Restriction and Resistance: The Power Dynamics of Black Freedom in Haywood County, Tennessee (1940-1965) as Examined through Oral Narratives and Media

Henrietta Giles

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RESTRICTION AND RESISTANCE: THE POWER DYNAMICS OF BLACK FREEDOM IN HAYWOOD COUNTY, TENNESSEE (1940-1965) AS EXAMINED THROUGH ORAL NARRATIVES AND MEDIA

by

Henrietta Giles

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Major: Rhetoric and Media Studies

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study examining the impact three historical events had on six current and former Black residents from Haywood County, Tennessee. The rhetorical examination, which includes oral narratives, media texts, and historical accounts, focuses on how these individuals maneuvered through the social and political restrictions set in place during a period of racial segregation from 1940 to 1965. The qualitative study includes reflections of lived experiences in the rural South and resistance to the laws that restricted Black freedom. Study participants provide insight into three events that have been largely suppressed and bring forth counternarratives that frame how Black residents reclaimed their voice amid attempts to silence them. The events include the lynching of Elbert Williams, a federal lawsuit by local Black activists to register to vote, and the desegregation of public schools in Haywood County. The repercussions from each of these events present opportunities to explore the power dynamics of restriction and resistance in a predominantly Black county during the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement. Reflexive observations by the researcher add to the contextualization of hegemonic principles and Black agency that coexisted in the region where she grew up. Additionally, this study highlights the process of how rhetoric can serve as a guiding force in research and sometimes shift the direction of inquiry.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The impetus of this study is a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice written in 1965 by my father and signed by him and my mother. I am grateful to Jesse and Geraldine Giles for their courage in holding systems of power accountable while working to make life better for themselves and their nine children in Stanton, Tennessee. They—and my immense cloud of witnesses—were with me and surrounded me while pursuing this degree. I felt their nudges and heard their whispers. I know they are proud. To God be the glory!

I would like to thank my extraordinary dissertation committee for their patience and unwavering support of my work. My co-chairs, Dr. Katherine Grace Hendrix and Dr. Antonio de Velasco, helped someone who was used to telling other people’s stories to tell her own as part of this qualitative study. You reassured me that this place I call home and its incredible people deserved scholarly attention. Your guidance, insight, and wise counsel prompted me to go further in my research and really hear what people were saying and amplify the strains of their resistance. Dr. Christina Moss and Dr. Earnestine Jenkins pushed me to investigate and interrogate why some voices could not be heard. Together, these remarkable scholars were part of a committee that cared about elevating moments and people in Haywood County, Tennessee’s history that have largely been suppressed. Thank you for honoring and affirming this work.

My wonderful family shares this achievement with me. They provided me with information that was crucial to my research. They encouraged me when I became weary and inspired me in ways they will never know. My siblings Patricia, Francine, Cecil, Linda, and Edith are my fiercest protectors and biggest promoters. Athalia left us just before I was accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Memphis—something she assured me of during our last conversation. Nine months later, Herschel left us, but he let me know how proud he was of his baby sister’s latest educational endeavor. I never knew our infant brother Gerald, but he
has always been in my heart. Collectively, we are why our parents worked so hard and endured so much. To my nieces and nephews—thank you for cheering me on and giving me that extra boost just when I needed it.

The names of my friends and relatives who encouraged me, checked on me, left meals on my front porch, and listened to the twists, turns, and dead ends in my research process are too numerous to list. I appreciate everything you did to help me boldly walk across the finish line. Zanice, Teresa, Lisa, Barbara, Danny, Cathy, Karla, Vicki, Tuwanda, Fran, Jan, Gail, Cynthia Ann, Joyce, and Ms. Helen are also part of my village—thank you. To my friends, students, and colleagues at the University of Tennessee at Martin, I am so appreciative of your support.

This study would not have been possible without the willingness of the six participants to share their lived experiences—some quite painful. They revisited events and emotions that had been tucked away for decades to help shine a light on Black agency and resiliency. I marvel at their strength and am eternally grateful to them for trusting me with their stories. Mildred Bond Roxborough, Cynthia Rawls Bond, Dr. Dorothy Granberry, John Ashworth, Dr. Francine G. Madrey, and Samuel Sanderlin—you are Haywood County griots, and I am enriched by just being in your presence.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the courageous citizens and civil rights workers in Haywood County and West Tennessee who are featured in this study. Their equity and justice work was transformative and it helped foster change in a rural, overlooked area and the nation. Racial violence, evictions, restrictions, humiliation, and murder could not halt their quest toward equity and justice. The historical events and Black citizens’ response to racially biased social and political systems can inform strategies for new/old issues many groups face today. The results may reveal that the past is actually closer than it appears.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The forces of change, whether for good or bad, leave indelible impressions from the shift. However, a more remarkable impression is derived from the response to that change and how our minds, spirits, and bodies take shape as a result of this new adaptation. Interpreting the shift is a subjective process and relies heavily on the positionality of the initiator and the recipient.

A powerful force of change is what led me to this study. It was initiated by the lived experiences of six African Americans who witnessed and participated in some of the American South’s most defining moments of social change over a 25-year period beginning in 1940. Their minds, spirits, and bodies bore the deep impressions of these shifts and the way in which they responded prompted me to rethink my research.

It has been said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. So is the journey to effective scholarship. Its many twists and turns, with occasional pit stops in hell, brought me to a familiar place. I am a storyteller, and this scholarly work directed me to lean in and intently hear what my interviewees were saying. Initially, this study set out to examine the six participants’ relationship with media and how early examples of print and broadcast stories informed their sense of blackness. From the first day of my doctoral program, I knew my research would somehow involve media representation and African Americans. Rather than grappling with this vast issue of media and wrangling with its many tentacles of research areas, I decided to return to the place that first fed my imagination about Black strength and ingenuity. Stanton, Tennessee, located in Haywood County, about 40 miles northeast of Memphis, is my home and it is where I soaked up blackness and began to understand my place in the world as a Black girl.

Living in a mostly Black town with White-owned media diminishes the possibility of diverse voices and events being included and reported without bias. As a child, I remember the
excitement of seeing stories featuring Black people in the local newspaper. There was a small 
editorial section that highlighted social, family, and church events in the surrounding Black 
communities, but seeing Black-themed news stories that were not associated with crime was a 
rare occurrence.

Fortunately, my exposure to Blacks featured in print media exceeded the local fare. My 
parents, like many Black American families, subscribed to cultural staples like *Ebony, Ebony, Jr.* 
(at my request), *Jet*, and *Black Enterprise*. It was important that my siblings and I could envision 
success and know that it was possible for Black people living in the segregated South. I can 
appreciate the determination my parents had because there were not many options for culturally 
relevant materials, but they made sacrifices so their children could see themselves represented in 
magazines and books.

My fascination with the mystique of media began with my family’s radio, a shoebox-
sized device that regularly produced soul music, gospel music (exclusively on Sundays), and 
conversations between grownups discussing *important* things. As a three- or four-year-old child, 
it thrilled me to no end to turn on the radio, rotate the small dial to listen to its varied selections, 
and stare at the small box—wondering how all those people fit inside. Thankfully, my vivid 
imagination developed some sensibilities along the way, shaped by the undoubtedly endless 
questions directed at my parents. The wonderment of electronic media never left me, the 
amazement of how radio and television brought its bounty of entertainment and information right 
into my home via these boxes continued to intrigue me. But, the *how* later morphed into the *who* 
and the *why*. Who were the people behind the voices and faces emanating from our radio and 
television and why was there virtually no one on television who looked like me? (This would 
later change on a fall Saturday morning in 1971 with the culmination of R&B music and
television presented as “the hippest trip in America”—*Soul Train.*) The adage about not missing what you’ve never had is true to a certain extent. However, as I matured and my worldview broadened, I knew something was amiss and came to embrace the thinking behind “you have to see it to be it.” I wanted to have a hand in the *seeing.*

As a writer, producer, filmmaker, and educator, it is important to me to better understand how imagery and messages influence perceptions. Representation is at the forefront of media projects I produce, even the textbooks I select for the college courses I teach. The disproportionate content was an appalling discovery when I entered the teaching profession in 2015. But then, why would academia be any different from other entities in society? For this study, I originally wanted to delve into the participants’ processes for knitting together their racial identity while growing up in the Jim Crow South and drawing possible connections to the media they consumed.

Enter change. Now, the shift.

After conducting interviews with current and former residents of Haywood County and sitting with their experiences as the recipients of change, their stories revealed a common thread of resilience during a time when unimaginable social restrictions ruled their lives. As I spoke with them and inquired about what their younger lives entailed, it became apparent that despite encountering racial bias, intimidation, and violence, they possessed a will to move toward something greater. They did not internalize the descriptions White-owned media used to define Black people. Instead, they created counternarratives that spoke to their resolve while facing white supremacy rule, the initiator of oppressive change. After closer inspection, these study participants and other Black racial justice workers evolved from being primarily the recipients of change to becoming agents of theory. Their responses formed the foundation of my examination
of these powerful oppositional forces—restriction and resistance—against a backdrop of racist ideology and actions in a predominantly Black enclave in West Tennessee. The shift from examining the influence of media on the lives of people who lived through the Jim Crow era was overshadowed by the influence of the participants’ voices. They were aware of the efforts to keep them politically powerless, landless, and lost within the educational system. Their awareness did not allow them to accept these issues as their fate. For every social and political restriction against Black advancement, there was resistance. This continuous push and pull caused the shift in my research.

One text remained a constant source of inquiry even as my focus shifted from media impact to the participants’ response to the restrictive forces surrounding them. My interest in this research was broadened by a copy of a letter my father, Jesse Giles, Jr., wrote to the United States Department of Justice in 1965 (see Appendix A). His plea for protection from organized racial violence is clear as he points to Blacks in Haywood County and their “fight for freedom” as raising the ire of local Ku Klux Klan members. He mentions cross burnings and activities by a more emboldened Klan, referencing an article in The States-Graphic about the growing attendance at their rallies. My father’s request was simplistically direct, but with a sense of urgency: *Can we hope for protection and justice from the United States Government?* While segregated systems set the tone for how Blacks were to navigate within social structures, I was particularly struck by my father’s account of the local newspaper’s reporting on terrorizing events, and in a sense, utilizing media as a recruitment tool for the Klan. Even though local Black citizens were making strides to exercise the right to register and vote, they were being physically threatened and harmed because of their actions. Despite this, stories that chronicled their activism or that reported the violence inflicted upon them because of their work were rare.
The overarching sentiment expressed by White-owned media was generally one of “keeping Blacks in their place.” This was not only a colloquialism; it was essentially a control mechanism designed to quell any movement toward racial equity and was repeated by the individuals who were interviewed for this research.

**Study Overview**

My examination of events between 1940 and 1965 in Haywood County, Tennessee, involves collecting oral histories to understand hegemonic structures of a predominantly Black county by considering interpretations of event coverage and personal impact. I will show how these historic events and the participants’ involvement in this small region were part of national social movements. Haywood County, Tennessee, and the surrounding area is a region with rich historical connections to compelling people and complex policies. Three events situated on the cusp of the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement flank the lived experiences of the participants in this study. These historical events also include occurrences that would have garnered media attention based on the gravity of their social impact within the context of race.

This research includes the narratives of six current and former residents of Haywood County, Tennessee. Their association with these events and each one’s personal accounts in relation to them will be outlined later in this work. These incidents were selected because of their community impact, connection to Black racial matters, and their likelihood to have received media coverage, primarily, in locally published newspapers. Brief descriptions of the three events are below.

- The lynching of Elbert Williams in 1940 after attempting to recruit members to join the Haywood County branch of the NAACP (I learned of this story in 2015, as did many
former and current residents. It was a very well-kept secret that still wields power in silencing some residents.)

- The U.S. Department of Justice’s lawsuit against the local Democratic Party in 1959 on behalf of Black residents of Haywood and Fayette counties to obtain the right to vote (This was the first voting rights lawsuit in the nation and paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.)

- School desegregation efforts in Haywood County in 1965, including a federal lawsuit, and the impact on Black parents, Black students, and their educational experience (Four of my siblings helped integrate the county’s White high school in 1965; I was among the group of Black students in 1968 to continue integration efforts at one of the White elementary schools.)

Analyses of the oral narratives will show the participants’ connections to the events and their personal reflections on dealing with racial restrictions and implementing their resistive measures. In conjunction with the participant narratives, I employ close reading to published news stories, as a form of rhetorical criticism to enhance meaning associated with race, hegemony, and activism in Haywood County. I revisit the indisputable power of media ownership, which impacts gatekeeping, framing, dissemination, even the destruction of the news. The interviews I conducted with the six individuals reveal insight into these events from their personal perspectives. Their memories help to develop a vivid snapshot from these moments in history, enhancing how contemporary audiences may view these occurrences. The narratives also reinforce the understanding that Black people were not passive followers into the depths of Jim Crow policies. There were counternarratives that elevated the agency of Black citizens in Haywood County. Their strategies were fueled by a determination to do better and to have better
even if it meant risking their lives or their children’s lives. They fiercely resisted the restrictions that were placed upon their very being. There is a cost for freedom, and many individuals in this distressed rural area possessed the capital to obtain it.

This qualitative study involves critical research elements that position personal interviews within rhetorical discourse related to hegemony and the oppositional social forces of restriction and resistance in Haywood County, Tennessee, between 1940 and 1965. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study and explains the process for extracting this research topic from my original research plan. The study includes an examination of three Haywood County events that are related to social, political, and educational justice. My research relies heavily on personal recollections of participants’ lived experiences during these events. I present a review of literature to guide the reader through research related to qualitative research methods, rhetorical examination, and reflexive analysis. I also include scholarship on hegemony in the South and the power dynamics cultivated among Black and White citizens in this region, specifically in West Tennessee.

Chapter 2 outlines theoretical and historical underpinnings for understanding texts related to race, agency, and power, specifically in the South. This section explores rhetorical criticism, narratives and counternarratives that give structure to restriction and resistance, and Black media’s role in establishing agency. I provide background information on Haywood County and its relevance to this study as well as brief biographical profiles of the six study participants who are either current or former residents. This chapter will also provide a historical foundation of the three news events that occurred in Haywood County, giving geographical and social context to their selection for this study. I will explain the development of questions and the interview process, including the utilization of teleconferencing applications for conducting interviews. This
section will emphasize the importance of identifying thematic trends and will detail the processes for collecting, transcribing, and compiling the data to ensure methodological rigor. This chapter prepares the reader for examining the historical events and oral narratives of the participants.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I present an overview of the three historical events included in this study. Chapter 3 focuses on events surrounding the lynching of Elbert Williams in 1940 in Brownsville, Tennessee. Chapter 4 outlines the actions that ensued when local Blacks in Haywood County and neighboring Fayette County sought to regain the right to vote. Chapter 5 chronicles the steps a handful of Black parents took to enroll their children in the county’s all-White high school and the repercussions Black students and families faced. In each of these chapters, I provide biographical information for the two primary participants selected for the event. Each chapter includes excerpts from interviews conducted with the participants along with citations from secondary sources and historical and legal texts. I provide contextual analysis of those narratives and published comments that are related to the events. I also discuss themes associated with restriction and resistance that were evident in the narratives and related texts. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I offer a closer reading of events that occurred in Haywood County, Tennessee, between 1940 and 1965 that reveal a more nuanced understanding of how Blacks navigated oppressive racial systems. I juxtapose restriction and resistance and explain how these historical events were interpreted by various audience members. Social and political parameters in Haywood County, and the South, dictated the restrictions that sought to control the Black body and the narrative. I show how those same parameters invoked a different response from Black residents—resistance. These counternarratives serve as a definitive voice to Black intellect and ingenuity at a time when both were underestimated by White power holders. I highlight the
work and the resulting circumstances Blacks in Haywood County endured to resist the restrictions exacted upon them.

Chapter 6 summarizes the study’s significance and shows how its findings may promote additional research on Black agency as a resistive force against racially corrosive systems. I stress the importance of elevating Black topics and voices through narrative collection to broaden research paradigms. Additionally, I outline how similar research could contribute to more transformative pedagogy in the academy’s struggle to include more racially diverse perspectives. My closing thoughts include how this study could serve as a tool for community engagement and education on historical events in Haywood County that are not widely known. I stress the importance of scholars including more diverse and silenced experiences to better understand groups and events that have historical and cultural relevance.

Literature Review

This section provides a rhetorical foundation for the qualitative research utilized in this study that focuses on three historical events in Haywood County, Tennessee, between 1940 and 1965. I explain the components of qualitative research and how this method factors into my study. Since this is a case study that incorporates participant narratives, the review of literature includes scholarship with an emphasis on rhetorical analysis, reflexive discourse, and rhetorical criticism that specifically gives attention to race, place, and power.

Qualitative research broadens the spectrum of research allowing scholars to design an approach to actively observe and document an issue. It is especially effective when examining social issues because of the interaction with subjects. Individuals can provide descriptive narratives of affect and impact, which add nuance to quantitative data. Qualitative research brings meaning to an issue and people’s responses bring greater dimension to numerical results.
Because of the expanding scope of work involved in qualitative research, its definition has evolved over the past few decades. Creswell and Poth (2018) include Denzin and Lincoln’s description referring to qualitative research as a visible and transformative activity that situates the researcher in a state of examination to help better understand an issue. More precisely, “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 7). Research practices encompass “field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (p. 7). Philipsen (1982) credits qualitative research as providing a specific lens through which to understand various contexts of human communication with the researcher undertaking “in situ, exploratory, openly-coded, participatory research” (p. 4). Creswell and Baez (2021) contend that a central phenomenon must be present as well as an interest to study it (p. 6). Researchers should be aware that the focus may shift or expand from the original idea as the analysis progresses.

Situating qualitative and quantitative research alongside each other has occasionally been met with some resistance. Both approaches bring value to examining issues, however, concerns remain surrounding the researcher’s ability to remain objective while observing activity. With quantitative analysis, the numbers speak for themselves and reveal a scale of impact for subjects, but a qualitative approach investigates impact and interrogates those affected for a deeper understanding. Philipsen (1982) notes four limitations when relying primarily on quantitative analyses.

One, the heavy reliance of artificial contexts (such as the laboratory and the research interview) limits the degree to which findings can be generalized to non-trivial contexts.
Two, the constraints of hypothesis-testing and related operations limit a researcher’s freedom to provide exploratory answers, grounded in observations, to many important questions about significant patterns and regularities in communicative life. Three, the imposition of pre-determined units and measurement categories limits the subtlety and richness of descriptions of human communication. Four, brief, relatively detached involvement in the social contexts of research precludes the kind of empathic understanding of persons and their conduct which many scholars seek to produce and systematize (p. 4).

Scholars can often bring dimension to research by considering other factors beyond quantitative inquiry. Closer readings of trends, impacts, and perspectives add context to numerical results. The aforementioned concerns helped usher in a theoretical framework for researching social problems and categorizing patterns and themes from participants. As the field expanded, so did the discourse surrounding qualitative approaches and the areas of study that would most benefit from observer/participant examination. The five approaches Creswell and Poth (2018) outline are the result of synthesizing frequently utilized approaches by peers, incorporating the authors’ personal interests, and selecting appropriate disciplines (p. 10). The following approaches tend to be associated with these disciplines in qualitative research. The five diverse perspectives show that “narrative originates from the humanities and social sciences, phenomenology from psychology and philosophy, grounded theory from sociology, ethnography from anthropology and sociology, and case studies from the human and social sciences and applied areas such as evaluation research” (p. 11).

A brief review of Creswell and Poth’s research methodology outlines five analytic practices for identifying research approaches. The narrative method “begins with the experiences
as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” and can also be identified as “the phenomenon being studied” (p. 67). Phenomenological research “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75).

Grounded theory relies more on the perceptions of the researcher where “the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (p. 82). Ethnographic research can be both a design (studying a process) or a research outcome. The researcher examines the language and behaviors of participants and “interprets the shared and learned patterns of values” after prolonged observation (p. 90). Finally, case study methodology closely examines a case or cases “through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes” (pp. 96-97).

While these approaches offer methodological structure to qualitative research, they open the door to studies that may employ varying levels of scrutiny. To this end, Tracy (2010) delineates the attributes of qualitative research from quantitative study and explores implementing a set of criteria to promote rigorous qualitative inquiry and “a path to expertise”.

Criteria serve as shorthand about the core values of a certain craft. A simple structure of qualitative methodological best practices can therefore encourage dialogue with members of the scientific, experimental, and quantitative communities. A language of best practices provides the option to frame our work, if desired, as systematic and structured (p. 838).

Tracy’s criteria consist of eight items that are meant to be used as a pedagogical tool and as a means to garner respect from those who misinterpret qualitative research. Characteristics of
esteemed qualitative methodological research should include a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, p. 839). By considering these guidelines, scholars of qualitative research can have consistency among varying paradigms. Examining issues from different perspectives is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. Diverse approaches undergirded by criteria provide options for researchers attempting to study or understand social issues. These methods also quell dispersions about inferior rigor present in qualitative studies.

In addition to being a qualitative case study, this mixed methods research includes a rhetorical element that examines participant narratives and media texts associated with the three events. Mills and Birks (2014) define case study as an exploratory form of inquiry that provides an in-depth picture of the study (p. 145). It typically involves interviews, observation, and any number of mixed methods of qualitative or quantitative research. Case studies, according to Hancock and Algozzine (2017), are “intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time” (p. 9). Mills and Birks posit that determining the unit and the boundaries of the study is at the discretion of the researcher (p. 145). Based on guidelines by Hancock and Algozzine, my intrinsic case study possesses design elements that are ethnographical and historical. These characteristics will help inform my understanding of restrictive and resistant forces at play during segregation in Haywood County, Tennessee (pp. 42–43).

Researchers engage in intrinsic case study research when they want to know more about a particular individual, group, event, or organization. Researchers conducting an intrinsic case study are not necessarily interested in examining or creating general theories or in generalizing their findings to broader populations (p. 38).
This research design allows me to engage with individuals and collect oral histories to gain insight into media impact. Mills and Birks contend that in utilizing case study “the researcher is inherently complicit in the unit being studied, and that the observations and influences of that individual are therefore the lens through which any observations of the unit are reported” (p. 148).

My approach for examining the rhetorical voice of the participants in this qualitative study is reflexive. This incorporates my interpretation of the cultural, regional, and racial threads that bind their narratives. My shared understanding of the limitations placed on Black life in Haywood County brings some context to the historical events highlighted in this study. This brings another layer to research that typically overlooks or dismisses nuance. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) posit that a reflexive approach in qualitative research involves participants and researchers producing interpretations that serve as the texts being studied (p. 160). Creswell and Poth (2018) note that when utilizing reflexive practices, the researcher must be positioned in the research. They add that researchers must be explicit in explaining their background and connection to the topic. This can be a professional, cultural, or historical association folded into an explanation of “how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study and what they have to gain from the study” (p. 44). Weber (2003) stresses the difficulty of reflexivity, trying to interpret the relevant themes in collected information. He asserts that “the quality of our reflection will depend on the breadth and depth of the knowledge we possess. Absent knowledge, we cannot reflect. We have no basis for gleaning self-insight and enriching our understanding of the world” (p. v). My positionality in this study will be clearly noted with the expectation of adding to the discourse of Black-subject research topics and to include my perspective of events of which I have knowledge and in which I was involved. Hall (2013) explains how meaning is
assigned to texts based on our knowledge. This applies not only to the researcher attempting to interpret information but to the subject sharing the information. There should be some level of importance and knowledge assigned to the text by both parties.

Meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural 'things'; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into the everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value or significance (pp. 3-4).

The geographic area of study is where I grew up, so I bring a reflexive, autoethnographic perspective to the topic. An autoethnographic approach can incorporate “discursive self-reflexive insights, musings, anecdotal information, alternative discourses, and…emotional responses connected to the project” (p. 94). My lived experiences emanate from a cultural and regional space similar to the lived experiences of the participants in this study. The researcher’s personal insight can be a critical tool in broadening understanding of the topic. Autoethnography allows researchers to address complex issues and offer interpretations that are presented through the voices of overlooked stakeholders. Mills and Birks add that “by dissolving conventional boundaries between ethnography, oral history, testimonials, and storytelling, it is possible to open up discursive spaces in which to explore alternative frames and meanings, especially for those in marginalized locations” (p. 95).

Weber acknowledges the researcher’s need for fluidity in interpreting data and not being tied to paradigms related to an issue. Having knowledge about previous research should not direct the researcher along the same path but should serve as a guide to encourage observation of new themes. Weber explains the process for identifying and explaining collected information.
On the other hand, the so-called interpretive, qualitative research methods are not amenable to collecting large amounts of data that can be subjected to inferential statistical analyses as a means of identifying underlying regularities. Instead, they are designed to obtain detail about phenomena, often in copious amounts, that ultimately require extensive interpretation by the researchers who use them. When they are employed, they lead naturally to accounts that focus more on explanation than prediction. Prediction based on the data obtained via these methods is a tenuous affair because statistical methods often cannot be employed to identify underlying regularities (p. ix).

Oftentimes, research is directed by the narratives, not the numbers. Amplifying the voices can result in understanding an issue and its associated reactions. The shift in my research focus is noted throughout the study. Themes derived from participants’ oral histories were observed and led me to extract similarities in their responses to social and political restrictions in Haywood County. Racist perceptions of Blacks that were reinforced by media helped normalize hegemonic systems. However, the counternarratives produced by Black citizens during an era of racial oppression stood out and demanded closer examination.

This rhetorical examination takes into consideration the underpinnings of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism related to overlooked voices in overlooked spaces. Building on the adage that everything is rhetorical, my layered exploration of Haywood County supports the stance of Middleton et al. (2015) that “all texts, whether created and experienced by critics through field-based presence or documented and reproduced by rhetors or other observers (e.g., media practitioners), have rhetorical significance.” My reflexive approach to explicating meaning derived from people and texts offers another example of understanding cultural and mediated
impacts related to Blacks in this Southern rural area. Middleton et.al (2015) further explain the rhetorical significance of place.

All rhetorical acts are embedded within particular places and spatial practices. Just as rhetoric cannot be separated from bodies, rhetoric always happens in a place and that place influences the rhetorics that circulate with(in) it…In short, place and space matter in the invention, dissemination, circulation, and criticism of rhetoric (p. 92).

The South during the Jim Crow era is of particular interest for rhetorical examination. It is a place defined by hegemonic policy and whiteness, even now. Focusing on events that are central to this location and exploring narratives and texts from persons who were impacted have a way of confronting rhetoric that has long characterized the South. Ellis and Forst (2021) posit that Southern identity is steeped in nostalgia, an emotion that clouds reality, particularly when elements of race are added.

Southern identity and race are braided in nuanced (and often problematic) ways. The history of the South and the concept of southern heritage is based in antebellum nostalgia and is noticeably whitewashed. We account for the ways we are implicated by this history and heritage, and we, as embodiments of southern white hegemony, use this space to own this embodiment while simultaneously challenging it (pp. 164-165).

Lipsitz (2007) takes it further and links the constructs of race to place and explains how significant one is to the other. Racial categories form borders where there are none and determine geographical and societal access in this country. Lipsitz provides a granular explanation of staying in one’s place.

The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension. People of different races in the United States are relegated to
different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems. The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially-shared system of exclusion and inclusion. Race serves as a key variable in determining who has the ability to own homes that appreciate in value and can be passed down to subsequent generations; in deciding which children have access to education by experienced and credentialed teachers in safe buildings with adequate equipment; and in shaping differential exposure to polluted air, water, food, and land (p. 12).

When discussing the South, race and power are dominant factors in every sense of that term. They are the pillars bracing the three events outlined in this study. Not only does race as a social construct make itself known, but the concept of race is also defined overwhelmingly by whiteness. Shome’s (2000) assessment of the normativity of whiteness builds on other research claiming it is part of “an institutionalized and systemic problem” that creates a social comfort generated by the unchallenged “everydayness” of white privilege (p. 366).

With race regarded as a social construction, it becomes problematic when racialized assertions—in this case, whiteness—are used to suggest its naturalness and superiority. This speaks to its invisibility and unfettered application to exert power in social, economic, and political settings. Nakayama and Krizek (2017) see the dual categorizations of whiteness in discursive terms as something and nothing. While some may deny its social power, others are constrained by it.

In order to approach this contradiction, we need to expose whiteness as a cultural construction as well as the strategies that embed its centrality. We must deconstruct it as
the locus from which Other differences are calculated and organized. The purpose of such
an inquiry is certainly not to recenter whiteness, but to expose its rhetoric. It is only upon
critically examining this strategic rhetoric that we can begin to understand the influences
it has on our everyday lives and, by extension, our research (p. 524).

Hall (2013) offers a layered explication of the concept of power and how it intersects with media
and representation. Power must be understood “not only in terms of economic exploitation and
physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to
represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain ‘regime of representation.’ It
includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices” (p. 249). Hall goes
on to characterize stereotyping as “an exercise of symbolic violence,” recognizing this use of
power as a way to minimize and distort meaning (p. 249).

At the center of power negotiation is the promotion of whiteness and its normativity.

Shome (2000) describes how whiteness and all of its nuances have maintained a stronghold on
social structures to ensure hegemony in a racialized world (p. 368). She explains how media
further perpetuates whiteness as the racial standard. “If it is the case that whites ‘learn’ how to be
whites and that whiteness is a structural ‘process’ through which whites are produced and
socialized as whites, the importance of the media in the (re)production of whiteness becomes
clear” (p. 368). Visibility of whiteness on full display provides lessons to audiences also on its
normativity. The preponderance of messages and images depicting whiteness produces
familiarity through a constant gaze and diet of media controlled by White systems of power. In
the first half of the twentieth century, the presence of Blacks in media were in step with societal
norms. The events and racial restrictions taking place in the South were parallel to media
depictions of Black life that were created by White owned media.
Media depictions and hegemonic policies help frame the public’s definition of blackness. However, the same components can inform Black individuals’ definition of blackness. Often, trends of resistance are evident when policies and perceptions are challenged. This opposition to restriction has been passed down and Black change agents have a wealth of examples to serve as guiding lights. Tate (1998) references resistive practices that are documented in slave revolts and protests addressing Black suffrage.

Paradoxically, Black resistance is a disruptive force in the body politic because its essentially emancipatory ideal runs counter to the ideological constructs of a capitalist system. As a transformative vehicle of liberation and, consequently, American society, Black resistance embraces both the complemental defensive forces of political protest and collective political violence (p. 766).

This study includes examples of political protest and violence that show the outcomes of resistance. Their experiences are among those scattered throughout American history documenting racial oppression and violence. The next chapter provides a rhetorical and historical framework of social, political, and racial structures that challenge Black access and agency. Later, I will outline how this foundation assists in understanding the three historic events in Haywood County, hegemonic policies, and the participants’ response to restrictive forces.
Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

This study adds to the discourse surrounding the need to bring forth voices that shed light on overlooked and undervalued events and people. As a product of this region, there were elements of these three events that I was unaware of, leading me to question why conversations about Elbert Williams’ lynching and the inhumane treatment of Blacks were silenced. It was crucial to elevate those voices and make them part of the rhetorical record. What did their strategies and actions mean? What do their words mean? During my inquiry, characteristics of agents of theory emerged from the six participants. Their narratives, including texts from other rhetorical contributors to this study, take the lead in understanding race, power, restriction, and resistance. Their experiences encouraged me to not only understand how media impacted their sense of blackness but how their resistance to racist dominant rule defined their blackness. The resilience exhibited by the participants interrogates the narratives set forth by media and the academy. Actions that confronted white supremacy also rejected the stereotypes and slights that have permeated American society and spheres of research for centuries.

While the research focus is no longer exclusively on the subjects’ relationship to media and the impact on identity, the study includes rhetorical analysis of some media examples related to the three historical events. I outline theoretical approaches examining restriction, resistance, hegemony, and media framing using news reports about the 1940 lynching of Brownsville, Tennessee, native Elbert Williams; the 1959 federal lawsuit filed by local Blacks to obtain the right to vote, and the desegregation of public schools in Haywood County in 1965. Through close reading of interview transcripts, I identify themes that were central to understanding the development of Black agency and counternarratives in a segregated space.
As part of this reflexive study, I:

- position the voices of participants at the forefront of the study to understand the outcomes of restriction by White power holders on local Black citizens and the resistance they exerted.
- explore characteristics of the South as they relate to hegemony, restriction, and racial violence. Social and political power dynamics will factor into this explanation.
- incorporate research that connects pivotal American historical events like the era of Black enslavement, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement to race and agency.
- highlight the importance of incorporating oral narratives that represent ethnically diverse groups into scholarly research.
- include accounts of my understanding of media impact, race, and restriction as a Black female growing up in the South. These reflections punctuate my research to provide context to my experiences as a writer, producer, and instructor, along with personal observances of Black agency in these spaces.

The following section presents theoretical grounding for understanding power dynamics of race, place, restriction, and resistance evident in the narratives of the six study participants. The memories of their lived experiences reveal an unwillingness to accept the social and political restrictions placed upon Black citizens during each of these events in the Jim Crow South. While they were not asked specifically about these two human forces—restriction and resistance—the participants’ responses organically evolved as they described the humiliation, inequity, and trauma that was attached to their blackness.

If experience is the best teacher, the lived experiences of Blacks in the segregated South have much to teach about the shifts that occurred between restriction and resistance. The next
section provides a rhetorical overview of examining texts that are often excluded from review and offers suggestions for embracing their rhetorical value and extracting meaning from them.

**Rhetorical Framework**

The concept of rhetoric can be daunting and intimidating because of the various identities it embodies. For scholars who embrace Aristotelian canons, it may be difficult to grasp the liberating characteristics of texts, particularly when the boundaries encompass more than speeches of noble European men. The evolution of rhetoric and rhetors and how the value of each is defined is a complex journey, but it somewhat mirrors the path many social movements take when there is unequal distribution of power and resources among groups. Wichelns (2017) chronicles the shift from orator to critic and shows how person, time, audience, and purpose manifest themselves in rhetoric from the perspectives of select twentieth century thinkers.

The points on which writers base their judgments of orators do afford a classification. The man, his work, his times, are the necessary common topics of criticism; no one of them can be wholly disregarded by any critic. But mere difference in in emphasis on one or another of then is important enough to suggest a rough grouping (p. 4).

Wichelns also makes known the distinction of the orator’s situational placement by stressing that “oratory is intimately associated with statecraft; it is bound up with the things of the moment, its occasion, its terms, its background, can often be understood only by the careful student of history” (p. 4). These orators, or auditors, as Black (2017) refers to them, tend to dominate discourse and the textual engagement centers too heavily on the person. The ever-present *second persona* is “sometimes sitting in judgment of the past, sometimes of the present, and sometimes of the future, depending on whether the discourse is forensic, epideictic, or deliberative” (p. 56). Early rhetoric focused primarily on the man—the orator—but as the discipline advanced,
audiences and their relationship with topics became important. Wrage (2017) notes that “techniques of the speakers are often highly individualized and perish with their bones; their ideas live after them” (p. 30). Black also cautions rhetoricians to insert space between the man and the work, implying the persona presented to audiences is not reflective of the orator’s true self (p. 56).

While many of the early works and orators are praised for their prose and performance, they rarely focus on persons of color and women, nor do they critically examine larger issues of the day. Who decides what is worthy to document or debate? Can critique be adequately recognized if diverse voices are not part of discourse? As a relatively new scholar, these are inquiries that frustrate my desire to understand the discipline from a “classical” historical perspective. Neo-Aristotelian discourse broadened what and who would be explored, as well as how topics and ideas impacted society. McKerrow (2017), in the 1980s, looks at the shift in reasoning that points to critical rhetoric, which he characterizes as “a perspective of rhetoric that explores, in theoretical and practical terms, the implications of a theory that is divorced from the constraints of a Platonic conception” (p. 82). Rhetorical criticism, which opens the door to expanding rhetorical thought, is explored further later in this chapter. McKerrow stresses that recognizing hegemonic social structures assists in understanding how decisions about discourse are formed.

These restrictions are more than socially derived regulators of discourse; they are institutionalized rules accepted and used by the dominant class to control the discursive actions of the dominated. The ruling class does not need to resort to overt censorship of opposing ideas, as these rules effectively contain inflammatory rhetoric within socially approved bounds—bounds accepted by the people who form the community (p. 83).
McKerrow advances the argument of how power is manipulated to control society and discourse. The dominance of one ensures control over the other. Including and examining the experiences of groups that are routinely excluded challenges the practices that have historically determined which texts have value. The following section shows how narratives and counternarratives can enhance understanding of people and issues routinely omitted from research.

**Narratives and Counternarratives**

One of the directives of qualitative research is to give voice and space to topics that have been under-researched and oversimplified. Oral narratives are living voices that give dimension to groups and issues and put their concerns on record for current and future exploration. Patricia Davis (2016) discusses the importance of collecting narratives of African Americans to help dispel erroneous and damaging information that has historically been validated as the truth. Biographical narratives allow participants in historical events to add their voices and perspectives to call out canards, particularly those bound by hegemony.

Narratives emphasizing resistance to dehumanization and perseverance within a hostile social, political, and economic context are particularly powerful forms of discourse and function in a way that uses experience to construct and assert subjectivity … These social actions refocus history in ways that suggest to contemporary audiences that their identities are not narrowly defined by narrations centered on degradation and suffering, and that more expansive notions of southernness and blackness—as delineated through Civil War memory—are empowering (pp. 127-128).

Framing these narratives within the context of the three Haywood County events address the distinctiveness of time and place and present a more layered view of African American identity and the initiative taken to construct their own agency. By presenting historical accounts of events
from individuals who were participants or witnesses, it introduces an expanded narrative to a manufactured idyllic history that often goes unchallenged. The experiences and hardships many Black citizens endured are unknown to many residents.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) point to how imperative counternarratives are for resisting dominance. These informative and often liberating accounts can help diminish reimagined narratives perpetuated by those in power. This speaks to the efforts that have been exerted historically to suppress or alter the experiences of those deemed in the minority. It becomes even more troubling when the actual majority has no voice or power.

We define the counter-story as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (p. 32).

Narratives concerning issues that impact Black freedom and access decenter whiteness. The focus is no longer on those with the means to control the larger story. Solórzano and Yosso conclude that “within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard counter-stories. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 32). Certainly, stories that detail Black life are often minimized or overlooked altogether. Media and the academy can claim responsibility for much of the dismissiveness and devaluing of Black experiences.

The collection and examination of lived experiences from persons who are often overlooked in discourse is of immeasurable cultural and historical importance. Ono and Sloop (1995) explain how vernacular discourse recognizes the voices of groups and communities that
are moved to the margins because of markers like race, gender, and economic class. Adding their narratives gives a more expansive perspective of how individuals navigate dominant power systems.

As rhetors engaged in a critique of vernacular discourse, when we study the ways in which marginal communities are constituted, we show the ultimate respect not by attempting to allow space for a "reified" margin to speak within the hegemonic culture, but by recognizing the transitional nature of marginal communities and the ways in which such communities may purposefully construct themselves outside of hegemonic culture (p. 27).

