he and his family worked before they harvested it. Hicks knew that he had produced the crop in accordance with the terms of his contract and that he was entitled to his share of its yield, so he had no reason to accede to Darden’s efforts to steal the crop he produced. Besides, he knew that surrendering his crop and the property he rented would mean financial hardship for his family and undermine his hard-won advances beyond slavery. Therefore, instead of deferring to Darden’s perceived authority over him, Hicks rebutted the man’s claims to his crop. It was this defiance that prompted the white man to shoot at Hicks in an attempt to achieve what threats could not.
Understanding that his life and that of his family would be in danger unless Darden possessed his crop or surrendered his demand for it, Hicks fled, believing that his absence might give the man time to calm down. In Hicks's absence, a gang of white men descended on his home, terrorized his family, destroyed his property, and threatened to kill him if he returned. Rather than remain on the land and endure continued threats to his life, Hicks returned to collect his wife and children and whatever belongings they could carry. Hicks and his family attempted to start anew in Lowndes County, Mississippi. Yet starting over without the money that Hicks might have gained had he been able to sell the crop he had produced was difficult. Moreover, a gang, presumably men who were angry over his defiance of Darden and their inability to punish Hicks, followed him to his new residence, donned disguises, and whipped him, which left Hicks incapacitated for several weeks. In the end, with the loss of the Hicks family's home, their belongings, their share of the crop, and James's injuries, there was little chance that they would recover from the losses that they sustained.

James Hicks's experience of a degree of socioeconomic success, consequent violence, and resulting physical and psychological injury and dispossession was quite common for black southerners after slavery ended. What makes his experience stand out, however, is that he resisted the violence he and his family experienced by putting his account of what happened and his assessment of its impact on him and his family into the public record. Hicks did this in 1871, when he joined dozens of black people from across the South in testifying before members of the congressional committee about the violence they endured and witnessed. In these and other African Americans’ efforts to advance beyond slavery, they collided with whites who insisted on maintaining the antebellum status quo of white supremacy and black subjugation. Southern whites used a variety of strategies for subjugating blacks, or bringing them under white people’s control, that ranged from threats to murder. Black people who overtly resisted white supremacy risked the most violent repercussions.

As the testimonies of people like Hicks indicate, blacks wanted to strike back at their attackers; however, many of them understood the futility of such action given the monopoly of force enjoyed by white people and the limits of their power as a racially subjugated people. Indeed, African Americans’ appreciation for the constraints on their agency comes through in the language victims and witnesses used to explain their action or inaction in the context of violent attacks. For example, when a congressman asked Hicks why he did not defend himself and his crop against Darden’s attack, Hicks
explained, “I didn’t do nothing. I didn’t have nothing; I had my axe, too, but then I didn’t want to—I knew I wouldn’t—I oughtn’t to hit him; at least I felt like if I hit him I would not be doing right, or, at least, I should not be protected in any way.” With this statement, Hicks testified about his understanding of his positionality in the postbellum South—he wanted to defend himself and his property, but he knew that if he did, then Darden would be able to retaliate by killing him, driving his family off their land, and rendering the family destitute. Moreover, Hicks explained, “The majority of white people would punish me in some way or other, and for that reason I never hit him. I didn’t want no fuss if I could get round him, and so I never did anything to him.”

The layers of African Americans’ shared experiences of racial violence that had accumulated across slavery, the Civil War, and freedom had shown people like Hicks that if black people resisted white supremacy, then whites could use violence with probable immunity from prosecution. Until well into the twentieth century, white southerners who attacked or killed black people were rarely prosecuted because of the white community’s tolerance of violence, in defiance of existing laws and procedures, to protect white power. As Christopher Waldrep argues, white southerners supported what he calls “popular constitutionalism,” the idea that the Constitution supported local whites’ right to decide what was right and wrong in their communities and which crimes could be punished outside the formal rule of law. Thus, violence to subjugate black people enjoyed support in many towns and cities across the country. African Americans understood this, to be sure. In fact it is their conveyance of an intersubjectivity, a sense of themselves as subjugated people in relation to racial violence, to perpetrators, and to a nation that accepted white supremacy, that explains why blacks might have felt constrained during attacks by armed white men but, after the violence ended, also felt compelled to testify about it. These victims’ and witnesses’ subsequent refusal to endure violence silently constitutes an underappreciated form of resistance to white supremacy.

