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Lindsey B. Green-Simms, *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 280pp. ISBN # 9781517901141.

Reviewed by: Devin Bryson, Illinois College, U.S.A.

At times in West African urban centers, it seems as if there are more vehicles than people. In Senegal's Dakar, for example, the West African city that I know best, a small percentage of the city's population owns a car. Yet those automobiles swarm the streets, jockeying for position alongside well-worn cabs, municipal buses, bush taxis, and various mopeds, motorbikes, and scooters. Even if one rarely uses any of these forms of vehicular transportation in Dakar, they quickly become well-known markers of daily urban life. Even outside of West African cities, when a person travels between villages and rural areas, automobiles are essential. With little mass transportation accessing such regions, whether that be trains, planes, or coach buses, travelers must rely on a passenger vehicle. Automobiles are *the* means of mobility in West Africa.

Yet, of course, they bring with them myriad problems. Automobile pollution chokes cities due to the advanced age and poor-up keep of numerous West African vehicles. Safety concerns are acute for pedestrians, passengers, and drivers alike since there are few safety regulations on automobiles and drivers, and the ones that exist are poorly enforced. Traffic often grinds to a halt in most urban centers as the number of vehicles outpaces the construction and maintenance of automobile thoroughfares. While vehicles dot the landscape of West African countries, serving as necessary modes of mobility, they also complicate and confound private and public life in those societies. It's understandable then that the municipality of Dakar has consistently made gestures to alleviate vehicular problems in the city, most recently by announcing in 2016 that it would phase out the colorful, ubiquitous *car rapides* which provide informal communal transportation, by 2018. Of course, given the primacy of automobiles, and especially the *car rapides* to mobility, sociability, and personal and communal agency in Dakar, it is equally understandable that the 2018 deadline has passed without any noticeable change to the number of *car rapides* in the city. The West African vehicle persists as a site of individual and social contestation and negotiation.

In *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa*, Lindsey B. Green-Simms insightfully acknowledges and deepens our understanding of "the complicated ways that consumption, mobility, stasis, scarcity, and excess all intersect along West Africa's bumpy and multidirectional roads" (4). Green-Simms is not the first Africanist to locate various dimensions of West African culture and society in the trope of the vehicle, as she herself notes in the number of scholarly works on African automobility that she draws on for her analysis. Most recently, in *Bottleneck: Moving, Building, and Belonging in an African City* (2016), Caroline Melly uses the symbol of the traffic jam in Dakar, and especially the role of taxis in these bottlenecks, to consider the duality of car culture. It provides mobility, but also creates blockages, both of which might be equally limiting and productive to Dakarois individuals and society. Melly then extends this image out for a widescale ethnographic study of mobility in Senegal, touching on migration, economic

opportunity, and political structures. Green-Simms undertakes similar considerations, but does so by analyzing the representations of vehicles, roads, drivers, and passengers in postcolonial literature and cinema. Depictions of automobility within a book or on a movie screen are especially rich for study since these aesthetic forms from West Africa inevitably contain their own complexities around class, nationality, and cultural belonging as they bring West African specificities into the network of global artistic distribution, consumption, and reception. Green-Simms, then, is able to powerfully highlight how both works of creative expression from West Africa, as well as West African car culture, are sites for complex interactions between "an everyday practice, an ethos, a fantasy of autonomy and mobility, and an affective experience" (p.4).

In this way, Green-Simms's book contributes significantly to the increasing study of objects, to the methodology of new materialism within African Studies, as exemplified by Melly's *Bottleneck* and Rosalind Fredericks's *Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal* (2018), which examines the production and collection of garbage as representative of state-citizen relations. Within this field, *Postcolonial Automobility* is specifically a part of the burgeoning corpus in African cultural studies. An area that identifies and explicates the perhaps initially minor objects that populate contemporary works of African cultural expression, such as Kenneth Harrow's *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (2013) and Vlad Dima's forthcoming *The Beautiful Skin: Football, Fantasy, and Cinematic Bodies in Africa*, which considers the fantastical wearing of soccer jerseys in African films. *Postcolonial Automobility* is a noteworthy contribution to this important scholarship that provides careful and close readings of the material details, even examining the minutiae of African life in considerations of overarching artistic, social, and cultural trends.

