

**Postcolonial Automobility:  
West Africa and the Road to Globalization**

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Adviser: Timothy Brennan

August 2009

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support, mentorship, and stimulation of the faculty and graduate students in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature and the Department of English at the University of Minnesota. The members of my dissertation committee deserve special thanks for their continued encouragement and feedback. Timothy Brennan contributed greatly to my intellectual formation and introduced me to the ways of thinking and writing about globalization that undergird this dissertation. His vigilant attention to detail and confidence in my intellectual abilities enabled me to keep striving for precision in my arguments. John Mowitz, whose own work on the films of Ousmane Sembène has been highly influential, never ceased asking pointed and difficult questions. Cesare Casarino helped me to make sense of dense theoretical material and to think about how cinema can act as a form of philosophy. Charles Sugnet was an endless source of information on all things related to African cinema. His keen eye for various types of locomotion in African film first tuned me in to the constant and unique presence of automobiles in African urban cinema. Shaden Tageldin has been a most generous and detailed reader as well as an excellent mentor and sounding board.

Three graduate colleagues have read through various portions of my dissertation. Andrew Opitz provided me with comments on early stages of chapters two, three, and four. Steven Groening, who has been my anchor and my ally throughout graduate school, read through each of my chapters, sometimes in several stages. His comments helped to rein me in and were indispensable to the formulation of my thoughts and arguments. Alicia Gibson's final lightening round of proofreading was a godsend.

I would also like to thank my peers in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature for their collegiality. Special thanks goes to my colleagues in Timothy Brennan's Globalization seminar and Charles Sugnet's African Film seminar who provided intellectual nourishment when the seeds for this dissertation were just being planted.

Research for this dissertation was funded by the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship and the Harold Leonard Memorial Fellowship in Film Studies at the University of Minnesota. A special thanks goes to the staff at the Senegalese National Archives and at Northwestern University's Melville J. Herskovitz Library of African Studies.

When I was conducting research in West Africa, several people offered vital amounts of help and companionship. In Senegal, the M'Bengue family provided me with a wonderful and loving home. With Tsitsi Jaji, I explored the city of Dakar. From Rosalind Fredericks I learned all about purchasing a used Volkswagen in Senegal and navigating unnamed roads. Francis Nyamnjoh at CODESRIA schooled me in *thiofs*, *disquettes*, and *diriyankes*. Françoise Pfaff was an encyclopedia of information on African cinema. And Rudy Gomes, my Wolof tutor, taught me as much about Wolof as he did about Senegalese politics, music, and 4x4s. In Ghana, Socrate Safo and his crew at Movie Africa Productions generously indulged all my questions about video making and helped me to acquire my own video film library. Cori Princell was a most faithful

travel companion throughout Mali and Burkina Faso, with whom, even in trying times, I never stopped sharing laughter.

While I was in the throes of dissertating I had the good fortune to present a portion of chapter three at an African Film Conference at the University of Illinois. I would like to thank all the participants for their feedback and for suggestions that helped to shape my discussion on the history of motorization and on Anglophone video film. Comments by Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer – whose writings have also been greatly influential – were particularly valuable. I would especially like to thank Mahir Saul and Ralph Austen, the conference organizers, for their comments on the version of my paper that will appear in the conference proceedings. Ralph was also generous enough to read an early version of chapter one and to point me in the direction of many valuable resources.

I would have never had the courage to pursue my graduate studies had it not been for the unflinching support of my parents, Debra Simms and Stuart Simms, who have always showed so much pride in my academic pursuits. Likewise, the extensive praise from younger sisters, Kimberly, Carly, and Alexandra, has been a frequent source of encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank Amy Green-Simms. It would be impossible to enumerate all the ways that she has sustained me throughout this process. But whether we have been across the ocean from one another or studying at desks side-by-side, she has been my constant, my source of inspiration, and my home.

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## Introduction

### Driving while African

*The problem of commodities . . . . [is] the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects.*

–Georg Lukács

*The motor-car is the epitome of ‘objects’, the Leading-Object, and this fact should be kept in mind.*

–Henri Lefebvre

In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995), Kristin Ross examines the rapid appearance of consumer objects – from cars to laundry detergent – in France during the decade of modernization and decolonization immediately preceding 1968. At the time, France was experiencing an unprecedented industrial growth that crystallized in a Fordist regime, and was also witnessing the final collapse of its empire, beginning with Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and ending with Algerian independence in 1962. Having closed the door on over a century of colonialism, France was happy to wash away its sordid history and focus instead on new Citroëns and all-electric kitchens. Thus, Ross argues, the arrival of new consumer goods in France helped to situate colonialism as a thing of the past: France emerged as a modern nation, while the colonies remained “dirty” and “backwards.” If the previous relationship between France and Algeria was described as a marriage, this, writes Ross, was a divorce, one where France needed to make clear that it was *not* Algeria, that it was not in fact anything like any of its former colonies.<sup>1</sup>

Following Henri Lefebvre who called the car the “Leading-Object” of modernity and Guy Debord who referred to the automobile as “the sovereign good of alienated life

and the essential product of the capitalist market” (69), Ross assigns the car the status of *the* central commodity of the postwar period. The car was not only central in creating new forms of factory production, it also created a newly mobile work force, a new *jeune cadre*, or managerial class, new urban spatial organization, and a new “sublime” experience of everyday life. In short, it established a new subjectivity that was deeply intertwined with the idea of a modern, mobile France. But if, as Ross argues, the car defined France *against* its former colonies, this dissertation investigates the social and symbolic function of the car *in* the ex-colonies, and in particular in the Francophone and Anglophone post-colonies of West Africa. On the one hand, the postwar period of decolonization and independence was a modernizing one for West Africa, just as it was for both of its two main former European rulers. In the same decade that Ross examines – the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s – the number of automobiles in West Africa more than doubled, while roads and modern infrastructure in and between cities multiplied at a quicker rate than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to a certain extent, African ex-colonies were indeed going through their own period of urbanization and development, creating new spatial arrangements and a middle class that was not unlike the *jeune cadre* Ross describes. Young cosmopolitan men in Accra at the time even referred to themselves as Jaguars and cultivated a sense of style worthy of the modern, high-class car of their dreams.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, then, decolonized Africa too must be experiencing this sublimeness of everyday life, one that, coupled with newfound sovereignty, might also produce a national sense of pride, a unity in consumption.

On the other hand, however, the material benefits of independence were not experienced by the vast majority of the West African population. Despite hopes to the

contrary, the globalizing and homogenizing forces that Ross identifies failed to bring the same universal consumer culture to the curbside of most Africans. Whereas by 1966 one in four people owned cars in most industrialized countries, in West Africa the rate hovered just over one percent in the more well off countries, with about one in eighty people owning vehicles in Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Cameroon.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while cars in France, Britain, or the United States were often shiny and new objects, fresh off the assembly line, the vehicles arriving in West African ports were more likely to be second-hand, in some cases overhauled war vehicles. Although the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Nigeria each had a few small assembly plants for European carmakers at the time, no West African country was producing its own vehicles. The Fordist regime that was penetrating Western Europe, and that had already swept up America, was therefore experienced in West Africa as something dissonant and nonsynchronous – neither fully present, nor fully absent. Furthermore, while globalization theorists in recent decades have been quick to declare a “modernity at large,”<sup>5</sup> a global shift to a post-Fordist regime of flexible accumulation, mass consumption, and endless “lifestyle” options, West Africans continue to experience modernity as discontinuous and selective rather than all-consuming. Automobile ownership is still among the lowest in the world (ranging between two and six percent in most countries);<sup>6</sup> no West African nation has any automobile industry to speak of; and the majority of cars imported into the region are still second-, third-, and fourth-hand. And yet, despite the low motorization rates, West Africans are still eight to ten times more likely to be in a fatal car accident than those in developed countries (Chilson 15).



*Postcolonial Automobility* therefore presents the *other* side of the decolonization-modernization story presented in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*. It is about the way in which the automobile, the commodity par excellence of global modernity, acquires new meanings and enables different subjectivities in areas of the world where it is not a universal accessory. In postcolonial West Africa the car has consistently been the most prominent consumer object in various forms of cultural expression, indicating that despite the relative lack of car ownership and the absence of mass marketing, the automobile is still a central and polarizing object. The plays, films, videos, and novels I examine in this dissertation – which range from the immediate independence period of the 1960s until the present – therefore make palpable many of the continuing contradictions of postcolonial automobility. While the car in Western and industrialized cultures stands for power, autonomy, speed, and social as well as physical mobility, the West African texts I discuss reveal an understanding of the automobile as an object that is much more ambiguous and multiply determined by the social and material realities of everyday life in the postcolony. Therefore, by examining this “Leading-Object” of modernity outside of its privileged and central locations, I demonstrate that the automobile, like modernity itself, is a paradoxical and disjointed social experience.

### **Automobility and the Modern Self**

The term “automobility” is not new. Since the beginning of the twentieth century it has been used colloquially to describe the type of movement associated with the motorcar.<sup>7</sup> However, since James Flink’s *The Automobile Age* (1988), a small group of cultural scholars has been highlighting the way in which the word emphasizes the

automobile's promise of autonomous, unfettered mobility. The "auto" in automobile refers of course to the idea of a self-propelled motor vehicle free from dependence on an animal, but it also marks the automobile as a self-directed vehicle liberated from the restrictions of a rail track and able to move in any direction whatsoever (Featherstone 1). Thus, the implication is that this self-moving vehicle enables a freedom of movement for its drivers. Flink referred in particular to the way the car engendered an age of "mass personal automobility," stressing the very individualized and privatized nature of this collective phenomenon. John Urry takes the notion of automobility one step further by elaborating an entire system of automobility that incorporates not only cars and drivers, but roads, traffic signals, parking, and fuel into a self-organizing, *auto-poetic* system. Urry argues that the notion of automobility captures both the humanist notion of autobiography, or self-making, as well as the machine's capacity for automation. Automobility therefore, for Urry, indicates the idea of an autonomous human linked to an automatic machine through a network of roads, technologies, and policies.

However, immediately after defining the system of automobility as such, we can see that it is also involved in an auto-contradiction, for it is technically impossible to be both a fully autonomous human subject and one who is dependent on both a machine and the entire socio-technical institution that supports it. It is for this reason that Steffen Böhm, Campbell Jones, Chris Land and Matthew Peterson, the editors of the recent collection *Against Automobility* (2006), have proposed viewing automobility as a disciplinary regime rather than a self-organizing system. They argue that automobility is not a smooth auto-poetic network, but rather one that is characterized by core antagonisms. Pointing to the proliferation of traffic jams, the dependency on non-

renewable resources, ecological devastation, as well as the prevalence of accidents, they assert that within the regime of automobility “the pursuit of individual mobility becomes collective immobility” (9). For them, automobility is fundamentally an impossible system, not simply because it is unsustainable, but because it is inherently contradictory: it produces as much inertia and destruction as it does mobility.

To these important observations, we might also add that the automobile requires the stillness of the body, the literal suspension of movement, in two distinct ways. First, the driver or passenger of the car, unlike the pedestrian or cyclist, is situated inside a machine that has its own motor. What is required of the driver is nothing more than a few small gestures – putting the keys in the ignition, slight pressure on the pedal, occasional gear shifting. The real objective is for the driver to remain relatively still and focused while the car moves itself through space and time. The agency and mobility of the driver is subordinated to the automatism of the machine. Second, we must remember that the car itself is produced inside the factory where what moves is the assembly line, not the worker. In his autobiography *My Life My Work* (1923), Henry Ford boasts that just over ten percent of the tasks in his factory actually need able-bodied men. Of the 7,882 different tasks required to build a Model T he found that “670 could be filled by legless men, 2,637 by one-legged men, two by armless men, 715 by one-armed men and ten by blind men” (76). While this was encouraging for disabled war veterans who, had it not been for the assembly line, might have found it difficult to work, it also underscores the level of automatism and immobility required by factory work. Both operating and producing a car therefore necessitates a certain amount of stillness in motion.<sup>8</sup> For that reason we must acknowledge that automobility operates according to a double logic in

which the machine both extends human mobility and limits that mobility by transferring it to the machine.

Of course, part of the power of automobility is that it is not simply a technical system about movement, but an ideological construct tied to the concept of autonomy, an ideal that is rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. Broadly speaking, autonomy incorporates the idea of free will, self-rule, self-knowledge and absolute independence. Within Enlightenment thinking, autonomy is considered to be both desirable and attainable; it is often understood to be the goal of the rationalist, atomistic individual who is not bound to or by dependent relations.<sup>9</sup> However, the concept of autonomy as such has now been thoroughly debunked by intellectual traditions as wide-ranging as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, structural anthropology, and Foucauldian poststructuralism. What these traditions have in common is an understanding of the human subject as socially determined, bound by class, labor, family, gender, kinship, and historical epistemes. Each of these discourses has argued in various ways that humans did not spring from the earth like mushrooms, as Thomas Hobbes suggests, and that they cannot ever be irreducibly autonomous or self-sufficient. Furthermore, Nancy Yousef, in her study of the notion of autonomy in Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic literature, argues that even in Enlightenment thought itself the idea of the self-made autonomous man was never taken as a given fact. It was never assumed that man had actually created himself out of nothing. Where the idea held sway, she argues, was in its “theoretical and imaginative implications” (19), in its ability to assuage anxieties and fears that derived from feeling weak, helpless, and dependent. The idea of autonomy therefore enabled people to view themselves as self-determining individuals, free from

the oppressive institutions of authority, instead of as helpless individuals at the mercy of others. I would argue that it is because of this imaginative capacity that autonomy still persists as an ethos, or as a modern attitude, as Michel Foucault suggests, despite the fact that it is illogical to think that human beings can exist as autonomously independent of their social environment.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, like the socially determined human subject, the automobile and its driver exist within a system of dependent relations. These dependencies include, but are by no means limited to, manufacturers, laborers, laws, police officers, roads, signs, advertisements, geographers, oil companies, gas stations, and gas-station clerks. Automobility as an expression of pure autonomy is therefore essentially nonsensical. And yet, as an ideal it persists. The idea of the automobile as a private cocoon that can take its owner wherever she wants to go whenever she wants to go there is at the very core of the idea of automobility. It is what separates automobile travel from the train journey, which is tied to specific schedules and specific locations. It is what makes the automobile what Sudhir Chella Rajan calls “the (literally) concrete articulation of liberal society’s promise to its citizens” (112-3), the leading object of a post-Enlightenment order that has not yet given up on the idea of the free and autonomous individual. Thus, automobility is an ideology insofar as it expresses its own kind of truth. It is, as Louis Althusser famously suggests, a manifestation of the way human subjects live out their relation between themselves and their real conditions, rather than a direct expression of real conditions. This distinction is crucial to understanding the way that automobility as an ideology does not always directly correspond to automobility as a practice, why the car might take on a symbolic function that is dissonant with the ways in which it is

experienced in everyday life. Thus, I suggest that we must not simply see automobility as an expression of a system, or even a regime, that links cars to a network of social practices. Automobility, as I am defining it, is a system of dependent relations that is paradoxically valued as an ideology of autonomous movement.

Finally, then, this definition allows us to state clearly what automobility is not. Despite the fact that cars have become a key mode of cultural expression and a focal point for various subcultures throughout the world, automobility does not offer a means of subverting dominant culture. Dick Hebdige, in his optimistic embrace of neo-liberal consumption, suggests otherwise. In his study of the British reception of streamlined American cars in the 1950s, Hebdige writes that American automobiles provided youth and various working class subcultures a way of rejecting oppressive and elitist aesthetic standards. He argues that the American cars, which were considered vulgar and decadent by many Europeans, allowed their owners to take a stand against the establishment, and workers often viewed their Fords and G.M. cars proudly, as a sign that their standard of living could improve. Thus, the car for Hebdige has no fixed meaning – it shifts willy-nilly to fit the cultural contexts in which it is used. It does not hide or conceal anything (as Marxist theories of the commodity fetish would suggest) because it can do no more than reflect various surface meanings. Daniel Miller in his introduction to *Car Cultures* (2001) adopts a similar stance. Miller writes that “the car has become more a means to resist alienation than a sign of alienation” (3), and, like Hebdige, Miller emphasizes the flexibility of the car’s significations, underscoring the way it can reflect multiple expressions of modernity.

However, it must be emphasized that although the car is often embraced as a sign of empowerment, this does not mean that it actually is empowering. Paul Gilroy cogently expresses this paradox of car consumption in his essay “Driving while Black,” which appears in Miller’s collection. Gilroy reads African-American car culture – from the Cadillacs of Motown to the “pimped out” rides of hip-hop videos – as distinct responses to an historical experience of being denied both private property and opportunities for material advance. He claims that given this unique experience, it is understandable that cars for African-Americans have been over-invested as public displays of success. And yet Gilroy concludes that car culture ultimately depoliticizes the black community, marking an end to a period of protesting the injustices of consumer capitalism with a triumphal participation in one of its most destructive practices. In the end, then, cars destroy more than they empower.

Like Gilroy, I offer an historically determined and culturally specific portrait of automobility without giving up the idea that the automobile universally organizes social life into a system that is contradictory, unsustainable, and ultimately an anathema of collective life and the idea of a public good. Thus, while the experience of automobility shifts from one cultural context to another, this does not, by any means, make it a means in and of itself to resist hegemony. However, what a study of specifically *postcolonial* automobility does offer is a means of resisting a particular narrative of automobility. I am referring here to a narrative that links the automobile and its diffusion to modernity, progress, development, and to what we have now come to call globalization.

## **The Globalization Effect**

There are perhaps as many different definitions of globalization as there are experiences of it. Generally speaking, as Timothy Brennan suggests, we might understand globalization as a theory that the world is becoming increasingly constituted as a singular and modern “social space,” and, moreover that this shrinking of space and speeding up of time, what David Harvey calls “time-space compression,” is the result of numerous technological advances such as air travel, satellites, fiber optics, and the internet. Brennan states:

One might interpret this to mean that the world is becoming more homogenized, that we are seeing the creation of a single, albeit hybridized, world culture whose pace of life, tastes, and customs – conditioned by a similar regime of commodities consisting of cars, computers, and cellular phones – has increasingly fewer local variations. It could also mean that we are on the road to global political integration. It is worth recognizing, however, that it does not necessarily stipulate either position. (123)

Thus, according to this argument, globalization theory need not erase differences and smooth over paradoxical social forms. And yet, in much of the academic and popular discourse on globalization, this is precisely what has occurred. The experiences of the time-space compression that have come to define everyday life in so-called post-industrial regions of the world (or even in the currently industrializing zones) are taken to be paradigmatic of the entire world. Globalization has become a way to express how capitalist industry and technology has been spread to the far-flung corners of the globe. Arjun Appadurai describes a “modernity at large;” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari



evoke a “worldwide axiomatic” in which capital is the function of a sole external world market; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe a post-modern, global Empire where “power is now exercised through machines that directly organize the brain” (23) and where territorial boundaries have all but evaporated.

However, what is too often brushed aside in these types of sweeping descriptions of globalization is that while mobility for some has never been more available and while information and goods flow across borders with fewer restrictions, there are many parts of the world where physical mobility and access to commodities – some desperately needed – are becoming more difficult. Thus, when a theorist like Jean-Francois Bayart opens a book called *Global Subjects* with the declaration that “globalization and air travel are more or less synonymous” (iix) – by which he means that the lives of global subjects are literally and metaphorically in constant flight – we can see the way in which theories of globalization often elide the fact that its core experiences are reserved for a very small number of world citizens. In fact, we might remind Bayart that while Americans and Canadians who make up 5.2 percent of world’s population are 42.7 percent of the global airline passengers, Africans – over 12 percent of the world population – comprise only 2.2 percent of airline passengers (Simon 26). With these facts in mind, one might re-interpret Bayart’s claim about the homology of globalization and air travel to be about the selective nature of both.

Instead of focusing on the paradoxical experiences of globalization, much of the globalization theory that dominates academic discourse today falls under what I am calling the globalization effect, where differing experiences of modernity are repressed in the name of singularity. The situation is analogous to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls

the Christmas effect. For Sedgwick what is so disconcerting about the Christmas season is that it is the one time of year that all institutions – the state, the schools, the family, the Church, the media and the market – all line up to speak in one monolithic voice. The state talks about legal holidays, the schools talk about vacations and musicals, the media produce endless news stories, movies, and television shows about the holiday, and advertising is almost exclusively aimed at Christmas shoppers who will then get together with their families and attend Church to celebrate the season. What I am claiming is that one of the things that is so disheartening about much of current globalization theory is that, like the Christmas season, it often includes many diverse and divergent voices that, at the end of the day, speak about an event that is 1. presumed to be universally experienced (even though most know that it is not) and 2. primarily about the spread of market ideology.

A more accurate and genuine approach to understanding globalization will therefore acknowledge that there is indeed but one singular global modernity – not, as some would have it, several incompatible modes – but that this modernity is formed and shaped by inconsistent and contradictory social experiences. Thus, when discussing Africa’s road to globalization, or experience of “modernity at large,” we need to acknowledge that despite Africans’ acute desire to have access to modern goods, like the cars, cell phones, and computers Brennan mentions, this access is often partial, limited, and profoundly uneven. We must also acknowledge that over the past several decades, beginning in the mid-1970s, sub-Saharan Africa experienced an economic crisis that was particularly extreme, even when compared to other peripheral world economies, and that modernity, as James Ferguson argues, became situated as an experience of the past rather

than a hope for the future. In fact, as Giovanni Arrighi notes, the African economic collapse that occurred between 1975-1990 – and whose effects, it should be noted, are still very much present today – was the manifestation of a sharp divergence between sub-Saharan Africa, the least economically stable among third-world regions, and East and South Asia, who were able to take advantage of the new capital flows that began to materialize in the late 1970s. Arrighi reminds us that up until 1975, sub-Saharan Africa's overall economic performance was not very much below the world average, although, to be sure, wealth was heavily concentrated. But when the United States became the world's largest debtor, rather than a main source of liquidity as it had been during the 1950s and 1960s, it began to compete with countries it had previously tried to help and "develop." This shift in policy led to higher interest rates and a new strategy of "structural adjustment" that proved to be disastrous for sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, while East and South Asia found themselves poised to take advantage of American consumers in search of cheap commodities, many African countries, which had been more dependent on foreign capital, saw their economies plummet. For the first time, most of these countries had a labor surplus, which led many rural Africans to migrate to the cities in search of work. Corrupt leadership and insufficient infrastructure, especially in the rapidly expanding urban areas, only aggravated the situation.

In essence, then, as Arrighi demonstrates, Africa is just as much a part of a singular global economy as any other region. But because Arrighi focuses his attention on the historical conditions that proved to be deleterious for Africa, he avoids making sweeping generalizations that conflate privileged experiences of globalization with all experiences of globalization. Accordingly, this dissertation, in its attempt to characterize

West Africa's singular yet unequal experience of globalization, turns away from the much-discussed lines of flight and informational superhighways that have become central tropes in globalization theory. Instead, I focus on the actual highways that are crumbling and deteriorating in one of the world's poorest regions. In other words, against those who argue that the technological developments and speed of the modern world have erased the significance of space, I demonstrate that the experience of technology and globalization is mediated and shaped by the spaces within which it is utilized.

Automobility becomes a strategic discursive formation within which to examine the impacts of globalization because it is, despite its unevenness, experienced globally – much more so than the ship, the airplane, or even the internet. Furthermore, because the automobile has been a major protagonist in global narratives of progress and development since the advent of Fordism, it can, when decoupled from these plots, become a key vehicle through which to examine paradoxical experiences of modernity. But before we proceed to disengage the experience of automobility from its Fordist and post-Fordist lineage, we must briefly examine the ways in which the car has been sutured to various globalizing narratives.

### **The Automobile at Large**

Henry Ford realized the global impact of the automobile when he claimed that the practices that he put in place in his factories had just as much to do with establishing a “natural, universal” code of freedom as they did with the particularities of manufacturing motorcars. To Ford, the eight-hour, five-dollar workday, the streamlining of the automobile, and the building of a car “for the great multitude” (52) were part of a

democratic world vision that would eliminate poverty and allow each individual to maximize his or her personal freedom. Antonio Gramsci, writing in Italy not more than two decades after the first Model T rolled off the lines in 1914, was already pondering whether Fordism and Americanism would constitute an entirely new globally reaching historical epoch. He saw Fordism as a comprehensive yet contradictory set of forces that were not limited to the production of automobiles, but extended to questions about mass consumption, sexuality, urban and rural space, and new types of social discipline. In short, Gramsci predicted the entire socio-technical system that we now call automobility. While Gramsci was clearly concerned about the negative impacts of Fordism (although he did perceive some benefits as well), Fordism later became unequivocally championed as a model of development by Walt W. Rostow. Rostow's book *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) became one of the foundational texts of modernization theory – the now dubious model that purports underdeveloped countries need to “catch up” to the West. Here, Rostow writes that the mass diffusion of the automobile is the most decisive signal that a society has reached the last of several stages of development. Widespread automobile ownership therefore would epitomize the achievement of development in the stage that he called the “age of high mass-consumption” (4) and measure the advancement of the lifestyle patterns of societies.

In narratives of post-Fordism, the automobile becomes less of a central character, but one that is, nevertheless, key to understanding the story. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri cite the shift from Fordism to Toyotism as one example of what they call Empire, the new political logic of a universal globalization. They argue that Toyotism is based on an inversion of the Fordist relation between production and consumption. Whereas

Fordism produced standardized vehicles and had little need to listen to its consumers, Toyotism involves a “rapid feedback loop” (290) where, in theory, the decision to produce a vehicle comes after the market, or the consumers, have already decided it should be produced. In extreme cases, the commodity is produced only after the customer has already selected and purchased it. Toyotism is therefore an instantiation of the postmodernization of the global economy, a model of the way consumption works in a smooth, decentralized world where capitalism can be as liberating as it is oppressive. In essence, the shift in the way cars were produced signified both an end to the rigid and large-scale industries that were dependent on the nation-state and the beginning of what has been called flexible accumulation, a way of producing, consuming, and moving that relies on the shrinking of the world through space and time.

In his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), Thomas Friedman also turns to Toyota for his model of the new world order. After visiting a Lexus car factory outside Japan’s Toyota City on assignment for *The New York Times*, Friedman is struck by the symbolic value of this luxury car that is produced almost entirely by robots in one of the most technologically advanced nations of the world. To him the Lexus stands for all that moves us forward: global finance markets, prosperity, modernization, and technological development. Although it is in constant tension with the olive tree, which represents those values that root people to family, history, community, and place, Friedman claims that “sooner or later the Lexus always catches up with you” (39). Thus, Friedman opines that any society that wants to thrive needs to be thinking of ways to build a better or newer Lexus.

What all these narratives have in common is that, despite the fact that they are describing different global orders from very different theoretical perspectives, they each depict scenarios in which capitalist relations, either Fordist or post-Fordist, spread to all social relations. What is striking, however, is that, with the notable exception of Gramsci, they each link the automobile to advancement and democratization. Whether this advancement is understood in terms of development and modernization, Empire, or the cult of the Lexus, the automobile is part of the new world order, not an impediment to it, and certainly not a contradictory or ambivalent product of it. Automobility is therefore a product of what I am calling the globalization effect. As a product of this globalization effect, the automobile is seen to have more or less the same meaning no matter where it is experienced. Even in the subcultures described by Hebdige or in Miller's collection, the car remains a symbol of material success, power, and progress – a sign that one can participate in modernity, either in its local or global variant. Of course, there are those who reject and resist car culture – just as there are those who reject globalization, or Christmas for that matter. In fact, one of the upsides of the current economic downturn is that the car has been revalued and the system of automobility has been called into question. Even Thomas Friedman wrote a recent column entitled “No, No, No Don't Follow Us” in which he warns India, who is in the process of building a \$2,500 car, against following the West in its pursuit of mass automobile ownership. However, although Friedman has come to see the dire ecological consequences of inviting everyone to join what he calls the “fast-world” of the Lexus, he has not shifted his position that the automobile is the emblem of modernization and the means to the much-coveted American way of life. The only difference between *The Lexus* Friedman and the “No,

No, No” Friedman is that the latter asks India to invent a green mass transit system *as well as* a cheap car.

By contrast, in the West African texts I discuss in this dissertation, the automobile is sometimes positively linked to modernity, but it is also sometimes embedded in experiences that are considered to be non-modern: inertia, suspension, witchcraft, occultism, confinement, and exclusion. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to extricate automobility from the overlapping narratives of globalization, modernity, and progress. Thus, although critiques of both automobility and capitalist ideology are implicit throughout this dissertation, my primary aim is not to denounce them, nor is it to point to the way that West Africa has been victimized or economically prohibited from them. Rather, I seek to disengage the experience of automobility from the Fordist and post-Fordist narratives within which it is primarily viewed. In other words, my goal is to articulate various non-Fordist narratives of the car that view automobility as a disjointed set of practices determined not only by the modern liberalist promise of autonomous mobility, but also by various nonsynchronous experiences.

I take my cue from Ilya Ehrenburg’s interwar tour de force, *The Life of the Automobile* (1929). Ehrenburg’s globally arching semi-fictional chronicle of the automobile covers, in a way unmatched today, the combined violence, alienation, and unevenness of the system of automobility as it was experienced not only by modern European and American drivers, but also by accident victims, immigrant factory laborers, strike leaders, and rubber plantation workers across the world. Beginning with the very first patent for a gas engine, Ehrenburg juxtaposes discussions of the automobile as a public good, a sign of global prosperity, a worldwide business empire, and an enabler of



speed and autonomy with stories about the new oppression of machines, the destruction of nature, gruesome accidents, and noxious gases. He contrasts the speeding cars of New York, Paris, London, and Berlin with the peripheral world regions that are mined for the resources that enable capitalist automobility. However, the “life of the automobile,” despite being experienced in contradictory ways, describes a situation in which the world is indeed becoming increasingly linked through technologies. “Cars,” Ehrenburg writes “don’t have a homeland. Like oil stocks or like classic love, they can easily cross borders . . . The automobile has come to show even the slowest minds that the earth is truly round” (167). Thus, what Ehrenburg offers us is a way to understand the globalizing technology of the automobile – or the singularity of modernity that it effects – without either the liberal panegyric rhetoric of much of today’s globalization theory or the equally debilitating language of victimization and exclusion. While the scope of my project is admittedly much smaller than Ehrenburg’s, I follow his lead by revealing the very specific and paradoxical ways that peripheral subjects experience the automobility that has penetrated their lives as the world continues to shrink.

## **Methodology**

In an essay titled “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” Igor Kopytoff advocates a way of studying an object by providing it with its own cultural biography, which is different than its technical or economic biography. Such a methodology, he suggests, would allow us to understand what makes an object significant, why it has been put to use and defined in a given culture in the way that it has. The example he provides is, conveniently, the car in Africa: “The biography of the

car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it . . .” (67). To date, at least two anthropological works have followed Kopytoff’s suggestion and produced a biography of the car in Ghana: Jojada Verippis and Birgit Meyer’s “Kwaku’s Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-Distance Taxi-Driver” and Brenda Chalfin’s “Cars, the Customs Service, and Sumptuary Rule in Neoliberal Ghana.” Both essays look at the business of importing used cars often purchased at auctions in Europe, the bureaucracy of taxing and licensing these cars, the built-in system of bribery, the relationship between cars and spirituality, and, in the case of “Kwaku’s Car,” the endless cycle of breakdown and repair. One can see from this list of topics how the car in West Africa requires a biography quite different than the American car. As Kopytoff suggests, such culturally informed studies reveal much about the way objects lead different lives in different places.

But this dissertation has a different objective. Whereas the goal of the above anthropological projects is to produce detailed answers to questions about the cultural biography of the car, I read texts for their ability to pose questions about automobility and to reveal the tensions and contradictions within its West African avatar. Although chapter one will provide a historical overview of the motorization process of West Africa, I have little to add to a cultural biography of any particular car or set of cars. I also do not attempt to produce any new ethnographic knowledge about the people who own, drive, repair, and maintain cars. Rather, I want to know how automobility as an ideological structure is experienced, valued, and critiqued given the particular socio-

historical and economic conditions of West Africa. To do so, I turn to another ideological form, another way in which subjects produce their own truth and express their relationship to their lived experiences: narrative art. As Theodor Adorno claims, artworks often provide “insights into human beings and social relations that are not readily accommodated within science and scholarship” (“Essay as Form” 8). Hence, through a close textual analysis of characteristic but diverse forms of cultural production, I examine how the car simultaneously becomes mythologized and banal; how automobiles affect people’s identities as consumers in an unevenly globalized world; and how people narrate technology in areas where it rarely functions at its optimum capacity. I consider how the practices that delimit automobility in West Africa come to us in the shape of diverse and dynamic stories.

It is my contention that automobility is not just a set of routines or procedures that can be observed and recorded. It is also a discursive mode that is encoded in narrative forms. In essence, what I am arguing is that the texts I analyze have the ability to mediate automobility and to express the contradictions of the system as it is experienced in its West African context *because* they too are part of the same larger socio-economic structure – they too exist within (and not outside of) the fabric of society. Thus, my methodology requires a literary or narrative theory that acknowledges the fact that texts have the ability to say something about the world they represent, but that is also cognizant of the fact that texts are just as much ideological products of the reified capitalist system as cars. In other words, like automobility, the novels, films, and plays I discuss are social forms of the paradoxical socio-economic system of West Africa, and as social forms of the same system, they are all formed and determined by the specific

crises, tensions, and ambiguities that shape daily life in the West African postcolony. However, this does not mean that narrative forms and automobility are homologous structures.

Following Fredric Jameson, I understand narrative to be a “socially symbolic act” that necessitates a mode of interpretation that brings repressed contradictions to the surface. In the *Political Unconscious* (1981) Jameson refers to mediation as a “process of transcoding,” a process that can be used to analyze “two very different structural levels of reality” (40). Thus, mediation allows the analyst to temporarily overcome the compartmentalization of different regions of social life, but, at the same time, to acknowledge the way in which they are interconnected in one “seamless web.” Accordingly, the texts I read in this dissertation transcode automobility by relating different semi-autonomous ideological structures to the same overall problematic or set of crises. Moreover, what makes Jameson’s theory of transcoding a particularly appropriate model for this project is that it also privileges the idea of contradiction, which has, of course, been a central concept to a long tradition of dialectical thought.

In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson lays out his method of interpretation and theory of contradiction through an engaged dialogue with Louis Althusser. In *Reading Capital* (1968), Althusser lays out three forms of historical causality: mechanical causality, expressive causality, and structural causality. Althusser rejects the first two models in favor of the third, which, he believes, is the only model capable of expressing historical contradictions. Jameson, however, acknowledges the limited potential of the first two models and parts with Althusser by insisting on the necessity of mediation, a concept that Althusser tosses out with the model of expressive causality. To begin with,

Jameson acknowledges the outmoded nature of mechanical causality (i.e. the billiard-ball model), where one element affects the other directly, but he also maintains that it has certain validity for particular situations. He cites the example of the way in which the change in nineteenth-century publishing led directly to a transformation in novelistic production. But the main object of Althusser's critique, and the one Jameson spends the most time recuperating, is expressive causality or Hegelian historicism. In Althusser's formulation of expressive causality, the economy is understood to be the hidden force determining everything on the surface. In other words, the economy is *expressed* through the superstructural levels such as art, religion, law, and politics. Jameson's intervention in this case is to suggest that Althusser has conflated expressive causality with homology, particularly as it is expressed in Lucien Goldman's *The Hidden God*, where a social situation, an art, and an ideology are found to share the exact same structural identity. Furthermore, Jameson believes that Althusser erroneously folds the concept of mediation into expressive causality, mistaking mediation to be nothing more than a symbolic identity between levels of the superstructure so that everything is the mere expression of the economic system. However, for Jameson mediation is based on transcoding *different* elements rather than expressing an ultimate identity between them. Like Althusser, then, he rejects any model that represses difference.

What Althusser proposes as an alternative to these models is structural causality, where the economic is no longer the base, but rather another level in the structure. Althusser calls this a system of overdetermination because all levels are both determining and determined: economics, art, religion, law, etc. are all conditions for the functioning of each other. It is a system in which "the 'contradiction' is inseparable from its formal

*conditions* of existence, and even from the *instances* it governs” (Althusser, *For Marx* 101, italics in original). In this system of relations, only one structure exists: the mode of production. Thus, causes are not hidden beneath the surface as they are in expressive causality but, rather, in the relations among elements of the superstructure. Jameson agrees with Althusser’s notion of a hidden or an absent cause, but points out that Althusser’s formulation, despite his objection, is in fact a practice of mediation. Jameson explains:

To describe mediation as the strategic and local invention of a code which can be used about two distinct phenomena does not imply any obligation for the same message to be transmitted in the two cases; to put it another way, one cannot enumerate the differences between things except against the background of some more general identity. Mediation undertakes to establish this initial identity, against which then – but only then – local identification or differentiation can be registered. (41-2)

For Jameson, mediation is necessary because our repressed history is accessible to us through texts, through “its narrativization in the political unconscious” (35), just as for Freud our repressed unconscious is accessible through dream interpretation.

Contradictions are not smoothed over, but, instead, brought to the surface through interpretive acts. My mode of analysis follows this logic by engaging in an interpretive method that is aimed at bringing the often-repressed contradictions of postcolonial automobility to light through close analysis of the texts that mediate them.

However, we might also follow Jameson in understanding the limited potential of the first two models of causality. For instance, we can see that mechanical causality is a

viable model for explaining the way in which the invention of cars led to a system of paved roads and a new way of social organization. Where the model is incomplete is in its ability to explain why the same invention sometimes led to different or competing forms in different contexts. Likewise, there is some merit in the model of expressive causality. Just as Kristin Ross reads postwar French cinema as expressing the new fascination (both positive and negative) with the sudden ubiquity of the automobile, we might also read West African cultural forms as an expression of the lack of mass motorization. However, while this type of expression certainly informs my readings, it would fail to explain why two texts about the same West African city might produce very different versions of automobility, why one might focus on the breakdown of old cars and the other might focus on glistening Mercedes Benzes. Expressive causality would also fail to explain the way in which the ideology of automobility in West Africa often overlaps with the ideology of automobility in the United States, despite the fact that both driving and car ownership are often radically different experiences in the two countries. What I am suggesting is that while automobility and the art forms I discuss clearly express a certain economic mode, we must also recognize that the automobile and the subject's relation to it are always overdetermined. Such an understanding allows us to see automobility as both a practice and an ideology formed within the context of a disjointed and uneven globalization that makes West African roads the sites of multiple conflicts and contradictions. Thus, in each of the texts I examine, the multi-directional relations between cars and their users illuminate the way that subjects and objects are multiply determined within this specific historical juncture.

## Chapter Overview

This dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I is titled “Suspended Animation,” a concept I utilize to counter the image of the automobile in forward motion and as a part of a forward-marching history. What is suspended is therefore both the automobile and the progress it supposedly represents. In scientific discourse, suspended animation refers to the stopping or slowing of vital organs, or to a body that has been frozen and may later be brought back to life. Accordingly, the idea of suspended animation implies a temporary interruption, a deferral of movement rather than a complete cessation. An automobile in suspended animation might be one that is waiting for a new spare part, one that has misfired, one that has crashed, one whose driver is no longer willing or allowed to drive, one that is stuck in the sand or mud, or one whose carcass has been put to other uses. In the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank’s push towards the free-market in West Africa (and elsewhere) resulted in a liberalization of the importation of used vehicles and an influx of very old and poorly functioning cars and trucks. In Cameroon, where more than eighty-four percent of all cars circulate between thirteen and twenty-two years *after* importation,<sup>11</sup> these substandard cars came to be called “*congelés*” or “frozens.” The name, however, according to Xavier Godard and Pierre Teurnier, was not only given to the cars because they were often immobilized on the roads. It also was intended to link the cars to the frozen imported chickens – also imposed upon Cameroonians as part of structural adjustment programs – that were regarded to be far inferior to those raised locally. Thus, Cameroonians linked the substandard cars, their lack of national autonomy, and the stalling of their economic progress in one word: *congelé*. My use of the phrase “suspended animation” is intended to evoke such multiple freezings.



The chapters in Part I therefore examine suspended animation as it is refracted through different discursive formations. Chapter one looks at the history of the motorization of West Africa, which began in 1900 with a failed attempt by Félix Dubois, a French businessman, to bring a fleet of automobiles into modern-day Mali, an event that has been absent from historical accounts of African development. Whereas historicist versions of African economic development position the motorcar as part of Africa's road to modernization, I argue that it is part of a process that has been continually thwarted and overdetermined by various modes of suspended animation. Thus, in order to reveal the tensions and conflicts present in the process of motorization, I concentrate on events that have largely been absent from mainstream historical accounts of economic development – Félix Dubois' aborted enterprise, the propagandized trans-Saharan and trans-African treks organized by André Citroën, and scuffles about motorcars between chiefs and colonial officers in Dahomey. Chapter two focuses on the tragedy of motorcar accidents through a close reading of Wole Soyinka's play *The Road*. Here, I read the road as a chronotope that includes various lived times of postcoloniality, and I argue that within the experience of Nigerian daily life, automobility is a system conditioned by death and its own breakdown. However, because the road is also associated with the restorative justice of its god Ogun, for Soyinka, this breakdown or state of suspended animation is also a mode of survival and a precondition for transformation. Chapter three discusses the ways that African avant-garde films reconfigure the historical and colonial link between the moving image and the moving vehicle by denying the ability of the automobile to represent a continuous, rational forward march towards progress. Using the technology of the moving image, these

filmmakers follow the avant-garde tradition of “making strange” that which is familiar and everyday. Thus, cars are not seamlessly integrated into the space and time of modern West African society. Rather, they misfire, drive around in circles, or disappear from the narrative at key moments. In this way, the automobile becomes dissociated from its position as an icon of “civilized” superiority and an emblem of development and progress.

Part II of this dissertation is titled “Consuming Mobility.” The two chapters in this section focus on the contradictory ways a code of automobility is consumed within postcolonial West Africa. Both chapters explore how what Roland Barthes calls the mythology of the automobile – or the mystically infused bourgeois rhetoric that enshrines it – is appropriated in the West African context. In his 1955 essay on the “other-worldly” design of the Citroën D.S., Barthes writes that cars are the equivalent of Gothic Cathedrals because they are consumed as purely magical objects, created by unknown artists. Barthes notes that the Citroën D.S. is, for those who consume and admire it, a goddess or a *déesse* (the pronunciation of “D.S.” in French). Everything about the *Déesse* – from its publicity to its design – is engineered to make it seem as if it were a heavenly rather than man-made object. Echoing Marx’s writing on commodity fetishism, Barthes reminds his readers of the quasi-religious and mystical experience of modern commodities that appear as hieroglyphs, or unintelligible results of their labor process. However, what Barthes’ essay seems to underemphasize is that for Marx, fetishism was more than just a theory about the mystification of goods. It also included an analysis of the way that commodities could organize social relations, belief systems,

subjectivity, and discourse. Thus, discussing the mythology or fetish value of the car is a way of bringing out the various contradictions and ideologies contained within it.

Chapter four discusses the sign function of the automobile in Nigerian video films, or Nollywood, the low-budget melodramas that have become incredibly popular in Nigeria and Anglophone Africa. In these Nollywood video films, the cars that had been parodied and made strange in the African avant-garde films return with all seriousness and fully imbued with their fetishistic valences. Yet while most Nollywood films are unflinching in their depiction of wealth, prosperity, and unbridled consumption as something wholly desirable, they have also made the darker sides of power and success central to their narratives. My readings of the films bring to the surface the ongoing tension between fantasies of development or material success and what I have called occult anxiety – the anxiety produced when sources of wealth are obscured and associated with magic and witchcraft. My final chapter examines the way in which automobility is specifically gendered in postcolonial West Africa. I discuss what happens when women drivers consume automobility as a myth of transgression, as a way to escape patriarchal and neo-colonial regimes of control. Although the car provides them with the opportunity to overcome physical and social boundaries and experience new means of power and pleasure, ultimately automobility re-inscribes them in a system where individualized and privatized mobility can do nothing to stave off collective immobility. I conclude by noting that despite the fact that automobility is overburdened by contradictions, nonsynchronism, violence, and impossibility, it has not, as of yet, dug its own grave.

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Lastly, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation about the types of motor vehicles examined in this dissertation. As I have already made clear, it is my contention that automobility is part of a larger system of liberal ideology in which subjects believe themselves to be freely mobile individuals. However, this type of ideology is clearly more aligned with the private vehicle than with buses, collective vans, or taxis. In West Africa, the overwhelming majority of people travel in various forms of collective transport or bush taxis, which range from typical four-door automobiles, to station wagons, mini-vans, mammy wagons, or larger trucks. These types of transport go by different names (*tro-tro* in Ghana, *car rapide* or *Ndiaga Ndiaye* in Senegal, *danfo* or *bolekaja* in Nigeria). In many countries there are also forms of bush taxi cars that are referred to by the number of places they have, with a seven-seater or five-seater being the most common (although the number of passengers regularly exceeds these nominal limits). Any vehicle can qualify as a bush taxi and most are informal, unregulated forms of transport (although drivers are often unionized) that follow no particular schedule – they depart when they have reached maximum capacity and they arrive when they have successfully passed through all the checkpoints, paid all necessary fees and bribes, and fixed all parts that have broken down during the journey. As I will discuss in chapter one, these forms of “indigenous” transport came about largely in response to the lack of both mass private automobile ownership and a reliable public transport system. Thus, we must be clear that vehicles used for collective transport do not have the same prestige and symbolic function as those used for private consumption – the ideals of autonomous mobility are often compromised by the non-individualized and more constrained nature of the travel. Accordingly, I try throughout my dissertation to specify when I think that

the liberal ideology of automobility must be re-evaluated given the different way the motorcar is used. At the same time, though, my arguments about the contradictions inherent within automobility, about the mode of suspended animation that conditions it, and about the dissonance between West African automobility and narratives that place the car in the center of a singular global (post)modernity, are only bolstered by the dangerous, overcrowded, and frustrating experience of riding in these forms of collective transportation. Automobility therefore becomes impossible in different ways and for different reasons.

