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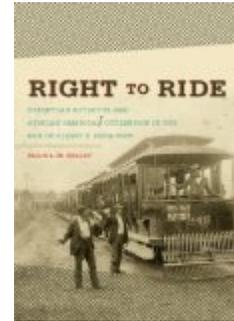
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Blair L. M. Kelley. *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 304 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3354-4; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7101-0.

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Today, few seem to remember that the civil rights movement did not begin with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956. In a now largely forgotten struggle between 1900 and 1907, African Americans in twenty-five Southern cities organized protests against the wave of segregation laws that followed the Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which allowed states to require segregation under the infamous “separate but equal” doctrine. In *Right to Ride*, Blair M. Kelley, associate professor of history at North Carolina State University, revives awareness of this forgotten generation of civil rights activists who have been largely ignored except for August Meier and Elliott Rudwick’s work in the 1960s. Meyer and Rudwick interpreted the *Plessy*-era boycotts through the lens of civil rights movement of the 1960s, seeing them as part of a more conservative, accommodationist movement dominated by middle-class followers of Booker T. Washington. Kelley points out that the motive of the diverse leadership of the streetcar boycotts cannot be neatly categorized as either accommodation or protest. While Kelley delves into tensions within the black community, she feels that is not correct to depict the boycott movement as “the failed effort of a small and select privileged class of black southerners to gain inclusion in a cross-racial middle class” (p. 10). Kelley also emphasizes the role of women in forming “the variety of approaches that characterized black political thought as expressed in the protests against segregated trains and streetcars” (p. 12).

Kelley examines in detail three of these boycotts, in New Orleans, Richmond, and Savannah, but first she develops a strong background, finding the roots of this dis-

sent in the nineteenth century. Boycotts, court cases, and other efforts to fight segregation in transportation go back to the earliest days of public transportation in the pre-Civil War North. In fact, the term “Jim Crow” was first used to describe segregated rail cars in 1840s Massachusetts, where Frederick Douglass initially came to public attention as a segregation resistor. This early resistance took the form of civil disobedience that resulted in violence or arrests followed by legal appeals. In New York City on July 16, 1854, a streetcar conductor violently ejected Elizabeth Jennings, a young African American schoolteacher, and her friend Sarah Adams when they insisted on riding inside a car reserved for whites. Jennings sued and won. The case did not overturn transportation segregation in New York, but it did inspire other people to resist. The Jennings case struck a theme that would continue in the civil rights movement from that time forward: respectable citizens should not be deprived of equal treatment before the law because of their race.

In the South before the end of slavery, segregation was not as developed as it would become in the early twentieth century, but the roots were there. On most Southern trains, African Americans, both slave and free, were relegated to the combination baggage and passenger car attached immediately behind the engine—the smokiest, least comfortable position in these days of coal- and wood-fired steam engines—unless of course they were nursemaids accompanying whites. However in some places, notably New Orleans, well-to-do “free people of color” able to afford first-class tickets could ride undisturbed among the white passengers.

During Reconstruction, Congress acted to protect civil rights, but enforcement of rules remained sporadic even after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. When the Supreme Court overturned the act in 1883, the door was opened for rail and streetcar companies to adopt segregation rules. Customs varied from place to place, and enforcement of rules was often at the whim of white conductors and passengers. African American holders of first-class tickets were frequently banned from the first-class “ladies’ cars” and forced to ride in the second-class smoking cars. Black women were especially effective at pointing out the logical inconsistencies of racial segregation: No matter how “lady-like” their dress and deportment, they were frequently forced into the smoking car. Yet black nurses in charge of white children could sit in the ladies’ car, where the waiters and porters were black men. In fact, a majority of suits brought against rail segregation before 1890 were initiated by women. Both segregation and the struggle against it increased during the early 1890s, leading to a climax with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Almost inevitably, the case came out of New Orleans.