The breadth of cultural texts that Green-Simms studies is truly impressive. Besides covering literary and visual works with equal adeptness, she pulls forms of creative expression from a wide range of countries, cultures, and time periods. In the introduction alone, Green-Simms touches on Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, and Cameroon, references texts from the early independence era to ones as recent as 2015, and sets early Senegalese cinema features alongside contemporary Nollywood videos. Each of her subsequent chapters undertakes similar trans-regional, cross-cultural, and inter-media approaches to its study of various dimensions of postcolonial West Africa. Chapter One details the historical colonial arrival of the automobile in the area and its progression through decolonization. Chapter Two offers a close reading of Wole Soyinka's play *The Road* from 1965, which dramatizes the potential dangers and violence that automobiles can provoke, to examine the postcolony and its own possibilities for liberation, but also damage.

In Chapter Three, Ousmane Sembene's film *Xala* (1975) is juxtaposed with Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart* (1992) to highlight the ways that stasis, or immobility, can be paired with mobility to foreground the continuing fits and starts of African postcolonialism that are due to structures of power and exploitation, both within African societies and internationally. Green-Simms's fourth chapter is a consideration of the depictions of material acquisition in Nollywood films, which can alternate between revelries of consumerism and skeptical warnings of communal degradation. Finally, Chapter Five focuses on the feminist reconfigurations in Sembene's film *Faat Kiné* (2000) and Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes.* It is *A Love Story* (1991) of typical modes of automobility in the neoliberal African state, which imagine women's upward mobility in terms of economic opportunity, but which also foresee the simultaneous pitfalls of striving for gender autonomy through socio-economic structures.

Among the components of Green-Simms's overarching methodology, I find her most innovative and insightful concept to be "infrastructures of feeling." She underlines the way that automobiles' material surfaces are not secondary, that they are indeed primary to the depths of emotion, sensation, interpersonal connection, and memories that vehicles evoke. Similarly, literature and cinema are particularly attuned to those affective relations between surfaces and depths; in fact, cultural texts themselves produce comparable dynamics between their formal and emotional dimensions. Therefore, Green-Simms writes:

> cultural texts do not simply transcode buried ideological formations…[T]hey also, at the same time, invite readers or viewers to pay attention to the complex and surface ways that people interact with and are shaped by everyday material life and to the specific forms of technology and infrastructure that allow bodies to inhabit the world the way that they do. Infrastructures of feeling therefore are those meanings and affects that entail a constant entanglement of "surface and depth. (p.24)

In her proceeding chapters, Green-Simms carefully attends to the representations of cars in their superficiality, as well as in their deep emotional meanings. She demonstrates thoughtful understanding of the ways that the surfaces and depths of automobiles simultaneously intersect with social systems and individual lived experience.

Green-Simms most masterfully unpacks these infrastructures of feeling in her analysis of Sembene's *Xala*. As Green-Simms herself acknowledges, *Xala* is a film that has been extensively studied through a wide range of methodological lenses, for various ideological ends. Her objective is to demonstrate that the automobile is as essential to the postcolonial critique in the film as its cynical depictions of the elite class, polygamy, and the binary of tradition and consumerism in Dakar. This unique approach opens up new understandings of the film and African Francophone cinema in general, in both their superficies and their depths. *Xala* might be most memorable for its enduring final scene; herein its protagonist, an exploitative yet sexual and socially impotent member of the upper class named El Hadji, is stripped naked and spat upon by the beggars who have been dispossessed and socially marginalized by El Hadji. Yet through her innovative framework, Green-Simms shows that the preceding sequence, which details the repossession of El Hadji's Mercedes, might be as meaningful to the overarching critique of postcolonial Senegal in the film. This sequence, along with other shots and scenes in the film, emphasizes, according to Green-Simms, "stalling, stuttering, and an insurmountable present" as characteristics of postcolonial African society and embodied experience (p.101). Once El Hadji has lost his job, his income, and the social support of his corrupt cronies, the police give a repossession note on his luxury sedan. Among the four officers present, none of them knew how to drive a Mercedes, and so they proceeded pushing the car down the street.

Green-Simms points out how the camera doesn't focus on this procession, but instead eventually zooms in on the minaret behind the scene, cutting the car out of the frame. The Mercedes has been rendered irrelevant, almost immobile except for the strength of the police officers. Even Sembene's camera moves right past it, giving its previous symbolic power nothing more than a parting glance. Green-Simms writes, "Instead of allowing the car to establish the continuity of the film by showing characters logically moving from place to place, Sembene suggests that the automobiles of the postcolonial elite serve as a blockage, or a jam, that has to be removed…In *Xala*, it is better for the car to stop, to disappear, than to continue driving in a direction that will lead down a flawed road" (p.102). Green-Simms sees echoes of Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki Bouki* (1973) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) in Sembene's cinematic

depictions of the binary of mobility and stasis in postcolonial African societies. The interplay between the subtle cinematic details, the social and cultural context, and the intertextual references in Green-Simms's analysis in this section of Chapter Three perfectly embodies her analytical infrastructures of feeling. Throughout the entire book, her attention to these dynamics consistently proves to be engaging, insightful, and provocatively creative.

