Introduction

The examination of the Ohio color line presented in this book is a reflection of the renewed scholarly interest in the study of the African American past as seen from within statewide perimeters. Black historical themes in states are the foci of a spate of books and doctoral dissertations produced since the beginning of the 1990s. The states examined are mainly southern: Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Most center on the African American struggle for citizenship rights, while some give special attention to other issues, notably concerning color and class. Excepting one, each work covers several decades in the twentieth century or in a time frame spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This Ohio book responds to a need for additional scholarship on black history in the World War I era and the 1920s, times that were fundamentally important in the shaping of twentieth century black experiences because they saw the culmination of trends that started in the nineteenth century and witnessed antecedents of the modern civil rights era.

Trends in the African American experience that were just getting well underway in the 1890s accelerated after 1915 and reached culmination in the 1920s. Among these trends were those that enlarged black urban populations through in-migration, broadened black urban community life, and magnified social welfare concerns in black urban neighborhoods. At the same time, mounting white hostility to blacks tended to further isolate African Americans in urban centers. Accompanying these trends was the development of a new black leadership that addressed welfare issues and equal rights grievances. Historian David A. Gerber (1976) carefully analyses these developments in their Ohio manifestations prior to World War I.

This book asserts that the color line in Ohio grew more divisive in the
period 1915–1930 when, as specialists in this field know, there was movement away from American principles of equality and justice. It is a reminder that the past does not always provide a comforting story of progress. Its analysis of racial discrimination and segregation in Ohio speaks to those historians who are still inclined to discuss Jim Crow as a wholly southern phenomenon.

Further, it provides a notable instance of the slavery era’s legacy making its influence felt in the twentieth century. This book argues that the intensity of the Ohio color line varied from south to north in the period 1915–1930 and that these differences were rooted in the antebellum era prior to the Civil War when Ohio ties with the slave South were weakest in northern Ohio and strongest in southern Ohio.

A theme transcending this volume is that local people in Ohio took the initiative on color line issues. It was mainly black Ohioans working locally who acted on civil rights complaints and welfare concerns arising from the Ohio color line. Traditional studies, such as John Flint Kellogg’s NAACP (1967), generally stress the roles of national figures and regional or national efforts to confront racial injustice. This book contributes to the more recent literature arguing that local initiatives were crucially important in twentieth century civil rights struggles, for instance, John Dittmer’s Bancroft Prize winning Local People (1994), which clarifies the importance of local residents in campaigns for equal rights in Mississippi.

The hardening of the Ohio color line in the period 1915–1930 occurred in a larger context of historical change in the nation. In the previous half-century, Ohio and much of the North experienced the compelling phenomena of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization and were transformed from largely rural and agricultural societies to modern ones. Ohio, like many northern states in 1915, encompassed numerous large cities with heavy industries and multi-ethnic populations. For over a century now, scholars have asked how African Americans figured in these changes, particularly those in the period 1890–1930. Research on black urban life done through the 1940s mainly was conducted by social scientists studying events in their own time, each focusing on themes such as race relations or black urban community formation in a single city. Publishing in the 1960s and 1970s, historians associated with the so-called ghetto school discussed the social scientists’ traditional black urban themes of the early twentieth century but placed them in a historical context that extended backward to related developments in the nineteenth century. Later studies done by historians in the 1980s and after refocused scholarly attention away from black ghetto formation to issues of race, class, and gender with special refer-
ence to the African American Great Migration’s contributions to the rise of the working class in black urban-industrial life. Knowledge of African American urban history also has been enriched since 1990 by the appearance of numerous other scholarly studies. Each is set in one city, and most focus on citizenship rights struggles in a selected twentieth century period.

This Ohio study comments on both traditional and current issues in the age-old scholarly discussion of black urban life. It deals with such older themes as black-white relations, black migration, and urban institution building as well as newer ones concerning color, class, and gender. The Ohio findings, for instance, support both the 1960s thesis that racial intolerance was an integral factor in early black urban community formation and assertions made in the eighties and nineties that black urban experiences also were affected by other factors that were inherent in urban growth, but different in each city. African American urban studies often relate to a single city, while this Ohio book comments on several urban centers. It asserts that differences in black urban community formation in Ohio were shaped by color line variations from place to place and were related to localized demographic, spatial, and economic factors.