_They Left Great Marks on Me_ weaves together the testimonies of people like James Hicks with a diverse selection of print culture to show how black people’s sharing their experiences of racial violence informed their participation in and support of formal campaigns against racial subjugation. Many of the victims’ and witnesses’ stories explored herein are those of black folk, “ordinary people,” who many scholars believed left few records detailing their experiences because many of them were illiterate. And into that void of black folks’ seeming silence about the violence they endured have flown

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more assumptions about what it was like to experience violence or bear witness to someone experiencing violence than knowledge gained from scholarly examination. These people did create and leave records of racial violence. However, they produced these accounts of their experiences in ways that made sense to them, which was often in collaboration with family members, friends, neighbors, civil authorities, journalists, state and federal officials, and members of civil rights organizations. Consequently, this book presents a historical record of racial violence that victims and witnesses narrated from emancipation through the establishment of the NAACP’s anti-lynching crusade.\(^7\)

In highlighting African Americans’ testimonies about violence, this book fashions an alternative to existing understandings of racial violence in the postemancipation era and of black people’s mobilization to advance civil rights reforms. Though historians have explored records documenting African Americans’ experiences of racial violence, their use of victims’ and witnesses’ testimonies to illustrate this violence leaves many unanswered questions about the effects of violence on blacks and about how some of them channeled the traumatic wounds they endured into orchestrated political action. Indeed, scholars who initially examined accounts of racial violence in the Freedmen’s Bureau Records, the Joint Select Committee investigating the Klan, and ex-slave narratives often did so to correct Americans’ historical amnesia on this violence, to prove that violence occurred, or to argue that black people resisted this violence.\(^8\) Unlike those researchers who vigorously examine slave narratives and ex-slave narratives or the memoirs and public statements of civil rights crusaders of the 1950s and 1960s, scholars of racial violence and the earlier phases of African Americans’ civil rights activism have not explored victims’ and witnesses’ testimonies of violence with the same verve.\(^9\) Assuming silences where none existed, historians have missed opportunities to reveal who blacks thought they were as a people in direct relation to the violence that they and their family members, friends, and neighbors endured and how this aided African Americans’ mobilization against violence.

This near silence in the scholarly literature on African Americans’ specific representations of the impact of violence on them is unfortunate because blacks who testified about their experiences of racial violence were an exceptional class of people who had to overcome great odds to have their testimonies entered into the public record. These women, men, and children endured and witnessed some of the most violent desecrations of the social compact established by Reconstruction: that blacks and whites would coexist

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without slavery. They are exceptional because these people surmounted many victims’ instinctive desires to banish memories of horrific events, which for black people in the postemancipation South ranged from the daily attacks on their bodies, psyches, and homes to the terrors of nightriding, lynching, mas-sacring, and rioting. Regardless of the form violence took, it was a weapon that white Americans used to deny African Americans the opportunity to enjoy their citizenship rights. Violent whites achieved some success in their efforts to subjugate African Americans. Like survivors of other human atrocities, some black people subjected to racial violence were too traumatized and therefore psychologically incapable of bearing witness to what happened to them and relating it to others. In fact, scholarship on trauma suggests that even those who were able to relive traumatic events often did not want to relate their experiences to others for fear that they would be attacked or that listeners would not believe them. In this respect, suppressing memories or refusing to speak about violence is an understandable form of self-preservation and self-protection. Yet the existence of testimonies by people like James Hicks shows that some blacks either could not or would not suppress their memories and decided first to relive their experiences and then to find the words to explain to others what happened to them or to people they knew.\textsuperscript{10}

