H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lindsey B. Green-Simms. *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Illustrations. 280 pp. $112.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5179-0113-4.

Reviewed by Martha Lagace (Boston University)

Published on H-Africa (June, 2020)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Boston University)

In the cover photo of the vibrant *Postcolonial Automobility*, a young man sits in the driver's seat of a bush taxi in the desert, stalled. Multicolored goods—bags, buckets, and nets, essentials for some onward destination—are packed in the back and piled high on top, but nothing and no one is poised for moving. Off to the side out of view, explains author Lindsey B. Green-Simms, passengers in the shade of a little house wait patiently. Though the car's hood is propped open, no relief is in sight. The young man—a passenger, as it turns out—leans his forehead against the steering wheel, presumably feeling a combination of despair, fatigue, and gathering irritation. Where is the driver? Enjoying a cigarette and unbothered by the engine's recurring hiccup.

This cover photo, a still from Abderrahmane Sissako's 2002 movie *Heremakono* (Waiting for Happiness), encapsulates several themes in the book: the obstacles en route to global modernity, the simultaneity of stasis and mobility, and the car as symbol of and vehicle for belonging. The car in Africa is not a triumphant marker of infinite freedom or an ever-upward development trajectory, but a full bag, in a way, of hopes, desires, machine dreams, structures of power, and problems just getting from point A to point B. "Ça va," says the smoking driver in the movie to the young man behind the wheel: "Don't worry, it goes." "Mobility and immobility become two sides of the same coin, and technology often misfires," writes Green-Simms (p. 80).

The same coin at stake is what people want to achieve through—and despite—postcolonial capitalism. Within this currency, automobility forms a current of life and part of a larger argument: "Cars are important belongings ... precisely because they allow one to belong" (p. 196). Green-Simms, a professor of literature, makes an excellent case that there is something special about car culture in West Africa. Pulling together and analyzing the works of many West African scholars, writers, and filmmakers, the author shows how they have long probed this theme in different ways through the symbol and vehicle of the car traveling along what Ben Okri calls "the famished road" in his book by the same title (1992). This special something harks to ideas about consumption, modernity, colonial power, gender, and the occult, and to such authors and filmmakers as Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Ousmane Sembene on what cars mean to them.

"Automobility" is not simply the increasing presence of cars, though that is indisputable. Green-Simms provides an intriguing history of how cars came to West Africa thanks to African entrepreneurs and, as well, gives attention to literary interpretations of the dramatic rise in traffic

since the 1980s and the "urgency and ambivalence" that cars and car spectacles pose for people's everyday lives, identities, and aspirations (p. 3). (For example, the character Ifemulu, a Nigerian woman in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's best-selling 2013 novel ***Americanah***, marvels at class transformations via Lagos roadways after ten years in the United States.) Green-Simms's use of the term "automobility" means more an awkward intersection of mobility and autonomy—"two mutually dependent ideals" (p. 12)—and the ways this affects "feelings of participation and lived experiences of belonging or unbelonging" that arise in the hearts of African literary and cinematic characters. Everyone experiences automobility differently (p. 22). "As several scholars have noted, mobility is often seen as a fundamental aspect, a right even, of modern culture.... Like mobility, autonomy is typically considered to be an attractive quality and one that is enabled by the automobile. But unlike mobility, autonomy is often an unattainable ideal" (pp. 12-13). Why is it unattainable? Because Africa is in a matrix of postcolonial capitalism. "What is central to my discussion of West African automobility is how this interplay of mobility and immobility is entangled with everyday experiences of postcolonial capitalism" in which scarcity and abundance live cheek by jowl (p. 29).

Five car-oriented chapters explore, in turn, motorcar history in West Africa; Nobel prize-winning playwright, poet, and essayist Soyinka's longstanding concern with road carnage; African Francophone movies; Nigerian video films about upward mobility and the search for "the good life"; and women as drivers and passengers. (This last chapter broaches a feminist automobility in which identity, equality, and commodity culture intersect.) The methodology involves literary methods, such as a lens of postcolonial criticism and close reading of texts—as distinct from, for example, interviews and participant observation—to probe how people make meaning from auto-related experiences and feelings. Close reading, for those unfamiliar with the term and method in humanities, means intense observation and interpretation of details and passages, in effect reading between the lines. This is where readers like myself without literary training, and who have not already watched particular films under discussion, may occasionally skim to get the gist. The book remains accessible to Africanists interested in all the above-named themes. It is potentially teachable, too, perhaps as standalone chapters if students can also read and compare plays, poems, novels, movies, or videos.

One of the puzzles the author raises is why most drivers are men even though market women have been some of the most numerous "drivers" of the transport economy since colonialism. This paradox about a longstanding phenomenon makes me wonder if the lens of postcolonial capitalism and its imposition of, for example, "arrested time" and "suspended animation" is sufficient for understanding the lifeblood of transport and the gender dynamics that prevailed then and now (pp. 75, 61). What are people actually extracting from mobility itself that is not confined to capitalism and the car, and that so provokes spirits of the road? The author's insightful close reading of Soyinka's 1965 play ***The Road*** through a lens of postcolonial capitalism-criticism overlooks this role of these market women, "the backbone of Omolanke transport business" whom Soyinka's characters bawdily describe behind the scenes driving the plot and keeping people together.[1] For example:

Samson: I know he was conceived in the back of a lorry.

Kotonu: Samson! I was only born in a lorry.[2]

In this play, Soyinka emphasizes the humor and desires that create a circulation of people and generations in transport, a vital part of the "positive transformation" that Green-Simms does identify and that presumably keeps people moving or still trying to despite the odds, as in the scene from *Waiting for Happiness* at the start of this review (p. 61). Future editions of *Postcolonial Automobility* might also consider how, in literature and film, the

car is different from or similar to motorcycles, light rail, and other forms of transportation; what made it so different from West African trains; and how characters relate to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, its promised smoothness of highways and elimination of barriers. ***Postcolonial Automobility*** flows with ideas, insights, and food for thought.

Notes

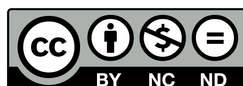
[1]. Wole Soyinka, ***The Road: A Play*** (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 48.

[2]. Soyinka, ***The Road***, 48.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa

Citation: Martha Lagace. Review of Green-Simms, Lindsey B. ***Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa.*** H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54719


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.