

CAR CULTURE IN WEST AFRICA

Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa.

By Lindsey B. Green-Simms.

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People often conceive of the cars, trucks, and busses that they either drive or ride in as passengers as mere tools to get from one locale to another. Anyone who has traveled a road in West Africa knows the perils of reducing such forms of mobility to a bland generality. In *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa*, Lindsey B. Green-Simms investigates the concept of automobility from African perspectives and emphasizes how West Africans, in particular, have developed affective relationships with cars, and the roads on which they drive them, to offer new insights into Africans' postcolonial experiences. At the center of Green-Simms's study lie important cultural texts such as films, popular videos, novels, plays, and poems, which she finds useful in determining how Africans value cars and weave them into the fabric of their daily social lives. The book makes notable contributions to emerging scholarly debates on automobility, as well as to understandings of the changing social and political landscapes of twentieth and early twenty-first century West Africa.

In her first two chapters, Green-Simms examines how West Africans have collectively conceived of motor transport and road infrastructure throughout the region. Historians will appreciate the first chapter, a detailed account of debates colonial officials engaged in over motorization in Africa and the subsequent ways in which Africans exercised their agency as drivers and automobile owners 'to fashion their identity and articulate their autonomy' (51). Many colonial officials resisted importing cars and building roads for political and philosophical reasons. Others envisioned the introduction of 'Western' technologies like cars and trucks as part of a larger civilizing mission. As Green-Simms argues, however, West Africans quickly co-opted automobiles early in European experiments with colonial rule to develop affective relationships that undermined what she refers to as a colonizing notion of a 'hum of progress' (Chapter One). In her second chapter, Green-Simms counters the notion that automobility must rely strictly on autonomy and mobility. Building primarily on the work of Wole Soyinka — most notably his critically acclaimed play, *The Road* — she focuses on the dangers of driving along West Africa's complex network of roads to demonstrate how the concept of the road in West Africa 'represents both the potential to move forward and the prevalence of roadblocks that thwart progressive movement' (60).

It is this ambivalence between mobility and stasis that Green-Simms finds most intriguing in her analysis of West African films and novels in the following chapters. African uncertainties about whether cars and trucks represent progress or not likewise serves as an important theoretical foundation that she draws upon to find meaning in the experiences one might have on the roads of West Africa, often 'intensified by touts, the conversation of very proximate fellow passengers, and loud "staticky" music' (57). Whereas the first two

chapters of the book emphasize West African forms of collective transport, the three subsequent chapters focus on the use of private vehicles. Green-Simms devotes one chapter to an African francophone cinematic tradition exemplified by Ousmane Sembène's classic *Xala* and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart*. In another, she shifts the discourse to the dramatically different production model of the popular straight-to-video Nollywood industry, devoting attention to how cars 'clear space for dreams of upward mobility and fantasies of the good life' in occult melodramas and 419 films (melodramas that focus on advance-fee scams and frauds) (140). In a final chapter, she reads Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, *Changes*, and Sembène's *Faat Kiné* as feminist texts. Noting that the 'subaltern may not speak, but she can drive', Green-Simms identifies how financially independent West African women articulate identity and power (173). Above all else, Green-Simms illuminates how cultural texts 'have often registered and recorded the ways cars mediate African subjects' relation to both modernity and mobility' (6).

There is much for historians of Africa to like about *Postcolonial Automobility*. Green-Simms's refreshing interpretations of cultural texts offer new insights into emerging discourses on a more recent, postcolonial West African past. Perhaps most importantly, she raises intriguing questions about how Africans have negotiated and navigated a post-colonial era. Her emphasis on how West Africans have developed affective relationships with cars and infrastructure illuminates collective ambivalences and excitement about post-colonial challenges and possibilities that historians are only now starting to explore in considerable depth. Of particular utility is Green-Simms's willingness to engage in cross-disciplinary debates to lend a better sense of how African authors and filmmakers have not only created a uniquely African form of social theory through their crafts, but also demonstrate how African audiences engage with the theoretical components of these cultural texts on the ground. This book is a compelling one that will no doubt encourage scholars from different fields of study to rethink the nature of change and exchange in postcolonial Africa.

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN RECOLONIZATION

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This volume reflects a resurgence of interest in the African American colonization movement and its importance in American history. It reexamines colonization in light of other historical developments and considers its relationship to the antislavery movement. Contributors to this book recast the American Colonization Society (ACS), vindicating it