Testifiers about racial violence faced additional challenges. They also had to prevail over environments made hostile by their unrepentant attackers running free in their communities, by unsympathetic law enforcement officers, by white patrons, and by state and federal officials who did not want to hear African Americans’ stories of violent attacks. The actions of people who testified under these conditions suggest that some felt what Mary Prince described in her account of slavery as a “duty to relate” the horrors of their suffering to people who, to paraphrase Prince, did not know what victims and witnesses knew about this violence and who did not feel what victims and witnesses felt about it. Hence, black people’s bold decisions to risk their lives and their credibility and to recover their agency and resist violence by proclaiming their trauma to strangers was essential to their mobilization against white supremacy.\textsuperscript{11}

Testifying about racial violence was a crucial factor in African Americans’ individual recovery and their collective resistance to white supremacy because whenever victims related their experiences of this violence, they created witnesses to their trauma. Family members, friends, and neighbors were the first people that victims made bear witness to suffering they endured or witnessed. A select few victims and witnesses took advantage of forums sponsored by federal officials, journalists, and civil rights organizations to report
violence. For example, from 1865 to 1869, testifiers made thousands of complaints and gave hundreds of affidavits to U.S. Army officials and to Freedmen’s Bureau agents stationed at federal satellites across the South. Officials recorded these statements word for word or offered their own perspectives on what transpired and shared their own observations and opinions of this violence in their reports to the military’s and the Freedmen’s Bureau’s upper echelon. Additionally, progressive members of Congress joined the executive branch’s efforts to record and suppress violence by calling for investigations into the Klan insurgency (1868–1871), political violence (1878), and the Exoduster movement (1879–1880). Dozens of victims and witnesses testified at these congressional hearings. These African Americans detailed the horror, shock, regret, and shame of enduring and witnessing this violence, the transcripts of which provide rich detail on their reflections on violence. Moreover, in the late 1880s, when federal officials stopped providing forums for black people to relate their suffering, some blacks made opportunities to provide evidence of their victimization at the hands of whites by writing letters, protesting public policies, publishing newspaper reports, and establishing and joining organizations to challenge violence.

When African Americans decided to testify about experiencing or witnessing racial violence, they were not merely giving statements; they were resisting violence discursively, engaging in what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe as calculated “speech acts.” In fact, black people’s proclaiming their traumatic experiences to family members, friends, neighbors, civil authorities, civil rights organizations, and state and federal officials represents an unappreciated form of their direct-action protests against racial violence. When interpreted this way, Hicks’s characterization of the white men breaking his family “teetotally up” suggests that he felt and wanted members of Congress and the American people to know that the life he and his family attempted to re-create after the raids on their home was not, and might never again be, as strong as it had been before the attacks. Accordingly, when testifiers made family members, friends, civil authorities, activists, or state and federal officials bear witness to their experiences of violence, they attempted to turn these people into witnesses or what Laub calls “co-owners of the traumatic event” they endured. Co-owners of trauma are people who, through their willingness to hear testimonies of violence, “partially experience” the fear, “bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflict” felt by actual victims. Thus, blacks who testified about racial violence hoped that they could make sure other people bore witness to their suffering and that understanding what had happened to them would motivate these people to identify with
victims and support reforms to end violence and to punish known perpetrators. In that way, making white citizens and elected officials bear witness to black people's suffering from racial violence was a critical part of African Americans' efforts to recruit allies to their campaigns to end violence and advance civil rights reform.\textsuperscript{14}

They Left Great Marks on Me recasts the history of African Americans' resistance to white supremacy by bringing back into view the women, men, and children who personally endured and witnessed racial violence and by highlighting the significance of their bold decisions to testify about the horrors of their experiences. African Americans' oral and written testimonies reveal victims' and witnesses' unique perspectives on having their lives transformed by violence and their desire to get justice by making other people hear and understand their suffering. For example, Mary Brown testified at the Joint Select Committee hearings that a gang of white men invaded her family's Georgia home and dragged them out into the yard, where they stripped and whipped them. In explaining, “they left great marks on me,” Brown described the physical injuries she sustained when nightriders whipped her. However, when read against the testimonies of other victims and witnesses and through the lexicon of suffering and trauma that racial violence produced among black people, the larger implications of Brown's proclamations about what happened to her and to her family becomes clear.\textsuperscript{15}