Furthermore, while I believe that there is some elasticity to the term, I do want to distinguish automobility from auto-mobility, or forms of self-mobility not associated with the motorcar. Automobility, per the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, is specifically the type of movement enabled by various types of motor vehicles. Thus, technically speaking, this would refer to any vehicle with a motorized engine, including cars, buses, trucks, but also motorcycles, mopeds, and even motorboats. For analytical purposes, I am using the term automobility to refer only to the types of movement related to various forms of the motorcar. Therefore, motorcycles, mopeds, or motorboats, just like walking or bicycling, would be forms of auto-mobility, or ways to move the self, but not automobility as I understand it. I make this distinction because if automobility were to embrace all of these types of movement, it would lose its ability to describe a system and ideology centered upon the motorcar. Moreover, while the motorcycle or moped is a popular mode of transport in certain regions of West Africa, it is not overdetermined in the same ways as the motorcar, and it has not been subjected to the same level of scrutiny in narrative and visual art. Furthermore, as I mention briefly in my discussion of

Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, the moped actively opposes some of the main sign functions of the automobile. The same may be said of the motorcycle in Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki Bouki*. Thus, when various forms of auto-mobility enter into dialogue with automobility, I attempt to highlight the differences and tensions between the modes, while preserving the relative coherence of automobility as I have defined it. Finally, when I use the term "auto-mobile" to refer to a subject, I have included the hyphen largely to distinguish the adjective from the physical automobile. Unless otherwise noted, an auto-mobile subject is one whose movements are coupled with that of the motorcar.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The assertion that "Algeria is not France" is a reversal of the belief that had dictated French policy in Algeria for 130 years. Whereas in sub-Saharan Africa, France saw her colonies in terms of property, Algeria was always viewed as an extension of France. The statement "Algeria is France" was one that was often repeated by the French throughout Algeria's struggle for independence. See Ross (123).

<sup>2</sup> See "L'évolution des marchés ouest-africains de l'automobile."

<sup>3</sup> Jean Rouch's 1967 film *Jaguar* chronicles the stories of three young men from Niger who travel to Ghana and attempt to emulate the style and fashions of the Jaguars there.

<sup>4</sup> See "L'évolution des marchés ouest-africains de l'automobile." The 1966 article claims that with the exception of Guinea, the number of cars in France's West African Empire had more than doubled since 1956.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase, of course, belongs to Arjun Appadurai.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to Western Europe and North America where most countries have 500 to 700 vehicles per 1,000 population, Eastern Europe where the rate is between 100 to 300 per 1,000, or Latin America where the rate is between 40 to 200 per 1,000, the majority of sub-Saharan African countries have a rate that ranges between 20 to 60 vehicles per 1,000 people. This rate is comparable to many Asian countries, although certain Asian countries have rates that equal those in Western Europe and North America. See Dr. G Jacobs and A. Aeron-Thomas's "African Road Safety Review Final Report."

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<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines automobility simply as “the use of automobiles or motor vehicles as a mode of locomotion or travel” or “mobility by means of an automobile or motor vehicle” and dates its usage back as early as 1903.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Virilio argues that innovations in technology – from roads and railroads to digital technologies – have created a situation where the human body is simply plugged into different interfaces. In *Open Sky* he claims that the various “prostheses” we use “make the super-equipped able-bodied person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person” (11). Thus, for Virilio, technologies yield as much inertia as they do speed.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Dworkin provides a brief catalogue of the way “autonomy” is used in moral and political philosophy. He argues that the term is at times equated with liberty, sovereignty, and self-rule, and in other instances it has more to do with “dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility, and self-knowledge” (6). The main constant, he claims, is that autonomy is always understood to be a desirable quality.

<sup>10</sup> See Foucault’s “What is Enlightenment?”

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Tamo Tatiéste and Afané Bidja’s “Impact of automobile lot and city roads’ length on the urban mobility in Yaoundé (Cameroon)” (488).

**PART I**  
**Suspended Animation**



## Chapter 1

### **The Hum of Progress: Motorcars and the Modernization of West Africa**

*The hum of our motors must always mingle with the splendour of the scenery and with the memories evoked by it. That hum has a beauty of its own. It is the song of progress, the rhythm of human effort chanting its victory over the elements.*

– André Citroën (quoting Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil)

*The superiority of the West lies in the materiality of its culture, exemplified by its science, technology, and love of progress.*

– Partha Chatterjee

West African automobility is inherently paradoxical because, like automobility everywhere, it often fails to bring either autonomy or mobility. Cars stall, break down, idle in traffic, and force one to become dependent on a host of ancillary services, while putting the lives and safety of road users at risk. Collective immobility and suspended animation are therefore integral aspects of the driving experience. But in West Africa the paradoxes of automobility are also determined by the historical particularity of the motorcar. This chapter provides an overview of the history of the automobile in West Africa and argues that African subjects, from colonial times to the present day, have remained partial and limited participants in the world of bourgeois automobility. Thus, automobility is not fraught simply by its internal contradictions – it is also weighed down by the historical conditions that have made the modernization of Africa into a project overdetermined by ambiguous intentions, technological mishaps, and various forms of paralysis and immobility. The motorization of West Africa was never a process that moved definitively forward; it was, from its initial failed attempts in 1900 to the traffic

jams and accidents of the present, determined as much by suspended animation as by any ideal of autonomous mobility.

James Joyce's slim story "After the Race" in his *Dubliners* (1913) collection is perhaps one of the earliest literary works to address the way in which automobility was experienced unevenly in peripheral geographical locations. The story captures the way in which a European motorcar race that speeds through a colonial territory highlights the limited and tenuous relationship the colonial subjects have to the world of bourgeois motoring. Thus, before turning to discuss the history of the automobile in colonial West Africa, I would like to take a brief detour to turn-of-the century Dublin. Joyce opens "After the Race" with the following description of Irish spectators at a motorcar race in Dublin: "[They] had gathered in clumps to watch the cars careering homeward and through this channel of poverty and inaction the Continent sped its wealth and industry. Now and again the clumps of people raised the cheer of the gratefully oppressed" (37). "After the Race" calls attention to the divide between the affluence and technological modernity of the European continent and the paralysis of British-controlled Ireland, whose "poverty and inaction" become that much more evident as the Continental motorcars race through its titular capital. The protagonist of the story, Jimmy Doyle, is a young Irish automobile enthusiast and a financial investor of Charles Ségouin, a French racecar driver and motorcar entrepreneur. However, throughout Joyce's brief story, Jimmy's zeal is undermined by his inability to be a full member of Ségouin's group of friends. As a backseat passenger in the car during the race, Jimmy strains to hear the conversation between Ségouin and his cousin, and at the end of the story Jimmy loses all his money – and therefore his ability to invest in Ségouin – in an aggressive card game

with the Frenchman's international cohorts. Like the Dublin that "wore the mask of a capital" (42) but wielded no actual power, Jimmy's achievements – his "rapid motion" (39) and high-class associations – are illusions. As the story ends, Jimmy, devoid of his own capital, seems poised to join the "poverty and inaction" of the colonial capital of Dublin.

What strikes a scholar of African automobility is how easily the opening passage of Joyce's story might describe not only the 1903 Gordon-Bennett race that provided Joyce with the background for his story, but also the Paris-Dakar rally or any of its myriad predecessors that have been taking place on the African continent since the 1920s. Like the Gordon-Bennett race, the African rallies have highlighted the economic disparity between the industrialized countries producing the cars and the non-industrialized, poverty-stricken landscapes through which they speed. Likewise, one might observe that the comparison is even more apt given the fact that many African cities today have much in common with the economically strapped (but culturally rich) Dublin that Joyce describes in his stories. In fact, while most modern social theorists, from Karl Marx to Walt Rostow, believed that the cities of the future would follow in the industrial footsteps of London or Chicago, it has recently been argued that de-industrialized colonial Dublin serves as a more appropriate marker for the fate of many cities of the global South today (Davis 16).

However, what makes "After the Race" a particularly apt prelude to the present discussion is the way that Jimmy Doyle negotiates his status as a partial and minor participant in the world of bourgeois automobility. In Joyce's story, Dublin is a city full of cars, trains, yachts, and cosmopolitan youth. Jimmy is not a spectator, not one of the

“gratefully oppressed” relegated to observe the historic motor race from the sidelines. He is a passenger in the race, a financial investor, and a Cambridge-educated associate of the French motorist. The story is therefore not about Jimmy’s (or Dublin’s) outsider status, but rather his insider-outsider status – his position in the backseat of Ségouin’s car, struggling to be a part of the conversation, but enthralled, nonetheless, by the speed and excitement of the race in which he is participating. It is this fragile and tenuous relationship to the world of bourgeois motoring and industry that I find to be the most illuminating for our discussion of West African automobility. In this chapter I argue that Africa’s participation in global automobile culture has, from the beginning, been marked by what Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler aptly describe as “the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion” (3). Just as Jimmy Doyle simultaneously participates in and is disconnected from the race, Africans’ involvement in global automobility has been, and continues to be, highly selective and volatile. It has been marked by mobility and modernization as well as by suspension and stasis.

The motorcar was not a technology that was forced on Africans, nor was it one from which they were explicitly excluded. From nearly the beginning of the motorcar’s introduction, Africans participated in car culture as drivers, owners, entrepreneurs, and mechanics. But the prohibitive cost of importing an automobile meant that Africans and Europeans participated in the world of motorcars in very different ways. As Michael Adas, Daniel Hedrick, Brian Larkin, Luise White, and Jan-Bart Gewald have variously argued, technological objects in Africa became central in colonial projects not simply because they were tools of colonial domination, but also because they came to embody the technological mastery and supposed superiority of their bearers. These objects

therefore mediated and reified the complex relationships between colonial subjects and colonial rulers. Thus, on the one hand, technological objects articulated the place that different bodies would hold in the colonial hierarchy and acted as agents in reproducing social orders that were constructed on ideals of difference and exclusion.

However, on the other hand, technologies, just like churches and colonial schools, also participated in an ideological project that aimed at incorporating colonial subjects into a culture of global universalism. David Scott, for instance, persuasively argues that colonial governmentality, as a form of modern power, aimed to create conditions under which colonial subjects would transform their conduct and behave, without coercion, as modern, “enlightened” subjects.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, modern technologies, like modern institutions, aimed to construct subjects who would think and behave like Europeans. By teaching Africans how to drive and maintain cars, sending them to technical colleges,<sup>2</sup> and training them to operate telegraph services, railways, and radios, Europeans were not just providing vocational training that they needed for their labor force. They were also trying to make these technologies desirable and appealing, as is evidenced by the mass efforts of propaganda projects like the Colonial Film Unit (see chapter three) that brought documentaries about the benefits of modern technology to the African countryside. In this way, technologies sought to “improve” and “uplift” natives, not to exclude them from a European modernity.

Thus, technological objects like the motorcar were concurrently symbols of Europe’s dominance, of its unique and distinctive scientific advancement, and of a universal culture in which both Europeans and non-Europeans could participate.<sup>3</sup> This contradiction – this constant shifting between exclusion and inclusion – lay at the heart of

the colonial project of modernization.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it was not the case that colonialists were simply undecided about just how far to go in integrating colonial subjects. Rather, the colonial project of modernization was marked by a constant tension between a European exceptionalism grounded in the ideologies of difference and exclusion and a project of governmentality that was based on incorporation. Europeans wanted their colonial subjects to be docile individuals that would submit to their racially superior, modern rulers, but at the same time the colonizers hoped their subjects would become “rational” and Enlightened, in short, like them. Colonial subjects were therefore supposed to be native and European, local and universal, pre-modern and modern.

These incompatible modes of articulating colonial power meant that throughout the colonial period there was not a singular political rationality that took center stage. Accordingly, the motorization of Africa was not a monolithic project envisioned by a unanimous group of colonial officials who believed that it would have a prescribed set of favorable results. Rather, the motorcar was brought to West Africa by different individuals with different and conflicting motivations. Despite the fact that motor transport was, according to the historian John Iliffe, the most influential innovation of the mid-colonial period, its history, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, is fraught by ambiguities and contradictions. Iliffe, like most historians of the period, agree that the expansion of road transport stimulated internal trade, reduced the cost of transporting materials, opened up new circuits of commerce, and provided opportunities for indigenous as well as European transporters. Thus, although it is widely acknowledged that the forced labor utilized to build roads often undid many of the humanitarian benefits of eliminating human porters, the automobile and lorry are nevertheless figured into a

grand-narrative of African modernization and development. This chapter, however, focuses on stories of the motorcar that have been marginalized in larger historical accounts of African development, stories that complicate and often contradict the narrative of continual modernization. Here, I centralize events that have been ignored, relegated to a footnote, or deemed more appropriate for cultural and literary critics than for those chronicling the expansion of modern infrastructure.

I will begin by discussing how some of the early initiatives to motorize Africa were met with resistance by colonial officers for various political and philosophical reasons. While some officers feared that the car would disrupt fragile social structures, others felt that it was not a practical use of limited funds, and many were put off by harsh climate conditions, lack of available spare parts, and the poor quality of the roads that led to chronic motorcar breakdown. The automobile that was continually in a state of suspended animation was, to the promoters of the civilizing mission, a rather inconvenient symbol of Enlightenment progress. However, after World War I, the immediate goals of colonial conquest became less important than convincing those in the metropole about the continuing necessity of colonialism. Thus, in this context, the motorcar became a symbol of European industrialization that could spread the benefits of technology to the less “civilized” colonies. As the technology of the motorcar improved and various actors became convinced that the motorcar could be economically and militarily advantageous to the colonial project, it was recast as a conquering hero. Colonial documentaries, most notably those depicting the famous trans-Saharan and trans-African Citroën crossings, portrayed motorcars like colonial explorers who were constantly on the move, annihilating space and time across hard-to-reach hinterlands.

In the second part of this chapter, I will argue that it was often Africans, not Europeans, who were at the vanguard of encouraging both motorization and the construction of surfaced roads. During the interwar years, African entrepreneurs were some of the most innovative pioneers in automobile importation and in establishing motorized mass transit. Likewise, during the period of decolonization, intellectuals and political leaders advocated the building of infrastructural projects, which, they argued, were being neglected by Europeans. They claimed that only sovereign African nations could bring about true social and economic development, in essence turning the tables on the Europeans whose pretensions of universalism could no longer be sustained.

Although the violence and ensuing devastation of colonialism should not be underestimated, the argument underlying this chapter is that colonial projects of modernization were essentially ambivalent and incoherent and often undermined by the actions and words of Africans. My goal in unearthing the complex and contradictory motivations of early West Africa motorization is to lay the groundwork for a study of postcolonial automobility that continues to be shaped by tensions between inclusion and exclusion, mobility and suspended animation, and progress and stasis. Thus, automobility in the current stage of globalization bears the traces, albeit in different forms, of the tensions between the colonialists' claims to a global modern universality and their harsh practices of exclusion. Like Jimmy Doyle, many West Africans today are striving to be a part of global car culture, but they find themselves marked by their insider-outsider status – they are passengers in a race, but they are straining to be equal participants in the action.



## **Ambiguous Beginnings**

In February of 1900, newspapers across the world reported enthusiastically on the first automobile journey in French West Africa. The drive, the result of efforts by the journalist and businessman Félix Dubois, was completed by Governor Jean-Baptiste Chaudié who traveled fifteen kilometers per hour from Toukoto to Kati in present-day Mali, reducing the length of a fourteen-day journey by eleven days. However, despite the initial excitement of the international press, the first effort to bring automobiles into West Africa has been largely ignored in historical accounts of the motorization of Africa. The omission is not entirely surprising given that Félix Dubois' attempt to establish regular motor transport in the French Sudan was ultimately a failure, one which ended with the colonial government seizing his automobiles and supplies and discharging his staff. But the reasons for the oversight of Dubois' venture may also have to do with the story's internal incongruities, which make it hard to place it into any pre-established narratives of colonialism and modernization. In an ambitiously researched article published on the occasion of the 1973 conference of the Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, Yves J. Saint-Martin revives the story of Dubois' "audacious enterprise" in order to pay homage to the forgotten pioneer. Saint-Martin's essay is largely a hagiographic project that attempts to praise the motives of Dubois and to malign those who stood in his way, and Saint-Martin's not-so-subtle goal is to re-narrate Dubois' failures into a story that ends, ultimately, with a success. Dubois, he concludes, was simply ahead of his time. However, what emerges in the many details that Saint-Martin provides is a story of competing agendas and conflicting beliefs as to whether or not it was advisable to bring motorcars into West Africa.

According to Saint-Martin, Dubois was motivated by a spirit of colonial humanism. Dubois believed cars to be the solution for eliminating the horrors of human portorage that he had seen first-hand in 1897 when he had accompanied Captain Cazemajou on a mission to Chad. There, Dubois had witnessed Cazemajou forcefully recruit and mistreat African porters, who were, at the time, the backbone of transportation in the region. Dubois publicly criticized the captain and argued that Cazemajou's behavior was "counter-propaganda" for it went against the ideals of a civilizing colonization as pronounced by the French Third Republic. But Dubois' objections were routinely dismissed, and the captain demoted him. When Cazemajou summarily executed ten of the porters for attempting to desert, Dubois abandoned the mission and returned to France. The following year, at the 1898 Automobile Exposition in Paris, Dubois came up with a potential solution to the inefficient and inhumane system of human portorage in the French Sudan, and he began to court investors to help him bring the De Dietrich gasoline truck he saw at the exposition to West Africa.

While Dubois' initial motives might have been humanitarian, they were not entirely altruistic. He believed and was able to convince his investors that the motorization of Africa could be a very profitable endeavor. Dubois estimated that to transport a ton of merchandise from Kayes to Bamako (where there was not yet a railroad) one needed forty porters and fifteen days, which would cost approximately one thousand francs. Dubois established a transport company that promised to do the job for much less, and he told his shareholders that they could expect their stock to yield generous dividends. Consequently, Dubois received wide support in the business community and also found an ally in Lieutenant Governor Louis Edgar de Trentinian, a

key figure in the colonial administration. But others were less enthusiastic. The military, for instance, was strongly against the idea. They were already over-burdened with providing security and recruiting a workforce to build the railroad. Dubois' automobiles would need additional roads, bridges, and military support and might divert resources from more immediate and reliable projects. Military officials published satiric articles making fun of Dubois' proposal, calling it "*l'automaboulisme*," *maboul* being the French word for "nut" or "loony." (The slur, I suggest, was also a likely reference to Georges Méliès' 1899 film *L'automaboulisme et autorité*, in which two clowns turn driving into an absurd and dangerous sport.) Furthermore, officials in Konakry – the only other area in French West Africa where there were somewhat suitable roads – turned down Dubois' proposal to begin automobile services, presumably for similar reasons. Governor Chaudié also remained very skeptical about the likelihood of Dubois' success.

Saint-Martin attributes Chaudié's hesitation to his weak character and lack of vision, disparagingly describing him as "timid" and a "porpoise." But Saint-Martin also hints at another possible explanation for Chaudié's uncertainty about motorcar transport. Saint-Martin describes how the Governor's initial but hesitant optimism was dampened by the continual breakdowns that he experienced on his test drive to Kati. On several occasions, the car had to be pushed by hand, and the chassis and mechanisms proved to be too fragile to handle the heat and the poor roads. Furthermore, what seemed to bother Chaudié was that photographers and journalists were present to record the journey. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Chaudié might have feared that the story of his "successful" test drive would be overshadowed by all of its setbacks and mishaps, by its constant state of suspended animation. Rather than seeing the journey as one of triumph

of the machine over nature, Chaudié may have feared that the technological failures of the colonizers would take center stage, exposing their weaknesses and the limits of their technological prowess at a time when the French were still trying to consolidate their power in the region. Although it is of course impossible to know Chaudié's thoughts, Saint-Martin notes that the colonial government was very quick to annul its contract with Dubois once it became clear that the fifty-five motorcars he imported would need more maintenance than originally anticipated. When Dubois fell into debt, the government immediately seized his materials and repatriated the fifty Chinese mechanics that had been brought in to work with Dubois. Dubois had trouble regaining support and as progress on the construction of a railway in the French Sudan continued, cars were increasingly seen to be an unnecessary nuisance.

However, roughly a decade after Dubois' premature attempt to motorize West Africa, automobiles began to trickle into the region. Dahomey (present-day Benin) imported its first car in 1910; Togo had about three automobiles four years after that; and by 1913, there was a regular transport service operating in northern Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> In theory, motor roads were cheaper to build than railways, and they made more economic sense because they could be easily abandoned if they became unproductive. They were also less likely to be shut down in the face of minor setbacks like a washed-out embankment, common during the heavy tropical rains (Hawkins 91). However, since the colonial government had already heavily invested in the railways, roads were originally intended only to be feeders to the railways or, as in the case of Dubois' proposed itinerary, to connect railways with river transport. In certain cases, roads were also seen as unwanted competition to the railway, and legislation taxed and even forbade motor transport on

routes that were served by the rail (Austen 127). Furthermore, many colonists before World War I opposed the building of roads for purely practical reasons – cars at the time were so heavy that they tore up roads, making repairs an expensive and unending task (Hopkins 196).

The tension over road construction is dramatized in Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson* (1939), influenced by the author's experiences as a district officer in Nigeria. In the novel, road building becomes a major obsession for Officer Rudbeck who commands a sparsely populated region in northern Nigeria. Because his superior officers are not as enthusiastic about the road and he is not provided with sufficient funding, Rudbeck has to falsify his budget and embezzle money in order to complete his road construction project. The local emir, or Islamic leader, is not in favor of the road because he fears it will bring moral corruption; however, an opportunistic Nigerian clerk, Mr. Johnson, assists Rudbeck in coaxing laborers to return to work on the road. Since road building was one of the ways an ambitious officer could "leave his mark" and connect his region to the outside world (Hay 95), officers were often aggressive when it came to recruiting laborers. But, at the same time, the colonial administration as well as certain local leaders feared that roads would bring unwanted chaos and disorder. They believed that the amount of criminal activity that the roads would bring would cancel out any economic benefits brought about by the increase of internal trade.

While motorization in Europe and the United States proceeded with relatively little mainstream opposition, the cultural configurations of colonial Africa turned roads into sites of intense conflict.<sup>6</sup> Underlying the divergent views on the appropriateness of cars and roads was a debate about African exceptionalism. Colonialism, its advocates

claimed, would bring European rationalism and scientific advancement to the less advantaged – it would, so it was argued, make bourgeois progress available to those at a distance from bourgeois metropolises. But, at the same time, these claims of global universality ran up against particularistic arguments. Questions that were never asked about motorization or modernization in the West suddenly became important. Could cars and motor roads be properly maintained in Africa? Would it be easier to preserve social order in the colonies by keeping with the systems of railroads, native porters, and pack animals? Who would benefit from motorized transport? Would trade and agricultural production be positively or negatively affected? In this way, the mantras of technological advancement and progress became inconvenient hurdles at moments when they threatened to upset the balance of colonial power.

### **Of Caterpillars and Colonization**

The project of social imperialism that followed in the wake of colonial expansion was not a predetermined result of unified programs – it was, in fact, continuously negotiated and renegotiated throughout the various stages of colonialism. In Europe, doubts about the legitimacy of the colonial venture needed to be constantly assuaged, and the coherence of the colonial project was one that needed to be manufactured, smoothed over, and sold back to the metropolises.<sup>7</sup> During the interwar years, one of the ways European publics could be convinced about the value of empire was through documentary films, which proved to be a particularly effective means of publicity.<sup>8</sup> Just as colonial film vans toured through rural Africa showing films that promoted Western values (see chapter three), pickup trucks equipped with film projectors brought images of

the colonies to the French countryside (Bloom 145). By using editing techniques and voice-over narration, documentary filmmakers were able to map a coherent project of a Western modernity traversing and transforming an exotic and decidedly pre-modern African landscape. These grand narratives of the civilizing mission could then be projected to the European public who often knew nothing of the conflicting agendas that played out in the colonial territories.

One of the most famous colonial-era documentary films was Léon Poirier's *La croisière noire* (*The Black Cruise*, 1926), a film that chronicled a twenty-month trans-African journey from Algeria through western, central, and southern Africa to Madagascar by Citroën half-tracks. The film, which was accompanied by various museum exhibitions, several shorter documentaries about the trek, and its own musical score and live orchestra, opened at a grand gala event at the Paris Opera with French president Gaston Doumergue in attendance.<sup>9</sup> Brett Berliner, who links the “*black* cruise” to jazz-age France’s “negrophilism,” reads the film as a “cultural expression of postwar French imagination and pacific conquest” that combined “exotic,” “primitive” and sexualized Africans with French nationalistic pride (190). Indeed, the films were even able to associate themselves with the popularity of Josephine Baker, who, after receiving a free Citroën, styled her hair in the large aureole style of a Mangbetu woman from the Congo who was featured on the promotional posters for the film (Bloom 93).

André Citroën, the French carmaker who brought Taylorist assembly techniques to Europe, originally intended his half-track vehicles for travel in the Sahara. The Citroën caterpillars, as they were affectionately called, were motorcars equipped with two front wheels and a back rubber band tread that would unroll under the vehicle – they

could travel over sand or mud without sinking in, and they could travel over rugged territory without deteriorating.<sup>10</sup> Citroën called them “the invention that Jules Verne couldn’t dream of: the steel dromedary that drinks gasoline and oil” (Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil 73). The caterpillar cars were first used in a trek from Touggourt, Algeria to Timbuktu in present-day Mali, and resulted in a popular documentary by Paul Castelnau, *La traversée du Sahara (Traversing the Sahara, 1923)*. Both the Saharan and trans-African trips were led by Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil who subsequently published their journals of the trips under the titles, *La Première Traversée du Sahara en Automobile: De Touggourt à Tombouctou par l'Atlantide (Across the Sahara By Motor Car, 1924)* and *La Croisière Noire (The Black Journey, 1927)*.<sup>11</sup> The books were intended to complement the films and provide curious readers with even more details about the missions that were marketed as acts of heroism. They were part of a larger promotional package that demonstrated to the world the new efficiency of an industrial France with the Citroën brand at its center.<sup>12</sup>

According to Citroën, bringing automobiles to the African continent was part of a spirit of colonial humanism that could spread the benefits of industrialism and progress to the “uncivilized” corners of the globe. Much like Félix Dubois, Citroën believed that this humanitarian project could simultaneously benefit native Africans, help establish communications between France’s African territories, and yield generous profits. The Citroën crossings therefore form part of a historical legacy in which motor vehicles were offered up as roaming symbols of a superior civilization that believed that technical know-how legitimized and naturalized their rule.<sup>13</sup> To the viewers in Europe, the sight of automobiles on a continent deemed to be untouched by modernity, with areas previously



impenetrable by anyone other than the most intrepid of explorers, was ultimate proof that nothing was beyond the reach of technological progress. The Citroën films sought to demonstrate that with proper equipment and the right amount of industrial rationality, geographical obstacles could be surmounted with previously unknown speed.

The trans-Saharan journey had a number of objectives. The half-tracks were armed and militarized reconnaissance vehicles exploring the potential for military air bases; they were intended to pave the way for motorcar tourism; and they also followed the itinerary of a proposed Trans-Saharan railway that would connect North and West Africa.<sup>14</sup> However, what seemed to take priority for Citroën and the expedition leaders was exploring quickly. Citroën charged Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil with the task of reaching Timbuktu in twenty-one days in order to prove that the half-tracks could not only traverse rough terrain, but that they could do so with unprecedented velocity. In their journal, Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil exhibit an obsession with time and speed as they dutifully record their mileage and average speed per day as well as the precise times of their arrivals and departures. They include the time that a particular mountain comes into view or a repair is made; sometimes the reader is informed what time they go to sleep or wake up. As the expedition leaders state, “It is just as well that the inhabitants of the Sahara should know that the power of France, represented in this effective manner, can now move at the rate of several hundred miles a day over any sort of ground” (*Across the Sahara* 50). If in the nineteenth century, “the comings and goings [of] trains (and steamships) proclaimed the Europeans’ mastery of time and space and demonstrated their capacity for precision and discipline” (Adas 224), the Citroën films demonstrated how

the motorcar (and, more specifically, the half-track) came to represent the crowning achievement of this mastery in the twentieth century.

In the film of the Saharan journey, which has less space to divulge the minute details, the sense of speed is captured in the opening sequence when long shots of camel caravans are juxtaposed with shots of the modern caterpillar cars traversing the desert to supplant them. The sequence is a manifestation of Citroën's declaration that "le chameau est mort – la Citroën le remplace" ("The camel is dead – the Citroën is replacing it") (qtd. in Reynolds 98). Furthermore, while Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil's journal expresses anxiety about whether or not the trip to Timbuktu will be accomplished in twenty-one days, the Castlenau's film represents a *fait accompli*, a travelogue in which exotic desert tribes welcome the French adventurers with admiration and awe. Any sense of political unrest in the Sahara, like any reference to mechanical difficulties that slowed the journey down, are conveniently edited out of the fifty-minute documentary. Furthermore, as Peter Bloom notes, the film, in its efforts to promulgate the Citroën and French name, oversimplifies the actual relationship between camel caravans and the caterpillar cars. Bloom argues that the salt caravans depicted in the opening of the film were actually a response to French territorial expansion that altered the grazing patterns and access to water of livestock, shifting the entire political economy of the region. Thus, the "rapid communication" that the trans-Saharan crossing sought to achieve would also have rapidly deleterious effects for the tribes that inhabited the region.

On the trans-African journey, or *la croisière noire*, which took over a year and a half to complete, there was much less emphasis on beating the clock and more emphasis on geographic unity, on showing the French expedition traversing the entire length of the

African continent (Bloom 91). In fact, here Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil seemed more concerned with stopping and preserving time before they propelled it irreversibly forward. Their journal is filled with the knowledge that the motorization of West Africa is inevitable and that it will irreversibly change the landscape through which they are passing. They are proud to be part of Europe's civilizing mission, but they admit that the progress they bring is destroying the same civilization that they are attempting to capture on film and in their journals. In one of their numerous hunting expeditions, they take along 135 African porters and sedan-chairs and extol the charm of traveling in "safari fashion." While they somehow miss the point that railways and motorized travel make human portage retrograde (even though it was often no worse than the forced labor of road-building), it is not lost upon them that the same manner of traveling that nourishes their bourgeois primitivism will soon become outdated. Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil conclude their journal with a tone of nostalgia: "Our white cars have only been the advance guard; the faithful worshipers of Boula-Matari were not wrong in believing them to be heralds of a new era. The old world is suffocating: in its conquest of space it is annihilating distance – and also the charm of the unknown" (308). The penetrating white caterpillars on their "black journey" – precursors, perhaps, of the white Sports Utility Vehicles driven by development organizations today – were therefore the symbols of a racially motivated imperialism.

Thus, both the book and the film of the *croisière noire* are concerned with preserving the "charm of the unknown" before it is annihilated. Poirier's film captures the mysteries of the "dark continent" in sequences of desert landscapes, tribal dances, and scantily clad women. But his film, like Castelnau's, makes no attempt to reflect upon any

of the disruptive effects of European territorial expansion. Moreover, the film does not divulge the fact that the journey was part of Citroën's larger plan to expand his empire in Africa. At the time, Citroën had wide-ranging ambitions in Africa that went beyond simply cornering the automobile market in West Africa – he wanted the name of Citroën to become synonymous with the progress of Africa, a progress made possible by French industrialization. During the interwar years Citroën advertised heavily in colonial journals and attempted to compete with the popular Fords in the African colonies.<sup>15</sup> He also had plans to establish European tourism in Northern Africa and even had land purchased to set up luxury hotels and tourist camps.<sup>16</sup> But in 1924, after Citroën had already invested substantial money in his tourism project, Colonel Dinaux, who was in charge of southern Algeria, informed him that there were too many security threats and that he could not guarantee the safety of the tourists. It was later revealed that Dinaux had exaggerated the level of instability in the region, most likely, as Alison Murray argues, because he did not believe that motorcar travel was appropriate for the desert. In a 1921 report entitled “L'automobilisme au Sahara,”<sup>17</sup> written three years before Citroën's proposal reached him, Dinaux wrote that the sight of the cars struggling to get over sand dunes would be humorous and potentially humiliating to French officials. He also believed that the camel was the only sensible means of transport in the Sahara and that anything else would cause a rift between colonial administrators and the natives. Without the approval of Dinaux, Citroën had to abandon his tourism project. He consequently focused a tremendous amount of energy on preparing for the *croisière noire*, which could make up for the loss of symbolic capital he suffered and did not need to be concerned with long-term security (Murray 106). Citroën had to prove that his cars

would not, as Dinaux feared, become suspended in animation, that they would, on the contrary, become mobile symbols of France's industrial progress and global power.

Of course, Poirier's film does not position the trans-African trek as the massive publicity stunt that it was, nor does it allude to any of the objections raised by Colonel Dinaux and other skeptics. Furthermore, European viewers would have no way of knowing that the journey was arduous, full of breakdowns, and completely dependent on African guides, porters, and thousands of poorly paid conscripted road workers.<sup>18</sup> In an effort to make the Citroën half-tracks into conquering, civilizing heroes, Poirier and his post-production team edited out anything that might contradict the grand narrative of colonial triumph. Like many other colonial films that depicted the arrival of European technology in Africa, *La croisière noire* portrayed an unproblematic, smooth victory over space, time, and nature that in reality never happened quite like it did on screen.<sup>19</sup>

### **Indigenous Transport**

Although the Citroën films and other colonial documentaries depicted Africans as primitive and unaffected by modernity, the few comprehensive studies that exist of early African road transport suggest that it was often African businessmen who were pioneers in the motorcar industry.<sup>20</sup> In Nigeria, some of the earliest innovators in the transport industry were Nigerian businessmen like W.A. Dawodu and Dr. Obasa. As early as 1913 Dawodu was operating transport services in Northern Nigeria around Kano, and a few years later Obasa was running the only passenger bus and van service in Lagos. In 1915 Dawodu imported the first Ford cars into Nigeria and was converting light Model T Fords into commercial vans by building stronger bodies onto the chassis. That same year

Dawodu's firm established an agency in Lagos where cars, mainly Fords, could be bought, sold, and repaired. By 1920 his firm was one of the largest vehicle importers, general mechanics, and builders of car and truck bodies in Nigeria.

During the nineteenth century, when the colonialists replaced Africa's traditional internal trading networks with the railroad and shipping systems that facilitated trade for European firms, they also displaced many African traders and offered mainly subordinate positions to native businessmen. In export economies like West Africa it proved difficult for Africans to establish themselves as entrepreneurs, but road transport was one of the rare exceptions (Hawkins 5). While many foreign trading companies owned vehicles to transport their goods, they did not generally operate transport services for the public, nor did they establish their own garages (Hawkins 46). Therefore, as motorized transport became more common, African entrepreneurs were quick to take advantage of the new business opportunities by owning and maintaining buses, taxis, and garages.

Immediately after World War I, the introduction of lightweight Fords into West Africa shifted much of the debate as to whether cars could and should be promoted in the colonies.<sup>21</sup> The Fords proved to be much more suitable to West African conditions because they did not destroy the existing roads and they could more easily travel on roads that had not yet been surfaced. They also had the advantage of being equipped with pneumatic tires that were easier on the road than the solid tires used by European cars. Suddenly, the cost and hassle of maintaining both motorcars and roads dropped significantly, and motorcars were able to travel into areas that were not yet serviced by the railroads.<sup>22</sup>

Philip Drummond-Thompson argues that it was in large part the African's eagerness to import American cars that gave him the competitive advantage over European firms. In Nigeria, the colonial government as well as many European trading firms were under contract to purchase British automobiles. But the American cars were cheaper and more durable, and spare parts were more readily available. Furthermore, thanks to the Congo Basin treaty of 1920 that allowed American and British cars into British West Africa under the same conditions, American cars were able to remain cheap and competitive. Therefore, Africans such as Dawodu who imported American Fords, Dodges, and REOs along with American Firestone tires were able to operate cheaper services than their European competition.

Even in the French colonies where Fords were subject to high taxes, they were highly competitive with French makes like Citroën and Renault.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Yves Hazemann argues that indigenous transporters in the French colonies also flourished because they were able to provide flexibility that larger companies were not.<sup>24</sup> Like the Nigerian transporters, they could vary their routes, their schedules, and the types of goods they transported. Thus, in both the French and English colonies, small indigenous transporter companies (or individuals) operated the majority of the mass transportation for both people and products.<sup>25</sup> These transporters, who were subject to little regulation, were financially successful because, by waiting until they could travel with a vehicle loaded with as much cargo and/or as many people as possible, they ensured that each trip would yield a maximum profit.<sup>26</sup>

Still, Europeans expressed ambivalence about the extent to which Africans should be owning cars, especially for personal use. Erdmute Alber analyzes instances in

northern Dahomey (present-day Benin) during World War I in which automobiles became the center of political tensions between local chiefs and colonial officers. In two separate instances, local chiefs, using compensation money they had received for recruiting soldiers for the colonial army, bought automobiles only to be duped out of them by colonial officers. The chiefs had asked the colonial officers to help facilitate the purchase of the automobiles, but the officers saw an opportunity to take advantage of the situation and knowing that the chiefs would be unable to afford maintenance, spare parts, or gasoline, they intended to use the cars for their own personal benefit. The matter was complicated by the fact that the local chiefs were acting upon the encouragement of the governor of Dahomey who introduced them to the sport of driving on his tour to bolster the efforts of the recruitment campaigns. Since cars were not yet standard issue for colonial officers (the governor was the only official to have one at the time), the officers believed they were justified in taking advantage of the chiefs' enthusiasm and newfound compensation money. To them, it was unthinkable that African leaders should have access to automobiles before European officers. During the legal investigation that ensued, the officers consistently accused the chiefs of not being developed enough to be part of the car-driving elite and questioned the ability of Africans, including their chiefs, to maintain and possess automobiles (Alber 82). The irony, which Alber fails to acknowledge, is that Africans were already doing so with a considerable amount of skill and innovation.

The governor of Dahomey and his officers had different ideas about how to exploit African labor power. The governor thought that allowing chiefs to test drive his automobile would increase the chiefs' desire for compensation money and encourage



them to recruit soldiers for France's war effort. The colonial officers sought a more direct form of exploitation – sheer trickery. In both cases, though, the Europeans banked on the powerful sign function of the automobile. As was the case in the Citroën films, the motorcar expressed a physical form of colonial domination, but it was one in which the use-value of the cars was often overshadowed by the status they could bring to their owners and operators. Thus, Alber is right when she argues that the presence of the automobile gave shape to a new and lasting type of social boundary that separated the car-driving elite from the bystanders who took their place at the side of the road to admire the new object of desire. But what is not clear is to what extent these boundaries were porous. If cars were promoted and flaunted by colonialists who were not always comfortable with the idea of Africans owning cars, it is evident that they could not prevent Africans from participating in car culture. (Unlike in the case of filmmaking, which I will be discussing in chapter three, there were no specific decrees preventing or limiting African participation in the transportation sector.) Furthermore, Europeans often relied on Africans to be drivers and mechanics, jobs that, at the time, enjoyed a relatively high level of prestige. The result is that Africans were simultaneously positioned both inside and outside of car culture.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of Africans could not afford to purchase their own cars, either for commercial or personal use. Moreover, the relative rarity of the automobile meant that it had the ability to impart social status to its owner, and this was especially true in rural areas where cars were even less common. Harold Smith, a colonial officer in Nigeria during the decade of decolonization, discusses how he was instructed to use the vehicles of the Ministry of Labor in order to campaign on behalf of

the political party that the British had selected to succeed them. Smith states, “To have cars and trucks in the bush at all gave you tremendous prestige . . . If a fleet of vehicles with maybe thirty or forty staff of clerks and administrators suddenly descended they would have made a very big impact as this was official, this was the government” (Thompson 54). Automobiles, even as late as the 1950s, were meant to inspire awe and, it was hoped, remind Africans of the superiority of the Europeans.

Thus, while there was not always a clear divide between car-owners and bystanders, it was certainly the case that the colonial state believed that it could benefit from the tremendous amount of symbolic capital that automobiles brought to them. When the colonialists sought African cooperation, as they did during World War I, enticing chiefs with automobiles proved to be an effective way of incorporating African elites into the colonialist project. But, at the same time, the colonialists realized that they had much to lose by sharing the symbols and physical manifestations of their power. They were often dismayed and shocked at the way overloaded and cheap indigenous transport had vulgarized the prestige value of the motorcar,<sup>27</sup> and to both colonizer and colonized, traveling by indigenous transport never acquired the same status as traveling in a private car.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous transport was, however, a key part of the motorization of West Africa, and it was proof that the colonies did not always modernize in the way that Europeans expected.

What is necessary to emphasize is that the colonial state acted on different rationales at different moments, never quite deciding whether or not they wanted Africans to be auto-mobile. Meanwhile, Africans did not need to wait for any official decisions as they developed tactics that would allow them to control their own mobility.

Although some Africans were nervous about the erosion of traditional culture and were often just as fearful as the colonizers about the corruptive and disorderly effects of increased motorization, it was clear that many West Africans sought to develop and democratize motorized transportation with or without the blessings of the Europeans.<sup>29</sup>

### **“Language as asphalt”**

The process of motorization was, of course, intimately linked to the larger project of modernization. However, for most of the period of colonization, neither France nor Britain was entirely convinced that they should be investing large amounts of resources into improving the infrastructure of their African colonies. Frederick Cooper notes that even as late as the 1920s and 1930s both France and Britain rejected proposals to invest in the infrastructure of their African colonies and decided instead that it would be more beneficial to rule over more “traditional” societies. However, by the 1940s both European powers began to realize that the legitimacy as well as the profitability of imperialism was becoming harder to sustain.<sup>30</sup> They came to believe that both of these problems could be addressed by adopting a developmentalist approach to colonialism. By socializing and urbanizing the African work force and by investing in large infrastructural projects, the Europeans believed that they could morally and financially reinvigorate colonialism.<sup>31</sup> The imperial project, they finally decided, would indeed be a modernizing one.

During the postwar period, colonial governments in West Africa prioritized spending on transport infrastructure, and, in a decisive turn from earlier policies, began to prioritize road building. Transport investment after World War II accounted for forty

percent of the French colonial budget and thirty percent of British expenditure, and in the period between 1945 and 1960 both the number of motor vehicles and the number of tarred roads grew ten-fold (Hopkins 282-3). Colonial policymakers in West Africa began to adopt what Rudolf Mrázek calls, in the context of the Dutch Indies, a “language of asphalt.” Asphalt language, according to Mrázek, is a language of modernization and development that speaks in terms of technology, speed, and progress “with little time and strength for nuances and accents” (34). It smoothes or paves over contradictions and obstacles in order to move unambiguously towards a future of modernization. The language of asphalt is therefore synonymous with a language of technological development, but it is, more specifically, a language that relies on the teleological metaphoricality of the road as well as the rhetoric of its technological improvements.

In a 1957 report on the development of road networks in West Africa, M. Georges Gayet, the Inspector General of Overseas France, speaks in asphalt language as he proudly measures how far France has come in developing road infrastructure for its West African colonies. Following up on a series of studies presented at the International Congress of Roads held in Dakar in 1952, Gayet is pleased to report that new technologies for paving roads, along with revenues from a new gas tax, have enabled France to improve the circulation of transport vehicles on three important itineraries: the coastal route from Dakar to Cotonou, which transported eighty percent of French West African export products; the itineraries that fed the four railway networks of French West Africa; and routes that allowed better access to hunting reserves, cottages, and hotels that Europeans enjoyed in their leisure time. Thus, the selected routes were intended to improve the overall profitability of the colonies and make colonial

exploitation a more enjoyable and leisurely pursuit. However, Gayet's report shows how development projects, while undertaken with a language of universalism and in the spirit of incorporating Africans into Western modernity, were still largely exclusionary.

Yet the language of asphalt did not belong solely to the colonizers. It was essentially the language of the modern, public road, and although its origins may have been European, colonialists could not maintain the monopoly on it. The road, Mrázek argues, is a public space, which necessitates a common language that all of its users – elite and ordinary, European and native – could share. In other words, modernization, which is universal by its very definition, could not be owned by the Europeans. Thus, during the period of decolonization, anti-colonial advocates seized upon this language of asphalt and development and turned it on its head. Asphalt language took on different forms and meanings, advocating not just for roads and cars that would benefit a select few, but for modern infrastructure that would ameliorate daily life for all. In his famous polemic, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues that, contrary to what the Europeans claimed, colonialism was actually serving as a *roadblock* to modernization. In quintessential asphalt language, Césaire writes, “The proof is that at present it is the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools, and colonialist Europe which refuses them: that it is the African who is asking for ports and roads, and colonialist Europe which is niggardly on this score, that it is the colonized man who wants to move forward, and the colonizer who holds things back” (25). Similarly, in “The Role of Culture in the Liberation Struggle” Amilcar Cabral argues in favor of “democracy . . . literacy, the creation of schools and health services, leadership training for persons with rural and urban laboring backgrounds, and many other developments

which impel people to set forth upon the *road of cultural progress*” (211, my emphasis). Roads, whether used metaphorically by Cabral or literally by Césaire, were part of a forward-looking and modernizing rhetoric, co-opted from the colonialists, but this time linked unambiguously to an appeal for universal rights. Furthermore, the language of asphalt appropriated by decolonization intellectuals was not strictly a technological language. It became a language of transition that included technological development but that acknowledged the role of culture and autonomy in bringing about this progress.

Likewise, in another instance of asphalt language advocating techno-cultural change, Frantz Fanon sharply criticizes the disparity between the European sections of colonized cities and the native quarters: “The settlers town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are *paved with asphalt* . . . . The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire” (39, my emphasis). For Fanon, nothing short of a complete reversal of this colonial structure is acceptable – “The last shall be the first and the first the last” (37). African and Afro-Caribbean leaders were therefore making it clear that the structure of empire could not be consistent with an ideology of progress and that both modernization and cultural autonomy were needed to right the wrongs of decades of colonial neglect.