Blacks have outnumbered Whites in Haywood County since the era of enslavement, making the race and power dynamic all the more perplexing. This research will offer a glimpse into understanding social engagement and resistance from the viewpoints of Black residents. While these interviews only represent a small sample, they will give voice to events that are relevant to the culture and history of the area.

Out of pain, something useful can emerge. This adage has lifted and supported people in struggle for generations. Various underrepresented groups bear this burden and restriction should not be the norm. However, history holds the cancelled checks as evidence of people of color being in a constant state of struggle. De La Garza and Ono (2016) assert that these collective stories help illuminate issues of inequity through the lens of critical race theory—a term that is now weaponized to dismiss anything remotely associated with understanding or celebrating blackness.

People of color are unified (not essentialized) by their experiences of navigating the structures of power that marginalize them. They all have stories of times when they were
dismissed, ignored, even oppressed. These experiences shape the way they interact with and understand the world. More importantly, in the stories of others we are able to recognize our own voices, our own experiences, and our own struggles within the narrative (p. 395).

Even now, efforts to acknowledge and analyze our stories through a racial equity lens have become politicized. Legislation in more conservative states has assigned the labels like dangerous and divisive to curricula that include Black literature, Black history, Black art—anything Black. This wave of restriction is only borrowing from ideology subscribing to Black inferiority tropes.

Oddly enough, Moore (2018) is able to extract something remarkable from a life defined by constant restriction. He offers a way of understanding—almost poetically—how Blacks have historically moved within this socially destructive dance of push and pull—restriction and resistance. His assessment gives justification as to how Black Americans manage to resist and remain.

At the root of Black resistance—the collective struggle through which we might imagine and build a world more just, more free, more equitable, more magical—is love. Nothing but an unwavering love for Black people can catalyze and sustain the protracted struggle for Black liberation and its various iterations across time, like the contemporary movement for Black lives … In fact, nothing but Black radical love can activate a Black politic shaped by an ethic of mutual care: an ethic that rests upon a grounding principle of shared concern and a responsibility to care for the different—the other, that person other than the self—in this moment of perpetual anti-blackness, fed by and large through this nation’s consistent investment in militarized capitalist patriarchy (p. 325).
We see tragic instances of the over-policing and lynching of Black bodies, Black voter suppression, and inadequate educational facilities and staffing for young Black students. At essentially every level of our life cycle, we are confronted with restrictions. We can’t breathe, we can’t vote, and we can’t effectively learn. I view this study as a form of resistance because it gives voice to muted events and experiences that could help expand views of blackness and racial injustice.

**Rhetorical Criticism**

While the breadth of rhetorical criticism is vast, questions abound within the spaces of race and equity. If current sentiments are any indication, it becomes evident how some have historically sought to silence the voices of those entangled in an unjust system. Extreme measures by the State to dispel historical truths about colonialism and the United States’ economic systems rooted in centuries of labor by enslaved Africans have been enacted to maintain a pristine narrative of exceptionalism and the fortitude of White “settlers.”

Wander’s (1984) examination of rhetorical criticism centers the importance of breaking through what history would have the present to believe. Critical analysis is guided by what he refers to as the Third Persona—a discourse of contestation by groups impacted by systems that seek to negate their voice and presence.

The moral significance of being negated through what is and is not said reveals itself in all its anguish and confusion in context, in the world of affairs wherein certain individuals and groups are, through law, tradition, or prejudice, denied rights accorded to being commended or, measured against an ideal, to human beings. The objectification of certain individuals and groups discloses itself through what is and is not said about them and through actual conditions affecting their ability to speak for themselves. Operating
through existing social, political, and economic arrangements, negation extends beyond the "text" to include the ability to produce texts, to engage in discourse, to be heard in the public space (p. 210).

Wander pointedly gives space to texts and individuals to speak, a process denied to groups of people and the symbols and narratives associated with their identity. The dismissal of analysis is rhetorical and he encourages exploration into the absence and the impacted audience.

Interrogating the Third Persona can center attention on those whose life experiences are largely excluded from academic study. Scholars like Jackson (2003) who engage in Afrocentric discourse disrupt research that promotes Eurocentric beliefs of superiority. Bringing attention to more expansive views shows the extent of *othering* undertaken by the academy. Highlighting disparities in scholarship challenges institutional practices that have long defined rhetoric.

In some respects, Afrocentricity has been resentfully received by the academy as a hostile takeover rather than a movement to construct space for the study and criticism of Black particularity throughout the diaspora. It is this intellectual xenophobia that has inhibited the progress of cultural models and critical practice within academic institutions (p. 117).

Ono and Sloop (1995) contended that “the focus of much recent work has not been on subjects but on how subjects are formed. In decentering the subject, ‘lived pain’ is too often forgotten (p. 21). The tendency to separate the person from the pain contributes to a racial reconstruction that is almost unrecognizable. Rhetorical criticism fuses the two together for not only broader understanding but fostering conversations and strategies for change.

Jackson also points to the multifaceted purpose of Afrocentric studies in that its rhetoric exposes struggle, but it also liberates. Narratives from lived experiences and oral histories fill in the gaps of rhetorical accounts that omit voices that have been moved to the margins. Jackson
(2003) contends that “the European tradition is meant to create, celebrate, sustain, develop, and introduce the totality of the European’s existence to the world. The Afrocentric tradition is meant to accomplish these same objectives for African descendants” (p. 120). While the objectives may be similar among the two groups, the reception of and respect for Afrocentric scholarly discourse is quite disparate.

An illustration that maps how historical suppression can alter discursive contributions within the academy is evident in Zora Neale Hurston’s literary work entitled *Barracoon*, published in 2018, decades after it was written. As an architect of the Harlem Renaissance and one who contributed to its formidable literary clout, Hurston’s anthropological and ethnographical research in the 1920s and 1930s was groundbreaking. Her work included an insightful introduction to Cudjoe Lewis, a formerly enslaved Black man who was brought to America on the *Clotilda*, the last recorded slave ship to arrive in this country in 1860 (Boyd, 2021). Lewis was the subject of a manuscript written nearly 90 years before it was published. Hurston’s writings presented an oral narrative from an individual who provided details of his abduction in Africa, personal experiences as human cargo to Mobile, Alabama, and the hardships of enslavement. As revolutionary as Hurston’s interviews and field notes were, *Barracoon* was not accepted in literary circles because of Hurston’s decision to steadfastly present Lewis’ accounts in the vernacular in which he spoke. As Jenkins (2021) notes, Hurston’s commitment to preserving Lewis’ identity included referencing him by his given name, Oluale Kossola, and allowing his language and dialect to rhetorically capture what had been taken away from him. Her refusal to acquiesce to the demands of publishers would result in the full account of Kossola’s haunting narratives going unpublished for several decades.
She believed telling the story from “Kossola’s first-person point of view,” in a style of writing that also expressed his storytelling sensibilities and authenticity, demanded that he speak in his own words and voice. The rejections, the impact of the Great Depression, the demands of her patron, and Hurston’s interest in other projects all contributed to the book’s lying dormant in the Alain Locke Collection at Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center for more than half a century (p. 109).

Certainly, Hurston’s position as a Black female intellectual during an era of Black cultural uplift and patriarchal standards did not advance her research efforts. The suppression of this story centers on representation and translation. How Kossola expressed himself and how his words were presented were more important factors than what he actually said. Hurston’s choice to defy the politics of Black respectability impacted the study of an individual with an uncommon perspective on the American slave trade. Afrocentric research, as Jackson previously noted, can have liberatory power when it becomes a part of discourse, not when it is limited by what some may subjectively deem as unacceptable. Jefferson-Tatum (2015) explains how interpretation and positionality can affect discursive selections. Therein lies one of the major stumbling blocks for inclusion of diverse topics and voices in the academy.

What is important at this juncture is to note that translation occurs within a matrix of signification wherein the positionality of the translators and the translated is often fixed, resulting in the creation of a one-sided narrative imposed on those same Others who have been deemed incapable of adequately and “objectively” constructing their own historical and cultural narrative (p. 281).

Jefferson-Tatum’s explanation sheds light on how othering plays a role in controlling the narrative. In this case, efforts to suppress Hurston’s manuscript likely aligned with efforts by
influential Blacks to dispel stereotypical narratives and behaviors that negatively portrayed them. Even so, she published articles outlining her anthropologic research and wrote character-driven novels incorporating the linguistics and customs of many Southern Blacks. Including Kossola’s accounts in the vernacular of his environment and station in life represented being unlearned and unsophisticated to some critics, traits that went against the growing movement that embraced Black intellect. However, his story uncovered another revelation for Hurston that further complicated her understanding of the transatlantic slave trade. Jenkins (2021) writes that during Hurston’s interviews with the aged Kossola, she discovered he had been captured and sold into slavery by Africans, namely, Dahomean female warriors who raided and slaughtered members of his village around 1860 (p. 114). This was a direct confrontation to narratives that had largely excluded African participation in the European and American slave trading economy.

Kossola’s account is a view of the Atlantic slave trade from the inside. He witnessed the activities of a widely feared African kingdom that facilitated the conquest of neighboring tribes and nations. Slave raiders from Dahomey negotiated with slavers from Alabama in 1859, resulting in Kossola’s capture. When Hurston traveled back to Alabama to conduct more in-depth research, she extended her work to show the dire, permanent after-effects of the trauma of capture and enslavement on the survivors of the “last African slaver” (p. 114).

Hurston’s work was informative and influential in other historical and artistic realms. Her descriptive article on the life of Cudjoe Lewis (Kossola) likely impacted the work of Black American sculptor Augusta Savage. After obtaining success and the support of sponsors, Savage moved to France in 1929 when fascination with African culture was burgeoning (p. 100). The attraction was primarily fueled by exoticism and sexualized myths of African life. Black artists
living in Paris responded with artwork that represented the people and culture of the African diaspora (p. 107). Jenkins attributes Savage’s artistic creations depicting Dahomey female warriors to Hurston’s writings about Lewis’ experiences. Additionally, Savage’s interpretation of the African fighters disrupted the perceptions Europeans had of the Dahomey.

One is struck by how Savage envisioned them beyond the spectacle of sexuality and unleashed savagery embedded in the European imagination. Even though the figures have been described as such, European sources—specifically, the mythologies about Amazons—are difficult to visually reference in Savage’s sculptures (p. 108).

The work of Savage and Hurston represents a commitment to incorporating an Afrocentric presence in spaces that sought to interpret it differently. Hurston moved forward with compelling narratives and presented them in an unconventional way. Her authenticity emanates throughout her writings and has become a hallmark of her publications. Savage broadened her reach in Europe with reimagined creations that captured Black femininity and strength. Both individuals contributed to the academy at a time when blackness, women, and agency were diminished in American society, making their academic and cultural offerings even more significant.

An example that draws comparisons to the 2022 film The Woman King emphasizes the importance of rhetorical criticism in redefining the past. One West African woman’s family connection to the modern world’s only female army is recounted in a Washington Post article. Researchers are now collecting narratives of these fighters’ descendants to piece together an unmatched yet muted history. Paquette (2021) explains the demise of the undisputed female army known as the Amazons and illustrates how imperialism essentially eviscerated the group’s achievements from historical records. “After France seized what is now southern Benin in 1894, colonial officers disbanded the territory’s unique force of women warriors, opened new
classrooms and made no mention in the curriculum of the Amazons. Even today, many in the
country of 12 million know little about their foremother” (Paquette, 2021). A refashioning of
facts prevented residents from knowing about how these African women trained, fought, and
outsmarted their male counterparts. Their military prowess rivaled that of other armies and for
three centuries countries near and far marveled at their genius. The liberating characteristics of
rhetorical criticism uncover and amplify hidden truths. Narratives such as these of the Amazons
can restore a cultural link to an already rich legacy that many did not know was missing.

Ono and Sloop (1995) offer an examination of vernacular discourse to understand how
different groups express and define themselves, which is in contrast to representations created by
groups in positions of power. Referencing Boyd’s work, they also stress that vernacular
discourse not only confronts hegemonic principles but it affirms by “articulating a sense of
community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant discourses” (p. 22). It is
fluid and ongoing, building upon itself as time progresses, as evinced by the Amazon women
warriors’ research. One century later, living descendants and future generations will have
interviews and historical accounts of this African female army to dismiss attempts to erase their
contributions. Criticism of discourse should destabilize negative and erroneous representations
so that it changes how groups are defined and seeks to “upend essentialisms, undermine
stereotypes, and eliminate narrow representations of culture” (p. 25).

Chavez (2015) casts a critical eye upon the academy for establishing boundaries that
prevent other perspectives from entering broader discourse. This exclusive club of scholars
determined what was valuable and acceptable and served as rhetoric’s gatekeepers. The standard
messaging was interpreted as: others needed not apply.
The many white men and the handful of women who have taken it upon themselves to tell our history are more or less unabashed about the fact that a primary concern in rhetoric is to examine and enhance citizens’ discourses. From traditional studies of public address, to an array of social movement studies, to analyses of democratic deliberation and the public sphere, Rhetoric scholars are concerned almost exclusively with citizen discourses, mostly from white men in public (p. 163).

One of the characteristics of rhetorical criticism is its emphasis on groups and communities that are overlooked in scholarly research. Therefore, a prominent question initiating this kind of research hinges on why issues associated with certain groups have traditionally been overlooked. Ono and Sloop (1995) describe the practice as “the concentration on the generalized, transhistorical, transpolitical subject and the avoidance of discussion of people struggling to survive” (p. 20). While rhetorical criticism takes on many forms, uncovering those covered contributions and voices adds another dimension to scholarly research.

My work in the media profession has impacted how I view audiences and the messages directed toward them. My focus tends to shift to media with African American themes and culminates with an analysis of how messages and persons are presented. This is mostly due to my fascination with storytelling, and partially because of my upbringing in a predominantly Black area in the South where race was at the forefront of all aspects of life. Being a Black woman in the South encompasses signifiers that bring perspectives to research that run counter to traditional views regarding media representation. The underrepresentation of Black voices in scholarship is one of the reasons this research appealed to me. Not only does it explore Black lived experiences, but it provides a closer look at individuals in an economically strapped region and their strategies for confronting racial injustice. My experience in media helps inform my
process for approaching related topics in academia. In a broader sense, Davis (1998) promotes the value of Black scholarship, but points to the specificity of research from the Black female perspective. She offers a more microscopic perspective that points to the importance of Black women researchers illuminating issues relative to Black life and culture. It is an approach that influences and motivates my research. Davis lays out the intentionality that should foster scholarship that centers Black issues and Black women.

To establish a Black women's standpoint in rhetorical criticism is to prepare to challenge academic hegemony. Toward this vision, a Black woman scholar serves as a keeper of rhetorical culture by revealing the long-standing diversity of ideas, culture, and aesthetics of Black women's intellectual tradition and the way in which Black women have constructed theory and its practice in their daily lives (pp. 80-81).

For many scholars, there is keen interest in exploring and elevating the stories and views of people of color, especially those whose perspectives tend to be diminished or erased. Based on societal structures in this country, it should not come as a shocking revelation that research involving people of color is not given priority review. Yet, scholars—particularly those with a penchant for focusing on White subjects and narratives—have been complicit in muffling voices of color and not valuing scholarship that seeks to shift that focus.

Shome’s (2000) assessment of the normativity of whiteness builds on other research claiming it is part of “an institutionalized and systemic problem” that creates a social comfort generated by the unchallenged “everydayness” of white privilege (p. 366). Further explication frames whiteness as “the everyday, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity and through that normativity function to make invisible the ways in which whites participate in, and derive protection and benefits from, a system whose rules and
organizational relations work to their advantage” (p. 366). Observing and studying topics that are not predictable energizes the academy and confronts the longstanding practices of conducting research through a myopic lens.

When the promotion of whiteness overrides any attempt to examine issues that originate from other positions, discourse becomes staid and invalid. How robust is rhetoric if the perspectives of certain groups are diminished? Davis (1998) questions the incomplete rhetorical space that is formed when social dominance strangles diverse voices.

When a discipline concerned with investigating the relationships among language, culture, and society fails to explore the multidimensions of Black women's lives—family, sexuality, age, spirituality, nationality, intellectualism—how then will "building community" occur in communication scholarship to include the social realities of all oppressed peoples (pp. 78-79)? Scholarship that excludes viewpoints from overlooked groups should not pass the academic litmus test because it fails to present views that are not defined by whiteness. By “violating the place of otherness,” Davis explains how scholars can broaden research and confront the challenges of institutional bias.

Disruption of power, especially the power to diminish or erase, involves resistance. Critical rhetoric can enlighten and empower groups whose experiences and stories have been overlooked or dismissed. Presenting scholarly research and narratives of individuals whose life experiences address historical and contemporary social issues adds to discourse that tends to overwhelmingly foreground the voices of old White males. The inclusion of diverse thought has the power to interrogate the “classics” label and redistribute the power from a predominantly White classification into other spaces. Davis (1998) stresses that writing itself becomes a tool
that signifies strength, just as it did for enslaved Black women. Finding and presenting one’s voice through the written word pushes past restrictive structures. Slave narratives illustrate this resistive force.

Rhetoric provides Black women symbolic entrance into a discourse of humanity. The act of writing became an act of resistance, for at once it proclaimed their intellectual prowess and disclaimed the myth of their non-humanness. Black women's rhetoric informs a new vision of what humanity could be should their lives find inclusion in the discourse of human communication. Writing became a symbolic act of redefining themselves in opposition to the dehumanizing images of Black women as breeders, chattel, and illiterate non-beings (p. 85).

If writing is a method of exerting power and humanity, this intensifies the argument around including those with limited power and agency in scholarship. If clarity and understanding are foundational to research, margins must be removed to allow diverse voices to co-mingle within the halls of research.

The works of rhetorical scholars referenced in this study bring critical examination to issues, struggles, and concerns of individuals that have been minimized. Their scholarship defies the status quo and disrupts the academic validation that many regard as the gold standard. These writers are but a few of the individuals who exemplify fearlessness in identifying and calling out historical ills and systems that have not always been addressed in academia. As a scholar, many of these writings have reinforced my ability to critically examine my work, cultural environments, and messages in media.

**Memory and Narratives as Rhetoric**

Including the narrative as a basis for rhetorical examination highlights the influence that lived experiences have on research. Diverse and previously muted voices become central figures
in helping to understand social trends, patterns, and behavior—past and present. My inclusion of rural Black southerners with personal interactions with oppressive social systems during the first half of the last century was intentional. Who better to illuminate the impact that race and media had on the construction of identity? As a result, these narratives revealed characteristics that were apparent in the participants’ response to hegemonic structures in Haywood County, Tennessee. The oral narratives crafted their own pathway to knowing and understanding resistance, thereby, resituating the participants as agents of theory. These are their own stories, experiences, and memories. Even as outsiders, these individuals instruct the reader on some transformations that occurred when they exerted agency.

In the mid-1970s, Dowd-Hall (1976) expressed how the spoken word brings an added dimension to rhetoric when compared to written accounts. She referenced the extensive and valuable oral history projects that highlighted the lived experiences of Native Americans and formerly enslaved Black persons. Such projects enlighten audiences and preserve the narratives for future study.

History itself is—in its broadest definition—our collective memory of the past.

Interviews provide a means of conveying the uniqueness and integrity of individual lives, while at the same time broadening the research base upon which our understanding of general patterns is predicated … Records which are created are seldom preserved. Interviews, then, may often serve as an indispensable avenue into the lives of those who are otherwise hidden from history (p. 19).

Hanchard (2008) points out that individual memories last only during the lifetime of the person. However, once those accounts are video/audio recorded or written, they become part of a collective memory and can help future generations understand their own experiences. Hanchard
also distinguishes *Black memory* as its own classification, describing it as recall associated with issues like racial inequality, violence, and bias.

We come upon one of the ulterior motives of black memory, to make claims in contemporary life about the relationship between present inequalities and past injustices. Black memory has mostly served the purpose of keeping visible the actual or imagined experiences of black peoples that would have been otherwise forgotten or neglected, and in this manner black memory can be characterized as a collectively instantiated process, distinct from the personal memories of individual black persons (p. 48).

These memories contribute to stories that help piece together a history of Black life in America that is complex. From slave narratives to current racialized incidents, these voices give insight to social and political systems that many would prefer to minimize. As a pedagogical tool, Dowd-Hall (1976) reasserts the relevance of oral history as a way of validating the way history is documented (p. 21). Bringing attention to overlooked groups is another way historians can contribute to the discipline.

Popular interest in oral history, I believe, springs from a vital democratic impulse. It presupposes that ordinary people can be articulate, even eloquent witnesses in their own behalf. It sees the individual, trying to make sense of his or her own life, as a valid source of historical information. I think it is crucial that historians find ways to connect with this interest, to respond to the need for roots and identity and self-respect from which it comes (p. 25).

Amplifying the voices of muted individuals who were instrumental in policy-shaping events helps to fill in gaps and challenge myths upheld by those with power. Most academic studies exploring events like lynching, voting rights, and school desegregation during the Jim Crow era
would not have included robust research centering on the perspectives of Black Americans. By incorporating firsthand accounts of the participants’ involvement, recorded interviews become rhetorical artifacts that permit emotions, vocal inflection, and details to assist with meaning and interpretation. An interview is a fixed form of media, but its impact is not limited by temporal constraints. Narratives can reveal and reshape knowledge well into the future. Rodden (2008) explains some of the fluid characteristics of narrative-based research.

Like a logic of narrative, a rhetoric of narrative moves by concepts. Yet they are not concerned chiefly with logical abstractions, valid proofs, and taut propositional linkages. A rhetoric of narrative does still include a substantial rational component, but its concepts are less dry or mechanical or head-centered, and instead more full-bodied and even impassioned. They are rational but also emotive and ethical (p. 151).

These many forms of rhetorical movement originate in the body, giving credence to an embodied rhetoric. Society places value on the color, shape, and geographic positioning of bodies initially. Knoblauch (2012) argues that the words and actions of specific bodies would also be valued differently.

This is what embodied rhetoric asks of the rhetor, to reconnect our thinking with our particular bodies, understanding that knowledge comes from the body. But, lest we forget, these are bodies both shaping and shaped by culture. And these bodies, and the cultures they inhabit, are complex entities, not to be reduced to singular essential tags such as “woman” or “Chinese” … Bodies are texts and are therefore unstable and subject to shifting positionalities, transformation, and continually revised and reconstructed histories. To write from the body, as asked by an embodied rhetoric, one must have a body (p. 60).
Knoblauch references agency and the way in which individuals make themselves seen and heard. Certainly, Black Americans’ bodies and this embedded rhetoric have not always been in their control, but they have found ways to speak, write, and express their truth. Narratives hold power and can oftentimes affect change, although social power dynamics can determine whose story is heard or believed. They provide an opportunity to critically exam issues and structures involved in silencing certain groups. These recollections can become windows into the individuals revealing their vulnerabilities and strengths. This method brings more saliency to narrative research, including this study’s collection of interviews from persons who lived through periods of social and political restrictions. Their voices speak directly to what was happening to rural Blacks in West Tennessee from 1940 to 1965.

**Southern Perceptions and Power**

As a Black woman who grew up in the South, there are myriad people, places, and events that lend themselves to critical study. Understanding the regional, racial, and cultural inferences associated with the South broadens how written and visual rhetoric is viewed, remembered, and commemorated. Not that the southern region of the country holds exclusive claim to racial, economic, and political inequity over other geographical areas, it does have a saturated history accentuated and complicated by the toil and violence of a nearly 250-year-old system of human enslavement. Systems are difficult to dismantle, and history reveals the impact of inequitable social and political processes, specifically during the Jim Crow era. This section attempts to show how perceptions of a Southern history is connected to the reality Blacks endured after Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century. The following rhetorical explanations should add context to the three historical events included in this study and bring into focus Blacks’ corresponding rejection of racial restrictions.
Robinson (2014) points to the chasm between some southerners’ interpretations of historical events and the State’s role in romanticizing some defining moments in the region. It is difficult for some to relinquish ideology and practices that center whiteness.

Black and white southerners alike are invested in processes of regionalization, which include manufacturing regional histories, memories, and identities, albeit to different ends. Although undoubtedly southern regional identity is grounded in the historical and cultural differences of slave society, Jim Crow segregation, and the consequent organization of people, space, and place in the South, regional identity is always already racialized, making and responding to cues from the state and social institutions (p. 13).

Without argument, a probable cause for suppressing or reinterpreting discourse related to Black violence and racial justice is tied to this country’s historical ledger. Agrarian literature promoted White southerners as victims after the Civil War, despite the power and terror they wielded over newly emancipated Blacks. Inabinet and Moss (2019) point to the “silenced marginality of African Americans” who accounted for nearly half of the South’s population yet had no voice in matters that directly concerned them (p. 163).

Believing that the loss of the war also meant a loss of control over how the South was depicted and portrayed in popular thought, the Vanderbilt Agrarians set about to change misperceptions of southern history and the value of southern culture by further establishing the “past in the present” as a literary and rhetorical device, folding and layering memories onto the present (also a central tenet of critical regionalism) (p. 163).

Even now, Southern identity is infused with remnants of the past that glorify whiteness, symbols of supremacy, and a longing for days gone by. This is verified by the outrage that has heightened over the past few years surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments. The South has been
weighed down with the baggage of monuments since the Daughters of the Confederacy launched their nineteenth-century version of crowdsourcing. They raised money and awareness to promote an earlier “Big Lie” and indoctrinate Americans with mythical and romantic restructurings of the South’s role in the Civil War. To make sure Americans would “never forget,” various organizations that were devoted to the Confederacy saw to it that monuments would tell the story long after they were gone. These statues and monuments became the bedrock of racially dominant principles that guided Southern society and reminded Blacks whose rules they were to follow. Powell (2007) asserts that different people and groups create descriptions of a region and the characterizations determine how it is understood (p. 67). “If place itself, then, is a complex and contingent social construction, region is a social invention for describing the political, cultural, historical, and economic relationships among places” (p. 67). Clearly, Black Americans have no place in that imagined Southern milieu and their contributions are diminished by Whites who continue to grip tightly to “southern heritage.” (In a somewhat ironic case of event branding, the longstanding annual football game featuring HBCU rival teams is named the Southern Heritage Classic.) Reyes (2010) explains how symbols of Americanism would evolve into a narrative that excluded African Americans.

Studies of race and ethnicity have thus revealed perhaps more starkly than any other line of research that there is no such thing as a monolithic national identity to which a unitary public memory might correspond, only practices of remembrance situated in time and enacted by discrete groups. An emphasis on race and ethnicity has thus revealed the multiplicity of memory; but it has also exposed whiteness as the invisible hand of official public memory (p. 2).
An undying fascination with Confederate narratives and symbolism upholding white supremacy has attempted to minimize the historical relevance of African Americans in this country. Particularly in the South, visual reminders of the Civil War conflate the racist, yet peaceful persona that have come to define the perfect southern setting. Davis (2016) explains the precision with which blackness is camouflaged in examples of Southern identity.

The allure of conventional representations of antebellum life relies on a blackness that is at once there and not there—a necessary element for its role in defining whiteness through serving as its polar opposite, yet servile, one-dimensional, hidden in the background, and silenced. It is this nostalgic imagery that provides the backbone for traditional southern identity (p. 150).

Davis reinforces the necessity of incorporating alternate narratives for the sake of historical accuracy and for cultural uplift. These practices help to diminish societal norms that elevate whiteness due to lingering racist ideals.

The common thread is the messaging and how it permeates societal, cultural, and political structures. When these types of perspectives are situated upon the broad base of Southern beliefs and myths, they present a distinct set of views from which to examine this region. As McPherson (2003) claims, “myths and narrative impact the real, shaping not only personal memory and perception but also our public and ‘official’ histories” (p. 11). The impact is far greater than personal longings for a return to the “good ole days,” but it is rather the pervasive hegemonic principles that define a region and its culture. McPherson goes on to explain its conflicted past.

The South – at least since the abolition movement – has long played a variety of roles within national mythmaking, alternating between (if not simultaneously representing) the
moral other and the moral center of U.S. society, both keeper of its darkest secrets and former site of a “grand yet lost” civilization, the site of both church bombings and good, old-fashioned family values (p. 17).

Davis (2016) refers to her Virginia childhood as a constant reminder that she possessed no real agency or power. The reshaping of some events and symbols altered the region’s history with reinterpretations of texts and narratives.

The conception of southern “heritage” encouraged by my history textbooks’ nostalgic focus on the grandeur and innocence of the antebellum South—and invariably invoked by bearers of the Confederate flag—served to advance a very selective, predominately white version of that heritage. This perception was reinforced every time my family drove past the Confederate monument on the grounds of the old courthouse in the middle of our town’s main square (p. 2).

This is an all too familiar scene and sentiment largely felt by Black Americans, particularly those who reside in the South. The presence of these graven images are impervious fixtures in the memories of persons who drive or stroll by them regularly. It is safe to say those memories connect Black and White citizens to the past. The exception is that many opt to rid themselves of a wretched and distorted identity, however, many do not. It is this dichotomous interpretation of the past that is cemented into Southern identity, and quite often, in the form of statues connected to the Civil War. They are symbols that represent reconstructed histories and promote hegemonic power structures. While symbols may be physically removed, the memory associated with their intended purpose and messaging cannot be carted off so easily.

A rhetorical examination of Southern identity calls attention to the marginalization of African Americans. de Velasco (2019) points out how the romanticization of Confederate statues
ignores the counternarrative associated with racist imagery. The ongoing statue debate, including other Civil War related elements, seek to mute African American discourse and invalidate their Southern roots and objections to Confederate symbols. Efforts to remove a statue in Memphis of the Ku Klux Klan founder ignited a firestorm and foregrounded a different viewpoint of “Southern heritage centered in Black historical memory” (p. 234).

Rhetors in the group gave immediacy to how White supremacy had sought to restrict who could claim to speak on and for the South historically, and to how White Southerners used – and still use – legal and extralegal means to seek control over the conditions of public life in the region (p. 235).

The concept of Southern othering connects many White Southerners to an apparent sense of ownership over southernness. It hearkens to an agrarian society sustained by Black human bondage and white supremacy. Black emancipation stripped White southerners of their economic freedom. For many, what the South is today is a less-dominant form of itself—a self that continues to attempt to recapture and recreate a wretched history through restrictive policies and actions. However, culture, heritage, and tradition inextricably link Blacks to the South, despite the struggle, for reasons vastly different than for what those terms mean for Whites. Our South isn’t their South, but it’s our South, too. This could explain the stand Blacks in this study took to defend their vote, their right to an equitable education, and their place in society.

**Power Dynamics of Restriction and Resistance**

The purpose of this section is to guide the reader through a more nuanced understanding of the participants’ response to social and political structures of power. I juxtapose restriction and resistance and explain how select mediated events were interpreted by various audience members. Social and political parameters in Haywood County, and the South, dictated the
restrictions that sought to control the Black body and the narrative. I show how those same parameters invoked a different response from Black residents—resistance. These counternarratives—discussed in this section and in the participant narratives—serve as a definitive voice for Black intellect and ingenuity at a time when both were underestimated by White power holders. African Americans were well aware of why restrictions were in place, yet they were not compliant or complacent. This knowledge preceded movements to achieve equity and bolstered advocacy along the way. Tate (1998) references how resistance during the era of American enslavement presented itself in different parts of the country as Black freedom was negotiated. She explains the common threads of resistance by noting that “although geographical regions determined the specific pattern of oppression, it is the pattern of oppression, coupled with the geographical region as well as the time period, that dictated the form of Black resistance” (p. 766).

The decision to identify historical events in a particular place, interview specific people, and understand their pursuit of justice opens the door to a swath of rhetorical considerations. Another component of this study—restriction and resistance—expands the rhetorical perspective. There is limited scholarship examining social control involving Southern Blacks and narratives that depict their lived experiences. The stories of persons of color have not always found their way into academic discourse with the swiftness that research centering on whiteness has. This study examines a segment of oral narratives reflecting on historical events that impacted the lives of Black citizens making their way through the labyrinth of Jim Crow laws in rural West Tennessee.

The racial environment in Haywood County, a predominantly Black county, was defined by White dominant power structures, all of which placed personal, economic, and political
limitations on Black citizens during that era. The research includes interviews with six participants (former and current residents) who will elucidate on how residents saw themselves as Black citizens and how they managed their lives at a time when participation in the democratic process and social engagement was limited and sometimes deadly. I extract themes from the oral narratives and published reports to explain residents’ modes of survival and their willingness to confront unjust systems. These are characteristics reminiscent of other historical moments that describe eras of racial oppression. Much can be learned from these events and experiences that are parallel to contemporary political and social restrictions people of color face in this country. Additionally, these events happened with the lifetime of the six participants in this study, so the distant past is not so distant.

Springfield (2000), in her book chronicling multiple generations of her family in Haywood County, shares her father’s memories of the terror Black residents felt in the wake of local NAACP members’ abductions. Later, I provide more information on the lynching of Elbert Williams in 1940, but Springfield notes how Black people in Haywood County were at risk of losing their lives.

Tonnie [Springfield’s father] heard that several of Brownsville’s black citizens with ties to the NAACP had left town and were in hiding. Buster Walker was the latest victim…the mob had come looking for him and met him leaving town on foot. Not recognizing Buster, who had disguised himself, one of the men yelled, “We looking for a nigger called Buster Walker. Do you know where he stay?” The minister had turned and pointed behind him and said, “Yessuh, yessuh, yessuh, he stay right down the road there.” He said the cars were loaded with white men who were cussing as they sped off in the direction he indicated. Buster quickly made his way out of town. After walking for some
distance, a motorist picked him up and drove him to Jackson and safety. Buster had left Brownsville like all the others who had been run out of town as part of the mob’s “fear campaign.” They had a good laugh at how Buster was able to trick the mob (pp. 76-77). Ingenuity and clever wit were strategies Blacks had long employed to save themselves and others when facing danger. They were acts of resistance to tactics and systems designed to oppress and diminish Black agency. The intense reality of the racial terror inflicted upon Black Americans is somewhat paradoxical. It should crush us in a way that we cannot rebound. In this study alone, participants have recalled incidents in their younger lives that were inflicted upon them because of their blackness.

At times, the decision to resist harmful social structures involves removing oneself from an environment altogether. The options for Black southerners during segregation were few. Resisting racist policies sometimes meant leaving their lives behind in order to preserve their families. Racial terror in the form of lynchings, rape, and intimidation fueled the momentum of the Great Migration. The North beckoned, and many Blacks living in the segregated South heeded its call, signaling one of this country’s most notorious population, economic, and cultural shifts. Wilkerson (2010) describes the human movement system as “a statistically measurable demographic phenomenon marked by unabated outflows of black emigres that lasted roughly from 1915 to 1975” (p. 177). Taking note of the social and racial restrictions, many Blacks saw leaving the South as their only chance to have a better life. I recall stories from one of my mother’s sisters, Justine Maxwell Robinson, describing how she pondered her plan of escape from backbreaking labor, stopping to rest on a hoe while chopping cotton in the sweltering Tennessee fields in the early 1950s. She would write a letter to an older cousin living in Chicago (transplanted from the South) and ask if she and two other sisters could come and live with her
until they could get on their feet. The sisters would save their money from working in the fields and then make their way north, leaving a familiar world and many family members behind. Wilkerson’s research emphasizes the compromises and strategies Blacks enacted to strike out for the unknown.

Like other mass migrations, it was not a haphazard unfurling of lost souls but a calculable and fairly ordered resettlement of people along the most direct route to what they perceived as freedom, based on railroad and bus lines. The migration streams were so predictable that by the end of the Migration, and, to a lesser degree, even now, one can tell where a black northerner’s family was from just by the city the person grew up in—a good portion of blacks in Detroit, for instance, having roots in Tennessee, Alabama, western Georgia, or the Florida panhandle because the historic rail lines connected those places during the Migration years (p. 178).

Tyson (1998) points to the significance of resistance enacted by Blacks in the South that was not always visible. Rejecting oppressive social and political norms was a skill carried out with precision by everyday Black people. They did not wait for change, but rather they operated as changemakers in the midst of hegemonic restrictions. While small-town activism may not have received the same attention as urban groups that were seized upon by media, Tyson notes that Black activism and the concept of Black Power took shape in the shacks and cotton fields in the South.

"The civil rights movement" and "the Black Power movement," often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. In fact, virtually all of the elements that we associate with "Black Power" were already present in the small towns
and rural communities of the South where "the civil rights movement" was born …

Independent black political action, black cultural pride, and "armed self-reliance"
operated in the South in tension and in tandem with legal efforts and nonviolent protest.
… World War II afforded the black southerners who carried those traditions forward
unprecedented political opportunities; many who seized them came from families with
long traditions of resistance to white supremacy (p. 541).

Rejecting the narrative of complacency and diminished intellectual capabilities, Black citizens—
many of them undereducated—made a way out of no way and challenged the stories and the
structures designed to restrict advancement by Blacks. Comas-Diaz et al. (2019) explain how
people of color, including indigenous people, are impacted by incessant racial restriction.
“(They) are resilient in the face of race-based stress and have developed coping strategies across
generations to heal from trauma. That is, although the effects of traumatic stress may cross
generations, so may resilience” (p. 2).

Examining the pushback from Blacks in Haywood County and the restrictive policies
that dictated their lives reveals a perplexing dilemma. The local freedoms that many were
fighting for would still be entangled with national policies that were not progressive and did not
support racial equity. Even so, in a region where Blacks outnumbered Whites, the stakes were
higher because Black citizens could possibly turn the tide and effect change. Strategies to resist
are twofold and, as Friere (2005) explains, can be beneficial to those without power and the
power holders.

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate
themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape
by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the
oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both (p. 44).

Friere’s concept of benevolence is aspirational, but not readily embraced by those restricting access to Blacks. Typically, periods of resistance are extended because the grip on power is so strong. Gibbons (2018) explains why activism is necessary for resistance and why freedom must be negotiated by the oppressed.

To understand that this is a world dependent on the ignorance of the privileged is to understand why the oppressed must take the lead in changing this world as part of the vocation of becoming more fully human. But this is a collective process through which we come to understand that we produce our own social realities (p. 732).

Early on, Africans in this country managed to meld cultures, pass along traditions, and develop unique communicative skills that were shared through various media. Messages in hymnal lyrics and quilt designs are common examples of how directives were passed along during the era of slavery. From race music to rap music, codes have been embedded to express discontent with the Black American condition. Many of these experiences involved struggles for racial, social, and political equality, and they continue today. Resistance showed itself in various ways. Visual displays carried messages of opposition that were not always obvious. The implicit methods of communication Blacks employed were always forms of resistance. Hobson (2014) sheds light on ingenuity in activism and stresses how even “art is an effective tool in undermining dominant civic myths—not to mention the intergenerational recognition of how certain forms of communication are often kept secret and hidden from the dominant white gaze” (p. 63). Black people communicated in their own way and relayed messages through a look, gesture, paint stroke, or a series of stitches. These were forms of resistance disguised in plain sight.
The social and political gains of Black Americans have largely been legislated, never garnered as an extension of citizenship or reconciliation. Even now, the political jockeying of who should be permitted to vote threatens advancements made by decades of legislating these rights. One of the frames in an expansive snapshot of African American culture is activism. Resistance was perhaps the first action ever displayed by Africans from the moment they were dragged upon these shores, and it would become the perpetual motion of a people in a land not their own. Even in bondage, these individuals established agency and understood their value was not synonymous with property listings in plantation ledgers. Kendi (2023) underscores the legacy of resistance that is embedded in the quest for Black freedom. Activism is prompted by the belief that a move toward equity and justice can and should occur.

