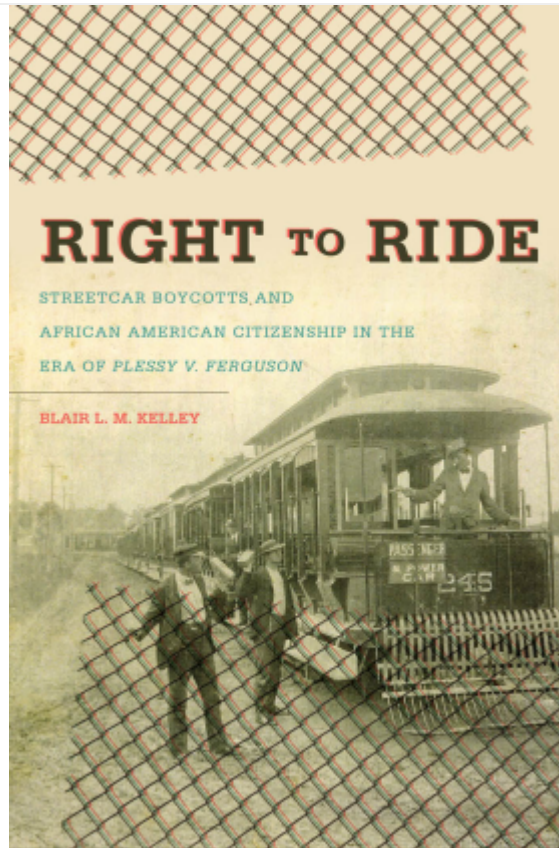


{essays in history}

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Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson



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Reviewed Work(s)

Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. By Blair L.M. Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pp. 280. Cloth, \$59.95. Paper, \$21.95.

In *Right to Ride*, Blair L.M. Kelley explores new dimensions of black protest during the early years of Jim Crow. The book begins with the history of railroad and streetcar segregation in the Antebellum North, and then examines boycott movements in New Orleans, Richmond, and Savannah at the turn of the twentieth century. The author not only describes the details of these particular boycotts but also uses them to explore trends in black community organizing and leadership. *Right to Ride* advances two central themes: “the collective nature of the struggle against segregation of trains and streetcars and the tensions that existed within black communities” (12). Analyzing debates about protest strategies among black leaders, Kelley shows that despite internal tensions, urban black communities used boycott movements to fight segregation and assert their citizenship rights. While these boycotts were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing segregation, they posed a serious challenge to Jim Crow laws and constituted an important chapter in the history of black protest in the South.

Streetcar boycotts were initiated in more than twenty southern cities during the first decade of the twentieth century. In the 1960s historians August Meier and Elliott Rudwick examined this wave of protests, providing the definitive interpretation of the subject to date.^[1] While Kelley builds on the comprehensive research of Meier and Rudwick, *Right to Ride* calls into question their classification of streetcar boycotts as “conservative” in comparison to protests of the Civil Rights Era. While these boycott movements were indeed led by black middle-class leaders, who were often critical of the black poor and steeped in the language of uplift, Kelley argues that they were pragmatic and not simply accommodationist. In addition, measuring protests by a subset of vocal leaders obscures the great number of working-class residents who participated in the boycotts for their own reasons. *Right to Ride* not only analyzes the nuanced motivations and arguments of elite boycott leaders; it also links ideological debates with the struggles of working-

class people who were also actively interested in protecting their citizenship.

The black populations of New Orleans, Richmond, and Savannah were unique, but their boycott movements encountered similar obstacles. New Orleans had the largest black population south of Washington, D.C. with a distinct Afro-Creole community. In fact, elite Creoles of color were a major driving force behind Homer Plessy's famous legal challenge of Louisiana's separate car law, which Kelley examines in its own chapter. Richmond too had a large African American population with a growing middle class, while Savannah's reputation for "compromise" on racial issues made it one of the last holdouts from segregation. As the author shows, streetcar boycotts in New Orleans in 1902, Richmond in 1904 and Savannah in 1906 drew participants from all sectors of the black community, but these movements eventually collapsed for a host of reasons, including internal divisions, increasing legal subjugation, and the long-term toll of hardship and violence.

The strength of black community organizing and the commitment of working-class people were crucial to the mobilization and sustainability of streetcar boycotts. Churches and fraternal orders offered networks and provided spaces for discussion and maintaining morale. For each city, Kelley explains how successful alliances between these local organizations could make or break the will of a boycott. He demonstrates, furthermore, that conflicts between black leaders and organizations over protest tactics served to weaken collective resolve. The author also vividly describes how streetcar transportation was integral to the lives of black working-class residents. For Kelley, staying off the rails demonstrated their incredible dedication and sacrifice. Although these boycotts lasted months or years and inflicted heavy financial losses on transportation companies, violence and the unyielding commitment of white segregationists eventually prevailed.

Most of the individuals highlighted in *Right to Ride* are editors of local African American newspapers, whose writings not only provide factual information on the boycotts, but also showcase the diverse perspectives of the black middle class. The author's discussion of the ideological differences in the writings of Maggie Lena Walker, editor of the *St. Luke Herald*, and John Mitchell Jr. of the *Richmond Planet*, is especially illustrative of the different ways black leaders conceptualized the

problem of segregation and of what constituted appropriate and effective protest. Kelley argues that while the *Plessy* decision was discouraging to activists who saw the courts as their prime means of contesting segregation, the defeat did not stem the tide of protest or encourage accommodation. Rather, African Americans looked beyond the law, to boycotts or the use of their economic power, as means of protecting their rights. While Kelley often highlights middle-class leaders, she does not assume that these articulate elites spoke for the entire black community. Kelley also explores the motivations of black working-class men and women who participated in these movements, demonstrating that boycott tactics appealed to black southerners across ideological and class lines.

Class divisions are a major facet of Kelley's analysis, but *Right to Ride* also tackles the gendered politics of segregation and highlights African American women's active participation in boycott movements. Concerns for black women were often central to arguments against segregation and helped highlight the fallacies of a system meant to protect white womanhood. While other authors have discussed the tenuous place of black women in the South's racial hierarchy, Kelley offers fresh observations. Especially interesting is her discussion of the *Plessy* court case in terms of gender politics. The author argues that the Citizens' Committee should have chosen a woman for its test case, claiming that if they challenged a woman being thrown out of a ladies car, they "would have been able to present a forceful and more dramatic case about the danger and damage of Jim Crow"(78).

As *Right to Ride* convincingly demonstrates, African American protest movements at the turn of the twentieth century were creative and organized, and while black southerners who participated in these protests were a diverse group, they shared a deep commitment to preserving black citizenship rights despite violence and the rising tide of legal segregation. Through well-chosen cases, Kelley succeeds in her intention to complicate our understanding of African American communities and analyze the long history of black protest in the South. The book, however, concludes with the comment that the failure of these boycotts was inevitable given the increasing rigidity of Jim Crow society. This conclusion is well supported by the facts, but it detracts from author's emphasis on dissent throughout the book. Nonetheless, *Right to*

Ride is undoubtedly an important contribution to historical scholarship, and succeeds in reminding readers that forced “toleration was not consent” and that streetcar boycotts still “planted seeds of resistance” for a later generation (200).

Lauren Acker

University of California, Los Angeles

[1] August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906,” *Journal of American History* 55:4 (1969).



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