Juxtaposing African Americans' testimonies temporally and geographically reveals striking similarities in the language that victims and witnesses used to describe violent attacks. Though the contexts of racial violence varied by situation, these testimonies indicate that black people who endured or witnessed the extraordinary violence of rape, domestic captivity, attempted and successful lynchings, riots, or massacres went through what Michael Taussig calls the “space of death,” experiences of terror-induced peril in which people face the uncertainty of surviving. Survivors of this violence conveyed that they were traumatized, marked physically, economically, socially, and psychologically by their experiences. In fact, many testifiers narrated their lives before, during, and after violence, suggesting that violent attacks became what Sasanka Perera labels critical “temporal markers” in the lives of victims and witnesses. In testifying to family members, friends, and neighbors, to law enforcement officers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, members of Congress, black northerners, elected and appointed officials, and to civil rights organizations, people like James Hicks and Mary Brown tried to explicate the traumatic marks they endured as part of their pursuit of justice for themselves and their loved ones.\textsuperscript{16}
Testifiers’ shared stories of traumatic injury cultivated intersubjectivity among African Americans and allowed them to create what Edward Baptist calls a “vernacular history” of racial violence. This vernacular history is “a narrative about the past constructed by laypeople in their everyday tongue . . . [that shows] who a people thought they were and how they got to be that way.” Testifying was the primary way that many black victims and witnesses resisted violence and thereby communicated who they thought they were in relation to the traumatic injuries they endured. Indeed, African Americans’ experiences of racial violence informed their development of a rich, complex, and original public record of their lives after slavery. It is this narrative of triumph over the adversity of slavery and subsequent racial discrimination, violent suffering, and consequent survival that motivated blacks to mobilize against racial injustice and to demand that the country live up to its democratic principles by rejecting violence and advancing civil rights reform.

Testifiers generated this historical record of racial violence by providing oral and written testimonies of their experiences. African Americans continued to embrace a rich oral tradition after slavery, so more people spoke about their experiences than wrote about them. Many people who testified about violence often did so to familiars—family members, friends, and sympathetic whites—because they were worried about reprisals and because they did not trust strangers to believe, understand, or care what happened to them. There are only faint traces of these private discussions in the historical record. However, when victims and witnesses narrated their experiences and observations to outsiders—law enforcement officials, judges, legislators, state or federal officials, journalists, and civil rights activists—the grooves of black people’s individual and collective experiences of violence are deeper and more easily traced historically. The decisions by some state and federal officials and civil rights activists to provide forums and opportunities for victims and witnesses to testify about violent attacks opened a discursive space for blacks to proclaim the violence they endured and witnessed. State and federal officials and these civil rights activists transcribed victims’ and witnesses’ testimonies or preserved them and then turned these records into the public transcripts of American history. Additionally, black public figures contributed to this history by documenting violence and its impact on black people in private correspondence and newspaper reports, and they resisted this violence by writing editorials and speeches and by developing creative projects. Likewise, literate black folk wrote about violence in their personal correspondence, and as literacy rates among blacks improved, more people authored their personal experiences, which they shared with federal officials.
and civil rights activists. Together these sources reveal African Americans’ notions about who they were, as a people, in relation to the violence they endured and witnessed and the origins of their efforts to mobilize against violence.

Racial violence and the threat of it were key features in the postemancipation lives of black southerners, so it should come as no surprise that African Americans understood and discussed how it shaped them as a people. Testifiers’ accounts of lives breached by violence not only reveal that individuals endured violence; they also show that in the process of telling their stories some victims and witnesses often added the voices of others. These people supplemented their stories with those of others by layering stories of violence on other stories, authenticating their own narratives with the stories of others for skeptics and testifying on behalf of people who could not or would not testify. In listening to the stories of others and in sharing individual experiences, weaving the stories of family members, friends, and neighbors into their own, victims and witnesses created what Robert Stepto calls an “integrated narrative,” a vernacular history of a people whose lives were transformed by violence. What emerges from these testimonies is a transcript of violence, terror, and suffering that later campaigns against racial violence suggest became embedded into the social memory of black people. On the whole, the discursive processes by which blacks and their allies fashioned individual histories into one narrative fostered community and calcified African Americans’ social and political links across time, space, and social status that formed the base of what became their collective effort to end racial violence.

