

Gerry Zelenak

HIST 581 Civil Rights in the 20th Century

Week 2 Discussion 2

Discussion Prompts:

- 1. In what ways does Kelley deviate from the classical history of civil rights? Describe how this deviation improves our knowledge of civil rights history.**
- 2. Identify and elaborate on two of Kelley's main points. Do you think she proves her argument on these points?**
- 3. Discuss how either class or gender intersected with race to affect streetcar boycotts.**
- 4. What primary sources does Kelley use to prove her argument and what challenges does she face with regard to evidence?**

1. Kelley deviates from the classical history of civil rights in several ways. One, she shows the underpinnings of early activism through the lens of lesser known leaders and activists. Instead of highlighting the achievements and efforts of the "famous few", she illustrates the struggles and strategies of, I hesitate to qualify, "ordinary" citizens who were anything but ordinary. She tells these lesser known stories of the fights against race segregation at the grassroots level and very clearly illustrates the complexity and nuance of this fight. She illustrates how this struggle is not an overgeneralized battle between black and white, or even that this is only a battle about rights itself. Kelly quite effectively shows how this battle crosses the lines of gender, race, ethnicity and class and that they are far from clear cut distinctions. This is especially evident in her examination of the cooperation (and division) in New Orleans and the Afro Creole culture and their differences between Americanized Blacks in history and ethnicity. She also shows the different approaches to win legal, social and economic equality, and the internal struggles that created additional challenges to success.
2. One of the themes that Kelley explores is that of divisions within the movement in New Orleans. Kelley spends significant energy explaining the differences between two distinct groups, Afro Creoles and Americanized blacks and their viewpoints regarding the approach that the movement should take. These differences led to conflict within the New Orleans protests that, on occasion undermined the protests themselves. It was interesting to note the number of free blacks in New Orleans prior to the civil war and how these different histories, particularly that of Creoles of color, led to divergent attitudes regarding segregation and the appropriate actions that should be undertaken. The Creole ethnic identity "emphasize[d] its distinctive in-between status" (pg. 52) and New Orleans itself reflected a far more complex structure of racial and economic gradation. Another point that she explores is the economic impact of the streetcars themselves another importance to African Americans. She, like Hale, points out that the battle over segregation on trains was no mere coincidence. Much of this might be attributed to the growing significance of public transportation in a growing industrial south and the cities at the center of economic activity. Kelley goes on to show that, while Desdune's interstate rail boycotts had no practical chance of success, however sound the organization and planning might be (pg. 70), this was not the case for streetcar travel where African Americans made up a large portion of its ridership. She shows the economic necessity and social enrichment (pg. 91) of the streetcars to African Americans throughout New Orleans, Richmond and Savannah growing cities across the American South. Because of this necessity to so many black Southerners, segregation on streetcars was particularly offensive to Southern blacks and therefore, by extension, a logical early battleground against "Jim Crow"
3. The story of Elizabeth Jennings at the beginning of the book sets the stage for two of Kelley's main focuses: class and gender and their intersection with the rail and streetcar boycotts. I found her exploration of gender to be extremely enlightening, especially the

“double edged” nature of womanhood with regard to their treatment on public conveyances and the utility of gender to the organization and implementation of the boycotts. Kelley explains fairly clearly that the treatment of women of color on conveyances, especially in her chapter on “the Ladies Car” was paradoxical. Women and children were seen as the most sympathetic of riders, yet they were frequently exposed to some of the worst conditions and offered the fewest protections. Ironically, when it came to testing the storm of segregation laws on rail and streetcars, gender became a discussion point when selecting a representative to test these cases precisely because they made more sympathetic victims of unjust Jim Crow laws.

4. Kelley uses a wide range of Southern newspapers from the era, many of which that were the mouthpieces for many Churches and Southern civil rights organizations, like the *Crusader Southern* and *Christian Advocate*, or sympathetic to the cause of desegregation, like the *Savannah Tribune* and the *Richmond Planet*. There are also a great number of personal stories that are woven through the narrative she tells. One might see a distinct challenge for Kelley in finding surviving copies of some of these sources of information. Additionally, it was mentioned that large numbers of African Americans were illiterate, half of the black population 1880 New Orleans for example, and while improvement efforts were making gains, there are likely many accounts that have been lost to history. Much of Kelley’s focus, the emerging black middle class, may have been out of necessity as the stories of the poorer, less literate lower classes may not have survived.