Kelley gives a brilliant picture of the unique racial and class mix of New Orleans, delving into the fraught relations between the mixed-race, French-speaking Afro-Creoles, who had been free in the antebellum period, and the Anglicized African American freedmen. The two groups had come together in the 1860s to get the Union occupying forces to abolish the “star-car” system in which streetcar lines provided separate cars for black riders. When Louisiana proposed a law segregating trains, leaders of both groups again organized to oppose passage of the law, but after it was approved in July 1890, the Afro-Creole professional class took the lead in setting up a test case that they hoped would end segregation permanently. Kelley gives a fascinating account of the landmark case, delving into Homer Plessy’s background, the Citizens’ Committee and other organizations and leaders behind him, and even the collusion of some of the railroads, who had an interest in avoiding the expense of providing two sets of cars.

Although she may have considered it outside the focus of her work, Kelley could have strengthened her account by looking into the reasons for the increased effort of Southern states to pass segregation laws. She makes no mention of the role of the conservative effort to counter the threat of the Populist Party, with its cross-racial appeal, by driving a wedge between the black and white poor. Also, while she gives a good account of tragic result of the *Plessy* case, she has little to say about the

Supreme Court’s actual arguments and makes no mention of Justice John Marshall Harlan’s Great Dissent, with its call for a color-blind Constitution.

Plessy laid the legal foundation for the imposition of the segregation regime across the South, and the response of the African American community to this situation forms the core of Kelley’s work. Following a new state law, New Orleans began segregating its electric streetcars in 1902 by placing a moveable screen near the back of the car, crowding black patrons into the last few seats. Because of the expense and problems of enforcement, the streetcar company itself opposed the law, to the point that its president was arrested for failure to comply. Since much of the traditional black leadership of the town preferred an inside strategy of working with the streetcar company in a court challenge to the law, it fell to the black clubwomen to organize a boycott. Support came from unions and other black organizations, many of whom cancelled events rather than ask people to ride segregated cars to attend. But in 1903, the state supreme court upheld the law. The boycott continued, but gradually petered out as progress did not come. Still, it was a decade before black passengers regained their pre-boycott levels.

In 1904, Virginia passed a segregation law, and Kelley uses the resulting boycott in Richmond to illustrate the divide within the black middle class and the role of black newspapers and women’s organization in organizing the resistance to growing discrimination. The middle-class division about the cause of growing segregation is personified by two of the most prominent leaders of Richmond’s black community, editor John Mitchell Jr. and Independent Order of St. Luke leader Maggie Lena Walker. Mitchell believed that the impetus for segregation came from lower-class whites and that African Americans should seek allies among the white middle class. Walker, the great champion of working-class black women, saw pervasive racism in the white community and looked for advancement of civil rights through African American unity and economic independence. Both sides saw segregation as a threat to black citizenship and buried their differences to support a major boycott effort against the streetcars. However, even though they had successfully fought off segregation over the previous twenty-five years and this boycott bankrupted the streetcar company, the state simply responded with more stringent laws and the boycott ultimately failed.

Kelley’s third example, Savannah, had a black majority and a long history of compromise. Boycotters had de-

feated attempts to segregate streetcars in 1872 and 1899. But when another segregation attempt developed in 1906, new forces were at work behind the scenes. Ironically, Savannah's white Progressive leadership employed segregation as a tool to achieve a Progressive goal: dissolution of the streetcar monopoly. Black Savannah, of course, did not intend to allow its rights to be sacrificed on the altar of Progressivism. A broad-based boycott organization quickly formed, led by the ministers and prominent representatives of the middle class, notably *Savannah Tribune* editor Solomon Johnson. Cast in terms of racial pride, the boycott devastated the streetcar company. The company struck back by hiring black workers, by bribing some within the community to oppose the boycott, and even by hosting a national convention of black composers and musicians. In the end, the com-

pany wore down the boycotters, and though the city's plot to break the streetcar monopoly failed, segregation remained. Despite all efforts, in Savannah as elsewhere during the first decade of the twentieth century, the segregation regime was enforced across the South.

Kelley thoroughly researched her topic in manuscript collections, government documents, court cases, and especially, black newspapers. Her writing is fluent, and the story she tells is compelling. Kelley has made a major contribution to the historiography of the South and the civil rights movement by reminding us that the struggle of African Americans for their citizenship rights did not begin in the 1950s and that an earlier generation fought just as strenuously against the imposition of segregation as a later generation would to overturn it.

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