Ousmane Sembène’s novel *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960), a fictional account of the 1947 Dakar-Niger railway strike in which Sembène took part, uses a type of asphalt language of transition to express a machine-based future in which technology works for and not against African subjects. As the strikers gather at the railroad stations to pass time, they begin to realize that the railway is a machine that belongs to them. Despite the fact that it was originally a form of colonial domination, that tribal lands were seized and

workers exploited and mistreated in its construction, the younger generation of strikers imbue the railway with new meaning:

Something was being born inside them, as if the past and the future were coupling to breed a new kind of man, and it seemed to them that the wind was whispering a phrase they had often heard from [the strike leader]

Bakayoko: 'The kind of man we were is dead, and our only hope for a new life lies in the machine, which knows neither a language nor a race.' (76)

Thus, technology – and not only that of the railway – is celebrated as a new modern way of being. Moreover, the workers understand that because they can shut down an entire transportation system, they are particularly poised to disrupt the flow of exports upon which the French colonial economy depended. In another instance of asphalt language – broadly conceived as a language of modern techno-social infrastructure – they argue for fair pay, family allowances, and a non-discriminatory work structure within the institutions and language of French industrialization and modernization. As they mobilize around the technology of the railway, they claim their rights as employees, and demand the same rights as French workers.

Likewise, leaders of newly independent African countries often spoke in the language of asphalt and continued, albeit in nationalist terms, the industrializing projects of the French and British imperialists. For instance, Kwame Nkrumah famously staked his entire political career on hydro-electricity created by the Volta River Project and claimed that the economy of Ghana needed to be “jet-propelled” into the future. During the period of 1955 – 1970, the colonial and post-colonial governments of Nigeria embarked on large-scale urban renewal projects in Lagos, constructing roads, bridges,

and Le Corbusierian, modernist buildings. Although there were certainly Africans who favored maintaining traditional structures and those, like Sékou Touré of Guinea, who would emphasize national unity and “authenticity” over universal class struggle, there was an undeniable clamor of African voices hoping that independence would allow them to become full-fledged participants in a universal modernity. They saw the colonial project for what it was – an ambivalent and often insincere invitation to join a bourgeois world – and they believed that national sovereignty would remove many of the obstacles colonialism had placed in their path. Although the language of asphalt and modernization has fallen out of fashion, what is often forgotten is that this discourse, this “universal” language, enabled African (and other third-world) subjects to demand inclusion in a world of technological modernity.

### **The Pockmarked Road to Modernity**

The advocates of decolonization expected that after independence, Africa’s insider-outsider status would be replaced by its full membership in the global economy.<sup>32</sup> However, independence often brought with it a new set of exclusions, and it gradually became clear to most West Africans that they had been betrayed by a language of asphalt that had promised to sweep everyone into a modernized future. The difference between Sembène’s 1960 *God’s Bits of Wood* and his 1976 novella *Niiwam* demonstrates the change of attitude. While *God’s Bits of Wood* celebrates the railway workers as the vanguard of a new modernist consciousness, *Niiwam* underscores the difficulties postcolonial urban migrants faced in suddenly having to pay the costs of transporting themselves to hospitals, cemeteries, schools, markets, and places of work. *Niiwam*, made



into a film by Clarence Delgado in 1988, tells the story of a father who has just arrived in Dakar from his village with his sick baby. After his son dies at the “Native Hospital,” the father is shocked to discover that the cemetery is located on the opposite side of the city from the hospital and that he must have money to take transport there. The father does not have the required bus fare, but a poor man at the morgue takes pity on him and pays his way. Much of the story deals with the degradation the father feels as he rides a rickety bus with the corpse of his son in his arms. Delgado’s film further emphasizes the difficulty of transport by showing the problems the family must initially face in reaching the city hospital. In fact, even as early as 1963 in his first short film, *Borom Sarret* – which I will be discussing in detail in chapter three – Sembène highlights the conditions of inequality and degradation the urban poor faced when they were not privy to modern forms of transportation. Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), similarly uses the motorcar – here, dilapidated Nkrumah-era cars – to symbolize the wrecked hope of postcolonial modernization. Today, roads in West Africa, which were once emblems of modernity, are so scarred and pockmarked that they are often a public nuisance rather than a modern convenience. The state of suspended animation that the early colonialists thought would be an embarrassing symbol of progress and enlightenment is now part of the daily experience of automobility in postcolonial West Africa.

Much ink has already been spilled on what went wrong, on how the postcolonial state failed its citizens and how Western countries created unfavorable conditions for fledgling African countries. My goal here is not to belabor these points, but instead to emphasize the moments of continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods in

order to demonstrate how postcolonial automobility is shaped and formed by many of the same contradictions that I have been discussing throughout this chapter. The dialectic tensions between inclusion and exclusion and between mobility and immobility that existed throughout the age of colonialism were not resolved with independence but, rather, recast in a different light. Postcolonial African countries are no longer held back by colonialists afraid of making them too modern, but they are in many ways cut off from the capital flows of the global economy. As James Ferguson suggests, transnational capital does not so much flow through as it does “hop over” the areas where most Africans live, stopping in the mines or oil fields of resource-rich countries to enrich elite businesses and corrupt governments (*Global Shadows* 14). This does not mean that Africans are backwards, lagging, or lacking the skills, mindset, and disposition to be modern. Nor does it mean that Africa exists in a void of globalization – it is not, as Manuel Castells suggests, one of the “black holes of the informational capitalism” (162). But what is undeniable is that the deficit of economic opportunities means that many African countries cannot participate in “modernity at large” with the same level of intensity as their industrialized and post-industrial counterparts. If, as Anthony Giddens argues, modernity is experienced as the increasing connection of “extensionality and intentionality” (2), or globalizing influence and personal choice, the choices available to African subjects are considerably limited. This means that automobility, as an expression of personal mobility, is not always an option available on what Giddens refers to as the “lifestyle menu,” despite the fact that the globalizing influence of car culture is as dominant as ever.

What I am arguing is that not all experiences of modernity have been equally modern. Although it has become fashionable to emphasize modernity as a plurality of experiences, many theories of alternative modernities have de-emphasized modernity's experiential disjunctures and have failed to note that for many people, especially those in the global South, modern technologies and institutions remain unavailable.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, efforts to multiply modernity by South Asian scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, as well as by Africanists such as Peter Geschiere and Charles Piot, have been successful at dislodging modernity from its position within linear, teleological narratives. By pluralizing modernities these authors have taken an admirable stance in ceasing to allow European and Western achievements to be the benchmark for all other societies. However, as an analytical device, this multiplication of modernity causes us to lose sight of the fact that modernity as a technological, political, and socio-economic *condition* is not evenly experienced across the globe. In other words, we may all be part of a modern temporality – West Africans are in many senses coeval with Americans, Japanese, or the French – but this does not mean that everyone has equal access to modern devices, institutions, and personal choices. While there is clearly no one single road to modernity, those who advocate a plurality of modernities often fail to articulate that the different roads to modernity are not all paved in tarmac.

## **Conclusion**

The title of this chapter, “The Hum of Progress,” is intended to recall Citroën's introduction to *Across the Sahara* in which he quotes his expedition leaders Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil (see my epigraph) who have equated the hum of their motors to the

“song of progress, the rhythm of human effort chanting its victory over the elements” (13). The reader will by now understand both the irony and the arrogance of this victorious claim, given the fact that the Citroën treks were only tangentially concerned with modernizing Africa and not at all interested in providing any benefits to the people inhabiting the landscapes they traversed. The progress that they speak of then is a European one, for their professed goal is to enter the “golden book of French industry” (13). But what I am interested in is the unintended implication of the twice-repeated word “hum.”

I would therefore like to conclude this chapter by briefly turning again to the scene of the motor race in Joyce’s “After the Race.” As Jimmy Doyle is sitting in the backseat of Ségouin’s racecar two things prevent him from hearing the conversation occurring in the front seat – the deep bass humming of his Hungarian friend Villona and the noise of the car. Here, both humming noises are, of course, part of Jimmy’s experience in the motor race. They form, define, and mediate Jimmy’s insider-outsider status, as they signify both his exclusion from the conversation and his inclusion in the race.<sup>34</sup> A hum is different than a song in that it has an indistinct, droning noise and is, by definition, devoid of lyrics. In Joyce’s story it is used in contrast to the “light words” of the conversation being flung about in the front seat. It is distortion and confusion – “Besides Villona’s humming would confuse anybody” (Joyce 39). In *God’s Bits of Wood* Sembène uses the hum of the machine in a similar manner: “All of the contradictory emotions he felt were still revolving in Tiémoko’s head, like the humming of a motor he could not stop” (87). The hum of progress I am referring to in my title is therefore meant to undermine the clear and meaningful “song of progress” that Citroën believed had

chanted its victory over the untamed African landscape. The hum of progress, to me, underscores the indistinct, contradictory, and muffled nature of progress both in the period of colonization and in the equally muddy and confusing postcolonial age.

For anyone who has spent time traveling in cars, vans, or trucks in West Africa, it goes without saying that noise is an overwhelming part of the experience. Rattling mufflers, ageing suspension, sputtering exhaust, misfired engines, not to mention the shouting of roadside vendors who thrust their goods through the windows, often coalesce to form a chorus of indistinguishable noises. For those traveling in collective transportation the noise level is intensified by touts, the conversation of very proximate fellow passengers, and loud, “staticky” music.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it is within this amalgam of noise, this muffled hum of progress, that I situate the following chapters of this dissertation.

A growing body of postmodern criticism has recently taken to celebrating the African city as “a place of manifold rhythms, a world of sounds, private freedom, pleasures, and sensations” (Mbembe and Nuttall 360). Like those who advocate pluralizing modernity, these critics have commendably sought to liberate Africa from its position as backwards, exploited, and un-modern, and they have pointed to a number of ways that African subjects may stylize themselves and participate in the rich and sophisticated dynamics of urban life. However, urban life in West Africa is extremely overdetermined and private freedoms and pleasures do not always come easily. Amidst the “manifold rhythms,” the pulses of cosmopolitan delight, the sounds of high-life or *mbalax* music blasting from clubs of youth wearing Pumas and knock-off Prada are the noises of clattering mufflers, screeching brakes, generators being fired up after another power failure, and men and women unable to find formal work hawking Kleenex or

plastic combs on the streets. Thus, while it is important to note the dynamism and positive energy in African cities, it is also important to note that jobs, freedoms, and daily mobility can often be severely limited. The question then becomes: how can one stylize the self in such a context? Or, to put it differently, what kind of narratives are created in this atmosphere? What types of meaning are fashioned amidst all this noise?

Automobility is just one of many narratives of self-stylization available to West Africans today. One might object that by focusing on such an expensive commodity, I set myself up to focus on lack and failure rather than creative and successful forms of urban mobility. Indeed, had I chosen to focus on the mobile phone, a technology that is becoming rapidly available to middle-class Africans and one that works with remarkable consistency and reliability, my dissertation would have taken a much more celebratory tone. But there is perhaps no other techno-object in modern history that has been as mythologized and fetishized as the automobile, and it therefore offers us privileged insight into how West Africans navigate their complex and strained relationship with neo-liberal consumption.

I have argued that the paradox of automobility is deeply rooted in the social divisions created by colonialism and challenged by West Africans. This has led the automobile to take on contradictory sign functions at different historical junctures. Postcoloniality and the ascendance of neo-liberalism have neither resolved nor condensed these contradictions; they have only multiplied and complicated the already existing paradoxes of modern automobility. In the postcolonial films, videos, plays, and novels to which I now turn, the automobile and the liberal ideology that it represents are coveted, maligned, and appropriated in different ways by different authors. Like the colonialists

who could never quite decide how auto-mobile they wanted their African subjects to be, Africans have had – and do have – conflicting desires as to how “Westernized” they should allow themselves to become. Furthermore, as the car becomes less a symbol of Western life and more a badge of global citizenry, its sign-function shifts accordingly. What remains consistent, however, is that the automobile continues to shed light on Africa’s insider-outsider status on the world stage. It continues to be a “leading object” through which West Africans negotiate their relationship with commodities as they struggle to create meaning within and above the confusing hum of progress.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Recently, Jean-François Bayart has made similar claims, arguing that colonization was a foundational moment of globalization, in part, because it was a mutually interactive process. While neither Scott nor Bayart denies the brute violence of colonialism, their focus lies more on the ways colonialism produced normative forms of conduct through projects that incorporated and included colonial subjects.

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Headrick’s *The Tentacles of Progress* for a discussion of technical and vocational training schools in colonial West Africa.

<sup>3</sup> I am here indebted to the research agenda laid out by Cooper and Stoler in their introductory essay to *Tensions of Empire*.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Larkin calls this constant shifting a “pendulum swing” between whether colonial subjects were to be preserved as inherently different or whether they were to be fully incorporated into institutions of modern liberalism. Although he is writing specifically about the contradictions and instability of the British policy of indirect rule in Nigeria, the suggestion, I believe, applies to colonial rule in general (24).

<sup>5</sup> See Saint-Martin and Philip Drummond-Thompson.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, road building in Europe and America was not entirely uncontroversial. In France during the Second Empire, Baron Haussman widened the streets of Paris to allow better military access and also to prevent revolutionary mobs from building barricades. In the United States and Britain, property owners initially opposed the widening and paving of roads because they wanted to keep high-speed vehicles (including bicycles and horse-cars) off of residential streets. However, by the time the internal combustion

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automobile came to replace the steam automobile – which was prone to explosions – and horses – whose manure and carcasses caused tremendous pollution and public health concerns – they were often enthusiastically welcomed. Automobiles were critiqued as status symbols of the elite, but they faced minimal regulation and public opposition except to address basic safety concerns. See Clay McShane’s *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and The American City*.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, William Schneider discusses the pro-colonial stance taken by editors and publishers in the French mass newspapers of the late nineteenth century. He discusses the ways the editorial content of the newspapers made the case for colonialism at a time when the merits of colonial expansion were being debated in popular discourse. The editorials linked the acquisition of colonies to the mitigation of the effects of the depression of the 1880s. Schneider also argues that ethnographic exhibitions provided an important way to mark Africans as savages in need of French civilization.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of the ways in which colonial film was used to promote the “civilizing mission” of French colonialism, see Peter Bloom.

<sup>9</sup> See Brett Berliner for further details on the cultural significance of what he refers to as France’s first multi-media extravaganza.

<sup>10</sup> Adolphe Kégresse, the inventor of the caterpillar cars, originally designed them for the Czar of Russia who wished to have a motorcar that he could drive on the snow.

<sup>11</sup> Although both the film and the book of the trans-African trek have the same French title – *La croisière noire* – the film is typically translated as *The Black Cruise*, whereas the English translators of the book chose the title *The Black Journey*.

<sup>12</sup> After “conquering Africa,” Citroën also organized *la croisière jaune* (the yellow cruise) through Asia and *la croisière blanche* (the white cruise) through sub-Arctic Canada. A book was written on the “yellow cruise” and films were made of both expeditions.

<sup>13</sup> As Jan-Bart Gewald states in a discussion of the early motorcars in Namibia, “(M)otorized vehicles . . . were seen by the colonists as a material manifestation of their technological superiority and hence by extension their natural moral superiority, which in turn legitimated their right to rule” (257).

<sup>14</sup> Citroën received much political support from proponents of the highly contentious railway, but, ironically, the advent of airplane and motorcar transport made the railway redundant.

<sup>15</sup> On the advertisements Citroën placed in official colonial journals in Guinea, see Odile Goerg, “Publicité et transports routiers en Guinée dans l’entre-deux-guerres.”



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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the history of CITRACIT (Compagnie transafricaine Citroën), Citroën's failed attempt to launch regular tourist expeditions to North Africa, see Alison Murray, "Le tourisme Citroën au Sahara (1924-1925)."

<sup>17</sup> See Murray.

<sup>18</sup> In preparation for the expedition, extensive amounts of road had to be cleared, especially in the Belgian Congo. Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil write that the Belgians used 40,000 natives to clear a stretch of 700 kilometers in just a few months. Impressed by the ability of the Belgians to exploit African labor, they write, "When we consider how difficult it is to get even one of them to work, we can but admire a result all the more exceptional because the black man does not carry out willingly any work of which he cannot clearly see the utility" (153). In fact, throughout colonial Africa, much of the road building was accomplished through forced or coerced labor. In *Voyage Au Congo* (1927), about his travels in 1925 throughout the Congo, André Gide describes seeing women with children on their backs repairing roads with their bare hands.

<sup>19</sup> Although no other expedition reached the fame of the Citroën trans-Saharan and trans-African raids, the interwar years saw a series of expeditions sponsored by carmakers and undertaken by independent travelers. On their way to Cape Town, the Citroën expedition passed two British Crossley motorcars independently pursuing an all-British overland route to Cairo (Wolf 116). During the 1930s Wilfred D. Hambly, collecting artifacts for the Field Museum of Chicago, drove a Ford truck through Angola and Nigeria and recorded his journey in a book titled *With a Motor Truck in West Africa* (1931). Likewise, Renault sponsored several African expeditions that culminated in the Mission Gradis and a film entitled – *La première traversée rapide du désert (329 heures)* (The First Rapid Crossing of the Sahara [329 hours]). A Peugeot-sponsored Saharan expedition traced part of the route that eventually became the Paris-Dakar auto rally. The accumulative effect of these various travelogues was to open up Africa as a playground and racetrack for a new brand of tourist who wanted access to an exotic and disappearing landscape.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the historical accounts by Philip Drummond-Thompson, A.M. Hay, and E.K. Hawkins as well as the broad discussions of urban transport in Sub-Saharan Africa by Xavier Godard and Pierre Teurnier.

<sup>21</sup> Ford, in his autobiography, takes pride in the practicality of creating lightweight vehicles. He writes, "There is no more sense in having extra weight in an article than there is in the cockade on a coachman's hat. In fact, there is not as much. For the cockade may help the coachman to identify his hat while the extra weight means only a waste of strength" (15).

<sup>22</sup> Because motorcars opened up new circuits of trade that did not directly compete with old routes, they were no longer seen as a threat to the railway (McPhee 118).

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<sup>23</sup> On the competition between Ford and Citroën, see Odile Georg.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1920s, Nigeria and the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) imported twice as many cars as French West Africa, in part because of the unimpeded efforts of indigenous importers who brought over American cars – by 1923 almost 75% of the 550 cars imported into British West Africa were Fords. Most of the remaining cars were British makes and were used primarily by government officials (McPhee 118).

<sup>25</sup> In Senegal in 1954, 90% of transport businesses employed less than 10 people and less than 2% had more than 25 people (Hazemann 214).

<sup>26</sup> The system of transport by collective taxis (also called bush taxis when used for long-distance travel), minibuses, vans, and large converted buses continues virtually unchanged today. Although drivers and owners have formed unions and are taxed by the government, they are subject to very few regulations.

<sup>27</sup> This was also the case in the Dutch Indies. See Rudolf Mrázek.

<sup>28</sup> However, it was the case that Africans, who had previously been excluded from motorized transport, at first looked very favorably upon these indigenous modes of transport because they were accessible to those in peripheral neighborhoods, relatively quick, and inexpensive. For instance, paratransit mini-buses, called *tro-tros* in Accra and *duru-duruni* in Bamako, were named after their low-cost fares, while the *car rapide* mini-buses of Dakar were named for their rapidity. See Godard and Teurnier.

<sup>29</sup> Of, course, not all Africans welcomed motorcars. Africans were no more monolithic than Europeans and many had very ambiguous feelings about motorization. In many cases, the practices of forced labor, especially within the French colonies, created ill will towards roads and road transport (see Adeline Masquelier). Labor abuses led some people to leave their villages and establish encampments far from the roads and away from colonial surveillance. Zan Semi-Di notes that in the Ivory Coast, after forced labor was abolished in 1946, many villages that were constructed along the roadside moved away from the road so that villagers could return to agricultural practices. But several decades later, as Ivory Coast became more integrated into the global economy, these villages that withdrew into the forest began demanding available road infrastructure.

<sup>30</sup> See Ralph Austen's *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* as well as Frederick Cooper's *Decolonization and African Society: the Labor Question in French and British Africa*.

<sup>31</sup> In 1946 France ended both the practice of forced labor and the *indigénat*, a series of laws that gave local authorities discretionary power to inflict punishment on colonial

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subjects. The abolition of these practices, which no longer seemed morally sustainable, paved the way for a modern, colonial work force and civil service.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, James Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity*.

<sup>33</sup> Both James Ferguson and Frederick Cooper have powerfully argued against proliferating modernities for precisely these reasons. For a more detailed account of the intellectual costs of alternative modernities theories within in an African context see Cooper's "Modernity" chapter in *Colonialism in Question* as well as Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity* and *Global Shadows*.

<sup>34</sup> On noise as a function of mediation, see Brian Larkin.

<sup>35</sup> At a conference I recently attended at the University of Ghana, a music professor delivered a very well received paper on potential solutions to the problem of loud music in *tro-tros*, collective mini-vans commonly used for travel. The decibel level and poor quality of the music seemed to be something that many audience members felt made for an extremely unpleasant experience during their daily commutes.

## Chapter 2

### **“No Danger No Delay”: Wole Soyinka and the Perils of Driving**

*Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.*

–Walter Benjamin

It would be difficult to find an intellectual more committed to curbing the bloodshed and breakdowns on African roads than Wole Soyinka. The Nobel laureate is perhaps better known for his activism during the Nigerian civil war – notably the attempt to broker a peace deal that cost him almost two years in prison – or his exile during the Abacha regime. But he has also maintained a long-standing commitment to road safety campaigns, which dates back to the late 1970s when he urged the creation of the Oyo State Road Safety Corps. Soyinka, appalled by the number of lives being lost on Nigeria’s highways, used his status as a literary celebrity to call attention to the poor construction and maintenance of roads, lack of law enforcement, shoddy vehicles, and hazardous driving practices.<sup>1</sup> “We are tired,” he asserted, “of an environment polluted by the stench from slaughter and maiming on the road” (qtd. in Gibbs 473). Soyinka patrolled roads as an Oyo State marshal until the corrupt government disbanded the Corps in 1983, fearing that this independent body might be an impediment to their election-rigging schemes. In 1988, when the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida established the Federal Road Safety Corps, Soyinka was at first invited to sit on the

council and then to become the chairman. According to James Gibbs' account, Soyinka received considerable criticism for participating in a capitalist military regime that he had spent much time condemning, yet he was able, nonetheless, to use the chairmanship of the Federal Road Safety Corps as a national platform for his personal road safety project. Even after Soyinka resigned as chairman in 1992, he still remained involved in the Corps as well as in pan-African road safety campaigns.

During his years with both the Oyo State and the Federal Corps, Soyinka wrote review sketches and journalistic pieces on the dangers of overtaking, speeding, and improperly maintaining vehicles. But Soyinka's preoccupation with death on the road both predates his safety campaign and indicates a much deeper philosophical problem than the ones he articulated as the public face of the Safety Corps. For Soyinka, the road, associated with its patron god Ogun – also the god of metal, iron, creativity, and transition – is a site of both creation and destruction. The language of the road is therefore decisively *not* the language of asphalt that, as Mrázek argues, smoothes over contradictions in its teleological pursuit of modernity. Rather, the road in Soyinka's work serves as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a chronotopic device, a spatio-temporal matrix, which for Soyinka represents both the potential to move forward and the ability to thwart any progressive movement. For Bakhtin, in the chronotope “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history” (84). This historically charged, multi-faceted road is not one that can find its full expression in Soyinka's road safety material, but only in the literary space of his poems and plays. Soyinka's 1965 play *The*

*Road* is, of course, the work that deals most directly and profoundly with the paradoxical symbolism of Nigerian roads. It is a play in which the road itself encompasses the entire system of automobility that is on the brink of disaster.

First staged at the Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1965, *The Road* dramatizes the lives and deaths of those who work as lorry drivers, touts (drivers' assistants)<sup>2</sup>, policemen and various sorts of criminals on the roads and highways of the newly independent Nigeria. Each night these characters come together to drink palm wine at a bar *cum* spare parts store run by a man simply referred to as Professor. The central action revolves around Samson, a tout for the truck "No Danger No Delay," and his driver Kotonu who have recently been involved in two road mishaps. One occurred during the annual Driver's Festival of Ogun when Kotonu ran over Murano, a palm-wine tapper who was masked as a god. Unbeknownst to Samson and Kotonu, who believe that the masked god mysteriously disappeared, Professor has discovered the half-dead tapper, arrested him in his transitional death phase, and employed him as a servant. Samson and Kotonu's second brush with death occurs when they arrive at a bridge moments after it collapses and kills all of the passengers in a truck that had just overtaken them. Traumatized by the events, Kotonu has sworn to give up the road, but Samson is intent on convincing him to continue driving. Samson seeks the help of Professor, but Professor is too obsessed with his own quest for the enigmatic Word – some truth incarnate – to provide Samson with any help. Moreover, the death-obsessed Professor who amasses spare parts for his store at accident sites is happy to declare Kotonu unfit for the road. His intention is to install Kotonu in his AKSIDENT store to replace Sergeant Burma, the manager who recently died in an oil tanker explosion when his brakes failed.

What I argue in this chapter is that automobility becomes legible not in the movement of the drivers but in the detritus of their accidents, in the fallen bodies, spare parts, wallets, or uniforms that Professor collects, as well as in the psychological debris that accumulates in the consciousness of the characters. Thus, this chapter is not about automobility per se, but rather about how it interacts with its foil: suspended animation. If automobility is a system of cars, drivers, roads, and signs that becomes the foundation for a culture of individualized mobility, suspended animation is what occurs when there is a kink in this system, when mobility becomes temporarily paused. As I argued in the previous chapter, the suspended animation of a broken-down, overturned, or confiscated car provides a visual counter to the idea of development and technological progress. However, in Soyinka's play, it becomes both the impediment and the precondition to any type of progress. The road is therefore a type of holding device – an autonomous suspension – that can unleash both death and transformation.

Hence, despite its tragic framework, *The Road* is not a lashing out at the modern and technological system of automobility, but rather a rescue mission to save it from itself. Mobilizing various chronotopes, which I will outline below, Soyinka creates a new language of the African road, one in which the shocks of modern technology create both suspended animation and the conditions for the survival of the auto-mobile subject. However, the shocks of technology that the characters of the play undergo are by no means simply those of a universal or homogeneous modernity. Specifically, they are those dealt by technologies experienced in their failed, inoperative mode on roads that are riddled with danger and violence. Thus, the system of automobility represented in *The Road* ceases to be that of a civilizing progress and exalted autonomous movement, and

instead becomes a system conditioned by its own accident or breakdown. *The Road* therefore reveals the limitations of Western visions of automobility as well as the need to modify existing theories of technology and disaster to better suit an African context. I will begin by discussing the usefulness and shortcomings of several of these theories and then move on to describe the three main chronotopes of the road that are woven throughout the play: chance time, suspended animation, and everyday survival. Ultimately, I argue that it is only by examining these three chronotopes dialogically that we may understand the way in which the modern Nigerian subject experiences and, hopefully, survives the road.

### **The Technological Accident**

What theories of new technologies and modes of production all have in common, from the Fordism of Walt Rostow to the post-Fordism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is that they presume that the technologies about which they are theorizing function properly.<sup>3</sup> Thus, whether one is talking about Henry Ford's mass production of Model Ts, the "flexible specialization" characterized by diversified markets and mobile populations, the post-modern flood of consumer gadgets into public and private realms, or the new types of social organization engendered by the internet, these theories only make sense when the technologies upon which they are centered actually work. One might expect that histories of technology focused on the so-called third world would take a different approach, given the penchant for various types of breakdown and states of disrepair. However, by and large, this has not been the case.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Daniel Headrick's *The Tentacles of Progress* (1988), a study of how the massive transfer of



technology from European powers to their colonies ultimately failed to enable industrialization, discusses many of the unsuccessful projects of technological development, but rarely mentions the failed technologies themselves. Headrick, like Walter Rodney before him, provides an impressive amount of evidence as to *how* Africa was underdeveloped without ever addressing how Africans experienced this underdevelopment through everyday technological objects. Even Manuel Castells, who underscores Africa's technological apartheid in the information age, does not address the fact that it is, as Brian Larkin suggests, often the slowness of an internet connection or the malfunctioning of a computer – and not simply the lack of technology – that reinforces the digital divide. Thus, while there are theories aplenty about the lack of technological development in sub-Saharan Africa, relatively few address the realities of unreliable technology. Theories of development and underdevelopment alike fail to recognize the frustrating and shocking experience of technology, opting instead for studies that measure either the success or lack of technological progress. Thus, I turn to Walter Benjamin, who theorizes the way subjects react to the jolts of modernity, to provide us with one provisional starting point to redress this omission.

For Benjamin the history of civilization coexists with a history of destruction. While mainstream historicism presents us with history as a cumulative process where events are simply added to one another as a mass of data, Benjamin contends that history does not move forward in a seamless straight line of progression. Like Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," Benjamin sees history as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" ("Theses" 257). In order to counter the empty, homogenous force of progress that propels the angel forward, Benjamin argues that we must capture

history as it “flashes up at a moment of danger” (“Theses” 255); we must arrest the flow of thoughts by giving it a shock, by reading history against the grain instead of smoothing it over with false universalisms. Within Benjamin’s oeuvre, the figure most willing to subject his thoughts to this shock is, tellingly, not a historian, but rather the poet Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin champions Baudelaire above all as a poet who can expose the brokenness and ruptures of modern life under capitalism by revealing his own susceptibility to shock. “Of all the experiences which made his life what it was, Baudelaire singled out his having been jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unique experience” (“Motifs” 194). Benjamin argues that battling the crowd – which is compared to a “reservoir of electric energy” (“Motifs” 175) – not only enables Baudelaire’s poetry, but also serves to productively train the human sensorium for the shocks and chaos of urban modernity. Thus, the shocks of modernity are part of a process that arrests the empty, forward movement of time *and* prepares human consciousness for the various jolts and ruptures of modernity. Benjamin is therefore not concerned with measuring technological progress, but, instead, with understanding how it is subjectively experienced as something jarring and disjointed.

However, despite Benjamin’s contention that shock forms one of the central experiences of modernity, his writing on technological apparatuses still presumes that they function smoothly and properly. Whether he is talking about films, the flow of electricity, dodgem cars at the fair, or the chaos of modern traffic, the technologies that condition modern subjects seem to do so when they are working at their fullest, intended capacity. Although Benjamin sees history as being shaped by permanent catastrophe, for him that catastrophe is not that of the technological accident. For Soyinka, by contrast,

technology is always experienced alongside its failures. While Soyinka also explores how modern consciousness carries the shock of technology, in *The Road* this shock is most often the result of a breakdown. Thus, we must supplement a Benjaminian understanding of technological shock with insights provided by Paul Virilio, who discusses how each new technology brings with it its own form of accident, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, who theorizes the way the railroad accident shaped modern consciousness in the nineteenth century.

Where Benjamin, following in the Marxist tradition, locates the experience of shock in the urban commodity culture and the experience of capitalism, Virilio locates it in the military experience. For Virilio, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was not primarily an economic shift, but, above all, a martial one. He argues that the feudal, fortified city did not disappear because feudalism as an economic system became obsolete. Instead, Virilio suggests that it was the advent of transportable weaponry and accelerated space-time that transformed the largely motionless feudal city into one defined by the war of movement and the circulation of the masses. While I am not wholly in accord with Virilio's technological determinism, I do believe that he offers one of the most sober understandings of the way technology has shaped our modern experience. For Virilio, each technological invention produces not only new forms of movement, but also its own localized integral accident:<sup>5</sup> "To invent the sailing ship or steamer is *to invent the shipwreck*. To invent the train is *to invent the rail accident of derailment*. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway" (*Original Accident* 10). Thus, the acceleration of temporality and the creation of new types of motors lead us to quicker, more catastrophic breakdowns.

For Virilio our experience of modernity is influenced as much by technological disasters and malfunctions as by technological advances. Yet, as he argues, modernization and globalization deny the occurrence of the accident: the positivist ideology of progress, in its various guises, sweeps the potential for calamity under the carpet. While Virilio provides examples ranging from Italian Futurism to Bill Gates as ways in which “the hype in favor of technology dismisses its negative aspects” (“From Modernism” 32), we need to look no further than the writings of Henry Ford as an example of this denial. Ford writes, “No reason exists why factory work should be dangerous” (80), and he claims that as long as workers are not too fatigued and are happy with their wages, they will have enough mental concentration to avoid accidents. Furthermore, with proper dress codes, safety mechanisms, and training, Ford maintains that his factory has “practically no serious accidents” (80). “Industry,” he claims, “needs not exact a human toll” (80). Of course, as Virilio suggests, these types of denials come at a very serious cost. Like the Italian Futurists whose embrace of technology played right into the hands of Fascism, the exuberance around technology today leads to “globalitarianism,” Virilio’s neologism for the totalitarian way in which new modes of communication have shrunk the world into a single space-time on the verge of catastrophe. While Virilio overlooks the very different ways people across the globe experience technology, he is not wrong in suggesting that, universally, we have a responsibility to future generations to be forthright about the frequency of industrial and post-industrial accidents.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey* (1977) provides us with an ideal illustration of what Virilio describes as the local, integral accident. Schivelbusch, in fact,

provides us with one of the most detailed elaborations of technological breakdown in the Marxist tradition. For even Horkeimer and Adorno, who chastise Benjamin for his naïve faith in technology (see chapter three), still seem to presume that the technology they denounce functions in the way in which it was intended.<sup>6</sup> Building upon the insights of Ernst Bloch who claims that “the crisis of the accident (of the uncontrolled things) will remain with us longer to the degree that they remain deeper than the crises of economy (of the uncontrolled commodities)” (*Traces* 125), Schivelbusch argues that the technological accident is intimately tied to capitalist industrial organization. Like Virilio, Schivelbusch distinguishes the technological accident from its pre-industrial predecessor, the natural accident. He argues that while pre-industrial catastrophes were natural events like floods or storms, the technological accident made possible by the Industrial Revolution was of its own making. While the natural accident (hardly an accident at all) was the result of some outside force of nature, the modern accident occurs from within.<sup>7</sup> Like Marx’s economic crisis that comes about when elements of its own internal system become unbalanced, technological accidents occur when pieces of machinery no longer work in harmony. “The technical apparatuses,” writes Schivelbusch, “destroyed themselves by means of their own power” (131).

According to Schivelbusch’s account, in the initial years of the railway, travel was marked by an acute awareness of the latent destruction involved in this new form of technology. The common and violent metaphor of the railroad as “a projectile shot through space and time” (129) captured the mixture of excitement and uneasiness that these earlier passengers felt about the journey. However, Schivelbusch argues that the fear of the ever-present disaster remained only until the railroad became a part of normal,

daily life. Activities like reading in the train as well as new forms of panoramic perception eventually created an additional psychic layer, or an industrialized consciousness, which allowed old fears and anxieties to recede. These new activities formed what Freud would call a stimulus shield, which acted as a preventative mechanism to buffer the effects of trauma. Then, it was only the accident – the interruption of normal functioning – that would reawaken the repressed memory of danger and violence. Thus, as the train journey became smoother and more seamless, the accident had a more catastrophic, unexpected effect.

For Schivelbusch, the traveler who sat reading felt more secure because his attention was focused on an independent object rather than on the technological aspects of the journey.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the improved technology of the train, like the upholstery that eliminated vibration and jolts, made it easier to forget the possibility of derailment or collision. The car, of course, underwent parallel changes in the postwar period: softened suspensions, individualized sound systems, and climate control helped to create a feeling in which the driver was sealed off from the rest of the world. All of these developments helped to isolate the driver from the potential dangers of driving. It was no coincidence, then, that works like Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series in the 1960s and Jim Dine's 1959 Car Crash pastels came about at precisely the moment when Americans could feel safer in their automobiles. These works, like other romantic celebrations of the car crash, restored the risk and thrill to driving. They reminded one of the original dangers of driving, dangers that the automobile industry works hard to have us forget.<sup>9</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that the car crash is not romanticized in countries where the threat of the accident has remained more visible and ever-present.

While the type of analysis Schivelbusch instantiates is useful in understanding the way that transportation accidents leave their imprint on the psychic landscape of the subject, there is a dissonance when one is discussing accidents on African roadways. The condition of roads and vehicles – which since the writing of *The Road* have only worsened – make it impossible to isolate oneself from the jolts of travel, and the experience of traveling in one’s own private cocoon is reserved for a very small minority who will still hardly be as isolated as their Western counterparts. The lack of grade-separated highways, functional traffic signals, and speed limit enforcement means that colossal traffic jams, vehicles dangerously weaving in and out of traffic, and pedestrians successfully and unsuccessfully dodging cars are almost always a part of an urban driving experience in Africa. The World Health Organization reports that Africa is the region with the worst death rate from road crashes, despite the fact that it is also the region with the least amount of motorcars per person. This makes car accidents one of the leading causes of death in Africa. Furthermore, wreckages that are slow to be cleared form a part of the landscape in both urban and rural West Africa, while cars that are repaired with recycled or makeshift parts are par for the course. Far from being repressed and compartmentalized, the commotion and violence of travel is very much a dominant part of the experience.

Thus, Soyinka’s choice to have Professor set up his bar in an emptied out *bolekaja* – a passenger lorry with wooden benches – is significant in understanding the way in which automobility in an African context is never the liberalist, atomized automobility of someone privileged enough to repress the inherent violence in road transport. A *bolekaja*, or mammy wagon, is a form of transport that is denigrated by the

characters of the play as the least prestigious type of vehicle to drive.<sup>10</sup> Say Tokyo Kid, a thuggish lumber transporter, refuses to drive a *bolekaja* because he says that he does not want to die with “passenger piss running on ma head” (27). The noble way to go, he boasts, is carrying timber: “Carrying timber ain’t the same as carrying passengers I tell you . . . You carrying rubbish. You carrying lepers. The women tell you to stop because they’re feeling the call of nature. If you don’t stop they pee in your lorry. And whether you stop or not their chirren mess the place all over” (26). Soyinka himself calls the *bolekaja* a form of “transportation torture on four wheels” (*Art* 250), not simply because it is unsafe, highly prone to catching fire, and usually illegally operated, but also because it entails riding “with humans crushed against one another and against market produce, sheep, and other livestock, suffocated by the stench of rotting food and anonymous farts” (*Art* 251). Tellingly, the meaning of the word “*bolekaja*” translates into “come down, let’s fight.”

The setting of the *bolekaja* for the bar/AKSIDENT store therefore evokes the chaos and unpleasanties of everyday road travel. That it is filled with goods gleaned from accident sites – objects as diverse as windscreen wipers, springs, pistons, toys, cigarette holders, and trousers – further attests to the mayhem and disorder of both life and death on the road.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as these objects are purchased and reused by other drivers, it becomes increasingly difficult to repress the possibility of an accident. One character, Salubi, even wears the bloodstained uniform of a former driver. Thus, while innovations like smoother roads, air bags, and sound systems make it possible for drivers in developed countries to forget the danger of the accident, in Africa, the constant



reminders of accidents create a state of continued anxiety, a state that, according to Freud, readies and prepares the conscious for future shock.

### **“Death in the Dawn”**

*The Road* builds upon many of the themes and images of the road adumbrated in Soyinka’s poetry collection *Idanre* (1967). Of particular importance is “Death in the Dawn,” which was penned in 1960, five years before *The Road*. “Death in the Dawn” lays the foundation for a view of the technological accident as a negative indicator of progress, and also begins to point towards the type of consciousness one develops in the wake of these accidents. As a preamble to the poem, Soyinka describes the event that inspired it: “Driving to Lagos one morning a white cockerel flew out of the dusk and smashed itself against my windscreen. A mile further I came across a motor accident and a freshly dead man in the smash” (6). “Death in the Dawn” begins with an injunctive: “Traveller, you must set out/ At dawn” (6), enjoining the reader to become a fellow traveler, to experience the event as a co-witness to the destruction. The poem opens, like Soyinka’s journey, at dawn, a time of hope and promise, a time filled with the potential for productivity and action. It is the time for “Racing joys” and “Processions on grey byways” (6); it is the hour when marketplaces set up and people begin to stir for another day. Dawn, then, is decidedly “Not twilight’s death and prostration” (6). Yet it is precisely at this “holy hour” that the cockerel’s “Perverse impalement” smashes into the poet’s windshield. Unfortunately, the cockerel is not, as the traveler might have hoped, a sacrifice that will appease the hungry god of the road, but instead “a futile rite” that only wets the road’s appetite. A mother prays that her child never walk “When the road waits,

famished” – a line repeated in Soyinka’s “Idanre” poem and in *The Road*.<sup>12</sup> But it is to no avail. The cockerel serves as a warning sign for the far more insidious crash that the poet witnesses further down the road. The collision with the bird therefore symbolizes a challenge, or impediment, to “The wrathful wings of man’s Progression” (7).

The final line of the poem addresses the dead man the poet sees in the crash: “Brother,/ Silenced in the startled hug of/ Your invention – is this mocked grimace/ This closed contortion – I?” (7). Most critical readings of the poem assume that Soyinka is pondering his relationship with the dead driver and wondering whether he too, a fellow traveler of the road, is not inching towards death.<sup>13</sup> The fraternal salutation draws Soyinka – as well as the reader – away from the position as a detached witness and makes us all comrades-in-arms, all victims of the machines we have invented. However, what I would like to suggest is that the “mocked grimace” and “closed contortion” is not necessarily the surprised expression of a man freshly torn from life, but instead, or maybe even as well, the twisted metal of the car itself. In this reading Soyinka would be proposing an identification between the poet and the crashed automobile and shifting his focus towards the way in which the technological apparatus is destroying itself, as both Virilio and Schivelbusch suggest. If I am correct in recognizing the poet’s identification with the mangled automobile, then the poem is not a tale of man against technology, but rather a reflection on an entire system of roads, drivers, and automobiles a system of automobility – that has failed itself. The crisis, in other words, generates from within the system itself. Or, to put it in the poet’s terms: “The road waits, famished.”

Furthermore, if the poet has identified with the shattered shell of the car, this will no doubt have serious implication for the type of industrialized consciousness or

prevention mechanism he develops. Like the body of the automobile, the poet's shield has been badly damaged, and the crisis of the automobile accident has become interiorized. The poem ends with a question mark, which I argue is as much an identity crisis – a fear that man and machine have become one<sup>14</sup> – as it is a question about the effects of technological failure on the psychic process itself. *The Road*, essentially picks up where “Death in the Dawn” leaves off – it opens at dawn, in the aftermath of accidents too numerous to count, and it weaves together the lives of characters who piece themselves together despite the fact that moments of danger and destruction threaten their very existence.

### **Chronotopes of the Road**

For Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road is a decisive one in the history of literature. The road, a particularly precise articulation of the unity of space and time, is the site of adventure, chance encounters, and social heterogeneity. He writes,

On the road the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of *social distances*. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. (243-244)

Thus, the road, as we saw in the previous chapter, is particularly well suited to metaphorical expressions. Soyinka's original title for the play, *The Road of Life*, captures perhaps one of the most common metaphors of the road: the road as an expression of the course of one's entire life. However, Soyinka's decision to shorten his title to a more

ambiguous one underscores the way in which *The Road* contains a constant slippage between the geographical road and the metaphorical quests of the road's users. Thus, the chronotope of the road that Bakhtin describes as the time-space of chance encounters and literary turning points becomes in Soyinka's play a chronotope of the modern African road, a time-space overdetermined by motorcars, accidents, death, spiritual journeys, and survival. I have therefore identified three main chronotopes of the road in the play that work, as Bakhtin suggests, in dialogue with each other: 1. chance time (the chronotope Bakhtin originally associates with the road in Greek adventure novels); 2. suspended animation, or the arrest of time, influenced by the technological accident; and 3. everyday survival, the chronotope that turns passive time into active time and prepares the conscious for situations of danger. Before I go on to describe the way that these chronotopes are woven throughout the play, let me first say a bit more about its plot.

*The Road* opens at dawn, when Samson, the tout for the lorry "No Danger No Delay," awakens in the motor-park that is situated beside Professor's AKSIDENT store and the church where Professor was once a lay reader. While the other drivers, touts, and thugs, sleep peacefully on benches or on the floor amidst worn-out tires, mangled bumpers, and other rubble, Samson watches Murano, the mysterious palm-wine tapper, perform his daily ablutions. After Murano sneaks off to begin collecting palm-wine for Professor, Samson wakes Salubi, a would-be driver who is desperately waiting for Professor to forge him a license. The two begin enacting a parody where Samson, standing high on a table, pretends that he is a millionaire and that Salubi is his personal driver. Just then Professor returns from an accident site carrying a road-sign bearing the word "BEND." Thinking that he has lost his way and that Samson is a real millionaire,

Professor promptly leaves for another accident site, this time taking Kotonu with him, despite Samson's protests. When the two return Samson tries to convince Kotonu to return to driving "No Danger No Delay," and he begs Professor to help him. But Professor tells Samson that Kotonu will "find the Word" instead.

The dramatic action of the play is interspersed with call-and-response style banter, praise-singing, boasting, satirical police chases, flashbacks, and a funeral dirge. The climax occurs at Professor's bar when Samson and Kotonu begin to suspect that Murano is the abducted god that they ran over during the Driver's Festival, an annual Ogun ritual. Professor tells Murano that he should try on the mask of the *egungun* spirit, the very mask he was wearing during the accident, so that Samson and Kotonu may judge for themselves. However, to wear the mask and invoke Ogun out of season is utter sacrilege and the revelers at the bar assume that Professor is plotting something diabolical. As is the case in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, irreverence towards the *egungun* mask invites death. Many of the characters implore Professor to stop Murano's dance, but when he refuses, a frenzied and inebriated Say Tokyo Kid deals Professor a fatal stab. As Professor dies, he warns the audience of the necessity to "Be even like the road itself" (96), a line to which I will return momentarily.

