

BOOK REVIEW

Riding Jane Crow: African American Women on the American Railroad

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Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* inaugurated a new direction in Black feminist scholarship that centered “embodied discourse” or a “form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies in the texts they write and speak” in the way that we study Black women's lives and intellectual thought (Cooper 2017, 3). Miriam Thaggert's *Riding Jane Crow: African American Women on the American Railroad* continues in that same vein, writing nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American women into American railroad history by detailing their negotiations of respectability politics and the sociospatial race and gender politics that limited their mobility. Using literary analysis and comprehensive archival research, Thaggert resituates Pauli Murray's legal theorization of “Jane Crow” into the context of Black female railroad travel, considering how Black women's experiences as passengers and workers trouble depictions of the train as a technological symbol of American progress.¹ Her recovery of Black women riders' critical interventions into increasingly restrictive Jim Crow car segregation laws, predating and extending beyond the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, reclaims the long tradition of Black women's travel experiences being essential to testing what Anna Julia Cooper called America's “national courtesy” (Cooper 1998, 94).²

Thaggert argues that the train serves as a “mobile repository” of the larger intersectional practices and tensions of race, gender, and class taking place throughout the United States during this period, leading Black female railroad travel to be a crucial measure of African American social progress. Read against cultural studies of trains done by white philosophers and historians like Karl Marx and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the literature and archives of Black female travelers ranging from Ellen Craft, Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells provide alternative theorizations of the train that expose the paradoxical relationship between the “forward movement” of the train and the restricted mobility of African American women.

In addition to Black women travelers, Thaggert calls attention to the Black women waiters who sold food to passengers on the platform, extending their spatial orientation beyond the train compartment, to the train platform, and eventually to the dangerous railroad tracks. On the one hand, Thaggert highlights the often understudied independent food businesses nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Black women created in the liminal space between the train, platform, and railroad tracks. On the other hand,

she reveals the precarity of their position as white locals decried the presence of the “old aunties” at the train station, believing that they were “representations” of the past and were detrimental to the town’s modernization and progress (86).³ In her last chapter, she recovers the presence of Pullman Company maids, who were originally included in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, but were later removed, likely due to the mass furloughing of Pullman maids in the 1930s. Thaggert creates a counterarchive to their historical erasure from the unionization record, combing Pullman Company records to find evidence of Black Pullman Company maids who resisted the strict oversight of conductors and passengers. *Riding Jane Crow* applies Murray’s theorization of Jane Crow to Black women’s train travel, encompassing Black women’s experience as passengers, employees, and contributors to the railroad economy as critical to understanding the intersectional politics of race, gender, class, and mobility taking place as Jim Crow segregation became increasingly concretized.

Thaggert’s exploration of their erased histories, as well as their disappearance from Pullman train archives and American train studies in general, speaks to the necessity of locating Black women’s counternarratives to the train’s symbol of progress and courtesy that abounded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thaggert extends upon previous scholarship that similarly focused on Black women’s travel on Jim Crow trains, notably Blaire L. M. Kelley’s *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. Kelley’s scholarship highlights the long tradition, beginning in the antebellum period, of African American men and women protesting laws and policies that segregated trains, predominantly through legal means. She argued that Black litigants viewed segregation not only as “a daily inconvenience and public humiliation” but also “a focused attack on [their] citizenship” (Kelley 2010, 10). Grace Elizabeth Hale emphasizes that the railroad is central to understanding late nineteenth-century racial conflicts precisely because railroads’ “connecting lines broke down local southern racial sentiments often violently pieced together in the years during and after Reconstruction” (Hale 2000, 164–65).⁴ Thaggert’s focus on Black female passengers and workers expands beyond court cases to center their quotidian experiences on and adjacent to the train and their nuanced theorization of the interplay between Black women, respectability politics, Jim Crow trains, and their restricted mobility.

The first two chapters concentrate primarily on Black female passengers’ ordeals on the train and their responses to its discriminatory policies. The first chapter details several cases of nineteenth-century Black women intellectuals being subjected to physical and verbal violence in response to their resistance to sitting in the Jim Crow car and the lack of “courtesy” shown to them as Black women. The second chapter shifts toward examining the lawsuits Black women filed against railroad companies, emphasizing the language used by the defense and court to justify segregation policies. Even though some Black women successfully sued railroad companies, their gains were temporary (63).⁵ Several key cases were lost as plaintiffs sought to test the railroads’ enforcement of court decisions, culminating in the *Civil Rights Cases of 1883* that severely limited African Americans’ ability to use the court to end discriminatory train policies. The second half of the book further explores the participation of Black women in the train’s economy, as food-service providers and maids hired to assist white women and children. Whereas the first half of the book focused on Black women’s confinement to the Jim Crow compartment and the denial of their womanhood by white conductors and passengers alike, the last two chapters expand that same feeling of confinement, and what Thaggert calls “gendered double consciousness,” to the female waiters on the platform

and the Pullman Company maids. This “gendered double consciousness” bridges the experience of Black women as passengers and workers who are hyper-aware of the subjective decisions made by white conductors and train personnel about where they belong—shuttling them off into the margins of the Jim Crow car, the train tracks, and inevitably erasing them from the history of Black Pullman Company workers.