When African Americans testified about this violence to Freedmen’s Bureau agents and before members of Congress, when they wrote letters to federal officials and the NAACP, and when they published accounts of violence and used their creative talent to educate Americans about violence, they spoke as an afflicted community. Indeed, the language of African Americans’ solidarity regarding racial violence and their eventual mobilization against it are testaments to the effectiveness of victims’ and witnesses’ efforts to make others experience violence vicariously through their testimonies. When testifiers spoke with a collective voice, they attempted to make sure that their fellow citizens as well as elected and appointed officials knew that the horrors black people endured were not limited to individualized physical pain. Victims and witnesses wanted listeners to know that what gave racial violence lasting meaning over African Americans’ lives were the violent assaults on their bodies, psyches, dignities, families, homes, livelihoods, and communi-
ties. In other words, it was black people’s understandings of the true costs of violence and their desire to achieve justice that made them testify and develop their own histories of the postemancipation era. Blacks carried these histories with them across time and space; they passed them on horizontally to their peers and relatives and vertically to subsequent generations. In this way, testifying helped black southerners and their northern and western counterparts understand what Dwight McBride calls their “collective corporeal condition” with respect to violence. Victims’ and witnesses’ finding their individual voices on violence allowed them to find “a voice in community with other voices” and to create a history of the “collective black body” as being under assault. This knowledge and shared traumatic history helped galvanize blacks and progressive whites to form a movement designed to end racial violence and other forms of racial discrimination.22

As this book shows, it was victims’ and witnesses’ stories about the traumatic impact of violence on individuals, families, and communities that, combined with the emergence of an environment that was receptive to reform, inspired African Americans to mobilize against the violence during the Progressive Era. In this manner, testifying about and against racial violence was a “consciousness-raising” process among blacks and their white allies that constituted what Lisa Gring-Pemble calls the “pre-genesis” phase of social movement formation. This activity, along with creating and making political opportunities to advance reform, ushered in the institutionalized activism of the early civil rights era that eventually yielded extensive legislative and judicial reforms.23 Thus, black people’s mobilization against racial violence started with testifying and congealed in the NAACP’s antilynching crusade, which James Weldon Johnson described as the “first organized, systematic, persistent and financed effort” to end lynching.24 This campaign helped move African Americans’ suffering from closed conversations among black people back into the dominant public spheres where victims and witnesses stood a better chance of getting redress for their grievances as citizens from the federal government and from the American people. The reform movement against racial violence served as a political training ground for activists who went on to participate in civil rights reform. To illuminate one underappreciated dimension of black southerners’ Sisyphean aspirations to rise above slavery and black northerners’ and westerners’ efforts to help them, this book explores the oral and written precursors to the establishment of an ambitious reform movement that helped activists to push for revolutionary reforms and to use African Americans’ experiences of violence to achieve them.
The chapters that follow chart African Americans’ testimonies about violence and their efforts to mobilize against it from emancipation through the establishment of the NAACP’s antilynching campaign. The order is roughly chronological but becomes more thematic after 1900, when the chapters explore similar events in African Americans’ mobilization during the First World War from different angles. Each chapter illuminates the historical contexts that informed white southerners’ physical attacks on black people, victims’ and witnesses’ testimonies about their experiences, and the challenges blacks faced in advancing and eliciting political support to end violence. Through the prism of trauma theory and social movement theory, we see how blacks channeled the horrors they endured into a reform movement designed to end violence.