When *The Road* was performed on Nigerian stages during Soyinka's tenure at the Road Safety Corps, local critics and audiences focused largely on its literal meaning, taking its emphasis on accidents as lessons about overtaking, speeding, and the need for proper road signs.<sup>15</sup> Outside of its context within Soyinka's safety campaign, however, many critics have focused on the spiritual quest of the Professor and its allegorical meanings. For instance, Ato Quayson suggests that Professor's quest is shaped by two

contradictory notions of time that can be seen to parallel Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of enchanted time, or the non-linear time of the gods, and disenchanted time, the time of homogeneous scientific historiography. Quayson argues that Professor's quasi-Christian teleological quest for the Word is coupled with his embrace of the Yoruba belief system that adheres to cyclical time. To him, "Professor mirrors in his consciousness the contradictory temporal frameworks that shape postcolonial transition" (150). While both these views of time are no doubt present in the play, Quayson's reading places the chronotopicity as well as the allegorical meanings of the play almost exclusively within the time that Professor occupies, sidelining both the tropes of suspended animation as well as the time needed to survive the ordeals of the modern, African road. Thus, I argue that in order to understand the full breadth of postcolonial time, and more specifically the time of postcolonial automobility, we must look not only at Professor, but also at the chronotopes of those drivers, touts, and thugs attempting to establish themselves as automobile subjects.

Despite both its Christian and Yoruba overtones, Professor's time is determined primarily by what Bakhtin refers to as chance time, a chronotope organized on the logic of random contingency. Bakhtin writes, "'Suddenly' and 'at just that moment' best characterize this time, for this time usually has its origin and comes into its own in just those places where the normal, pragmatic and premeditated course of events is interrupted" (92). Thus, any rupture or unexpected event provides an opening for chance simultaneity, or coincidence. For Bakhtin this is often the chronotope of the road because the road is the site of random, heterogeneous encounters that often set the plot of a literary work in motion.

In “Death in the Dawn” Soyinka uses this chronotope of the road as he juxtaposes the chance crash with the cockerel with his chance happening upon the fresh corpse. Professor occupies this chance time of the road, but he does so in a satirical, hyperbolic way. He believes that all road accidents are random events, happening precisely at the right moment in order to provide him with some clue along his journey to discover the one true Word, which we come to understand is also the essence of death. In addition to acquiring spare parts for his store, he collects scraps of paper, football pools, or road signs (sometimes still standing), seeing them all as miraculous chance “signs” that set him forth on the right path. Thus, when he calls his trips to the crash sites “business trips,” he is referring both to his business of selling the detritus he finds and the business of finding what he calls “redemption.” He says to Kotonu: “Come then, I have a new wonder to show you . . . a madness where a motor-car throws itself against a tree – Gbram! And showers of crystal flying on broken souls” (10-11). To him, the driver and the passenger had a reason for fleeing up the tree: to provide Professor with the “BEND” sign he finds near the site. He therefore denies that the car crash had any “accidental” qualities, for an accident to him is something that is not supposed to happen:

You would think, to see it, that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. Oh there was such an angry buzz but the matter was beyond repair. They died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. I found this growing where their blood had spread and sunk along plough scouring of the wheel. Now tell me you who sit above it all, do you think my sleep was broken over nothing, over a meaningless event? (11-12)

For Professor, time is organized from without, as in the Greek adventure-novel, where outside forces – gods, demons, the Fates – intervene by chance in human life. In such a worldview, “where events have no consequences” (Bakhtin 150), the subject is merely passive; he is the individual to which things happen. This is a world where things are more or less static, and both time and space are somewhat empty and abstract. Accordingly, the roads on which Professor travels could be any roads. It is not essential that they are Nigerian roads, and it does not matter that there are human and mechanical failures that cause the accidents he finds so illuminating, so telling of the death that he seeks to understand. Likewise, time for Professor is primarily empty time that lacks any substance or concreteness. All that matters to him is that the chance road accidents bring him closer to some future time of redemption. This eschatological time could be Messianic or it could be catastrophic, but the only thing that is essential is that it is soon approaching. Thus, Professor largely ignores the present action of the play believing that the tragedies of the drivers and touts, whom he suspects hold answers to the mysteries of death, are there to provide him with both spiritual and actual income. It is only at his moment of death that Professor is able to acknowledge the struggles of others.

The second chronotope of the play, the one that I have labeled “suspended animation,” is also, like chance time, a chronotope of static and passive time. But the primary difference is that here time has been suspended by a traumatic incident that has psychological, spiritual, and material consequences. Accidents are accidents in the sense that Virilio and Schivelbusch describe them: events where technology created by humans has malfunctioned. Furthermore, it matters very much that these accidents are taking place on neglected and dangerous Nigerian roads. It is Kotonu who presents the most



literal example of suspended animation and the most precise embodiment of automobility conditioned by its own breakdown. After running over Murano, Kotonu panics and tells Samson that the engine of his truck is stalled, even though he is not inside the truck and not experiencing any problems with it. Kotonu's misperception of the stalled engine foreshadows the mental state that will eventually prevent him from driving "No Danger No Delay," a truck whose name takes on a most ironic meaning given the state of its driver. Kotonu is experiencing what Freud describes as an inhibition of locomotion:

In some neurotic conditions locomotion is inhibited by a disinclination to walk or a weakness in walking. *In hysteria there will be a paralysis of the motor apparatus*, or this one special function of the apparatus will be abolished (abasia). Especially characteristic are the increased difficulties that appear in locomotion owing to the introduction of certain stipulations whose non-observance results in anxiety (phobia). (*Inhibitions 5*, my emphasis)

Kotonu has, like the poet in "Death in the Dawn," identified with the paralyzed motor(car) apparatus. But for Kotonu this identification has led to neurosis. After the accident with Murano and the apparent stalling of his motor, Kotonu prefers to sleep and do nothing, to simply give up all animation. Thus, Samson becomes furious when Professor drags Kotonu along to accident sites, fearing that further exposure to traumatic scenes will only result in increased anxiety and prolong his driver's state of paralysis. Moreover, the crash sites are themselves marked by suspended animation, as is evident in the language used to describe car crash victims suspended in a tree or Professor's following report of the lorry that overtook Kotonu and Samson on the bridge: "It dragged

alongside and after an eternity it pulled to the front swaying from side to side, pregnant with stillborns. Underline with stillborns” (56). The image of a truck filled with stillborns, with those who are dead at birth, captures, perhaps better than any other, the notion of automobility that is pregnant with its own demise. These stillborn passengers, who failed to make it across the bridge alive, become permanently suspended in their act of animation.

Furthermore, like the stillborns inside the truck, the time of the play too has suspended itself – Professor’s broken watch (that still tells time) marks the hour of the nightly evensong at his bar, and flashbacks to the accidents occur seamlessly integrated into the forward progression of the play, in one case even prefaced by Soyinka’s obfuscating temporal marker: “About an hour later”(55). Likewise, the play is preceded by Soyinka’s notes to the producer and a brief explanation of the preface poem, “Alagemo,” which is meant to help explain the significance behind the *egungun* dance. Soyinka writes: “The dance is the movement of transition; it is used in the play as a *visual suspension of death* – in much the same way as Murano, the mute, is a dramatic embodiment of this suspension. He functions as an arrest of time, or death, since it was in his ‘agemo’ phase that the lorry knocked down” (no page number, my emphasis). Thus, Murano’s state of “arrested time” between life and death becomes a metaphor for Kotonu and the other drivers whose daily encounter with deadly car accidents suspends them between the world of the living and the world of the spirits.

The final chronotope is therefore what I call “everyday survival,” the time-space occupied by the touts, drivers, and thugs who struggle against this stasis, turning the passive time of the previous two chronotopes into active time. Like Benjamin’s

Baudelairian hero, the drivers and touts – Kotonu excluded – react to the paralyzing effects of the shocks they endure by adopting a position of detachment and aloofness. Their sharp tongues, wit, and swagger demonstrate not only the toughening of their psychic stimulus shield, but also their willingness to preemptively dole out shocks. Samson, for instance, tells Salubi that his breath “stinks so much” that he would be an effective bodyguard: “When the police bring their riot squad with tear-gas and all that nonsense, you will open your mouth and breathe on them. That is what is known as counter-blast” (7). The insult is therefore doubly protective.

As Bakhtin suggests, laughter and ribaldry, which are part of what he calls simply the chronotope of “everyday time,” destroy traditional hierarchies, as in the Rabelaisian novel. Thus, Samson crassly parodying a millionaire or Salubi’s mock prayer to “give us our daily bribe” mark insinuations of irreverence that participate in the symbolic destruction of corrupt authority. But what I am suggesting is that in the time-space of everyday survival, laughter also functions as a psychic release of inhibition, as Freud suggests in his work on jokes. It is therefore important to note that both Kotonu and Murano, the characters who most embody suspended animation and arrested time, are the only characters isolated from the mockery and witty banter of the play.

In the chronotope of everyday survival, the road is a site of real, concrete danger, but it does not matter whether events happen by chance, because of godly intervention, or because of human or technological error. For Samson and the other drivers and touts, what is essential is that they are committed to continue driving regardless of the risks. Thus, it is Samson, not Kotonu, who embodies the spirit of “No Danger No Delay,” even giving the truck’s name as his address. In Nigeria slogans like “No Danger No Delay”

are typically painted on cars and trucks as a sign that the drivers have special power and that however lackluster a given vehicle might appear, it has been divinely endowed with the ability both to overcome danger and to produce wealth.<sup>16</sup> Samson, like his truck's slogan implies, believes danger is surmountable, that the near miss at the bridge was "divine providence," and that squandering time, or delaying, is a waste of money. At Professor's bar, he expects his wine glass to be filled promptly, that is, he expects others to act without delay just as he would. He gladly and willingly submits to the speed and chaos of life on the road and, like Baudelaire who plunges into the crowd, he will pay dearly if he must. Salubi, who is anxiously waiting for a forged driving license, and Say Tokyo Kid, who boasts about the type of lumber he carries, articulate a similar attitude.

Furthermore, for these drivers, death is an ineluctable part of daily survival. The list of drivers and friends they have lost to the road seems endless:

Where is Zorro who never returned from the North without a basket of guinea-fowl eggs? Where is Akanni the Lizard? I have not seen any other tout who would stand on the lorry's roof and play the samba at sixty miles an hour. Where is Sigidi Ope? Where is Sapele Joe who took on six policemen at the crossing and knocked them all into the river? . . . And Saidu-Say? Indian Charlie who taught us driving? . . . (21)

But these fallen friends do not deter and traumatize most of the drivers and touts; rather, they become heroes, the subjects of praise-songs. Sergeant Burma, the late manager of Professor's store and a fearless oil tank driver, is particularly admired for his ability, in Kotonu's words, to "protect himself" against the trauma of losing so many friends. It is a skill he learned while fighting in Burma and one that proves useful to the battlefield-like

conditions of driving in Nigeria. Kotonu remarks: “Sergeant Burma was never moved by these accidents. He told me himself how once he was stripping down a crash and found that the driver was an old comrade from the front. He took him to the mortuary but first he stopped to remove all the tyres” (21). But Kotonu who is “tired of feeling too much” (20) knows that he lacks the indifference and bravado of Sergeant Burma and the other drivers. Without the psychic shield the others have built up, he teeters on the brink of madness.

Thus, we can see the chronotope of suspended animation and the chronotope of everyday survival as corresponding to the two forms of anxiety Freud describes. The first is the anxiety that reacts to trauma and leads to the type of paralysis we see in Kotonu. But the second is actually a protective anxiety, a reaction to danger and loss that prepares the conscious for future situations in which it is jeopardized. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the *fort-da* game that Freud observes a young child playing provides the model for this type of preparation. Freud watches the child play a game in which he over and over again throws his toys away and then goes to retrieve them. In Freud’s analysis, the young child, who never cried when his mother left him, was enacting the departure and reappearance of his mother in order to make himself “master of the situation” (16). In other words, when the child’s mother would leave, he was a passive subject, having no say in the matter. However, in the *fort-da* game, he was actively creating the conditions for disappearance and retrieval. The anxiety that he mastered in the game therefore better enabled him to handle the anxiety of his mother’s departure. In a similar manner, characters like Samson, Say Tokyo Kid, and Sergeant Burma are able to become “master of the situation” by turning the tragedy and danger on the road into

something pleasurable. In Yoruba mythology, it is the story of Ogun – not unimportantly the god of the road – that provides the model for psychic preparation needed to face danger.

Soyinka goes the furthest in describing his version of Ogun’s tragedy in the poem “Idanre,” which was written at about the same time as *The Road*.<sup>17</sup> An abbreviated version of the myth is as follows: Ogun, the “Primal mechanic,” builds the town of Ire in order to bring the worlds of man and the divine closer together. The town’s inhabitants ask Ogun to be their king, and after originally declining, he accepts their offer. However, in his absence, the people of the town relocate, escaping drought and disease. When Ogun finds them, he slaughters his subjects in a mad, drunken rage. After sobering up, Ogun is left with the shocking truth of what he has done and with the task of restoring order so that he might prevent further violence. In “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka writes that Ogun “is saved only by channeling the dark torrent into the plastic light of poetry and dance” (*Myth* 160).<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ogun breaks the cycle of violence and retribution by admitting his tragic flaw and bridging the abyss of damage and ruin through his creative will.<sup>19</sup> Soyinka explains that Ogun continues to enjoy palm-wine as a reminder of his error and as a constant challenge to his exercise of will. The chronotope of everyday survival is therefore an Ogunian chronotope, one that entails a willingness to submit oneself to the chaos of modern life, much like Ogun after his rage.

However, Professor’s final speech in the throes of death indicates the degree to which all the three chronotopes of the road are interwoven into *The Road*, and, ultimately, into the experience of the modern, African road replete with its chance

accidents, paralysis, and constant threats of danger that must be surmounted. Here is a brief excerpt from Professor's final speech:

Be even like the road itself. Flatten your bellies with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your hands with the knowledge of death. In the heat of the afternoon when the sheen raises false forests and a watered haven, let the event first unravel before your eyes. Or in the dust when ghost lorries pass you by and your shouts your tears fall on deaf panes and the dust swallows them . . . Breathe like the road. Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveller in his confidence . . . (96).

Professor advises his audience to internalize the chaotic world of the road, but he does so by infusing his own faith in the simultaneity of events with both the tragedy of Kotonu's accident at the bridge ("when ghost lorries pass you by") and the active language ("strike the traveller") that enables one to become "master of the situation." These chronotopes therefore all co-exist and enter into a dialogic relationship with each other, so that, at the end of the day, the chronotope of the road in Soyinka's play is an amalgam of all three types of experience. In this sense, *The Road* can be understood as the spatio-temporal embodiment of the chthonic realm, what Soyinka calls the "fourth stage," which he describes as "the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming" (*Myth*, 142).

There is, of course, also a nihilistic element to Professor's advice, which, given the series of wars and coups that began in Nigeria just a year after the play was first performed, makes Professor's speech seem like a prescient description of a never-ending

cycle of violence. But one must remember that the road is the source of livelihood for a vast number of Nigerians and that it has profound symbolism for an emerging nation trying to stamp itself as modern and independent.<sup>20</sup> The road is therefore the enabler of automobility as much as a source of destruction: it links together families; it enables pan-African trade; it is the lifeblood of a nation in motion. Historically, the drivers and touts that occupy Nigerian motor-parks during this period are men (it was, and still is, rare to see women taxi or truck drivers) who have left their villages with the hope and expectation of earning incomes, often to send back home to their families. All of these aspects of the road are present in Soyinka's play as well, woven through the banter and praise-songs that take place amongst the drivers, touts, policemen, and thugs who pass through Professor's bar. What I am suggesting is that one can take Professor's suggestion to "breathe like the road" as advice to be a conductor of life, even if that requires surrendering to the violence of the road. As Biodun Jeyifo suggests there is an ironic hope in the message that, "if the road, as literal highway for commerce and travel and as metaphor for the journey through life, is destructively treacherous, to 'breathe like the road,' to 'be even like the road itself' is to live without illusions, to become equal to the destructiveness of the road" (229).

In the end, then, if a man of the road wants to survive, it might mean fixing his truck with the carburetor of one he just crashed into, wearing the uniform of a fallen friend, or buying his children toys scavenged from an accident. This is clearly no exuberant celebration of a life of informal labor and no stamp of approval for the horrid conditions of Nigerian roads, but it is an acknowledgment that ruins may be pieced together for the sake of survival. Thus, layered over Soyinka's eschatological vision of



an urban periphery living off its own debris – a condition that has become all the more prevalent in Nigeria – is the dramatic action of people who know how to prepare themselves for the worst and who can, perhaps, emerge for the better.

## **Conclusion**

According to Freud, the body needs a protective shield, a layer of consciousness, to help defend the nervous system against the excessive stimuli of the outer world. For Schivelbusch it is important that Freud's text, which discusses the types of neurosis brought about by exposure to violent outside events, was written in the immediate wake of World War I. Schivelbusch argues that the theory of shell shock or war neurosis is very similar to the theory of railroad shock that was developed in the nineteenth century. In both instances, the victim is traumatized by violent activity without being physically harmed, and in both cases, the more the subject has been prepared, the better he or she parries these shocks. Soyinka, however, is not just concerned with protecting the body from the violence of modernity; he is also concerned with the cycle of colonial and postcolonial violence that keeps subjecting the body to shock, that leads over and over again to a state of suspended animation. The violence in *The Road*, in this sense, presages the chaotic, informal economy of poverty that materializes full force in the wake of civil war, military regimes, post-oil boom corruption, and IMF structural adjustments.

For Soyinka protection also means escaping cycles, escaping the ways in which history keeps repeating itself as tragedy. In his poem "Idanre" he offers a theoretical way out of such cycles by describing Ogun's road as a Möbius strip. He then offers the following definition of this bounded and twisted strip: "A mathe-magical ring, infinite in

self-creation into independent but linked rings and therefore the freest conceivable (to me) symbol of human or divine (e.g. Yoruba, Olympian) relationships. A symbol of optimism also, as it gives the illusion of a 'kink' in the circle and a possible centrifugal escape from the eternal cycle of karmas that has become the evil history of man" (90-91). But by Soyinka's own accounts, the kink in the Möbius strip offers up only an illusion of escape. It gives us no real way out of the crisis.

In his later work, Soyinka turns towards Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* and Amilcar Cabral's "National Liberation and Culture" as texts that offer viable cultural solutions that reverse the stagnation of progress. He admires in both works the insistence on cultural autonomy, on searching for progressive solutions within one's own culture, but he also notes that for these authors part of cultural autonomy is opening oneself to the possibilities technology might afford. I have already suggested how *God's Bits of Wood* dramatizes the railroad workers strike of 1947 and celebrates the technology of the railroad as the basis for a new class consciousness. Similarly, Soyinka observes in Sembène's novel, "a passive technological phenomenon which must be dominated and exploited by the collective will, forged in the pre-eminence of an organic community," and he notes that "the railway is translated into the pulse of that community, even as it is manifested as the life-guaranteeing device for maximizing their productive potential" (*Art* 130). I would argue that the role Soyinka ascribes to the railway in Sembène's novel is the exact role he assigns to the road in his own work. Thus, the road becomes an example of how a technological matrix can be utilized by the creative and collective will of a group of people. Professor's advice to "Be the road" is, after all, advice to make the properties of the road one's own, to be dominant instead of passive. Thus, the antidote to

suspended animation, or rather the solution that emerges from it, is not automobility in its liberalist avatar, but, rather a cultural autonomy, which would reshape or transform automobility along its own lines. Granted, *The Road* does not offer the clear visions of cultural autonomy that *God's Bits* or Cabral's "National Liberation and Culture" provides, but it does vividly set up the tragic landscape in which these types of solutions are necessary.

While this chapter has focused on the prominence of the accident and its effects on the psychic terrain of postcolonial Nigeria, the following chapter looks more broadly at the ways cars become immobilized and stalled, taking as its texts a number of West African films, including those of Ousmane Sembène. By turning to the technology of the cinema, I discuss the ways that a technological apparatus that is defined by movement has the ability to reflect upon a technology that, as I have argued here, is often in a state of suspended animation. Whereas Soyinka uses the "agemo" dance to act as the visual suspension of time, filmmakers have a panoply of cinematic devices at their disposal. The next chapter, therefore, presents a number of films that use the cinematic apparatus to reconfigure the technological and historical link between the moving image and the moving vehicle.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See James Gibbs' "The Writer and the Road: Wole Soyinka and Those Who Cause Death By Dangerous Driving," which chronicles Soyinka's entire career with both the Oyo State Road Corps and the Federal Road Safety Corps. Although Soyinka lent much credibility to the Road Corps, he was, according to Gibbs, a polarizing figure at times.

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<sup>2</sup> Enoch Okpara writes, “Touts can be defined as free-lance workers at railway stations, airports, ferry points, and especially motor-parks, who undertake the self-imposed responsibility of recruiting and organizing passengers who wish to travel by road, and for this work they receive a fee, or more appropriately, a 'commission', that is generally paid by the drivers of the vehicles just before their departure” (327). Motor-parks – which serve as transportation hubs across Africa – are most often built and owned by local governments. However, the government does not participate in running them. Touts therefore essentially run the motor-park, procuring passengers and collecting fees for their drivers.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Larkin has a similar critique of theories of media, which, he claims, assumes that media systems and their infrastructure are “smoothly efficient” rather than “messy, discontinuous, and poor,” as is the case in Nigeria and other poor nations (220).

<sup>4</sup> Although notable exceptions include Brian Larkin’s *Signal and Noise*, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman’s “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis,” and Jojada Veripps and Birgit Meyer’s “Kwaku’s Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-Distance Taxi-Driver.”

<sup>5</sup> Virilio posits that these localized accidents, like car wrecks and train accidents, will eventually give way to more generalized accidents, such as nuclear spills or even global stock market crashes. He technically reserves the word “integral accident” to refer to these globalized accidents, but it is clear from his logic that the local accident is also integral, albeit on a smaller scale. I have therefore taken the liberty of referring to the small-scale accidents as local (or localized) integral accidents. I will leave aside the argument of global, integral accidents for the present discussion.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, while Soyinka is writing on the chaos and violence of the road, Adorno, in an aphorism in *Minima Moralia* writes that roads in America are *too* smooth, that they cause us to forget the violence we are doing to nature. Had Adorno experienced the roads in Nigeria rather than America, one would expect he might come up with a very different type of conclusion on their violence.

<sup>7</sup> Although, given the prevalence of shipwrecks caused not only by storms and fires, but also by faulty hulls, masts, and riggings, it seems that the technological disaster does in fact predate the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, Schivelbusch is right to point to the intensification of technological accidents after the Industrial Revolution. He writes, “The increasingly rapid vehicles of transportation tended to destroy themselves and each other totally, whenever they collided. The higher degree of intensification (pressure, tension, velocity, etc.) of a piece of machinery, the more thorough-going was its destruction in the case of dysfunction” (131). This is the same type of argument that leads Virilio to fear a large-scale globalized accident.

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Groening makes a similar argument about in-flight entertainment in *Connected Isolation: Screens, Mobility, and Globalized Media Culture*.

<sup>9</sup> See Jeffrey Schnapp's "Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)" for a further discussion of the history of the Euro-American romance with the car crash, which he traces back to the Futurist Manifesto of 1909. In *Blood on the Nash Ambassador* Eric Mottram makes similar arguments, but he traces Americans' appetite for a constant state of emergency to the stock market crash of 1929 and its subsequent recovery.

<sup>10</sup> It is also used to describe intellectual pugilism, which Soyinka finds to be as distasteful as riding in a *bolekaja*.

<sup>11</sup> By way of stark contrast, Jeremy Packer points to the ways that in America a number of different discourses overlap to expel "mayhem" from automobility. He posits that "mobility without mayhem" has become the guiding principle on which we organize and regulate how different sectors of the populations (women, African Americans, truckers) can access and utilize automobile-related mobility. Examining drivers education programs and popular media, he demonstrates that in America the accident has been smoothly integrated into a system of automobility that attempts to yield disciplined citizens. In Africa, of course, the accident is integrated into the system of automobility *with* its mayhem.

<sup>12</sup> The line is also the inspiration for the title of Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road*.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Fraser writes, "The poet's reaction to this reminder is torn between a chastened recognition of man's limitations and a haughty dismissal of all that these imply. It is noticeable, for instance, that Soyinka supplies no answer to the rhetorical question with which the poem ends. Most commentators have assumed that the implied answer is 'Yes', and that the poet therefore fully identifies with the dead driver" (236).

<sup>14</sup> Although Soyinka is no Luddite, for him the idea of the machine replacing man is not an appealing one. Soyinka is still, above all, a humanist. He, in fact, criticizes Sembène's novel *God's Bits of Wood* for perpetuating the belief that the hope for a new life lies in the machine. (Although this is the only negative thing he says about a book that he otherwise praises as "a novel of our times.") See *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*.

<sup>15</sup> See Gibbs.

<sup>16</sup> Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi explains that in Nigeria the slogans painted on vehicles are important for creating a sense of confidence in the driver as well as assurance to potential passengers. He writes that slogans like "Unlimited Promotion," "The struggle continues," or "The world is hard" reflect both the precarious nature of motorcar travel in Nigeria as well as the sense of struggle and survival of road users. Likewise, he observes that almost all drivers use juju – fetish objects like feathers or a special comb – hidden

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behind dashboards or under seats. Juju, like the slogans, reminds drivers that they have enough power to survive danger and increase their wealth.

<sup>17</sup> As Robert Fraser notes, many different version of the Ogun story exist. Soyinka takes the Ogun myth and makes it his own, using it to suit his poetic purposes. Similarly, Biodun Jeyifo writes that Soyinka's appropriation of Ogun tends to be idiosyncratic and involves an "over-semiotization" of the god.

<sup>18</sup> However, it is necessary here to draw a distinction between Soyinka's view of Ogun as artist and those articulated in the theories of Negritude. Soyinka writes, "We must not lose sight of the fact that Ogun is the artistic spirit, and not in the sentimental sense in which rhapsodists of negritude would have us conceive the negro as pure artistic intuition. The significant creative truth of Ogun is affirmation of the re-creative intelligence; this is irreconcilable with naïve intuition" (*Myth* 150).

<sup>19</sup> There are, of course, obvious parallels to Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch as well as to his discussion of Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. But Soyinka warns against conflating his views with Nietzsche's. For him, Ogun is a combination of Dionysian, Apollonian, and Promethean virtues, but he also goes beyond them. Furthermore, Soyinka notes while Greek tragedy built a fictive chthonic realm upon which they established the principle of illusion, Yoruba tragedy plunges directly into the chthonic realm, requiring no "copying of actuality." See Soyinka's "The Fourth Stage" in *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Auslander, discussing roads in postcolonial Africa writes, "The romance of the national highways – celebrated in conversation, oral narratives, and song – offers symbolic commentary on the complex urban-rural networks that emerged . . . As the virtually bankrupt state ceases to be the supreme source of wealth and power, popular mythology has increasingly come to portray the tarmac and the world through which it courses as a nearly magical pathway to wealth" (182).

### Chapter 3

#### Moving Pictures, Misfired Cars: The Automobile in African Avant-Garde Cinema

*What goes on in the windscreen is cinema in the strict sense.*

–Paul Virilio

*We didn't invent Romanticism, Naturalism, Modernism, or the car industry, none of which prevented us from adopting them. But adopting them did not imply that we reproduced the social system of their countries of origin.*

–Roberto Schwarz

In an early scene of Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Heremakono (Waiting for Happiness, 2002)*, the protagonist, Abdallah, paces around an empty bush taxi that is stalled in the Mauritanian desert. The roof of the car is loaded with the baggage of its passengers who wait patiently in the shade of a small adobe building. After completing his circle around the car, Abdallah sits down in the driver's seat, turns off the radio, and abruptly silences the hypnotic desert music – Jan Garbarek's "Sull Lull" – that the audience assumes to be extra-diegetic. At the same time, the camera, which for almost a minute cuts back and forth from the waiting passengers to the broken down vehicle, draws our attention to the technological failures of the automobile. After several moments of watching Abdallah despair, the taxi driver approaches the car and looks down at the engine. He guesses that the problem is "*le ratement*," that the car "misfired." He explains: "That happens to a car when spark plugs get wet or gas is cut. Sometimes it goes click and tap tap. *Ça va*." His nonchalant reassurance that it is okay (*ça va*), or literally, "it goes," is a reminder of the regularity of these mishaps and an indicator of his

faith that the car will again be able “to go.” In the next shot, seen from behind the front windshield, the taxi is indeed on the move, steadily driving through the desert past camel pens and lax checkpoints. Only the driver’s malfunctioning visor, which constantly flips down and dumps out his papers, recalls *le ratement* of the previous scene.

This chapter discusses the ways in which Sissako along with two other prominent West African filmmakers – Ousmane Sembène and Jean-Pierre Bekolo – use the cinematic medium to register their disillusionment with the false promises of modernization and development that are embedded in the automobile.<sup>1</sup> What I suggest here is that the car acts as a mechanical double for the cinema much in the same way that the railroad, as Lynne Kirby suggests, doubled the cinematic apparatus of the early silent film era by acting as a “social, perceptual, and ideological paradigm” (2) for filmmakers and spectators. As products of industrial capitalism, both the car and the cinema are mechanisms of mobility, displacement, and consumption and both can instantiate similar forms of modern subjectivity and spatio-temporal consciousness.<sup>2</sup> However, in the postcolony, the car and the cinema also share a certain historical legacy: they have been agents of a contradictory cultural imperialism that has, as I discussed in chapter one, acted on the competing logics of exclusion and inclusion, as well as mobility and stasis. In a region like West Africa where daily experiences with technology often include breakdowns and malfunctions, African avant-garde filmmakers therefore deploy techniques that undermine “cinema’s fascination with its double” (Kirby 2), creating a counter-cinema that exposes the technological and historical impossibilities of a postcolonial automobility.



In this chapter I focus on four films: Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1963) and *Xala* (1974), Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart* (1992), and Sissako's *Heremakono*. *Borom Sarret*, Sembène's first film, focuses on the story of a struggling horse-cart driver who is ejected from the modernized city center where automobiles are the preferred mode of transport. In *Xala* Sembène turns his attention to the privileged automobile-driving comprador class only to uncover its corruption and unchecked materialism. *Quartier Mozart* depicts a Cameroon, steeped in the moment of economic crisis, where cars are more often than not broken and abandoned, and in *Heremakono*, cars that misfire just as easily as they take to the road become material symbols of the myriad contradictions of global underdevelopment. In different ways, each of these filmmakers refuses to portray the automobile as seamlessly integrated into the space and time of modern West African society. Rather, through narrative and editing techniques, they unravel the ideological system that delimits automotive practices, exposing the cracks and holes in narratives that see mass automobile ownership as an achievable and desirable goal. Thus, despite sharing many of the same qualities as commodities of industrial capitalism, it is not the case that the automobile and the cinema are homologous. While they are both products of a reified and alienated mode of production, cinema is also the product of intellectual labor, of critics who possess the ability to reflect upon and examine the destructive and contradictory experiences of the automobile. Film, then, can negate the smoothness, power, and constant mobility of liberal automobility and, instead, enact a visual suspension of these ideals.

## **Automobility Misplaced**

What I wish to argue is that Sembène's films *Borom Sarret* and *Xala*, Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart*, and Sissako's *Heremakono* present the automobile as what the Brazilian literary theorist Roberto Schwarz refers to as a "misplaced idea." For Schwarz, a misplaced idea is a cultural form that emerges from specific developments in one country, but is adopted in another country where the existing social system is incongruous. Schwarz argues that whether the misplaced idea is a literary movement like Naturalism or Romanticism or an automobile industry, it will be transformed and reconfigured in its new environment. To him, the automobile and the narrative text are both ideological structures that are determined by the specific socio-economic and historical conditions of the contexts in which they are created. These structures therefore contain a very particular set of contradictions. Thus, when they are transplanted into an entirely new context, their original inconsistencies become apparent in different and more pronounced ways. The idea is "misplaced" because by incorporating the social contradictions of its new milieu, which are slightly different than those of its original setting, it always seems "off-center."

I refer to the automobile as a misplaced idea and not simply a misplaced technology because I want to emphasize that the automobile is never separated from the larger ideological structures of automobility. As I have discussed in my introduction, the term "automobility" has come to mean more than just the type of mobility enabled by the use of the automobile: it implies the mutually dependent *ideals* of freedom, movement, progress, and autonomy. Furthermore, automobility, rooted in the values of the free market and liberal social institutions, denotes a set of automotive practices through which

modern capitalist relations are organized. Accordingly, automobility – in theory, that is – allows the driver to realize the liberal promises of the post-Enlightenment order.<sup>3</sup> Since one can move, travel, or flee in any direction at any time, the subject can experience space and time as he or she chooses. Thus, ownership of an automobile confers power and personal control to its driver: it conjoins the modern subject’s dual desires for increased mobility and a larger degree of individualization. In this sense, cars are assumed to represent modernity itself as well as progress towards a liberal and Westernized world order.

But, as I have already discussed, automobility, like the liberal social order that shapes it, is full of inconsistencies, contradictions, and inequalities. While it enables the autonomous mobility of some, it also disables those who do not have access to cars. While it grants the power to move, it also bestows the power to dominate and destroy. In West Africa, one of the world’s least automobilized regions and one of the few global zones without its own automobile industry, the car as a sign of development becomes particularly problematic. Thus, many of the ambiguities of automobility in the West become more explicit in a region where cars are often in a state of suspended animation and where ownership is inaccessible to a large majority of the population. As Schwarz suggests, when the car is transplanted or “misplaced,” the ideological structures that support it begin to crack and fissure in distinctive ways. Through a series of close readings of the four above-mentioned films, I discuss how Sembène, Bekolo, and Sissako, using a combination of narrative and formal techniques, reveal the ways automobility “on the periphery of capitalism” – to again borrow a term from Schwarz – begins to break down and disintegrate, just like so many of the decaying automobiles on

West African roads. Accordingly, the films I discuss in this chapter help to reveal the ideological tensions of postcolonial automobility by re-imagining the colonial and technological relationship between cars and films. Thus, before turning to my discussion of the films themselves, it is necessary to elaborate first on the way in which the two technologies are linked together historically in the European colonial project, and second to underscore the way in which, despite sharing many of the same qualities, film can in fact mediate and de-familiarize its relationship to the automobile.

### **A Shared History**

In West Africa both the cinema and the motorcar arrive nearly simultaneously at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1900, the same year that the governor of French West Africa made the region's first official automobile drive in present-day Mali, a foreign merchant projected the Lumière film *L'arroseur arrosé* (*The Waterer Watered*, 1895) in a Dakar marketplace.<sup>4</sup> However, while *The New York Herald Tribune* as well as newspapers in France, Belgium, Germany, Russia, and South America enthusiastically reported on the first "autocar through French West Africa,"<sup>5</sup> little attention was given to the traveling merchants who began to tour films throughout West Africa just five years after the Lumière brothers debuted their *cinématographe* in France. Clearly, the economic, political, and military advantages of being able to move more quickly through colonized territories were understood to be more immediately useful for maintaining order in the colonies than the projection of comedic moving images. And yet, under colonial rule, both the automobile and the cinema served to solidify a European hegemony – in the Gramscian sense of hegemony as both consent and coercion – by

making Africa and African resources (goods as well as bodies) visible and available to the West and, at the same time, making the West and its technological superiority visible (although not necessarily available) to Africans. The colonial officials driving their automobiles down streets of admiring onlookers, mobile cinema units, and urban theatres showing Western films all participated in a cultural imperialism that combined a physical conquest with an ideological one. In other words, movement, either on roads or on the screen, was used to both dominate and charm – to exclude and include – an audience that had unequal access to the moving technologies.

As discussed in chapter one, several decades would pass before the automobile could provide any true practical advantages for the European colonizers in West Africa. Félix Dubois, the journalist and explorer who was responsible for the governor's drive and for bringing the first automobiles to West Africa, originally envisioned an automobile service that would be able to extend the railway service in the French Sudan. His vehicles, though, were not strong enough to withstand the heat, dust, and poor road infrastructure of the region, and without a ready supply of spare parts, not to mention gasoline, he could not sustain the fleet of cars he had imported from France. Likewise, during World War I, when cars started to appear more regularly in West Africa, albeit in very small numbers, the lack of drivable roads meant that they had a very limited function. Unlike telegraph lines and railways whose construction gave the colonizers an immediate advantage in terms of trade and communication, cars – owned primarily by government officials – were at first little more than signs of power and prestige.<sup>6</sup> As more roads were built, mainly through forced labor, the automobile gradually became more useful as a means of transporting people and goods. But in many ways, as Erdmute

Alber argues, the early motorcars were perhaps most important in maintaining the social boundaries between colonizers and the colonized by drawing a distinct line between those who were privy to modern forms of movement and those who were forced to rely on “primitive” or “indigenous” modes of transport. While local West African businessmen were quick to enter the transport business – importing vehicles, operating commercial truck companies, and stocking spare parts – the use of private, luxury automobiles was reserved mainly for colonial officials and select local elites.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar manner, the moving picture brought European technology to Africans who would at first participate in it under very unequal terms. In the French colonies, where the 1934 Laval Decree had been implemented, anyone wishing to make a film in Africa was required to submit a script as well as a list of people involved in the production process to the French authorities (Diawara 22). According to Manthia Diawara, this policy insured that the cinema would not have any sort of revolutionary role in the colonies, and it also discouraged any would-be African filmmakers from entering the industry. In the British colonies, the Colonial Film Unit established in 1939 exhibited documentaries about British ways of life and promoted Western practices of farming, hygiene, and industry. But Africans did not participate in film production until after World War II when the Film Unit decided that their messages would be better received if Africans were participating in the making of the documentaries. However, it was generally agreed that the illiterate African audiences would be unable to understand most modern cinematic conventions. Thus, the Colonial Film Unit avoided films that used montages or wipes – for fear that the natives would think that the machinery was broken – as well as panning shots, unconventional angles, or any device that would

interrupt the visual continuity from one scene to the next (Pearson 25). They opted for longer scenes – “the native mind needs longer time to absorb the picture content” (Pearson 25) – as well as transitions in which a moving person or objects in one scene leads the audience to the next scene. Thus, the degree to which Africans could participate in filmmaking and even film viewing was limited and partial, just like their involvement in bourgeois automobility.

Moreover, in colonial Africa, the motorcar and the cinema became mutually dependent technologies. The films of the Colonial Film Unit toured throughout the colonies via mobile cinema units that profited from the postwar surge in drivable roads and lighter vehicles. The journal *Colonial Cinema*, published by the Unit, set out specific instructions on how this most important imperial duty should be executed. The operator of the mobile cinema unit – an African – was also to be the driver of the van. He must not only take care of the technological equipment, but should demonstrate a level of showmanship. He was instructed to direct the screen and the loudspeakers towards the center of town, preferably at the bottom of a slope, so that audience members could easily approach the show even if it had already begun. Although initial tours were to be supervised by a colonial officer, once trained, the African staff was able to travel on its own.<sup>8</sup> The vans were thus charged with the crucial task of “carrying enlightenment and education in the form of amusement to the less privileged people in rural areas” of Africa (“Vans” 92).

But the Colonial Film Unit was not the only entity organizing mobile cinemas and capitalizing on the ability of the motorcar to help disseminate the moving image. During the interwar years, missionaries toured the African countryside not just with bibles but

also with film and slide projectors (Ukadike 30). Furthermore, merchants, who had been traveling with copies of popular commercial films since the turn of the century, found their task made easier with the advent of the automobile. After World War I, George Weekes, a British businessman, brought a cinematograph outfit and truck to Nigeria and started to travel around to villages projecting films outdoors or in courthouses. After the shows he found that he could also charge the audience for a ride home, and he became one of the first Europeans to establish regularly scheduled transport services throughout South-east Nigeria (Drummond-Thompson 224). Thus, in this case it was the film that helped to propagate the motorcar.<sup>9</sup>

As N. Frank Ukadike writes, “Cinema came to Africa as a potent organ of colonialism” (31), and because of its power of influence as a visual medium, it proved to be an extremely adept way to indoctrinate Africans into the ideals and aesthetics of foreign cultures. Ukadike further notes that the very earliest turn-of-the-century films by the Lumière brothers and George Méliès, which were widely exhibited in Africa, already began to stigmatize and mock Africans. The image of the exotic and uncivilized African continued in the later fictional and ethnographic representations of black Africa. Thus, missionaries, merchants, and the colonial government each combined the two new moving technologies to spread Western values as well as racist images.

Moreover, the historical conjunction between motor transport and cinema extends beyond the projection of films: both technologies were also dependent upon each other for the production of colonial films. The Citroën films I discussed in chapter one are only the most famous examples of documentaries in which the motorcar and the movie camera were conjoined in colonial expeditions. Here, the roaming half-tracks, equipped



with cameras, could capture a culture that had been unmoved by technological progress and transport that “fixed” culture back to the modern metropole. In fact, without the movie camera, the Citroën expeditions would not have been able to communicate their triumph in the grandiose way that they did, and, likewise, without the half-tracks to take them through the African hinterland, the cameras would have been unable to capture the movement and speed of this conquest. Additionally, Patrice Nganang notes that in many French colonial documentaries, cameras were mounted at the front of a ship, a car, or a train, and he suggests that such positioning made the filming of Africa a part of its physical conquest. As in the case of the Citroën treks, cameras were almost always present in expeditions into unknown territories, and they allowed audiences in France to travel to distant lands and feel as if they were participating in the colonizing process. According to Nganang several of these documentary films were titled *La France en Marche* (*France on the March*), and they showed Frenchmen using various modes of Western transport, deploying their heroic machinery in order to spread the benefits of civilization throughout Africa. Colonial cinema, therefore, relied on the motorcar to bring the camera to distant places, while the motorcar relied on the cinema to make its conquests known to the European public. Thus, in terms of production, exhibition, and circulation, the colonial car and the colonial film were mutually dependent on each other. However, the postcolonial counter-cinema I discuss here unhinges this dependency by divesting the car and the cinema of both their ability to spread “enlightenment and education” and to embody the ideals of progress and civilization. But this counter-cinema also, at the same time, seeks to sever the perceptual logic that links the moving vehicle to the moving image.

## **A Shared Technology**

In *War and Cinema* (1984), Paul Virilio claims that the motor of both the film projector and the motorcar have taken over from the “anima,” or “true” inner self, by supplying the human mind with artificial dream images that trigger the violent fragmentation of visual structures. In other words, he argues that the twin experiences of watching a film and riding in a motorcar destructively alter human perception by causing the dissipation and vitiation of ordinary ways of seeing. One of the earliest and most vivid literary illustrations of this type of perceptual pairing occurs in Ilya Ehrenburg’s *The Life of the Automobile*, which, as I suggested in my introduction, is also one of the earliest and most sustained attacks on the liberal rhetoric of automobility. It is not unimportant, then, that Ehrenburg begins his book by linking the automobile and its auto-destruction with the cinematic experience. Ehrenburg’s opening anecdote revolves around the story of Charles Bernard, a retired cigarette paper dealer, who feeds the sparrows at the Botanical Garden and likes to read the *Almanac of Nature Lovers*. Charles’ peaceful life is changed forever the day he sees a car racing across the screen at his neighborhood cinema. The movement and mechanization of the cinematic automobile become irreversibly etched in his mind. Charles becomes seduced by the advertisement posters covering the automobile-filled streets of Paris and by the blazing letters on the Eiffel tower that, in 1925, spelled out the name “Citroën.” The nature-lover purchases a ten horsepower car and begins to take lessons. At first he is a mindful and careful driver, but when he sets out on the open road, the scenery rushes by as if he were in a film. Caught in the speed of the moment, Charles loses control of the car and drives off a slope, destroying the automobile and killing himself. Thus, in Ehrenburg’s fatalistic

account, “the birth of the automobile” – the ironic title of his opening chapter – is indebted to the verisimilitude of the moving image, to what Kristin Ross refers to as their “shared qualities” of “movement, image, mechanization, standardization” (38). The starry-eyed Charles Bernard becomes a casualty of modern technology because, in his excitement to join the Parisian automotive culture, he loses the ability to distinguish the spatio-temporal illusion of speed on the silver screen from what he sees through his windscreen. With his instinct towards self-preservation destroyed by his new technological perception, he has succumbed to the literal death drive.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer express similar misgivings about the violent and deadly force of these moving technologies when they write that: “Automobiles, bombs, and films hold the totality together until their leveling element demonstrates its power against the very system of injustice it served. For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society” (95). Throughout their critique of the Enlightenment notion of progress, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Hollywood cinema and what Adorno fittingly calls “the auto religion” participate in a bourgeois culture industry that subjugates individuality, replacing it with pseudo-individuality, or what we might think of as false auto-mobility. Moreover, this thoroughly administered culture industry saturates subjects in images of violence and produces a culture in which numbness and indifference to brutality become the norm. For its part, the film industry exerts its violence ideologically, producing sado-masochistic subjects who soak in the images of violence they are conditioned to seeing. But the automobile – like the bomb – exercises a violence that is both ideological and

physically immediate. In a passage in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno suggests that the automobile is connected to the loss of civility and deliberation in human movement. He asks: “And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children, and cyclists?” (40). Thus, automobiles, along with bombs and films, threaten human existence by creating subjects whose behaviors have been conditioned by their daily experience with technological violence. In Ehrenburg’s chronicle of the automobile, this violence begins with the cinema but extends well beyond it into the Fordist factories of France, the rubber plantations of Indonesia, and the roads throughout the world.

What Virilio, Ehrenburg, Adorno and Horkheimer all capture is the way in which the cinematic apparatus and the automobile both lead to new forms of perception that destroy older, pre-industrial modes of consciousness and replace them with the shocks and ruptures of modern society. However, while the above passages provide rich images of the multiple ways in which the technologies of the moving picture and the moving vehicle overlap, they do not allow for a theory in which the cinema can cast a critical (kino) eye towards the automobile. Here, the writings of Walter Benjamin again provide a useful supplement. Benjamin acknowledges that the cinema provides new forms of spatio-temporal consciousness, but by applying a Brechtian aesthetic theory to the camera, Benjamin demonstrates the ways in which the camera can reveal what has been reified or concealed by capitalist ideology. For Benjamin, then, film represents the liberatory rather than destructive aspects of modernity:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms,  
our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up

hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: *it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals them in entirely unknown ones . . .*

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked-eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. (“The Work of Art” 236, my emphasis)

A number of things are at work in this dense passage. To begin with, Benjamin allows the camera to act as a type of moving vehicle, a virtual mobility, which allows the stationary spectator “to go traveling.” Thus, rather than underscoring the violent connection between the camera and the mode of transport, Benjamin emphasizes the more mundane act of the still body traveling through space. As Gilles Deleuze reminds us the movie camera – at least in what he refers to as “classical cinema” – acts as “a *general equivalent*” to the forms of transportation that it shows and of which it makes use: like a moving vehicle, the cinematic shot communicates or “translates” space by reproducing the continuity of space and time through movement.