I just don’t know how we can create change if we don’t believe it’s possible. I come from a tradition of African Americans who were enslaved for hundreds of years but still believed the day of Jubilee would come. And it was that belief that caused them to continue to resist enslavement. To resist, whether through revolts or through running away or through not picking as much [cotton] as they could, or liberating some food, it was that resistance. But resistance is typically derived from a belief that the resistance could be successful (University of Tennessee at Martin Parker Speaker Series).

There are moments dotted along the timeline of Black life in America that indicate the power of resistance. Confronting the systems and people that held back participation and advancement within social and political spaces has long been a part of Black agency, even when it was not recognized as such by Whites.
Black Media through the Lens of Advocacy and Agency

It is important to recognize the impact of media on the messaging involved with advocacy. Black people used their intellect to construct strategies and amplify their voices in a society that was intent upon silencing them. One effective tool utilized by Black communities and activist groups was the Black press. The various communication networks connected, informed, and warned Black Americans, with these outlets serving as instruments of resistance. This section offers rhetorical examination of the role and contributions of the Black press. Events like the ones featured in this research were documented by Black journalists across the country. They provided their readers a counternarrative to the stories that were published in White-owned newspapers about Black people. Reporting the news in Black communities was not only a job, but a form of protest to the rampant injustices directed at Black people. Initially, my research was to focus on the impact media had on the study participants. Conversely, their voices taught me a different way of interpreting how a group of Black people’s identity was influenced by media. Instead, they were the influencers because their consumption and comprehension of media was overshadowed by their advocacy. They were aware of how Blacks were portrayed in White-owned media and the narratives that were rooted in keeping Blacks out of civic and educational arenas. However, the participants and other persons noted in this study found ways to cut through the injustices, which also meant utilizing Black media and Black voices. Those efforts are detailed in their narratives in chapters 3-5. This section provides historical context for how Blacks were portrayed in media—portrayals and messages that further promoted and validated the need for hegemonic systems.

The issue of media representation is even more pronounced when considering news coverage of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. It is worth mentioning to illustrate how
an agenda that focuses on racial oppression and restriction can be widely promoted through media. Negative perceptions of Blacks are supported with published reports that are deemed credible. Stories in Haywood County’s local newspaper in rural West Tennessee in the early 1900s reveal several articles with derogatory characterizations of African Americans. A section in the May 22, 1903, edition of *The States-Graphic* includes this news account: “Neal Smith, the old darky who did most of the slaughtering for our butchers, died at his home east of town last Monday evening.” Another article published one week earlier states: “Last Saturday evening, Dan McFarland, a negro wanted by police, was knocked senseless by John Jones, another bad negro. At the trial it was developed that McFarland was wanted for assaulting Scott Morris, a well known negro a week before” (Hutcherson, n.d.).

Black subjects were identified as “Negro,” a term that helped frame the story by ethnicity rather than topic. They were often characterized as criminals or having criminal tendencies and were arrested at alarming rates for the smallest infraction. News stories featuring African Americans also contained subjective descriptors like “lazy” or “lowdown.” Such framing was not evident in stories with White subjects. Instead, personal, social, and professional achievements were frequently highlighted. Two news items in the June 3, 1903, edition of *The States-Graphic* reported: “C. L. Carlton and family have moved from the Lebanon neighborhood to town, and are now occupying the Mann residence on Lafayette St. Mr. Zack Biggs, of Trenton, has been appointed cattle inspector for West Tennessee, vice, C. C. Shaw” (Hutcherson). Stories about Blacks or Black-related events took on a different tone in White-owned papers.

Hard labor and frequent lynchings were hallmarks of the South, and Blacks were subjected to them both. The topics were explicitly documented by Ida B. Wells, the Memphis-
based journalist and activist whose writings galvanized support to bring an end to the horrific crime of lynching. As B. Bond and Sherman (2003) note, Wells’s reporting centered on the killing of Blacks in the late nineteenth century, bolstered by her work at and part-ownership of the Free Speech and Headlight in Memphis, some forty miles southwest of Haywood County (p. 46). This was one of many publications that informed Blacks in the region and across the nation about the rampant racial injustices. Wells’s piercing articles also ushered in a reframing movement which shifted the lynching narrative of criminality and blame to horror and injustice. Raiford (2011) explains how the reinterpretation of lynching photographs revealed another aspect of the “southern problem” giving Blacks some agency in how the story was told.

Antilynching activists chose to tell the story in a different manner, indeed to invert and subvert the common tale of black bestiality resulting in swift white justice that culminated in, and forever echoed through, the frozen black and white still photographs … This transformation from lynching photography to ‘antilynching photography’ was realized by reframing the lynching photograph, enabling African Americans to ‘return the gaze’ of the ‘dominant other’ (p. 40).

Antilynching photography, articles, essays, pamphlets, and banners helped to bolster the work of orators. These texts represent the agency Black activists and the Black press acquired to galvanize support and force White Americans—abolitionists and racial terrorists—to see the horror through another lens. Rather than viewing lynching as a spectator event as the basis for curiosity, entertainment, or justified punishment, antilynching activists fought to uncover “whites’ criminality, both as perpetrators of lynchings and as persons responsible for crimes for which African Americans were blamed; historic and systematic white male sexual assault of
black women; anxiety about white female sexuality; and the breakdown of the justice system” (p. 48).

Logan (2008) refers to this kind of media advocacy as rhetorical education. Regarding the Black press during Wells’s publishing tenure, Logan explains that dissemination was not its sole purpose, but “journalists believed their role was to instruct readers and hearers in how to receive, interpret, and respond to that information (p. 97). Early Black newspapers encouraged Black readers to find their political voice, not only through information but oratory performance (p. 128). Logan centers the Black press as a site for promoting activism and inviting criticism, which would serve readers well when interpreting and responding to Black news accounts.

A collage illustrating racial injustice in the South would most certainly include images of West Tennessee that were captured by photographer Ernest Withers. Growing up in Haywood County, I would hear Withers’ name from time to time, and I regularly saw his credits in books and magazines. He and one of my uncles, Theodore Giles, served together in the Army and remained friends after their service. Withers is best known for documenting the turbulent years when Blacks in the South were fighting for voting and civil rights. His iconic and raw photographs of Black tenant farmers in Haywood and Fayette counties who were evicted for attempting to register to vote alerted the nation to the deplorable conditions Black citizens endured at the hands of power-wielding Whites. Withers captured families forced to live in army tents in the middle of fields in the dead of winter. Tent City was a landscape consisting of stovepipes from woodburning stoves protruding through canvas roofs, children sleeping on beds made of stacked cardboard boxes, and people standing on dirt floors among all their possessions. More information about Tent City is included in chapter 4. I used one of Withers’ images in a news story years ago depicting a jubilant Black woman in Fayette County proudly showing off
her hard-won voter registration card. (The story profiles Dr. Paul A. Thomas, a civil rights worker from Ohio who lived with my family in 1965. His work in Haywood County is referenced later in this study.) Her reward represented triumph in the midst of oppressive conditions. Another evicted woman with a husband and six children in Fayette County stated to a reporter for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) newsletter that she registered to vote because “I had been stomped on so long until I was ready to do anything to get out of it” (King, 1961). Raiford notes that articles and photographs illustrating injustice and Black life in the South “offered a watching world a microcosm of the whole race, class, and gender ideologies and practices, past and present; and a glimpse of that which could not be understood as finished or complete, a glance at a process and a promise of an alternative future” (p. 79).

Electronic media assisted in producing and disseminating transformative information as well. In radio, there is one station that unequivocally influenced the way Blacks in West Tennessee saw themselves and how others saw them. Jenkins (2006) positions WDIA as the social and cultural voice of Black Memphians during the Jim Crow era (p. 266). Having the distinction as the country’s first Black-oriented radio station, WDIA appealed to its audiences using innovative grassroots strategies. Its emergence onto the broadcast scene could not have come at a better time, as it coincided with the racial turmoil boiling over in many American cities in the 1940s and 1950s (p. 255). The innovative community programming, promotion of Black entertainers, and charismatic announcers turned this once-failing station catering to white listeners into a cultural powerhouse, earning WDIA the moniker “The Mother Station of Negroes” (p. 256).
Even with its dominant appeal to Black listeners, the control of the station’s White owners was evident in some of the programs and fundraisers it promoted. Green (2007) contends that many likened some of the station’s strategies to Jim Crow policies, like supporting separate medical services for Blacks and announcing work ads for menial occupations that specifically targeted Black job seekers (p. 179). These types of station programs did not portray Blacks in the best light, particularly at a time when Black Americans’ civil rights were being challenged.

In some ways, WDIA DJs’ dual identities as on-air personalities and ordinary black Memphians placed them at the heart of these paradoxes of post-war black-oriented radio in Memphis … WDIA put together an amazing lineup of entertainers and educators to serve as Memphis’ first African American DJs, who encouraged race pride and critical thought while forging new directions for popular culture (p. 180).

WDIA gained the trust of its listeners and helped usher the city into calmness and advocacy when needed. Some of the participants in this study recount how WDIA announcers introduced them to entertainment and a social and political awareness that resonated with their sensibilities. This is the station people turned to during racial disharmony and to celebrate blackness. The station’s representation of Black Americans and its rapport with Black Memphians created an unprecedented community relationship and established a blueprint for urban radio. As noted by Jenkins, WDIA “played a critical role in laying the foundations of the freedom struggle, helping African Americans articulate issues concerning racial identity and consciousness” (p. 254). The connection Black listeners had with the radio station went beyond entertainment. WDIA was a space that nurtured a generation into another phase of advocacy in Memphis.
The power of media is evinced by gatekeeping and distribution mechanisms that are in the hands of groups in power. Those influences can distort and erase the narratives of underrepresented groups. Traditional mainstream media outlets have a long history of dismissing stories that are not prioritized by White audiences. Well into the twentieth century, racial violence and segregated systems continued to be embedded into Southern life and was the bane of Black Americans’ existence before and after Reconstruction. White writers and journalists discounted the importance of documenting and reporting the injustice inflicted on Blacks even as lynchings and other acts of brutality were rampant, particularly in southern states. Editorial and news content were driven by White ownership and Black citizens played essentially no role in deciding the story or how it would be told in those publications.

Even scholarly articles echoed the racial and social structures that were in place during the Jim Crow era. This excerpt from a 1938 article on the act of lynching published in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* details the responsibility of newspaper editors in reporting these acts. The author states that “newspapers and Southern society accept lynching as justifiable homicide in defense of society” and that the lynchers’ motives were to be praised (p. 78).

This peace and friendship, based on a recognition of and respect for a caste system, is the basis of good race relations. Negroes, undisturbed in the philosophical acceptance of their "present capacity" in a white society, go along unharmed and un lynched. Sometimes Negroes forget their status, even to the point where they think they can defend their property against greedy white neighbors. Then they are liable to sudden death (p. 81). This journal article was published two years before Elbert Williams was lynched and is an example of the racial environment in which two participants in my research would have lived. During the Jim Crow era, Black reporters were motivated to cover stories White reporters and
publishers ignored. Notably, reporter Ethel Payne of *The Chicago Defender* was guided by the concerns of African Americans and their welfare. Morris (2015) documents her journalistic journey revealing her relationship with Black audiences and how she was able to provide context for unfamiliar or complex topics for readers. Payne’s approach for covering stories went beyond documenting an event. She believed her reporting was part of a personal mission to inform Black readers about issues that could affect their current station in life, positively or negatively.

The line between journalism and advocacy blurred. Looking back years later, Payne offered an explanation. ‘If you have lived through the black experience in this country, you feel that every day you’re assaulted by the system itself,’ she said. ‘You are either acquiescent and you go along with the system, which I think is wrong, or else you just rebel, and you kick against it … That was just my feeling that somebody had to do the fighting, somebody had to speak up. So I saw myself as an advocate as much as being a newspaper person’ (p. 149).

Advocacy showed itself in many unconventional ways and was more clearly evinced in Black publications. A literal underground railroad operation executed by Pullman porters helped form an intricate news distribution system for Black southerners during the first half of the twentieth century. The International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids was a tenet of the work being carried out for racial justice. Smith (2005) notes that “as a black organization, not just a union, the Brotherhood was an important early component of the civil rights movement. Porters distributed the *Chicago Defender* after that black newspaper was banned from mail distribution in many southern states” (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters). This unconventional newspaper delivery system gave Southerners insight about work opportunities in northern cities and dangers that threatened their way of life at home. Gibson (2022) explained how the porters
would sneak copies of *The Chicago Defender* onboard and “drop them off at barber and beauty shops so they could be distributed to Black southerners” (*The Chicago Defender*).

In addition to other community networks in churches, civic groups, and social organizations, Black southerners gained knowledge about the changing social and political landscapes through the Black press. Black citizens found ways to be informed despite local White-owned media’s efforts to suppress and reframe events related to Black life and to violence inflicted on Black citizens by Whites. The intended effect by those in power was ineffective in terms of suppressing Black identity and agency. Blacks did not just blindly consume the news produced by White-owned media outlets; they instinctively investigated other sources and methods for information and inspiration for who they wanted to be.

In order to have engagement and support within a safe space, Black individuals needed places of their own to discuss and strategize next steps outside of the gaze of Whites. This is why Black churches, lodges, businesses, and restaurants were sites where Blacks could gather and freely speak. Squires (2002) describes these kinds of locales as enclaves and considers them counterpublics when they are central to devising plans to confront unjust systems and policies.

The enclave is signified by the utilization of spaces and discourses that are hidden from the view of the dominant public and the state. These clandestine places and communications are dedicated to Black interests and needs. Thus, the creation of discourses and media by and for Blacks dominate the enclave response … Maintaining separate, safe spaces for blacks to meet and speak was an arduous task, but a necessary one for the development of Black protest and ideologies of self-determination. Black organizations provide places to work out issues and problems outside the view of
potentially hostile publics and can be a source of history, pride, or community connections (pp. 458-459).

Throughout this study, participants mention various places within the public sphere that Blacks repurposed during the Civil Rights Movement. Blacks devised their own form of social media in terms of coming together, crafting a message, and disseminating it to the intended audience.

**Deconstructing Haywood County, Tennessee**

Haywood County, Tennessee, is a predominantly Black rural area about 40 miles northeast of Memphis, primarily known for its agricultural production and being the home of music icon Tina Turner and blues legend Sleepy John Estes. Farming is still an economic driver in the area with cotton, corn, and soybeans leading the way in agricultural production. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, African Americans represent 50.6% of the county’s population of 17,864 (QuickFacts: Haywood County, Tennessee, n.d.). Haywood County and Shelby County are the only two counties in Tennessee where Blacks make up the majority of residents (Schaeffer, 2019). In 2014, the city of Brownsville—also the county seat—elected its first Black mayor in the town’s history, with William Rawls, Jr. garnering 65% of the vote (Chandler, 2014). Despite this achievement, social and political structures in Haywood County today do not reflect parity in terms of racial and economic markers. Carter (2007) explains the dynamics of power and how precarious majority status can be. “The group in power determines what values, behaviors, and beliefs are considered to be proper. In this way, they determine when and if a group or its members fail to meet the standards of good character or appropriate behavior” (p. 21). This kind of power structure is repeated in different spaces, making it difficult for underrepresented groups to advance. The racial demographics of Haywood County can be described as the cause and effect of the power imbalance. The simple fact that Black citizens
outnumber White citizens has stymied the democratic process and is the common thread running through the three events outlined in this study.

This income-strapped, rural area is now positioned for a major economic and cultural shift with the arrival of Ford Motor Company’s electric vehicle and battery facilities in Stanton, my hometown. The manufacturing enclave is known as Blue Oval City and its presence will undoubtedly change the social and political environment of this predominantly Black town. Already, some Black landowners are feeling the tension from fighting to keep ancestral property that the State has designated as eminent domain (Wadhwani, 2023). The eras in which the three historical events in this study occurred are lightyears away from the technological and economic developments underway in Haywood County now. However, some racial inequities related to economics, education, and healthcare remain.

Case Study Overview

This research is guided by separate interviews I conducted with the participants who are current or former residents of Haywood County. The interview questions allowed respondents to elaborate on media and its contributions to racial identity—then and now—thereby, providing a qualitative framework for explicating my research questions. I incorporate these oral narratives to gain insight into how media and sociopolitical structures informed their sense of racial and personal identity.

One of the events I examine predates the American civil rights era while two serve as markers during the struggle for equality, bearing witness to societal and racial shifts within a rural Black area in West Tennessee. Collective memory contributes to interpretations of how these historical occurrences impacted African Americans in terms of racial identity and in the pursuit of social and political equity.
The news event that would come to define the pervasiveness of White power in Haywood County and its control over Black bodies is the lynching of Elbert Williams. His murder also underscores the muting of a community through fear tactics that would continue for more than half a century. Many persons born after Williams’ lynching in 1940 had essentially no knowledge of this local horror until the city of Brownsville commemorated his life in 2015. The activism of local residents to secure voting rights would result in a federal lawsuit that paved the way for national legislation. The persistence and courage of Black citizens in this region broke through another social blockade—segregated public schools.

I incorporate the voices of six current and former residents in this study to stress the impact and influence concerning social structures and restriction. My study includes 4 female subjects and 2 male subjects ranging in age from 73 to 96. Three participants live in Tennessee (two live in Brownsville—the county seat of Haywood County), and three reside in Maryland, New York, and North Carolina. The following chart provides a brief overview of the events and people associated with this study.

**Case Study Events and Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Event</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elbert Williams lynching</td>
<td>Mildred B. Roxborough</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbert Williams lynching</td>
<td>Cynthia R. Bond</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Brownsville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting rights lawsuit</td>
<td>Dorothy Granberry</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Frederick, MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting rights lawsuit</td>
<td>John Ashworth</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Brownsville, TN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School desegregation</td>
<td>Francine G. Madrey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Pfafftown, NC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School desegregation</td>
<td>Samuel Sanderlin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Mt. Juliet, TN</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Biographical Information and Association to Event

- The lynching of Elbert Williams in 1940 after his attempt to recruit members to join the Haywood County branch of the NAACP
  - Mildred Bond Roxborough: African American female; born in 1926; parents served as officers with Elbert Williams in the local NAACP branch; civil rights advocate and consultant; longest serving staff member in the national office of the NAACP; 14 years old when Elbert Williams was lynched
  - Cynthia Rawls Bond: African American female; born in 1934; neighbor of Elbert Williams; father was the local Black mortician summoned by the sheriff to retrieve Williams’ body from the Hatchie River in Brownsville and instructed to bury immediately; 6 years old when Elbert Williams was lynched; retired business owner and executive; longtime Brownsville resident and NAACP officer

- The U.S. Department of Justice’s lawsuit against the local Democratic Party in 1959 on behalf of Black residents of Haywood and Fayette counties to obtain the right to vote
  (This was the first voting rights lawsuit in the nation and paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.)
  - Dorothy Granberry: African American female; born in 1943; former resident; author; retired university professor and social psychologist; 16 years old when federal lawsuit for voting rights was filed
  - John Ashworth: African American male; born in 1943, former commercial airline manager, Vietnam veteran; social justice advocate; 16 years old when federal lawsuit for voting rights was filed
School desegregation efforts in Haywood County, including a federal lawsuit, from 1965-1970 and its impact on Black students, their educational experience, and their understanding of racial identity

- Francine G. Madrey: African American female; born in 1949; former resident; retired university administrator and professor; among first group of students to integrate the White high school in Haywood County; graduated as one of the Top 10 students in 1966; 16 years old when enrolled at Haywood High School

- Samuel Sanderlin: African American male; born in 1948; former resident; retired long-haul driver; among first group of students to integrate the White high school in Haywood County; 17 years old when enrolled at Haywood High School

The interviews with the six participants took place between July and September 2022 and were recorded. Due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each lasted longer than one hour, with one lasting more than two and a half hours. One participant did not have a camera installed on her computer but used the Zoom call-in number and passcode to access the call. To better understand their engagement with media, I asked a series of questions to gain a sense of their experiences growing up in Haywood County, how they came to know about specific events, and how mediated characterizations of Blacks impacted their comprehension of blackness. From those interviews emerged themes that highlighted strategies for rejecting hegemonic restrictions placed upon them. Five participants were born in Haywood County between 1926 and 1949; one participant moved to Brownsville as a teenager in 1956. Two respondents reside in Brownsville now. These individuals were alive at the time of the event(s) for which they were interviewed and provide firsthand accounts of their connection to the historic events and the cultural/racial landscape of Haywood County during that period of
time. Hearing their lived experiences provides context for understanding the dynamics of race, power, and place.

**Methodology**

This study examines the oral narratives of six individuals whose lived experiences provide insight into the personal and group strategies that were employed to resist racial oppression in Haywood County, Tennessee, during a 25-year period beginning in 1940. My study utilizes two primary methodologies to understand how Black citizens navigated the restrictive confines of life dictated by white supremacy. The sample of six participants and their connection to three historical events in Haywood County form a basis for seeing how they viewed themselves and how they constructed Black agency in the midst of racial intimidation and terror. The mixed methods utilized include qualitative case study and rhetorical analysis. My study is built upon personal narratives collected from in-depth interviews with the six participants.

The latitude that qualitative research permits is an attribute that appeals to me. I am able to probe the issue and bring forth perspectives from individuals who know the stories and who are the stories. This methodology is intrinsic and reveals more than quantifiable data. My relationship with media underscores common themes with qualitative research. There is an acute yearning to know more, to ask more. In light of this, there must be a willingness to adapt to a changing narrative and not be chained to an original theoretical approach. This is evinced by my subsequent shift to incorporate themes of restriction and resistance in this study based on the participants’ responses. The researcher’s mission should be to present perspectives, not validate one’s own. I am trained to identify insightful sources, pore through research, and conduct thorough interviews as part of the process for producing informative and engaging media
projects. These are skills that transfer seamlessly to academic research and tend to fit quite well within the qualitative realm.

I am a storyteller and my fascination with African American culture and racial injustice is at the forefront of my research interests. I examine how mediated historical events impacted African Americans in Haywood County, Tennessee. Collecting oral histories from current and former residents of this West Tennessee area brings perspective to how their participation in specific events contributed to shaping their identity as African Americans. Some interview excerpts and cited material in this study contain racially descriptive language. I chose to use the writers’ and participants’ words to bring historical context to the topic and to authentically convey their written and oral narratives.

I utilize the case study approach throughout interviews conducted with individuals with knowledge of or participation in the historical events being examined. The events include the lynching of Elbert Williams, the federal lawsuit for voting rights filed on behalf of Black Haywood County citizens, and the desegregation of public schools in the county. Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a real-life, contemporary bounded case, or cases, over a period of time through in-depth data collection (Creswell & Poth, p. 97). Stewart (2014) characterizes case study as the “ubiquitous component of qualitative research” because of its range of utility across various disciplines (p. 145). She asserts that most qualitative studies are case studies, which are “an exploratory form of inquiry, providing an in-depth picture of the unit of study, which can be a person, group, organization or social situation” (p. 145). The case study research approach was most effective in centering the participants’ voices to better understand the racial environment and hegemonic systems that restricted Black agency at the time. As I explored the impact of media on their lives, other components of Black
identity and resiliency presented themselves. These prominent themes revealed how Black citizens in Haywood County confronted social and political restrictions and formulated ways to improve their situations despite punitive ramifications. The next section outlines how I selected participants and implemented the research design for this case study utilizing reflexive analysis.

Research Design

A few weeks prior to conducting the interviews, I developed a list of current and former residents of Haywood County with knowledge of the three local news events. These are individuals I have known for several years and was familiar with their connection to the community and the news events in my study. Originally, I had identified six events to include in my study but later shortened my list to focus on three events. This would allow a more manageable exploration into life experiences and media consumption among participants. Centering my study on three events led me to identify six persons (two for each event) as part of my research design. These individuals would need to have lived in Haywood County, Tennessee, at the time of one of the events. Having knowledge of these individuals’ connection to the area and their connection to some of the events in my study, I compiled a list of current and former residents. I then matched the persons to the historical events they would likely be able to discuss.

In my foundational work, I had developed research questions that supported my inquiry into possible correlations between media and the making of racial identity among Black residents. However, after recognizing similar themes during the interviews and particularly after reviewing transcripts, I followed the narratives and shifted the framework of my study. Their relationship to media would still be present, but it was not a central component of the study as originally intended. Even without asking specifically about restriction and resistance, these two themes symbolic of the power dynamics during the Jim Crow era made their way to the forefront.
After developing a list of potential study participants, I began the institutional review board (IRB) process at the University of Memphis. Approximately four weeks later, I received IRB confirmation that my research proposal was exempt from human subject research requirements. After this determination, I proceeded with my study and contacted five subjects by phone to inform them of my research intentions and to request their participation. The sixth subject lives out of state and was contacted through a relative of hers. I chose this contact method because I believed the relative could more easily connect me with the subject as opposed to the subject receiving an impromptu call from me. I know the subject, but not as well as the other subjects, and I had not seen her since 2015. Because of upcoming travel commitments and some apprehension due to health challenges, she could not commit, but wanted to think about my request.

Upon calling the other five subjects, I informed each of them of my doctoral research and my desire to include them in my study to understand earlier attitudes toward media and their connection to racial identity. I then described the three historical events I had selected as part of my research and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed to discuss their knowledge about certain events. The news stories I selected included the Elbert Williams lynching, the voting rights lawsuit filed on behalf of local Black citizens, and school integration efforts in Haywood County. Because of the 25-year time span among the events, some subjects’ knowledge about all three events would be limited, however, one subject would be able to speak about them all. My familiarity with the subjects permitted me to determine which events they could most likely share information. Additionally, each subject confirmed their involvement with or knowledge of each historic event during our phone conversations. One subject said he had not
thought about the events surrounding school desegregation in years because it was a painful experience. He also wondered how valuable his story would be to my research.

I inquired about each person’s comfort level in recalling events and sharing information in an interview setting. I asked if they had reliable internet access and some knowledge of utilizing Zoom or the ability to enlist the help of someone who did. I told them the interviews would be conducted on Zoom and recorded for clarity and accuracy. One participant had never used Zoom, nor was there anyone living in the home to assist him. I offered to conduct a practice Zoom session with him one week prior to the scheduled call so he would be familiar with the process. At the time of our practice session, he had enlisted the help of his sister and was able to successfully connect. I informed each person that the interview would last at least one hour and asked if they could devote that amount of time to my study. I assured them the interview would be scheduled at a time that was convenient for them. Each participant was told there was no monetary or otherwise tangible benefit to participating in this study and their participation was completely voluntary. Participants were emailed the designated Zoom link one week before the interview. They were also reminded that the interviews would be recorded.

About six weeks after the initial calls to subjects, I was informed of the sixth subject’s decision to participate in the research. I confirmed her decision via email and she provided me with date and time options. In my correspondence, I explained the purpose of my research and outlined the parameters of the interview as I had done with the others. As the oldest participant in the study, her interview would provide a greater span of lived experiences and more diverse examples of media engagement.

As part of my study, I developed a list of 20 interview questions that aligned with my three major research questions (see Appendix B). Participants were not given the questions
beforehand because I wanted their responses to be authentic and unrehearsed. They were provided with the general scope of the research regarding their relationship with media and their memories related to events between 1940 and 1965 in Haywood County. The participants were interviewed separately at the time they selected. At the start of the Zoom session, I informed each participant that the interview would be recorded and asked for permission to use his/her name in my research as a courtesy. In many instances, confidentiality restrictions would be applied to interviews collected for research. However, my participant interviews were designated as oral histories by the University of Memphis’ institutional review board (IRB) and were exempt from guidelines guaranteeing participant anonymity.

**Data Collection**

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded; the primary equipment included two internet-connected computers. I used the Zoom account assigned to me through the university where I am employed and conducted the interviews in my home. The first computer served as the main device to connect the researcher and the participant on Zoom. The second computer was used as a backup device to capture and record the interview. One computer recorded the interview to the computer; the other recorded the interview to a secure cloud-based server. I also used a digital audio recorder for each interview, thereby utilizing three electronic devices to conduct and record the interviews.

Once the participant logged on to Zoom, I checked the computer’s audio level and the positioning of their camera. When the participant was situated and comfortable, I began recording and read the consent disclaimer to make sure the participant understood the focus of my research and consented to being interviewed and recorded. I also informed the participant of the flexibility to choose to not answer a question.
Being careful not to prime the subjects, I provided a brief outline of my research during the consent disclaimer, which included my intention of examining their relationship with media and their knowledge of some local historical events. I read this disclaimer at the beginning of each scheduled interview. While this was not an exhaustive compilation of events during the 25-year period, it provided some range of the types of events that were significant to the social, political, and educational advancement of local Black residents. I developed questions that would prompt spontaneous responses culled from lived experiences associated with the various events.

A major component of this study lies in the collection of oral histories from participants. This information produces additional knowledge related to media influence on identity construction among a small group of African Americans. Their lived experiences which are related to historical events will bring insight to the impact media portrayals of African Americans may have on how they think of themselves. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe knowledge derived from interviews in explicit terms to emphasize their value to research.

We presented interview knowledge as something produced, constructed in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee; relational, arising through concrete human relations; conversational, arrived through questions, answers, and descriptions; contextual, with the meanings more or less tied to specific contexts; linguistic, carried in the medium of spoken and later written language; narrative, disclosing the storied nature of the lived human world; and pragmatic, ultimately deriving its legitimacy from enabling us to cope with the social world in which we find ourselves (pp. 342-343).

The interviews I collected from the six participants satisfy Brinkmann and Kvale’s requirements associated with knowledge attainment on a particular topic. Knowledge that is produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic frame the
epistemological approach in interviewing. The role of the interviewer helps bring balance to the research process. They also note the interactivity necessary for effective interviews and how they “are not simply practices of observing the other and listening to her stories but processes of meaning construction with the interviewer appearing more as a participant than a spectator” (p. 112).

One of the aims of this study is to enhance its readability to diverse audiences. Incorporating the voice of participants and their descriptions of lived experiences is how readers can grasp the social, racial, and historical contexts evident in the narratives. Brinkmann and Kvale posit that qualitative research presented through interviews can follow a journalistic process and help participants convey their stories clearly (p. 318). The question and response structure should show that “contextualization and interpretation can be built into the conversation, with both journalist and interviewee more or less having the intended audience in mind” (p. 318). My questions led to narratives that revealed how participants were impacted by hegemonic structures and the framing of Black-related news content. Reflexive analysis assists in adding contextual meaning to the participants’ responses.

During the interviews, individuals were asked about the historical events to initiate the process of recalling information related to their knowledge of the events and how they learned about each one. Based on Haywood County’s small community setting, I anticipated the inclusion of interpersonal or group communication accounts (word of mouth or community gatherings) to explain how participants may have learned about events. These interviews would help determine if news reports of these events helped give meaning to residents’ understanding of blackness. Participants’ recollections could also reveal how relevant these mediated events were in shaping their identity as Black Americans living in a rural Southern area. While
describing the different historical events, participants invariably shared information about how they constructed alternative ways of being and bypassed the restrictions that were in place for Black citizens.

Reyes (2010) points to how drawing on past experiences and decoding public memory construct a broader view of identity. Public memory interacts with “the practices of remembrance” and acts as puzzle pieces in forming the larger scope of identity (p. 2). “Academics analyze mnemonic practices to comprehend the influence of remembrance on identity. In this sense, the scholar acts as *bricoleur*, building from the fragments of public memory a basis for understanding the role of remembrance in identity formation” (p. 2). Hendrix (2020) notes that researchers must be open to becoming a bricoleur, or a “jack of all trades,” to assess and shape the data, even if it means creating new tools to complete the research (Lecture notes). The data should speak and inform the researcher on the story that is revealed. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the methodology for qualitative research is characterized as inductive, meaning the logic is followed “from the ground up, rather than handed down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of the inquirer,” as was the case in this study (p. 21). The participants’ responses introduced a different way of interpreting their experiences that were associated with the historical events. Their accounts did not center as much on racial identity formed by media, but rather their actions and reactions related to oppressive laws dictating their lives. Davis (2016) notes the importance of oral histories in reclaiming cultural relevance and reshaping narratives. They are also pieces of the puzzle in constructing African American identity and agency.

Biographical narratives are productive means of building cultural syncretism and hold a position of priority among the narrative traditions of African Americans … The social
impact of these stories is of great import to a number of constituencies, with their tropes of triumph over adversity serving as a mobilizing device for both black and white interlocutors, as well as a mode of selfhood and identification for the former (pp. 126-127).

By selecting individuals whose life experiences intercepted with the historical events selected for this study, their stories offer context to place and society which factor into how Black residents were perceived by controlling groups. These narratives also help the researcher understand how the participants perceived themselves as African Americans living in a predominantly Black, disenfranchised, and racially oppressed region in the South.

Participants shared memories of news items related to the three historic events and expressed general knowledge of how they were informed or whether they remembered if the stories were reported in media. In essence, I explored how some members of one Black community saw themselves represented in media and whether those representations contributed to their construction of racial identity and uplift. Their accounts of identity and uplift held the essence of the primary themes of resistance. Through those narratives, I was able to draw upon the participants’ construction of counternarratives that helped them forge a way through the restrictions.

Each interview lasted between an hour and a half to approximately two hours and 45 minutes. All interviews lasted longer than anticipated; participants were very insightful and detailed in their answers regarding race and media. The Roxborough interview was the longest. She is the subject who had scheduling conflicts and some hesitancy about participating yet ended up sharing numerous stories about events in Haywood County in her youth and her family’s advocacy work. Roxborough’s lifelong involvement with civil rights and knowing Elbert
Williams when she was a teenager in Brownsville give her a unique perspective on key elements of my research. She proudly informed me that she still works as a consultant for the NAACP’s national office in New York City.

In addition to using the videoconferencing application Zoom and recording the interviews on multiple devices, I uploaded the interview media files to YouTube Studio as another back-up location and for access to editing and sharing capabilities. The file setting was set for private sharing and only the transcriber was provided access to the files. I enlisted the assistance of my sister, Edith Giles White, to transcribe the interviews because of her familiarity with five of the participants, the topics, and the region. She utilized a computer-based voice-to-text dictation application that created a Word document containing the interview transcription. White reviewed the transcripts and made corrections, as the computer-generated transcriptions contained some errors. She highlighted some phrases that she could not interpret. I reviewed the transcriptions, made additional corrections, and used the documents to identify common themes in participants’ responses. To assist with the coding process, White put my questions and comments in boldface type so I could easily identify participants’ responses.

When I initiated my research topic, the plan was to conduct in-person interviews with participants. However, social and public health limitations related to COVID-19 forced me to consider alternative methodological approaches. Conducting interviews virtually ensured safety for the researcher and participants and satisfies health protocols for eliminating exposure to COVID. While I was not physically in the same space as participants, Zoom permitted me to effectively collect information for my research. Videoconferencing shifts the literal meaning of fieldwork in a qualitative context, but as Howlett (2021) explains, “digital methods can support similar ethnographic research by encouraging co-presence with our participants and by helping
us embed ourselves in our research sites from afar. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought much uncertainty for academia, it has evidently also challenged, and will continue to challenge, previously held notions about fieldwork” (p. 5). Additional research by Gray et al. (2020) found that the quality of face-to-face interviews does not differ from that of interviews conducted virtually and that the rapport between participants and researchers is not negatively impacted (p. 1294).

Other benefits of utilizing Zoom, according to Gray et al., include the researcher’s ability “to observe participant’s non-verbal communication and where the participant chooses to be during their interview, which may provide the interviewer with a glimpse into the participant’s life, while also considering their budget, convenience and personal health and safety” (p. 1297). Participants did not need to travel to another location or prepare for a home visit to take part in the interviews. Given the advanced ages of some participants, meeting virtually eliminated the spread of illness among all parties. Videoconferencing with older persons could also present concerns about technology adoption, however, there were no major issues with participants’ abilities that prevented them from connecting via Zoom. One participant’s computer was not equipped with a camera, so she connected to the call using a Zoom conference number and passcode. I was able to conduct the interview and record it in the same manner as the others.

Prior to 2020, incorporating videoconferencing into research would not have been an immediate consideration. However, with global shutdowns occurring in most sectors, Zoom and similar applications became primary channels for communicating in real time among various groups.

**Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were further analyzed by the researcher to identify common themes in descriptions of events, racial connotations, emotions, media
consumption, and interpretations of news content. My analysis was guided by three areas of research interest which concentrated on Black media texts in the local newspaper, the paper’s relevance to Black residents for acquiring information, and the impact local and national media had on Black residents’ sense of racial identity. The interview questions prompted the participants to express their thoughts related to the three historical events and their relationship with media. The order in which I asked some questions depended on responses. If a response correlated with a future question or topic, I moved to that question and resumed my previous order of questions. This occurred quite often, as respondents’ references to media consumption, events, and life experiences frequently intersected.

To implement methodological rigor, I reviewed the recorded Zoom interviews and transcripts to develop thematic bracketing of the narratives of lived experiences by participants. Examination of field notes and video footage of the interviews helped reduce ambiguity. Having knowledge about the geographical area and the topic assisted in deconstructing the responses. Brinkmann and Kvale outline steps for analyzing interviews, which include focusing on meaning (coding, condensation, and interpretation) and focusing on language (linguistics, conversation, narrative, discourse, and deconstruction) (p. 223).

My findings are presented in a narrative format and grouped by the event and topics for each respondent. Stewart (2014) references Clifford Geertz’s thick description method “which involves the use of many quotes from interviewees or field notes to allow the study to ‘speak for itself.’ This approach is more narrative in style, and may read like a story” (p. 155). Organizing responses by common keywords and phrases resulted in a more seamless presentation of various perspectives. My decision to give participants a platform to recall events and fully express themselves resulted in longer stories. These are their words and the narratives ground my
research by including firsthand experiences that relate to the events and overarching themes of restriction and resistance. Creswell and Poth (2018) note important standards for further evaluating narratives in case study. They include focusing on an individual or multiple persons; collecting stories about a particular issue; developing a chronology to connect different aspects of the story; identifying themes within the stories and including descriptions of how the speaker tells the story; and incorporating reflexive thought from the researcher (p. 270).

During the interviews, I noted common words and phrases that were mentioned by participants which gave me an idea of their importance to this study. Data as evidenced by heavy repetition were coded appropriately and given closer examination. Coding characterizations included highlighting responses that were relevant to the study and adding highlighted keywords in a different color to the section. This allowed me to more easily identify comments in the transcripts for later review. Keywords like Ebony, Jet, The States-Graphic, Elbert Williams, lynch/lynching, vote/voter, register/registration, identity, representation, and desegregation/integration are some of the more frequently used terms or references noted among participants.