Although Thaggert brings critical attention to Black women’s contentious relationship to trains at the turn of the twentieth century, their contributions to the train’s economy, and their early example of the implications of Jane Crow, her reliance upon respectability politics to understand their protest elides the radical potential of their resistance. Thaggert’s work directly engages with Brittney Cooper’s own redefinition of “Jane Crow” as a “socio-spatial race and gender formation” that would serve as a lens through which to analyze Black female intellectual thought and the strategies Black women used to “navigate inhospitable spaces” (122–23). However, Thaggert’s attentiveness to Black women travelers being denied the status of “ladies,” and their efforts to abide by respectability politics by “stifling” disclosures of harm in their writing, as well as the strict code of conduct expected of Black Pullman maids, stifles the radical potential of her term *situational riding*.

Thaggert defines situational riding as the “condition of riding in which the probability of being treated fairly is always contingent on who else is in the car” (14). This phenomenon would thus be expressive of the gendered double consciousness of being Black and a woman aboard the train and guides Black women’s encounters with conductors and other passengers. As detailed throughout the chapters, Black women intellectuals, waiters, and maids all had their own methods of resisting their confinement to the margins of the train in ways that both fell within the lines of respectability politics and lay outside of it. They might choose to sue or dress a certain way in an effort to be granted “courtesy,” but they also might bite, slap, or wear makeup in protest of the “rules” of the train—all depending upon “who else was in the car,” how they were being treated, or how they were being addressed. Situational riding, then, could be one form of the “queer mobility” Thaggert uses to describe Murray’s own train travel experiences. It might better express the myriad of strategies Black women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century used to navigate the race and gender politics of the train, particularly how they challenged the conductor’s power to make subjective decisions about their character, designate where they could sit, and punish their transgressions against the Jim Crow code. These differing strategies of resistance can be seen through Ida B. Wells’s decision in 1883 to sue the Chesapeake, Ohio, and Southwestern Railroad for violently removing her from the train or Mary Church Terrell’s decision in 1908 to slap a white male passenger after he refused to make room for her and called her the n word (46–48).

By exploring Black women’s relationship to American railroad history, Thaggert’s theorization of Jane Crow centers Black women passengers and workers in state and federal efforts to limit African Americans’ mobility in public spaces, years before *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Her exploration of “gendered double consciousness” or “Jane Crow” on the train has important implications for how we might better understand Black women’s intellectual thought about increasing restrictions to African American mobility prior to the Civil Rights Movement, further emphasizing that Black women have a long tradition of protesting segregation on public transportation. This book would be especially useful for undergraduate and graduate students in Introduction to African American Studies courses, particularly by providing a more nuanced study of race and gender within Jim Crow car segregation at the turn of

the twentieth century, compared with Black women's resistance on segregated buses during the Civil Rights Movement. This book would also be useful in legal studies courses studying Black women's resistance to Jim Crow segregation from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, considering cases like Ida B. Wells's 1883 lawsuit alongside *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Mary Church Terrell's Supreme Court lawsuit that led to the desegregation of public restaurants in Washington, D.C. a year before *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided (Parker 2020, 1).

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Notes

1 Pauli Murray defines Jane Crow as “the entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements that have robbed women of a positive self-concept and prevented them from participating fully in society as equals with men” (Murray 1970/1995, 186).

2 Anna Julia Cooper's full quote is “There can be no true test of national courtesy without travel,” which can be found in her “Woman versus the Indian” essay circa 1891–92 (in Cooper 1998). Cooper further contends that Black women are the touchstone of American courtesy. Thaggert includes this quote as the epigraph to the first chapter of the book under review.

3 Thaggert is specifically referencing comments made by the white citizens of Gordonsville, Virginia, as reported by the *Richmond Times Dispatch*.

4 See Hale 2000. Other texts also focus on early African American protests against limitations to their mobility on trains and nineteenth-century Black women's navigation of segregation laws in the courtroom (for example, Minter 1995; Bay 2012; Pryor 2016).

5 Thaggert notes that judicial paternalism, the phenomenon by which white male judges made favorable decisions toward Black women in an effort to protect them from the “indelicacies” of male passengers, was often why some Black women won their lawsuits.

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