More importantly, though, Benjamin describes how the cinema’s various formal techniques – close-up, slow motion, enlargement – can reveal both new forms of

subjectivity and *unfamiliar* qualities of movement. Thus, film has the ability to “make strange” modes of being and moving that would otherwise remain unremarkable. Film for Benjamin does not damage and weaken human perception; on the contrary, it can foster a critical awareness of technology by revealing its own complicity in creating illusion. Like Brecht’s epic theater that alerted the audience to the fact that both social life and artistic productions are human constructions, Benjamin hopes that film can jolt the spectator into discovering the laws that govern society.<sup>10</sup> Benjamin compares Brecht’s epic theatre to examining film on an editing table, suggesting that just as Brechtian theatre discloses its own conditions of production, so too can editing reveal a film as an assemblage of moving images that are pieced together by the artist.

Accordingly, Sembène, Bekolo, and Sissako, rather than dismissing the cinema as another form of mystification, use various discontinuous and disruptive devices – the interruption of the soundtrack in *Heremakono* is one example – in order to reflect on the film’s status as fiction. Through a labor of reflexivity, they make the cinematic apparatus “bend back”<sup>11</sup> on itself in order to de-familiarize the movements of the automobile and to undermine the shared technological functions between the camera and modes of transport. But unlike Benjamin, who, as Adorno charges, often exhibits a naïve faith in technology, these filmmakers have not diminished the violence, standardization, and modes of domination embedded in the technologies they film. In fact, as was the case in Soyinka’s play, they often foreground the way in which automobility is conditioned by breakdown and destruction. However, as I have already suggested, my focus in this chapter is slightly different. While the violence of automobility is an important aspect of this postcolonial avant-garde cinema, what I wish to demonstrate here is how the car is

*misplaced* in the postcolonial context – how it results in very specific incongruities and forms of dissonance. My argument is that African art cinema reconfigures the technological and colonial link between the moving image and the moving vehicle by denying their ability to represent a continuous forward march towards progress.

For Sembène, Bekolo, and Sissako, the automobile and its misplaced ideology instead characterize the highly fraught dilemma in which “progress is a disaster and backwardness a shame” (Schwarz 29). To move forward and fully embrace automobility is, on many levels, disastrous as well as impossible under the current political and economic conditions. However, to move to a time before the automobile’s arrival is equally impossible, and a shameful prospect to those wishing to participate in global culture on more equal terms. The postcolonial cinematic apparatus therefore strives to capture the inherently paradoxical lived time of postcoloniality. In the films I discuss below, cars, and in particular nonfunctional cars, are deployed metonymically: they both embody and represent the stasis of postcolonial society, the inability of the postcolonial state to realize its promises, and the slowness that typifies life in areas of the world where high-speed technologies rarely function to their potential. Of course, both automobility and the cinema are ideological products of the same socio-economic and historical conditions, and the films I discuss are therefore just as much a part of the fabric of society as the cars they depict. However, as I have been arguing, it would be a mistake to understand all elements as a mere expression of the economic system. Thus, I am arguing that the films I read in this chapter express the socio-economic conditions of West African postcoloniality, but that they also enable us to mediate and “transcode” automobility. In other words, the films I discuss do not simply reflect or perceive the

realities they represent; they also provide us with a way of analyzing and bringing to the surface the contradictions and fissures of postcolonial automobility.

### **The Car-less Wagoner: Sembène's *Borom Sarret***

Ousmane Sembène's 1963 *Borom Sarret* is considered by many critics to be the first professional film made by a black African in Africa. It was also the first film to receive financial support from the French Ministry of Cooperation, which, in an effort to form binding economic ties with its ex-colonies, began to actively fund West African films in the 1960s. Further, Sembène's short, just nineteen minutes long and post-synched in French, was the first African film to be shown internationally, playing at the 1963 Tours International Festival in France where it won the filmmaker an award. I begin my discussion of the automobile in West African cinema with *Borom Sarret* because, among its firsts, it is also the first film to call attention to the disparities of transport in postcolonial West Africa. Although the film does not deal directly with automobiles, it lays the foundation for a critique of automobility as a system and a set of practices that organize spatial movements and alienate certain sectors of the population.

The protagonist of the film is a *borom sarret*, a horse-cart driver or wagoner, who struggles to earn a daily living in a newly independent Senegal. Sembène begins his film with the morning call to prayer, which is heard several seconds before the film's first image: the Medina mosque in a working-class neighborhood of Dakar. In the next shot, we see the wagoner kneeling on his prayer mat outside his home while his wife pounds grain with a mortar and pestle. As the opening credits roll, Sembène layers the continuing sound of the prayer call over shots of a local thoroughfare. For half a minute,



cars of various makes along with minibuses, motorbikes, and a handful of bicycles and pedestrians steadily traverse the screen.

In these images of Dakar, shot on location, the absence of horse-carts is conspicuous and especially paradoxical given the title of the film. Thus, when we see the wagoner hitch his horse to his cart in the hopes of earning enough money to feed his hungry family, it is clear that in Dakar the horse-cart has already been surpassed by motorized transport and that the type of passengers the wagoner attracts will be required to pay very little for the experience. Beyond the sandy, pedestrian-filled streets of the Medina, the automobiles, taxis, and buses dominate the road, and those with means gladly choose these modern motorcars over the slow and jerky discomfort of the horse-cart, which Sembène emphasizes by using the horse-cart as a dolly for the camera.

The positioning of the camera on the horse-cart recalls, of course, the placement of the camera on the front of ships, trains, and Citroën half-tracks in the colonial cinema. However, here the camera does not film the conquering of exotic, unknown territory, nor does it signify the unobstructed triumph of man over nature. Rather, it films a crowded market, an everyday scene in Dakar, and forces the viewer to experience the market through the bouncy shots and awkward framing that come from the movement of the horse-cart, a lower class and non-modern form of transport. Sembène is therefore not only filming Dakar's urban poor, he is also rewriting the historical relationship between cinema and modern transport by predicating his film on the conjoining of cinema with the horse-cart.

Additionally, the linking of the camera with the horse-cart suggests a connection between the plight of the wagoner and that of the third-world filmmaker. Although

Sembène did receive limited funding from the French, the infrastructure needed to make a celluloid film in postcolonial Africa was – and still is – virtually non-existent. In order to make *Borom Sarret*, which was filmed by three people using non-professional actors, Sembène had to start his own production company, Domireew, meaning “the country’s child,” and build partial production facilities in Dakar. (All the post-production work was completed in Paris.) In a play on the words *bricolage* and *mégot*, or cigarette butt, Sembène calls this form of shoestring filmmaking, *mégotage* because it was akin to piecing together a cigarette using random butts (Harrow 238). Like the wagoner whose cart consists of a wooden platform set on a car axle and two tires, Sembène makes use of whatever equipment is available, and his use of the cart as a dolly highlights rather than disguises that filmmaking in postcolonial Africa is always *mégotage*.

After the wagoner foolishly hands over his morning wages to a *griot*, or traditional singer, he is approached by an upwardly mobile Senegalese businessman who needs to be transported to his new neighborhood. The businessman is headed for the Plateau – the former colonial administrative center where Europeans and Senegalese elites reside. Although horse-carts are forbidden in the Plateau, the businessman persuades the penniless wagoner with good pay and promises of connections. As the background music switches from traditional kora music to Mozart, the camera offers a slow panoramic view of the European-style high-rises and government buildings towering over the trees of the Plateau. In this clean and modern neighborhood where shiny cars drive down tree-lined streets, the noise, smell, and sight of a horse-cart is an unwanted reminder of the poorer, grittier, and less modernized city below.

As the misplaced wagon encroaches on the modern city, it is clear that the *borom sarret* is circulating in a system that is not designed for him. Not surprisingly, he is unable to pass through the streets of the Plateau unnoticed, and as his passenger hurries into an automobile without paying his fare, the wagoner is stopped by a police officer. He must then hock the cart in order to pay his fine. As he is leaving the Plateau with his horse (sans cart), he stops at a traffic light meant for automobiles, for those who have the means and the right to go anywhere they choose. Ejected from the center of his city, the wagoner, nonetheless, remains subject to its rules and regulations. When he looks up at a tall apartment building that contrasts so much to his own home, the viewer can catch a glimpse of an “Air France” sign outside one of the retail shops below, but boarding an airplane is so outside his realm of possibility that the camera only lingers for a brief moment.

At the end of the film, when the wagoner returns to his neighborhood, we notice that here many more pedestrians and bicyclists negotiate the roads and share the urban space with diverse modes of transport. The tall buildings and sterility of the Plateau are gone. The houses, restaurants, and shops are low, wooden structures that symbolize the continual, horizontal struggle to make ends meet. As the protagonist laments: “Yesterday was the same and the day before. We all work for nothing.” While some upwardly mobile Senegalese don business suits and, quite literally, move up to the Plateau, the wagoner’s daily life remains repetitively circular.

Despite the fact that he is relieved to be back amongst people he can trust, in a neighborhood where there are no menacing police officers, the wagoner must break the news about his day to his hungry wife. When she finds out, she calmly hands him their

child and heads for the door, promising him that they will eat that night. Before she leaves she must turn away two *talibey*, or street children who beg for food and collect money for the religious leader who shelters them. Thus, as the wife leaves, presumably to sell her body, the only resource she has, we see that it is not simply the wagoner's child who is hungry. The same system that suffocates Dakar's working poor also prevents them from fulfilling their religious obligation to give alms and from looking after the country's children, for whom Sembène named his production company. The film, which begins with images of modern traffic, ends by insinuating that the wagoner's wife will have to participate in one of the oldest forms of traffic.

### **Postcolonial Impotence: Sembène's *Xala***

In the European tradition, Jean-Luc Godard provides one of the best examples of a Brechtian filmmaker who uses cinema to undermine the fluidity and triumph of the automobile. In *Au bout de souffle* (1959), a car chase film becomes one in which the hero circulates the city of Paris and experiences time as multiple and fragmented. Rather than giving into the continuity and romantic lure of the open road, Godard captures the hero's circular motion by famously spinning his cameraman in a wheelchair. In *Pierrot le fou* (1965), where Godard parodies bourgeois car talk and the two heroes burn one stolen car and drive another one into the sea, Godard uses various colored filters to distance the viewer from the driving experience. In *Weekend* (1967) Godard registers his frustration with bourgeois automobile culture in an infamous eight-minute tracking shot of a traffic jam, and, in his most violent critique of automobility, we see a French countryside that is littered with bloody corpses and wrecked cars. Godard, like many other postwar

European filmmakers, forges a cinema that de-glamorizes the car and debunks Hollywood's myth of American automobility. But he does so in a newly Fordist society where the car, along with Hollywood films and other American consumer products, are quickly encroaching on everyday life. In postcolonial West Africa, however, economic life is quite different: for the majority of its inhabitants, it is characterized by an inability to be fully immersed in the consumer products that characterize everyday life in the West. Thus, while the African avant-garde films I discuss clearly share the European avant-gardes' interest in an anti-illusionist art and the disruption of spatio-temporal coherence – and are certainly influenced by Godardian cinema – they also develop a language that expresses the particular conditions of everyday life in the postcolony. For them, the car is *misplaced* – it results in specific incongruities and forms of dissonance – and must therefore be *displaced*.

While *Borom Sarret* depicts the impossible lives of those who are not automobile, those without cars as well as those without economic self-determination, Sembène's *Xala*, made over a decade later, turns its attention to the likes of the businessman who duped the wagoner. In *Xala* Sembène's aim is to expose the corruption and greed of the Mercedes-driving Senegalese comprador class. A brief summary of the film's plot is as follows: The protagonist of the film, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, is a member of the prestigious Businessmen's Group, which in the opening of the film is celebrating the appointment of one of its members as President of the Chamber of Commerce. As the businessmen are assembled, El Hadji invites them to the wedding celebration of his polygamous marriage to N'Gone, his third wife. However, when El Hadji attempts to consummate his marriage that night he discovers that he has been

struck with the *xala*, the curse of impotence. He initially blames his first two wives whom he suspects of jealousy. When he cannot confirm their guilt his search for a cure and for the source of his *xala* begin to consume him. Eventually, El Hadji's physical impotence becomes an economic impotence – he loses his business customers and his overspending catches up to him. When it is exposed that El Hadji has paid for his wedding by selling off the National Food Supplier's rice, which had been intended to help those affected by a recent drought, El Hadji's Mercedes is repossessed and he is expelled from the Businessmen's Group. Once El Hadji loses his Mercedes, those responsible for placing the curse come forward – they are a group of beggars who have situated themselves outside of El Hadji's office. Annoyed by their music, El Hadji had called them “human rubbish” and used his friendship with the President of the Chamber of Commerce to have them expelled from Dakar. But, as they reveal, they are also El Hadji's kinsmen and years earlier they had been duped by El Hadji who appropriated their inheritance and sold the rights of their village land with falsified documents. The *xala* they place on El Hadji is to exact revenge for his original misdeed, or what Marx would call his act of “primitive accumulation.” They offer to remove the curse only if El Hadji agrees to undress, place N'Gone's wedding tiara on his head, and allow them to spit on him. Feeling that he has no other choice, El Hadji consents.

To date, there has been much criticism and debate surrounding this now-canonical film, and it has inspired many rigorous analyses. What follows is an attempt to read *Xala* as a film that is just as much about automobiles as it is about postcolonial elites, polygamy, phallic objects, or fetishes. I examine the status of cars as intermediaries, like the middlemen Sembène satirizes, whose unreliability becomes central to the narrative

structure and cinematic language of the film. Reversing the notion that cars are the bearers of progress and development, Sembène instead uses the automobile to draw attention to the façade of autonomy and progress that has been erected, so to speak, by the postcolonial elite. Sembène therefore extricates the automobile from its Fordist and post-Fordist narratives and places it instead in a state of suspended animation, a state in which it symbolizes postcolonial stasis instead of postcolonial modernity.

As the film opens, El Hadji's Businessmen's Group ceremoniously ousts the French members of the Chamber of Commerce to a dancing and cheering crowd. However, as the businessmen take their seats around the table that the colonizers had occupied, the previously ejected Frenchmen re-enter through the back door and hand the Senegalese men attachés filled with francs. Visually, Sembène makes no secret of the fact that the French financially back the Senegalese economy. Yet, at the same time, Sembène has an off-screen narrator, in the style of a colonial newsreel, state: "We chose socialism. The only true socialism. African socialism. Socialism on man's level. Our independence is complete." Since the action on the screen suggests that Senegal's independence is anything but complete, the film opens by creating disbelief in the cinematic apparatus (also, incidentally, backed financially by the French). Throughout the film, the trope of the *xala*, of impotence and immobility in different guises, is repeated in the cinematic language to remind the audience that despite outward appearances these elites do not embody Senegalese independence – their actions have, in fact, stalled and thwarted the very progress they pretend to represent. For instance, as the businessmen exit the Chamber of Commerce, a red carpet is imperially unfurled down the stairs, but it falls just short of opening up all the way. Here, Sembène is making a pun on

the French word *défilement*, which means both unwinding (as in the unwinding of the carpet) and the projection of a film's progressive static frames. Furthermore, *défilement* is also related to the word *défilé*, or parade, and, fittingly, in the following shot sequence the businessmen begin their motorcar parade to El Hadji's wedding. After each of the businessmen enters his own chauffeur-driven automobile, there is another quick gag as one of the Mercedes starts and then jerks to a stop so as not to hit the President's black Ford. In both of these gags, the usual *défilement* of the moving image is paused. Increasingly throughout the film, these types of impediments will reveal that the businessmen are not the agents of autonomy and postcolonial progress that they appear to be. Driven around by chauffeurs and funded by the French, they are actually anything but the modern, self-sufficient individuals fulfilling the promises of automobility.

In the exaggerated two-minute, police-escorted *défilé* of the businessmen's luxury automobiles, Sembène satirizes the Senegalese upper class by calling attention to its excesses. Then, if this *défilé* were not enough, a few scenes later, the film contains another equally long and perhaps noisier procession of the bridal motorcade that makes its way around the Place de l'Indépendance and through downtown Dakar (passing both a Renault dealership and a Mobil petrol station) as crowds look on. At the end of the line of cars is El Hadji's wedding gift to N'Gone – a light blue two-seater car perched on top of a trailer and decorated with ribbons. Although these two parades are not quite as long as Godard's eight-minute tracking shot of traffic in *Weekend* – a film directly referenced later in *Xala* – they are still notably overindulgent, on the brink of absurdity. Yet, despite its satirical treatment, the automobile at this point in the narrative is still aligned with the



forward movement of the film. However, after El Hadji's failure to consummate his marriage, the automobile becomes one of several signs of suspended animation.

In John Mowitt's detailed reading of the shot sequence in the nuptial chamber that enacts the trauma of El Hadji's impotence, the failed act of copulation is mimed and repeated in the semiotics of the film. According to Mowitt, Sembène's reflexive devices work to highlight "the 'impotent' stasis" (110) of the postcolonial present. Mowitt points out that while El Hadji prepares himself for N'Gone, he stands in front of a bathroom mirror, reflected by his own moving image. N'Gone, however, as her aunt instructs her on how to be a docile and subordinate wife, is framed by a triad of black-and-white photographic stills of herself. In other words, while El Hadji is associated with the moving image, she is reflected in the atemporal and immobile image of the photograph. Sembène follows El Hadji's exit from the bathroom with a false match-on-action cut to the next morning when the aunt arrives to confirm N'Gone's deflowering. This shot sequence, therefore, skips the attempted consummation and, as Mowitt argues, literally *suspends* the act of copulation. When the unsuccessful couple is discovered, Sembène again organizes his shots and frames around the atemporal stills in the bedroom, but this time he includes the now impotent and immobile El Hadji.

Mowitt concludes his shot-by-shot analysis as El Hadji leaves the villa and the soundtrack plays the music and voices from the night before, but if we continue into the next sequence, we can see how automobiles are also integral to the suspension of the forward motion of the film. After El Hadji exits N'Gone's villa, he stands outside the gates staring dejectedly into the headlights of the parked wedding gift, which can only be driven once he confirms his bride's virginity.<sup>12</sup> When N'Gone's motorcade arrives at her

villa on the night of the wedding, the blue two-seater is parked suggestively on its trailer – it is a sign of the “ride” that will occur on the wedding night, and it is assumed that the wedding-gift car will soon become part of the forward, continuous movement of the film. However, the morning after the failed consummation, a medium shot of the front of the car, almost identical to the shot seen when the car first arrives at the ceremony, again brings the film back to the previous night’s impotence. In the next shot, Modu, El Hadji’s chauffeur, pulls up the Mercedes, and here we have returned to a veritable match-on-action in which the shot of the front of the moving Mercedes matches and replaces the front of the wedding car. The restored continuity of the shot sequence suggests that what had previously been unequal – N’Gone’s stasis and El Hadji’s mobility – are now connected.

From this point on, two important changes occur in the film. First, the wedding car ceases to be singularly associated with N’Gone. When El Hadji stares into the headlights of the parked car, he is in fact looking at a reflection of his own impotence because it is the failure of his penis that causes the car to remain parked. El Hadji therefore no longer faces himself as a moving image as he did when he examined himself in the mirror on his wedding night. Instead, he becomes feminized like the small, pastel-colored car wrapped in bows. (This, of course, also foreshadows the final scene of the film when the beggars persuade El Hadji to undress and wear N’Gone’s wedding tiara). Later in the film, when he is temporarily cured of the *xala*, he returns to N’Gone’s villa to take his bride’s virginity. Before entering the home he kisses the car’s ribbon and pats its front tire. Confident that his virility is restored, he feminizes the car and attempts to re-

introduce his separation from it. However, his confidence is premature, for N'Gone is menstruating and El Hadji is turned away.

The second change that occurs after the enactment of the *xala* is that automobiles are no longer the dominant and triumphant form of mobility in the film. Car travel is set alongside other types of transport, such as El Hadji's daughter's moped – a symbol of her independence and a rejection of her father's elitist, auto-mobile values. Like the motorcycle driving Mory in Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki Bouki*, Rama's chosen mode of transportation sets her apart from the bourgeois automobile drivers. It is a sign of rebellion as well as an indicator that she has chosen a form of transport that is more affordable and therefore more often associated with the less privileged occupants of Dakar. Moreover, El-Hadji's automobility is contrasted with the walking of the beggars who are responsible for his *xala*. As El Hadji is driven to his office after his failed wedding night, the band of beggars hobble through the same streets – some using crutches, the polio victims with shriveled legs using their hands and knees. El Hadji's shameful “morning after” drive is therefore set alongside the victorious yet imperfect march of the beggars who have successfully enacted their revenge. However, their vulnerability in the face of the automobile is made apparent when their advance is interrupted by the sound of a car striking down a pedestrian. At the scene of the accident, a blind man is robbed of the money he has collected from his fellow villagers to buy much-needed supplies during a drought. The thief, a Monsieur Thieli, is the one who will replace El Hadji when he is expelled from the Chamber.

As the film continues the story of El Hadji's fall from grace, El Hadji's movements are increasingly staggered and less aligned with the security of the Mercedes.

The narrative becomes one of downward mobility. The forward and teleological automobility that characterizes the film before the *xala* (driving to the wedding, driving to pick up his wives, driving to the office, etc.) is replaced by a quest that leads El Hadji to nothing but dead-ends. When he travels to villages to find a cure for his *xala*, the lack of drivable roads means that he must leave his Mercedes behind and travel by horse-cart; when he returns to Dakar he crisscrosses the city in his dirty car to his three wives' villas looking for somewhere to rest; upon the advice of a traditional healer he crawls (like the beggars) towards N'Gone with a fetish in his mouth.

Likewise, as El Hadji becomes decreasingly aligned with the movement of his Mercedes, he is increasingly identified with various immobilized objects. Laura Mulvey argues that the clothing, language, briefcases and, of course, automobiles in *Xala* serve as a carapace or a protective shell that the postcolonial "upper-crust" uses in an attempt to camouflage its corruption and neo-colonial collusion.<sup>13</sup> Thus, when El Hadji's Mercedes – the "literal material of the carapace" (526) – is taken away, it can no longer protect him from the truth of his original crime against his kinsmen. When he receives the news of the Mercedes' repossession, an officer brings him his chauffeur's stool from inside the shop. Mulvey writes, "The stool is like a shrunken, or wizened, version of the proud object of display. It is a trace of, or a memorial to, the Mercedes and its meaning for El Hadji" (526). El Hadji is therefore downgraded from a moving Mercedes, to a parked two-seater, to a squat stool. And in the final freeze-frame of the film, we are left with the beggars spitting on El Hadji's completely motionless and exposed body.

However, what is interesting from the point of view of this discussion is not what happens to El Hadji when the carapace is removed but, rather, what happens to the

car/carapace when *it* is removed. The officer serving El Hadji with the notice of the repossession asks the three uniformed policemen who accompany him if any of them knows how to drive a Mercedes. They each respond with an assertive, military style, “No, sir.” The three officers then position themselves behind the Mercedes and proceed to push it down the street. The camera zooms in on the mosque towards which they are headed and eventually cuts the Mercedes out of the frame, leaving only a close-up of the mosque’s phallic minaret. In its final act, the Mercedes becomes both un-drivable and irrelevant. It is not uncommon for automobiles in cinema to be associated with status, sex, luxury, or even greed and excess, but what is different about the automobile in *Xala* is that Sembène, in the Godardian mode to which he pays homage, does not permit the car to cover its own tracks. Instead of allowing the car to establish the continuity of the film by showing characters logically moving from place to place, Sembène suggests that the “misplaced” automobiles of the postcolonial elite serve as a blockage, or a jam, that has to be removed.

As El Hadji and his loyal chauffeur walk away from the shop, the mosque’s minaret again protrudes in the background. But it would be wrong to conclude that Sembène is insinuating that the mosque, or religion and tradition, have triumphed over an impotent modernity. Several seconds later, the phallic walking stick of the beggar replaces the image of the mosque. Here, it is the beggar, a member of the *lumpenproletariat* – the class Fanon famously places at the forefront of a revolutionary national consciousness – who is the last phallus standing. In *Xala*, the car, too invested in the contradictions of modernity and neocolonialism to function properly, must be literally

taken out of the picture. However, it cannot be replaced with anything other than the insertion of the less-mobile outcasts into national life.

In the opening of the film, the independence of Senegal is consummated by each member of the Chamber entering his own automobile. In the logic of those like Walt Rostow, this action would seem to indicate the pinnacle of modernity, the true sign that individuals in a society can be completely autonomous. But as they enter their automobiles, the Senegalese businessmen carry the attachés stuffed with French money, and this, Sembène suggests (and elaborates upon in *Guelwaar*), is the true face of development. In *Xala*, the liberal demand for automobility is compromised by the fact that it depends on the “collective immobility” of the masses; for as we discover at the end of the film it is only through depriving his kinsmen of their inheritance, and in fact turning them into beggars, that El Hadji can become a member of the Mercedes-driving class. What Sembène seems to suggest is that real progress is possible only when mobility itself is pluralized and accompanied by the economic advance of the entire nation. The car in *Xala* is therefore part of a mythical speech that hides and distorts the nepotism and corruption of the new elite. As Roland Barthes suggests,

Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History . . . all one has to do is to possess these new objects from which all soiling trace of origin or choice has been removed. This miraculous evaporation of history is another form of a concept common to most bourgeois myths: the irresponsibility of man (151).

By exposing El Hadji’s irresponsibility, Sembène therefore restores this covered up history and denies the automobile its mythological status.

### **Imaginary Automobility: Bekolo's *Quartier Mozart***

Sembène begins *Xala* with a moment of hope, a moment when it was possible to establish a postcolonial nation that would not simply mimic the structure of the colonial state. However, as El Hadji's various betrayals to the Senegalese people are revealed to the audience, the tropes of thwarted progress become increasingly evident. In Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film *Quartier Mozart* (1992), the moment when a different future was possible has long been forgotten: stasis is the point of departure. Amidst Bekolo's fast-paced and disjointed style of editing, any signs of economic development are already worn out and in disorder. The cars once occupied by Cameroon's postcolonial elite, and even increasingly by the middle class, are almost entirely incapable of physical movement; they are quite literally misplaced, appearing abandoned at the side of the road, rather than as a part of modern traffic flow. Bekolo's film takes place in a country where cars have come to be called *congelés*, or frozens.

More specifically, *Quartier Mozart* is set in Mozart, a working-class neighborhood of Yaoundé during a period of widespread economic collapse in the early 1990s. During the time that Bekolo was filming, Cameroon was also experiencing a period of political unrest, and the film was released just after a five-month general strike (called the ghost town movement) attempted to bring down the corrupt government of Paul Biya by shutting down cities and neighborhoods like Mozart.<sup>14</sup> The strike failed, however, and economic conditions continued to worsen. Thus, even those who were prosperous during the immediate post-independence decades could not escape the political and economic crises that materialized within the urban landscape. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman describe the state of affairs in the 1990s as follows:

Today, Yaoundé's roads are in near total disrepair and dilapidation. Central avenues are as bad as streets in peripheral neighborhoods. Many roads that were paved a few years ago are now paths of beaten earth. They are broken up by sections that juxtapose efforts of resurfacing with potholes, crevices, and precarious ditches. Most traffic circles are nothing more than a heap of old tires or empty, rusted barrels.

The traffic lights no longer function. Some are still intact but no longer light up. Due to the absence of maintenance, vandalism, or, most often, traffic accidents, others have either toppled over, exposing their massive cement base, or lean dangerously over the *ad hoc* sidewalk or over the road itself. Although they are still, sometimes in the very spot where they were erected, they are now masses of useless "traces," outliers of bygone days. (159)

Until the mid-1980s, Cameroon had experienced one of the highest rates of economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa. In Yaoundé, a powerful middle class strove to create a city with visible markers of modernity – paved roads, traffic circles, skyscrapers, and foreign automobiles. However, Mbembe and Roitman argue that in the wake of economic crisis, these distinctive signs of modernity, now in ruins, became markers of the "instabilities, shortages, constraints, and blockages . . . [that] bring about several types of incoherence" (171). Cars in Cameroon, they argue, have become barely drivable, with missing windshields and doors, defective joints, and faulty soldering as par for the course. Automobile transport is therefore no longer characterized by a relative



certainty that one will arrive at a destination safe and on time; rather, it becomes one of the ways that the Cameroonian subject experiences the disjointed nature of urban life.

However, unlike Mbembe and Roitman who see the car simply as a figurative object, as an emptied out sign referring to nothing more than its former power and status, Bekolo invests the suspended *congelés* with new meaning. Bekolo uses the car to underscore the incoherence of Cameroonian economic life, but, at the same time, he also deploys the camera to re-imagine the space and function of the immobile automobile. In the neighborhood of Mozart, mobility is derived from ingenuity and creativity. Bekolo – only 26 years old when the film was made – turns his attention towards the younger generation who must, given the current crisis, envisage a very different type of automobility than what one might have hoped for in the euphoric days just after independence. Thus, while the neighborhood of Mozart itself is riddled with images of abandoned, broken-down, and immobile vehicles — clear signs of its overall inertia – the youth of the neighborhood find ways to enact a comical, informal, and imaginary form of mobility that does not depend on the liberal ideology of automobility.

*Quartier Mozart* is a farce about the sexual politics of Cameroonian teenagers who are preoccupied with the types of things that concern all teenagers – sex, beer, soccer, popular culture, and parental authority. But it is in no way a typical coming-of-age “teen flick,” and Bekolo satirizes this Western genre by peppering his film with jokes, puns, and clichés that make fun of the teen flick’s teleological presuppositions. The protagonist of *Quartier Mozart* is Queen of the Hood, a brazen and curious young girl who asks a local witch, Maman Thékla, to transform her into one of the neighborhood guys. She wants to “rip off the houses’ roofs with one blow” in order to

catch a glimpse of what happens in the private spaces of the neighborhood, and she articulates her desire for magical gender reassignment as the wish “just to see.” In essence, she wants to become an active viewing subject in a social space where girls are considerably less free to move about. Maman Thékla transforms Queen into My Guy, a neighborhood stud who seduces Samedi, the police chief’s daughter. The witch then transforms herself into Panka, a man who arrives in Mozart and shocks all by his ability to make a man’s penis disappear by shaking his hand. After My Guy makes love to Samedi, he is transformed back into Queen of the Hood, and the film returns full circle to show Queen and Maman Thékla sitting right where they were before their transformations. Although nothing has ostensibly changed for Queen or any of the other residents of Mozart – despite a claim in the tongue-and-cheek introduction to the film that things will never be the same – Queen has been able to experience a brief period of auto-mobility (only tangentially related to the car) that would not have been possible without Maman Thékla’s sorcery.

Because Queen of the Hood’s conversion into My Guy occurs in an abandoned pickup truck, Bekolo invites the analogy between My Guy’s newly acquired mobility and the figure of the automobile. However, after the transformation the truck is mysteriously towed away by an unidentifiable character and is not seen again. It does not belong to My Guy, and it is not available for his use. We are certainly not in the realm of *American Graffiti* or *Rebel Without a Cause* where teenage boys cruise around town in their cars. The truck therefore remains an ironic and ambiguous symbol of My Guy’s newfound mobility: at the same time that Bekolo encourages a correspondence between auto-mobility and masculinity, he also makes it impossible.

Furthermore, Bekolo's detachment from the car demonstrates his concerted effort to decentralize cars from the narrative of the film and to disallow them to act as agents of continuity. As the car is towed off screen, Bekolo's voiceover asks, "Where are they taking that car?" But rather than answering the question, he claims "I'm going back to sleep." In other words, Bekolo as narrator refuses to connect the dots, to help the audience make sense of the situation. In *Xala* when the officers push El Hadji's Mercedes away from his store, the car disappears from the story just as it disappears from the frame. However, it is almost certain that the Mercedes will have an afterlife. Most likely, according to the narrative logic of the film, it will be resold or given as a "gift" to someone like Monsieur Thieli who is no less crooked than El Hadji. But in Bekolo's film any recourse to narrative logic is eschewed. While the automobiles in *Xala* serve as outer shells that hide the impurity and corruption of those who have compromised the dreams of independence, the automobiles in *Quartier Mozart* come to us as carapaces already emptied out of their potential to be signifiers of any sort of progress.

Notably, the pickup truck is the second vehicle to be towed in the opening few minutes of the film. The first car to be towed is one whose driver dies suddenly at a stop sign. The driver's wife explains that he had just returned from a trip to the United States. On the way home, his airplane – the wife refers to it as a witch's plane – crashed, killing five hundred people. The man survived the crash, but the wife explains that the witch, a stand in for modern technology, got him anyhow, killing him while he was driving in his own neighborhood. After the man's death, the car is pulled away to become one of the many driverless, abandoned cars in the film. Neither the husband nor the wife is mentioned again during the film. That such an unconnected anecdote would occur so

early on in the film is a signal that Bekolo inverts the typical role of the automobile in cinema. Instead of using it to connect disparate spaces, Bekolo uses non-functioning modes of transportation – often tied to witchcraft and magic – as a way to privilege interruption and nonsynchronism over narrative continuity. In fact, throughout the film the stalled automobile often serves as the locus of incoherence and transgression. In one scene we see Samedi's younger brother and Queen of the Hood kissing, or playing hide-and-seek as they call it, in the back of an abandoned car. My Guy approaches the car in order to pass a message to Samedi through her brother, since Samedi's father Mad Dog (who is also the police chief) has restricted her ability to move about the neighborhood. However, My Guy is taken aback when he sees Queen of the Hood there. Since My Guy and Queen are supposed to be the same character, the inconsistency of them appearing together disturbs the narrative logic of the story.

In addition to the obvious irregularities in the narrative structure, Bekolo's frequent use of jump cuts, photographic stills, and false match-on-action shots continually disrupt the continuity of the film. In an analogy reminiscent of Brecht's equation of his theatre to a children's theatre where errors in the presentation undermine the mimetic effect of the performance, Bekolo compares himself to a rap artist who puts his finger on the gramophone in order to stop the record from playing normally.<sup>15</sup> Or, in the words of Benjamin, Bekolo makes the film appear as if it were in fact displayed on the editing table. However, one must remember that *Quartier Mozart* is not just a reflection on the act of filmmaking; it is also a reflection on the act of filmmaking in a third-world country where film technology, like all technology, does not always work smoothly. Thus, when photographic stills (frozen images) comprise an entire scene of

the film, when the narrative becomes discontinuous, and when frozen cars (*congelés*) punctuate the *mise-en-scène*, Bekolo, like Sembène, suggests that the usual *défilement* of events and images must be interrupted in order to indicate the actual lived experience of postcolonial time.

Bekolo injects stasis into the moving image in order to foreground an alternative point of departure and instantiate a type of auto-mobility that operates outside the system of traditional power. As is the case in *Xala*, in *Quartier Mozart* it is only the corrupt and vitiated patriarchal figures who have access to private, working automobiles. Mad Dog, the police chief, uses his car to pull over a man in a wheelchair and confiscate his identity papers. His haranguing of the less mobile is clearly reminiscent of El Hadji's, and his troubles with his newly polygamous family show that, like El Hadji, he has also over-extended his patriarchal power. By contrast, the broken-down cars, which cannot produce the same types of meaning as functional cars, act as sites of play, imagination, and satirical performance. In addition to being the site for Queen's sexual discovery and gender transgression, the suspended car functions as a location for the informal communication that eludes the hegemonic structures of power. First it is the site where My Guy passes notes to Samedi's brother, which is necessary because Samedi's father is closely monitoring his daughter's movements. Then, when a neighborhood child writes "My Guy and Samedi" in the dirty windshield of another deserted car, the automobile is used to spread rumors about My Guy and Samedi's sexual exploits. Since the spreading of rumors is in direct violation of Mad Dog's order that My Guy keep his relationship with Samedi quiet, the windshield of the car becomes a way to counter the authority of the corrupt and patriarchal police chief. The windshield, rather than aligning the camera

with the movement of the automobile, as was the case for Charles Bernard in *The Life of the Automobile*, acts as a stationary screen – a windscreen, as the British say – where the characters (like the filmmaker) can circulate information without having to answer to local or state authority. Thus, Bekolo rejects the often-used graphic match between the windshield and the camera viewfinder – such as that described by Ehrenburg and Virilio – in order to produce an entirely different form of movement.

*Quartier Mozart* is therefore a film in which the local imaginary is set in opposition to the corrupted and weakened nation-state. Indeed, whenever something rumor-worthy occurs in the film, we hear characters remark, “Mozart moved last night!” Bekolo implies that, regardless of what might be occurring on a national or global level, it is the neighborhood itself that sustains the motion of the film. However, at the same time, the film does demand to be read within a transnational context. Jonathan Haynes, borrowing the language of Arjun Appadurai, suggests that the characters of *Quartier Mozart* inhabit a “post-modern globalized mediascape” (“African Filmmaking” 27). To be sure, the local teens mock global perceptions of Africans as starving and barbarous, and their popular culture savvy seems to be a direct response to those who only see Africans through the lens of underdevelopment. They discuss Denzel Washington, Lady Di, and Princess Caroline of Monaco, and they point out that Michael Jackson stole his “Wanna Be Startin’ Something” lyrics from the Cameroonian Manu Dibango’s “Soul Makossa.” Likewise, the various forms of hip-hop music played throughout the film reflect the multiple directions of musical influence across the Atlantic and show that global cultural flows are not a one-way street.

Yet, at the same time, I would argue that *Mozart* is not exactly the type of in-flux, rhizomatic neighborhood Appadurai seems to be envisioning when he describes his ethnoscapes, or landscapes of people, where locality is contextual and relational instead of spatial. What is missing from the film is anything that would physically connect the neighborhood to the outside world (even the passenger train that Panka takes goes only as far as N'goundere in northern Cameroon). There are no images of airplanes, telephone calls abroad, or references to emigration. The neighborhood of *Mozart*, therefore, is bound heavily by space and is not so much “shot through with . . . realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move” (Appadurai, *Modernity* 33-4) to different global locales as it is “shot through” with tropes of immobility, which are embodied so clearly in the number of stationary cars. Thus, a reading of the film at a transnational level must account for the local and national realities in which the global flow of images are often incongruent with the global flow of technologies. While, as Appadurai argues, communication technologies do provide us virtual access to the world at large, it certainly does not follow that everyone with access to these images will be able to directly experience the hyper-mobility of modernity.

*Quartier Mozart* depicts a world in which automobiles are entirely dislodged from the ideals of speed, technology, and freedom that they have come to represent in Western consumer society. In a world marked by empty time and where vehicles of supposed progress go nowhere, both the characters and the camera search for alternative forms of movement and ways of being. However, Bekolo's satirical treatment of Western notions of development (plot as well as economic development) makes it clear that any alternative ontology must occur outside of structures of linearity. In other words,

development as a structural impetus is made entirely impossible in the film. “Where are they taking that car?” becomes a question that simply does not matter, because cars, without the imagination of the filmmaker, are nothing but markers of the mundane passage of time. The questions Bekolo asks are not of a teleological nature. He is not asking: Where are we going? Where is our destination? Where is our future? Rather, his film is a playful, and in the end inconclusive, exploration of a cinema and technology whose form and content are inherently different from those in the West.

### **Le Ratement Encore: Sissako’s *Heremakono***

In his essay on misplaced ideas Schwarz discusses the way that Brazil, with its singular historic, social and economic situation, has always “improperly” reproduced European ideas and social forms, from literary and scientific schools to Volkswagen cars. He argues that while the imported forms themselves remain the same, the system of ambiguities that arise from their local use is always divergent. Furthermore, Schwarz believes that the types of structural disjunctions produced from the introduction of these misplaced ideas become the source of creativity for the Brazilian artist. Similarly, my claim here is that when West African filmmakers choose to acknowledge rather than ignore the paradoxical nature of automobility in African cities, they rewrite the historical and technological link between film and transportation and push the limits of cinema in a creative and aesthetically innovative manner.

For both Sembène and Bekolo the moving car – so important to Western notions of development, progress, and modern freedom – is the object of an extended and complicated joke that reveals the contradictions of automobility in the face of corruption,



greed and poverty. In Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakono*, the automobile – here, a Peugeot 504 bush taxi – is also far removed from the liberal ideology of autonomous, technological mobility. And, as in *Xala* and *Quartier Mozart*, the car throughout the course of the film becomes less significant as a practical means of transport and more significant as a reflection on the experienced chronotope of postcoloniality. What is different about the devalued automobile in Sissako's film, however, is that the car cannot be associated with a specifically Western modernity.

In *Heremakono* it is important to note that the car in which Abdallah travels is not a private automobile. It is a collective taxi, an affordable means of transport to many Mauritians, but certainly not one that could act as the individualized, private cocoon of liberal automobility. Thus, the car itself may be an imported technology, but here its form has changed – it transports the group rather than the individual – and it represents a model of transport that is neither foreign nor native. Indeed, throughout the film, the division between what belongs to the West and what is “African” becomes blurred. The music playing from the Peugeot's radio sounds traditionally North African, but upon closer listen, one can hear the saxophone of the Norwegian jazz musician Jan Garbarek and the tabla of the Pakistani Shaukat Hussain Khan mixed in with the North African oud of Tunisia's Anour Brahem. *Heremakono* paints a picture of a singular world where kora music, *attaya* (a lengthy tea-drinking ritual), and the desert winds coexist with karaoke, television, and taxis. The overriding visual metaphor for the film is embodied, perhaps, in a gift that a Chinese watch vendor – neither a Western nor an African figure – gives to one of the film's principal characters: a small handheld prism through which images are refracted and multiplied.

Thus, the paradoxical social forms that exist in the film do not clash in dialectical opposition and they do not result in the same type of satire and farce as in *Xala* and *Quartier Mozart*. Instead, Sissako takes a more Adornian approach where the work of art preserves and crystallizes the tensions between the two terms. Sissako's loose narrative, which knits together connected vignettes, oscillates between destination and origin, going and coming, and permanence and change without, however, losing its ability to expose the violent unevenness of globalization in which mobility often becomes an impossibility. For Sissako, the automobile – although much less a presence in *Heremakono* than in the other films discussed thus far – is important because it is part of a meditation on transport and travel that expresses the lived time of modernity as a layering of multiple experiences.

*Heremakono* takes place in Nouadhibou, Mauritania's second largest city (although reviewers of the film often refer to it as a village). Nouadhibou sits in the north of Mauritania, close to the border of Western Sahara, at the intersection of the Saharan desert and the Atlantic coast. It is an important port in Mauritania where foreign fishing vessels, taking advantage of the extraordinarily high density of fish, often harbor and where iron ore brought by railroad from central Mauritania is processed and exported. Recently, Nouadhibou has also become a major departure point for Africans trying to reach Europe illegally.<sup>16</sup> Nouadhibou is therefore a place of transit and temporary dwelling. The word "heremakono," which literally translates as "waiting for happiness," also refers to the name of the temporary housing units built in Nouadhibou and elsewhere throughout West Africa as well as to the name of many villages and towns in the region.

Sissako's film is loosely based on his own experiences in Nouadhibou where, like so many others, he rested – in a state of suspended animation – before traveling abroad. Although Sissako was born in Mauritania, he grew up in Mali, his father's country. Therefore, like the main character, Abdallah, Sissako could not speak the language of his mother's country and felt deeply alienated by his inability to communicate. Sissako's stay in Nouadhibou preceded his film studies in Russia and helped him to form the visual observation skills he needed as a filmmaker. Abdallah, Sissako's alter ego, is constantly seen observing the inhabitants of Nouadhibou through frames – the window of his mother's house, doorways, the window of a clinic, etc.

Abdallah travels to Nouadhibou in a Peugeot 504 bush taxi, also known as a *sept-place* or seven-seater (three in the front seat, four in the back seat). In Mauritania such bush taxis are the only form of non-private transportation, and throughout much of West Africa they are the most common. Bush taxis, which do not arrive or depart according to a formal schedule or timetable, leave only when all of the seats have been purchased. In big cities, this can sometimes take less than an hour, but in less densely populated areas, this can take days. On longer journeys in Mauritania, where things are decidedly less rushed, bush taxi drivers will often pause in a town to have a meal or pull off the side of the road to relax and drink *attaya* or warm camel milk. Also, because of the sandy roads and the poor quality of the cars, breakdowns are common. Thus, much of driving consists of waiting, and when the audience first encounters Abdallah, he and his fellow passengers are doing just that.

Abdallah is dressed as a Europeanized city slicker. He is wearing a yellow retro button-down shirt and blue trousers. In the scene I described at the beginning of this

chapter, Abdallah is pacing around the empty bush taxi whose roof is loaded with baggage and whose hood is propped open. After Abdallah sits down in the driver's seat and turns off the background music (in the first of many deadpan gags), he gazes through the open passenger door at his fellow travelers resting in the shade. The driver, who was enjoying a cigarette, looks back at Abdallah and sees his head resting in exasperation on the steering wheel. Finally, the driver approaches the car and diagnoses the problem as "*le ratement*" – the car simply misfired.

In this sequence, Abdallah's impatience frames his view of his fellow passengers as he looks at them through the front passenger door. While they appreciate the rest and shade, he sits anxiously in the car, clearly unable to fix whatever the problem might be. But, as the passengers look back at Abdallah, Sissako repeats the framing of the open door, thus suggesting that the two views are equal in value. When Abdallah looks at the passengers they seem naïve and oblivious to the fact that they are en route to a destination. But when they look at Abdallah he seems inexplicably vexed and oblivious to the fact that this temporary breakdown provides an opportunity for much-needed shade. As it turns out, the problem with the car is not serious. The engine failed to ignite, but the car is as easily set in motion as it was stalled. Here, the breakdown does not have any significance to the plot except for that, like most things in the film, it is temporary. This sequence is typical of a film in which various perspectives of time are set side by side and framed within each other, where mobility and immobility become two sides of the same coin, and where misfiring is part of the daily encounter with technology.