I also used coding techniques to indicate narrative examples of White hegemonic restriction and Black sociopolitical resistance. Various actions and displays of activism by Blacks in segregated Haywood County emphasized their agency in challenging racial inequities. I provide a closer look at some examples later in this study.

My background in media assisted in my engagement with participants from contacting them initially, preparing them for the interview, to conducting interviews with each of them. The interviews were relaxed and conversational which allowed participants to comfortably discuss the issues and share information about events from a different era. Memory associated with the
events occasionally produced emotional responses that could be defined as determined and, at times, cathartic. Some participants inferred they had not thought about or discussed their connections to the specific events in decades, as they had chosen not to share details about painful or humiliating moments related to a segregated society’s response to their blackness.

While there is familiarity with the selected events and the interview subjects, I was able to maintain my boundaries as a researcher by not allowing personal relationships to limit my method of inquiry. I am a storyteller by profession and my interest in African American culture and racial inequity drives my research interest. Collecting oral histories from current and former residents of Haywood County, Tennessee, brings perspective to how their knowledge of and participation in specific events contributed to shaping their identity as African Americans.

The qualitative approach provides a foundation to examine a topic and bring greater perspective. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) refer to qualitative research as a visible and transformative activity that situates the researcher in a state of examination to help better understand an issue (p. 10). More precisely, Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that “qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 7). A more abstract description is given by Devers and Frankel (2000) presenting it as a “rough sketch” that is filled in by elements of the research design (p. 264). Characteristics and experiences of the subjects can outline the topic of inquiry, but “the researcher must make the design more concrete by developing a sampling frame (i.e. criteria for selecting sites and/or subjects) capable of answering the research question(s), identifying specific sites and/or subjects, and securing their participation in the study” (p. 264).
As previously noted, prominent themes of restriction and resistance were present in the narratives of the six participants. Collectively, the texts led me to explore their responses to a local lynching that was meant to quash Black activism, suppressed Black voting rights, and segregated public schools. Participants were asked about media coverage related to the events, their memories of Black media representation at the time of the events, and media’s impact on constructing identity as Black individuals. They comprehended White media’s depictions of Blacks, but those perceptions were not internalized. This rejection of false narratives fueled the resistant position many Black citizens in Haywood County assumed. Their stories were organic and revealed common elements that prompted me to address responses that went beyond media consumption and impact. As a researcher, I had to be willing to go where the narratives took me.

Throughout this study, I have incorporated information describing the barriers many Black Americans faced as they built lives and raised families, specifically those living in segregated regions of the country. They used unconventional strategies to enact change, stay informed, and support others within their network. The next three chapters detail some of the recollections of the participants and highlight the dangerous work and circumstances they and other Blacks in Haywood County endured to resist the restrictions enforced on them. The following events and narratives shed light on their lived experiences as they navigated the social, economic, and political environments in Haywood County during the Jim Crow era.
Chapter 3: The Lynching of Elbert Williams - 1940

One of the most notorious mysteries of Haywood County, Tennessee, is actually no mystery at all. The word mystery connotes not knowing and an inability to solve a problem. The 1940 death of Elbert Williams, however, satisfies both definitions. He was a young man who worked to support his family and was a civic-minded officer in the burgeoning Haywood County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Williams’ recruitment efforts came under the scrutiny of White power players intent on maintaining this system of apartheid. His abduction and murder one summer night created a muteness among Black citizens causing future generations to have essentially no knowledge of his life or state-sanctioned lynching. Since local law enforcement was involved in Williams’ abduction from his home, the prosecution of White officers for his death during the Jim Crow era was an impossibility. This type of assault on Black bodies was a common occurrence and was effective in dissuading Blacks from pursuing an equitable place in society. Despite the area’s racial ethnic make-up, power was a fleeting concept for Black citizens. This paradox would fuel the mystery of a 31-year-old martyr well into the 21st century.

In this chapter, I will examine the context of the Elbert Williams lynching and the media coverage it received in 1940. I will introduce the two interview subjects who provide personal insight into the event and the sociopolitical setting of Haywood County at that time. A closer, more textured look at how Elbert Williams is remembered will be presented through my reflections of attending a memorial event 75 years after his killing. I will also offer rhetorical analysis of the interviews and discuss major themes derived from their narratives.
Historical Context of the Event and Media Coverage

The events prior to the lynching of Elbert Williams could be summarized as a calculated series of racially motivated attacks on members of the local chapter of the NAACP. The week leading up to June 20, 1940, was filled with abductions and intimidation, causing some members to go into hiding to escape White mobs. Couto (1993) describes how Tip Hunter, a Brownsville sheriff, and a band of other officers, businessmen, and townspeople, had gone into the homes of Jack Adams and Elisha Davis in search of civil rights workers attempting to encourage Black residents to vote and kidnapped the men (p. 135). After taking the men to a riverbank outside of town, the mob of 50 to 60 White men threatened and interrogated the two Black men. Davis was able to convince the gang that Adams was not involved with the NAACP’s efforts and he was released. However, Davis recognized some of the mob and stood up for the work he and the organization were undertaking. As Couto (1993) notes, a few of the men relented because of Davis’s character and reputation, and released him but “promised that if he ever came back to the county he would be killed” (p. 136). Davis was in hiding for several weeks, an absence that prompted his brother Casher Davis to also go into hiding. Word quickly spread that NAACP members were the targets of a police-led violent mob. The window of safety for Elbert Williams was quickly closing.

Five days after the abduction of Elisha Davis, the mob formed again and took two more victims, Thomas Davis, Elisha’s brother, and Elbert Williams. On Thursday night, 20 June, at approximately 9:30 P.M., Tip Hunter, Ed Lee, Casher’s employer; and Milton Osburn came to the home of Thomas Davis and began inquiring about NAACP activities. The three men took Davis with them in their car and drove to the home of Elbert Williams (p. 143).
From there, Williams, wearing pajama pants and no shoes, would be abducted by the mob in front of his wife Annie. The couple was preparing for bed when the sheriff and his posse went in, grabbed him, and forced Williams into a waiting vehicle. That would be the last time Annie Williams would see her husband alive. Thomas Davis was released a few hours later and managed to get past a mob assembled outside the jail. Three days after Williams was abducted, his wife received word about him from Al Rawls, the local Black mortician (p. 144). Rawls is the father of Cynthia Rawls Bond, a participant in this research. He asked Annie Williams to come to the Hatchie River, a few miles from town. Couto provides details of that notification.

A fisherman had found a body in the river. She went and found her husband’s body. The coroner at first refused to take the body from the water, but Annie Williams insisted that he do so. Once the body was on the riverbank, the signs of torture and death on it were unmistakable. Williams’ head was twice its normal size from beatings. Holes in his chest indicated either stab or bullet wounds. Williams’s hands and arms were still tied, and a rope tied to a heavy branch remained around his neck. The group on the riverbank put Williams’s corpse into a box and took it away for immediate burial (pp. 144-145). After a speedy and unceremonious burial in Taylor’s Cemetery on the outskirts of town, Elbert Williams’ wife soon went to Memphis. She was advised to leave their home shortly after identifying her husband’s mutilated body on the banks of the Hatchie River. Annie Williams sold the family car to make her way to Farmingdale, New York, to live with friends (p. 145). Her husband’s murder became a cautionary tale about what would happen to Black people if they wanted agency and a say in how they lived.

The suppression of Williams’ lynching in West Tennessee is profound. This was White supremacists’ lasting blow to the newly formed NAACP chapter in Haywood County and the
brutal act instilled fear in Black residents for decades. Similar to a patchwork quilt handed down from a grandmother to a granddaughter, fear and silence were a tightly woven warning passed on to generations of Blacks. Their unwillingness to speak about the unspeakable should not be seen as complacency or complicity in the suppression of Black liberation. Silence was a means of survival; if residents (past and future) were not informed, they could not inquire. QJ (2022), an online columnist for Medium, puts the complexity of bequeathed Black pain in context.

Some passed on their fear. They taught their children that they were in constant danger. Not because they wanted to, but because this belief had kept them safe, and they wanted to keep their children safe too. And some passed on their dreams. They taught their children that a better world was possible. Not because they expected to see it first-hand, but because they hoped their children would. From the same painful experiences, black people fashioned unique inheritances for their children. And while none of them was the whole truth, they each shaped the beliefs of the children who heard them (QJ, 2022).

Word of Williams’ lynching spread across the country and Haywood County quickly became known as an area for Blacks to avoid. Coming up against police would most assuredly result in harm or death. Bond (2011) points out the severe consequences Black travelers faced.

For example, African Americans traveling through west Tennessee were forewarned not to drive through Brownsville. As a result, many drove miles out of the way to bypass Haywood County’s Sheriffs, Tip and Jack Hunter. Blacks driving new cars were often arrested on bogus charges; whites certainly resented Blacks who seemed to have more than they. Moreover, the competition for limited resources was fierce, and even the most poorly educated and economically impoverished whites believed they were entitled, by virtue of their whiteness, to more liberties, rights, and opportunities unavailable to
Blacks. The feelings of invincibility and absolute power that accompanied whiteness gave officials like Tip or Jack Hunter unparalleled confidence, particularly as they interacted with Blacks, who remained defenseless against political and law enforcement officials (p. 34).

Tolnay and Beck (1992) note that lynchings of Blacks tended to occur in isolated, rural areas with large populations of African Americans (p. 109). These acts were part of a segregated system and sanctioned by legislation rooted in racial bias. Being Black during the Jim Crow era meant not finding safety anywhere—not in one’s home or vehicle. It also meant not having a voice in social or political matters, which meant Blacks could not participate in shaping the world in which they lived. Elbert Williams sought to change that by quietly engaging with Blacks about joining the local chapter of the NAACP. In the White imagination, Williams was out of his place and was attempting to round up other Blacks to rise up and take over. He and his wife both worked at the Sunshine Laundry in Brownsville in labor-intensive jobs that they should have been glad to have and without stirring up trouble.

The Equal Justice Initiative has researched racial terror and its regional predominance, documenting 4,084 lynchings in southern states between 1877 and 1950 (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). Tennessee was one of twelve states that was especially dangerous for African Americans during this period. As Blacks sought to gain social and political parity, they were met with tactics designed to maintain the status quo.

From 1915 to 1940, lynch mobs targeted African Americans who protested being treated as second-class citizens. African Americans throughout the South, individually and in organized groups, were demanding the economic and civil rights to which they were entitled. In response, whites turned to lynching (Equal Justice Initiative’s Report, 2017).
Justice had no place in Haywood County as evinced by the process used to bring together a grand jury to hear evidence about Williams’ lynching. Springfield (2000) accounts that Elisha Davis had been abducted and threatened by Tip Hunter five days before Williams because of his work as a charter member of the local NAACP chapter (p. 74). Davis was prepared to give his sworn statement, as were other members. Couto (1993) outlines the flawed judicial process.

Elisha Davis stood ready to identify the men in the mob that abducted him. [Milmon] Mitchell was also ready to provide sworn affidavits naming mob members who had abducted Thomas Davis and Elbert Williams. Such affidavits would not be conclusive evidence sufficient to convict anyone of actually murdering Williams, but they certainly would have cast suspicion on some men as having had a part in the murder. The grand jury did not have this evidence, and local police, obviously, were not about to produce any evidence that would identify their own members as participants in or leaders of the mob that had abducted Williams and the others (p. 161).

The circumstances surrounding Elbert Williams’ killing were not an anomaly. Operations to enact social control were not covert and the justice system ensured perpetrators could continue racial terrorism with ease. This was a constant reality among Blacks, especially those living in the South.

Fewer than 60 years before Elbert Williams was killed, life for Blacks in Haywood County was somewhat different. Voting was a freedom that resulted in the election of Black officials, a sharp contrast to the political environment in which Elbert Williams lived. The quest for this same privilege cost Williams his life.

During Reconstruction, newly freed Blacks staked their claim in what would soon become a vapid promise for liberty and an enhanced American life. However, Samuel McElwee,
who was born into the system of slavery in West Tennessee, made headway into the political arena with aplomb. After Emancipation, his father moved the family to Haywood County which would mark his political ascent. As a scholar, entrepreneur, and attorney, McElwee served multiple terms in the Tennessee General Assembly as an outspoken opponent of racial terror and restricted civil rights of Black citizens (Laska, 2017). Haywood County, with its large African American population of devoted Republicans, held a prominent place in Southern politics in terms of Black leadership. In participant Dorothy Granberry’s (2004) research, she outlines the dominance McElwee and his fellow Black statesmen possessed.

In the 1882 elections, Haywood County voters elected Samuel McElwee, a black educator, to the state house. The same year, William Winfield, the son of a prominent black Baptist minister, was elected county registrar. In 1884, McElwee led a delegation of forty-eight men from Haywood County to a state political convention of black men in Nashville. This was the third largest delegation, only surpassed by Shelby with sixty-two delegates and Davidson with fifty-two. By this time, black Republicans in Haywood County had a set political ticket for black candidates: William Winfield for registrar, Samuel A. McElwee for state representative, Robert Voss and Mitchell Hollaway for district constables, and two county court magistrates in Murf Currie and Oscar Walker (p. 38).

This was part of a shrewd strategy to proportionately shift the power to Black residents who outnumbered Whites in Haywood County. Thus began the charge by White citizens to institute unconstitutional laws to cement their hold on social and political rule. The same script has been used throughout history whenever democratic shifts threaten the status quo. It is evident now with redistricting, voter fraud arrests, fewer polling places, shorter early voting periods, and
other explicit voter suppression tactics. An excerpt from F. C. Heard’s letter to the editor of the Brownsville *States-Graphic* on September 8, 1905, shows the rhetoric used in describing the supposed ineptness of Black voters in an attempt to suppress their votes and maintain power.

I am constrained to address the people this letter in the interest of Capt. Scott’s candidacy for Register in this county, as this is the first time he has asked for an office since the days of reconstruction. It is true he has filled other offices but has ALWAYS been pushed forward by his friends, who wished to show their gratitude for the inestimable services he rendered the county in her darkest days—days that tried the souls of men and blackened the escutcheon of old Haywood; days when she was dominated by the Republican party; days when negro Magistrates sat upon the bench and negro Constables were in the saddle; days when, on election occasions, if a gentleman wished to vote and went up to deposit his ballot, he was confronted by a string of negroes from 30 to 100 yards long, each one with the ballot in his hand and the majority knowing no more about what they were voting for than the man in the moon (The States-Graphic, 1905).

The writer’s tone reveals a thinly veiled disgust of Black citizens and their inability to lead and take part in the democratic process. The county’s *darkest days* and a time that *blackened the escutcheon* of White citizenry are phrases that attempt to racialize the state of affairs as the fault of Blacks. The epistolary harangue describes a desire for white splendor—*if things could only be as they were*—at a time when Whites controlled power and *the Negroes*. It is this imagined superiority of whiteness that convinced/convinces Whites they should have power over Blacks. For generations, this White power structure would shroud all aspects of Black life.

Lovett et al. (2021) outline that the political stage had been set in the late 1800s but progress for Black Southerners eventually came to a halt early in the twentieth century. For
African Americans living in rural areas in Tennessee, disenfranchisement was almost complete by 1900 (p. xxxviii). McElwee and other Black legislators found themselves pushed out of the political process and the state with the advancement of Jim Crow policies.

**Introduction of Interview Subjects**

The individuals selected to discuss this portion of this study lived in Brownsville when Elbert Williams was killed. They offer unique insight into the social and political structures that dictated Black life in Haywood County and the atmosphere surrounding Williams’ lynching. Mildred Bond Roxborough and Cynthia Rawls Bond lived during the Jim Crow era and both women knew Elbert Williams. Because of these factors, some historical details related to Williams’ lynching are intertwined with their narratives that will appear in the next section.

What follows are brief biographical sketches of the two interview subjects.

Mildred Bond Roxborough, an African American female, was born in 1926 in Brownsville to parents who were educators. Ollie and Mattye Bond also held offices in the local NAACP, roles that would attract much scrutiny from White citizens in the area. Roxborough’s career choice would be inspired by their work fighting for racial justice. She is the longest serving staff member in the national office of the NAACP. Roxborough, although 96 years old and retired, still works—under contract, as she proudly notes—in the NAACP office in New York. Her historical framework of the civil rights organization is vast and spans several decades, and includes her work on several cases with many notable figures. She resides in Manhattan.

Cynthia Rawls Bond, an African American female, was born in Brownsville in 1934. Her father, Charles Allen Rawls, owned several businesses that catered to the needs of Black residents, even providing service at the end of their lives. Rawls was the local mortician and a prominent member of the business community. Bond recalls out-of-town mourners lodging in
her family’s home because Blacks were not permitted to stay in hotels. Her father and mother Maude attempted to restore Black residents’ dignity by creating spaces in which they could shop, socialize, and dine without the humiliation dispensed by White vendors. For many years, Bond worked in the family businesses but has since retired. Now, at age 88, she remains active in the Haywood County branch of the NAACP—the same local organization she worked to reestablish some years after Elbert Williams’ killing. Bond and her husband Maltimore raised their children in Brownsville where she still resides.

**Analysis of Interviews**

The ability to include perspectives from persons who knew Elbert Williams is an enriching element to my research. Although the event took place in 1940, participants in this study can draw upon memories that describe their lived experiences from that era. They are also able to describe the racial environment and attitudes toward African Americans, with attention to how they were portrayed in media, primarily newspapers. Their comments frame the social and political setting of Haywood County leading up to and after the killing of the NAACP officer.

Mildred Bond Roxborough recalls family oral histories that highlighted the participation of Black Haywood County citizens in political matters after the Civil War and wondered as a child why Black sociopolitical achievement was stagnant. Her grandparents in the 1800s established the all-Black town of Tollette, Arkansas, during the Reconstruction era (Bond, 2011). It remains today. Roxborough’s curiosity and dedication, even now, are evident in her lifelong work as a social justice advocate. She grew up in a family that was politically aware and heavily engaged in social justice efforts to improve the lives of Black people.

So, the Black citizens of the community were the majority. And although Blacks voted in Brownsville, Tennessee, prior to Reconstruction, after Reconstruction it was determined
by this White leadership and the community that Blacks were a threat to the good and wealthier, I assume—in quotes—of the community and were not permitted. I should say we were not permitted to vote again after Reconstruction and that of course caused difficulty with the Black citizens, who a portion of them I should say, not all of them, but a portion of them, of us, who were determined to regain the right of franchise (Roxborough, 2022).

Efforts to organize and secure the right to vote were associated with great personal risk. Roxborough’s father Ollie Bond and her mother Mattye both held key positions in the local NAACP chapter in 1939. Ollie and other officers were targeted by the Klan for their work in bringing Black citizens into the organization and promoting voting rights. Roxborough explains how her father narrowly averted death after secretly receiving a warning.

The reason the doctor, who was the county coroner, who was White, communicated with my father (was) to let him know that there was a plan. They intended to kill him and teach a lesson also to another officer of the branch, of the NAACP branch, which had been organized … He was the president of the branch and my mother was the secretary and a good friend of theirs. While they had convinced him to serve as a treasurer, he was younger than they were. The good friend, Elbert Williams. The man they actually lynched (Roxborough, 2022).

Roxborough’s father was often targeted for his work with the NAACP and periodically beaten by the sheriff’s deputies. These encounters were not merely scare tactics, but criminal acts meant to eliminate NAACP organizers and the organization. Reliable warnings of retaliation caused Roxborough’s father to send her to live with relatives in town while he surreptitiously left
Brownsville to join his wife in Kansas. Roxborough recalls the events that occurred six months prior to Williams’ lynching.

On Christmas Eve, when my father left—and nobody knew he had left—he went to Memphis and got the train to go to Kansas City, or the bus, or whatever. I forgot which he took, but he got there. And that was the night they had chosen to come and get him out of the house and take him down to the Hatchie River, which is near where we lived. This little river was the branch of the Mississippi River. But that night, they came apparently after midnight when the town was quiet and people were asleep and so forth and so on ... The Christmas Eve night is when they finally came to destroy the house. So, they set fire to the house, thinking that my father was home in it and that the fire would drive him out of the house, which it would have, and they would catch him and take him down or do whatever they were going to do with him (Roxborough, 2022).

Mildred Roxborough remained in Brownsville where she lived with relatives until she was reunited with her parents in Kansas. Six months after their family home was burned to the ground by law enforcement officers and the Klan, Williams was abducted from his home while his wife watched. Roxborough recounted the events that were part of a reign of terror intended to stop the work of NAACP workers.

As far as we know they shot Elbert Williams. First of all, they came to his house and forcibly removed him from his house in his pajamas. He was in bed asleep when they came. I know the sheriff had his posse and they took Elbert and entered the woods. They reconstructed the story from some eyewitnesses that were willing to talk—some of the White folks who knew what went on, what happened. And so, they apparently, according
to the reports, shot him in the woods. So, they had taken him down to the riverside and
had shot him in the woods before dumping him in the river (Roxborough, 2022).

A similar fate would have been Ollie Bond’s had he not been warned. During this interview,
Roxborough explained the remarkable yet unlikely dynamics of kinship between her father and
the doctor. He was her father’s half-brother, and this gesture revealed some devotion in
attempting to prevent harm to his Black sibling. These familial ties to whiteness were not enough
to loosen the oppressive hold on a Black man with light skin fighting for Black people’s civil
rights.

And of course, this was an open secret. You understand? This was not unusual. This is
something that happens even today, I guess, but the secrecy doesn't have to occur though.
And in any case, it was something that the whole town knew. It was no secret about it,
and if you saw them together you could see they looked like each other… They had a
genuinely pleasant relationship, the two of them did, and also with the family, you know.
Overlying all of that was where the relationship came from, but you couldn't change that.
So, you learn to live with a lot of things and have a pleasant life despite such
encumbrances, as was in this case. (Roxborough, 2022).

It was not unusual to see the results of rape by White owners of enslaved Black women. Since an
enslaved woman was considered property and under the rule of a slaveowner, the sexual act
could not be consensual. Roxborough’s grandmother (and other enslaved women) could not give
consent because she was considered an article of catalogued property and the owner wielded
control over all aspects of her life. By separating Black humanity from Black bodies, the
infliction of harm or death by White power holders is validated and not contested.
Cynthia Rawls Bond, like Mildred Bond Roxborough, lived in Brownsville when Williams was killed. The two women are related by marriage. Their memories of that event reveal hegemonic structures and racial boundaries that were apparent to them even as young children. Blacks in Haywood County existed in a volatile region and any work toward equality disrupted the rule of law.

Bond, who is 88 years old and retired from the family’s insurance and funeral home businesses, grew up during the Great Depression. For Black Americans, particularly those living in the South, there was no clear distinction between life before or after this era of economic hardship. As the daughter of a successful entrepreneur in Brownsville, her family’s upper middle-class status afforded them little escape from the restrictions placed upon Black citizens in how they went about their daily lives. Certain spaces and freedoms were designated as off-limits to Blacks, regardless of their economic standing.

Oh, my. Things were really tough in those days everywhere. I think I wrote a paper for somebody and I said I spent half of my life looking for signs. You had to be sure you were on the Black side, you had to see the Black water, you had to sit in the back, you had to be sure to see what sign to make sure you’re on the right … if you're on the bus, if you're on the train, if you were in the station, wherever you were you had to always be, you'd be looking for a sign to make sure you were on the right side, on the right seat whatever that was. It was, you know, being Black in those days, back in my day and even before, was tough because it was, you had so many problems, so many things to think about, and so many things to do, and so many little things could get you killed, and could get you beat up, and could get you talked about and talked to. So, it was rough in those days being Black, and especially, I think, in Brownsville (Bond C. R., 2022).
Cynthia Bond has spent most of her life as a resident of Brownsville, Tennessee, and lived amid the oppressive and humiliating social structures implemented by Whites. These deafening unspoken rules dictated daily life for Black citizens in the predominantly rural Black county.

But there was a problem right there. We had a number of White people and they were always afraid that we were gonna rise up and take our place and take over, and so they were hard on us. They were making sure that we knew our place. That's what they called it, our place. You drink only the Black water. Just whatever it was that showed that you were Black, you had to do that. I had a sister-in-law who was at Lane College. She was very, very fair. And coming from Lane on the bus, naturally, Black people sat in the back. But she would go to the back with her friends and they would come and get her and put her in the front. The man said ‘I cannot drive this bus with you being in the back’ because she looked like she was White, and they would make him lose his job if they thought he had put a White woman in the back. So, she had to sit in the front until she got to Brownsville. Then she got off the bus and got with her friends and went on wherever she was going. But that's just how sensitive things were at that time. Being Black, it was rough. And white people wanted you to know that they were superior, that they were everything. They were Miss John and Miss Something, and you were, I don't care if you were 80 years old, you were still Cynthia and they were Miss Sarah when they were 15 or 10. You had to start calling them Miss and they never called us anything but by our first name. (Bond C. R., 2022).

Cynthia Bond was 6 years old when Williams was abducted on June 20, 1940. Her family lived about three houses down from the Williamses on Bradford Street in Brownsville. She recalls Elbert’s wife Annie banging on their front door and appealing to her uncle for help.
And I heard her say to him, ‘Buddy, they got him.’ Well, I didn't know what that was, but I knew it was something because the lady was so sad and Uncle Buddy was trying to console her…She said, well he, Elbert, was in the house. He was already undressed for bed, had his pajamas on listening to the radio. Joe Louis was fighting, and he was there listening to the fight, to the prize fight, and minding his own business. And the car drove up in their yard and the chief of police came to the door and told him to come out and wanted to ask him some questions. He walked out, didn't have his shoes on, in his pajamas, and he went out and talked for a while and talked to people in the car. And then they put him in the car and took him away…And so it ended up it was just like three days later she kept looking for him and going to town to the sheriff’s office and to the police wanting to know what happened to her husband. Where was he?...Nobody could tell anything about where he was, and I think it was three days later, they called my father, who was in the funeral business, C. A. Rawls, and told him to go to the river and he would find Elbert Williams, and bring a casket with him (Bond C. R., 2022).

Couto (1993) notes how a hasty burial would symbolically bring closure to the gruesome events related to Elbert Williams’ death. Robert McElwee and his brother (descendants of Reconstruction-era politician Samuel McElwee) dug the grave for Williams and described the event.

The only people there at the cemetery were us that opened the grave. It was pretty sad.

They cut his tongue out, cut his privates off, and stuck them in his mouth. I just thought it was mean of those people (p. 147).

Throughout the South, similar scenes were common. Bond explains how intimidation and terror impacted Black people in Haywood County after Williams was killed. The incident sent a
message that guaranteed silence for years to come. It also confirmed then that the assault and lynching of a Black person would not lead to prosecuting the perpetrators.

But that was a sad thing for Brownsville. I mean, we had been oppressed all the time, but that was really a sad thing, and a thing to let us know where we stood with White people. They started lynching us, you know. That was the first time that had happened… Several other members of the NAACP, something had happened to them to let them, let the people know … if you belong to the NAACP, something is going to happen to you. And, so naturally, a lot of the Black people who were NAACP members left town. In fact, they were told to leave town. White folks told them, ‘You get out of town.’ So, Uncle Ollie [Bond] moved to Kansas City, Mr. Buster Walker moved to St. Louis, and somebody moved to Jackson, Tennessee. And they moved around to different places … and Mr. Elbert Williams’ wife moved to New York. And it was really a terrible thing, and so the NAACP kind of went underground at that time (Bond C. R., 2022).

Violent responses from Whites were justified as a means of justice for a crime a Black person had supposedly committed. However, they were mostly unsubstantiated accusations and the punishment had nothing to do with justice. Lynchings “were designed for broad impact—to send a message of domination, to instill fear, and sometimes to drive African Americans from the community altogether” (Equal Justice Initiative’s Report). This was unequivocally the case with Elbert Williams. People connected to him by association or relation scattered quickly, with many leaving and cutting all ties with those who remained. Wilkerson’s (2010) documentation of the Great Migration—when Black Americans escaped oppressive Jim Crow laws in the South for better opportunities and safety in the North—details what Blacks lost in the exchange.
When they fled, there were things they left behind. There were people they might not see again. They would now find out through letters and telegrams that a baby had been born or that parent had taken ill or passed away. There were things they might not ever taste or touch or share in again because they were hundreds of miles from all that they had known … Perhaps the greatest single act of family disruption and heartbreak among black Americans in the twentieth century was the result of the hard choices made by those on either side of the Great Migration (p. 238).

The decision to leave was often made because of dire circumstances. The persons who fled after Williams’ killing had no other choice. For many Blacks in the South, they either left in search of a better life or to preserve it. Those that remained did not openly engage in discourse about the events, which is why Williams’ lynching was unknown to many residents for several decades. Additionally, local media coverage would not be reliable in reporting these incidents because those in power controlled the messaging. As in this case, those in power were also involved in the crime. These factors associated with not knowing may contribute to some observers’ categorization of Elbert Williams’ killing as a mystery.

As horrific as the cases of kidnapping and murder were, local media coverage did not reflect the seriousness of the crime or the toll this reign of terror had on citizens in the area. Differing news accounts on the same story reveal the disparate reporting between White-owned media and Black-owned media. For instance, coverage of the lynching of Brownsville resident and voting rights advocate Elbert Williams in 1940 shows remarkable disparities between reports in The States-Graphic, the local White newspaper, and the Black press. In 1940, Blacks represented 75 percent of Haywood County’s 19,000 residents (Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.). Williams was the treasurer of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People and had been meeting with Black residents about registering to vote. NAACP organizers reported a pattern of harsh intimidation tactics by local law enforcement officers. The name of one of the abductors is redacted in a report by the U.S. Department of Justice.

A few days later, on June 20, 1940, Sheriff Hunter, Ed Lee, and XXXX abducted Thomas Davis from his home, forced him into a waiting car, and drove him to Elbert Williams’s home. During the ride, Hunter told Thomas that they were ‘going to break up the negroes around Brownsville who wanted to vote.’ They then forced Williams into the car with Thomas and took both men to the police station. After questioning Thomas and Williams about their NAACP activities, Hunter eventually released Thomas into a waiting crowd of white men. Thomas was able to escape unharmed and fled immediately to Jackson, Tennessee. Thomas would later confirm that Williams was still inside the jail when Thomas was released. Williams was not there, however, when his wife, Annie Williams, came to the station looking for him early the next morning (The United States Department of Justice, 2018).

The States-Graphic’s edition on Friday, June 21, 1940, one day after Williams was abducted, makes no mention of him as being reported missing. The following week’s edition embeds the story underneath a cryptic headline that provides no indication of the commission of a crime or his being a victim of abduction. There is no photograph of Williams or the scene where his body was found. “Grand Jury Is Called By Judge Bond” is the headline for the story that is hidden in plain sight on page one.

Judge W. W. Bond of the 13th Judicial Circuit has issued a call for a special session of the Haywood County Grand Jury to be held here on August 12 to investigate the death of a negro whose body was found floating in Hatchie River Sunday morning and who has
been identified as Everett Williams, 25, who lived here…Sheriff Hawkins made the investigation and the coroner’s inquest rendered a verdict that Williams met death in an unknown manner and reported to Attorney General L. L. Harrell who later came here that they believed that he came to death by violence at the hands of parties unknown, the body having been in the water too long to definitely determine the cause of death (The States-Graphic, 1940).

Inaccuracies abound, including the misspelling of Williams’ first name, his age incorrectly reported, the cause of death unlisted, and the perpetrators unidentified. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, Elbert Williams was 31 years old when he was lynched (Equal Justice Initiative, n.d.). The Department of Justice documented that Williams’ body was found badly beaten with bullet holes in his chest, and members of local law enforcement were named as his abductors, an act carried out at the direction of the sheriff (2018).

Mildred Roxborough recalled how stories in the local newspaper referenced Elbert Williams and Blacks, in general. Typically, published news reports about Blacks were framed and guided by social norms. Basic courtesies (physical/racial descriptions or titles) were not extended to Black citizens in reporting or in general communication. This oversight helped to reinforce power structures in a mediated form.

I remember the fact that there was an article, and of course, as usual, when they refer to the color and race or whatever, they used the small, they didn't capitalize, they didn't in those days capitalize Black or Negro or Colored. It was all lowercase and that was a demeaning way of putting Blacks in their place, you know. The fact that it's a little thing, but it's also something that was noted, notable, and it was noted in the treatment of the reporting of the Blacks and the Whites are different would be…the use of the English
language. And they would have small letters when you describe the Colored, Black, or Negro. They wouldn't capitalize that because that would lend some dignity to the person … They would speak about them in belittling terms … The reporting was demeaning, let me put it that way. In those papers—now, there were some papers and maybe the major cities who didn’t go to that extreme, you know, but I lived in Brownsville and that’s what I knew (Roxborough, 2022).

Black-owned newspapers in states like Oklahoma, Kansas, Ohio, and New York published accounts that framed Williams’ death as racial violence that came as retribution for Blacks who sought participation in civic and political matters. A few weeks after Williams was lynched, The Plaindealer in Kansas City, Kansas, ran a story about the ongoing terror waged against Blacks in West Tennessee. A headline beneath the paper’s masthead reads “Brownsville Hoodlums Continue Reign of Terror,” which is in sharp contrast to the ambiguous headline in the Brownsville news article that reported Elbert Williams’ death.

Charles Williams, a farmer who lives near Brownsville was taken by a mob of whites last Friday night while on his way to church and given a severe flogging. He was threatened by the mob by tying a rope around his neck and being told he would be hung if he did not stay in line … Williams is only one of the many Negroes who have lived in danger and fear of their lives at the hands of white hoodlums who have caused a reign of terror in this section of the country for the past month (The Plaindealer, 1940).

The article’s headline “Farmer Escapes Necktying Party; Flogged” leaves no room for speculation regarding the racial violence directed at Blacks in Haywood County. This above-the-fold story in The Plaindealer is quite remarkable considering Brownsville is located 500 miles from Kansas City.
Farther north, *The Chicago Defender* reported on the Williams lynching and one month later the paper detailed the events and made a case for a national investigation. “The Brownsville Beasts” was the headline, a more virulent description of the local officials and business leaders whose names had been circulated as the abductors and killers of the civil rights organizer.

Elbert Williams was foully and bestially murdered because he sought to exercise his constitutional right to vote in Tennessee. Elbert Williams was an American, born and bred. He only asked his rights, rights too long denied Americans. He was determined to vote. He was right (The Chicago Defender, 1940).

How this story was reported and discussed locally also sheds light on its suppression for more than seven decades, making this nationally reported lynching virtually unknown to persons born after its occurrence in 1940. Media representation is also a factor when considering news coverage of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. Stories in Haywood County’s local newspaper in rural West Tennessee in the early 1900s, reveal several articles with derogatory characterizations of African Americans. A section in the May 22, 1903, edition of *The States-Graphic* includes this news account: “Neal Smith, the old darky who did most of the slaughtering for our butchers, died at his home east of town last Monday evening.” Another article published one week earlier states: “Last Saturday evening, Dan McFarland, a negro wanted by police, was knocked senseless by John Jones, another bad negro. At the trial it was developed that McFarland was wanted for assaulting Scott Morris, a well known negro a week before” (Hutcherson, n.d.).

Black subjects were identified as “Negro,” a term that helped frame the story by ethnicity rather than topic. They were often characterized as criminals or having criminal tendencies and were arrested at alarming rates for the smallest infraction. News stories featuring African
Americans also contained subjective descriptors like “lazy” or “lowdown.” Such framing was not evident in stories with White subjects. Instead, personal, social, and professional achievements were frequently highlighted. Two news items in the June 3, 1903, edition of *The States-Graphic* reported: “C. L. Carlton and family have moved from the Lebanon neighborhood to town, and are now occupying the Mann residence on Lafayette St. Mr. Zack Biggs, of Trenton, has been appointed cattle inspector for West Tennessee, vice, C. C. Shaw” (Hutcherson, n.d.).

Investigations into the Elbert Williams lynching at the federal level were grossly ineffective and intentionally decelerated the process. Appeals to the Department of Justice were volleyed back and forth to delay the process of requesting information from members of the sheriff’s department and prosecuting them along with other prominent White citizens. Brownsville native and Tuskegee University professor Jo Zanice Bond (2011) notes in her research how the federal investigation into Williams’ lynching unfolded.

The federal investigation itself was a mockery since the FBI agents who came to Brownsville to interview Black residents allowed Sheriff Tip Hunter, a well-known racist and a leader of the mob, to accompany them to the interviews. While only a small number of Blacks in Brownsville had joined the NAACP and pursued the right to vote, the white leaders, who had a stronghold on the town’s social, political, and economic life, fought to maintain their apartheid-like control of Blacks in the town. African Americans feared mentioning the NAACP because of the physical, emotional, and financial backlash its presence in Brownsville had ignited (p. 75).

The national office of the NAACP intensified its work in bringing the Williams case to the forefront and prosecuting those responsible for his death. As described in *The Chicago Defender*
one month after Williams’ killing, “Two bankers, a state highway commissioner, several police officers and merchants are charged with his murder in a report sent to President Roosevelt by the N.A.A.C.P., after a three-day investigation by Walter White” (The Chicago Defender, 1940). White was the national organization’s executive secretary and directed the investigation (NAACP, n.d.). Officials worked remotely and locally collecting information and communicating with persons with knowledge of the abduction and lynching.

Before he became the first African American to be appointed to the United States Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall was an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and came to Brownsville to investigate the murder. Mildred Bond Roxborough, a participant in this research, worked with Marshall on many cases that were under review by the organization’s national office until his federal judgeship appointment in 1961 (Bond, p. 198). In correspondence to Wendell Berge in 1941, Couto (1993) notes that Marshall appealed to the assistant attorney general about the obligation the Justice Department had to Black Haywood County citizens.

All of the Negroes in Brownsville know that [Sheriff Tip] Hunter killed one man and ran several other Negroes out of town who had attempted to register. If no action is taken against him by the department, the intimidation of the Negroes who want to register and vote will be complete (p. 174).

Despite the work of the NAACP, civic organizations, and the Black press, no one was ever convicted for the lynching of Elbert Williams. The case closed, time moved on, and the erasure allowed at least three generations of West Tennesseans to never know about one of the area’s most notorious murders.
Even now, the killing of Williams haunts descendants who know him only through accounts that have been handed down to them. His great-great niece Leslie McGraw who lives in Michigan, describes the generational pain that has also been passed down in her family.

McGraw, a 41-year-old entrepreneur, said that if her great-great uncle had not been killed and lived a natural life, he would have been alive when she was growing up. Her family would not have fled to Michigan, as so many African-Americans did, who left the South during the Great Migration... McGraw’s family used to avoid mentioning Williams’ name, a silence that’s begun to lift in the past few years. Growing up, McGraw felt pride at knowing the role her uncle played in the struggle for civil rights (Jackson D., 2018).