After slavery, African Americans prioritized laying down the bricks and mortar of their freedom with the help of progressive Republicans who crafted policies to bestow sociopolitical power on black people so that they could protect their freedom. However, white southerners, who were outraged by Reconstruction policies that constrained their racial power over black people, responded by using violence to destroy the foundation of freedom. Using victims’ and witnesses’ complaints about violence to Freedmen’s Bureau officials and their testimonies before Congress as a compass for charting the course toward the institutionalized crusade against racial violence, chapter 1 illuminates the violence blacks endured and presents the vernacular history victims and witnesses created about white southerners’ violent insurgency against emancipation and Reconstruction and its impact on black people.

African Americans who survived Reconstruction lived through the purgatory of white people’s experimentation with new frameworks for subjugating black people during the Gilded Age. Black people dealt with violence, segregation, and disfranchisement by testifying about ongoing racial violence, by migrating, and by attempting to retain the rights that they gained under Reconstruction. Chapter 2 shows how the absence of a sense of national urgency, the embryonic state of black institution building, the inexpert black national leadership, and federal officials’ growing disinterest in providing forums for victims and witnesses to testify about violence all hindered African American activists’ efforts to mount a reform movement that would inspire federal officials to intervene and halt the corrosion of black southerners’ rights and the violence used to achieve that result.

African Americans’ testimonies in the 1890s about racial violence indicate a growing appreciation for what W. E. B. Du Bois called a “descent to hell” regarding white supremacy and the ongoing deterioration of black people’s
rights. Chapter 3 shows how black public figures during this period used their political influence and their status, as representatives of black folk, to try to seize control of Americans’ knowledge and understanding of racial violence and other forms of racial discrimination. They projected black folks’ testimonies of their experiences of violence into the dominant public spheres. These activists wielded print culture to publish the vernacular history of black people’s experiences of the changing dynamics of racial subjugation. Public figures represented African Americans’ testimonies of violence, disfranchisement, and segregation as though they constituted a crisis that merited collective action. Their work illuminates the maturation of African Americans’ efforts to build institutions to fight racial violence and to get support for civil rights reform from their fellow citizens and federal officials.

Many blacks responded to the erosion of their civil rights by “turning inward” to regroup and address the needs of their local enclaves. Chapter 4 shows how reading reports of racial violence inspired a coterie of “organic intellectuals” from an archipelago of black community spheres to resist violence by penning letters to federal officials. In testifying about violence, these letter writers attempted to use the nation’s principles of freedom, democracy, and citizenship to lobby federal officials to address violence. Working together across the nation, these activists constituted some of the foot soldiers in the mounting of a reform movement against violence in the 1910s.

African Americans mobilized against racial violence by marshaling their resources and using all of their political might to launch an aggressive institutionalized campaign under the NAACP for federal legislation against lynching. Chapter 5 shows how testifiers worked with an interracial coalition of progressives to use racial violence to re-present the problems of black people and to elicit support for federal antilynching legislation. Victims and witnesses wrote letters to NAACP leaders in which they testified about the violence they endured and witnessed. In using written correspondence to testify about violence, these women and men helped turn nonsouthern activists into co-owners of the trauma of violence, which inspired the NAACP to develop an ambitious multiyear campaign to end violence.

_They Left Great Marks on Me_ is not intended to be a definitive history of African Americans’ experiences of racial violence or their campaigns against it. Instead, this book fits into a larger and longer conversation that scholars have been having about racial violence and civil rights campaigns. Indeed, I could not have developed this book without the remarkable research on violence and black resistance conducted by my predecessors. In attempting to pro-
vide more of what Nell Irvin Painter calls “a fully loaded cost accounting” of African Americans’ testimonies about and against racial violence, this book seeks to shift the focus on racial violence from the physicality of the violence or the culture it produced, from the white perpetrators, or even from the well-known black and white activists and organizations that resisted violence, to the victims and witnesses and to their efforts to communicate their suffering as a way of resisting and ending violence.35