After a long stay in Nouadhibou (the length of the stay is deliberately obscured),

Abdallah meticulously packs his suitcase and prepares for his departure. Again, we see the Peugeot 504 bush taxi driving down the main road of Nouadhibou. As before, it is first seen in motion from behind the windshield, and the driver is still experiencing problems keeping his papers from falling out of the visor. But when Abdallah leaves Nouadhibou, the car does not take him away. This inconsistency is not, however, related to technological mishaps. The car appears to be functioning well, and there seems to be no apparent reason why Abdallah would not be able to secure a place. Instead of waiting at the taxi park, Abdallah walks out into the desert, away from the road, and sits down next to a giant sand dune. As in *Xala* and *Quartier Mozart*, the moving vehicle is erased and removed from the narrative – Sissako leaves the job of the automobile unfinished.

Although Sissako could have chosen to provide a neat closure in which the protagonist arrives and departs in the same car, he instead chooses to rewrite the notion of departure. Throughout the film traveling is a part of almost all of the characters' lives, and most often these voyages are focused on movement out of Nouadhibou. However, these migrations, like the misfired car, commonly fall victim to unpredictable failures. The journeys misfire not only because of technological failures, but more often because of the difficulties and dangers involved in emigration. The tragedy of *Heremakono*, and one of the many tragedies of globalization, is therefore not that Africa has failed to reach the mythical phase of "high mass consumption" and universal automobility; it is not that the West's objects and toys are inaccessible or unreliable. Rather, it is that Europe (and by implication the United States) is hardened and indifferent towards the daily struggles and aspirations of Africans.

Symbols of this rejection permeate the visual landscape of *Heremakono*. For instance, Makan, a melancholic and unsure man who constantly looks out at the rusty, abandoned ships that dot the Bay of Nouadhibou, discovers the body of his friend Michael washed ashore.<sup>17</sup> Michael had been attempting to migrate to Spain as an illegal stowaway and Makan had been considering doing the same. When the police come to remove Michael's corpse, they question Makan, asking if he can identify the corpse and if he has ever seen a body washed up before. Makan replies in the negative, but he does volunteer that he had once retrieved a car tire (which we see him carrying in the opening scene of the film). Makan therefore associates the rejected tire with his rejected friend – both are casualties of failed mobility. In another scene, Abdallah listens to Nana, a young woman in Nouadhibou, tell a story about visiting the French father of her deceased daughter Sonia. As Nana explains how she took the train to France to inform Sonia's father, Vincent, about the death, the cinematic images move with the story so that we see the railroad tracks and the hotel room where Vincent, never seen in his entirety, brings Nana. The bright and saturated colors of Nouadhibou are replaced with drab and grainy images, and both Vincent and Europe are visually portrayed as cold and indifferent. Sissako's imagery, which equates the faceless Vincent with the inhospitality of Europe, suggests that the way that Vincent casts aside Nana is part of a larger story in which Europe and the rest of the world have refused Africans. As he listens to Nana's story, Abdallah holds a yellowing photo of Sonia, a reminder that the girl remains frozen in the past. Likewise, when Michael's body is found, the police discover a waterproof bag containing photos Michael had taken with friends before his departure.

Nana's photograph of Sonia, Michael's photographs and corpse, Nouadhibou's ship graveyard, and the tire Makan discovers but cannot hold on to are all remnants of what was once alive, active, or moving. But now they serve as atemporal and immobile remains of the violence of rejection. Like the neighborhood of Mozart, Nouadhibou becomes littered with signs of its own inertia, and here a common complaint resonates: Africa, in receiving discarded ships, cars, trucks, and even toxic waste, becomes *la poubelle d'Europe*, the trashcan of Europe. At the same time, however, the immobile images and remains are all set in motion through the moving image projected on the screen. They are made tangibly present by stories, memories, and the constantly moving ocean, which, in the last instance, washes up a light bulb, a sign of delicate hope, discovered by an aspiring young electrician.<sup>18</sup>

The hope in Sissako's film, as he expresses in a recent interview, is that happiness will be discovered in the process of the journey, and that his audience will not see a happy Europe contrasted with an unhappy Africa. Thus, the car disappears from the narrative not because it has been maligned, overdetermined, or too closely associated with Western notions of progress, but because the voyage itself is replaced with a wait. When Abdallah stands by the dunes in the vast openness of the desert rather than traveling in the Peugeot, he is, of course, experiencing a temporality that more closely resembles that of the residents of Nouadhibou. The film therefore concludes not with a rejection of the West or Western commodity, but with an open-ended question about how the West's rejection of Africa might lead to somewhere other than stagnation.

## Conclusion

In an age in which the tenets of modernization theory have been so widely discredited and the realities of global climate change make mass automobile consumption more of a threat than a telos, the filmmakers I have discussed here reveal that modernity and globalization do not automatically lead to greater mobility and greater freedom in either the West or the third world. They contend, rather, that development has always been fragmented, disjointed, and nonsynchronous. Thus, they do not simply portray conditions of underdevelopment, nor do they rail against the evils of a modernity from which they feel excluded. Rather, each engages in a modern, critical discourse that creatively and thoughtfully grapples with the double-edged sword of progress.

Furthermore, as these films reflect upon the current status of the automobile in postcolonial society, they also invite the audience and the critic to question what an alternative, emergent value system may be. They present automobility as an unlivable and impossible system in which cars represent ideals that cannot be realized under the current political and economic system and are not necessarily advisable under future ones. But they also intimate that another direction is possible, that Africa need not make the same mistakes made by the United States in creating a society that is dependent upon rather than freed by the automobile. In an interview with Frank Ukadike, the Guinean filmmaker Flora Gomes claims, “We have to stop because we started poorly . . . Just like when you build a house, if you feel that something is not going right, it is better to stop or else the house will fall down” (106). In *Xala*, *Quartier Mozart*, and *Heremakono*, it is better for the car to stop, to disappear, than to continue driving in a direction that will lead down a flawed road.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the influence of Charles Sugnet whose work on African cinema addresses several of the overall themes of temporality, locomotion, and mobility that inform my reading of automobility in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Ross makes a similar argument in her discussion of the relationship between automobiles and French postwar cinema. She writes, “In production, cars had paved the way for film; now film would help create the conditions for the motorization of Europe: the two technologies reinforced each other” (38).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the “liberal disposition” of automobility, see Sudhir Chella Rajan’s “Automobility and the liberal disposition.”

<sup>4</sup> See Paulin S. Vieyra’s *Le Cinema Au Senegal*.

<sup>5</sup> See Yves J Saint-Martin’s “Le premières automobiles sur les bords du Niger: Félix Dubois et la Compagnie des transports par automobiles du Soudan français, 1898-1913.”

<sup>6</sup> See Erdmute Alber’s “Motorization and colonial rule: two scandals in Dahomey, 1916.”

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the early indigenous domination of the transport enterprises in Nigeria see Philip Drummond-Thompson’s “The Development of Motor Transport in Nigeria: A Study in Indigenous Enterprise.”

<sup>8</sup> See William Sellers’ “Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa.”

<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Brian Larkin notes that it was not uncommon for the African staff of the mobile cinema vans of the Colonial Film Unit to furtively use the vans as taxis to transport people between the cities and towns they visited (96).

<sup>10</sup> For Brecht, the goal of epic theater was not only to shock the audience into discovery, but to incite activity as well. Admittedly, this theory of praxis becomes somewhat buried in Benjamin’s writings on film.

<sup>11</sup> As Robert Stam reminds us, the word “reflexivity” comes from the Latin *reflexio/reflectere*, which means “to bend back on” and refers to the mind’s capacity to be both subject and object to itself (xiii). Thus, filmmakers who use reflexive devices – such as direct addresses to the camera, the frame-within-frame or film-within-film, and authorial intrusions, etc. – underscore that the cinematic apparatus is both subject and object: it perceives and it is perceived.

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<sup>12</sup> This is made more explicit in the novel where Sembène also explains that N’Gone’s mother is concerned that this condition may not be met since prior to her engagement N’Gone had been spending time with disreputable men.

<sup>13</sup> Mulvey builds upon Teshome Gabriel’s notion that *Xala* follows the African poetic form known as “wax and gold,” where “wax” refers to the outward obvious meaning of a poem (the casting), and “gold,” the valued object beneath, refers to the “true” but often inaccessible meaning.

<sup>14</sup> The “ghost town” movement in Cameroon eventually came to an end after promises by Biya’s party to reform democracy and allow fair elections. However, after making a few superficial reforms, nothing changed within the Biya dictatorship. In 2004, Biya won the national election with 99.9% of the vote while, according to the global watchdog group Transparency International, Cameroon was ranked the fourth most corrupt nation in the world. In both 1998 and 1999 Transparency International ranked Cameroon the most corrupt country in the world. See [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_and\\_research/](http://www.transparency.org/policy_and_research/) for more information regarding corruption rankings.

<sup>15</sup> See Bekolo’s interview with Frank Ukadike.

<sup>16</sup> Since the film was made, Nouadhibou has increasingly become the choice departure port for Africans trying to reach Europe via the Canary Islands. This increase is largely due to the tightening of emigration controls around the coasts of Morocco and Southern Spain in 2005.

<sup>17</sup> The Bay of Nouadhibou contains one of the largest ship graveyards in the world. It is estimated that more than 300 ships from around the world were dumped there during the last 20 years by companies who paid off Mauritanian harbor officials in order to find a cheap way of discarding their unwanted ships.

<sup>18</sup> From the director’s notes included on the New Yorker DVD release: “The feeling of not being able to go ‘over there’ towards another life, of being deprived of one’s human freedoms – this is a feeling which is familiar to us Africans. The sea rejecting a body on the shores of Nouadhibou, of Tangiers or of Tarifa symbolizes the refusal of one civilization to another. This refusal of us is a violence that is not spoken about. But there aren’t only bodies that wash ashore, there is also a light. The light bulb that washes ashore scintillates witness to the fragile hope of what is life.”

**PART II**  
**Consuming Mobility**

## Chapter 4

### The Return of the Mercedes: The Case of Anglophone Video Film

*If one had to choose a single image to express the culture of the [Nigerian] videos, it would undoubtedly be a Mercedes Benz, which appears ubiquitously as the symbol of the desired good life, the reward of both good and evil, the sign of social status and individual mobility.*

–Jonathan Haynes

*Oh man, we're good. That's why I'm driving a Hummer.*

–From *Boys Cot*

Over the past five decades, since Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1963), African film studies has been primarily concerned with studying the types of avant-garde celluloid films I addressed in the previous chapter, the majority of which have been produced in former French colonies. But the recent boom in Nigeria, and to a lesser extent in Ghana, of locally-made, mass-produced films using video and digital technology has led to calls for new models of study, ones more appropriate for popular culture than *auteur* cinema. Like the soap operas and *telenovelas* that have influenced them, these Nollywood<sup>1</sup> video films often focus on the highly commodified world of the urban upper class. The main characters are dressed in the latest American, European, and African fashions; they live in opulently decorated mansions; shop at expensive boutiques rather than in crowded markets; and they seamlessly traverse cities in luxury cars and SUVs. Rather than highlighting the conditions of uneven development or rejecting the premises of capitalist mass culture, these films center on stories of upwardly mobile, Mercedes-driving individuals. Indeed, as Jonathan Haynes points out in my epigraph,

nothing typifies the culture of video films as much as the Mercedes, or the flashy luxury car. Thus, unlike the Marxian celluloid films that reject the glamorization of consumer society and what Roland Barthes calls the mythology of the automobile, video films thrive on the world of shiny, new things.

Nollywood films therefore participate in a conscious myth-making, one in which the automobile is central to both the display of goods and to the idea that subjects may define themselves through the liberal ideology of automobility rather than through the physicality of their poverty. Whereas films in the previous chapter debunk the mythology of automobility through reflexive devices that distance the viewer, video films do just the opposite: they create mythical speech and attempt to bring the automobile closer. In the avant-garde films I discussed, cars like the Mercedes become the object of farce and parody because they participate in what Sembène calls “the fetishism of technology,” a fetishism that is ironic and “misplaced” amidst widespread poverty. But in the video films, the Mercedes makes a comeback – it returns completely laden with the fetishism and mysticism the celluloid filmmakers attempted to expel.

However, to assume that video films have no critical relationship to the worlds they represent is to refuse to read them on their own terms. It is to ignore the fact that video films, in the words of Nollywood filmmaker Bond Emeruwa, aspire to be a form of “edutainment,” educative entertainment. While the moral messages of the films might at times be obscured behind the glamour of Nigeria’s elite or relegated to the last five minutes of a five-hour film, it is not the case that Nollywood filmmakers are simply concerned with filming the outward signs of material success. What the films focus on is how these signs allow the characters to become global subjects in a world where

consumption, for better *and* for worse, has increasingly become the mode through which subjects forge their identities. Thus, while video films may gleefully depict modern capitalist subjects, they also, in the same breath, morally condemn those who become part of that commodity culture by trouncing upon social codes integral to the welfare of the community at large. Video films therefore underscore the ambiguity of cars and the commodity culture of which they are a part by dramatizing urban legends that reflect the anxieties about everyday life where inflation and the cost of living have spiraled out of control. They grapple with the task of determining how, in an economy of scarcity, one might become a global, self-sufficient and auto-mobile subject without breaking the bonds of community and sacrificing human integrity.

On the one hand, then, Nollywood films celebrate the types of personal liberties increasingly available to African citizens who find themselves able to participate in a global, cosmopolitan consumer culture. But, on the other hand, the ability to drive and own a car rarely derives from or results in the type of economic autonomy or freedom that the characters would ideally prefer. This is not simply because people become dependent on the machine, but, more importantly, because acquiring the machine in an economy where formal employment is scarce often entails a series of moral compromises that result in impeding someone else's autonomy. The video films therefore enact a double move: they both celebrate the possibilities of automobility and, at the same time, they portray auto-mobile subjects as automatons of a corrupt and occult market economy. Through a reading of three popular Nigerian video films – *Living in Bondage* (1992), *Blood Money* (1996), and *Boys Cot* (2007) – this chapter explores how tensions between desires for material wealth collide with pervasive feelings of anxiety about heightened

levels of conspicuous consumption. First, however, I will discuss how Nollywood emerged as the first major commercial form of media in West Africa and how it has become a major form of popular art that speaks to the pressing economic concerns of many Nigerians.

### **African Commercial Cinema**

Video films are made with the explicit intent of generating profit and are widely consumed by Anglophone African audiences throughout the continent and, increasingly, in the diaspora. The video films, which now come out on Video CDs (VCDs) or DVDs, are exhibited on television screens in small video clubs, or they are purchased or rented for home viewing in markets and street stalls. Ideally, the filmmakers make enough money from one video to be able to fund the next. They try to sell the bulk of their films in the first several weeks of its release in order to recoup costs as quickly as possible and to stay ahead of pirates who will soon be selling cheaper copies.<sup>2</sup> The system has proven to be so effective that Nollywood is now a \$250-million-a-year industry that produces well over 2,000 films yearly (Meltzer). A recent UNESCO report finds that Nigeria is the world's second largest producer of feature-length films, just after India. Whereas celluloid filmmakers have relied heavily on foreign funding, video-makers have developed a self-perpetuating system that makes them independent of foreign and state financing, but relies on consumer tastes and the popularity of each film.

Thus, Nollywood films have been integrated into African popular culture in a way that African celluloid films – even those outside of the art or avant-garde genre – have not. While most celluloid filmmakers do make their films with an African audience in

mind, the films are, to their chagrin, rarely shown in local cinemas. Since it is more profitable for theatres to show American, Hong Kong, and Indian films that draw large crowds, many African feature films are only shown in African theatres during FESPACO (the Pan-African Film Festival of Ouagadougou), the bi-annual festival held in Burkina Faso. Furthermore, African television stations have been reluctant to show African celluloid films, preferring foreign soap operas or even locally made television shows (many of which are filmed plays) that are less critical of African states, cheaper to purchase, and popular enough to command advertising money. According to the prominent Senegalese producer Clarence Delgado, the stations believe that if filmmakers want their movies aired on television they should provide them for free, but filmmakers, insulted by such suggestions, have been unwilling to simply give their movies away. Thus, despite the fact that filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambety, Flora Gomes, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Abderrahmane Sissako, Med Hondo, or Souleymane Cissé have made aesthetically innovative films that are highly acclaimed on the international circuit, most Africans have not had the opportunity to view them.<sup>3</sup> Because African celluloid filmmakers do not anticipate wide distribution or exhibition, filmmaking is generally not seen as a profit-making activity.

Nollywood, in contrast, has, since its inception, been a capitalist and commercial enterprise. In many ways, the industry is a reaction to the surplus of laborers – sparked by the new circuits of capital and the global shortage of liquidity – that began to plague most West African countries in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> According to Onookome Okome, Nigerian video films first emerged during the post-oil boom economic collapse of the mid-1980s when Yoruba theater groups turned to the new technology of the VHS cassette in order to



be able to continue performing during times when theater patronage was in decline (“Introducing” 2). By recording their plays on video, or “canning” them, and selling cassette copies, they could generate enough profit to fund their subsequent performances. At the same time, economic hardships made it increasingly difficult for Nigerian state television stations to survive, and many directors and technicians who had been released from their positions turned to the widely available videocassette technology and began making low-budget films to sell or rent for a small profit (Haynes and Okome 57). In 1992 the commercial success of Kenneth Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage* jumpstarted the industry now known as Nollywood and paved the way for many films that would follow the format of the multi-part melodrama about rich city-dwellers. The success of Nnebue’s film marked the first time that a Nigerian media industry was able to exist independently of foreign or state funding.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, Ghanaian filmmakers, who had begun experimenting with videocassette technology slightly before the Nigerians, were establishing a very similar, albeit smaller, industry. Thus, today the financial success of the Nollywood and Ghallywood industries is a point of immense pride. Utilizing the same dubbing machines, blank cassettes, and informal distribution networks of pirated media, the video films have retooled the means of reproduction and distribution established by “the infrastructure of piracy” in order to establish a legitimate and profitable media industry (Larkin 218). Nigerian and Ghanaian video-makers have created a commodity-art that is one of the rare instances where the working class is the producer of the mass media it consumes.

However, although the video industry emerged at a moment of economic collapse, the films themselves show a financially secure middle and upper class

surrounded by readily available material goods. Therefore, even though Nollywood filmmakers are certainly affected by the failures of the postcolonial state and more than aware of the daily realities of uneven development, it is clear that they have downgraded class antagonisms, geopolitics, and neocolonialism to second-order explanations. They appear less concerned with identifying and critiquing the totalizing power structures that have prevented them from having ready access to formal jobs and smoothly working technologies, and more interested in creating fictional scenarios in which wealth is abundant and technology operates optimally. Thus, rather than pointing to the paradoxical sign function of the Mercedes in such systems as their celluloid counterparts do, Nollywood films favor classic melodrama plots where the tastes and practices of the financially successful are placed on display. However, at the same time, the non-affluent class of viewers can separate itself from the wealthy characters by acknowledging that its members do not operate according to the same moral codes. Thus, it can be argued that the pleasure of watching these films consists of simultaneously viewing the goods and, when appropriate, denouncing (alongside other spectators) the means by which they were acquired.<sup>6</sup>

We can therefore identify a common thread in both the video films and the celluloid films discussed in chapter three: both traditions remove technological icons – like the car – from their position of moral superiority. In celluloid as well as video film, vehicles like the Mercedes-Benz become symbols of the postcolonial nouveau riche, a class that has gained its wealth not through hard work but through (sometimes literally) sacrificing others. In the video films I will be discussing in this chapter, the characters associated with Mercedes, Jaguars, and Hummers have all acquired their cars because

they have engaged in cult worship, ritual murder, illegal organ trade, or international internet fraud. Thus, in contrast to the Citroën and other colonial films that championed the motorcar as the symbol for industrial rationalism, video films link the car to the world of magic, witchcraft, and horror. However, unlike previously discussed African celluloid films, video films have not entirely dislodged the car from its status as an emblem of development and progress. While the plots of video films might condemn the moral aberrations of wealthy car owners, their visual aesthetics privilege modernized and tree-lined city streets, reproduce the thrill of riding in the car, and display only the most desirable vehicles. The result is an unresolved tension where video films express anxiety towards conspicuous consumption and, at the same time, place hope in the potentials of technological progress.<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I articulate this tension as one between occult anxiety and a dream of development.

What I am here calling occult anxiety refers to the various uncertainties about outward displays of wealth in what Jean and John Comaroff have appropriately labeled “occult economies.” According to the Comaroffs, occult economies are those in which wealth, because it has been separated from formal, discernible labor practices, appears through seemingly supernatural or mysterious networks. In other words, an occult economy is a result of the informal economy, but, more specifically, it is one in which people “acquire vast fortunes without ordinary labor costs” (“Alien-nation” 20), making wealth appear enigmatic or magical. Thus, the occult economy is fueled by rumors about those who have become rich through witchcraft, vampirism, zombies, or cult murders. The occult economy is therefore driven by the forced privatization, soaring food prices, inflation, and unemployment that have increasingly pushed African workers into the

informal sector and made ways of earning money more and more opaque. In such economies, the clear and observable paths to wealth – education, government employment, salaried labor, production of agricultural exports – have been overshadowed, if not replaced, by the shady and underground routes that are beyond the ken of the regulated economy.<sup>8</sup> As many of the conventional paths to earning wealth wane, money is increasingly acquired through fraud, speculation, pyramid schemes, scams, secret financial dealings, and witchcraft. Because its sources are inscrutable, money appears as if by magic even when magic per se is not involved.<sup>9</sup> The occult economy is therefore, according to the Comaroffs, tied to a capitalism that appears to be based upon supernatural forces that can bring wealth to those who can properly harness them. In such economies public signs of success, like the automobile, are often understood to be the result of occult or secret forces, and cars themselves become visible signs of the often-invisible duplicity of their owners. They produce occult anxiety because it is often assumed that their owners have been participating in an occult economy that deals either directly or indirectly with witchcraft, magical forces, or other forms of unscrupulous behavior.

Yet, at the same time, the abundance of luxury cars in the video films and the disproportionate visual details they provide of the elite lifestyle indicate a fascination, even implicit admiration, for those who are financially successful. Thus, even though the video films situate themselves within the world of occult economies – garnering criticism from those who believe they play to unflattering stereotypes of “backwards” Africans – they also, by and large, refuse to participate in aestheticizing underdevelopment. In these films, as Birgit Meyer suggests, Lagos and Accra look like modern cosmopolitan cities,

devoid of the gridlock traffic, pollution, and infrastructural deficiencies that its occupants find inevitable. Despite their willingness to delve into the seedy and irrational worlds of the occult, the cinematic language of the films often projects a very rationalist dream of development that dates back to late colonialism. This, I argue, is a reflection of the dream-world of the spectators who would prefer to have their cities look like idealized images of Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or Dubai where roads are wide, gutters are covered, and cars are not constantly breaking down and sputtering.

Thus, it would be wrong to claim that cars in these films become celebrated signs of self-fashioning, or a means of a postmodern type of freedom through consumption. Unlike theorists like Daniel Miller who argues that the car has become “more a means to resist alienation than a sign of alienation” (3) or Dick Hebdige who sees the influence of American car culture in Britain as liberating, I am not suggesting that Nigerian and Ghanaian films represent some sort of subversive consumption-based subculture. What the dwindling of the formal economy has in fact led to is an ironic relationship to the automobile. Therefore, in what follows, I explore how the tensions between occult anxiety and the dream of development in video films coalesce around the icon of the automobile and provide us with means to better understand the very complex relations between consumers and objects in a globalizing, postcolonial West Africa.

### **Occult Anxiety**

In his essay “The New Citroën” on the mythical design of the 1955 Citroën D.S., Roland Barthes writes, “I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic Cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by

unknown artists, and consumed in image if not usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object” (88). Barthes writes that the Citroën *D.S.* – pronounced *déesse*, or goddess, in French – is designed to erase all signs of the labor that produced it. Its smooth lines, which Barthes compares to the seamless robe of Christ, cover up the fact that there are human hands involved in constructing it, and make the Citroën appear as a quasi-religious object originating from heaven. Following Marx, then, Barthes suggests that modern technological objects appear as mystified fetish objects that are completely severed from the labor process that produces them. However, in African film – both celluloid and video – what the mythologized car erases is not so much the process of production as the means of acquisition. Mystification, therefore, occurs at the level of consumption, especially given the conditions in postcolonial societies where, as the Comaroffs suggest, the wealth of the new elite often seems to accrue from nowhere. In *Xala*, we discover that El Hadji acquires his Mercedes by duping his kinsmen out of their property. In the video films, luxury automobiles are most often acquired by characters who engage in some form of occult labor.

In her influential essay “Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira,” Karin Barber points out that in Nigeria the overnight oil boom of the 1970s provided a sudden influx of wealth to a select elite who performed virtually no work and had nothing to do with the actual process of production. In fact, as was the case in other African countries that experienced a period of economic prosperity in the 1970s, not many average Nigerians were able to profit from the boom, as jobs created for unskilled or semi-skilled laborers were minimal. In the aftermath of the oil boom, as Nigerian currency became virtually worthless while the cost of living rose, wealth became even more distanced from formal

and established modes of labor and production. Thus, the flood of wealth and new commodities to a rising elite often appeared to be enigmatic to those who did not directly benefit from it. Without an immediately perceptible or knowable source, this new wealth became increasingly linked to occultism and has contributed to the proliferation of stories about zombies, witches, and ritual, or cult-based, murders. The logic of witchcraft, vampirism and occult fraud – which act as explanations for capitalist accumulation – operates such that personal success is accomplished only through cheating, tricking, or somehow “consuming” the labor of unwitting innocents. In this sense, these capitalist “monsters” grow wealthy by destroying victims rather than providing jobs that will grow the economy.<sup>10</sup> In other words, as Marx would suggest, capital is amassed by appropriating the victims’ autonomy through mysterious practices.

Video films are simply a recent manifestation of stories that use various rumors about witchcraft and sorcery to describe anxieties about the success of the nouveaux riches who accumulate wealth by appropriating the lifeblood (literally “eating” the spirit) of innocent people. For instance, in southern and western Cameroon, as well as in South Africa, stories have circulated since the time of colonialism about wealthy men employing zombies – rather than paid laborers – to work for them on invisible plantations (Geschiere 137; Comaroffs “Alien-nation” 20). Likewise, Francis Nyamnjoh, in an essay on nyongo witchcraft in Cameroon’s grassfields, describes how these zombie stories have been refashioned to explain the new logics of a globally scattered workforce. He writes that Cameroonians living abroad often describe themselves as zombified victims because their relatives in Cameroon expect to profit from the fruits of their labor without caring about their physical or mental wellbeing as migrant laborers. Throughout West Africa,

these types of stories circulate alongside rumors about the theft of human tissues and organs, often acquired through witchcraft or ritual cult murder, that are sold on the black market for a steep profit.<sup>11</sup> Like the zombies, the de-organged victims are used to add to the wealth of the already mobile and privileged.

Furthermore, video films are not the first instance of African popular stories that link motor vehicles to occult practices in order to express anxiety and uncertainty about seemingly incoherent labor practices. In *Speaking with the Vampires*, Luise White describes how rumors about vampires in colonial East Africa often centered on cars, ambulances, and fire trucks.<sup>12</sup> She documents stories about how Africans, working for European supervisors, would capture victims in their vehicles and take them to pits near government buildings. What White explains is that these stories circulated not because the motorcars themselves were feared, but rather because these new vehicles often had indiscernible purposes and represented a concealed labor process. White argues that rumors about cars being used to capture vampire victims can be explained only in part by the fact that fire trucks (painted the color of blood) were occasionally used in blood drives, and ambulances emblazoned with (suggestive) red crosses were used to take sick people to hospitals from which they did not always return. The stories, she suggests, must be understood in the larger context of the reservations that many Africans had for a new sector of skilled laborers that came into close proximity with motor vehicles. Africans who worked for the colonial administration as policemen, health inspectors, firemen, engine drivers, and mechanics participated in a labor practice that placed them in contact with specialized equipment under the close supervision of European officers whose motives and policies were not always clear. They were also often working



extended days and oftentimes overnight, which was a new and sometimes terrifying experience. Furthermore, because many of the early vehicles had no windows, there was much fear and anxiety about the type of equipment they might contain. These various “hidden” aspects of the labor practices associated with the vehicles made motorcars particularly susceptible to stories about other-worldly phenomena. The stories about vampires in motorcars therefore describe the peculiarities of new and highly obscured labor practices as well as the feelings of powerlessness that Africans experienced as a result of the colonial economy.

What all of the stories about witchcraft, zombies, organ-stealers, and vampires have in common is that they describe how wealth in occult economies is achieved by appropriating someone else’s productive capacity – by turning another person into an automaton, an unwilling organ donor, or a human sacrifice. As Peter Geschiere writes, “Witchcraft offers hidden means to grab power, but at the same time it reflects sharp feelings of impotence, it serves especially to hide the sources of power” (9). Rather than accumulating wealth through government employment, entrepreneurship, or other formal paths, those participating in the occult economy conjure wealth through techniques that defy practical reason, are seemingly beyond human control, and are based upon real or perceived forms of magic. Thus, stories involving various types of magic and witchcraft often proliferate when subjects feel that their autonomy is threatened and when new forms of labor (both formal and informal) appear to be opaque and murky.

Today, as was the case in the colonial-era stories White describes, the occult anxieties people have about cars have less to do with the physicality of the vehicles and more to do with the obscure and concealed labor practices of their owners. In video film

culture, ritual murderers and fraudsters are often identified by and closely linked to their cars. For instance, the Ghanaian movie *Girl at 18* features a businessman named “Black Jaguar” – a reference to the car, not the animal – who kills young women and sells their organs to European colleagues.<sup>13</sup> However, unlike the vampire stories in which all modes of transport are associated with sorcery, video films most often make very little use of taxis, collective mini-vans, and motorcycles.<sup>14</sup> The cars that become part of the story, the dialogue, or a character’s persona are almost always luxury cars, and they are nearly always used to identify characters who are engaging in forms of accumulation that others view with a mixture of suspicion, resentment, and admiration.

### **The Development Dream**

If the means by which wealth is obtained has led to mixed feelings about those who drive luxury cars, it is clear that in the world of video films, to be a modern, financially successful auto-mobile subject is still exceedingly desirable. While many critics accuse video films of unabashedly portraying irrationalist and “backwards” aspects of African culture, what strikes many Western viewers is the undeniable modernity of these films that show Nigerians and Ghanaians dining in fancy restaurants, talking about trade in Dubai, and playing Beyoncé and Wyclef Jean on the sound systems of their Hummers. Indeed, in the world of video film there is no apparent contradiction between owning a fleet of luxury cars and drinking the blood of a friend’s wife.

Brian Larkin argues that it is precisely this mixture of modern consumerism and spiritualism that makes the video film an entirely new form of cultural expression, typical of the instabilities, uncertainties, and frustrations of urban subjects in today’s economy.

Larkin argues that the films express “an aesthetics of outrage” where the narrative is organized around events that shock and outrage the viewer, making the ethical transgressions of contemporary urban life vividly concrete (172). As opposed to the didactic “developmentalist” films produced by both the colonial government and the nationalist postcolonial state in Nigeria and Ghana, video films, according to Larkin, “are about stimulation not cultivation” (192). In fact, he argues that the most “rationalist” characters in the video films – the bankers, the businessmen in suits, and the government officials – are the most likely to be involved in occultism (192).

Yet I argue that Larkin provides us with only part of the picture. While uplift and progress may not be the primary logic of these films, the occult economies they depict do commingle with an economy of desire that is rationalist, modern, and, in a certain sense, developmentalist. Amidst what Andrew Apter describes as the “pervasive condition of verisimilitude and dissimulation” (287) of everyday life in West Africa, video-makers have constructed their own world of simulacra where the infrastructure is up to par with Western standards, where those who cheat the system are held accountable, and where modern Christian cosmopolitanism (generally) triumphs over witchcraft and sorcery. The emotions of outrage Larkin describes are therefore deeply entangled with those of desire, and in the video films, contrary to what we might expect, these desires often resonate with those of Henry Ford or Walt Rostow, both of whom championed the mass diffusion of the automobile as sign of and means to development and progress.

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how filmmakers like Sembène, Bekolo, and Sissako critique the notion that development is synonymous with an automobilized population and show that an automobility over-invested with techno-fetishism becomes

an unlivable reality in the postcolonial context. But video film, on the contrary, works to preserve the dream of technological development. As Birgit Meyer writes, in video films modernity forms the “context of life, not an option to adopt or reject” (“Prayers, Guns and Ritual Murder” 110). The most popular video films do not, therefore, highlight the squalor and chaos of African urban life. Rather, many open by positioning the camera inside the protagonist’s Mercedes as he or she passes by high-rises, fancy restaurants, large hotels, and wealthy neighborhoods like Lagos Island or Accra’s Osu.<sup>15</sup> Rarely do we see the traffic jams (or “go-slows” as they are called), street hawkers, crowded markets and densely populated areas that are an inevitable part of daily life in African cities, and rarely do we see characters traveling by means of *tro-tros* and *danfos* (collective vans and mini-buses) that the vast majority of Ghanaians and Nigerians use for transport. For the most part, in fact, the camera avoids filming the less-flattering aspects of the city. When such scenes are depicted, they are brief and are most often used to contrast a character’s life either before or after he is wealthy. Because video-makers depend on the profit from one film to produce another, they reproduce images that they believe their audiences will want to pay to see.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, this desire to appeal to the audience is one of the main functions of commercial cinema. As Christian Metz argues in *The Imaginary Signifier*, his seminal study of cinematic spectatorship, the capitalist film institution has “filmic pleasure alone as its aim” (7). It wants to set up good object relations between the film and the spectator so that the spectator will continue to pay for his visits to the cinema (or, in the case of video films, to continue to buy or rent videos). Therefore, Metz argues that the outer machine of the cinema industry and the inner machine of the spectator’s psychology are

metaphorically related – the latter a reproduction of the former – but also metonymically related as parts of the same whole (8). In other words, the cinema is a dream code, one that can be read and interpreted as the projection of the spectator’s latent wishes.

However, Metz points out that cinema may be closer to the daydream than an actual dream, not simply because it is a waking activity, but, more importantly, because the daydream is a conscious phantasy rather than an unconscious wish.<sup>17</sup>

Metz discusses the way that cinematic framing and camera movement reveal space to the spectator in a type of generalized striptease where the camera partially undresses its objects, but always reserves and exercises the power to dress again. Video films participate in these “veiling and unveiling processes” by alternating images of a glistening modernized city with its seedy underside and spaces of cult worship, prostitutes, and uncollected trash. By reminding the audience of the co-existence of these two types of spaces, the video films “gamble simultaneously on the excitation of desire and its non-fulfillment (which is its opposite and yet favours it) . . .” (Metz 77). For Metz one of the characteristics of the cinematic apparatus is that it offers the viewer a glimpse of what is absent, but always desirable, thereby leaving the spectator in a state of extended anticipation.

Video films operate according to this same logic, and the pairing of the camera and the automobile becomes a useful tool in this creation of desire. Whether the camera is inside the car or stationary next to it, what is revealed is always incomplete. The spectator may drive through wide tree-lined streets of Lagos Island or she may be watching the Mercedes do so, but in either case, the displacement of the framing makes the experience momentary. As I suggested in the previous chapter, filmmakers like

Sembène, Bekolo and Sissako pair the camera and the automobile cautiously and ironically and attempt, through gags and hyperbole, to reveal the “tricks” of cinema. In video film, as in most commercial film, there is no attempt to create this type of distance between the audience and the film. On the contrary, the aim is often to use the camera and the automobile together to create “an illusion of proximity” (Virilio, *War and Cinema* 12).

By placing the modernized city-spaces on display, but simultaneously presenting the realities of underdevelopment and the horrors of occultism, video films create a verisimilitude that anticipates the possibility of development. In other words, video films remind their viewers that this type of conspicuous consumption does in fact exist within the city they experience on a daily basis – often the affluent neighborhoods are only separated from the poorer neighborhoods by a few kilometers. One of the most remarkable accomplishments of the video film industry is that in both Nigeria and Ghana the films become more popular than the Hollywood, Kung Fu, and Bollywood films that previously dominated the market, and this is despite the fact that video films are typically more expensive than the pirated foreign films and have considerably lower production standards.<sup>18</sup> The wide appeal of the video films can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that they more closely parallel the manifest dream content of their spectators because they depict, for better or worse, their particular visions of the modern African city. That video-makers have chosen to represent a city full of shiny new cars and fancy boutiques rather than one defined by the reality of electricity outages and crumbling roads resonates with Freud’s claim that dreams are neither strange nor irrational. Rather, dreams represent an amalgam of repressed and not-so repressed desires that are triggered by the

ways in which daily experiences remind the dreamer of what he or she lacks. Thus, despite the fact that video films embrace the excessive and often irrationalist mode of the occult, they keep the dream of development and mass automobile ownership on the table. The question they never quite answer, however, is how individuals can pursue this dream when the structures capable of enabling it have collapsed.

The three films I have chosen to highlight – *Living in Bondage* (1992), *Blood Money* (1996), and *Boys Cot* (2007) – are each popular Nollywood films that, like many others, link both occult anxieties and dreams of development to the visual imagery of the automobile. I have selected these films based on their popularity and their typicality. It is, of course, difficult to measure popularity in the absence of box-office and sales statistics, but I am, in any case, more interested in “popularity” as an indicator of the way in which a film resonates with audiences. As Karin Barber reminds us, one of the most powerful aspects of African popular culture is that it is “the work of local cultural producers speaking to local audiences about pressing concerns, experiences and struggles that they share” (“Views” 2). *Living in Bondage*, as I already mentioned, is the film generally attributed to initiating the success of Nollywood and defining the industry as it exists today. In academic discourse, it is perhaps the most discussed Nollywood film – indicating that it unquestionably belongs in the embryonic Nollywood canon. More importantly, though, *Living in Bondage* is one of the only Nollywood films of the 1990s that is still being sold today. It can easily be purchased online or in more specialized video stores in Accra or Lagos. In a market that is highly geared to selling only the newest and latest films, the continued availability of *Living in Bondage* speaks to its lasting fame and significant staying power. Although it is no longer in circulation, *Blood*

*Money*, starring the highly popular Zack Orji, might also be considered to be a “classical” Nollywood film. Both John McCall and Birgit Meyer have written on the popularity of the film in Nigeria and Ghana, respectively, and have noted the profound ways in which its warnings against the bloody nature of greed resonated with the local audiences they studied. Furthermore, both *Living in Bondage* and *Blood Money* belong to the highly popular genre that we might call the occult melodrama and have many of the plot elements typical to that genre. Both films are morality tales that focus on murderous family men, money cults, “blood wealth,” and retribution. As the Nollywood industry grows at a rapid pace, so too does the diversity of the genres and sub-genres, but the occult melodrama, in various guises, has remained a constant.

Afam Okereke’s *Boys Cot* (2007)<sup>19</sup> – and I am also including the sequel *The Return of Boys Cot*, both of which are two-part films that I will simply refer to as *Boys Cot* – is a film that has been a top-seller on Nollywood websites and has generated significant chatter on online Nollywood discussion boards. Moreover, *Boys Cot* is typical of an increasingly common category of occult melodrama that focuses on the activities of 419 criminals.<sup>20</sup> 419 is the Nigerian penal code for financial crime and is the colloquial term used to describe scam artists, forgers, impersonators, and money doublers. These types of criminals have become increasingly visible and active in the post-oil-boom economy and have gained global notoriety by using internet technology to seek out victims across the world, sending out the familiar emails requesting various types of financial “help.”<sup>21</sup> Although 419 men do not necessarily participate in witchcraft or even in violent crime, I would argue that they are nonetheless part of the occult economy. This is not simply because, as I will discuss below, they are often rumored to utilize sorcery



and establish secret cults, but also because they participate in financial activities that are associated with money magic and because their scams require a considerable amount of dramatic trickery and obfuscation. What separates the occult economy from the above-ground world of finance is thus the degree to which the former utilizes secrecy, the art of magic, and dubious and indiscernible methodologies. Admittedly, though, the line is often blurred, and it must not be forgotten that such a blurring is at the very heart of Marx's notion of a mysterious and hieroglyphic capitalism described in terms of fetishism, a word first used in relation to the occultism of West African religion.<sup>22</sup> Thus, by reading the more literally occult films of *Living in Bondage* and *Blood Money* alongside *Boys Cot*, which does not directly deal with magic, I hope to foreground how all three films speak to anxieties about an occult economy that strips subjects of their agency and autonomy, without, however, entirely giving up on the liberal promises of automobility.

### **The Mercedes Returns: Nnebue's *Living in Bondage***

Kenneth Nnebue's Igbo video film *Living in Bondage* is, like Sembène's *Xala*, a Mephistophelian tale. However, unlike El Hadji, Andy Okeke at the beginning of *Living in Bondage* has not yet discovered how to acquire wealth in the complex world of the postcolonial city. Dissatisfied with the pay at his previous job, Andy attempts to go into business on his own, but he finds himself unable to garner wealth as his trading partners have. Each of the three friends with whom he does business has been able to acquire a Mercedes, and Andy admits that he too is desperate to own one. Andy runs into Paul, a former school friend driving by in a Mercedes, who takes Andy to a party at Ichie

Million's home and introduces Andy to his "millionaire's club friends." Eventually, Andy is permitted to join their exclusive cult of Lord Lucifer and is informed that he must offer a blood sacrifice of the person he loves the most, his wife Merit. Andy is shocked to hear that such a sacrifice is required, but each of the cult members reveals that he too sacrificed a loved one and that the loved one was quickly replaced by more friends, wives, and luxury cars like Mercedes, BMWs, and Pathfinders. Andy presents Merit to the cult, and she dies in a bizarre bloodletting where her blood is given to the cult members to drink. Nnebue's message here could not be more explicit: those who get rich do so with the lifeblood of the most innocent.

The film then jumps forward several months, and the audience sees that Andy has acquired the signs of material wealth – a mansion, fine clothing, and a blood-colored Mercedes. Several hours of the five-hour film are consumed with Andy enjoying the good life, frequenting fancy restaurants and hotels, and entertaining women. But Andy begins to be haunted by apparitions of Merit, and he eventually goes mad, tears off his clothing, and wanders the streets of Lagos digging through trash bins like a pauper. Luckily Tina, a reformed prostitute, discovers Andy in the streets and brings him to church where he confesses his sins and is redeemed.

Despite his despicable deeds, the audience can sympathize with Andy's initial dilemma. The problem with pursuing wealth in sub-Saharan Africa, they know, is that opportunities to become wealthy via legitimate routes are few and far between. Andy's wife Merit is well aware of this and tells Andy that his friends are only rich because they participate in money doubling schemes or drug-pushing. She would rather see them make do with what they have, but Andy identifies, above all, as a consumer whose

existence is contingent upon objects. For Andy, not owning an automobile is a source of what he describes as physical malaise: “My body is suffering” is a common refrain for the pre-rich Andy. Yet Andy does not appear to be suffering in any visible, outward manner. Merit has a decent-paying job as a secretary for Ichie Million, and she has even been able to borrow a substantial sum of money from her parents for Andy to start his own business. The couple dresses reasonably well, lives in a small but respectable apartment, and has sufficient food. They are quite far from the millions of Nigerians living in true poverty, and they are certainly not representatives of the *lumpenproletariat* eking out an existence in Nigeria’s growing slums. What Andy means, then, is not that his body itself is suffering, but that his ego is suffering. (Thus, it is no coincidence that Ego is the name of the wife who replaces Merit, the one who “deserves” to be Andy’s wife.) However, Andy’s choice to emphasize his corporeal misery is important in understanding his position as a consumer-subject in the neo-liberal global economic order that has become the rule of the day.

Andy’s body is suffering because he is failing to consume – to nourish his body – in the way that he believes a viable capitalist subject must. Cars become a particular obsession for him because they are the most visible and outward manifestation of the ability of his body to become fully integrated into consumer society. As Marshall McLuhan suggests, cars, like all technologies, are extensions of the physical body, “extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed” (90). Thus, it is in this sense that Andy’s Mercedes acts not as a carapace but, rather, as a prosthesis. In *Xala* the car is a carapace because it allows the members of the comprador class to “encase themselves in expensive consumer goods” (Mulvey 519) – it serves as a

shell for some, while leaving others, like the beggars, completely vulnerable and open to the harsh realities of daily life. Likewise, it props up the façade of Senegalese autonomy and helps to perpetuate the illusion that independence has achieved its intended goal of allowing Senegalese citizens a slice of the consumer pie. But in *Living in Bondage*, everyone seems to know that the cult members get rich by appropriating the lifeblood of others; there is no gradual process of revelation here as there is in *Xala*. Merit, in fact, repeatedly rebukes the advances of the Mercedes-driving Chief Omega whom she directly accuses of matricide, an act that Omega does not deem necessary to deny, and Andy's involvement in Merit's death is hardly a secret. The car, then, while it is still a fetish object of mythical status, does not protect the body, nor does it camouflage the moral transgressions it necessitates. Rather, it works to integrate the subject into a world where these transgressions have become normal.

The prosthesis points not only to the way in which a body has been wounded or disfigured, but also to the way in which it can constitute or reconstitute itself with and through material objects and technologies. Unlike the carapace, which is always only an outer shell, the prosthesis joins the body to extend its ability to function as a human. While I do not wish to trivialize or erase the very real disabled bodies that make use of prosthetics (not to mention the disabled, third-world bodies that often have to make do without prosthetics), the prosthesis serves as a useful metaphor for the way in which Andy relies upon the car to constitute himself as a "normal" consumer subject. Like a prosthetic limb, the Mercedes adds to or extends his ability to participate in consumer society by filling the wound created by his missing wages – wages he should have been able to obtain through honest work. It helps him to navigate a world in which subjects

are defined by the objects from which they are simultaneously kept at arm's length. But, at the same time, it makes him dependent on an artificial body: his self-worth is contingent upon the possession of a machine. In other words, the Mercedes both extends Andy's agency and limits it. Thus, in the process of pursuing his dream of automobility, Andy loses his autonomy. Although he obtains a car, he becomes subject to the demands of the cult, and eventually he finds his own actions determined more by the ghost of Merit than by his own free will. He can never become the type of "self-moving" and "self-directing" individual that philosophers like Thomas Hobbes describe.