Family stories can now include a new chapter. In 2018, the Haywood County district attorney reopened the investigation into Elbert Williams’ murder (Sainz, 2018). Documents indicate the abduction of Williams was carried out by a police officer and no one was ever charged with the killing. Family members had tried to have the case reopened but the request was rejected in 2017 because the statute of limitations of 75 years to investigate a federal crime had expired. However, the Civil Rights Crimes Cold Case Law, opened the door to investigate the events surrounding Williams’ death and to identify the perpetrators. By now, those involved have likely died and prosecution would not be possible. It would create a record of events and offer some answers to Williams’ family members.

The voices of this study’s participants are a reclamation, of sorts. As hooks (1992) notes, Black people do not see White people the way Whites see themselves. Remembering and speaking freely break the societal hold white supremacy has on othering.

Whiteness in the black imagination is often a representation of terror. One must face written histories that erase and deny, that reinvent the past to make the present vision of
racial harmony and pluralism more plausible. To bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed… Theorizing black experience, we seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys, are possible (p. 172).

One such journey began for me a few years ago. My experience is recounted in a reflexive analysis of the event that brought Williams’ unlikely legacy to the forefront. I first learned about Elbert Williams’ death shortly before the memorial event in Brownsville in 2015 and wondered how this murder had largely been erased from the area’s history. Its significance is astounding not only because the vicious act was committed by members of the town’s sheriff’s department, but because the case received national attention. While many people are familiar with the murder of Medgar Evers, an NAACP field officer gunned down in his driveway in Mississippi, few know about the NAACP chapter officer who was lynched in Brownsville, Tennessee, 23 years earlier (NAACP, n.d.). Elbert Williams is noted by the organization as “the first NAACP martyr for civil rights” and “the first NAACP member to die in the struggle for civil rights” (NAACP, 2017).

To acknowledge the event that silenced a town by repressing its memory helps to reshape the narrative. The Haywood County-based group that organized the event in June 2015 brought attention to the incident and place that marked the end of the 31-year-old civil rights worker’s life. In just a few short months, organizers arranged a public event memorializing the seventy-fifth anniversary of Williams’ murder. The group’s website outlines its purpose.

The Elbert Williams Memorial Committee was formed on February 25, 2015 for the purpose of commemorating the life and legacy of Elbert Williams. Mr. Williams was the
first known member of the NAACP to lose his life doing Civil Rights work on June 20, 1940. Mr. Williams has laid in an unknown, unmarked grave in Taylor’s Cemetery, Brownsville, Tennessee the date of his death (Elbert Williams Memorial Committee, n.d.).

My attending the event provides some insight into how memory was interpreted more than seven decades later. The commemoration program was held at Haywood High School in Brownsville, Tennessee, with representatives from various civic, religious, and political arenas. Perhaps the most anticipated speakers were members of Elbert Williams’ family. His great-great-nieces had traveled from Michigan to Haywood County, the place where their uncle had been killed, and the place they had reluctantly returned to in order to mark the anniversary of his lynching. (Further research is needed to fully understand the generational impact Williams’ lynching had/has on his family.) Members of the local branch of the NAACP all wore matching commemorative t-shirts and were seated together. Life-member Cynthia Rawls Bond was in attendance. Mildred Bond Roxborough had traveled to Brownsville from New York to witness the moment when the past made its way to the present. Elbert Williams was an officer in the Haywood County chapter and was killed for trying to encourage local Blacks to register to vote and support the civil rights group. The mood in the gymnasium was solemn; it almost felt like a funeral. Through a variety of speakers, the audience heard information about Williams and the events that led to his abduction and subsequent murder. There were also video-recorded messages from people who had known Williams, like the Rev. Clay Evans, the Chicago-based pastor who had grown up in Brownsville. U.S. Representative John Lewis reflected in a video clip about his familiarity with the case and the shame of how justice never prevailed.
The historical marker that was unveiled is visible from the county courthouse, the place that made a mockery of justice for Williams and his fellow Black citizens. Its location is near the site of the laundry where he worked heaping coals into the boiler. The stark contrast between people gathering to commemorate Williams’ life and those who could not gather in 1940 to save it is remarkable. Later, a drive to the outskirts of town and the somber walk to Taylor’s Cemetery felt like the processional to Williams’ final resting place that family and friends were not permitted to have. The gathering, the words, and the heat compounded the gravity of the moment, bringing to life a memory that had only recently been formed.

Learning about Elbert Williams and attending a program commemorating his life marked two distinct rhetorical moments. In one instance, I could examine the reports about his work, abduction, and death, and draw comparisons with how Williams was depicted in media. Conversely, I could be immersed in a setting that framed his life differently than how it was defined 75 years earlier. The shift consisted of a move from the inhumane to humane, all in the same geographic space.

**Major Themes: Restriction and Resistance**

Elbert Williams was lynched because of his resistance to being locked out of the political process. He resisted by recruiting others to seize what was theirs as American citizens. Roxborough and Bond were exposed to acts of advocacy early on by witnessing their parents’ community work and through family oral histories. Growing up in families that presented boldness and rejected defeatist postures impacted how Roxborough and Bond saw themselves and influenced the way they wanted to present themselves in society. They both built identities and careers that focused on service to Black communities and causes while promoting Black uplift. Possessing a strong sense of self affirmed their ability to call out injustices, specifically
those related to disenfranchisement, and to dismiss inaccurate notions about colored people, Negroes, Blacks, and African Americans. They have witnessed the many iterations of labels for blackness—including some that are omitted from this list. Their identity as Black Americans was not grounded in the mediated messages and images they were exposed to, but rather the pride and resilience associated with blackness.

Throughout the reflections and mediated texts included in this chapter, there are identifiable threads that stress the uniqueness of place and people. This small, obscure area was a microcosm of the racial hate and inequity festering in this country, particularly in the South. Blacks in Haywood County were not outnumbered, but they were outpowered by the girth of Jim Crow. This stronghold brought death and silence. It also brought an inexplicable motivation from Blacks to fight through fear and loosen the restrictive grip.

A Strange Land

If the true meaning of democracy were applied, the events of Black citizens’ plight to obtain voting rights should not have happened. This is especially true in Haywood County, a sector with a long history of Black residents outnumbering White residents. Had Blacks been able to fully exert agency, the political landscape would have looked differently. Therein lies the reason for restriction then and now. The many shades of Black and Brown in this country remove the gray area for understanding voter suppression today. With the vote, citizens of color could/can shape the world in which they lived/live, and this fact helped construct the big fear/lie among White power holders.

Fewer than 100 years after Emancipation, Blacks in Haywood County were still viewed as not being capable of making decisions about their social and political wellbeing. Mildred Roxborough and Cynthia Bond both grew up in well-to-do families, however, their financial
standing had little influence on their political advancement as Black citizens. They both described the treatment all Black people received when they were growing up in the 1940s. Despite Blacks tipping the majority population scale, they were restricted from living their lives freely. Further, the mechanisms for control included violence which complicated the presence of Black bodies in this area. Even so, generations before and after Elbert Williams found the resilience to lay claim to a land and life that they believed they had earned.

**Strange Fruit**

The premise that democracy cannot be trusted in the hands of the individuals who built this country took root and thrived during the era of enslavement in America. Agriculture drove the economy in this part of the Delta and Blacks were the key contributors. Keeping Black people in the fields, in debt, and disenfranchised was the civic arrangement that proved beneficial for White landowners. A collective cry of *enough!* by Black southerners after Reconstruction once again brought out the fury of white supremacists which produced the widespread hanging horrors that Billie Holiday lamented about in song. Thousands of Black men and women were lynched in this country. There did not have to be a reason to kill, only an opportunity and an ire for blackness.

If the freedom to cast a vote held enough power for some to terrorize and kill, many Black Americans understood it was a freedom worth fighting for. In Haywood County, men like Casher Davis, Elisha Davis, Thomas Davis, Buster Walker, Ollie Bond, and Elbert Williams summoned the courage to canvass, organize, and strategize to add their voices to the political record. Forming a local chapter of the NAACP would bring national support and resources to a struggle they had long waged. Their efforts also brought attention to racial terrorists and resulted in the lynching of Elbert Williams. His abduction and killing were not strange, though. Blacks
had become accustomed to evading the grasps that were intent upon hoisting them from trees or drowning them in rivers. The South was fertile ground for strange fruit and Haywood County received a horrific reminder of what could happen when Black people resisted. As tragic as Williams’ lynching was, the work for racial equity never waned. Many Black people were threatened and run out of town, but they found a way to be resilient even as their world was becoming more unsteady.

Strange Silence

The description of a strange silence is not attributed to peculiarity, but rather the complexity of carrying out silence. Silence is not always silent, in the same way that every closed eye is not asleep. The experiences associated with racial violence impact people differently. Those mentioned in this study either stayed in town or left. At the time, few talked about the events that led up to Elbert Williams’ killing. The unspoken rule was to not speak openly about racial terror groups and their actions. As evinced by Leslie McGraw’s comments, her family has been shrouded in secrecy for decades, rarely approaching information about her great-great-uncle, Elbert Williams. This kind of silence is produced to survive, and it is passed on. Recalling unsettling details can be paralyzing and many would rather stay silent than still. As mentioned earlier, the Williams lynching was not widely known because it was not widely discussed.

The Klan and their ilk operated through intimidation tactics which meant no one wanted comments attributed to them for fear of retaliation. It is understandable that those who witnessed the unspeakable horrors of racial terror were left with trauma that rendered them unable to recount what they had seen or endured. Annie Williams hurriedly left Brownsville after
identifying her husband’s mutilated body by the Hatchie River. It would be years before she would reveal the events to close family members.

In addition to living under oppressive conditions, Black people lived in fear and in silence. This outward silence, for many Black citizens, masked the advocacy work that was going on behind the scenes. While silence may have represented survival, Black survival was also fostered by the covert meetings, gatherings, and prayers taking place in communal Black spaces. Roxborough and Bond both referenced events and meetings their parents organized to inform and uplift the Black community. Roxborough’s childhood home was burned to the ground by the Klan anticipating the family would be inside. Her parents continued their advocacy work away from Brownsville. Carrying this pain while working on ways to eliminate it was the extraordinary method Blacks utilized to resist the inequities that dictated their lives. That is the uniqueness of a strange silence.

Transition

The interviews with Mildred Bond Roxborough and Cynthia Rawls Bond reveal formidable character among the women. Additionally, their narratives speak to resistance to earlier restrictions designed to block Black access, significant identity-making experiences, and a reconciliation with injustice. The memory associated with the Elbert Williams lynching brings clarity to the lived experiences of Blacks during that era and the grip that white supremacy had on Black life in Haywood County. Their inclusion in this study offers insight into critical racial shifts in this country where the subjects bore witness to and participated in the uphill push toward equity. Sadly, recent political ideologies have linked up with the past and produced a nauseous sense of déjà vu. The resistance that both women and their families exhibited to reject
White rule says more about who they are than the power White people thought they possessed. Informed Black citizens knew their place, and it was where freedom and equality resided.

The trauma from seeing one’s childhood home destroyed by the Klan, hearing about threats against family and community members, and watching loved ones and friends leave to escape certain death remains, as do the memories. As children, Roxborough and Bond brought those experiences with them into adulthood which contributed to the shaping of their worldview. Instead of allowing the racial hatred that surrounded them as young people dictate their paths, these Black women were guided by the forces of resistance. Without question, their exposure to racial injustice and the ebbs and flows of social change during their lifetimes outweigh that of most Black Americans. Living for nearly one century in this country validates a level of struggle for Blacks that cannot be disputed. Their wisdom is remarkable and their willingness to “speak their truth” resonated throughout their interviews. At ages 96 and 88, what is there to fear? They spoke candidly about the restrictions against and the treatment of Blacks and named some of the perpetrators. Reconciling with the past can be freeing. Not that these women sought to wipe the slate clean of the heinous crimes and despicable treatment of Blacks by White citizens and facilitate a kumbaya moment. They remember. They know. Even if stories of Elbert Williams’ lynching were never fully reported in local newspapers or part of cultural discourse, Mildred Roxborough’s and Cynthia Bond’s words provide a resistive narrative to decades of disparaging shouts and muted whispers.

The effects of Williams’ lynching would remain for years. It would take some time for local Blacks to gain the momentum needed to secure the right to vote. The next chapter examines the political and social struggle that ensued during the ongoing pursuit of voting rights for Blacks in Haywood County during the 1950s.
Chapter 4: The Voting Rights Lawsuit - 1959

Over the next 25 years, other stories would chronicle the ways Southern Blacks braved the opposition to gain political equity, and pivotal events occurred in Haywood and nearby Fayette County. The black and white footage of President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 signing the Voting Rights Act into law and handing one of the pens to Rev. Martin Luther King standing in the crowd of supporters is an iconic frame in American history. Now seen as mostly symbolic, this event served as a catalyst for change for many Black Americans but voting rights activists in West Tennessee had long been on the front lines. Blacks were restricted from voting, but citizens in this small pocket of the South remained vigilant and risked their lives to recapture what the Fifteenth Amendment had promised. This chapter will show how Blacks in Haywood County pushed through their fear and pain and rolled out a bold strategy that would lay the groundwork for crafting national voting legislation. The murder of Elbert Williams cast a long shadow over Black life, but another death would actually offer a glimmer of hope in terms of acquiring voting rights.

Historical Context of the Event and Media Coverage

The correlation between enfranchisement and property ownership would be the common thread that forcefully held back Black citizens in Haywood County and the South. Without land, Blacks were not seen as full citizens with rights to engage in political decisions. This social control mechanism was reinforced at the end of the Civil War. Lovett et al. (2021) provide historical insight into the disparity of land ownership among Blacks, an economic injustice that continues today.

Despite the presence of the Freedmen’s Bureau, little economic opportunity developed for rural blacks during and immediately after the war. Almost all 355,731 acres of land confiscated from Tennessee’s Confederates were returned to whites after 1866 … In
Fayette and Haywood counties in West Tennessee, the white minority allowed little land to fall into black hands. No more than 400 black Tennessee farmers owned their land by the end of 1866. By 1910, compared to most white Tennessee farmers, only 25.7 percent of Tennessee’s black farmers owned their own land (pp. xxxi-xxxii).

The loopholes to deny Blacks the right to vote multiplied over the years and created a chasm that engulfed any measures to ensure equitable representation. Deceptive tactics like literacy tests, secret ballots, and poll taxes were upheld by legislation designed to eliminate Blacks from the political process (National Park Service, 2009). Despite Blacks having the population majority in Haywood County, large numbers could not disrupt the White power structure which instituted racist tactics to prevent Blacks from voting. Details of voter suppression practices across the South are outlined in a report by the National Historic Landmarks Program (2009).

In Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas, white legislators continued to implement the secret ballot and poll tax requirements to achieve disenfranchisement. Literacy tests, if administered fairly, would have disenfranchised a considerable number of poorly educated blacks and whites. Instead, white registrars decided who passed the exam, and they used their discretion mainly against African Americans (p. 12). Some 50 years later, those insidious rules were still in place. High illiteracy rates among Black citizens only worsened efforts to participate in the voting process given the ridiculous tests Blacks were expected to complete.

In 1941, one year after the lynching of Elbert Williams, another event involving racial terrorists would mark the beginning of a series of events that would eventually lead to unprecedented voter registration campaigns in Haywood County and neighboring Fayette
County. Black citizens would later file the first federal lawsuits to regain the right to vote. Burton Dodson, a Black man who lived in Fayette County, became involved in an argument with a White man over a Black woman with whom both men were romantically involved (National Historic Landmarks Program, 2009). Later that evening, the White man went to Dodson’s house with a lynch mob, where a shootout ensued killing one person in the mob. Dodson managed to escape and hid in a wooded area before fleeing to East St. Louis, Missouri. He lived in obscurity for 18 years until authorities discovered his whereabouts and brought Dodson back to Fayette County to face trial on murder charges. The circumstances of the Dodson case in 1959 drew a lot of attention, despite the fact there was no way to determine who fired the lethal shot in the barrage of bullets. Facts were of no consequence when a Black person could easily be accused of any crime. It did not help Dodson’s case that he was not tried in front of a jury of his peers. Blacks immediately discovered they could not serve on the jury because they were not registered to vote. This revelation came from an unlikely source. It was a common occurrence for a Black man to be on trial for a crime with no evidence, but it was quite uncommon for the defendant to be represented by a Black attorney, particularly in the South (National Park Service, 2009).

The trial that April was important to local blacks because Dodson was defended by a black lawyer named James F. Estes. Estes drove from Memphis for the trial and African Americans in Fayette County flocked to the courthouse to watch him work since “a black lawyer appearing to defend a black man was unheard of. People put aside their farm work and flocked to the courthouse to see it for themselves.” John McFerren and Harpman Jameson, African American farmers in the area, wanted to serve on the grand jury. When “we found out you had to be registered before you could serve on the grand jury,” Jameson said, “…we got interested in registerin’ and getting our people registered.” After
Burton Dodson received a 20-year sentence for a murder he did not commit, Jameson and McFerren “began to register to vote” (p. 39).

The trial of Burton Dodson was a watershed moment that prompted some strides toward political freedom. Attorney Estes questioned the absence of Black jurors and the discriminatory voter registration practices. In Fayette County, 16,927 residents had registered to vote; only 17 were Black and none of them had ever served on a jury (Couto, 1993). In an equally startling revelation, a poll taken among White registered voters represented a significant leap for Blacks to regain the right to vote.

Estes asked the white prospective jurors if they believed that African Americans should vote. To the amazement of the African Americans, who packed the courtroom to observe the trial, the white men of the jury pool responded that African Americans should have the same right to register and to vote (p. 192).

The irony of a Black man wrongfully being tried for killing a White man becoming the impetus for Black Americans gaining the right to vote is incredulous. A White deputy testified that Dodson was likely not the shooter based on the location of Dodson and where the body of the slain deputy was found (Wynn, 1996). James Estes opened the door for Blacks to take steps to regain their voting rights. Shortly after the Dodson trial ended, John McFerren and Harpman Jameson formed the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League and went on to register hundreds of Black voters in Fayette County after orchestrating the first two registration events (National Park Service, 2009).

Wynn (1996) notes that at the urging of Currie Porter Boyd, a Haywood County native, educator, and activist, Estes handled the legal proceedings for forming the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League in 1959 (p. 209). Collectively, the two organizations worked tirelessly
to register Black residents. When one of the members, Omar Carney, went to pick up the charter from the courthouse, he was struck in the head with a cane by a White man. Couto (1993) wrote that the blood-stained document was reminiscent of “blood shed in the past as whites moved to keep their parents and grandparents from exercising their civil rights, and recalled the possibility that their own blood might be shed, too” (p. 193). Carney was reluctant about bringing charges against the White man who hit him because retaliation would be certain. In a Jet magazine article, Carney stated, “I’m afraid I'll be killed if I had him arrested” (Johnson Publishing Company, 1959). Met by more violence and humiliation, in less than one week in 1960, the League managed to register 141 Black Haywood County citizens (Couto, 1993).

Delaying tactics caused long lines in the hot summer sun. African-American registrants were not allowed to sit or stand on the grass of the courthouse lawn or to leave the hot sidewalk. When some registrants reached the courthouse steps and sat down, they found that battery acid had been left on the steps to eat through their clothes and damage their skin (pp. 198-199).

Efforts to register to vote released a reign of terror on Blacks in Haywood and Fayette counties. Intimidation, violence, and refusal of service were only a few ways Whites asserted their power. These two majority-Black counties led the way and took the brunt of force in a national struggle for Blacks to exercise their right to vote. Currie Porter Boyd presented a vivid description of how Whites exerted their full force through policing to restrict Blacks living in Haywood County (Couto, 1991).

Haywood County was a terrible place for blacks. You could get a beating because a policeman didn’t like you. It was hard to imagine…you could be beaten for nothing. The police force was always selected from the most sadistic, brutal, ignorant men that they
could find, racist types, to frighten and intimidate black folk. We had a curfew at night. They blew the whistle then; you had to leave town by 10:00 P.M. Nothing happened in particular, just curfew (p. 34).

This was how Blacks lived. The constant surveillance made it impossible to freely go about life in this segregated area. A few months after the Dodson trial in 1959, another event occurred that resulted in the death of Brownsville sheriff Jack Hunter. He was shot by a Black man after attempting to enter the man’s home pointing a rifle. However, Willie Jones was not the person Hunter was looking for to serve an arrest warrant, rather someone with a similar name.


Once again, justice for Jones was averted since Blacks could not vote or serve on juries. As noted in an edition of the Southern School News, Jones’s trial marked another watershed moment that only stalled progress. “For the first time in Haywood County history, two Negroes were summoned as prospective jurors. Both were excused, one because he said he opposes capital punishment, the other because he is a cousin of the defendant's wife” (Southern School News, 1959). This was merely performative because Blacks would have never been permitted in 1959 to participate in the justice process anyway. Even with a case that included mistaken identity, an unmarked police car, and no verbal identification by the sheriff, Jones was sentenced by an all-White jury to 20 years and a day.
This obscure, rural area in the segregated South became the center for activism and political change for disenfranchised Black Americans. Having a say in how they lived their lives was paramount, and these Black citizens took risks and lifted their voices for all to hear. The two organizations played a critical role in advancing the cause of voting rights. There was no way for the community leaders to know that their grassroots work would impact and inform voting legislation in the country. The events in Haywood and Fayette counties received attention from the national press and the federal government, while local entities essentially ignored the brewing firestorm. *Jet* magazine regularly followed the events and gave the voting struggle top billing as evinced by the cover’s cutline in all caps: EXPOSE TENNESSEE COUNTIES WHERE NEGROES CAN’T VOTE. One 1959 article in the Black weekly national magazine explicitly summed up the situation.

Low in the cotton country of western Tennessee, and anchored on the Mississippi border sits Fayette County with adjoining Haywood County stacked on top. Only counties in the Volunteer State where the Negro population outnumbers the white (Haywood: 64 per cent Negro, Fayette: 70 per cent), they have one other thing in common: it is easier to get blood from an ice cube than for a Negro to vote in either (Johnson Publishing Company, 1959).

An expansive report published by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1961) chronicled the outrageous measures levied by Whites to suppress Black voters and the courageous strategies implemented by determined league members in both counties.

Fayette and Haywood Counties, Tenn., provide dramatic examples of how justified the fear is, and how disastrous its realization can be. Negro tenant farmers and sharecroppers who succeeded in registering were evicted from their farms and subjected to other forms
of reprisal, including the cutting off of supplies, refusal of credit, and cancellation of insurance policies. These events underscore the dwindling importance of the tenant farmer in a one-crop economy, his economic dependence, and the power of whites to retaliate against Negroes who attempt to exercise their political rights (p. 191).

Cotton was king, and had been since the era of enslavement, but Blacks rarely benefitted from its lucrative return. Working and plowing the land and picking the pillowy blooming bolls was how most Blacks living in the South made a living, although a very economically strapped living. The system of sharecropping is designed to foster dependency and debt, making it impossible for tenant farmers to become self-sufficient. This would be the backdrop for the plan White landowners hatched to retaliate against Black sharecroppers who attempted to register to vote.

Certainly, the most egregious act of cruelty in the region’s hegemonic system was the eviction of Black families in the dead of winter. In a predominantly agricultural region, Blacks who had built their lives tilling White landowners’ soil found themselves with nothing and “no place to go” as the Memphis Times Herald reprinted in 1960 after Black citizens cast their ballots. They have no homes and, in most cases, they have nothing. This is the predicament of 1,000 colored citizens who went to the polls in the presidential election in Fayette and Haywood Counties, according to Mrs. John McFerren … These Tennessee citizens are suffering from an economic squeeze that’s becoming tighter and tighter … Mrs. McFerren said large numbers of colored farmhands who voted have been ordered by whites out of their shacks and many small farm owners face loss of their land (The Times Herald, 1960).

One by one, Black tenant farmers—with children in tow—began populating the tent cities that had been quickly established in Fayette and Haywood counties. Living in army surplus tents with
dirt floors and woodburning stove pipes piercing the canvas material was the price of a ballot. It was a payment that would last a few years. These are descriptions I periodically heard about people who had been thrown off the land they worked in these two neighboring counties. I remember being appalled after understanding that Black families endured these conditions through two winters. A Black farmer had offered a plot of land on which to erect the tents, but there were additional hardships. In Robert Hamburger’s (1973) seminal collection of interviews with Black Fayette County activists and residents, John McFerren described the danger evicted Blacks were subjected to while living in the tents in the middle of a field.

We had three hundred people forced to live in tents on Shepard Towles’s land. And when we started puttin em in tents, then that’s when the White Citizens Council and the Ku Klux Klan started shootin in the tents to run us out (p. 8).

The travesty taking place in Fayette County had even gained the attention of President John F. Kennedy. At his first press conference after winning the presidency in 1960, Wynn (1996) notes that Kennedy was asked if he planned to intervene and help the Black citizens who faced retribution because they registered to vote (p. 217). The events that resulted in the establishment of Tent City were no longer a local or state issue. The settlement containing Black and impoverished families had now been placed in front of the president and it demanded his attention. Kennedy’s authorization to send surplus food was merely a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. Furthermore, local politicians delayed distribution of the aid, stating Blacks were earning money working in the cotton fields and were self-sufficient (p. 218).

When Tent City in Brownsville was erected, additional hardship followed for Black families who were struggling even before they attempted to register to vote. One group of Black women in Brownsville chose an unconventional way to financially support their families and
community. Eric Weinberger, a social justice worker from Massachusetts, helped the women form a nonprofit cooperation in 1962 where they made leather bags and purses for sale in other parts of the country (Weeks, 1963). The 75 Black women—many who had been sharecroppers—used their hands in ways other than picking cotton or laundering White people’s clothes. They learned how to fashion leather and were able to provide for their families. Weeks (1963) illustrates the work of the Haywood Handicrafters League and its only White and male member, Weinberger.

The League operates by virtue of a strange admixture of the impossible and the unlikely—anarchists supporting the right to vote, pacifists paying federal luxury taxes which support the war effort, vegetarians rounding up orders for leather goods, etc…But although the Haywood Handicrafters League is physically not a community at all, and philosophically far from the average intentional community (at most it is an "intentional community of need"), it outshines all American middle-class communitarian attempts to resolve differences, to blend incompatibles (p. 19).

This creative force of resistance among the group of poor Black women sustained families and emboldened a community to take care of itself. The economic contribution of the Haywood Handicrafters is one that I learned about less than a decade ago, despite growing up roughly 10 miles from where Tent City in Brownsville was located. It is but another example of historical and cultural narratives being suppressed. No matter the level of skill and self-sufficiency, Black citizens would pay dearly for daring to go against the rules that had been established to keep them disenfranchised.

Entrepreneur and civil rights activist Odell Sanders owned a grocery store in Brownsville but was cut off from suppliers when he began leading the efforts for Blacks to gain voting rights.
Black consumers were also impacted when Sanders’ store was no longer stocked. A 1960 article in *The Nashville Tennessean* outlined the intricate system that was designed to punish anyone seeking Black voter equity.

But, so far, the prime target of the economic boycott in Brownsville is Odell Sanders, 45, a Negro grocer without any groceries. He says white merchants have told wholesalers not to make deliveries to him or they’ll stop buying from the wholesalers. Most of the time Sanders’ shelves remain bare, but every few days he takes a truck to a neighboring county and comes back with a load of staple goods … The sheriff is S. T. Hunter, an aging lawman who is far from being in good graces with the Negroes. “I'll tell you this,” he said, “the white people and the black people are not going to mix on an equality basis, at least not yet, for awhile.” He said he knew of no boycott or mistreatment of Negroes and added: “We don’t eat with niggers, we don’t sleep with niggers, and we don’t go to church with niggers. Period” (Talley, p. 1).

This mandate made clear the social parameters White power holders constructed around Black citizens. Law enforcement and White business owners tightened the economic chokehold on Black businesses by convincing distributors not to deliver goods to them. Sanders’ resistance to the harsh measures included independently purchasing food and supplies in other towns and bringing the items back to his grocery store. One White farmer in Brownsville, Robert R. Dulin, faced backlash after aiding Sanders in picking up goods in nearby Jackson, Tennessee. Dulin’s account about Sanders’ treatment and the boycott is included in the news article.

“He ought to have the right to make a living, same as white folks,” said Dulin. The retired farmer said he didn’t care if the Negroes vote in Haywood. “I’ve be criticized for what I did for Odell,” he said, “but just like I told the sheriff, I’m not sorry” (p. 8).
In the true sense of the word, Blacks were blacklisted and restricted from buying groceries and gasoline from White-owned businesses, and even banking. Printed lists with the names of Black citizens who had registered to vote were distributed to businesses in Haywood and Fayette counties. In notes taken during a personal conversation in 2019 with my cousin, Louise Jones, who resided in Somerville, Tennessee, in the 1950s, she discussed how difficult it was living amid the demeaning economic restrictions. She and her husband Floyd, both educators, would have to drive to the town of Eads in the next county to purchase gas. The couple had to always make sure the car had plenty of fuel because they never knew where they would need to drive to find an accommodating gas station. Jones said a gas distributor once suggested they get a small gas tank for their back yard for convenience. (After my father was denied service at local gas stations, he purchased a gas tank that was situated in our back yard. Gas distributors filled the tank on site, providing fuel for vehicles and farm equipment and circumventing economic barriers for Blacks.) When the Joneses needed prescriptions filled, they would drive to Jackson, more than 45 minutes away from Fayette County. She also said various groups from Nashville would bring supplies and food items to people who had been blacklisted (Jones, 2019). President John F. Kennedy even authorized shipments of food to Haywood and Fayette counties, much to the chagrin of local white supremacists who argued the food was not needed (Wynn, 1996). In their eyes, Blacks could work and purchase their own food given the vast acres of unpicked cotton. This claim contradicted their earlier stance that Black workers were not in demand because of advancements in machinery like automated cotton pickers.

White business owners were expected to abide by the blacklist and deny service to Black patrons whose names were listed as registered voters. As noted by Blackburn and Coughlin (1991), Oren and Sarah Lemmons owned a store in Stanton in Haywood County and were run
out of business when they continued to serve Black customers (p. 137). Leo and Frances Redfern’s business suffered the same fate when they ignored the blacklist (1991). There were some White citizens who also resisted the racist mandates inflicted upon local Black residents.

White leaders in Brownsville began conducting meetings to devise plans of retaliation. Generational relationships between landowners and sharecroppers—some spanning 40 years—ended abruptly, leaving scores of exploited Black adults and children, literally, out in the cold (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1961). According to the Civil Rights Commission’s report, “300 Negroes comprising 48 families had been told to move by January 1, 1961” (p. 93). Blacks were relegated to a field outside of the town of Brownsville to erect tents in which to live.

Curiously, I learned about Tent City in Haywood County only a few years ago—a subject that requires more research. This speaks to the erasure of pivotal events that could help knit together a fractured history.

Forced eviction, like what had occurred in Fayette County, took its toll on any Black person in Haywood County who attempted to register to vote. There were other measures enacted that sought to cut off access to basic necessities. The report by the Civil Rights Commission outlines the economic restrictions on members of the Haywood County Civic & Welfare League, which were some of the prongs of the U.S. government’s lawsuit.

The white community levied economic sanctions against the Negroes involved in the league movement. In Haywood County white persons conducted meetings whose only known purpose was to devise means to thwart Negro registration efforts. Copies of the Negro Civic & Welfare League charter, together with the names of charter members, were circulated. Negroes whose names appeared on the list were denied credit by certain
...merchants, and landowners "were pressured to evict tenants who were League members, however satisfactory the sharecropper-landlord relationship had been" (pp. 92-93).

Decades-long relationships with landowners and loyalty from sharecroppers meant nothing. The eviction of Blacks because of their decision to register to vote led to a federal lawsuit, marking another touchstone of voting rights legislation. The U.S. government’s intervention into the matters of Black disenfranchisement provided, at least, documentation of the criminality and ruthlessness behind voter intimidation.

After thorough investigation of these events, the Government filed suit on September 13, 1960, against 29 defendants, including 2 banks. By amendment on November 18, 1960, the Government joined 36 more defendants. This suit was soon followed by a suit regarding Fayette, filed December 14, 1960. Rather than seek a further amendment, the Government filed a second suit concerning Haywood on December 1, 1960, against 10 more defendants, bringing to 75 the number of persons named as defendants in the Haywood suits (p. 93).

Wynn (1996) notes that after a series of court proceedings and appeals regarding the lawsuits filed on behalf of the civic leagues in Haywood and Fayette counties, a federal appellate court halted the evictions of Black citizens with a caveat that supported “legitimate causes” (p. 216). These cases, ignited by the indomitable fortitude of rural Black citizens in West Tennessee, would broaden the path toward legislation that would benefit African Americans across the country. They would be the first federal lawsuits filed on behalf of Black citizens, serving as a blueprint for legislation that introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It would take 95 years of murder, violence, eviction, and intimidation for the United States to formally enact legislation to
uphold the Fifteenth Amendment and, again, give Black men the right to vote (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2022).

Community organizer and local NAACP charter member Tom Sanderlin could not make sense of the complexities involved in Blacks trying to secure voting rights. As noted in a published narrative by Couto (1991), Sanderlin candidly explains the importance of the vote from the perspective of Black citizens and how some responded when they were categorically restricted from participating in the process. Telling Black people what they could not do was motivation for action.

If they had just opened up and said, “All ya’ll niggers come on up here, register and vote,” it wouldn’t have been a bit of problem because they wouldn’t have went. But when we found out that they were trying to keep the vote from us, then we went to getting the folks to register and vote. We knowed it was important. I knew by reading, reading the best reading I could, at night sometime. I knew what registering and voting meant in the county, but a lot of them didn’t even pay it no attention (p. 39).

The tumultuous events in West Tennessee emboldened several Black people to seek public office and change discriminatory policies from within. My father, Jesse Giles, and Currie Porter Boyd, both ran for two county court clerk seats in Haywood County in 1965. The article appearing in The Jackson Sun makes a point of identifying the Black candidates by race; White candidates are listed by their names (p. 6). “Two Negroes are running for the County Court” is how the paragraph begins referencing my father and Boyd. The capitalization of “County Court” without the title of clerk gives an erroneous implication of their desired office. (In a later reference, my father’s name is misspelled.) The next sentence states, “Rawlins W. Moore, county court clerk for 30 years is opposed by William Joyner, Brownsville radio and TV repairman.” These
individuals are named sans ethnicity and their professions are included, clearly an attempt to elevate their status and give a coded endorsement. Later in the news article, another Black candidate is mentioned: “Negro Joe S. Taylor is in the race for road commissioner from Districts 7, 9, and 11, and is opposed by H. D. Floyd and Elbert Stewart.” The Jackson Sun story makes no attempt to hide its bias in the reporting of Black candidates running in the upcoming primary election.

In a content analysis of The States-Graphic from the early 1960s, Bond Hopson (2005) notes the scant news devoted to Black subjects and how those stories were framed. Various demographics including economic class and gender factored into news coverage related to Black citizens, but none more so than race.

The community was majority African American and was almost neglected and ignored, except in stories about crime and catastrophe, or when there was some interaction between them and Whites. The Brownsville States-Graphic seemed to treat all African Americans the same, whether they were land or business owners or unemployed--they were Negro first and anything else second (p. 12).

Still, the racial environment for Black Americans, particularly those living in segregated areas, was hostile and pervasive. In 1959, Brownsville sheriff Tip Hunter gave his assessment of local Blacks to Jet magazine (Johnson Publishing Company, 1959) after stating they had the same rights as White people.

You got to understand we got two types of Nigras in this town: Niggers and colored people. Now the niggers make trouble and ain’t no count. The colored people go to church and get something out of it. They don’t cause trouble. They’re decent (p. 15).
Statements like these were neither shocking or rare. They were the common sentiments of White supremacists and enforcers of the ruling class. It seems impossible to think any actions could penetrate the hardline worldviews of people intent on eviscerating a Black presence. For years, racial justice advocates at the grassroots level chipped away at an unrelenting unjust system.

The year 1965 would mark a significant frame in my family’s work to assist with preparing community members to vote. One civil rights worker from Indiana lived with my family for several weeks in the summer of that year. Paul A. Thomas, a sociology professor at DePauw University, traveled to Haywood County with a group organized by the Quakers whose mission was to register Black citizens. I have vivid memories of Thomas’ stay in our home while he and my parents participated in efforts to improve life for Black people. One of the roles my parents had, along with other community workers, was to teach adults how to fold the paper ballot before casting their vote. There was a literal method to the madness. If ballots were not folded the way the rules directed Black voters, their votes would be discarded. This was one of many examples of voter suppression.

Disenfranchisement was not the sole issue. Illiteracy was rampant throughout much of the South, and it challenged the advancement of civil rights groups. This agricultural region relied on the labor of Black hands and White power structures made sure educational attainment was out of reach. Being uneducated sharecroppers was the desired social and economic position in which White power holders wanted Black individuals. If Black Americans could not read, they could not exert their civic force in the voting process. Mr. Thomas, as my family called him, helped prepare Black citizens for the registration process, teaching adults—many of them in their golden years—basic reading skills. He also cautiously talked to Black tenant farmers about registering to vote, something they had never done in their lifetime. Having a nonconfrontational
conversation with a White person was also an infrequent occurrence for many Black people. In a news story I produced featuring Mr. Thomas in 1999, he described the trepidation many sharecroppers had about this new concept of registering to vote. The risk was too great for some.

Her boss man, [a] White man, told her after we had started this that if she continued that reading thing with us, she would have to leave, and she couldn’t stay in that house where all these people were depending on her. So, when we arrived that day, she said, ‘Mr. Thomas, you can’t come back here anymore’ (Giles, 1999).

The threat to Blacks registering to vote was real for not only the residents, but for the out-of-town workers as well. A White man living in the home of a Black family in an all-Black rural community could not help but draw attention—especially one driving a small foreign car. Even with Mr. Thomas hiding his Morris Minor convertible behind our house to elude racial terrorist groups, he eventually received a dire warning that prompted my father to secretly escort Mr. Thomas out of town to ensure his safety. Whiteness was not a safeguard in the South when advocating for racial equity and justice.

Paul Thomas was one of several White civil rights workers from the North who came to Haywood and Fayette counties in the 1960s, living and working with Black families to assist with voter registration efforts. Virgie Bernhardt Hortenstine is a woman I also recall from my childhood who lived with our neighbors and visited our home occasionally. She was a leader in the civil rights group Operation Freedom. Much of her work, including accounts of the violence inflicted upon Black residents and White freedom workers in West Tennessee, is documented in articles, books, and personal notes. Blackburn and Coughlin (1991) include accounts of her work alongside peace activist Maurice McCrackin (pp. 143-144). A Quaker from Ohio, Hortenstine led the grassroots work of the Fayette-Haywood Workcamps and brought groups of northern
college students to West Tennessee to complete various construction jobs and teach educational and employment skills to Black residents (The University of Memphis, 2023). In 1961, Hortenstine vividly describes in her typewritten notes the oppressive conditions people living in Fayette County’s Tent City endured.

