

Bay, Mia. *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance*. Cambridge: Harvard-Belknap, 2021. 391 pages. Paperback, \$19.95.

In the epilogue of this vital and fascinating new book, historian Mia Bay quotes civil rights activist John LeFlore, who, late in his life, lamented that the struggle for equality in American transportation had stretched “across different eras” and taken forms that younger activists “do not appreciate” (306.) LeFlore’s argument succinctly mirrors Bay’s own scholarly intervention: for too long, scholars have not recognized the central importance of travel and mobility to Black history. To rectify this, *Traveling Black* traces the history of “Black mobility as an enduring focal point of struggles over equality and difference” (3.)

The book is organized in rough chronological order, covering the Civil War era through the dawn of the Black Freedom Movement, but its true structure is thematic. Between big-picture bookends, Bay’s chapters detail the history of Black protest regarding railroads, cars, buses, and airplanes. Each of these chapters is an absorbing narrative unto itself, offering details about the peculiarities of each mode of transit, and how those peculiarities became battlegrounds in the struggle against segregation and other forms of racist oppression. In the case of railroads, for instance, Bay notes that so-called “Negro cars” or “Jim Crow cars” were inevitably placed near the front of the train—and made of wood as opposed to steel—giving train derailments and crashes a gruesome “racial logic” (71.) Yet Black Americans both resisted and exploited these systems in ingenious ways. Pullman rail cars contained a private compartment known as the “Lower 13”; Black passengers were frequently placed in the Lower 13 to keep them separate from other passengers, thus giving them a berth with a private bathroom—an extravagance that usually cost twice the price of a regular ticket, but at no extra charge.

Bay's book is a terrific success because of its ability to balance perspectives, offering a large-scale view of the forces that structured Black travel and mobility, as well as vivid personal narratives of how those structures were felt and resisted. *Traveling Black* offers a detailed explanation of the background behind *Plessy v. Ferguson*, for example, but also Black passengers' deep bitterness at being transported alongside luggage, coal, lanterns and other supplies, and, in some cases, police and their manacled prisoners. The acts of resistance described in *Traveling Black* are uniquely well-drawn, and often shed light on lesser-known personages. The Freedom Riders are extensively discussed, of course, but so is Arthur Wergs Mitchell, a Black congressman from Illinois during the 1930s and early 1940s (a period during which he was the only Black member of Congress) and avowed anti-radical who nonetheless helped provide legal impetus for dismantling *Plessy*. Or take Irene Morgan, a Black woman who was ordered off a Virginia bus in 1944. When she refused, police were summoned; Morgan sent the first officer away by kicking him in the groin, clawed at the second one, and, when the third told her he wasn't afraid to use his nightstick, replied, "we'll whip each other" (230-231.)

Yet *Traveling Black* is not merely a collection of colorful anecdotes. The book succeeds because Bay makes a compelling case that mobility is a significant level of analysis, particularly for Black history. With each technological advancement—railroads, cars and buses, airplanes—Americans felt their horizons expanding, their possibilities multiplying. Yet Black Americans repeatedly saw these hopes cruelly shuttered behind the walls of segregation. While Black Americans (at least, those who could afford them) hoped the rise of automobiles would "afford them with a small space in which to escape segregation's humiliations," Bay reminds us that cars rely on a whole network of other industries—service stations, hotels, restaurants—where the color line ruled (108.) Even within their own cars, Black southerners were not fully free of Jim

Crow's grasp: a complex set of informal rules governed the roads, barring Black drivers from passing white ones and guaranteeing white drivers the right of way at any intersection. Similarly, while Americans of all races followed with excitement the development of large-scale passenger air travel (and it should be noted that Bay is one of the first historians to extensively examine Jim Crow in airline travel), but Black travelers were forced to purchase tickets through agents who were specially trained "to identify Negro voices" and under strict instructions to confine Black passengers to separate flights whenever possible (214.)

Bay's sweeping excavation of Black travel in the hundred years after the Civil War provides fertile soil for future studies. Given the scope of this work, much analysis remains to be done on local peculiarities. The streetcars of Chicago, for instance, were not segregated, but became the site of racial clashes during the race riots of 1919. As Bay's analysis reminds us, mobility quite literally connects the various parts of historical experience, and so traditional understandings of Black and white Chicagoans defending their neighborhoods from interlopers might be reimagined as contestations over mobility—over who is allowed to move, and where, and when, and in what capacity. Bay's sober, thoughtful conclusion also points out the continuing legacy of "traveling Black," from the mistreatment suffered by Black airline passengers, to the disproportionate number of traffic stops that target Black drivers, to the brutal violence that so often results from such stops. Forcefully argued, compellingly written, and opening doors to new avenues of scholarship, *Traveling Black* is a major contribution to our understanding of Black history and life.

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