Furthermore, *Living in Bondage* is replete with multiple extended scenes depicting grandiose displays of wealth. The scene at Ichie Million's party, for instance, takes up sixteen minutes of screen time and contains very little dialogue to advance the plot. Here the millionaires gorge themselves on meat and dance to Oliver de Coque's song *Ana Enwe Obodo Enwe* ("We Own the World"). By contrast, Andy's descent into madness under a highway overpass takes up only five minutes of screen time, and it does not occur until over four hours into the five-hour film. Thus, the plot advances the moral lesson that the personal accumulation of wealth, no matter what the given obstacles are, should not be pursued at the expense of others. However, the visual images of abundant wealth send a more ambivalent message: they place the conspicuous consumption of the urban elite on display and confirm the fact that there is indeed much money to be made in Lagos. Moreover, at the end of the film, when Andy and Tina both embrace the church, Nnebue intimates that another point of entry into bourgeois respectability is possible. Although the audience is not sure whether the church will lead Andy to material prosperity, the narrative logic of the film – and of many Nigerian churches that now offer

profit through prayer – certainly does not foreclose the potential for this type of financial redemption. In fact, considering that many popular Pentecostal churches in Africa now preach the “prosperity gospel” in which material wealth – often embodied in the Mercedes of the pastor<sup>23</sup> – can also act as the sign of moral righteousness, Andy very well might be able to regain at least some of his former status. What has come under attack in the film then is not the dream of automobility, but rather the un-Christian method Andy has taken to pursue this dream.

### **Excess, Rumor, and Anxiety: *Blood Money***

Although the African Anglophone video industry is in many senses unique in its success at using new technology, the films, whether they are love stories, occult films, or comedies, often conform to standard melodramatic forms. I use the term “melodrama” here to express a certain mode, one that Peter Brooks describes as a mode of excess, or heightened dramatization, that is framed in terms of personal, moral imperatives. Brooks locates the origins of the melodrama within the epistemological moment of the French revolution. He notes that it is during this historical rupture that the traditional sacred institutions, like the Church and the monarchy, as well as the hierarchical societies they denote, are completely invalidated (15). Melodrama is the form that emerges in this post-lapsarian world where good and evil can no longer be imposed from above and must be interiorized and individualized.<sup>24</sup> Hence, for Brooks the melodrama resides within the province of the “moral occult,” the domain where spiritual values are masked beneath the surface of quotidian existence but must somehow be revealed and restored.

Because it is tied to the French revolution, the moment of bourgeois triumph, melodrama is, by and large, viewed as an expression of bourgeois values, codes, and norms. According to Paul Willemen, “Melodrama is the drama of capitalist modernization, framed in such a way as to exclude the very possibility of change in a socialist direction” (188). In his analysis of *Andaz*, a popular Indian melodrama from the 1950s, Willemen argues that although the melodrama is able to capture the tensions involved in trying to adapt Indian pre-capitalist social relations to the present capitalist milieu, it does so by “forgetting that the Indian bourgeoisie is itself a colonial legacy” (186). A similar argument could be made about the Nollywood films, which seem content to ignore any links between the colonial moment and the present-day unequal distribution of wealth that is at the heart of many of their plots. But rather than dismissing Nollywood films as yet another instance of historical amnesia or – liberal apologia – as Marx suggests of Eugene Sue’s famous *Mystères de Paris* – I prefer to examine the particularities and ambivalences of melodrama as it travels from one context to another.

Unlike Willemen and Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser argues that melodrama can be radically ambiguous and that depending on its emphasis and context, it may function either as escapist or subversive (516). Elsaesser notes that melodramatic forms have changed throughout the course of history and have varied by country. Instead of fixing the melodramatic form within the French Revolution, he posits a dual genealogy. The first lineage comes from oral narrative and dramas like the medieval morality play, fairy tales, music-hall dramas and folk songs. Here, he argues that melodramas have a “myth-making function” insofar as their meaning lies within the structure of their action, rather

than within individualized choices (513). The second current does indeed lead from the romantic drama that peaked after the French Revolution, but Elsaesser argues that it is also rooted in the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, which emphasized “private feelings and interiorized (puritan, pietist) codes of morality and conscience” (514). I would argue that both of these genealogies are present in the Nollywood video films, which come out of the oral theater tradition, but also are clearly influenced by the bourgeois family melodrama of the global soap opera.

Recognizing this dual genealogy helps us to understand how video films are often repositories for local rumors. The films dramatize and lend melodramatic excess to everyday stories that circulate in the marketplace, living rooms, and local tabloids. Even when they describe unlikely occult events, these rumors help to validate and explain the very real feelings of vulnerability that postcolonial subjects experience. Amongst other things, they explain how, in the face of such widespread unemployment and poverty, some men and women seem to have no problem accumulating luxury cars and other signs of wealth. The melodramatic excess of the video films lends expression to the feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness that African subjects undergo as they try to function and succeed in this type of economic crisis. The ways in which video film can dramatize anxieties about local rumors can be seen clearly in the case of Ojiofor Ezeanyaeche’s popular film *Blood Money*.

*Blood Money* illustrates the simultaneous resentment for and attraction to the new Nigerian elite who parade through cities in luxury cars, but are often suspected of illegitimate trade and occult activity. The film, set in Lagos, is loosely based on local rumors of ritual murder and fraud that crystallized during the famous Otokoto Saga. In



September of 1996, the local news station in Owerri in southeastern Nigeria broadcast images of a worker at the popular Otokoto Hotel holding the severed head of a young boy. Several days later, the police found the rest of the boy's body buried at the hotel. The sudden death of the hotel worker in police custody (a possible cover up for police involvement) and the discovery of the body at the hotel led to a series of riots in Owerri and a flood of rumors concerning the discovery of more human corpses at millionaires' homes and at a local church.

According to the anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith, the rioters in Owerri attacked only symbols of the young elite and the religious and state powers that were rumored to support them. They burned, amongst other things, fancy vehicles, the Otokoto Hotel, an upscale supermarket, expensive homes, and the palace of a local chief. The riots were seen largely as a purging of the "connected evils" of kidnapping, ritual murder, and the accumulation of illegitimate wealth through 419 crimes (Smith 804). Although it was widely known that the nouveaux riches of Owerri – like those throughout Nigeria – were 419 men, operating largely with either tacit or direct support of government officials and church leaders, the discovery of the headless boy at the hotel seemed to confirm long-standing rumors that the elite were also involved in ritual murder and the trafficking of human body parts.

The storyline of *Blood Money* roughly follows that of *Living in Bondage*, but it also makes explicit reference to many of the rumors that exploded in Nigeria in the aftermath of the Otokoto scandal. For instance, Smith, who was doing fieldwork in Owerri at the time of the riots but was not familiar with *Blood Money*, describes rumors about a boy who died vomiting banknotes in his uncle's home and others about men who

were temporarily turned into vultures so that their businesses could flourish. Both of these rumors made their way into the plot of *Blood Money*, which follows the story of Mike Mouka, a bank manager who, at the urging of his wife, misappropriates money for a laundering scheme. When Mike himself becomes the victim of fraud and is unable to repay the money, the bank discovers his theft and threatens to send him to prison if he cannot replenish the funds.

Out of desperation, Mike seeks the help of the extremely wealthy, Mercedes-driving Chief Collins who offers to let Mike join his cult of “Vulture Men.”<sup>25</sup> Like Andy Okeke, Mike is initially repulsed by the idea, but eventually he is seduced by the promise of riches. He first offers his own mother, whom he kills with a magical death cloth, and then he is turned into a vulture for three days while he feeds on human flesh. At the end of the three days, he is turned back into a human and is told to bring the cult a young boy. The boy is transformed into a zombie that spews out an endless supply of fresh banknotes, and Mike is instructed to keep the boy locked away in a hidden room of his house. As in *Living in Bondage*, several hours of the film are consumed with spectacles of Mike enjoying his newfound wealth. While Mike accumulates cars and other material goods, the zombified boy, immobilized in Mike’s mansion, becomes the antithesis of an autonomous, mobile subject. He is a complete automaton, the ultimate figure of alienated labor and of the disempowered victims of a rapacious capitalism. However, as the “Great Vulture” begins to demand more human heads, Mike too becomes an automaton of the cult. He is turned into a killing machine, and, like Andy, he cannot escape the torment of his victims’ ghosts. Mike’s punishment – his complete loss of autonomy – therefore aptly fits his crime.

Yet while Mike's actions are despicable, he is, to some extent, seen as the victim of his wife's initial desire for more money, the fraudsters' dishonesty, and the "Great Vulture's" quest for human blood. The real scorn in the film is reserved for Chief Collins who participates in the highly profitable trade of human body parts. In his menacing Mercedes, which is shot from a low-angle position to designate its position of power, the Chief collects body parts from a morgue and from a hotel where his henchmen have murdered an innocent businesswoman. He then sells her hands and breasts to an Arab man for a briefcase full of American dollars. Collins' men also use the Mercedes in order to lure young boys whom they will use in both ritual murder and international organ trade.

As Arjun Appadurai argues, the global trade in human body parts, as well as the trade of whole humans as laborers, is one of the forms of the flexibility of globalization. It represents for him the "new circulatory logics" of global finance and typifies a world no longer marked by the "social life of things" (as his earlier work suggests), but by the liquidity and malleability of humans in the marketplace. In *Blood Money*, the vulture men meet in a high-rise building, they live in mansions, dress in the latest global fashions, and trade on the international market. They are clearly no strangers to the world Appadurai describes "in which cyborgs meet flexible citizens, clones meet split subjects, and organs for sale meet cyber sociality" (36). However, the objects that they use to define themselves and to participate in the global networks of trade indicate that the world of services or practices and the world of things are inseparable and mutually dependent. Furthermore, to relegate the world of objects to the margins is to miss the point that possessions, like Collins' Mercedes, represent a world of values gone awry

where the human body is something that can be replaced by material goods.

Like the rioters in Owerri, the film therefore targets the outward signs, the specific “things” of the capitalist market, in part to express anger but also in part to create an alternative spectacle by calling attention to the excesses and horrors of the new elite. Smith quotes the following newspaper article that articulates one way in which the highly mobile 419 men are viewed in Nigeria:

The result is that big designer and exotic cars were bought, huge magnificent mansions and castles were built in villages for rodents and insects because their owners were always either in Lagos or overseas. A new class of "*Nouveaux Riche*" emerged. They moved in convoys of about six cars on the largely untarred roads. The first, usually a jeep, often a Nissan Pathfinder followed by another jeep (this time either a Mitsubishi Pajero, Izuzu [sic] Rodeo or the America Cherokee), then the man in the Lexus brand of car followed by an American Limousine (carrying wife and children where he is married), escorted by two V-Boot Benz cars . . . . Whenever they spoke money was splashed. (qtd. in Smith 815)

Therefore by smashing these cars and torching mansions, the Owerri rioters sent a message to the 419 men that they were no longer able to hide in their hotels and convoys. Similarly, *Blood Money* forces the mysterious world of organ trading, 419 fraud, and cult ritual into public view where it can be judged according to the audience's moral codes. The pivotal moment of the film (in a scene reminiscent of the opening of *Goodfellas*) occurs when the police open the trunk of Chief Collins' Benz and discover the bodies of two murdered boys, exposing the secrets of his occult commerce and leading to Collins'

eventual arrest. This incident is paralleled by the shattering of a mirror that Mike uses to conjure images of his victims, an event that turns Mike into the hunted rather than the hunter. In both instances, the restoration of law and justice terminates the ability of the characters to hide behind objects and representations. The film sends the message that these men can no longer parade around in fancy automobiles in a country that is too poor to even tar its roads: *Blood Money* holds them accountable for their actions.

However, at the same time that the mysterious and obscure practices of the vulture men are brought out into the open and declared to be illusions, tricks, and highly orchestrated rackets, the film itself hides behind its own magic. Throughout *Blood Money*, Ezeanyaeche's deployment of special effects – the turning of human to vulture before our eyes; a mirror that displays images of far-away victims being murdered; a boy who vomits money – often reinforces the mysterious and opaque nature of occult economies. In this way, the cinematic images create the type of generalized striptease that Metz describes. Acts like the opening of the Benz's trunk make visible, or unveil, the occult practices of the vulture men, but, at the same time, the special effects as well as the shots of a modern, glistening Lagos “makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has previously shown, to take back as well as to retain” (Metz 77). Rather than laying bare what Bertolt Brecht calls the “causal network of events,” *Blood Money* restores both the magic of film and the modern spaces of Lagos.

Here, as in *Living in Bondage*, the dream of development has turned into a nightmare, a world of human vultures, zombies, and ritual murderers who inhabit modern city spaces and are supported by corrupt police officers and government officials. But the nightmare is not presented as the natural result of the failures of the postcolonial state.

On the contrary, it is the result of the *unnatural* practices of people who believe that, as a corrupt police officer tells Mike, “Today the ends justify the means.” Thus, what becomes important in the film is punishing individuals who have violated codes of morality by bastardizing modernity, by turning high-rise office buildings into spaces of cult worship, by using their Benzes to kidnap young children, and by transforming human beings into automatons. Those who are rebuked in *Blood Money* are those very automobile, car-owning subjects who have impinged upon the personal liberties of others by taking their lives, their organs, or their free will – they have, in fact, acted against the liberal ideals of automobility and the pursuit of personal freedom by denying this pursuit to others.

### **Working for the Hummer: *Boys Cot***

Although occult economies begin in the colonial moment – when the circulation of new goods and values radically restructured indigenous economies – Jean and John Comaroff use the term to describe the proliferation of occult reactions to an economy structured upon the flexibility of laborers, markets, and products. Occult economies are driven by systemic conditions of inequality and by the frustration and outright bewilderment that are generated by the economic disparity of changing global markets. They are also the product of a neo-liberal spirit that promulgates freedom and self-fashioning through consumption rather than through labor (Comaroffs, “Alien-Nation” 20).

Like many observers of globalization and postmodernism, the Comaroffs contend that as consumption has become the “invisible hand” or “moving spirit” of the present

age, it also has been accompanied by a concomitant waning in the importance of production (“Alien-Nation” 17). What has occurred, they argue, is that on a global level production and labor have become less salient in the creation of value, identity, and class consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Although the Comaroffs insist on keeping production as part of the dialogue on global capitalism (for it goes without saying that consumption is utterly dependent on the production of goods), for many scholars who prioritize new modes of self-stylizing – or what Foucault calls subjectivation – the question of labor seems to have evaporated altogether.

Recently, globalization scholars who wish to privilege the sites of consumption have brushed aside the workplace – whether it is the factory, the office, or the makeshift street stall – in order to make room for a more abstract “production of modes of existence” (Bayart, *Global Subjects* 130). This devaluation of production, however, not only overlooks important aspects in the creation of identity, it also leaves us without a theoretical apparatus to understand how values are constructed in societies where there is a major paucity of work opportunities. The issues of unemployment, underemployment, and illegitimate employment are often skirted by assertions that identities are the messy conglomeration of *all* of the fragmentary, provisional, and imaginative experiences of day-to-day life in the global metropolis (see, for instance, Mbembe and Nutall’s “Writing the World from an African Metropolis” and Michael Watts’ apposite riposte.) While this all-inclusive approach does allow us to avoid the pitfalls of reducing the third-world subject to his or her conditions of poverty, it does not help us to explain the complex and tangled relation that many subjects have to a consumer culture that flourishes despite the fact that formal modes of earning money have dwindled. Furthermore, it does not

provide an explanation for the present historical moment in which global capitalism has led to hitherto unimaginable amounts of accumulation without creating more jobs. The trope of “occult economies” helps address this lacuna in contemporary scholarship by allowing us to theorize the presence of the absence of work.

In *Blood Money* Chief Collins and Mike Mouka represent the worst sort of criminals because their participation in the occult economy is motivated by sheer greed. Most audience members do not identify, nor can they sympathize, with rich men trying to get richer. Thus, when Collins is arrested and the ghosts of Mike’s murder victims hunt him down and turn him back into a vulture, the audience feels vindicated. Yet, as Andrew Apter points out, in certain cases – especially when the crimes are non-violent – there is also a degree of Robinhood-esque righteousness attached to 419 scams. Because these scams often dupe corrupt businessmen and politicians or “first-world” victims who have typically been the ones to benefit from the flows of global capital, 419 can be seen as a form of wealth redistribution. For instance, the chorus to the popular theme song “I Go Chop Your Dollar” to Uzodinma Okpechi’s 419 film *The Master* (2005) repeats the refrain, “I am the master. *You* are the *mugu*.” Thus, it is clear that 419 scams attempt to reverse the power dynamics that have long-since placed third-world subjects in positions where they are anything but master. Since the 419 schemes – that is, when they do not involve murder and kidnapping – work with the somewhat willing participation of greedy victims who believe that they too will profit from the scam, there is a sense that the 419ers, many of whom come from humble backgrounds, are simply using the tools of global mobility, such as the internet, fax machines, cell phones, and international banking, to their own advantage. They are in essence fighting back against the



unevenness of global capitalism with the very resources it has generated. In *Boys Cot*, there is, therefore, an initial sympathy for the young characters who are simply trying to become successful businessmen.

The main characters in *Boys Cot* – Kelvin, Philip, and Duran – have just finished their stints in the National Youth Service Corps and are excited about moving into the real world, making “real” money, and starting families. However, four years after their graduation, Kelvin, who dreamt of becoming a big oil executive, is working for a small company but is not earning enough money to pay his rent, and Philip is unemployed and desperately trying to get a visa to the United States. Duran, whom we see carousing in a Hummer and drinking Cristal in the opening sequence of the film, is the only one able to live the lifestyle they all desire because he has become the assistant to a prosperous 419 man. Duran therefore has all the outward signs of success and global citizenry that his friends lack.

Yet Duran feels that his boss, who has a bigger home and several Benzes at his disposal, should be paying him more. He decides to go out on his own, and he enlists the help of Kelvin and Philip. The boys spend months stationed at internet cafes looking for *mugus*, or fraud victims, until finally they find a wealthy and gullible Westerner willing to send them five hundred thousand dollars. Once they have their initial seed money, they are able to reel in dubious Nigerian politicians looking to hide their illegitimate money as well as avaricious foreigners who are eager to make fast money. But they falter and lose audience sympathy when they begin to target innocent victims as well. Kelvin, posing as a white American, meets a British woman over the internet, becomes engaged to her, and then dupes her out of her entire life savings. Then, in a scheme that

takes him months to execute, Kelvin sells Philip's sister to a Kuwaiti slave trafficker by convincing her that the Kuwaiti works for Steven Spielberg and will be helping her to make it big in Hollywood. Philip's father, who notices his son's new automobiles, assumes that Philip has killed his sister in a cult ritual.

Kelvin, Philip, and Duran epitomize both the ideals and excesses of automobility. They are self-made men who are able to drive their Hummers and SUVs around Lagos as they please. They use their money to bribe government officials and purchase false documents that give them access to places and pools of information that are usually off limits. Like Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil crossing the Sahara in Citroën half-tracks, they have used technology to conquer space, and although the internet is the tool they have used to do so, their large automobiles remain the most recognizable signs of their success. This is why the film opens with a scene in which Duran spends several minutes speeding through the city in his Hummer with a girl and a bottle of Cristal at his side. Although the scene is never connected to the plot, and, in fact, occurs temporally out of place, it serves to identify the film as one about "fast" wealth. Any viewer familiar with the nouveaux riches of Lagos and their manner of conspicuous consumption will immediately be able to identify Duran as a 419 man.

However, if automobility is about the liberal pursuit of personal freedom – about the ability to be able to do what one wants, when one wants – the young men in *Boys Cot* are clearly hemmed in by the limited economic opportunities available to them. They live in a world culture where consumer goods are seen as central to one's worth and identity, but when they try, they cannot find any legitimate roads to earning money. Eventually, after the Kuwaiti smuggler who purchased Philip's sister is apprehended, the

Nigerian Economic Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) is able to track down the boys. Yet even though Kelvin, Philip, and Duran are undone by their excessive greed, they are also victims of the unequal distribution of wealth that has given rise to an occult economy. While the film celebrates the possibilities of automobility that exist in the increasingly flexible global market, it also critiques the conditions that prevent Nigerian youth from obtaining it. It shows that automobility in postcolonial Nigeria often masks and compensates for a lack of real autonomy. As I have argued, it is this sort of double move that typifies the ambivalence of Nollywood films towards capitalist society.

### **Conclusion**

Nigeria, like many African countries in the immediate aftermath of independence, focused its attention on infrastructural projects like improving road networks and constructing modernist buildings. The goal of these projects was to push African cities onto the global stage as cosmopolitan, international centers that could participate on equal footing in the global market. While this strategy worked to a limited extent and for a limited time, most subjects found themselves unable to participate in Fordist consumption to the extent that the modernizers had hoped. As various economic crises of the 1980s created a surplus of laborers and withered away the professional middle classes, experiencing the ideals of modern automobility – freedom, movement, progress, autonomy – became even more elusive.

Video films, which were established in response to this shortage of employment opportunities, express the various instabilities of a world where gradual accumulation through hard work, education, and individual merit are no longer paths that lead one to a

successful career. The usual roads to progress have been corroded by an economy that runs on dishonesty and trickery. But despite the fact that the consumer objects of these films are often shown to be a smokescreen for dishonesty and corruption, there is nothing anti-capitalist in these films. The economic hopes expressed by the characters show that they have not given up on the notion that success is achieved through consumption, or that auto-consumerism can lead to freedom and autonomy. Thus, *Living in Bondage*, *Blood Money*, and *Boys Cot* aim to expose the individual's irresponsibility rather than the inherent shortcomings of free market economics. And, like most video films, this critique of personal avarice is also accompanied by a preservation of the visual spectacle of material goods upon which the films' economic success depends.

However, the car cannot simply be reduced to a series of surface meanings or lifestyle options that are available to different social groups. Against those like Dick Hebdige or Daniel Miller, who argue that the car participates in an economy of consumption where there is nothing left to conceal or reveal (Hebdige 71), I have argued that the automobile in Nigerian video films is a signifier of unscrupulous and occult accumulation that is obtained with the lifeblood of one's fellow human beings. Nevertheless, it is true that while the video films push the workings of the occult above ground, the myth of the car and the ideals of automobility are left entirely intact. That one could and in fact should have a car is unquestioned, and concerns about a more equal and democratic approach to urban transportation never enter into the narrative. Furthermore, video films ignore the global, geopolitical problems that are generated as automobile ownership becomes more widespread, and it is particularly egregious that the films turn a blind eye to the records of Shell and other oil companies in their own

backyard. This lack of commitment to holding multinational companies accountable for their human rights records is perhaps even worse than the historical amnesia that Paul Willemsen attributes to Indian melodrama because it is an amnesia of the present. Yet to dismiss the films on this account alone and to fail to engage them critically would not allow us to understand the particularity of the historical moment that they represent. From the beginning of European imperialism to the projects of the postcolonial state, history has taught African subjects that liberal and neo-liberal signs of progress often hide that which is “evil” and corrupt, and the video films demonstrate a keen dramatization of these hard-learned lessons.

Today development projects have seen a revival in West African cities, but the video films reflect a celebration of the market that is marked by a pronounced degree of hesitance. While most of these films are unflinching in their depiction of wealth, prosperity, and unbridled consumption as something wholly desirable, they are also weary of the darker side of power and success. Thus, rather than underscoring the various modes of self-fashioning available to the global subject, the video films place consumption as something that is central to the creation of meaning in daily life, but that is nevertheless highly fraught with moral ambiguity and characterized more than ever by obstructions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Technically, Nollywood refers to the Nigerian film industry, but it is often used to encompass the Ghanaian one as well. The two industries frequently share actors, director, and producers. Still the Ghanaian industry is sometimes referred to as Ghallywood or Ghanawood. Although the examples in this chapter come from Nigerian video films, I consider my observations to be applicable to Ghanaian video films as well.

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<sup>2</sup> When I visited the studio of the Ghallywood producer Socrate Safo in Accra, he had recently established a system where his production company would be able to release one movie every week. The emphasis, he told me, was on quantity, not quality.

<sup>3</sup> When I was conducting research in Dakar, I interviewed several aspiring filmmakers with the hopes that they would be able to tell me about the African films that they enjoyed that might not have made it into international circulation. More often, however, they had not seen the “classics” of African cinema – much less independent films that had not captured the attention of Western intellectuals – because there were no copies available. They were amazed that I could get many of the films from amazon.com, an option not available to them because they did not have credit cards.

<sup>4</sup> See Giovanni Arrighi’s “Africa in Crisis.” As I discussed in my introduction, Arrighi attributes Africa’s economic collapse to the crisis in world capitalism – and the United States’ responses to it – that began in the 1970s when United States became a major debtor rather than lender and began to compete for capital. This, in effect, reversed the global flow of capital, and led to higher interest rates, structural adjustment programs, and a contraction in money supply that had a drastic affect on sub-Saharan African countries. These conditions, according to Arrighi, led to an economic crisis when African countries, for the first time, experienced a surplus of workers instead of a deficit.

<sup>5</sup> For a complete history of Nigerian media, see Brian Larkin’s *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Larkin explains that both the mobile cinema units used by the Colonial Film Unit and the state-produced media of the postcolonial government addressed the audience as political subjects in need of uplift and progress. According to Larkin, the video film industry is the first time Nigerian media has been able to exist outside of this type of framework. Birgit Meyer in “Ghanaian Popular Cinema and the Magic in and of Film” makes a similar claim about the trajectory of Ghanaian cinema.

<sup>6</sup> Onookome Okome makes a similar argument in his discussion of the “active” audiences of Nigerian video films. He argues that as they watch the films together, Nigerians try to make sense of the miseries that surround them. This involves a double move in which the audience sees the real world in which they live next to a distinct but interrelated wish-world where magical transformations and instant wealth are possible. See “Nollywood: Spectatorship, Audience and the Sites of Consumption.” Brian Larkin makes a related claim when he suggests that video technology has enabled the emergence of a new public sphere where people can debate and discuss social and economic issues in a community space.

<sup>7</sup> Birgit Meyer makes a similar claim about the visual aesthetics of the video films and about ambiguity of the cities presented in them. See “Sensuous Mediations: The City in ‘Ghanaian’ Films – and Beyond.”

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*.

<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, even when money comes from an identifiable source, like the earnings of an overseas relative or the profits of a savvy entrepreneur, the precise ways in which the money is earned are often obscure to those family members who also benefit from this wealth.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*; Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*; and Jean and John Comaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants and Millennial Capitalism."

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes notes that the global scarcity of organs has led many people to seek organs on the black-market, causing understandable anxiety in places like Nigeria and Ghana, as well as in other areas of the impoverished Global South, that have become the source of the organs.

<sup>12</sup> Nyamnjoh makes reference to similar stories in colonial Cameroon where victims of witchcraft and zombiehood were rumored to be transported to invisible plantations by motorcar ("Images of Nyongo" 245).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this film and an important critique of male violence in Ghanaian video films, see Wisdom S. Agorde's "The Triad of Men's Violences in *Time: A Ghanaian Occult Video Film*."

<sup>14</sup> In fact, in Socrate Safo's film *Women in Love*, a born again Christian taxi driver saves a woman who has been lured into a lesbian relationship with a member of a Mami Wata cult. The driver urges the innocent woman to pray and tells her that prayer will help her find Jesus and be free from the cult. Likewise, in *Living in Bondage*, it is a *danfo* taxi that brings Andy to church. It seems that "working-class" cars therefore have some, albeit tentative, association with the restoration of morality.

<sup>15</sup> Birgit Meyer writes, "The city of Accra features in video films in at least three different manners. Firstly, much effort is put into visualizing Accra as part and parcel of a particular kind of urban modernity, with the car, good roads and high buildings as characteristic markers. Movies are usually replete with long scenes – in fact, too long for spectators from outside – in which cars take the audiences on a ride passing by key sites of modernity – and, interestingly, these scenes are usually accompanied by Western style music" ("Sensuous Mediations" 263).

<sup>16</sup> Although not all video films focus exclusively on the wealthy, it seems that many of the most popular urban films do have at least one main character living in a mansion and driving luxury cars. Video-makers I spoke with admitted that scenes of poverty generally

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have less appeal with local audiences. Also see Birgit Meyer's "Sensuous Mediations: The City in 'Ghanaian' Films – and Beyond."

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Luc Godard reminds us of this when he prefaces his film *Le Mépris* by quoting André Bazin: "The cinema gives us a world in accordance with our desires."

<sup>18</sup> Although as Moradewun Adejunmobi argues, once pirated foreign films reach African audiences, the images have become so degraded that they are not noticeably different from the Nollywood films.

<sup>19</sup> The *Boys Cot* films follow the success of Okereke's *Girls Cot* (2006) series, which borrowed its name from John Nkiruka's unrelated hit film *Women's Cot* (2003). The word "cot" has generated a considerable amount of confusion on Nollywood bulletins, but one poster on the site "naijarules" claims that the word "cot" refers to a protective shelter. In the case of *Women's Cot*, the shelter is used to protect widows who were being abused, but the cot quickly degenerates into a violent *cult* of widows who murder men. The slippage from innocent cot to violent cult is present in each of the various *Cot* films.

<sup>20</sup> Other 419 films include Uzodinma Okpechi's *The Master* (2005) and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Yahoo Millionaire* (2007).

<sup>21</sup> According to Andrew Apter, 419 scams may be Nigeria's second largest source of foreign money after oil.

<sup>22</sup> See William Pietz's "The Problem of the Fetish."

<sup>23</sup> Brenda Chalfin, for instance, describes one Ghanaian church whose logo combines the insignia of the Mercedes Benz and the Cadillac. On the fancy cars of many Pentecostal pastors, see Birgit Meyer's "Prayers, Guns and Ritual Murder" as well as Rijk Van Dijk's "The Moral Life of the Gift in Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches in the Diaspora."

<sup>24</sup> Brooks' position is not unlike that of Georg Lukács who in *The Theory of the Novel* situates the rise of the novel within the historical moment when the Church no longer provides a transcendental home. The novel for Lukács is the representative form of a world that is fallen and without immanent meaning.

<sup>25</sup> John McCall says that the vulture is a common figure in urban legend in Nigeria. He writes, "In the village, little exists in the way of garbage, but in urban areas, mountainous stacks of refuse collect at dump-points throughout the cities, and these are perpetually covered with large vultures picking through the malodorous monuments to capitalist surplus. The vulture has clearly taken a place in Nigerian popular cosmology as a symbol of predatory capitalism" (91).



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<sup>26</sup> While I would like to point out that this waning in production would not apply in countries like Mexico, Brazil, China, and India where production and industrialization take on increasing significance in the daily lives of new factory workers, it is certainly the case that the overshadowing of production by consumption is characteristic of social life for many individuals in both post-industrial countries and in the largely non-industrial countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

## Chapter 5

### Women in Traffic:

#### Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Ousmane Sembène's *Faat Kiné*

*The bodywork, the lines of union are touched, the upholstery palpated, the seats tried, the doors caressed, the cushions fondled; before the wheel, one pretends to drive with one's whole body. The object here is totally prostituted, appropriated: originating from the heaven Metropolis, the Goddess in a quarter of an hour mediatized, actualizing through this exorcism the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement.*

–Roland Barthes

–Fatou, *what do you have in tow?*

–*You mean this? . . . Top of the line caboose: not for public transportation.*

–Sembène, *Faat Kiné* (2000)

Thus far, I have discussed texts in which women have been exchanged for cars, displayed in cars, and murdered for them. This chapter, which discusses Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) and Ousmane Sembène's film *Faat Kiné* (2000), examines what happens when women instead of men become the owners, drivers, and accumulators of automobiles. In the avant-garde and video films discussed in the previous chapters, the automobile functioned as a paradigmatic consumer object, one that conferred power and prestige on its male owners. Whether it was being displayed, coveted, or mocked, the private automobile was understood to be a fetish, a material object whose value did not directly correspond to its instrumental value. It was, as Guy Debord would say, pure spectacle, or image-value.<sup>1</sup> In the Nollywood films I discussed, men collected and amassed cars, often with the aid of cult and ritual powers, not because they needed functional transportation, but because the cars provided status for their owners. Cars could easily replace wives, mothers, and sisters precisely because both the

vehicles and the women served primarily to valorize male social stature. Likewise, in *Xala* El Hadji swapped a blue two-seater car for N’Gone’s virginity, washed his Mercedes with Evian water, and paraded it around Dakar in the manner of true Debordian spectacle. Even in *Quartier Mozart* and *Heremakono* the car – albeit for satirical purposes – was emptied out of its practical function, unable to participate in the “useful” act of transportation.

Thus, the films demonstrated how, under the capitalist law of value, the automobile was assigned value according to its ability to be exchanged and displayed, not according to its utilitarian purposes. As Marx would say, its fetishism did not arise from its use-value but rather from the mysterious character of the object as it entered into exchange as a social hieroglyphic. Moreover, the automobile was also a fetish in the Freudian sense. It was the locus of displaced lack, a proxy for the phallus: in Freud’s words, a “token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (“Fetishism” 154). In these various ways, the automobile was shown to embody values – spiritual, sexual, social, etc. – that did not directly correspond to its function as a method of modern transportation.

In *Changes* and *Faat Kiné*, however, the automobile is fetishized as a quotidian object. It is used to run errands, drive to work, and meet friends or lovers in the city. Rather than existing in the world of leisure and occult consumption, the automobile becomes an object marked by its use-value: it is transformed into an everyday, domestic instrument. But, at the same time, the automobile – like all consumer objects – can never be strictly utilitarian, and what is consumed is always more than its material use. For the female drivers in these two texts, the automobile – in addition to being used as a mode of

daily transport – is also consumed as a liberatory tool, a means for them to master space and time and to challenge patriarchal structures. What I argue in this chapter is that women drivers consume the automobile as a way out of circulation in a phallic economy, an economy where women, as Claude Lévi-Strauss argues, are the objects rather than the subjects of exchange. The car then is fetishized as a symbol of the modern woman, a sign that she can have access to the type of autonomy and mobility typically reserved for African men. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, automobility is *always* compromised. The liberalist ideals it represents – the freedom to absolutely determine one’s own movements, the ability to break loose and escape at any given moment – are never, in any circumstance, completely realized. Thus, in *Changes* and *Faat Kiné*, while the car offers a limited means for certain privileged women to escape patriarchal and neo-colonial regimes of control, it also re-inscribes them in the domestic sphere, re-situating them in a system of individualized and privatized mobility that is powerless against collective immobility. What is consumed is an ideal of liberation more than liberation itself.

As *Changes* opens Esi Sekyi, a Ghanaian government data analyst in the Department of Urban Statistics, is driving her unreliable car through the streets of Accra to arrange the details for an upcoming business trip to Lusaka. Esi’s car continues to stall as she makes her way to the travel agency, prompting crude remarks about women drivers from the taxi drivers whom she blocks. Immediately, however, the reader understands that Esi’s mobility is not only hindered by the failures of her car; it is also circumscribed within the male-dominated social system. On this particular occasion, Esi is driving to the travel agency because the office secretary has called in sick that day and

Esi's male colleagues assume that it should be a woman's responsibility to complete her tasks. It does not matter that their positions are equal to Esi's or that they too are to take part in the trip to Lusaka. Still, Esi's relatively high level of mobility and autonomy are contrasted with the even greater limits placed on her best friend Opokuya. Esi is an independent working woman who divorces her husband, drives her own car, decides to have only one child (whom she lets her ex-mother-in-law raise), and does not need to rely on men for either money or day-to-day mobility. Opokuya, on the other hand, shares a car with her husband Kubi who insists on parking it outside his office all day. This makes it difficult for Opokuya to commute to work and to do all of the household errands, for which she remains solely responsible, despite working full-time as a midwife. The novel, a melodramatic tale of the difficulties of heterosexual romance, is largely about the decisions that these two women make as they try to negotiate their status as commodities and consumers in modern, postcolonial Accra.

In Ousmane Sembène's penultimate film *Faat Kiné*, the protagonist of the same name is, like Esi Sekyi, an auto-mobile woman in a traditionally male job. Faat Kiné Diop not only drives about Dakar, dropping her children off at school, depositing money at the bank, going on dates, and meeting friends for ice cream, she also runs a Total petrol station where she honks a hand-held horn to summon her subordinates. However, unlike Esi, Kiné is not an educated woman. After having been impregnated by a high school professor, Kiné was expelled from school, disinherited by her father, and duped out of her savings by another lover. She began to work as an attendant at the Total station until she was promoted to a managerial position. At first glance, Kiné seems to be an unadulterated feminist hero, succeeding as a pleasure-seeking, single, working mother in

a world where the odds are so clearly stacked against her. She refuses to be bought and sold in a phallic economy and instead chooses her lovers, supports her family, and controls the mobility of those around her. However, Sembène, never the one for one-dimensionality, creates several points of tension. Despite the constant images of Kiné driving in Dakar, the film is shot through with tropes of immobility and impotence, which are reminiscent of *Xala*. Furthermore, the suggestion by Kiné's maid that she has the heart of a man begs the question as to whether Kiné has indeed found a way of exchanging that does not simply reproduce the phallic economy. Although the film celebrates her quest to find non-commodified pleasure in urban Senegal, Sembène constantly reminds the viewer that life for the Dakarois woman is full of unending contradictions.

However, what has dropped out of both *Changes* and *Faat Kiné* is an acknowledgement – one which has been present to some extent in all of the other texts discussed thus far – that automobility is a corrosive system that contains its own condition of breakdown and is weighted down by immoral acts. Instead *Changes* and *Faat Kiné* suggest a feminist counter-narrative where the car becomes a potentially transgressive tool. Like bell hooks who, in her autobiography *Wounds of Passion*, relishes the car with its “leather seats, the real wood on the dashboard, the shiny metal” (47) as a way to escape the segregated buses and racism of the Jim Crow South, the female drivers of *Changes* and *Faat Kiné* use the automobile as a way to evade, even temporarily, the patriarchal systems that would seek to determine their movements. What I want to make clear, though, is that this transgression is less about winning the opportunity to consume as privileged men – although this is no doubt present – and more

about the ability to escape being consumed. In other words, it is about the struggle to escape the cycle of what Gayle Rubin (borrowing from Emma Goldman) calls “the traffic in women” – a social and economic situations in which women’s value is directly related to their ability to gratify male needs, desires, and relationships. Thus, where automobility fails and is constrained in these two texts, we see not simply a failure of automobility to fulfill its liberalist promises, but also a failure to disrupt the traffic in women. Where it succeeds, we see an interruption of the traffic in women, but one that brings in tow many of the negative consequences of automobility.

Before turning to Rubin’s suggestive essay and to its implications for Aidoo’s novel and Sembène’s film, I would like to discuss how the car in these two texts has shifted from that of a male luxury object to an object of everyday consumption. Understanding how the automobile becomes an everyday object establishes the way in which automobility is always consumed as a code, even if that code mutates according to the social context. Two postwar French theorists, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, have written specifically on this transformation of the automobile from luxury to domestic object, and a brief discussion of their positions helps us to understand how the automobile never quite loses its fetishized meanings. What changes within the contemporary African context, then, is not the fact of commodification or reification, but rather its precise meanings and implications.

### **The Domestic Car**

Before he turned his attention exclusively to language objects, Barthes wrote two essays specifically about the mythology of the automobile in France. His first article,

which I have already discussed, examines the exhibition of the Citroën D.S. at the 1955 Salon d'automobile. Barthes' analysis hinges on the pronunciation of D.S. (*Diffusion Spéciale*) as "déesse," or goddess, and on the way in which the Citroën was displayed as a heavenly object. In particular, Barthes describes the seamless design, which not only erases all signs of its assemblage, but also contributes to its magical, goddess-like aura. Although he notes that the car was also becoming more "homely," more like a household utensil, Barthes' focus was clearly on the "spiritual" form of the car rather than its everyday use. However, in "La voiture, projection de l'ego," a 1963 article for the magazine *Réalités* (republished in his completed works as "Mythologie de l'automobile"), Barthes declares that the car is no longer a mystical, utopic object, no longer a sign of social standing. By 1963, then, he suggests that the automobile was becoming socially neutral and had definitively joined the rank of domestic objects: it was a need, separated from other household objects only by its limiting price.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the automobile to bread, Barthes writes that the automobile was a central object in French discourse, reflecting its values and morals, but one that had nevertheless been downgraded from its previous mythical standing. Realizing, however, that unlike a baguette, the car was still not a universal object (only one in seven Frenchmen own cars at the time he is writing), Barthes suggests that the automobile possessed an intermediary status – it was what one was going to buy next. Thus, the automobile was no longer a dream, but a project, and a rather banal one at that. Barthes therefore discerns an opposition between the "sporty function" of the car, where it retains some of its prestige and original myth that pits man against nature, and an ordinary domestic function, which by 1963 he believed was becoming more and more dominant.



Influenced both by Barthes' early commitment to material objects and by his turn to linguistic sign-systems in the late sixties, Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968) seeks to classify the growth of objects according to their semiotic system of meanings rather than according to their technical functions. For Baudrillard, this means discussing how objects are experienced in their everydayness, and, to him, no single object epitomized the abstraction of functionality and embodied the entire system of everyday ideological structures as much as the automobile.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of Baudrillard's analysis of the automobile is the collusion – not the opposition – between the sporty and domestic functions Barthes describes.

On the one hand, Baudrillard follows the Barthes of *Mythologies* by focusing on the types of semiotic messages that are inscribed in the design and form of the automobile. Baudrillard devotes a section of *The System of Objects* to the phenomenon of the tail fins that were the hallmark of American car design in the 1950s. He writes:

[Tail fins] have other meanings, too: scarcely had it emancipated itself from the forms of earlier kinds of vehicles than the automobile-object began connoting nothing more than the result so achieved – that is to say, nothing more than itself as a victorious function. We thus witnessed a veritable triumphalism on the part of the object: the car's fins became the sign of victory over space – and they were *purely* a sign, because they bore no direct relationship to that victory (indeed, if anything they ran counter to it, tending as they did to make vehicles both heavier and more cumbersome). (62)

Thus, the tail fins signify a fetishization of speed, a “miraculous automatism,” which paradoxically reduced the car’s real speed, proving to Baudrillard just how much the automobile as a symbol had lost touch with its use-value. Likewise, the design of the tail fins, borrowed as it was from “sharks, birds, and so on,” only reinforced modern society’s estrangement from a nature that it was systemically destroying. In the tail fins, we can see how an object, overwhelmed by form, can only signify the idea or the memory of its function.

Yet, on the other hand, Baudrillard acknowledges that the car had the everyday functional qualities of an abode, albeit a very exceptional one. For him, the car was a home away from home that had the extraordinary ability to transform space-time. The car therefore could serve as a refuge, a domain of intimacy and privacy, but it was also a home that was unbound, “one endowed with a formal freedom of great intensity and a dizzying functionality” (71). The car, he famously declared, may be either a “projectile or a dwelling-place.” However, whether it was a “projectile” sign of power and speed or a refuge, Baudrillard insists that “*it is experienced – and by everyone, men, women and children – as a phallus*, as an object of manipulation, care, and fascination. The car is a projection both phallic and narcissistic, a force transfixed by its own image” (74, my emphasis). Thus, for Baudrillard both the domestic world of objects (i.e. needs) and the territory of formal connotation (or style) are abstract, fetishized signs imbued with phallic meaning.

Baudrillard extends this idea in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), most notably in his critique of the Marxian notion of use-value. For Marx, the commodity’s value – according to capitalist logic – has nothing to do with its

materiality, but rather with its capacity to be exchanged for an equivalent. Fetishism is therefore typically located in a commodity's exchange-value. In this schema, use-value would refer to an object's ability to satisfy "real" or natural needs, while exchange-value would be nothing more than a system of abstract social labor. Thus, many Marxist theorists, like Georg Lukács, interpret fetishism as a theory of false consciousness – false because what is worshipped is an artificial meaning rather than a "true" or non-alienated use-value. But Baudrillard insists that use-value is also a system of abstraction, one that is equally fetishized and historically determined. Just as exchange abstracts labor, utility abstracts what Baudrillard refers to as a system of needs, a system that is just as entrenched in ideology and manipulation as any other. Thus, for Baudrillard the home or the domestic sphere, which would seem to be concerned primarily with basic and private human needs, is nevertheless a place where the individual seeks legitimacy in the social order and assures this legitimacy by signs. The home is not a separate refuge away from social constraints, but rather a site where social values are translated.<sup>4</sup> In effect, Baudrillard redefines the idea of commodity fetishism as the unity of two fetishizations: use-value and exchange-value. Therefore, although the automobile is losing its mythological status and taking on a domestic function, it is, nonetheless, part of a signified code. In other words, the car may function as a phallus, a goddess, or a home, but in each case, it is never *simply* a mode of transportation: it is never separated from its contradictory ideological functions. This is how we must see the domesticated car in *Changes* and *Faat Kiné*.

As Baudrillard moved further away from Marx and became more interested in the hyper-real world of simulacra, he became less interested in the material use of objects.

But what early and intermediary works like *The System of Objects* and *Political Economy of the Sign* provide are analyses of everyday, common objects (rather than advertising and packaging, which was to become the focus of later work) that are consumed for their fetishized functionality. Instead of use-values and exchange-values, commodity objects become sign values. Consumption for Baudrillard is therefore not really about satisfying needs: it is about participating in a certain code of consumerism and creating a passion for that code.

Consumption in postcolonial Africa is in this sense no different from consumption in the “first world” – as is the case everywhere, it works by creating needs that can never be fulfilled. This is why Baudrillard calls utility an abstract social relation. But whereas in the Western world, goods and gadgets often become progressively more available and increasingly a part of everyday life, creating more and more “needs,” in West Africa – even in the cities – it is still the lack of basic services, such as consistent electricity, modern health care, and working traffic lights, that is the source of most of the “everyday” complaints. In fact, for most Africans, the gap between desire and satisfaction is ever widening, not simply because consumption often leads to disappointment, but also because global flows of information constantly bombard Africans with images of out-of-reach consumer abundance.