The tents of Freedom Village had just been equipped with wooden floors when we visited it on February 2. The lumber for these floors was provided as part of Operation Freedom’s program of financial aid to the sharecroppers of Fayette[d] and Haywood counties of southwestern Tennessee who were evicted by their white landlords because they registered to vote. An almost-freezing rain had fallen all that day, and a tent in the mud scarcely seemed like a home as the children came off the school bus at the end of the school day. Yet the men were chopping wood for the stoves, and inside the tents it was warm from the wood fires. The tents were dark inside, lighted only by a kerosene lamp, but the farmers who lived there told us that next week they would have electric lights (Hortenstine, 1961).

The haunting commentary by Hortenstine makes the suffering of Tent City dwellers all too real, even decades later. Many workers from the North had their own versions of chillingly violent encounters. As noted by Blackburn and Coughlin (1991), Presbyterian minister and civil rights activist Maurice McCrackin is remembered for his relentless national protests, arrests, imprisonment, beatings, and hunger strikes. These experiences occurred in West Tennessee at various times and in other parts of the country. McCrackin made his first trip to the area in 1961 to “investigate the Tennessee situation” (p. 136).

As more White Americans became exposed to the images and news clips recounting the terror Black southern experienced daily, there were some whose piqued curiosity lured them and
their cameras into the region’s racial quagmire. Robert Young (2012), a White Jewish filmmaker from New York ventured into Fayette County in 1960 (p. 93). After a chilly and brusque welcome from local law enforcement, Young would learn firsthand how dangerous collecting visual narratives was, particularly those that promoted freedom and equity for Blacks in this rural area.

In the end I spent several weeks in Fayette County. In addition to attending the first NAACP meeting that ever took place, I interviewed countless black residents who told me about both their hopes and their fears. They also warned me not to eat in restaurants for fear of having arsenic put in my food. I was shepherded around town, lying on the floor of a car. It became obvious that there was no way that I could take a film crew into that environment without endangering not only them but also the people we filmed. This was a big disappointment, for I was determined to tell a story that would capture what was happening in the South (p. 94).

Even the infinite privilege of whiteness could not penetrate hegemonic power structures in the South. The contributions of White individuals and groups require closer examination to understand how they navigated Southern spaces and racial boundaries in the thick of racial violence during the Civil Rights Movement, specifically in West Tennessee.

For decades, America would witness other instances of oppression and acts of racial violence and accept them as the cost of being Black. This was a transaction Blacks rejected. If African Americans were not permitted to vote and being intimidated, evicted, and murdered as they attempted to, they would demand—again—from the United States what was rightfully theirs. Many can recall the horrendous moments that led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of
1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Media allowed audiences to see some of the vicious and humiliating attacks that were meant to eradicate any hopes of freedom for Black Americans. Television network news outlets collected and distributed visuals that would forever alter Americans’ understanding of restriction and resistance. Gnarled faces of White racists framing the stoic Black teenage girl wearing a crisp dress and sunglasses, clutching her notebook, and making her way to Arkansas’ Little Rock Central High School is an iconic image symbolizing Black Americans’ fight for access to equitable education.

Fighting for the freedom to be Black has long been a flashpoint in American society typically met with challenges to restrict movement, assembly, political agency, and education. Most importantly, the White agenda has sought to fully control Black Americans, for if that could be managed, there would not be a need for movement, assembly, political agency, or education of Blacks.

**Introduction of Interview Subjects**

The individuals who were selected to discuss the political setting in Haywood County in the late 1950s are Dorothy Granberry and John Ashworth. They were on the cusp of adulthood when the nation’s attention was trained on measures to prevent Blacks from voting. They were coming of age and part of the generation that would witness some of this country’s most significant social changes as young adults. Their academic and advocacy work later in life also contributed to the decision to include their voices in this study. Granberry, an African American female, was born in 1943 in Stanton, Tennessee, and is a retired university professor and social psychologist. She is also an author and resides in Frederick, Maryland. Granberry was 16 years old when the federal lawsuit for voting rights was filed. John Ashworth, an African American male, was born in 1943 in Middle Tennessee, roughly a three-hour drive from Brownsville. As a
teenager, he moved to Brownsville to live with his father, having been raised by his grandparents near Nashville after his mother’s death. Ashworth is a former commercial airline manager and Vietnam veteran. He now resides in Brownsville and is a social justice advocate serving in various roles with different groups. Ashworth was 16 years old when the federal lawsuit for voting rights was filed.

Additionally, Mildred Roxborough and Cynthia Bond provide commentary on the county’s racial and political environment because of their involvement with the NAACP and their ongoing work for Black voting rights. Their perspectives on hegemonic systems in Haywood County and the ways in which Black citizens resisted the status quo are added to this section.

**Analysis of Interviews**

The ebbs and flows of Black enfranchisement in Haywood County since the era of enslavement would define the political process for generations. Roughly 100 years after Dorothy Granberry’s enslaved great-grandparents lived, she would find herself existing in the same environment as they had—in a society where Blacks did not have the right to vote. However, she knew that had not always been the case.

Yes, I did know that Blacks had the right to vote at some earlier point in time. I didn't know the full story. I actually only came to know the full story as I got older and did research on my own. But when they [voting rights advocates] started, it was like whispered in the church and people came and talked to people, and so on like that. This is like maybe around 1956, 1957 when I remembered, you know, people coming and talking, things being said in the church and so on like that (Granberry, 2022).
The Black church was a space for worship and political strategizing. Saving one’s soul was not the only objective there. Black people needed to simultaneously save themselves and that meant having a say in the political process and making congregants aware of changes on the horizon. John Ashworth was a teenager when the push for voting rights moved into the litigation phase in Haywood and Fayette counties.

I don't know that I had the awareness that it was a lawsuit per se, but during that period 1959, the 60s, 'cause I graduated in '61, but in that three-year interim period, I knew that there was a lot of people that were leaving the farm, being forced out, were moving into the city of Brownsville. And there were a lot of other people moving into Tent City. As a matter of fact, I actually visited Tent City and so I knew and had the awareness 'cause I heard the discussion among the adults of what was taking place of people who were seeking to vote, and they were being put off the land. And it was a bit, quite honest, was a very scary period. There was also a lot of mass meetings that were held at First Baptist Church [in Brownsville], and I attended some of those. And, I mean, it [the community] was just simply trying to organize. It was black people trying to find a way to survive with what was going on. I mean, there was a great, great deal of fear in the Black community about what was taking place. But, clearly, we see people that we knew that were literally being forced off of land they had lived on, probably even some of the ancestors may have even been on the same land, you know, before or right after the Civil War (Ashworth, 2022).

Fear of White people retaliating against Black citizens who were working to empower themselves was at the forefront of voter activism. Yet, many Black people fought in spite of their fear and developed ways to advance the movement. Communicative methods were adopted and
shaped to accommodate the needs of a group. For many Black communities, sharing information is communal and oftentimes presented in a way to resist injustice. The Black church is central to disseminating information related to religious and social issues. Black businesses also were designated hubs for “getting the word out.” Cynthia Bond recalls how her family’s business could be instantly transformed into a lyceum.

The only thing we had was each other, to talk to each other about things, because we didn't have a Black newspaper. Just a few people got the newspaper out of Memphis, and we just didn't know what was going on a lot of times until somebody like Dr. C. P. Boyd [Currie Porter Boyd] came back home to work. And when he came back, things really started happening at the time … because he had been away and had gotten a doctorate. And I don't remember the school now, but anyway, he was very smart, very talented, and he came back. And I remember he was the first person I heard say we are going to register, and we are going to vote. Daddy had him to come to Golden Circle [her family’s insurance company] to speak one day and, oh, he was a great speaker. And he said, ‘I want to let you know that we are going to register and we are going to vote.’ Boy!

Everybody just clapped and it just, the crowd, oh, they were just so happy to hear, and it just thrilled me to death. I was quite young. I was there to hear him speak. But I looked at him and I always told him, I said, Dr. Boyd, you are my hero because he was the first man I heard, really to make that statement that we're going to register and we're going to vote (Bond C. R., 2022).

Boyd had returned to his ancestral roots in Haywood County after teaching in Decatur County, Tennessee, and later receiving his master’s degree at Iowa State University. Upon his return, he and other local leaders formed the Haywood County Voters League in 1957 (Couto, 1991).
Despite Haywood County’s distinction as a Black majority county in population, the balance of power rested with Whites. Dorothy Granberry’s young life in the early 1940s was shrouded in this reality and served as a reminder within every aspect of life in Stanton, Tennessee.

Black people, actually in the sense of public life, did not have a public life. They had a public life in the sense of, well no, it probably would’ve been a religious life. But in terms of public life like making decisions about what's going to happen in the town, how tax dollars will be spent, Blacks had no voice whatsoever in that … I said I lived in an all-Black world, but I forgot there was a White family that lived down the road from us, maybe a mile from us. And there were two boys in that family, and I recall when we were maybe about 8 or 9, something like that, and they were around my age, they announced that they had to be addressed as Mr. So-and-So. And I remember saying, well, I guess your name will never cross my lips because I will not be addressing you as Mr. So-and-So (Granberry, 2022).

The way of life for Black people in the South was in sharp contrast to the way Granberry imagined life should be. Hearing stories from her grandparents and reading books as a child deepened her understanding of racial difference and inequality and the impact on her life.

I’m thinking, you know, as a teenager, as a high school student. Well, I understood in some sense the power to vote. I really—and I still believe in the notion of democracy—and my notion of democracy is not democracy equals capitalism. My notion of democracy is that all people participate in the government (Granberry, 2022).

Ashworth recalls the heaviness of segregation in Haywood County as a child when he would come to visit his father. His grandparents in Wilson County raised him after his mother died.
during childbirth. Wilson County was and is predominantly White. His father remained in Brownsville where he worked as a teacher. Even as a child, Ashworth understood the social and racial boundaries that placed limitations on his Black body.

When my grandfather died, and I came to live with my father in 1956, Haywood County was an extraordinarily segregated place. Blacks stayed in their place. They knew what their place was without anybody telling them what their place was. And Whites knew that, which pretty much they had the freedom to go, to do anything they wanted to do. But it was just a very repressive society. In fact, I think there were probably more unwritten rules for African Americans in Haywood County that were well known than there were in Wilson County. And I say that because of the sheer numbers in Haywood County meant that whites had to do something very, very overtly to exercise that control, whereas in Wilson County, the numbers were not significant enough to cause any kind of challenge to anything. And so, without anyone saying it, you could literally breathe it in the air, and I may be saying breathe it in the air now because I’m older looking back, but it was there even then, even though I could not describe it then or articulate it, you know, then, in the way I’m able to articulate it now. But it was just, it was this ever present, unseen force that you just knew was out there, that you knew to stay in your place. You knew what to do. You knew what not to do (Ashworth, 2022).

For those who dared to venture beyond their place, they immediately felt the consequences of their actions. While Black freedom was already limited, Black resistance was another reason to make life more difficult. Cynthia Bond was one of several Black Haywood County citizens who challenged the status quo in an ongoing battle to have their political voices heard. Humiliation was a tactic Blacks regularly faced, and in many instances, their lives hinged on their reaction to
the acts meant to break them. Bond describes her resistance to white supremacy as “an honor.”

Nearly 20 years after Williams’ murder, there was a resurgence of advocacy in Haywood County, and Blacks focused again on obtaining their voting rights. She details how she and other local Black citizens waited outside the courthouse in the summer heat determined to register to vote.

You know, we stood. We decided we wanted to register to vote. And so, we went and stood for days and days, waiting to register to vote. There might have been 200 of us or more and they might register one person or three people that day. And you just stand all day long—old, young, crippled, whatever it was. Black people stood all day long waiting to register to vote… Naturally, some of us never were registered because they just took one or two and would register them. And when they finally called me, I went. They took me downstairs. You didn't know what was happening. You were scared to death when they came to get you because Buddy Sullivan, the terrible, terrible sheriff with a big dog, was the one who came to get you. So, you didn't know what was going to happen to you when you left with him and nobody else could go with you. And you'd get downstairs, they'd be laughing, talking, and drinking coffee, and you'd be standing there. They paid you no attention. And then finally, way after 30 minutes or more, they might go on and register you. It was really rough (Bond C. R., 2022).

Waiting…and more waiting…is a common trait of movement. The resolve of waiting can be seen in the implementation of slave revolts to the era of Black Lives Matter protests. Resilience is required to wait, and change occurs when the wait is over.

The consequences of crossing the racial lines drawn by White power holders were not subtle. Rules of control were clearly etched in the minds of Black citizens and Whites provided
constant reminders of infractions. Even a rumor that a Black person in Haywood County was considering to register to vote meant instant retaliation. This kind of intimidation would continue for decades. Ashworth explains how people who were already living under the oppressive mandates of Jim Crow experienced even more hardship. At the intersection of race and voting rights was a physical symbol of oppression and ostracization—two things that were guaranteed when Blacks sought justice.

Tent City came about during that period primarily in Haywood County and Fayette County. And what was happening was that people who were sharecropping—who attempted to vote—the people, landowners, literally put them off the land. You’ve got no place to go because they [White people] owned the land, they owned the little shacks that they [Black sharecroppers] lived in. So, when Blacks tried to exercise their right to vote, these people that were descendants of the folks who stopped their ancestors from voting, it was like, no, you’re not going to do that and no, we are not going to have that. And so, you’ve got to move. And they had no place to go (Ashworth, 2022).

For Dorothy Granberry and her family, being at the mercy of White landowners jeopardized their survival. While they were never evicted, the family suffered because of economic and political systems already in motion.

So, that year was, at least for me, a year of terror, meaning in the sense of there was no security. Understanding that everybody you know could be, could, that they didn’t have a place to live anymore, you know. Where would we go? And stuff like that. The other thing is the Whites who controlled the county, I think we were using things, like we were almost at the point of starvation with some years, you know. Like if the crop failed, and so on. And again, remember because we had no political say so. so even stuff like the
distribution of surplus commodities, they did that in the 1950s, you know, many of us were virtually starving, and it was not just in Haywood County. Well, you know, they used it as a political tool and so on like that (Granberry, 2022).

Cynthia Bond recounts the economic, physical, and psychological threats against Blacks. As a young Black professional in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the South, she had an acute awareness of the need for Blacks’ collective voice to break through racial barriers. Although Bond’s family would have been considered upper middle-class, its economic standing held little to no significance in terms of accessing voting rights.

It was just hard. Everything was hard for Black people because most of them did not have jobs, and if they did have jobs, if they worked for Whites, they were oppressed. And even the people, when you went to register, any Black person that went to register, his name was floated around to all the stores, and if he had credit with one of the stores, they’re [business owners] calling and saying, ‘Now we want that money, right now.’ And that was the way that they did them … We had never had a voice in Haywood County. We hadn’t registered at all and [were] just trying to register then. And they were determined that we were not going to be registered. And they were showing people if you register, something’s going to happen to you. And that’s when they were, that’s when they started, you know, killing folks and people were having accidents, and houses were being burned. And everything happened and our NAACP people were forced, really, to leave town (Bond C. R., 2022).

As Mildred Roxborough explains, there was too much at risk if Black citizens became involved in the political process. Black freedom depended on Black voters. No one understood that better than White supremacists.
And you were not going to vote because they [White politicians] wouldn't have an office if you did because of the disproportionate number of people who were Black and who would be registered voters. They could outvote—the population was about three to one, you understand (Roxborough, 2022).

The irony of mostly poor, Black, disenfranchised people in a rural section of West Tennessee becoming the catalyst for legislation that would change the national political landscape is remarkable. It would take years of this political dance of intimidation and resistance before local Blacks noticed any meaningful advancement. The year 1965 was somewhat transformative, due in part to the earlier contributions of two social justice groups intent on having their say in the voting booth and the signing of the Voting Rights Act.

**Major Rhetorical Themes: Restriction and Resistance**

Despite the efforts to deny Black citizens in the South the right to vote, there were strategies at work to defy the pervasive Jim Crow laws. As voting rights advocates in Haywood and Fayette counties clashed with White supremacists, examples of resistance were evident within the local movement. Dorothy Granberry and John Ashworth noted that despite segregation, many Blacks in Haywood County made the choice to create a better life. This choice was not without risk and they were well aware of what could happen when Blacks moved beyond any semblance of fear. Their very being was informed by racist laws that were constant reminders of how they should exist. Granberry and Ashworth were entering adulthood when residents again galvanized the push to register to vote. As Granberry mentioned, her understanding of how a democratic society relied on the freedom to vote inspired her advocacy. Ashworth knew people who were pushed out of the only homes they knew and forced to live in tents in the middle of a field in the dead of winter. They both witnessed the humiliation and
restrictions that were part of everyday life and were determined not to transfer them into their future.

Respondents Cynthia Bond and Mildred Roxborough experienced more directly the intimidation and callousness associated with hegemonic rule. While all lived and moved through segregated spaces in the 1950s and 1960s, as adults, Bond and Roxborough shared similar personal experiences that required immense fortitude. They were on the front lines of change and dealt with the consequences of registering to vote amid horrendous social and political restrictions.

A closer look at some of the rhetorical themes reveals the nuance amid the force of restriction and resistance. Patterns and trends break through the restrictive measures White power holders and Black citizens find a way to show their strength under pressure. I will explain how these themes help to characterize the fortitude of equity-seeking individuals and a determined community.

**Strength in Numbers**

One immutable fact about the political landscape of Haywood County is its majority-Black population. This truth created consequences for Blacks who sought to harness the power of the vote. Without a doubt, shifts in social and political life post-Reconstruction would have changed drastically had Black citizens been permitted to vote. Haywood and Fayette counties shared similar racial demographics, and these numbers were the foundation of the troubles that would plague the region for decades. The rationale behind limiting access to the voting booth was logical only to those who wielded control over the Black citizens who outnumbered them. Restricting voting rights would secure the continuation of this imbalanced political system. There were no subtle suggestions for Blacks to just remain disenfranchised. The messages and
tactics were severe, and murder was the outcome that would prevent Blacks from casting a ballot. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, there are published cases of the terrorist acts suffered by Black Americans. White supremacists went to great lengths to make sure Black persons were excluded from the democratic process—an action that would loosen the oppressive grip on Blacks that made them second-class citizens. A reimagined Haywood County where Black citizens could rightfully register and vote would have altered social, economic, and political structures, allowing Blacks to have agency over the way they chose to construct the systems that governed their lives. This was a reality the White ruling class fought so viciously to prevent.

Families like Elbert Williams’ scattered throughout the country and were forever changed by the threat and act of lynching. Williams, Ollie Bond, Odell Sanders, and many other Black community leaders understood the power a Black voting bloc possessed. They knew their strength and Black people’s ability to effect change. The push and pull of resistance and restriction defined a movement, and Black citizens’ movement never ceased. In an era of racial violence and trauma, they devised ways to disseminate information and challenge the very government that sought to relegate them to the margins. These were everyday people, but they were keen strategists and influencers who knew their collective power. They risked their lives to register to vote and summoned the temerity to run for office in an uphill race. Their work deserves more study, as it could offer insight into harnessing political power amid political turmoil. Knowing more about these individuals could help highlight the importance of local political systems and serve as an impetus to addressing voter apathy’s connection to a history of restrictive voting policies.
Even now, there are remnants of voter intimidation and suppression. The actions may not be as blatant as lynching or placing bombs under the homes of Black families and detonating them, but the freedoms associated with voting rights for Blacks who live in certain districts have been eviscerated. Fewer polling stations, irrational and inconsistent registration policies, shortened early voting periods, and the random removal of voters from the rolls are but a few of the issues Black voters face today. The slicing and dicing of districts that are overwhelmingly Black ensures that those citizens will likely not have their interests or concerns heard by elected officials. There is strength in Black numbers and White power holders recognize and fear this political fact. Fear was the crux of Jim Crow policy, and it continues to restrict Black freedom now.

In November 2023, the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals dealt a major setback to the Voting Rights Act when it ruled that only the U.S. Attorney General can bring lawsuits concerning voter discrimination, prohibiting organizations like the NAACP from filing claims on behalf of citizens (Durkee, 2023). Over the years, the historic piece of legislation has been stripped down into shreds of a barely recognizable document. In its current state, members of the Haywood and Fayette civic leagues would not have been permitted to file the 1959 lawsuit that eventually opened the door for Blacks across the country to vote. The irony cannot be ignored. Today, grassroots activists like Odell Sanders, John McFerren, Currie Porter Boyd, and my father Jesse Giles, could not have summoned their collective agency to help improve the political and social conditions of Black folk through legal measures. The actions of those determined Black citizens in western Tennessee informed Washington politicians on how to craft legislation for the Voting Rights Act. Now, Black Americans and other persons of color are in a vulnerable and precarious
state with legislation increasingly jeopardizing the right to vote, despite their strength in numbers.

The Workaround

The hardships that Blacks have faced since being stolen and deposited in what is now known as the United States have been many. As documented in personal writings, oral narratives, art, and song, Blacks in this country have fomented a cultural standard for *making a way out of no way*. The workaround has been evident in every segment of history where Blacks in this country—even before we were Americans—have exhibited an ingenious spirit to see beyond their present situations and work toward something better. I often wonder why this undeniable skill is underestimated by policymakers seeking to restrict Black freedom. By now, one would think, the endless efforts to undermine equitable access by Blacks would have ceased. Black folk always have a workaround to resist restriction.

It seems unfathomable that retaliation against Black citizens seeking to register to vote would include eviction in the midst of winter. Families in the late 1950s and early 1960s remained together and scraped together a living under the most dire circumstances. The pop-up concept of housing presented itself under the name of Tent City in both Haywood and Fayette counties. I hesitate to list these makeshift settlements as a workaround for obtaining decent housing, but Black people assembled what they could, and they survived. It was inhumane to subject men, women (some pregnant), and young children to the outdoor elements because of forced eviction. A Black man, Shepard Towles, offered his land when sharecroppers suddenly became nomads. Someone donated tents (still unnamed) to offer some semblance of shelter. By no means was this an ideal living situation, but those army surplus tents sprouting up among the brown weeds left over from the fall’s harvest represented vibrancy. Those displaced persons
were bent, but not broken. Their agency was established in the middle of a field. They held together the family unit, they sent their children to school, they cobbled together the bare necessities. They lived. No doubt, when racists passed by, they had to be both impressed and angered by that public showing of Black being, Black ingenuity, and Black resilience. The construction of Tent City symbolized a visible and resistive response to the ruling class.

Another workaround for evicted tenants centered on financial sustainability. Black women in Haywood County used newfound skills to craft leather handbags which they were able to sell and contribute to their families’ wellbeing. A collaborative business plan with a White freedom worker circumvented the entrepreneurial limitations placed on Black residents. This underground assembly line run by the all-female Haywood Handicrafters League produced income for men and women who chose the right to vote over picking the oppressors’ cotton. The labor of poor Black women helped fuel the economy of a Black community that had been cut off from the resources and services available to White residents. Their hands could do more than domestic or agricultural work. This workaround revealed a resistance to manipulative labor arrangements like sharecropping and Blacks having ownership of their own labor.

The Black church, in and of itself, represents resistance. This physical space—then and now—offers reassurance and respite for Black worshippers when neither can be found in a world of racial and social restrictions. The community in which I grew up and the surrounding communities were defined by the churches that anchored them. Mildred Roxborough, Cynthia Bond, Dorothy Granberry, John Ashworth, Francine Madrey, and Samuel Sanderlin all spoke of the multiple roles the Black church played to inform and energize their family members and other citizens. The structures’ usefulness extended beyond a Sunday morning time frame. As a workaround for silencing Black voices, Black churches have historically served as centers that
symbolize faith and freedom—the freedom for Blacks to express their frustrations out of the gaze of White power holders. These edifices were gathering spaces for activists who could not risk publicizing their strategy sessions. Black churches were places that provided spiritual covering while equipping attendees with the tools they needed to fight injustice. Messages of deliverance within a fiery sermon represented the metaphorical workaround for how Blacks could imagine escaping oppressive systems by making a way out of no way.

**My Land v. My Place**

Even though the right to vote is associated with citizenship, land ownership has historically been a caveat in exercising that right. If one is a citizen, he or she should be able to freely participate in making civic and societal decisions. That was not the case then and that is not the case now. Blacks in Haywood County in the 1960s who owned land were spared being evicted when they attempted to register to vote. Having one’s own property meant agency and security, albeit loosely. Ownership did not prevent racists from terrorizing Black families in their homes. In many cases, Black homeowners were targeted because of this distinction.

One of the mantras of White supremacists is that Blacks should stay in their place or know their place. Throughout this research, this message has been evident in first-person accounts of White power holders giving their assessment of Black presence. Despite property ownership, Blacks have no *place* in the eyes of racists. *Place* for Blacks does not denote sanctuary or peace when interruptions can occur because of one’s blackness. The struggle for Blacks in Haywood County (my family included) was complex and tangled with the supposed concept of political agency that came with land ownership. In reality, there was no real difference between Black landowners and Black sharecroppers in terms of political autonomy. Neither group could readily exert any power and cast a ballot. Even though many owned a place
(a home and property), they had no place in American society. White supremacist policies assured that.

One of the most remarkable impacts of the work of Black activists is the way in which they claimed their place. Black Americans knew their place and believed it was just as much theirs as White people claimed it for themselves. Their place was wherever they were, whether it was in a long snaking line inching toward a voter registration table, in a muddy tent in the middle of a field, or in the living room of their home. The resilience shown in the face of restriction helped define who Black people were and they did not let others determine where their place should be. This resistance cemented the belief that Black people’s place was beyond the marginalized spaces that restricted them from equitable resources and civic involvement.

**Accomplices in the Struggle**

The news of what was happening in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s prompted White academics, community workers, and college students to leave the comforts of their homes and travel to the deep recesses of rural West Tennessee. Media assisted in painting the horrid pictures of everyday events affecting everyday Black people in the South. White activists who came to Haywood County put their lives in jeopardy working on behalf of unregistered and displaced citizens. Rather than writing a check to support the needs of struggling Black residents, people like Paul Thomas, Vergie Hortenstine, Eric Weinberger, and Maurice McCrackin embedded themselves in the region and openly worked alongside Black activists and community leaders. They became targets because of their otherness. All four were northerners, expressed liberal views on race relations, and publicly interacted with Blacks. Either of these descriptors was enough to cause great harm or death to a White person in the South. Restrictions were also placed on their whiteness and privilege while in the region.
While the White activists’ local work and contributions to the Civil Rights Movement call for extensive study, their approach to moving the needle toward progress was not self-serving. Teaching Black people literacy skills so they could interpret voter materials and ballots and formalizing Black women’s entrepreneurial skills to increase evicted families’ incomes were pragmatic steps to begin addressing systemic racial issues. In order to understand the racial environment, they opted for an up-close and personal view and became accomplices in the struggle. They were also careful not to inadvertently bring harm to the people they sought to assist. It was a delicate balance for a White outsider to live in the midst of restriction and resistance.

**Transition**

The signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law revitalized the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and prohibited “any jurisdiction from implementing voting prerequisites that discriminate on race, color, or language” (HeinOnline, n.d.). This ostensibly signaled the end of evictions, the poll tax, voting tests, and precision in ballot folding. Years later, they would be replaced with gerrymandering, limited polling sites, and complex voting requirements for districts with high Black populations. In Haywood County now, the power of a collective Black civic voice can be seen in the multi-term election of Brownsville’s first Black mayor and being one of three counties in the conservative state of Tennessee to carry the Democratic presidential ticket many times. (Haywood County joins Shelby and Davidson counties, which represent Memphis and Nashville, respectively.) The fear of White people losing political power has historically led to Black people being on the receiving end of retaliatory actions. That is the vicious cycle of hegemony. The seed was planted when Africans were kidnapped and enslaved in America, and it has manifested itself in a myriad of ways over the past four centuries.
However, fear is but a footnote in the narrative of Black resistance, not the full story. Under oppressive conditions, Black people knew how to work through fear. Fear did not have the power to paralyze them—it propelled them to strategize and shift the narrative. As evinced throughout this study, there are examples showing how people who were pushed to the margins centered their self-worth and brought about change.

The next chapter discusses yet another form of restriction. School desegregation in Haywood County would be a battle that enlisted young people as foot soldiers. Black parents resisted the substandard facilities and funding dedicated to educating their children and demanded the proper resources just as White parents had. Black community leaders and civil rights workers could not shoulder this issue alone. Gaining equality would move into a phase in the mid-1960s that meant sacrificing the wellbeing and safety of their children.
Chapter 5: The Desegregation of Haywood County Schools - 1965

In a somewhat similar attempt as the Little Rock Nine, approximately 40 Black students in Haywood County entered Brownsville’s all-white Haywood High School in 1965. Similar in the fact that both groups embarked upon a mission, but under vastly different circumstances. Eleven years earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that public schools could no longer be segregated. The Little Rock Nine—as the media called the nine Black students—integrated the city’s all-white Central High School in 1957 amid hostility, violence, and restrictions within the school (National Park Service, 2021). Members of the U.S. Army and the National Guard were dispatched. Crowds and media cameras gathered to witness and document the moment Black students would make good on the judgment for desegregating schools. The vitriol directed at the students was captured on film and broadcast on the evening news. Those film images and clips are seared in many Americans’ collective memory and have made the transition into the digital world preserved for generations to come. For Haywood County students, there was no fanfare then and no recognition now. It was as if the landmark day never happened. However, they have the stories and the scars—physical and emotional—to prove their place in history. On the first day of integrating the White school, the insults and epithets cut through the atmosphere like shrapnel, landing squarely onto the Black teenagers who had not been trained for this kind of war.

**Historical Context of the Event and Media Coverage**

There was nothing announcing the monumental change in educational and societal norms in Haywood County. Perhaps, this is why there were no public protests opposing integration by 41 Black students on the first day school in 1965. Opponents would make their displeasure known in other ways once Black students enrolled and word spread that they were there. The school system had always been segregated—separate, yet very unequal. The premise for Black
families’ decision to send their children to the White high school was to ensure their children had access to the resources their tax dollars were paying for—resources that historically had been reserved for White students.

Dorothy Granberry, one of the study participants, pointed out transportation challenges Black students faced getting to school during her childhood. Her neighbor, Curtis Jones, who was also my great-uncle, purchased a bus and transported her and other children who lived in her community to school. My grandfather, Jesse Giles, Sr., did the same for the children in the Fredonia community in Stanton in the 1930s. I recall family stories of my grandfather, a farmer with a family, buying an old school bus and my father—a student who was barely a teenager at the time—driving the bus to take the neighborhood Black children to school in the next county. These are the investments—I will not call them sacrifices—that Black parents made to ensure their children—and others—gained the essentials to live and compete in a society not intended for them. The education Black children received then was not the byproduct of their parents’ federal, state, or county tax funds at work. Those dollars were not equitably distributed to Black schools. Black families’ contributions—material, labor-based, financial, and intellectual—funded the education of Black children in many poor, rural communities for more than the first half of the twentieth century.

After generations of *investing* and *making do*, the political climate in Haywood County during the late 1950s and early 1960s dictated change. Black citizens—buoyed by federal legislative decisions—demanded their children begin the benefit from the educational resources they had paid for. The slow and treacherous path to integrating America’s school systems had been well documented, including the vehement refusal by White citizens. Despite the danger in

The decision for states to desegregate, particularly those in the South, had little to do with complying with federal laws. Boards of education and school systems risked losing millions of dollars in federal funding if they did not take action toward dismantling separate and unequal schools. Doing what is right or just is rarely initiated by those with power. Any movement toward morality or justice is typically forced by legislation and never through goodwill or a desire for equality. Surprisingly, Tennessee was the first state to have every school district agree to the terms of the Civil Rights Act and submit compliances to voluntarily desegregate (Southern School News, 1965). These claims were less valuable than the paper on which they were written. Rather than implementing a legitimate plan to desegregate schools, a campaign of terror and harassment ensued.

Except for a short notice in *The States-Graphic* buried below the fold, the local paper did not report on the impending shift. The August 20, 1965, edition included a cryptic announcement that did not mention the arrival of Black students the following week.

Only students who attended Haywood High School during 1964-65 are to report on Monday, Aug. 30. This includes those who were in school at Haywood High last year, in the ninth, tenth or eleventh grades. Only these students are to report Monday (*The States-Graphic*, 1965).

One does not need to read between the lines to know this message was sending a message to Black students. Since no African American students attended Haywood High in 1964, the announcement was clearly intended for White students only, reassuring them that Black students would not interrupt their privileged educational environment.
As part of this study, I examined several editions of *The States-Graphic* online looking for stories about school desegregation. Since this represented a major jolt in Haywood County’s educational system, there would likely be news articles chronicling the endeavor. I was aided in my research by archivists at the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville, in search of *The States-Graphic* article my father had referenced in his letter to the Department of Justice. His letter was dated November 23, 1965, so I requested editions from six months earlier. I was disappointed to learn that initially the archivists could not locate any articles about a large Klan rally in Brownsville. A few days after my request, I received an email containing a file with a front-page scan of the August 20, 1965, edition (see Appendix C). The researcher was a bit skeptical about its usefulness because of the ambiguous wording of the headline and the unusual pairing of two polar opposite groups. It was a fortuitous moment, however, because I had been given a digital version of the 57-year-old article my father likely referenced, which happened to be surrounded by articles related to my research. On one page was a trifecta of rhetoric—three articles outlining restraint and resistance exhibited in the events related to Elbert Williams, voting rights (activism for equality by CORE—the Congress of Racial Equality), and school desegregation.

While the newspaper blurb about the first day of school could have easily been overlooked (it almost was), the newspaper writer boasted in an article in the top left corner of the front page about the “double-header”—a set of demonstrations that had taken place in Brownsville. The headline “Core and Klan Share Stage As Trouble Free Saturday Passes” is actually referencing CORE—the Congress of Racial Equality (*The States-Graphic*, 1965). By omitting the acronym, the paper minimizes the significance of the civil rights organization and insults its work by framing the group’s resistance to barring Blacks from the courthouse
alongside the vitriol of the KKK. The characterizations of the two groups reveal a lack of objectivity, describing the Rev. James Edward Smith of CORE as “a field secretary” who “led some 200 followers around the county courthouse and made a brief talk, which was climaxed by his statement that history had been made when approximately 15 negroes entered the courthouse, and visited the facilities inside” (The States-Graphic, 1965). As a child, I always heard stories about Blacks not being allowed to enter the Haywood County Courthouse. To this day, I have never set foot inside that building.

Conversely, the article mentions the state Klan leader by name who invited “the silent Klan members” to also march around the courthouse and notes that “Imperial Wizard, Robert Shelton, held a crowd of 1500 spellbound for two hours as he pointed out the grasp that communism had on our nation, citing instances to prove his remarks” (The States-Graphic, 1965). The prominent placement of this article overshadows the school announcement, making it clear the importance The States-Graphic placed on celebrating white supremacy. Most notably, however, is the main story’s headline in large, bold print announcing the nomination of George (Buddy) Sullivan as the new sheriff. The “local peace officer of many years experience” worked under Tip Hunter, the sheriff who led the mob in Elbert Williams’ abduction and lynching (The States-Graphic, 1965). On one hand, there is the county’s newly elected top law enforcement official (Blacks were not allowed to register to vote); then, there is the central building for conducting civic matters designated as off-limits to Black citizens. That is a daunting scenario for Black residents, complete with symbolic and literal examples of restriction.

Haywood County’s demographics have not shifted much in nearly 200 years. As Granberry (1997) points out, Black population numbers have remained consistently high.
Large numbers of persons of African descent came into the county as slaves in the 1830s and 1840s, mainly from southern Virginia and contiguous parts of North Carolina, resulting in the population becoming majority black by 1850. Blacks continued to move into this fertile agricultural region through the mid 1870s. Some county districts were as much as 75 percent black five years after the end of the Civil War (p. 44).

History and intimidation are a contentious pair. From a democratic standpoint, it does not seem plausible for a predominantly Black county to have policies that benefit White citizens exclusively. However, from hegemonic and political standpoints, sending Black children to schools that were lacking in resources would be a rational outcome, especially if White citizens were responsible for legislating those policies.

Even though city and county officials had enacted a freedom of choice policy to desegregate schools, intimidation tactics sought to prevent Black and White students from attending school together. In reality, white supremacists wanted to make sure Blacks had no freedoms, certainly none that would position African Americans to have access to the resources White students had always enjoyed. White parents were not enrolling their children in predominantly Black schools under the freedom of choice rule. These were mostly community schools that never received their share of state funding for faculty hires, upgraded facilities, or teaching resources.

Making the decision to send Black students to White schools in Haywood County occurred on the heels of voting rights legislation and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Black parents pushed the country to make good on the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling from more than a decade earlier. As local residents worked to gain parity on social and political levels, they lived amid an active Klan and endured gun violence, house bombings, cross burnings, and
threatening phone calls (United States v. Haywood County Bd. of Ed., 1967). As a small child, I recall being grabbed out of my bed by a sibling and rushed out of our house. Someone had phoned our father and told him there was a bomb under our house. It proved to be a false threat.

This would not be the case for Odell Sanders and his family. Sanders was a civil rights activist and entrepreneur whose home was in the town of Brownsville. Like many of the people mentioned in this study, Sanders’ involvement with the three events is borderless. In one way or another, several individuals’ fight for civil rights occupies more than one space. For years, Sanders had worked to secure voting rights for Blacks in Haywood County and served as assistant executive secretary of the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League (The Herald and Review, 1981). Sanders’ place in Haywood County history is significant. Couto (1993) notes that when African Americans there regained the right to vote in 1960, Sanders was the first Black candidate to run for public office (pp. 217-218). His campaign in 1964 and subsequent defeat did not hamper his work in civil rights. In 1965, Odell and his wife Margie enrolled their children in the county’s all-white school system as part of the freedom of choice policy. To the ire of white supremacists, they had actively resisted the oppressive force Whites held over Blacks. Sanders is described by his daughter, Marcia Sanders-Patterson, as a “foot soldier,” a strong, tall, physically imposing man who took care of the needs of his family and community, and one who people came to if they found themselves in need or in trouble (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017). On the night of May 16, 1966, Sanders’ home was bombed with his wife and children inside. An article in Jet magazine described the events.

Two hours after a cross was burned in the outskirts of Brownsville, Tenn., a bomb exploded, knocking out all the windows of civil rights leader Odell Sanders’ home, ripping weatherboarding from the front of the house and throwing debris onto the lawns
of next-door neighbors on each side. “The whole side of Sanders’ house was about gone,” said Patrolman Homer Lovelace. “But there wasn’t any fire after the explosion.” He said a one-foot hole at the base of Sanders’ house was found, apparently where the charge was placed (Johnson Publishing Company, 1966).

The officer’s statement about there not being a fire appears to be his idea of a silver lining, despite a home in the middle of town being blown apart. The placement of the device affected its trajectory. Sanders’ wife was physically injured after the bomb was detonated, but the entire family was emotionally shaken. Sanders-Patterson said her mother saw a lot of White people driving and walking up and down the street and an ambulance cruising by just before the explosion, as if they were waiting for something to happen. It was around 10 p.m., a time when a crowd would not be in the street, especially on a Monday night. Marcia was 10 years old at the time and recalled the events that night.