Chapter Five is, of course, a welcome and necessary inclusion of cultural texts that portray women as drivers, owners, and purveyors of automobiles. Yet, at times, Green-Simms's analysis in the chapter feels too limited or forced. Following the chapter on representations of upward (auto)mobility in Nigeria's video films of the early twenty-first century, Green-Simms wants to extend her consideration of the contemporary neoliberal African state in this chapter on depictions of feminine automobility. She, thus, focuses on "the ambivalent way that financially independent women constitute their identities and access power in West African urban centers" (161). However, this attention to middle-class urban women ignores the ways that poor city women and rural women are either excluded entirely from automobility or occasionally perform their own particular negotiations with automobility, often alongside more upwardly mobile women. Tellingly, Sembene's next film after *Faat Kiné*, which proved to be his last, *Moolaadé* (2004), depicts a rural community of women in an unnamed African country who do not have access to automobiles, but who instead use radios as their means to set their place and identities within global networks.

Near the end of her analysis of *Faat Kiné*, Green-Simms emphasizes how the titular female protagonist of Sembene's film, driving in her Citroën hatchback rather than the Mercedes of El Hadji in Sembene's earlier film, is not completely removed from the less privileged women who are employing other means of mobility, including *car rapides*, which are often shown stopping at the gas station where Kiné works . Her mobility is her mobility, exemplified partially by her vehicle. The reference to the *car rapides* made me want to see what Green-Simms would make of a film like Khady Sylla's *Colobane Express* (1999) that portrays working class women's use of communal automobility. A docu-fiction medium length film that depicts a day in the life of a *car rapide* driver, conductor, and their passengers, *Colobane Express* opens and closes with shots of women, showing their essential role in Senegalese economy and society.

Speaking to Françoise Pfaff about the film in *À l'écoute du cinéma sénégalais* (2010), Sylla states, "I chose to depict one day to show how the poorest people are the first to rise, with the women fish sellers going to market on the *car rapide*, and the last to go to bed, with the female beggar who gets on at the end of the film" (217). Here, Sylla draws our attention to the intersection between female identities and urban poverty in her film, and how the act of getting on the *car rapide* is an indicator of marginalization and daily struggle, but also of defiance and endurance. In the first scene, the *car rapide* pulls out in the darkness onto a deserted road, and we hear women talking as they make their way to the market. One remarks, "We've been here since 3:00 am; on our feet until dark, up before 4:00 am." Another complains that their husbands are hopeless, while a third points to her baby, who she has carried with her for two years. The middle class women of *Faat Kiné* and *Changes* that Green-Simms chooses to focus on are not the only women portrayed in West African cinema and literature who yearn for, but are also fatigued by, the automobility of contemporary postcolonial society.

Nevertheless, Green-Simms's methodology is extraordinarily supple and mutable in accounting for such a spectrum of cultural texts, national contexts, and socio-historical periods. It never loses its focus or fails in explicating the specificities of its given object of study, while it maintains a cohesive accounting of the historical, cultural, and social trajectory of the postcolonial

West African region. Because of this, Green-Simms's book is foundational for further studies of African culture and society. It can be used as a roadmap for analyzing "the way objects lead different lives in different places" on the continent (p.7). The mind reels at the number of objects that can be pulled from African literature and cinema for closer analysis in their global circulation that signifies specifically on the continent: wax fabric, basketball sneakers, repurposed t-shirts, portraits of family members and religious leaders, religious totems, mobile devices, digital messages and images.

Similarly, there is rich potential in offering localized or national understandings of objects, including automobiles, and their cultural significance in Africa. A jerry can, for instance, might signify slightly differently in Mali than in Djibouti; and the interplay between those meanings could be distinctly productive in understanding each national context, as well as continental connections. In *Postcolonial Automobility*, Green-Simms has pointed the way to a rich vein of cultural criticism that dynamically considers surface and depth, embodied experience and the materialism of objects, aesthetic forms and social ideology, affective responses and consumerist pleasures.

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