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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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Popular culture's understanding of the modern American civil rights movement seems to have all but forgotten that the struggle for civil rights preceded the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. Such shortsightedness, however, is being challenged by the curious minds of a new generation of historians of African American history, including Blair L. M. Kelley of North Carolina State University. In *Right to Ride*, Kelley draws on the history of African American southerners' protest against segregated trains and streetcars to explore notions of black identity and the purposes of black community institutions.

Just as streetcar rails intersect, so too do the dimensions of this study. *Right to Ride* explores the interconnectedness of social status, gender, and skin color with such clarity that it is no surprise that the book earned the Association of Black Women Historians' 2010 Letitia Woods Brown Memorial Book Award. *Right to Ride*'s achievement is especially impressive when one considers that its main contention–that "the age of 'accommodation' was simultaneously a time of resistance"–stands in direct opposition to decades-old historiography (p. 12).

While few historians are more venerated than August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, Kelley does not shy away from challenging their "blurred analysis" of the modern movement's struggles as the archetype of black protest. *Right to Ride*'s challenge is compelling, convincing, and, quite frankly, long overdue. Written in the midst of the turbulent 1960s, "The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906," Meier and Rudwick's definitive study of the turn-of-the-century streetcar boycotts characterized them as "conservative."[1] But does conservatism mean accommodationism?

Characterizations of this nature were (and in many ways, continue to be) easy given the prevailing analyses of Tuskegee University founder Booker T. Washington. There is no question that as black America's most prominent spokesman at the time, Washington made concessions on African American demands for social equality. Biographer Louis R. Harlan's seminal work *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (1983), however, sought to rescue Washington from one-dimensional studies, which did not consider his behind-the-scenes civil rights work. Even though *Right to Ride* is not about either figure, its brief treatment of Washington and his ideological rival, Fisk and Harvard University graduate W. E. B. Du Bois, is much needed and effectual.

As a social history, *Right to Ride* principally chronicles streetcar protest in three cities–New Orleans, Richmond, and Savannah–but appropriately begins by establishing the context in which black protest between 1890 and 1910 emerged. Streetcar protests, such as that of Elizabeth Jennings in New York, predate the landmark 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case by more than four decades. Similarly, race leaders (who traveled railways frequently), including Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells, fought segregated travel both figuratively and literally. These realities help reinforce Kelley's claim that mid-twentieth-century black protest had "deep roots," deeper oftentimes than we had even thought (p. 2).

Likewise, challenges faced by the modern movement, such as class differences and prejudice related to skin color, also date back to the turn of the century. Plessy and the New Orleans' creole elite "fell short of offering a more universal solution to the problem of Jim Crow" because of their refusal to embrace the plight of the black masses as their own (p. 80). It is important to note that the freedmen's deficiencies, while no fault of their own, were widely recognized as justification for their second-class social status even by some black Americans.

Still, the *Plessy* decision subjugated blacks, both light and dark, as well as rich and poor, to legally enshrined

second-class citizenship. Recognizing their shared fate, blacks from all cross sections of color and class joined efforts to fight segregation following the turn of the century. Although streetcar boycotts in New Orleans in 1902, Richmond in 1904, and Savannah in 1906 followed this model, they crumbled under the weight of nagging internal divisions and increased legal oppression.

Right to Ride also pointedly notes that every success, as well as every shortcoming, of these protests must be understood within the broader context in which they occurred. Not only was black protest often hard-fought and long-suffering, but it was also mounted during a time in which white terrorism was at an all-time high. Blacks during this period, Kelley observes, "lived in an America where black men, women, and children were hunted like sport" (p. 4).

Other important dimensions of this work include its exploration of the critical roles African American women and community institutions played in initiating and sustaining black protest. Black men and women alike were aware of gender politics and often used them to their advantage. Because many of the arguments underpinning racism were centered on notions of protecting white womanhood, attacks on black womanhood "laid bare the irrationality of segregation" (p. 11). Even so, black women's protest was not just limited to the public square. To challenge segregation, black women also used litigation, as well as their influence as community leaders. For example, in the process of highlighting the efforts of Richmond's Maggie Lena Walker, editor of the *St. Luke Herald*, and John Mitchell, of the *Richmond Planet*, Kelley reveals black women's roles in intellectual debate. In black communities, or the world-within-a-world, the problem of segregation was expansive enough for the employment of different tactics–such as litigation or economic boycotts–and for the popularity of divergent ideologies.

The most impressive accomplishment of *Right to Ride* is its successful reconstruction of the interrelationship of black protests against segregated streetcars in several cities over time. Surely it would have been easier to examine just one city or to have an even narrower focus, such as a particular campaign. Yet Kelley needed to examine several campaigns in multiple cities over two decades in order to chip away at the historiography and demonstrate that these protests were not just exceptions to the rule. In the process of rising to this challenge, Kelley may disappoint legal or even economic historians looking for a more thorough analysis of their subjects. However, Kelley achieves what she set out to do. *Right to Ride* reveals the deep roots of black protest as well as the diverse positions of black leaders during this period, challenging its sobriquet as the "age of accommodation."

Note

[1]. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906," The Journal of American History 55, no. 4 (March 1969): 756-775.

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