I remember when the bomb went off, my mother was in the—we had a beauty shop attached to our home. That was her living. She was a beautician. And so, my father had built a beauty shop next to the house so we could go through the house into the beauty shop. And she was up that night fixing a wig. She told us she was sitting on a stool in front of the windows, and when the bomb went off, the windows shattered. They came in on my mother and she had several cuts to her knees … So, she had cuts and bruises from the glass flying … We were blessed because the bombing went outward instead of underneath the house. They set it under the house, but it blew outwards, so it damaged the homes next to us and the ones down the street from us (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017).
These acts of terrorism were designed to send a message to the entire community, not just the intended victims. Black activists were frequently targeted, and it was unlikely for perpetrators to ever be held accountable or prosecuted. One newspaper account reported the Brownsville mayor saying he saw “no evidence that citizens had to guard their homes against nightrider shootings” (The Kingsport Times, 1966). This was after the Klan was presumed to have bombed the Sanders home. In 2017, while testifying before a special committee of the Tennessee General Assembly that was exploring some of the state’s cold cases from the Civil Rights era, Sanders-Patterson recalled the trauma her mother suffered.

Of course, it affected her quite a bit. She was very fearful, and right after the bombing she did have a nervous breakdown. It was, it was very detrimental to us as children to watch our mother suffer because of what Daddy was doing. We looked up to him, but we had no fear of what would happen to us (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017).

The next morning, Sanders-Patterson said her parents awakened all the children and their father told them they were going to school. Mr. Sanders made a defiant stand of resistance against the violence inflicted upon him and his family. The decisions Black people made to achieve freedom were complex. The physical and mental toll of deciding how to protect one’s children while putting them in the line of fire is inconceivable. This state of cognitive dissonance was one in which many Black parents operated during the Civil Rights Movement. In Sanders-Patterson’s testimony, she speaks of the shock her teacher expressed in seeing her show up for school the morning after the bombing. As a child, Marcia’s reaction was not a feeling of triumph, but rather one of embarrassment. She did not know how to process the trauma amid a classroom full of White people. Managing the memories was difficult the first weeks, but Sanders-Patterson said her father “was very strong and he took us through that trauma without scarring us as deeply as it
could have scarred” (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017). To this day, she and her brothers have never spoken of the bombing.

If schools were to be desegregated, it would be done with as little interruption as possible to White students’ educational structures. Integration was never the goal because that would indicate camaraderie and cooperation. Neither could be found as some Black children from across Haywood County began making their way to the White schools. Around 1960, the county’s board of education began closing “the more inadequate Negro elementary school buildings” (United States v. Haywood County Bd. of Ed., 1967). This was the proposed solution for equitable education. Equally funding and staffing all educational facilities in the county was never on the table. The contentious process involved a 1967 lawsuit filed by the Attorney General of the United States against the boards of education in Haywood County and Brownsville.

Beginning with the school year 1965-66, the City and County have operated under a freedom of choice plan for desegregation of their schools, and the Attorney General, contending that Negroes are being denied equal protection of the laws, in this action seeks to have this plan abolished and further seeks the desegregation of faculty, supporting personnel and all school-related activities (United States v. Haywood County Bd. of Ed., 1967).

If White parents did not want their children going to school with Black children, they certainly did not want their children to be instructed by Black teachers. The personal and professional difficulties Black teachers faced at segregated schools were harsh. Because they were teaching White students, they were challenged to maintain control in the classroom or discipline unruly
students. Their experiences as educators breaking the color barrier during the integration process deserve additional study.

The concept of freedom of choice put the responsibility on Black parents and often resulted in strategizing how to get their children to schools that were on the other side of the county. However, freedom of choice for White children meant they would choose not to leave their newer, well-funded schools and enroll in the old, drafty, and woefully underfunded schoolhouses Black students attended. In addition to bearing the burden of leaving their communities and traveling to hostile educational environments, Black families were terrorized for daring to demand equitable education.

At the hearing, the Attorney General offered evidence of public Klan meetings, bombings and arson of Negro homes, cross burnings, and threatening telephone calls and letters in support of his factual contention that Negroes are afraid to exercise the choice to attend schools with whites. Some Negro witnesses affirmed this fear. He also pointed out that in 1960 it was necessary for the Government to go to court and obtain an injunction to secure voting rights for Negro citizens in Haywood County (United States v. Haywood County Bd. of Ed., 1967).

Attorneys for the school boards confirmed that “there have been only two public Klan meetings in recent years in Haywood County, apparently organized by outsiders” and made it seem that hosting only two meetings was acceptable (p. 3). This was a volatile time in Haywood County and the region. Fallout from the voting rights lawsuit filed by Haywood and Fayette counties was still being felt at the time of the school desegregation lawsuit.

Similar occurrences took place across the country in which Black parents made the choice to go against decades of Jim Crow laws and end the unequal educational environment for
their children. Lawsuits were being filed to force school districts to comply with the Supreme Court’s ruling. Having Black children go to school alongside White children was not a change many people anticipated, but they felt it was inevitable.

bell hooks (1994) also participated in desegregating the schools in her Kentucky district. She points out the intentions of Black parents and the disruption to the status quo for demanding equitable resources. The goal was to desegregate, not assimilate.

The white folks never seemed to understand that our parents were no more eager for us to socialize with them than they were to socialize with us. Those of us who wanted to make racial equality a reality in every area of our life were threats to the social order. We were proud of ourselves, proud of our willingness to transgress the rules, proud to be courageous (p. 24).

As hooks clarifies, Black people were not seeking engagement when they chose to desegregate schools. They wanted equity for their children so they would not have to be educated with hand-me-down resources. They wanted what was due to them, and in this country, it is typically not granted without action and legislation.

**Introduction of Interview Subjects**

The persons selected to provide insight into their lived experiences of integrating the public schools in Haywood County are Francine G. Madrey and Sam Sanderlin. They were among the first group of Black students who entered Haywood High School in Brownsville in late-August 1965. While this was a remarkable feat, their enrollment brought little attention, unlike other mediated scenes of integrating public spaces that were synonymous with the South. The gaze affixed on them would come from the White students, teachers, and administrators inside the school, along with despicable words and actions.
Francine Giles Madrey is an African American female who was born in Stanton, Tennessee, in 1949. She is a former resident of Haywood County and is a retired university administrator and professor residing near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. At age 16, she entered Haywood High School as a senior. I will note that she is also one of my older siblings. Over the years, I have heard fragments of stories describing my four siblings’ experiences during the desegregation of the county’s all-White high school. Her inclusion in this study is an opportunity to better understand the event, her experience, and my family’s role in a landmark educational shift taking place across America.

Madrey’s classmate, Samuel Sanderlin, was also interviewed for this study. He is an African American male who was born in Stanton in 1948. He is a former resident of Haywood County now living in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, near Nashville. Sanderlin is a Vietnam War veteran and a retired UPS long-haul truck driver. Sanderlin, who was 17 years old and a senior at the time, was also among the first Black students to attend Haywood High School.

Interview excerpts from Dorothy Granberry and Cynthia Rawls Bond are also included in this section. Both participants provide insight into the Haywood County school system and the educational experiences of Black children. They share recollections of the vast racial differences between Black and White students and what parents and children endured prior to and during the school desegregation process.

**Analysis of Interviews**

Francine Madrey and Sam Sanderlin had previously enjoyed spirited times attending school events with their friends and participating in activities at Carver High School, the all-Black high school for the county. This is where they received encouragement from Black
teachers and strict discipline when necessary. It was a nurturing and culturally supportive learning environment where they formed lasting relationships with other students.

Prior to attending Carver, Madrey and her siblings went to the Black elementary school situated in their community—a small wooden frame building that accommodated all the children in the Fredonia community. Later, some would attend Douglass Junior High School in the neighboring Douglass community in Stanton for grades 9 and 10. Schools and churches anchored most rural communities and many entities shared the same name. Because of the layout of Fredonia Elementary School, several grades were grouped together in the same classroom and students learned in a collaborative environment. Madrey was promoted from first to third grade and matriculated alongside her sister, Patricia. She describes the early years of her education at Fredonia Elementary School.

I went to a two-room school from grades one through eight. I had three teachers my entire eight years. The first four years I had one teacher, the next three years I had another teacher, both females. I had my first male teacher when I was eighth grade, and that was the year [1961] that the tornado destroyed our home. One of the teachers at the school then was killed in the tornado, along with her husband. And so, we got our first male teacher, a young Black man from Brownsville, Tennessee, named Leonard Boyd who was quite the disciplinarian, but also very respectful of our parents, and very interested in our education. But he was a no-nonsense person. We were awed by him because he was a young Black man. We'd never had a Black male teacher. And he had a new car. I remember a red and white, I think, 1962 Chevrolet, and he would take us to field trips. And when we had to participate in things like spelling bees and all, he would take us (Madrey, 2022).
Agriculture dominated the life choices for many Black rural families. Attending school was not a requirement because farming families needed young working hands available during the day, not sitting in a classroom. Education was important, but it was difficult for some people to see its benefits in the midst of planting and harvest seasons. Farming was how Black people maintained their families financially, and if they were sharecroppers, field work superseded schoolwork.

Sanderlin and his eight siblings took care of the many operations on his family’s farm growing up. The backbreaking work posed real challenges to his attending school regularly.

We got up two hours before the sun came up and we worked until time to go to bed, and so that was 10 or 11 o’clock at night. Now, when we started high school we weren’t picking cotton because Daddy had bought a cotton picker. And so, then Daddy would pick cotton during the day and then … like we got home from school we had to work from the time we got home from school about 4:30 in the afternoon to some nights until midnight … Every morning when I got up, I always had to ask Daddy, ‘Daddy, you gonna let me go to school today?’ So, you know, if he don’t say nothing, then you know you gonna stay at home. If he said ‘go to school’ then you get ready doing chores and get ready and go to school (Sanderlin, 2022).

The decision to send Samuel Sanderlin to Haywood High School centered on defiance based on his father’s ability to show White people that his son was capable of interrupting and entering their exclusive White world. This public demonstration of a Black student sitting in a previously all-White classroom was a form of resistance that gave Sanderlin’s father a sense of racial pride and achievement, more so than his challenging a racist educational system.

Well, Daddy didn’t have an education. Daddy couldn’t read and write, you know. And Momma, I think she had an eighth-grade education. She was the kind of woman that
always did what Daddy told her to do. But, you know, education was something they didn’t teach. They didn't stress education (Sanderlin, 2022).

This was a common sentiment among many Black families that made a living by farming. If they owned their own land, it was the road to being self-sufficient and having some protection against eviction. Working the land did not require a degree and the cost of an education, coupled with the loss of a farmhand, was prohibitive. However, Sanderlin and some of his siblings would later attend college. As one of the first Black students to desegregate the public high school in Haywood County, Sanderlin believed the unbalanced educational systems among Black and White students would affect his performance at his new school. He entered Haywood High School as a senior in the fall of 1965 fully aware that agricultural work took precedence over schoolwork. He was expected to work in the fields and forego attending school for longer periods of time like his White counterparts. The school year was structured differently for Black students attending the local Black schools.

I remember us being, having split seasons ‘cause I remember us being in the field and we could see White buses pass by and so, you know, oh well. They had regular school from September to May, yeah. And see, we had to work. Back when we was growing up and all the kids in Brownsville used to get on buses and trucks and go to Humboldt [Tennessee] and do their labor. And see, that's how a lot of those kids that I went to school with at Carver made money for their clothes and stuff like that, see? But it was different. I mean, it was a different world (Sanderlin, 2022).

The choices for many Black youth growing up in the South were few and they envisioned more attractive opportunities beyond the cotton fields. Madrey also grew up working on the family
farm alongside her siblings. It was a hard life, and she knew she did not want her future to include performing this kind of physical labor.

And so, my father did everything he could to provide for us and to give us a good life. Always felt secure and loved by both our parents. And he wanted so much for us, and he instilled in us the importance of education. And he always told us if you don't want to have to live on a farm and work for somebody else and work hard like this the rest of your life, you need to get an education. So, I got as much as I could (Madrey, 2022).

While parents worked to contribute to the education of their children, dollars allocated for the county’s educational system did not find their way to Black schools. Dorothy Granberry explains the discrepancies in school funding when she was growing up in Haywood County.

The state earmarks certain dollars…and we don’t have any say so in terms of those dollars and those dollars were not equally distributed. These schools in Haywood County for Whites were ranked up there with any schools in the nation. The schools for Blacks were not, and it wasn’t that Blacks didn’t have the same kind of talent … The schools were segregated, and I grew up knowing that the schools were inferior. Now, I suppose I was taught that. By inferior I mean that even when I'm like the third, fourth grade I know that we're not getting first-rate books, and maybe it's because all of us knew when we got used textbooks that they had the names of White children in them. They weren't people we knew (Granberry, 2022).

Madrey’s description of her elementary school’s reliance on contributions from parents shows how Black schools were overlooked and underfunded for even the most basic of needs. Despite the lack of support from the school system for which Black residents helped fund with their tax
dollars, the Black teachers and community members did what they could to give the children the education many were not able to obtain themselves.

But our parents would raise money to buy liquid green soap. I remember so distinctly they would pour it into a ketchup bottle and dilute it, poke holes in the bottle cap. And then when we would get ready to eat lunch, we would go outside to this manual pump, and we would take turns pumping. And then everybody else would line up and put their hands under the ketchup bottle and get the soap poured onto and sprinkled onto their hands. And then we put our hands up under the water to wash them. Sometimes in the winter we would have warm water or hot water because the pan would just sit on the stove, you know, all morning. But our parents would buy the soap and they would purchase paper towels for us to use to dry our hands. And so, it was a really great educational experience because we felt loved and cared for. And our teachers lived in our neighborhood, they went to our church, taught Sunday school, so it was like one big family (Madrey, 2022).

Madrey recalls her father announcing to her and three of her siblings that they would be attending the White high school, thwarting her plans to spend her senior year with her friends at Carver High School. There was no discussion; this was a mandate. Several Black parents made the complex decision to sacrifice their children on the altar of school desegregation with the hope of securing equity in education. She explains how the life-altering decision was presented to her and her siblings.

He just walked into the living room where we were sitting and he just said, ‘Y’all will be going to the White school next year.’ I mean, just like that, and I don’t remember that anybody said anything. I mean, it would have been futile anyway, because that’s how our
father was. He made decisions. He and my mother made decisions and when the
decisions were communicated to us, those are the directions we followed. But I don’t
remember any conversation. I just remember feeling so deflated … It was as if he was
saying we were moving to another country because we didn't know anything about the
school. The one thing we did know, and my brother points that out, is that we knew the
names of the White students because we had always received their discarded and used
textbooks…but we didn't know them (Madrey, 2022).

The frequent coverage of White residents’ lifestyles was fodder for the local newspaper. Many of
the names scribbled in the back of the textbooks were printed in The States-Graphic to publicize
even the slightest achievement or activity of the county’s young White students. Madrey
remembers reading news reports about football and basketball players, cheerleaders, and girls
who volunteered at the local hospital. These virtual strangers were known only by name to Black
students as the first recipients of their worn-out books.

What we knew about them we saw in the newspaper … I don't remember that we've ever
even thought about or cared about what the White students were doing. I mean, it was
irrelevant to us. We were living in different worlds (Madrey, 2022).

Samuel Sanderlin’s father followed a similar script in his pronouncement regarding the county’s
freedom of choice decision. There were no family meetings to assess the children’s feelings.
Black parents made the decision to participate in school desegregation, and that meant the
decision had been made for their children. Sanderlin remembers meetings at the church where
his family worshipped and civil rights workers informing members about the plan to integrate the
county’s all-White high school.
We just heard a lot of stuff through conversation. When you went to church and they got up and announced certain things or whatever. Daddy didn't tell us a whole lot of stuff that was going out. And so when they came and said ... they were going to integrate the school. Well, I heard him and Uncle Dudley ... he was telling Daddy that he's going to let his children go to Haywood High. And so the next thing I know, Daddy came and told us, 'Y'all get ready. I'm going to send y'all over to the White school.' Just like that. And you know, so I called some of the guys that I know and told him that, you know, Daddy said that I was going to Haywood High. You know at that time, that was some big thing, you going over there with the White folks. But once you got there, you realized that you weren't as welcome as you thought you would be (Sanderlin, 2022).

As significant as this moment was, Madrey and Sanderlin have no recollection of how they prepared for this monumental school and life change. Madrey does not even remember discussions with her sister Patricia about their apprehensions related to completing their senior year of high school in a strange place with people who did not want them there.

I don't remember the preparation or anything. I just remember that the day came and we got on the bus and we rode with our other friends all the way to Brownsville. And we got down to the intersection and the bus let us out. Our [Black] bus driver was not allowed to even drive up to the school ... We walked up the hill to Haywood High. We had no idea who else was going; we just knew that the three of us were going. Our younger brother was given the option to go or not and he chose not to, but after the first week, he ended up at Haywood High with us. And so, we just walked up that hill to the school. We had never seen the school because it's nestled behind some trees. We never knew what was up there ... So, we got off the bus and we walked up the hill to the school and we walked in.
I don’t remember that we registered. I’m sure our parents had already registered us because we didn’t select classes or anything. But we went into the school and someone told us or showed us where our classes were and that was it. There was no orientation, no anything (Madrey, 2022).

Samuel Sanderlin’s account of his first day at Haywood High School is similar to how Francine Madrey remembered hers. Although Black students were enrolled and able to enter the school, Black bus drivers were not permitted to drive them onto the school’s campus.

Mr. Thad [Turner] was our bus driver. Well, he wasn't allowed to bring us all the way up to the school. So, it was a stop light down there on Covington and Ripley Highway and see, he would stop down there and put his blinkers on and let us (off). And it was about … it was us and Francine, Pat, about 10 or 12 of us … walking up to the sidewalk. You could see them [White students] standing on the side, on the other side of the street, you know, sniggling. So, we walked across on the campus with all the teachers. I think some of the teachers came there to meet us. And so, you know, my homeroom teacher got me and took me down to the band room. See, my homeroom teacher was the band teacher, so he got me and walked me on down to the band room. And so, in the meantime, we were walking into school in a little group, you know. They're standing on the side, or whatever, calling us names (Sanderlin, 2022).

Black students participating in Haywood County’s school desegregation efforts in the 1960s found themselves in the midst of a perplexing phenomenon—a decision they did not fully understand, and a decision not made by them, but rather their parents. This was not an individual or singular experience, but part of a national cultural shift that had finally made its way to Haywood County. The daily encounters were part of a collective pain many young Black people
endured to advance more equitable educational structures in this country. Madrey recalls the first day she, her three siblings, and 37 other Black Haywood County teens entered the all-White high school in Brownsville, Tennessee, on August 30, 1965.

We walked in. There were no parents outside protesting, no signs, no demonstrations. We just went in; we went to our classes. You know, some White students were looking at us and they began to use racial epithets and call us names, you know, the N-word and just ugly terms that, just ugly terms that related to us. ‘Go back to your school,’ throwing things at us. That picked up as the year progressed. The first day, I just don’t remember much of anything except stares and some of the younger White people were especially giggling and shouting out a name or two … The rest of the classes, it was usually something going on, and if not inside the classroom, once you stepped out into the hallway, you could count on something or somebody stepping on your toes, stepping on the heel of your shoes, trying to trip you, throwing something, shouting out racial epithets, saying we were dumb, stupid, you know, things like that. And that went on for the entire year, the entire year. Every day there was something and we just, you know, we didn’t say anything about it (Madrey, 2022).

Sanderlin experienced similar aggressions as Madrey did, but with a more visceral threat of racial violence. His response to the abuse White students inflicted upon him was more reciprocal. Unlike the racial demographics of the county, Black students were outnumbered in newly desegregated schools which compounded the verbal and physical attacks from White students. Sanderlin recalls standing his ground and fighting back to fend off the attacks.

They called you nigger. Yeah, yeah, and so, you know, then we got in a few fights or whatever. And one boy, right after school had started, he and I was in PE and they start
throwing basketballs at me and hit me. So, I said that the next person to hit me with a basketball...I'm gonna get a basketball and knock him down. That's what I did. So, another guy went out, got a Coke bottle and broke the neck off and came back and told me, said 'we don't want y'all up there, niggers.' Said, 'why don't you stay where you are? We don't want you up here so I'm gonna cut your heart out.' So well, the old PE coach, Coach Hooper was, I think he was the PE coach, and he wasn’t in the room and so somebody said, ‘Here come Hooper.’ So, I walked out and I told him what happened. He told me go sit down and he took the boy outside, and so I don’t know what conversations that they had (Sanderlin, 2022).

The abuse and humiliation continued for Black students after the first year of desegregation. My sister Linda tells the story of how a White teacher locked her in a classroom alone during the lunch period after the other students had left—a traumatizing experience that lingers in her memory. Another sister, Edith, recalls how a White home economics teacher refused to let Black female students try on sample tops during measurement sessions for a sewing class, announcing to the class that Black girls did not shave and therefore were not clean. She made the Black girls put paper towels underneath their arms so there would be no skin contact with the sample top. This same teacher also would not teach sewing techniques to the Black students in class. What she did not know was that our mother, Geraldine, was a skilled seamstress and taught Edith at home everything that she was not being taught at school. My sister then showed the girls on the bus ride to school the sewing techniques they needed for class. Resistance is sometimes multi-layered and exerted in a number of ways.

According to Madrey and Sanderlin, Black students had their own experiences with White students and teachers but tended to deal with their troubles privately. Many internalized
the degradation inflicted upon them, but some responded differently. Although Madrey was never involved in a physical altercation at Haywood High, she describes how her sister, Patricia, had reached her limit with a student from a nearby elementary school.

Patricia and I would talk to each other, and our younger sister Athalia, we would talk, and our brother Cecil, we would talk about some things that had happened to us, but we never engaged our parents in any conversation about what was going on at school until my sister was in a physical fight. And, you know, she did come home and tell our father that because we figured there would be some repercussions from him and from school the next day. But he never said anything against it. You know, he understood what we were going through. He didn't punish Patricia. He didn't admonish her or anything. We just reported it and that was it. And then nothing was done at school, as far as I know, the next day. I mean, she wasn't disciplined … It just kept happening, you know. Just some little White boy every day, just doing stuff to her, and she just got tired of it. And one day he came up in her face and she gave him a good little beat down. I'll put it like that. He didn't bother her anymore, so apparently it was sufficient (Madrey, 2022).

There was a scant number of students and teachers who exhibited civility toward the Black students. Sanderlin stated there were only three White students in his senior class who talked to him. Nearly 60 years later, he even remembered the name of one student, Jane Barcroft, who routinely showed kindness to him in class which opened her up to ridicule from White classmates. While most White students could not openly display friendliness toward the Black students for fear of retaliation, Madrey recalls how a couple of White teachers handled their newly integrated classes.
Patricia and I both remember one teacher who made it very clear on the first day that there would be no disruption or misbehavior in her classroom, that she was not going to tolerate any kind of misbehavior. And she was the only one who set that tone, but she made it very clear that day that everyone would be respected and there would be no misbehavior. Another teacher didn't say it so much but demonstrated it in such a way that not much happened in her class either (Madrey, 2022).

Nothing could have prepared the group of Black students for what awaited them. Madrey and Sanderlin could not recall seeing anything in *The States-Graphic* about school desegregation and their impending arrival at the all-White school. School districts across the country were forced to change their discriminatory practices because of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Some were more vocal than others, but school officials in Haywood County reluctantly complied with the order. There may not have been loud demonstrations at the school’s entrance, however, the disdain of most of the White students was on full display inside the high school during the day. Their parents and other racists, on the other hand, worked under the dark of night strategizing their next act of violence. Black parents’ decision to enroll their children at Haywood High was seen as a disruption to their idyllic White world.

The realness of racial terror permeated the lives of Black Americans because many of them living in the South knew what could happen as the result of White people misinterpreting any word or deed by Blacks. Madrey recalls the anxiety she felt in the early 1960s due to the racial unrest happening around the country and in Haywood County. Rumors of Klan activity sometimes proved true and citizens had to remain watchful for impending danger. Black families and communities were essentially under siege, especially those that challenged the status quo.
But you could hear grown people talking and you knew that it wasn't safe to be out there out alone at night or on the highway at night. You know, you heard stories about the high sheriff, so to speak, and you heard about people's homes being bombed and crosses being burned in people’s yards, and hearing my father talk about hearing that the Klan were planning to come to our house and burn a cross one night, and just being terrified by that. And we had not seen it [Klan activity] there. The adults had, we as children had not… And so, when we heard that they were coming, the Klan was going to be out that night burning a cross in our yard, that was a fearful time to us as children. Our father, on the other hand, just simply got the shotgun and a chair, walked down to the road, and sat there all night waiting for them (Madrey, 2022).

Fortunately, they did not come onto the property that night. This form of resistance by our father was one of many fearless acts undertaken by him and other local residents who were targeted by racial terrorists. He and his contemporaries, like Odell Sanders, were protectors of their families and had to remain on guard after they enrolled their children in the segregated schools. If White children had access to quality educational facilities and resources, Black parents wanted the same for their children, especially since their tax dollars were helping to fund the schools in Haywood County. Public dollars also funded private schools for White students who did not want to attend school with Black students.

The turmoil Black parents must have endured is unimaginable. How do mothers and fathers decide to remove their children from nurturing and culturally affirming educational environments and place them in unwelcoming and traumatizing schools? Unfortunately, I do not have knowledge of how my now deceased parents reconciled sending their children into a violent and hostile space every day in order to disrupt the status quo. As adults, they could not
personally change the situation, but they had to stand by and allow their children to take the blunt force of desegregating schools.

Like my older siblings, I was also involved in Haywood County’s desegregation process. As a first grader, I was among some of the first students to integrate one of the county’s White elementary schools. My young age prevented me from understanding the gravity of the moment. I rode two buses and endured taunts from groups of White children on the second bus. Again, I was too young to conceptualize their motives or reasons for their behavior. I do recall telling my mother about the jeers and pokes from the White bus riders. She told me I had just as much of a right to be on the bus as they did. I have no recollection of how I coped with the constant aggravation. In the classroom, I was strategically separated from my two Black classmates and not allowed on the playground—a ploy to keep us from interacting with White students. It would be decades later before one of my best friends and I realized we attended Haywood Elementary as first graders at the same time. Zanice Bond, a Tuskegee University professor whose research is included in this study, and I were in different classrooms but may as well have been on different planets. Her mother, Cynthia Rawls Bond, recounts a conversation she had with my father about her anticipation of their two daughters going to school together.

And I can remember, Henrietta, when we had the integration of schools. You and Zanice were one of the first ones to start in first grade at the school, Haywood Elementary. You were the first Black students to go, and I told your daddy, I said, oh, this is good because you and Zanice did not know each other. I said they can meet at school, they’ll have a good time, they’ll become friends. You two went there … and never saw each other because they had two Blacks in each class. Only two Blacks, and they had one Black student sit in the front of the classroom and the other Black student sat in the very back of
the classroom. So, you could not even see each other, couldn't talk to each other. It was really rough. And to think that y'all went to school all that time and never saw each other on the playground or on whatever, you know. Black students could never see the other Black students. (Bond C. R., 2022).

Madrey believes the archaic strategies to keep Blacks apart were evident when she and the other Black students arrived at Haywood High. They suffered in silence and could not support or protect one another from the verbal and physical abuse.

Too many of us were the only Black student, you know, in a class or just one or two of us in a class. But I think it was by design that we were separated because we couldn't help each other, we couldn't console each other, we couldn't share what was happening with each other. We would just—it's almost like we were just thrown in there, left to figure it out on our own. No guidance counselors to work with us, to help us at all. Nobody that you could take a problem to. The four of us, you know, from my family sharing from time to time about what we had seen and what we had experienced. And you know, I don't know why we never told our parents … But they were fighting their own battles with White people, so you know, to add to what we were going through would have just been another layer to worry them, because we were there because they wanted us to be. And for whatever reason, we just came home, we did our chores, we did our homework, and we went to bed, and got up the next day and started all over again (Madrey, 2022).

Various separation tactics would remain. The following school year, the freedom of choice option was eliminated, and Black children had to attend schools closest to where they lived. By then, community schools like Fredonia Elementary School had been closed by the board of education and children were bused to other Black schools in the county. I attended Douglass
Elementary School in Stanton for grades 2 through 8. This was previously named Douglass Junior High School, the same school some of my older siblings attended.

At Haywood High, Blacks were initially restricted from participating in many extracurricular activities. However, it would not take officials long to crack open the door to allow Blacks to play some competitive team sports at Haywood High. It would be years before Black students were included in the selection of class superlatives. These were descriptive categories like “the most likely to,” “the most,” or “the best” that were assigned to students by fellow students in their grade. By the time I entered high school, officials had moved to having two sets of superlatives—one Black and one White group. Career success and sartorial measures were limited by race. Male and female pairs could not simply be the most likely to succeed or the best dressed students. Classmates had to vote for superlatives defined by racial categories. The ethnicity of class officers alternated each year, meaning a Black student could be elected class president and a White student elected as vice-president one year, and the reverse process the following year. During my senior year, Tanya Williams was elected class president. She was one of my two Black classmates in first grade who had helped desegregate Haywood Elementary in Brownsville 11 years earlier. This insidious system was designed to represent progress and true integration. What it really meant was that White students were guaranteed a seat at a predominantly Black table. As White student enrollment began to decline after schools were desegregated, it became undeniably clear that the Black-majority county’s children greatly outnumbered White students. This reality continues to be at the center of educational concerns in Haywood County to this day.
**Major Themes: Resistance and Resilience**

Having the freedom to vote and attend schools without color barriers has been hard-fought by Black Southerners. Most were poor and not formally educated, but they are not to be pitied. They were the stalwarts of racial equality and helped pull the entire country forward as they beat off racist attacks and restrictions. Being resistant and resilient comes at a cost. Attacks, humiliation, even one’s life are costly payments for things that go unquestioned or unchallenged in a White world.

Throughout my research, there have been individuals who possessed what it took to survive while helping others do the same. Sims-Schouten and Gilbert (2022) point to the similarities and possible interchangeability of the two terms, noting that resilience could mean “resisting bad treatment and racism, as well as reflecting agency, identity and ownership of one’s own life and choices within this” (p. 87). The persons whose experiences and narratives defied the prescribed rules of the day give contemporary audiences examples for advancing in the face of restriction. The following themes appear in the examination of Black students, parents, and residents’ work to obtain access to equitable education in Haywood County.

**A Different World**

The Black rural communities in which Francine Madrey and Samuel Sanderlin lived helped shape who they are today. Many of the sensibilities they learned were developed on the farm and in the fields and assisted in their chosen professions. While the comparison is much easier to make now, life in a segregated world can impact people decades—and centuries—later. The Black families noted in this study dealt with power structures that most White families in the region did not encounter. Social barriers that restricted where and how people lived created worlds where there was little interaction between Black people and White people. Jim Crow laws
ensured they did not live or go to school together, marking off two very distinct worlds. During
the 1950s and leading into the 1960s, America was on the cusp of social change again, but any
advancements would be hard won, particularly for Blacks living in the South. Different sectors in
society reflected vastly different worlds, and educational attainment was a factor that could
potentially change the trajectory of Black life. The region’s White ruling leadership kept
equitable educational facilities and resources for Black students at bay. If Blacks remained in
their world with dilapidated schools and outdated books, that would fit the rigid hegemonic
design and continue to foster racist systems. In spite of efforts to restrict funding and educational
support for Black schools in Haywood County, Black teachers fought back with their intellect
and ingenuity—they improvised using worn out books in worn out schoolhouses. They prepared
Black students to meet the challenges of an awaiting, yet unwelcoming, White world. Black
parents, with their limited finances, contributed what they could to keep students fed, clean, and
warm when they could not rely on fair distribution of resources to Black schools. These two very
different and unequal worlds would collide once again when several Black parents in Haywood
County decided the educational restrictions on their children needed to end.

A Separate World

The belief that there is strength in numbers can be applied to the divisive measures taken
to keep Black students separated from each other during the desegregation of schools. Francine
Madrey and Samuel Sanderlin both commented on being the only or one of a couple of Black
students in most of their classes at Haywood High. Any interaction or communication among
Blacks in school was discouraged. The need to even restrict Black six-year-olds from sitting or
playing together showed the lengths White school administrators would go to appease their fear
of Black engagement. By isolating Black students, they could not commiserate with or uplift one
another when the racial abuse became overwhelming. It was not possible to band together and assist when one endured physical violence. There were no other Black witnesses to corroborate the harsh treatment White teachers and students put upon lone Black students. Plus, it was easier to surveil one Black body as opposed to a group, particularly a Black male body. In addition to being in a new learning environment where they were not wanted, Black students had to traverse this perilous landscape alone.

**A Missed Education or a Miseducation**

The debate about the benefits and losses to Black communities as they relate to school integration are complex. Examples that outline which variable outweighs the other are valid, but complicated, nonetheless. Black schools in Haywood County suffered while schools serving White children had resources. This concept of education inequity should come as no surprise, even today. The remnants from restricting enslaved Blacks from becoming educated remain in various forms. Modern-day policies determine which schools in districts receive funding. A brief perusal through history will provide evidence that reveals which areas are awarded more dollars for education than others. The information will also show the disparities along racial-ethnic and economic lines. In many Black neighborhoods and communities, schools have been shuttered forcing children to travel long distances to attend school. Those same communities also have under-resourced and understaffed schools making it nearly impossible for Black children to attain an education that will serve them well. The question of who should have access to a solid education has long been at the center of controversy in America. That same question is what drove some Black parents in Haywood County in 1965 to enroll their children in the county’s all-White schools. The issues still persist, which compounds the argument of integration’s benefits.
Some would stress that forfeiting the familiar and familial environment of small Black schoolhouses was detrimental to communities, their cultural practices, and identities. The sweeping changes of integration make it difficult to compare possible outcomes. The paradox of what was lost and what was gained as a result of integration is too monumental an examination for this research. However, study participants point to their early educational experiences in Black schools as flashpoints in their lives. They describe enriching lessons taught by Black teachers who engaged them and cared about their success and their futures. Even though these Black community schools were largely ignored by school board administrators, they received the full attention of dedicated teachers and parents. There is something to be said for that, but Black people should not have to always make do when others do not have to ask for anything. Was a small, intimate, communal learning setting a missed education for Black children? It’s complicated.

One example, however, offers a sense of satisfaction regarding the process of integrating Black students into all-White schools in Haywood County. When Francine Madrey joined nearly three dozen other Black students at Haywood High School, there was some trepidation about being able to adequately compete with White students. She, like others in the group, had grown up with little interaction with White people and assumed those students’ access to newer resources better positioned them as students. Madrey explains how she found out about the level of her academic performance at Haywood High.

On the night of graduation, I learned that I was among the Top 10 students in the class, which came as a total shock to me. One of my sisters always teases me about the look that came over my face when I stood up. I was shocked. The counselor had told us, you know, ‘you girls don't need to think about going to college.’ We got no information about
scholarships, and yet several students who were not in the Top 10, because their names weren't called, they got scholarships. But no one helped us … People didn't talk about the bright teachers at Carver and Douglass and Fredonia. But the fact that I was able to do well at Haywood High and that I graduated in the Top 10 signifies for me that I had a strong educational background before I ever set foot at Haywood High … So those who talk about inferior Black schools—yes, I absolutely agree, but only in the sense of inferior resources—the things that we did not have they had in bountiful supply at Haywood High. So, I say inferior only in terms of resources, but nothing inferior about the learning environment, or the capability of those teachers, or their compassion for students … They did everything they could to push us, to applaud us, celebrate us, and to care enough to stop us if they saw us doing something that was inappropriate and reminding us, you know, that we're better than that (Madrey, 2022).

The sentiment of Madrey’s assessment is akin to the argument opposing Blacks integrating into White educational spaces. Excellence is not equated to whiteness. However, the complexities involving equity and cultural relevance have a rightful place in the debate. Again, Black parents who subjected themselves and their children to racial violence did not make the decision so their children could morph into White children. They disrupted the status quo because they believed their children should have access to equitable educational resources and facilities to which they were being denied. And some, like Sanderlin’s father, wanted to demonstrate resistance by occupying and interrupting all-White spaces because they could.

**Suffering in Silence**

The experiences of the interview subjects shared in this study have revealed memories and emotions from several decades ago. Some discussed details that had been packed away for
some time. Recounting memories of the treatment they received while living in a segregated society was not always pleasant. (Participants had the option of not answering any of the questions with which they were not comfortable.) As a researcher, I did not want subjects to revisit experiences that would be emotionally triggering for them, but I wanted to better understand their involvement in the desegregation of schools in Haywood County. Madrey and Sanderlin have not often spoken about their efforts, but their stories and the stories of others who integrated local schools should be publicly recognized.

The racial violence associated with enrolling in all-White schools was not widely discussed at the time. Students dealt with the fear, bullying, and physical attacks in their own ways. The narratives of the two primary subjects regarding school desegregation will likely be surprising to their former Carver High School classmates. As stated, they did not share their daily trials with anyone. Parents did not talk to their children about the threats and violence inflicted upon them. However, in the case of Odell Sanders, the entire family was impacted when their home was bombed, but no one ever discussed the traumatic experience. The Sanders children attended school the next morning. Black students could not forge new friendships in their new schools because they were separated from other Blacks and targeted by racist students. Daily taunts and humiliation must have impacted their school performance. But no one talked about it.

Throughout this research, I have been concerned about how recalling decades-old traumatic experiences might affect the participants. Their narratives and the research connected to these three events have also impacted me. I grew up in Haywood County, so I know most of the interview subjects directly or indirectly. Hearing and reading about what took place when residents and students summoned the courage to desegregate the schools has been jarring. Sitting
with these stories has caused me to simultaneously want to disconnect from the research and investigate the events more closely. My young age at the time I attended a White elementary school has some bearing on how I processed the bus rides and classroom isolation. I rarely, if ever, think about it; plus, I had nothing to compare it to. It was my reality. It was their reality. My hope is that the emotions that emanated from them speaking their truth will reaffirm the importance of the work and sacrifices made by them and their families.

**Transition**

These experiences factor into how I approach education, the teaching profession, and my understanding of blackness as an African American woman with Southern roots. I am fully aware that attaining an education and working in both entertainment and higher education have come at the price paid by others before me. The fact that I can share my firsthand experiences and collect narratives from residents with personal knowledge of the segregated school system in Haywood County speak to the relative recent nature of these events. Young people in Haywood County today have essentially no knowledge of what took place to make it possible for them to attend the schools they do. The racial terror, physical violence, mental abuse, and isolation are unknown to many. There is no public acknowledgment of the efforts associated with desegregating the schools there, more than a decade following the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling. Since many of the Black students who crossed the color barrier elected to bear their crosses alone, their experiences are not widely known. As stated earlier, I have heard fragments of stories about the discrimination my siblings experienced from uncaring White teachers and students who relished in humiliating them. Their stories deserve to be engrained into the history of Haywood County’s school integration journey, one that began in 1965.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The pleasure of research resides in the exploration of unanswered questions. Our good intentions for discovery may lead to more questions—and frustration—but that, too, is part of the journey. The satisfaction in being entrusted with someone’s story gives research life and is a reminder to the researcher to carefully carry the words so another scholar can take it forward. My purpose for conducting this study is personal in the sense that my adoration and awe of Black resilience run deep. Even now, reflecting on the experiences of people who were not consumed by the unrelenting grip of racial oppression fills me with wonderment. How was their level of resistance possible in the midst of racial hatred? I was also drawn to this study in the hopes that it could be a small but meaningful contribution to scholarship that centers African American narratives and experiences.