Understanding how victims and witnesses experienced and represented racial violence is important because in the collective memory of this violence, the white perpetrators, the individuals and institutions who aided their work, and the most prominent activists and organizations who crusaded against violence have taken the center stage of the academic and popular histories of this violence. As such, the actual victims of this violence, people like James Hicks and Mary Brown, have receded into the background. Victims’ and witnesses’ testimonies of lives transformed by violence and the aspects of violence that mattered the most to them rarely get the scholarly attention that they deserve. This has happened because scholars have inadvertently rendered all but a few victims anonymous, secondary subjects in larger narratives that prioritize understanding violence, the perpetrators of violence, and their apologists or institutionalized and armed resistance to it. Consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or not, historians and sociologists have not wanted to shift their attention away from the arguments they are trying to make about the motives of perpetrators and their apologists, the forms violence took, the rhetoric of violence, the roles of activists and institutions resisting this violence, or the imprint this violence left on American culture or collective social memory. Thus, many avoid victims’ and witnesses’ representations of suffering, moving back and forth between showing when, where, why, and how this violence occurred and the different people and institutions that resisted it. In the process of developing what have become the dominant narratives of racial violence in the United States, scholars have failed to expose what lay at the very heart of the violence for blacks, which was terror and trauma and black people’s need for justice. In bringing the victims’ and witnesses’ stories of victimization and their efforts to achieve justice back into view, this book seeks to transform the historical narrative of racial violence and of African Americans’ civil rights crusades.

Many decisions I made about this book were informed by my commitment to build on the existing scholarship and my dedication to excavating black victims’ and witnesses’ representations of this violence and to illuminating their efforts to share those experiences with others in their pursuit of
justice and reform, while keeping the book accessible to a diverse audience. Rather than supply the traditional historiography section that would appeal to specialists but repel lay readers, I try to strike a balance by documenting the scholarship on which I have relied so heavily in the notes. I also try to use a few representative incidents and to resist the impulse of cramming in so many cases that they obscure more than they reveal. Moreover, I decided to make passing references to well-known activists and key historical events and to blend them into the larger narrative of racial violence and the institutionalization of responses to it, instead of elaborating extensively on specific antilynching crusaders or race riots that other scholars have covered so well.29

Additionally, my understanding of existing scholarship also informed the subjects on which I provide both cursory and lengthy analysis. Numerous scholars have provided comprehensive analyses of the public and legal aspects of the NAACP’s formal campaigns to pass federal antilynching legislation and Progressive reform. What remains underexamined is how acts of resistance by black folk, women and men who were unknown to most of the nation and the world, fueled these formal campaigns.30 I have therefore chosen to prioritize the mostly unpublished dimensions of the NAACP’s efforts to learn more about this violence and to use print culture to transmit African Americans’ experiences of violence to the nation and to frame their argument about the need for civil rights reform.31 Lastly, in a book about black people’s experiences of racial violence during an era when most whites believed they were racially superior to blacks and accepted violence as a way of maintaining white people’s power, there lies the risk of painting all whites with the same brush. Thus, rather than unpack the dynamics of white supremacy, the diversity among white people’s beliefs about blacks, or the use of violence to subjugate them, I use some clarifying language and defer to the scholars who have devoted ample time researching and writing about those subjects.32

I made the choices I did because I believe that James Hicks and Hannah and Samuel Tutson, who refused to surrender their livelihood; Alfred Blount and Randall McGowan, who insisted on participating in electoral politics; the formidable Mrs. M. Cravath Simpson, who read about racial violence and heard about it from family and friends; and Walter White, who helped spearhead the NAACP’s antilynching crusade, were everyday people who did ordinary and extraordinary things to confront and stop this violence. As a result of reading their testimonies, I believe that one of the most important things they did was to testify about the violence they endured and witnessed.
In speaking their truths about what it meant to be a victim of or a witness to racial violence and in telling what only victims and witnesses knew, these women's and men's determination to defy the white power structure inspired them to tap into and pass on African Americans' tradition of resistance to try to remake the nation's legal and social structure. Without their stories, it is impossible to understand the real meaning of racial violence in American history and African Americans' formal campaigns against it. That is why their testimonies and efforts to end violence and advance civil rights reform fill the pages that follow.