This book provides extended discussions of partisan politics, a relatively underresearched theme in early twentieth century African American history. Among the few such studies is one by Richard B. Sherman (1973), which mainly focuses on white Republicans in the period 1896–1933 making policies tending to abandon the cause of African Americans that the Republican Party had championed in the Reconstruction Era. The Ohio study shows African Americans as local activists who protested these policy changes, engaged in independent black Republican activities in the period 1915–1930, and helped prepare the way for the exodus of black voters from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party in 1936. Analyses explaining this black voter realignment mainly focus on 1930s events and black perceptions of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies.

Ohio is a rich field for research and writing about African Americans, one yielding an extensive literature about the black history of the state, its region, and the nation. There is much fine published scholarship about Ohio’s black history, especially in the nineteenth century field. Among these many works are David A. Gerber, Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860–1915 (Urbana, IL, 1976), Kenneth L. Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870–1930 (Urbana, IL, 1976), Kimberly L. Phillips, Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–1945 (Urbana, IL, 1999), and

This Ohio book reflects a great deal of intense searching in original sources over quite a few years. It relies very heavily on these primary sources, for example, newspapers, particularly African American weeklies, census reports and other government documents, records of the NAACP and Urban League, and manuscript collections of individual African Americans. This research yielded an enormous amount of detailed information about individuals, organizations, and places across Ohio, from Cincinnati to Cleveland, and across all sorts of subject matter.

The book uses accumulation of detail to empower its underlying argument that the color line hardened and that resistance to it mainly came from local people. Instead of asserting the thesis with only some illustrative material, it gathers evidence from every corner of Ohio and almost every aspect of life from cradle to grave, at least from hospital to cemetery. Amassing detail upon detail, it leaves little room for doubt that the hardening of the color line, in its various shapes, was ubiquitous in Ohio and that it made life in these times more difficult for African Americans everywhere. The volume quotes generously from the primary sources, black and white ones; this allows the voices of that time to speak again, resurrects the rhetoric of the color line, and conveys variations in both the tenor of white intolerance and the spirit of black resistance.

This book treats the color line as a barrier dividing social groups, and it looks at both sides. It extensively documents the many ways that the Ohio color lines increasingly separated and divided. But much of this study is given to individuals and organizations in African American communities that acted to promote social justice. Importantly, the period 1915–1930 saw the early development of Ohio branches of national civil rights and race relations associations that were the organizational mainstays of the civil rights movement in the early 1950s. Also in this time, African Americans staged community boycotts and set a few Ohio precedents for the kinds of direct action mass protests common in the early 1960s.

Moving from city to city and from region to region as it does, this approach to the subject shows the ambiguities and complexities of the color line. It reveals the great variety within the state. It examines cities in each region and shows that black experiences were different in northern, central, and southern Ohio; for instance, Cleveland was typically the most progressive on equality issues and Cincinnati the least so.
There was variety within this larger pattern as well. Also, this approach shows that some whites crossed the line to work for justice. But it emphasizes the many and varied ways that African Americans acted in the face of the widening color chasm. The basic choices were accommodation or active resistance or wavering between the two, but there were variations of each. Sometimes a color line situation involved a personal decision, perhaps about whether to enter a restaurant or public park. Sometimes a decision concerned a larger community question, perhaps whether to advocate the desegregation of a public school that would bring integration at the expense of black teachers’ jobs. Action was necessary to African Americans experiencing both the evolution of color lines and the formation of black communities in Ohio. All were in motion, executing complicated maneuvers of coping with always uncertain and changing circumstances in practically all aspects of life. Life along the color line was replete with challenges, some large, some small. There were failures and successes while color lines were inexorably extended. But, always, somewhere in Ohio local people resisted.

The book is intended for many kinds of readers. It makes a scholarly argument about the hardening of the color line in Ohio and the character of resistance there while providing a source of information and detail about dozens of themes of broad interest. It is meant to serve scholars interested in color issues. Naturally, it speaks to Ohioans especially. Further, it is intended to serve as a reliable and enduring reference for teachers, librarians, historical society staffs, museum curators, and others working on any number of programs and projects. Finally, it is hoped that the book speaks to general readers. It contains many stories of inherent interest revealing human conduct at its best and worst. One such instance involved a white sheriff who risked his life attempting to foil a white mob set on lynching the lawman’s black prisoner. Another concerned an African American campaign to form a black regiment for service in World War I and the heroic conduct of Ohio’s black combat soldiers in France. All of these stories help illuminate the reality of life along the color line for the Ohioans of this period.