As previously outlined, this study is not the study I set out to complete. The media professional in me sought to uncover how mediated messages about Black people influenced the participants’ sense of blackness. News accounts of the three historical events included in the study would have been published by the White-owned newspaper in Haywood County. Depictions and characterizations of Black Americans in publications like *The States-Graphic* were vastly different from the reporting in Black newspapers and magazines. I wanted to understand how the six Black participants interpreted the news stories and if the descriptions of Black people and events helped shape how they felt about themselves. After conducting the interviews and reviewing the transcripts, I noticed how their focus was not exclusively on memories of the generalized news reports from decades earlier.

Even though some of them had access to the local paper then, it was not their primary source for news about Black issues. These residents understood they were not the target audience
and that the information about Black people was written largely to marginalize them. The participants in this study did not internalize or believe the derogatory messages they read about African Americans. As noted earlier, some participants’ families did not buy the newspaper because they did not want to financially support a publication that demeaned Black people. That was resistance.

The three events examined in this study took place between 1940 and 1965 at a time when there were fewer media options. Largely, Black rural residents were aware of local print media but did not rely on newspapers to accurately tell the stories of Black people. There were also three major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) at the time that sparingly aired content that catered to Black audiences. This was an era when advertisers did not consider the tastes or spending habits of Black consumers as desirable or valuable metrics. Turning away from these media entities was not difficult for Blacks because they were not represented anyway. This act of resistance brought opportunities to become more selective regarding media choices and media consumption. Blacks were savvy enough to enact agency when determining who was represented, how they were represented, and the cultural standards of the news source. They did not have to consume content that humiliated or insulted their blackness.

Black consumers could choose to be informed by media that would infuse racial pride and advocacy to reshape the narrative that White-owned media had distorted. Ramasubramanian et al. (2017) posit that “it is, therefore, likely that mainstream media and ethnic media exposure vary greatly in the ways in which they shape audience members’ attitudes toward themselves and their ethnic group” (p. 1880). Participants in this study displayed clear protective barriers that shielded them from White media’s demeaning depictions of Black life. Despite the racial restrictions that engulfed them, Black people knew who they were and rose above the nonsense.
Their strong sense of self rejected messages that promoted Black Americans as unlearned, unsophisticated, and undeserving. Not only did they reject the frames, but they authored and orchestrated their own strategies for countering the narratives distributed by White media outlets.

The impact that mediated messages had on residents of Haywood County is framed by the period in which they grew up. The respondents’ understanding of the news sources reporting on racial violence, political justice, and educational equity appears to have prevented them from accepting Black portrayals created by White media. In terms of resistance, their activism confronted the racism embedded in the culture of a small, rural Black area. The publishing of disparaging news accounts was intended to keep Blacks in their so-called place, despite their population numbers outpacing those of White residents.

Ramasubramanian et al. (2017) emphasize the undeniable impact media stereotypes have as “socializing agents” among racially diverse individuals and groups. This content is created and distributed by White media outlets and intended to teach the audience about Black people. Mildred Roxborough explains on page 106 how newspaper articles with racial descriptors like *Negro* or *Colored* were not capitalized. This was a way to minimize the humanity of Blacks and reinforce societal disrespect in a published form. The language used to describe Blacks during the Jim Crow era was indeed a socializing agent. Francine Madrey recalls how the news was segregated on the pages of the local paper.

Well, the local paper, the one there in Brownsville, was that it printed White news and that it catered to the White population. I mean, I don't know how many Black people even took [subscribed to] *The States-Graphic*. I doubt that very many out in our community even took it, so maybe they [newspaper publisher] felt there was no need to print it. Well, we could see who was in the hospital by race. We could see who had a
baby because it would have *Mary Smith and baby boy*. I don't remember that the obituaries were printed. The draft, the draft list [for the Vietnam War] was printed every week and in high school we really did begin to look at that because we knew so many boys who were being drafted. So, the draft list was printed, the hospital list was printed, and that was about it for Black news. I don't remember any Black ads, don't remember many stories about Blacks. I mean, I just don't remember it (Madrey, 2022).

It is also important to note the social filters Black media consumers used within the socialization process. Derogatory descriptions and clear omissions did not have the impact that White power holders likely intended. Black residents in Haywood County did not subscribe to—literally or figuratively—to publications that sought to mischaracterize them. The interviews I conducted for this study show a collective dismissal of the negative messages directed at Blacks.

References to the participants’ activism and rejection of social control measures were recurring themes that directed me to shift the focus of my research. Given the harsh circumstances they endured, it mattered that participants’ voices were heard as they described their experiences. I was especially attuned to the details of their journeys as a researcher, but also as a former resident myself. It is important that others can partake of their knowledge and understand how they dealt with numerous inequities during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras. I appreciate their insight and willingness to go to emotional places they left decades before.

The desire to contribute to research that amplifies historical work related to advocacy was strong due to present-day attitudes about equity and democracy. There are lessons in the narratives from the participants and published accounts from other civil rights workers. As we witness legislative rollbacks and inflammatory rhetoric around citizenship, enfranchisement, and access, we could benefit from listening to how these individuals dealt with the restrictions of
their day. Myths that edge out historical truths are taking center stage and bear an eerie resemblance to rhetoric the participants encountered during the three events outlined in this study. Even as I worked on this research, I could not help but notice some parallels between racial attitudes toward Black Americans and legislative restrictions then and now. Equity and parity have become divisive and problematic terms today that are associated with voting rights and educational freedom. Social and political advancements that were made over the past several decades have vanished or become unrecognizable versions of themselves. This country appears to be flirting with an old admirer—legislated segregation—and rekindling a bond based on control and restrictions. It is an unsettling cycle that is evident in this study.

The following sections will provide an overview of my interpretations of the study participants’ narratives and how they factor into my understanding of restriction and resistance. I discuss some of the qualitative case study’s limitations that were evinced after collecting and examining the recorded interviews and reviewing historical materials from that region. I outline the research significance of this study from educational, social, and cultural perspectives and offer thoughts on how this research could be expanded. I then provide my closing thoughts on this study, discussing its impact on my professional work and my personal views on this region and its people.

Limits of Study

The original study design included in-person interviews which would have been videotaped for a later video project. Because of the pandemic, interviews were conducted using a videoconference program. While this did not limit my access to participants, I would have preferred engaging with them in their own personal environment. To that point, technology
adoption for various demographic groups can be challenging. I worked briefly beforehand with
two participants to make sure they could access the link and connect to the Zoom website.

Another limitation in this study was identifying previous research that examined media
impacts on Blacks in their construction of racial identity. I was especially interested in reviewing
results from studies that included Blacks who lived during the Jim Crow and American Civil
Rights eras and their relationship with media. This would have assisted in establishing a baseline
for understanding how Black media consumers were impacted during the time period included in
this study. Since the influence of media is evident among several demographic groups, I had
hoped to find some indicators related to media consumption and reception to messages among
Black Americans. However, the dearth of research now indicates how limited the information
would be for earlier research that focused on media effects and Black subjects.

The ubiquity of media exposure and the proliferation of messages that did not affirm
blackness led me to theorize that frequent media engagement might negatively impact how
Blacks saw themselves. What I discovered among the participants in this study was that they
were observant of negative messages, but their response was one of rejection. Blacks did not
internalize the news content that characterized them negatively. A centeredness of self that was
immune from racist media assisted in building up Black people’s resistance to negative
portrayals and policies. As participants discussed media impact, their conversations highlighted
the ways in which they dealt with the restrictive forces present in their everyday lives. Perhaps
stories that had been passed down from family members guided the participants and their parents
through some of this country’s murkiest times. The goals were equity and agency and Black
people employed strategies and counternarratives to move them further down the line.
Their responses guided the research, and the participants’ words taught me the important lesson of being willing to release a thesis that was closely tied to my work in media. It was a natural connection to the power that I knew media had on shaping identity. Instead, their responses moved me closer to something I had witnessed all my life—the resiliency of Black people in the face of restrictions. This shines a light on another area of research that is largely understudied. Information on Black rural America is scarce enough. However, adding the Jim Crow time period with navigating racial restrictions yields even fewer results. Not enough voices are included in research to rhetorically examine the thoughts, decisions, and actions of Black people who lived during some of this country’s most turbulent decades. The window is closing to collect narratives from individuals who were instrumental in helping to organize disenfranchised citizens and orchestrate local and national voting legislation. The two oldest persons in this study are ages 96 and 88, which indicate a need to immediately collect those voices that speak to Black lived experiences in this country.

In terms of research, locating published stories documenting hegemonic policies in the local Haywood County newspaper was somewhat problematic. Typically, newspapers provide a record of events of a community, even an indication of the attitudes of its publishers and editors. However, there were some noticeable inconsistencies in the archives for The States-Graphic. An important note regarding media texts, framing, accessibility, and gaps centers on ownership. An online search utilizing websites for the Library of Congress and Newspapers.com for the Brownsville weekly newspaper The States-Graphic garnered disappointing results. Editions from the years examined in this study were not available in the newspaper’s archives. The copies posted on Newspapers.com’s site are from 1916 to 1918, more than two decades before the Elbert Williams lynching. The Library of Congress’ directory of U.S. newspapers includes
copies of The States-Graphic from 1984 to 2015, the year the publication ended. The Brownsville Press began publishing its weekly newspaper shortly thereafter. The paper’s digital version also offers regular online updates throughout the week. The 66-year gap (1918-1984) of absent archival copies of The States-Graphic is not happenstance. This time frame includes pivotal eras involving race relations (Jim Crow, voter suppression, the Civil Rights Movement, and school desegregation) and Haywood County’s role was massive. Earlier print stories in the paper explicitly reveal how Blacks were portrayed, mainly with racist and demeaning descriptors. As previously mentioned, I had reached out to the Tennessee State Library and Archives to locate articles and the staff had difficulty finding older editions of The States-Graphic. This is a literal example of erasure. Some of the main tenets of journalism are to investigate, document, and truthfully report—in other words, to be a watchdog for the community and collect evidence to support claims of unethical, inequitable, or illegal practices. (To be clear, this was never the objective for coverage of Black citizens. Media served more as an attack dog for them.) John Ashworth provides some insight into why a newspaper would not have a historical record (evidence) of its work for a specific time period.

That kind of thing that tells another side of us, other than the side that they want, other than the image that they want us to portray, I think a lot has been done to do away with that. Just like, you know, there are courthouses that have literally been burned down on purpose so that you could not go back and do a title search on land that you know was stolen, taken away, or whatever happened. I think a lot of that has gone on. I think a lot of that went on in Haywood County, that it was deliberately done. I know for a fact that, in fact, I have the documents that prove it, that one of the editors during that period of The
States- Graphic was a member of the Klan. I mean, I have the proof of that. Owen Burgess, you know (Ashworth, 2022).

To be sure, much of the reporting in the local paper was void of accuracy as it related to Black life and the reign of terror that targeted Black bodies. If an editor is part of the group inflicting racial violence, why would there be an expectation of the paper to accurately report what happened to Elbert Williams? Or an investigation into the bombing of Odell Sanders’ home? Or the mass evictions of poor Black families in the dead of winter? Sixty-six years—roughly 3,432 editions—of The States-Graphic are unaccounted for, save for a few scant copies collected here and there. Haywood County was a hotbed for racial unrest and this rural area played a vital role in helping to bring national attention to the issues plaguing Black people in the South. Fortunately, other regional and national news outlets deemed the events important enough to cover.

The outcomes of hegemony were in no way beneficial to the Black citizens of Haywood County, so it stands to reason there would be little trust in media produced by the same system. This could explain the dismissal of negative media content in their construction of racial identity.

**Research Significance**

Haywood County is connected to some of the country’s most critical legislative and legal debates responsible for crafting national policy concerning civil and voting rights for Black Americans. (It is somewhat ironic that Tennessee is now a state known for some of the country’s most conservative and restrictive legislation on civil rights and voting policies.) This research is an opportunity to bring awareness about events and people who made many of the area’s educational and political freedoms possible. Shedding light on the historical movements that were born in this rural area adds to research with an emphasis on the South, political strategizing,
and Black resistance. Most are topics that often are expressed without Black perspectives, or not explored at all. The undervaluing of Black scholarship is well documented and signals ongoing issues within the academy.

**Following the Rhetoric**

Examining these three historical events in Haywood County creates an avenue to rhetorically look at the suppression of Black people, their stories, and the events in which they were involved. Their various reactions to the systems that dictated Black life are foregrounded in this study. How Black individuals responded to racial terror, disenfranchisement, and school desegregation is unique to this place, which designates it as a rhetorical space, of sorts. Powell (2007) speaks to the interconnectedness of place and people.

Places are not things to be found out there in the world; they are ideas about spaces that are constructed by people, in acts of observation and interpretation, and more durably in writing, in visual arts, in the built environment. Places come to seem like things because over time multiple interpretations and representations begin to coalesce around specific spaces … These descriptions and analyses are created by different people and groups of people for different reasons, and they shape not only how the region itself is understood but also how the places that make up the larger region are understood (p. 67).

Fleming (1998) notes that rhetoric is “a study that—in addition to imparting an art and guiding good practice—encourages critical reflection about the situated relations of discourse to reason, character, and community in human action” (p. 184). The rhetorical element of this research served as a guiding force from the beginning. Leaning into the study participants’ responses showed me just how fluid research can be and how the researcher must obediently go where the results lead. The natural response is to move forward with our research agenda, but the
malleability of the project is not determined by the researcher. That is in the hands of the rhetoric that comes forth from the voices.

What began as a study to determine the role of media in helping to shape Black identity around the mid-twentieth century meandered to a place that highlighted the will Black people exhibited in the face of restrictive social policies. Rather than identifying how these individuals with ties to Haywood County saw themselves as Black people based on the media they consumed, their responses revealed that their blackness was connected to their rejection of the status quo. This theme was overwhelmingly evident in the interviews I conducted and in published accounts documenting the three historical events included in this study. Black people were frequently victimized in the Jim Crow South, but collectively they never assumed the title of victim, or a people that should be pitied because of their suppressed station in life. While there is a litany of atrocities that mark the South, there are also rich cultural textures woven throughout the region. When the sociopolitical, economic, educational, and racial barriers are taken into consideration, it is truly remarkable that Black residents in West Tennessee could strategize and effect change the way they did.

*Listening to the Place and Its People*

As a former Haywood County resident, there was some difficulty in reviewing information related to the political and social climates Black people lived in during the time of the events included in this study. It was disheartening reading about the living conditions and hearing about the struggles they endured. They were not permitted to vote and suffered humiliation, violence, and death when attempting to engage in the process. Some were relatives and others were people I have known for many years. It became apparent after reading and hearing the stories of people who had to fight for things that were rightfully theirs that their fight
was central to my research. Their resistance penetrated the restrictions that dictated how they lived. The counternarratives they created spoke more to identity construction than negative media content. This is who they were—keen strategists, unrelenting activists, and shrewd organizers. These are identities not typically assigned to Black citizens living in the rural, Jim Crow South. Their intellect informed their rigid belief in racial equity. The all-powerful vote was at the center of the restriction-resistance tug of war. Both sides knew if Blacks obtained the right to vote change would be inevitable and monumental, especially in a county where Black citizens outnumbered White citizens. It was in the interest of White power holders to restrict access to the voting booth to maintain control. It was in the interest of Blacks to regain control of voting rights, like during the era of Reconstruction.

The methods that Blacks in Haywood County used to circumvent the forces of restriction were grassroots in nature and proved to be quite effective in getting messages into the various communities. On page 142, Cynthia Rawls Bond talked about how her father would invite speakers into his businesses to discuss political, economic, and social matters of the day. Workers would share this information which would often be reinforced by messages delivered throughout the week at churches. Black churches were primary meeting and planning sites for civil rights workers. Samuel Sanderlin remembered hearing conversations at his church about voter registration. Dorothy Granberry attested to the improvised networks Blacks enacted to keep relatives in other parts of the country updated on news in the Black community. Most Blacks did not have telephones in their homes in the 1940s and 1950s, so they shared news when they sent copies of Black newspapers and magazines through the mail. Even when relatives moved “up North,” Southern Blacks maintained an active pipeline transferring information across several states.
Passing from one person to the next person to the next person to the next person. I know my family and most families had family members who had moved away to other places like Chicago, Michigan, Ohio, places like that. So, as I said, in terms of with the voting rights struggle, some of that was covered by Jet magazine. I actually remember the Jet magazine part and even papers, like there were Black papers. So people, relatives who had access to it and some people probably in Haywood County, you know, they had subscriptions. We didn’t have a subscription to Jet magazine. Then, you know, (they) would send these magazines to people and people would read the magazine, pass it on to somebody else, and pass it on to somebody else, and so on like that (Granberry, 2022).

News also traveled by train by way of Pullman porters who strategically dropped off copies of Black newspapers in Southern towns where they had been banned. This innovation in communication kept Black people informed and created an expanded sense of community.

In terms of education, Black parents understood this was a stepping stone to success despite the numerous restrictions they and Black children faced. On page 159, I explain that my grandfather and great-uncle both purchased buses to transport neighborhood children to school in Stanton. County funds were not allocated for bus services or school resources for Black children. They were not men of means—both were farmers and had large families—but somehow, they cobbled together finances and provided a way for children in the community to ride to school rather than walking several miles. Parents contributed in so many ways to ensure their children received an education. When community schools in the county were established, parents raised funds to make sure students had the necessities. Francine Madrey, on page 172, talked about parents in the Fredonia community purchasing soap and paper towels for the school. Students
helped maintain the school by getting up hours before school started to build a fire in the woodburning heater to warm the building.

The boys would get there early. We had what we called a janitor, who was an older boy, one of whom was my brother [Herschel] at one time. So, he’d go to the school in the morning and, well, the day before we would bring in coal. We all had coal duty and so we’d go out to the little coal house behind the school and use a shovel. I think they called it a coal scuttle. We would bring coal in and it would just sit there and we'd bring in kindling. And so the next morning the janitor, an older student, would come in and start the fire and get the school warm so that when we got to school the classroom would be warm. There were only two rooms, so that's how we heated our classrooms (Madrey, 2022).

Teachers loaded schoolchildren into their personal vehicles and drove them to various regional competitions. These innovative instructors gave students an exemplary education even while working with old and outdated materials issued by the county’s school system. In some instances, Black students outperformed White students when they were finally permitted to go to school together.

I continue to hear stories about my uncle, Theodore Giles, and how for years he would take carloads of young Black men to Tennessee A&I State University (now Tennessee State University) in Nashville and help them become enrolled in college. These recent high school graduates who were fortunate enough to fit into the crowded car for the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Brownsville looked forward to abandoning backbreaking labor in the fields for a life with many possibilities. They attended school tuition-free and built successful lives. Today, these men credit those trips to TSU with “Professor Giles” as a life-altering experience. My uncle was
an army sergeant, a longtime educator, and an alumnus of A&I, as it was called then, and worked with the school’s administrators to secure admission for these young Black men from rural West Tennessee. He understood the transformative power of an education even as systems fought against Blacks having a pathway to an equitable education. Access to higher education for Black students was certainly not promoted by the White county school system, but Black educators helped inspire and prepare students for this next educational step.

In one of the most stunning examples of resistance in this study, Odell Sanders’ stand against racial terrorists is bold and defiant. In 1965, Sanders enrolled his children into the all-White schools in Brownsville much to the ire of white supremacists (page 161). His home was bombed while his wife and children were inside, and his wife was injured. The next morning, Sanders sent the children to school, a counteraction showing he would not be intimidated and that his children would be educated alongside White children. Perhaps the greatest takeaway from this research is how proud I am to be associated with the people and this place. I try not to linger on the hardship and violence Black citizens in Haywood County endured for decades because it is heartbreaking, especially when you know some of the people who were impacted. I continue to be intrigued by their fortitude to steadfastly resist the policies meant to break them down and diminish them. This area is unique in that it is predominantly Black, but for years African Americans had no political voice.

**Placing Value on Black, Rural, and Southern Ways**

Economically distressed areas are typically overlooked and stories describing the people and their experiences are often missed/dismissed as a result. Focusing on the work and the unlikely agents of change in Haywood County is of great importance because smaller areas with groups that have been marginalized tend to be overlooked for more populated spaces. As Eagles
(2000) asserts, perspectives from rural areas often produce primary sources with direct connections to historical events but go largely unknown. Conversely, there is immediate recognition of other rhetorical spaces that represent sites of Black struggle.

Not only do communities such as Nashville, Selma, and Atlanta obviously deserve scholarly attention, but the stories of many otherwise unknown centers of activity should also be recounted. The pivotal events and key individuals in unheralded places could further enhance an appreciation of the struggle in the lives of ordinary communities and of the movement in general. Especially needed are explanations of how the movement involved and affected people in the rural South (p. 836).

These small pockets of Black communities in Haywood and Fayette counties have rich cultural histories that are rhetorical goldmines. Research is one way to cultivate these stories and preserve them for future examination. The academy should encourage and welcome more diverse representation. My hope is that the narratives included in my research will also promote dialogue among community members to learn about residents who have been at the center of some of the country’s most pivotal moments regarding social change.

For me, this research offers concepts about media representation, the Black press, racial oppression, voter suppression, and other topics connected to the Black experience that I can incorporate in my teaching. It is one way to bridge the past to the present, as many of these equity battles continue. For students from this region, exploring these topics might forge an interest in understanding regional history and issues that impact Black life. Davis (1998) points to the obligation academia has in centering more diverse perspectives in research to enhance discourse.
As a rhetorical critic and critical educator, I see the classroom as a site where meaning, language, and values engage and challenge the beliefs of what it means to be human, to dream, and to struggle for a future of liberation and collective humanity (p. 86).

Including voices of individuals who are often overlooked and unseen breathes life into research and stands as a testament to the reality of being in a society that often dismisses those who operate outside of whiteness. The academy should be a welcoming and fertile ground for scholars to investigate the absence of narratives regarding race, gender, and class to cultivate broader discursive engagement. Corrigan (2016) explicitly outlines the factors contributing to this widespread issue. Her assessment adds to the debate about what is considered relevant and worthy of research.

The (relative) lack of racial diversity in the field of rhetoric alongside the structural barriers undermining scholarship about race and rhetoric has a tremendous impact on the knowledge that we are producing. The conferences, keynotes, and invited speakers are overwhelmingly White. The content is overwhelmingly White. The reviewers, editors, hiring committees, department chairs, and graduate directors are overwhelmingly White. This is an obvious fact for students and faculty of color but perhaps not as obvious to White scholars. I suggest that acknowledgements of the field’s Whiteness need to underscore how Whiteness shapes what we consider “knowledge” (p. 190).

Diverse scholarship permits the interrogation of White-centered themes while constructing additional cultural elements of study. Since I grew up in this region, I have a special interest in events and texts that are relevant to Black experiences that tell the stories of the area.
Acknowledging the Elephant in the Ivory Tower

The study’s focus has some geographic commonalities with the university where I teach. The University of Tennessee at Martin is situated in a small agricultural community. (The town’s population is primarily White.) While I often discuss cultural and racial differences that are evident in this area, students will likely not be familiar with the referenced historic events in Haywood County. However, they could explore historical events in this area. My research will permit me to develop more opportunities for my students to interview individuals, collect narratives, and understand social issues that will help expand their worldview.

Hendrix (2011) recognizes how one’s personal encounters can enhance research as an “outsider within” and may subsequently inform pedagogical principles. These experiences contribute to “developing a critical gaze, and earning the right to speak within academia,” a freedom that is ephemeral for many Black scholars (p. 316). There is immense value in bringing diverse narratives to the forefront of research and resisting White normative standards.

This brings me to another point that is essentially the elephant in the ivory tower. The shamefully low number of African American instructors is appalling and there appears to be no immediate remedy. According to a 2021 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, African Americans make up only 6% of full-time faculty at universities in this country, with Black women representing 4% of faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The problem impacts students, curriculum, and the academy. In my own educational experience, the absence of Black faculty has been felt. I am the only Black instructor in my department and the only Black woman in my college comprised of five departments. Until I began the doctoral program at the University of Memphis, I had not been under the tutelage of a Black instructor since high school. While my research is but a miniscule fraction of research that is generated, the dismal
statistics reveal the poor representation of diverse scholarship produced by diverse scholars. One of the benefits of this study is to contribute to the exploration of political, societal, and pedagogical issues that impact African Americans. However, a previous point recognizes the dearth of scholars assigned to do this work. That is a limitation across the research field. Additionally, much of this work relies on relationships and trust. Research is hindered when subjects cannot relate to scholars with whom they have no connection or when scholars are not attuned culturally to matters concerning Black lived experiences.

**Embracing the Unexpected**

Another development in this study included a happenstance encounter with one of the White students who attended Haywood High School with Francine Madrey and Samuel Sanderlin. When I met her in person in 2023 at a university luncheon, I knew she had been in their graduating class but knew nothing about her experience at Haywood High. After introducing myself and talking for a few minutes, she became emotional and described her senior year simply as hell. This was the same person Sanderlin mentioned in his interview (referenced on page 181) when discussing the student who showed kindness to him in class. Jane Barcroft’s actions ignited ridicule directed at her by White students. She remembered Madrey and Sanderlin and the horrendous treatment they and other Black students received at Haywood High. She would witness school integration up close and personal; all the while being perplexed by the racism and hatred that were on full display every day. Barcroft had grown up in a military family and moved to Brownsville from Bermuda during her high school senior year. The Atlantic Ocean territory was essentially a million miles away from the racist tinderbox that was her new home. Experiencing culture shock would not aptly describe her entry into a town and high school that
did not want change. The 1965-66 school year was terrifying for Barcroft and left her with memories that she prefers not to remember.

After some hesitation about connecting Barcroft with Madrey and Sanderlin, my television producing skills took over. This had all the makings of a reunion segment, of sorts. Since all interviews for this study had been conducted, their interaction would not impact the research that was well underway. I received confirmation from all three individuals regarding communication with each other and allowed them to connect in their own way. After nearly 60 years, Samuel Sanderlin was able to express his gratitude to Jane Barcroft by phone for respecting him in a hostile school environment. Francine Madrey and her sister Patricia Clark connected with her via Zoom. This was an unexpected development that added a bit of context to school integration efforts and the lasting impact those experiences had on the students who participated.

**Further Research**

This study focuses on three historical events that occurred in Haywood County, Tennessee, between 1940 and 1965. They are all pivotal events that brought attention to inequities and racial terror directed at Black citizens, yet most are not part of local historical discourse. Many first learned of Elbert Williams’ lynching in 2015 when the city of Brownsville held a service of remembrance on the 75th anniversary of his murder. Countless Black lives in the South were snuffed out due to lynching. As men and women were stolen from their homes, fields, and vehicles, their disappearances were never resolved. They were just gone. Sometimes there was the community spectacle of a public lynching, but many Black families suffered those losses without any legal intervention or accountability. In many cases, the irony of police officials investigating their own actions outweighs logic. The long, wooded, and swampy stretch
of the Hatchie River in Haywood County undoubtedly holds legions of Black souls. It gave up Elbert Williams, but I often wonder as I drive by how many others remain there. To tell a more complete history of that region, additional documentation of the racial violence inflicted upon Black citizens should be collected. Narratives from family and community members could help restore the victims’ humanity and provide an outlet for individuals to speak the unspeakable.

Even now, the details surrounding the fight for voting rights and equitable educational resources are not widely known. There are so many stories that have been suppressed or erased from public memory that document the roles Black Americans have played in the construction and development of that region. Namely, Tent City in Haywood County requires more examination. The encampment erected in Fayette County is regularly included in research focusing on voting rights activism in that area. However, the stories of Haywood County residents who were evicted after registering to vote have not received adequate attention. Those tents were the birthplace for many children who are now in their 60s. The entrepreneurial prowess that a group of Black women in Haywood County exhibited helped support those evicted Black families. These women and the leather products that fueled the economy of Tent City deserve additional research.

I had never considered research that bridges past and present Black life experiences as entering into a spiritual space. Olga Davis (1998) focuses on the uniqueness of Black voices, particularly Black women, because they are routinely omitted, or their relevance is diminished in research. She approaches their stories with reverence and invokes an African framing of harmony, time, and place to support her womanist standpoint for including the words and actions of Black women.
Framed within an African cosmology, the rhetorical critic locates her work between the past and the present lives of Black women and how they responded dialectically and dialogically to oppression in order to liberate, transform, redefine, and re-claim the distinctive rhetorical tradition of intellectualism of Black womanhood for future generations of thinkers within and without the academy (p. 80).

Specifically, the Haywood Handicrafters League was an enterprise run by Black women who had previously been sharecroppers and thrown off the property of White landowners when they attempted to register to vote. They were not formally educated, but they produced leather goods that were distributed in various parts of the country. These women generated a stream of revenue that supported displaced families when other economic outlets had dried up. Tapping into their resilience and connecting to the steel will of these women’s endurance, along with several others featured in this study, embodies an awesomeness that touches on the spiritual. As a woman scholar, I take pride in showcasing the gifts and strengths of Black women who made a way out of no way, and I learn from them. Women like Annie Williams who could not properly grieve but instead had to escape North shortly after her husband Elbert had been lynched, or the women who stood in the scorching heat on courthouse steps trying to register, or the mothers who had to send their children off to school in the mornings into hostile environments day after day. They endured. Considering what they experienced every day, one can understand how their purpose and agency may inform future research on advocacy and Black women’s presence in spaces that are often overlooked.

Like Davis, my research tradition centers on uncovering and telling those unlikely stories of the Black experience—then and now. She adds that her search “reconsiders the rhetorical strategies of women who transformed the ‘ordinariness of daily life’ into a rhetoric of survival
not only for themselves but for generations beyond” (p. 81). Delving deeper into the lived experiences of the remaining Handicrafters and women like Leslie McGraw, Elbert Williams’ great-great niece and Marcia Sanders-Patterson, who was a child when her family’s house was bombed, would yield perspectives of survival—and resistance—emanating from moments of racial hatred in this country. Examining their stories and those of the female participants in this study through a womanist lens would add a richer layer of research for the academy. Our experiences and interpretations are different and cannot be inserted into categories outlined by perspectives of whiteness and maleness.

These pages of history deserve to be included in the annals of Haywood County to better understand the power and resistive dynamics of this region. There is a crucial need to obtain the oral histories of social, political, and cultural change agents. This is especially true for those who are of an advanced age and still have the ability to cogently recall events and memories.

While the participants’ response to restrictive policies and laws prominently surfaced in this study, an examination of media’s impact on Black Americans during the Jim Crow era is still warranted. This was part of my initial research inquiry. There is insufficient research documenting attitudes and impact among Black Americans as they relate to media exposure. Certainly, media habits among individuals now differ significantly from those during the mid-century due to technological advances. The field of media studies has also advanced since the period related to this qualitative case study. While we cannot go back in time and capture individuals’ first reactions to news stories that maligned or ignored Black life, it is important to examine how media coverage may have informed the construction of racial identity in Black Americans. Of particular interest is the study of media impact on Black rural residents in the South who lived during the Jim Crow era. My study contains a small sample group, but future
research could explore media effects on larger groups utilizing oral narratives. This method assists in understanding media and cultural impacts within various groups.

This research also revealed the need to collect narratives of individuals who integrated public school systems across the country. In discussing my research, I discovered that several individuals I have known for years were instrumental in integrating schools in their hometowns. These conversations sometimes grew emotional as they recounted the pain and humiliation from decades ago. As noted earlier, the perspectives of some White students could be useful in understanding their decision to participate in or reject the aggression and violence directed toward Black students. Determining a level of accuracy might be problematic since many may want to distance themselves from earlier beliefs and behaviors. I would imagine some would not be forthcoming and admit any harmful actions. There are also some educators—Black and White—who could fill in some historical blanks recounting their teaching experiences during integration. As Francine Madrey noted, there were a couple of White teachers at Haywood High who did not tolerate the mistreatment of Black students in their classes. The selection of those students and teachers would rely heavily on information collected from interviews with the students who participated in school integration. More research is needed to capture those narratives and fully document the intersections of race and education in this country. This story is still unfolding as directives about ethnically diverse curricula are being eliminated from all levels of public educational institutions. In short, I wish to continue fostering the desire in myself and in my students to examine the world around us and ask these two questions: What is missing? and Why? This is the basis of my research philosophy.
Study Synthesis

So many stories have been eclipsed by myths or altogether erased. By sifting through history’s ashes, we find vibrant and inspirational remnants capable of illuminating new paths of study. As a Black scholar from the South, I am drawn to certain areas of study that deal with social injustice and Black resistance. My research standpoint directs me toward those historical and contemporary entanglements that involve place, race, class, and gender. Olga Davis (1998) encourages the Black woman scholar to embrace her role as “a keeper of rhetorical culture” and to collectively become “sister griots.” She defines this title as researchers who “take rhetorical criticism to another level by illuminating the liberatory strategies of Black women in their attempts to transcend the essentialist ideologies that neglect their experiences, lives, and critiques from the discourse of human communication” (p. 80). My belief is if the stories and the storytellers representing the Black experience were to increase, it could be transformational for the academy.

Taking note of place—specifically, the South—presents many research opportunities. The contested definition of who and what is Southern has a contested history. Terms like “southern heritage” or just “southern” tend to skew toward characterizations of whiteness which have produced ideologies of geographical ownership. However, an examination of cultural and labor contributions by Black Americans would logically shift the title of ownership; so would the Black population majorities in some areas. Patricia Davis (2016) reflects on how the South reinvented itself with sanitized narratives about Black enslavement, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. She explains that “as an African American, I had effectively been written out of the identity of ‘southerner’ symbolized by the flag, the official history, entertainment representations, and other various texts implicated in the dominant narratives constitutive of
belonging within the region” (p. 2). With elimination comes elevation, which is the basic formula of mythmaking. The myth can be twisted and amplified, even adopted into mainstream thought.

But history has also shown how these tactics can draw opposition. This study focuses on Haywood County, a predominantly Black county, and it rhetorically interrogates power dynamics in the South. Debates on the disapproval and removal of confederate statues in Memphis add to the discourse of ideographic representations of the South. As de Velasco (2019) notes, “such moves weaken the default linkage of ‘Southern’ to Whiteness, by forcing audiences to confront a robustly Black vision of the past” and illustrate how exploration of similar rhetorical and historical texts create “a visual map of Blackness” (p. 239). A broader map of the region could help expand definitions of Southern rhetoric and how it is interpreted by various groups.

I consider myself fortunate to have included the voices of persons with seasoned stories that began in the 1920s and 1930s. Mildred Bond Roxborough and Cynthia Rawls Bond collectively have witnessed nearly 200 years of the ebbs and flows of Black American life. Their narratives are painful and inspiring—much like the Black experience in this country. I hope this research provides some motivation for scholars to seek out these rhetorical repositories of history, culture, and resilience. They are the link for attempting to reconcile the past with the present. Their recollections, along with those of the other four participants, are evidence that policies that many are quick to dismiss as “ancient history” are actually quite recent, relatively speaking.

This study brings attention to historical events related to equity and justice, Black lived experiences surrounding those events, and hegemonic principles that restricted Black freedom in
Haywood County, Tennessee. I often think about my parents’ reaction to the politics of the day and their perplexity related to voting restrictions and racial attitudes. Though I examine actions and attitudes from 1940 to 1965, many of the issues that hampered social and political advancements for Black residents then are resurfacing. Some efforts have intensified since I began my research, which is concerning. We would be wise to be watchful and learn from our foremothers’ and forefathers’ strategies of resistance. Black Haywood countians were involved in events and struggles that were horrific and astounding. This tension—the push and pull of restriction and resistance—is what propelled change in this unsuspecting rural area. Their forthright approaches to freedom caught the attention of national lawmakers and inspired federal legislation. People in this region of West Tennessee—one of the most economically distressed areas in the country at the time—were not passive. They did not take the harsh restrictions against their blackness sitting down. They stood and they resisted.
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Appendix A

This letter was written by Jesse Giles, Jr. to the U.S. Department of Justice in 1965 regarding Klan activity in Haywood County, Tennessee.
Appendix B

Interview Questions for Participants

1. Please state your name and spell it.
2. What is your current or former occupation?
3. Where do you live?
4. When did you live in Haywood County?
5. What was your life like in Haywood County then?
6. Regarding the select historical events, how did you learn about (Elbert Williams’ death, the DOJ lawsuit, or school desegregation)?
7. What is your direct connection to the event?
8. Was the story reported in the media? If so, how?
9. How did the coverage make you feel?
10. How do you feel about each of these stories now?
11. What were other methods for obtaining news related to Black life or events? (word of mouth, community or religious gatherings, other print or electronic media)
12. How relevant was local newspaper coverage of Black-related events to Black Haywood County residents? (Were these published stories Black residents’ primary source of information?)
13. What media did you read, watch, or listen to? Why?
14. What about now? Why?
15. What is your earliest memory of seeing Blacks represented in media? (newspaper, magazine, television, radio)
16. What did media teach you about yourself when you were young?
17. How did media impact your understanding of blackness? Examples?

18. Did those images or lessons have any bearing on how you saw yourself or how you wanted to be? How did they contribute to constructing your identity as a Black American?

19. What are your thoughts about television news, newspapers, magazines, and radio today?

20. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?
Appendix C

This article was published in *The States-Graphic* in Brownsville, Tennessee, on August 20, 1965, reporting on separate local events by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Ku Klux Klan.

Core And Klan Share Stage As Trouble Free Saturday Passes

Residents of the Brownsville area were treated to a “double-header” in the way of demonstrations last Saturday afternoon, as at 1:30 o’clock a parade by some 200 civil right marchers was followed by a parade of about 30 visiting Ku Klux Klan members later in the afternoon.

The Rev. James Edward Smith, a field secretary with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) led some 200 followers around the county courthouse, and made a brief talk, which was climaxxed by his statement that history had been made” when approximately 15 negroes entered the courthouse, and visited the facilities inside.

The silent Klan members marched around the courthouse inside the same roped area as provided for the civil rights workers and after a brief invitation from state leader, Dragon Anderson, some 20 odd spectators fell in behind the marching Klansmen.

At 7:30 that evening, Imperial Wizard, Robert Shelton, held a crowd of 1500 spell-bound for two hours as he pointed out the grasp that communism had on our nation, citing instances to prove his remarks. He was enthusiastically received, and was interrupted on many occasions by applause from the crowd, which included many Negroes.

At the conclusion of his address, applications for membership in the Klan were taken with many of the spectators availing themselves of the opportunity.

The days festivities were eyed closely by local, state, and federal officials, but not the slightest incident of any kind marred the proceedings.