Nevertheless, some African cities, in addition to harboring a very select affluent class, have also been able to support a small bureaucratic and managerial class that can modestly consume objects like used cars. While the percentage of car owners in most African countries is still nowhere near the one in seven of Barthes’ 1963 France, the number of people owning cars in the wealthier cities like Dakar and Accra soon may

approach that number. Whereas cars still remain a dream for the majority of the urban population (see my discussion of Nollywood films in the previous chapter) it is clear that automobiles do occupy an intermediary status – a project as Barthes says – for a moderate petit-bourgeoisie in these two cities. In this sense the car is an object that is both banal and extraordinary. But if, as Baudrillard suggests, the car, in its capacity to serve as a mobile, unbound home, becomes the locus of a new form of subjectivity, then it is one that, in the African context, is certainly determined by the various structures that bind and circumscribe it. In *Changes* and *Faat Kiné*, this new subjectivity – this new automobility – is determined, bound, and limited both by the economic disequilibrium that defines African cities and by postcolonial gender relations.

### **From Traffic in Women to Women in Traffic**

One of Baudrillard's most suggestive observations about the car is that in contemporary society, the automobile is never dissociated from its phallic meaning, no matter who is driving it, no matter what his or her purpose might be. For Baudrillard, who saw the car – and rightly so, I might add – as an indicator of disintegrating communities, pollution, and noise,<sup>5</sup> the automobile's phallic meaning was linked to its narcissistic decimation of nature and social bonds. But because the phallus is always the symbolic value of the penis, or of male power, I would argue that Baudrillard prematurely dismisses the gendered aspects of driving. What Baudrillard overlooks is that when men are driving, the car is a natural extension of their power, but when women drive – especially in societies where women are more explicitly consumed and exchanged – the car becomes a means to access phallic power. This does not, of course, take away

from the fact that cars, almost universally, have had a destructive effect on community life. But it does allow us to explore some of the ways in which automobile consumption in a feminist context might complicate our critique of automobility and require additional qualifications.

Gayle Rubin's 1975 essay "The Traffic in Women" helps us to clarify the way in which modern women continue to circulate in a phallic economy. Rubin begins by arguing that Marx's theory of the reproduction of labor and surplus value cogently explains how women are useful to capitalism, but falls short of explaining the root of women's oppression. Thus, in order to understand the domestication of women that capitalism inherited from earlier systems, Rubin turns to Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), which she reads as containing, in its theory of the exchange of women, an implicit theory of women's oppression. Of particular importance are Lévi-Strauss' discussions of gift transactions and the role of the incest taboo. Lévi-Strauss, borrowing from Marcel Mauss, understands primitive societies as being structured upon a system of giving, receiving, and reciprocating in which things, women, and animals circulate in a structure that ensures social links between the partners of exchange. But Lévi-Strauss supplements Mauss' theory by positing that marriage is the foundational form of gift exchange and that women are the most profound gifts. The incest taboo works to ensure that women are exchanged between families and that the exchanged women will solidify a bond or alliance between two groups. A system is created in which women are transacted as gifts, and men are the givers and receivers. "The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange

women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges – social organization” (Rubin 37). Thus, Rubin suggests that “the traffic in women” and not their participation in capitalist circulation is the initial locus of their oppression. Rubin then turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which examines the ways in which these systems of kinship leave traces on the human psyche, in order to argue that the cultural organization that kinship systems impose persist in modern societies. In the Oedipal scenario, the child learns that the father is the possessor of phallic power. If the child is a boy, he will inherit that power; if she is a girl her social status will be different – the phallus will only pass through her to the next generation of boys. Thus, the cycle of gift exchange repeats itself through the phallus: “Moreover, as long as men have rights in women which women do not have in themselves, the phallus also carries the meaning of the difference between ‘exchanger’ and ‘exchanged,’ gift and giver . . . We still live in a ‘phallic’ culture” (Rubin 47). The girl or the woman can only get the phallus as a gift from a man, and, even then, it is never hers to give away.

Luce Irigaray, in two Marxist essays that appear in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), makes many of the same observations as Rubin. However, whereas Rubin applies Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of the exchange of women to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Irigaray weaves it through Marx’s discourse on commodity fetishism, claiming that women are considered valuable based on their ability to be both exchanged and accumulated in a phallic economy. Irigaray is not searching for the root of women’s oppression inasmuch as she is adumbrating its trans-historical persistence in capitalist societies. Just as commodities for Marx are alienated from their use-value in order to enter into a symbolic order of exchange, women, according to Irigaray, are treated as

abstractions or fetishes, alienated from their “natural” bodies. She writes, “The economy of exchange – of desire – is man’s business. For two reasons: the exchange takes place between masculine subjects and it requires a plus-value added to the body of the commodity, a supplement which gives it a valuable form” (177). Women as fetish-objects are therefore circulated in a phallic economy, establishing and smoothing over men’s relationships with one another as in the system of gift transaction.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since Lévi-Strauss claims that the exchange of women and the incest taboo constitute the origin of our cultural organization, Irigaray sees an end to this system of exchanging women as a way to rewrite the entire symbolic order. She asks: “What modifications would [society] undergo if women left behind their condition as commodities – subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone – and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges?” (191). Of course, women have been the subjects of exchange, in their role as both consumers and producers, as long as men have been, and African women are no exception. The issue though – as Thorstein Veblen argued almost a century before Irigaray and Rubin – is that when women consume in a patriarchal society, they do so in the name of the father or husband, in order to exhibit the status of men.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, what Irigaray is really asking is what it might look like for women to consume in a *different* way than men, to create their own language of exchange amongst themselves, outside of the “phallogocratic model” she describes. Thus, while I object to Irigaray’s claim that women are alienated from their use-value or “natural” bodies – Baudrillard’s analysis of the fetishization of use-value seems apt here – Irigaray’s question provides a useful benchmark to measure the epistemological shift that



occurs when we see women not only as producers and reproducers, but also as active exchangers.

The question I ask, however, is more modest than Irigaray's, for, like Rubin, I am weary of a feminist program that reverts to biology and purports to overturn the entire organization of culture. My goal, then, is to explore how the symbolic order of automobility – based as it is on its own phallic model – might change when women become the operators and exchangers of cars. If we are to follow Baudrillard, then nothing changes: the car is experienced as a phallus no matter who drives it and the ideological functions of automobility should not undergo any real transformation. If we follow the Lacanian logic of Rubin, then we can see how women and men might inhabit the car differently. For the woman driver, who can only receive the phallus as a gift from a man, the power assumed behind the wheel is really only on loan. This does not necessarily alter Baudrillard's claim – for the car in either case is still a phallic object – as much as it does qualify it. But if, as Irigaray suggests, women could forge a new language of exchange and consumption, if “they maintained ‘another’ kind of commerce, among themselves” (196), then the system of automobility would also undergo certain changes. This is precisely the tension that informs my reading of *Changes* and *Faat Kiné*. On the one hand, women drivers are merely inserting themselves into the system of automobility, substituting a fetishization of exchange-value for one of use-value and making a grab at phallic power. On the other hand, they are using the very everydayness of the automobile in order to make substantial changes in their own everyday lives. There is an active attempt to consume in “another” kind of way and to escape a system where they are seen as commodities and objects of exchange rather than autonomously

mobile subjects. Indeed, driving does in fact offer women new forms of power and pleasure, which, if we are to honor dialectical thought, should not be ignored. However, at the end of the day, as one might expect, the system of automobility does not transform itself, nor does it provide women with a way to entirely transform themselves. Therefore, what results in women's struggle to actively alter the code of automobility is a reflection on the difficulties of appropriating its ideology in ways that are not linked to the triumph of neo-liberal consumption.

### ***Changes: A Car of One's Own***

From its opening lines onward, *Changes* is a novel full of the minutiae of driving. Aidoo provides active descriptions of checking tires, opening car doors, situating oneself in front of the steering wheel, putting the keys in the ignition, parking, backing out, locking the gate, etc. What she emphasizes is the everyday *use* of the automobile as it transports characters from home to work to errand. Aidoo therefore breaks with an African male literary tradition in which the car, albeit as a satirical object, is quite literally a projection of the phallus. For instance, Nkem Nwankwo's aptly titled novel *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours* (1975) begins with the following description of Onuma Okudo driving his new golden Jaguar:

Once upon a time a young man was savouring the pleasures of a new car  
. . . It was like when you have gone into a woman. Some of the time is  
taken up with clumsy flopping about; trying futilely to find the perfect  
position and rhythm. Then there are moments of complete  
synchronization of limbs which seem to come about without effort. (1)

In contrast to Nwankwo, whose sexual language is not unlike Sembène's in the novel version of *Xala*, Aidoo focuses on the taken-for-granted banalities of driving.

Like Henri Lefebvre, Aidoo acknowledges that women, as the primary agents of social reproduction, are also the primary subjects of everyday life and are, consequently, the ones primarily subjected to it. Thus, in the custom of other women novelists in the realist tradition, Aidoo ushers in a language of driving that ties the car's everydayness to the gendered personal and political lives of its drivers.<sup>8</sup> She highlights the unequal ways in which men and women experience the lived realities of everyday postcolonial life in her description of the constant fight, or *wahala*, that Esi's friend Opokuya has each day with her husband Kubi over who should drive their shared car. For each member of the couple, the answer is obvious. Kubi believes that, like his other male colleagues in the civil service, he should drive the car to work and park it all day in the spot marked out for him. Kubi is not worried about the logistics of his transportation, because when he does not have the car, Opokuya can drop him off and collect him. Rather, he is concerned with the visibility of the automobile that he possesses, a visibility without which his status would suffer. Opokuya insists, on the contrary, that "a car is to be used" (17), that parking it all day is a waste of its function. She knows that she is solely responsible for maintaining the household, even with her full-time job as a midwife, and she feels that having her own transportation is essential for performing the tasks involved in feeding and clothing a husband and four children. Her female colleagues, accustomed to stories about men who use their wives' cars to drive around other women, feel that Opokuya is spoiled. Opokuya, however, refuses to assign the car value based on its image-value.

For her, the car is a modern accessory that has the unique ability to make her domestic life as a woman more convenient.

Opokuya and Kubi each consume the automobile in different ways and for different reasons. In essence, they each consume different codes of automobility. For Kubi, this is a code of narcissism: the car for him is purely a reflection and projection of his ego. The car, as Debord suggests, is pure image-value emptied out of its use-value. For Opokuya, the code is more closely related to the functional capabilities of the automobile that provide her with the autonomy of movement. Within the feminist logic of the novel, Kubi's code is a retrograde vestige of male power, one that keeps women sacrificing to the male ego. But while the novel is clear in condemning Kubi's code of automobility, it is much more ambiguous when it comes to Opokuya's. The automobile gives Opokuya a temporary or situational autonomy, but it does not seem to proffer any solutions for the larger structural inequalities that African women face. Rather than providing an escape from the phallic economy, it seems that the car simply re-inscribes her in the domestic sphere. On the rare days when Opokuya does win the car, her list of errands only seems to cause her additional anxiety.

Although for Baudrillard it should not matter whether men or women drive automobiles, throughout *Changes* it becomes clear that because women are there to serve as status symbols for men, to be amassed and displayed – like cars – their position as drivers is necessarily different. Thus, in order to establish the specific ways that women inhabit the car in this novel, it is first essential to establish the ways in which they are figured as objects of exchange. As Irigaray points out, a woman's role in the phallic economy is to smooth relations between men. Esi's first husband Oko says as much

when, moments before raping his wife, he complains that his friends are laughing at him for allowing his wife to put her career above her family. When Esi first meets Oko, he is attracted to her intelligence and air of independence and spends years courting her. But as time progresses, Oko begins to resent Esi's independence and scolds her for not spending enough time at home. After he forces himself into her one morning, parading around afterwards like an "arrogant king," Esi decides to leave him. She decides to keep the rape a secret because she knows that in Ghanaian society he has the right to have sex with her whenever he pleases. So she explains to her friend Opokuya, not being entirely dishonest, that Oko was simply too demanding of her time. Opokuya acknowledges that the few men who claim to like independent women "are also interested in having such women permanently in their beds and in their kitchens" (45). Therefore, Opokuya and Esi agree that intelligent women in Ghana are in "an impossible situation" (45). Even Esi's grandmother reminds her that women are pampered on their wedding day because the "whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been" (110). After marriage women must focus their energies on satisfying the sexual and domestic needs of their husbands, and not on their own aspirations or desires. Thus, as Rubin argues, the practice of exchanging women – of giving them in marriage, taking them in battle, trading them for favors – is not confined to the pre-modern world.

But it is also important to note that women are exchanged in a way that is qualitatively different than the way men are exchanged. Rubin writes, "Men are of course also trafficked – but as slaves, hustlers, athletic stars, serfs, or as some other catastrophic social status, rather than as men. Women are transacted as slaves, serfs, and prostitutes, but also simply as women" (38). Thus, the men in Aidoo's novel do not face

the same contradictions as the women. All of Esi's friends and family think she is mad for leaving a man who desires her and actually wants to spend more time with her. However, when she makes it clear that the relationship is over, Oko's mother finds a young woman and deposits her at Oko's doorstep. Oko is surprised that there are still women who would agree to be carried off to marry a total stranger, but he is flattered at his mother's gesture and decides to keep the woman. Although he prefers Esi, he acknowledges that women are indeed transferable.

Esi also remarries, but she does so with the explicit knowledge that the man she loves, Ali Kondey, sees her as "occupied territory." Moreover, Esi has decided to marry a man who is already married – she will become his second wife, and while his status will be augmented hers, as second wife, will diminish. What makes the situation an acceptable compromise to Esi is that, besides being enamored with Ali, she believes that being a second wife in a polygamous urban marriage will allow her time to devote to herself and to her job. Since Esi will stay in her own bungalow and Ali will spend most nights at home with his first wife and children, Esi will not be obligated to fill the role of homemaker. She will not be reduced to the role of mother. Indeed, Esi feels "free and content" that Ali is not making demands on her, and she enjoys being able to take work home and participate in meetings and conferences to the full extent that her male colleagues do. She even delights in her purchase of a personal computer that allows her to work at home. When the marriage begins to sour it is because Ali begins spending time with his new secretary and rarely comes to visit Esi. It only dawns on Esi then that if a man can "occupy" two wives, he can certainly have three, or four. Ali, then, despite his several degrees and his training in England, continues in the tradition of his male

ancestors. Ali's father, Musa Musa, was a traveling salesman who amassed a great fortune and numerous young wives throughout West Africa. Ali's grandfather, likewise, had been a wealthy man: "He owned an impressive number of sons, cattle, horses, sheep, goats, wives, and daughters. All definitely in that order of value" (24). When Ali establishes his travel agency with offices in capital cities throughout West Africa, he becomes exactly like his father: constantly on the move and collecting commodities – clothing, electronics, foods, and, of course, women – from his travels. He therefore puts a modern face on an older system of seeing women as commodities.

It becomes apparent, then, that there is an element of irony in both the title and subtitle ("A Love Story") of the novel. Like the audience of *Quartier Mozart* who realizes only at the end of the film that Bekolo surely must have been joking when he declares that nothing in the neighborhood will remain the same, the reader of Aidoo's novel does not immediately appreciate the sarcasm of the title. In fact, when Esi divorces her husband and allows her daughter to live with his family, it seems that Esi is breaking out of the mold of essentialized womanhood. By refusing to be both wife and mother, Esi is stepping out of the identities normally allotted to African women. But as Ali begins bribing Esi with gifts only to maintain his exclusive right to occupy her, she realizes that the relationship is not nearly as equal as she thought. Ali is the giver; she is the receiver. As in Lévi-Strauss' kinship system, women are not in the position to benefit from their circulation – they are not exchange partners. Similarly, Ali's first wife Fusena (for whom Esi, incidentally, expresses very little sympathy) has little to say when Ali decides to take a second wife. When the patriarchs of Ali's family ask their women to speak with Fusena, she realizes that, like the women of previous generations, she must

accept her role as one of Ali's possessions. "The older women felt bad . . . It was a man's world. You only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman. What shocked the older women though, was obviously how little had changed for their daughters – school and all!" (107).

Yet there are indeed real changes that occur for the women in this novel, even if they are at times compromised and limited. As was the case in the static world of *Quartier Mozart*, the women in *Changes* actively play, experiment, and imagine lives other than the ones they are currently living. However, here it is not the technological apparatus of the cinema that enables this experiment; it is the technological apparatus of the up-and-running automobile that allows them to see the world through their own (wind)screen. As Baudrillard claims, "The driving license is a sort of passport" (*System* 70), and once the license is coupled with a functional automobile, it allows the women in *Changes* to move about the city with the same level of freedom as the highly mobile men of the novel. Moreover, cars enable an experience of the city that is qualitatively different from riding in collective transport, shared taxis, and city buses. Rather than being crammed into substandard vehicles, waiting in the sun or in a crowded motor park, car drivers have a portable refuge as they make themselves at home in the metropolitan world. In best-case scenarios, they have a prime vantage point to experience the pleasures of the city and its pockets of privilege. The prevalence of women drivers in the novel indicates that these public delights are no longer the domain of men alone.

Furthermore, driving for the urban women in *Changes* constitutes what Michel de Certeau might describe as a tactical speech act, an act in which the Other – "the weak" – may poach the property of the dominant, or "the strong." For de Certeau, "many



everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’” (xix). While driving is not among his list of everyday practices – perhaps because it is so often the speech act of the strong – in *Changes* it becomes one of the ways in which women can react against their imposed silence. Esi, for instance, cannot utter the phrase “marital rape” – she points out that the concept does not exist in any African language – but because she has her own job and her own means of transport, she can leave the man who committed the act. Fusena, too, finds that she can only express anger at Ali through her driving. When she hears he will be taking another wife she utters just two questions: “She has a university degree?” (99) and “Is she also a Muslim?” (100). When the affirmative answer to the first question leaves her speechless (and the negative answer to the latter only reinforces her shock), she can do nothing other than get behind the wheel of her “small two-door vehicle [that] she had come to love unreasonably and fiercely” (99) and “screech [it] into life” (99). She bangs her car door and backs out so violently that she almost sideswipes Ali’s “elegant and capacious chariot” (99), which, described as such, evokes the kinglike arrogance of Oko after he rapes Esi. Other than the above questions, Fusena barely speaks throughout the novel. Moreover, when she does express her own desires to teach, or to continue her education, she is always met with a “no.” The extent of her rage, then, becomes visible only in her driving, and it is perhaps this ability to express herself, to escape temporarily from her husband’s arrogance, that saves her from the utter isolation that faces other women in her situation.<sup>9</sup>

For Opokuya driving is also linked to language, and while she is not driving, she chooses not to utter a word. On the days that Kubi wins their *wahala* and parks the car at

his office Opokuya remains silent as he drives her to work. When Opokuya wins the car for the day, she hums all the way from his office to the hospital. Her humming, in contrast to Kubi's self-important whistling, signifies her muffled victory, a victory somewhat overshadowed by the lengthy list of errands she feels she must complete on her rare day with the car.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the subaltern may not be able to speak, but she can drive. In these instances, the car does not necessarily integrate the woman into the phallic order, but it does allow her to enunciate or clear her own space. Here, then, we can see both the importance as well as the impossibility of consuming the car in a language of one's own.

Furthermore, at the end of the novel, a three-way exchange of cars complicates both Esi and Opokuya's positions as commodity and consumer. Ali, tiring of his marriage to Esi, gifts her a brand new car as he begins to spend more time with his new secretary. The new car, like the many other gifts Ali heaps on Esi, is meant to be a bribe, a "substitute for his presence" (147). Of course, the car as phallus does not confer on her male power any more than it would in the Oedipal crisis. "The phallus is affirmed in the boy, who then has it to give away. The girl never gets the phallus. It passes through her . . ." (Rubin 49). Ali maintains his position as giver, and Esi accepts the gift of the phallus from her man, understanding that the car is a final verdict on the impossibility of egalitarian romantic love as it places her within the very economy of exchange she sought to escape.

However, because Esi already has a car – one that her government job has enabled her to purchase – she also has the phallus to give. She turns around and sells her car to Opokuya for next to nothing, accepting a small sum only to spare her friend's pride. Esi puts much time and effort into retrofitting the car with a host of spare parts

hand made by her mechanics (the cost of new, imported spare parts is prohibitive), and she has the car repainted and thoroughly worked through before handing it over to her friend. Notably, the exchange between Esi and Opokuya is the first and only exchange in the novel that occurs beyond the scope of male needs and desires. And, even more importantly, it works to bolster Opokuya's self-reliance and reduce her dependence on Kubi, giving her the "freedom and autonomy" she had always envied in her friend. In this way, the gift exchange between the two women signifies a socializing outside the phallographic model, a veritable exchange "among themselves" as Irigaray describes. In fact, driving Esi's old car gives Opokuya a renewed sense of power, a power that comes from being able to drive freely and independently throughout the city without Kubi determining her movements. Thus, while Esi's gift-car from Ali signifies her re-inscription in the phallic economy, Opokuya drives with a new clarity of vision, enabling her to escape "the watchful eyes of [her male] 'guardians'" (Irigaray 196).

Yet, as much as the gift of Esi's car secures a bond between the women, it also reinforces their isolation from each other and threatens to reify their friendship. When Opokuya arrives to pick up the car, Esi has just ended her relationship with Ali, but Opokuya is too excited about the car to stay to console her friend. Then, when Opokuya does not return home, Kubi drives to Esi's in search of his wife. Finding her gone and Esi feeling vulnerable, Kubi immediately attempts to take advantage of the situation. At first, Esi does not resist his advances and even considers it to be a good solution to her loneliness. After a moment, though, she remembers Opokuya's face and her grandmother's warning that "a man always gains in stature any way he chooses to associate with a woman – including adultery . . . But, in her association with a man, a

woman is always in danger of being diminished” (164). Esi pulls away from Kubi, realizing that she could not afford to lose Opokuya’s friendship, as it was the one solid human bond that she still maintained. But Esi’s near-betrayal complicates the nature of her non-commodified relationship to her friend. Although they come close, Esi and Opokuya are not able to entirely escape the economy of exchange where women, as commodities, relate to each other as rivals. The gift-cars they each drive signify both their autonomy from and their participation in a system dominated by the exchange relationships amongst men.

Furthermore, the immense significance Aidoo places on cars and independence must be seen within the context of the crisis of public infrastructure and transport in African cities. In the novel, as Esi is pulling into the significantly named Hotel Twentieth Century, which was “consuming enough electricity to light up the whole nearby fishing district” (43), she finds herself thinking about the villagers there who have no electricity. She wonders when the government will provide motorized boats and fishing nets to the Ghanaian fishermen who feed the country and when the Minister of Power will stop raising the price of kerosene. When Opokuya and her husband fight about who will drive the car each day, their situation is aggravated by the fact that the city buses are constantly breaking down and that the hospital vans Opokuya can take to and from work make it impossible for her to do after-work errands. Although it is curious that *tro-tros* and taxis are not mentioned as alternative modes of transport, especially given their ubiquity on the streets of Accra, it is still the case that the failure of public infrastructure mentioned throughout the novel makes it increasingly necessary for Ghanaians to find individual solutions to their problems.

The automobile in *Changes* therefore becomes a mode of self-reliance that African women use to cope and adapt in their urban environments where governments have failed to create viable systems of infrastructure. In other words, the car is “a projection of the ego,” insofar as it is a projection of a possibility, a way of making do and juggling the contradictions and demands of daily life. But while automobiles give the women in the novel a certain degree of individual independence, their level of autonomy is far from being celebrated or idealized. Esi, in fact, debunks the myth of individual solution when she is contemplating the myriad dilemmas she and other modern Ghanaian women face: “But she was going to be humble enough to admit that the answers . . . could not come from her, an individual. Hopefully a whole people would soon have answers for them. In the meantime she would listen to her grandmother” (115). Esi discovers that being a modern, auto-mobile woman does not always provide her with more freedom or happiness. In fact, at times it leads to less.

The code of automobility consumed therefore expresses both the real material changes that occur for the women of Aidoo’s novel as well as the limits of those changes. Compared to their mothers in the village, the auto-mobile city women in the novel clearly have more opportunities for self-fulfilling careers and what Esi calls a choice of “lifestyle.” Yet, for Esi a life outside of the constraints of monogamous marriage and motherhood does not lead to the happiness she seeks. Esi and Opokuya bemoan the fact that Accra is, after all, not like cities abroad where single women have plenty of opportunities to occupy themselves after work or on weekends, and as the novel closes Esi has sunk into a deep depression. For Esi, automobility has failed to live up to its transgressive potential. Although it provides her with the opportunity to consume in her

own language, it does not allow her to escape being consumed. She has obtained mobility without autonomy. One can only assume that Opokuya will also find herself disappointed.

### **Kiné at the Pump**

What Esi Sekyi consumes is indeed a code, a fetishized system of social relations, which makes even banal objects, like sputtering cars, ideological. As Baudrillard would have predicted, automobility only plunges her further into a consumer society that is a perpetual system of dissatisfaction. But in *Faat Kiné* Sembène provides us with a more ambiguous understanding of the ways in which commodities are consumed as constantly mutating codes. For Fatou Kiné Diop, the domestic car is not only intermediary (part luxury, part utensil), it is also an intermediary, a liaison between the world of alienated consumption *and* a freedom from the alienation that occurs when one's automobility is disabled by the structures of uneven capitalism and postcolonial patriarchy. Thus, in Sembène's film we can understand consumption as a panoply of significations without lapsing into a Baudrillardian dualism in which primitive society is necessarily positive and consumer society is necessarily negative.

Faat Kiné, born in the year of Senegalese independence, is presented as a figure of a new Senegal, a Senegal where a gender revolution is altering the dynamics of heterosexual romance, where women are becoming more prominent in the business community, and where a spirit of entrepreneurship is replacing some of the stale platitudes of a socialist, patriarchal government.<sup>11</sup> However, as was the case with Aidoo's novel, the social changes that the film chronicles are often ambivalent. As Faat

Kiné subverts traditional society and marks a break from the past, she is, as her mother suggests, part of a “generation of women that is affluent and conflicted.” Here, consumer society is not marked by the “psychological pauperization” or “magical thinking” that Baudrillard describes,<sup>12</sup> nor is it, however, a means to liberation: the constraints and limitations placed on the lives and auto-mobility of all Senegalese women are made abundantly clear throughout the film. And yet, *Faat Kiné* does read as a celebration – albeit a hesitant one – of a financially independent woman who is dominated neither by the goods she consumes nor by the men who seek to consume her.

What saves *Faat Kiné* from becoming a celebration of car culture is that the automobile for Faat Kiné does not become a *means* of self-expression or freedom, but, rather, a part of a larger will to mobility.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Kiné is not liberated by her consumption of the automobile, as, for instance, Opokuya hoped to be. She is liberated by her tenacity and by her refusal to cooperate in her own circulation as an object of exchange. And even then, her liberation is far from complete. Thus, what Kiné and her cadre of female friends, Amy and Mada, consume is not so much a series of neo-liberal consumer objects as a code of mobility for the modern Senegalese woman. The automobile is part of this code, but unlike in the other texts discussed thus far in this dissertation, the automobile here becomes tangential, subordinate to other more pressing forms of movement.

Nevertheless, it does seem odd that after having spent decades of his career critiquing bourgeois capitalism, Sembène would make an automobile-driving franchise capitalist the protagonist of his first film in a trilogy on everyday heroism.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Sembène tells an interviewer, defending his own willingness to accept foreign funding

for his films: “In war, wherever you get the gun, what matters is that you know how to point it towards the enemy and shoot” (185). Thus, to Sembène, it matters very little to the plot of *Faat Kiné* that Kiné receives her paycheck from a French-owned company, or even that it is an oil company. What matters is that, like Sembène, she has the “final cut” on her work. Of course, part of the dialectical gravitas of the film is that Kiné is by no means uncompromised – the audience questions her actions as much as admires her accomplishments. Hence, while Kiné is in many ways a modern day heroine whose will to mobility has overcome innumerable blockages, Sembène has refrained from idealizing Kiné as a model African woman.<sup>15</sup> Kiné smokes in public, pepper sprays the wife of one of her lovers, spews out vulgarities to the men who have crossed her, snaps at her maid, and allows her son to call her by her first name. It is clear that her automobility has come at a cost.

As was the case with Esi in *Changes*, we first meet Fatou Kiné N’Daye Diop as she is behind the wheel of her car, a car that the camera often cuts to as Kiné is driving about the city, parking, pulling into her garage, etc. Kiné’s car of choice is a royal blue Citroën Saxo hatchback – not a Citroën *déesse*, not the slick white Mercedes of El Hadji. Just as Kiné is no object of worship, neither is her car. It is a practical car for a single working mother and it enables her to do her errands without having to hire taxis or ride crammed into unsafe *car rapides*. Through a series of flashbacks we learn that when Kiné was in high school she became pregnant with her philosophy professor’s child and was expelled from school just two months before sitting for her baccalaureate, or bac, the exam that would have enabled her to continue her studies. Her dreams of becoming a judge or a lawyer were shattered and Professor Gaye took off to Gabon, assuming no



responsibility for his new daughter Aby. On the day the child was born, Kiné's father attempted to scald Kiné and the infant with a pot of boiling water, but Kiné's mother stepped in to shield them. Kiné is thrown out of her house and Mammy's back is forever scarred and stiff. Having to support herself, and without a high school degree, Kiné becomes a gas station attendant. Eventually, she meets Boubacar Omar Payone, or BOP, a slick businessman who promises to build her a beautiful house full of imported furniture. But after Kiné becomes pregnant with his son, BOP tries to flee the country with Kiné's savings and false documents. He is caught by the police and imprisoned for most of his son's childhood. Kiné is left to raise and educate Aby and Djibril on her own, and she works her way up to become the manager of the Total station, determined to provide her children the opportunities she was denied. Most of the film takes place in the days following the news that Aby and Djib have successfully passed their bac, completing the exam that their mother never had the chance to take. As Aby and Djib plot to find their mother a partner who will keep her company once they have gone off to university, Professor Gaye and BOP have heard news of their children's academic achievement and Kiné's financial success and are attempting to re-enter their lives.

Thus, Kiné's will to mobility – her desire to enter traffic as a provider, commander, and consumer of mobility – must be seen as a reaction to a society and system in which she has been trafficked for the benefit of others. Kiné, whose name suggests the kinesis of cinema (*ciné*), therefore takes the code of mobility to its extremes. She not only drives herself and her children around the city and saves up for travel abroad, she also distributes gas to the moving vehicles of Dakar. She purchases a wheelchair for a young handicapped man who visits her regularly, and she stations

herself behind a spotless desk where she honks an oversized horn when she wants her assistant to come see her. And Kiné also takes pleasure in immobilizing others. She confiscates the keys of an arrogant and condescending woman who tries to pay for her gas in foreign (and, as it turns out, counterfeit) currency and when the wife of Mossamba Wade threatens her, she attacks the woman with mace. Thus, when Jean, one of Kiné's suitors, parks his car in front of hers and blocks her in for a half hour, Kiné becomes furious. Having spent her entire adult life overcoming the obstacles others have put in her way, she has lost all patience and sympathy for those who obstruct her path for their own purposes.

Kiné, therefore, is not interested in remarrying, for she knows that it would mean giving up her hard-won independence. She enjoys work and spends her free time with her other single friends, Amy and Mada, who are also successful businesswomen. The friends meet at the LGM, a local, upscale ice cream parlor, and discuss plans to travel abroad. The limits marriage places on mobility are underscored when Amy confesses to her friends that she cannot join them because she has bowed to parental pressures and married the husband she had left fifteen years earlier. This time, she laments, she will be his third wife. Therefore, when Kiné needs physical satisfaction she avoids becoming the exchange object and instead hires the services of Mossamba Wade or seeks relationships in which she can maintain her power and autonomy. The women are acutely aware of the fact that their hard work and financial independence do not provide them with the social advantages that men have. Amy's new social status is a painful reminder that, as Esi's grandmother admonishes, while a woman will always add to the social status of men, her own status risks being diminished. Acknowledging the continuation of women's

oppression, which persists despite their economic self-sufficiency, Kiné remarks that “if it only took work to liberate women, women farmers would be liberated.”<sup>16</sup> Kiné and her friends therefore forge a new type of feminism that is not based solely upon work and production, but is, rather, one in which they energetically, and sometimes desperately, consume their code of mobility. While, as Baudrillard suggests, this code is very much tied to phallic power, it is also the case that it has engendered its own language, a language in which women are not commodities valorizing men’s relationships with one another.

In the local lexicon of Dakar, Faat Kiné, Amy, and Mada are the types of women often referred to as *diriyankes*. A *diriyanke* is typically a well-to-do businesswoman who dresses in fashionable traditional clothing, wears an abundance of jewelry and perfume, and attracts men with her seductive skills and financial flattery. She is often, although not always, a single mother or divorced woman who seeks pleasure and sexual satisfaction outside of the institution of marriage. Francis Nyamnjoh, in his brilliant discussion of sexual metaphors and the language of “commoditized sex” in Dakar, cites two possible explanations for the origin of the word “*diriyanke*.” One theory is that the word is a combination of the Wolof verb *direeku*, which means “to drag oneself,” and the word “Yankee.” According to this hypothesis the word comes from the *diriyanke*’s ability to drag, or carry herself, like a dignified and independent American woman who, consequently, can have her selection of African males. Another theory posits that the word is the combination of the Wolof “*diri*,” which means “to pull a load behind or keep on a leash,” and the Pulaar suffix “*yanke*,” meaning “the person who.” *Diriyanke* would thus be the person who drags, or more specifically “the woman who keeps others on a

leash” (Nyamnjoh 300). In either case, the emphasis is notably on the woman’s ability to drag or pull. She is the active agent who chooses her men and moves around autonomously. I would also like to suggest that the *diriyanke*, as a person who drags, might also resonate with the French word *dragueur/dragueuse*, a man or woman who is particular adept at luring the opposite sex. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that until Jean-Pierre Mocky’s 1960 film *Les dragueurs*, the common meaning of the verb *draguer* was to fish with a dragnet. That fashionable men in Dakar are referred to as *thiofs*, an expensive type of fish, lends further credence to the overlapping of the word *diriyanke* with the French connotations of *drager*. Yet, more importantly for the present discussion, it must be noted that the *diriyanke* resembles in many ways the figure of the Mama Benz (sometimes called Nana Benz) of the Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, and the Congo.<sup>17</sup> The Mama Benz, is also a successful businesswoman, usually in the cloth trade, whose trademark is a Mercedes Benz. Both the *diriyanke* and the Mama Benz are respected figures who embody the values of traditional, full-figured beauty and female self-reliance. They are auto-mobile women in several senses of the word. If, as Marx suggests, “commodities cannot go to market and make exchanges on their own account” (88), the *diriyanke* is certainly no commodity beholden to her guardian.

In Dakar, the female foil to the *diriyanke* is the *disquette*, a young, slender woman dressed in foreign fashions who uses wealthy men in order to participate in a consumer culture from which she would otherwise be excluded. A *disquette* is the French word for a portable floppy disk. Accordingly, these slim young women are known for their flexibility, for their ability to service different “hard drives,” and for the ease with which they can be formatted and reformatted by different users (Nyamnjoh 311). *Disquettes*

seek men who can provide them with one or more of the 4 Vs (*villa, voiture, voyage, virement bancaire*: house, car, travel, and bank transfers), although school-aged *disquettes* will often also settle for professors who can provide them with high marks (Nyamnjuh 304, 306). In contrast to the *diriyankes* who control their men and keep them close, *disquettes* are portable and easily exchanged. (In Abidjan, these types of women are referred to as *portables* or *cellulaires* – both words for cell phones, which are smaller and more mobile, trendy, and flexible than phones fixed to a landline.) *Disquettes* are also compared to spare tires, which are nice to have but not necessary to keep, while *diriyankes* are likened to the (auto-mobile) wheels of a truck (Nyamnjuh 304). In a similar metaphor, Faat Kiné refers to her own “caboose” as “top of the line, not for public transportation.” Faat Kiné acknowledges the local euphemisms associated with the *diriyanke* and makes it clear that she will not transport just anybody – like any true *diriyanke* she can afford to be selective. The *diriyanke*, like the Mama Benz, is never dependent on another driver for her mobility. By contrast, the *disquette*, although she can be quite crafty and seductive, is financially dependent on men and characterized by her ability to be moved around by others: she offers herself up as an object of exchange, hoping that in the process, she will improve her own value. The *disquette* is therefore a commodity “without the power of resistance against man” (Marx 88), while the *diriyanke* consumes according to a language and a code in which she holds the power.

At the Total station, Kiné is at the center of a male dominated world, but, as a quintessential *diriyanke*, it is she who drags (*dragner*) and pulls the leash. In the sexually charged metaphoric language of Dakar, replete with its transportation euphemisms, it is significant that Kiné is “at the pump,” distributing her gasoline to the various vehicles

that come to fill at her station. She has the phallus both to give and to deny. It is at the gas station that the financially motivated Professor Gaye comes to see if Aby has passed her bac and is promptly ordered to leave Kiné's office. Kiné's command to "get out" is immediately echoed in a flashback where the school director shouts the same words, in the same harsh tone, to expel the young Kiné from school. Now, however, it is Kiné who has the power to command mobility. While Gaye is denied a seat in her office, Mossamba Wade, who has come to scold Kiné for cruelly pepper spraying his wife, is told to sit off to the side. He is denied a seat on the opposite side of Kiné's desk where equals and customers sit. Then, a stunned Mossamba is "fired" and told that his previous sexual services will be compensated but that he will no longer be needed. Only Jean, who seems to want nothing from Kiné other than love and companionship, is treated with kindness. He passes several other stations on his way to "fill" at Kiné's, and, in the end, it is Jean that Kiné chooses as a romantic partner.

Jean is a significant choice because he is the partner that Aby and Djib have deemed the most suitable for their mother, and also the partner that Kiné's mother has declared entirely unsuitable. Mammy objects to Jean first because he is a Christian and second because he is a widower who may bring "bad luck" for his wives. But Aby and Djib do not believe in superstition and find that Jean, an honest businessman and a single father, has much in common with their mother. The relationship between Jean and Kiné promises to be one of equals, a point that is underscored when Aby berates Djib for talking to Jean about their mother as if she were an object of exchange. Here, the daughter objects to her brother's efforts to re-inscribe their mother into an economy of exchange. And yet, while her children seem obsessed with finding Kiné a husband, Kiné

never mentions actually marrying Jean and certainly does not intend to relinquish her autonomy. When she speaks about sleeping with Jean, she describes herself as active, never passive. In keeping with transportation metaphors, she tells her friends that she has already “driven him” and done it *bu baxx*, quite well, with gusto even.<sup>18</sup> In the final scene of the film *Faat Kiné* sits in a chair exposing her *petit pagne* (or small sarong), a seductive Senegalese undergarment, and beckons Jean to come and pleasure her. The last shot of the film is a close-up of Kiné’s large toe wriggling – another form of (phallic) movement – in delight.

Thus, despite the fact that Kiné often flaunts her power over movement in typically masculine ways, in some instances causing physical harm to others and lashing out at the wrong people, *Faat Kiné* proffers a new and different type of relationship between pleasure and power. Whereas in both *Xala* and *Changes* sexuality was placed within the political economy of exchange and used to control women, in *Faat Kiné* it becomes an egalitarian, heterosexual exchange of pleasure. Thus, while *Faat Kiné* might assume phallic power, the relationship between pleasure and power in the film is no longer ordered on the phallocratic model, nor is it replaced with a reductive or essentialized gyno-centric order, as Irigaray might have it. Thus, if El Hadji’s world was one of the (im)potent Mercedes, Sembène does not attempt to substitute it with what Barthes calls, in a different context, “the goddess of petit-bourgeois advancement.”

What I would like to suggest, then, is that *Faat Kiné* reconstitutes the phallocratic model of exchange and mobility in *Xala* by exploring the possibility for a new type of feminist automobility. As John Mowitt argues, the enunciative tropes of *Faat Kiné* might be productively read as an “inverted rearrangement” of *Xala*. My argument is that in

*Faat Kiné* Sembène has decided to explore what would happen if he were to take seriously the claims of autonomy mouthed by the businessmen who take over the Chamber of Commerce in *Xala*. In the opening scene of *Xala*, the narrator, speaking as if he were one of the new elites, declares: “We must control industry, our commerce, our culture, take in hand our destiny.” But, of course, the actions on screen – the Frenchmen handing the new Senegalese leaders briefcases filled with money – contradict this spirit of independence and set the tone for a satirical fable of impotence and greed. In *Faat Kiné*, however, Sembène has created a protagonist who has no choice but to take her destiny into her own hands. This is not to say that *Faat Kiné* is not full of mockery, contradiction, or banter, but here Sembène creates a hero who, unlike the businessmen in *Xala*, succeeds at economic self-sufficiency. That this protagonist is a woman, and is joined by a small cadre of equally successful female friends, is crucial to the way in which *Faat Kiné* reorganizes some of the central tropes of *Xala* via a new politics of gender and auto-mobility.

To begin with, the opening images of *Faat Kiné* are all taken from the playbook of *Xala* – automobiles of various makes and functions circling Dakar’s central Place de l’Indépendance, stunning panoramas of a city in motion, and women carrying plastic buckets of water on their heads. The first shot of the film captures these women crossing the Place de l’Indépendance where N’Gone had circled with her wedding car in tow, and as the camera pans out we see the Chamber of Commerce marginalized in the left hand corner of the frame. After the women make their way across the square, the camera returns to a medium shot of them walking single file with their buckets. In the next shot, Faat Kiné is dropping off her two children to find out the results of their bac. In *Xala*,



women carrying buckets of dirty water are a nuisance to El Hadji and his secretary Madame Diouf. They dump their water in the open sewer right outside the office creating an unpleasant smell, and they would certainly be placed in the category of *déchets humains* (human rubbish) that El Hadji sought to remove from his environs. In *Faat Kiné*, however, these women walk deliberately and nobly across the screen, while the previously important Chamber of Commerce remains in the background. *Faat Kiné* is a tale of everyday people *moving about* the city in cars, on foot, and in *car rapides*, not the elite “moving up” (like El Hadji or the businessman in *Borom Sarret*) at the expense of others. The juxtaposition of the sequence of the women crossing the Place de l’Indépendance with the shots of Kiné behind the wheel links the plight of the bourgeois protagonist to these less privileged city women. After Kiné’s children exit the car, the women cross the street in front of the car and she must pause for them. Despite the fact that she is rushing off to work, she shares the city with them and even yields to them. Later in the film when another single file line of people cross her path – this time a group of blind children – Kiné steps out of her office to hand each one of them alms. For Kiné, unlike El Hadji, personal mobility and social responsibility are not mutually exclusive.

Similarly, as Mowitt points out, *Faat Kiné* dramatically restages the wedding celebration scene of *Xala* with its own lengthy celebration. In *Xala* the wedding of El Hadji and N’Gone occurs towards the beginning of the film and reaches its anti-climatic conclusion with the revelation that El Hadji has been stricken with the curse of impotence. As I argue in chapter three, from this point on, the film becomes riddled with tropes of stasis and regression. El Hadji’s movements become less and less aligned with his Mercedes until eventually the car is removed from the film. In *Faat Kiné*, the

celebration is in honor of Aby and Djib's successful completion of the bac, and it is organized by the Club of Utopia and Prospectives, a group of young men that wants Djib to be the future president of the federation of West African states. The celebration here occurs at the end of the film, and finishes with the successful coupling of Jean and Kiné.<sup>19</sup> Central to both celebrations is a mockery of irresponsible male power. At his wedding, El Hadji is offered both traditional and Western sexual aids, but he refuses to use them. He learns only when it is too late that he should not have been so sure of his potency. At Kiné's party Amy recounts what happened when she asked her jet-setting husband to wear a condom to protect against HIV/AIDS: "His flag dropped from 12:00 to 6:30." But now that her husband wants nothing to do with her, Amy tells her friends, she is free to travel abroad with them. In *Xala*, the loss of the erection is a tragic symbol of the failed leadership of the country. In *Faat Kiné*, it is not only comedic, it is liberating. Without denying the possibility for heterosexual romantic love and pleasure, the women are successful at getting male power to lose its erection, to lose its ability to penetrate and dominant women's lives. However, the most sustained critique of patriarchy comes not from the women, but from Djib – the figure of a new type of masculinity and leadership – who rallies the young party guests as he defends his mother and tells Gaye and BOP that "the rights of paternity imply responsibility." Thus, while El Hadji's wedding launches a film that revolves around female subordination, religious and commodity fetishes, and male impotency, *Faat Kiné* ends in a celebration of youth leadership, female mobility, and a foot flexed in satisfaction. While one fête is marked by stalled progress and the failure of the penis, the other is marked by deferred progress and polymorphous sexual satisfaction.

Furthermore, in *Xala* El Hadji is defined in large part by his white Mercedes Benz. His identity as a prosperous businessman, his façade of autonomy, and the range of his daily movements are dependent on it. But in *Faat Kiné*, the Citroën hatchback is a minor figure: Kiné uses it to complete her daily errands but the car seems rather detached from a larger post-Enlightenment ethos. Rather than literally parading the car on a pedestal, as he does with N’Gone’s car in *Xala*, Sembène allows the automobility of the Saxo to become one type of mobility among many. In other words, it helps Kiné maneuver the city in a privileged way, but it does not define her, nor does it mark her as in any way superior to the women walking with buckets on their heads, the disabled man in a wheelchair who works as a messenger, or even those passengers riding in the rickety *car rapides*. Of course, the car is still consumed as code, a code that exceeds its material use, but in *Faat Kiné* the car is less a dominating phallus (which is not to say that it has completely shed its phallic significations) and more a part of Dakar’s polymorphic movements.

Likewise, the multiplicity of forms of mobility in *Faat Kiné* is underscored by the range of activities that occur at the Total petrol station, which is situated at a major intersection in Point E, a middle-class neighborhood in Dakar that evokes neither the elitism of the Plateau in *Xala*, nor the poverty of the Medina in *Borom Sarret*. At the Total Point E we see private automobiles as well as aging Toyota taxis, *car rapides* coughing black smoke, men on motorcycles, hobbling beggars, ambulant flower vendors, and Muslim motorists seeking a spot to pray. Thus, while the Total station may be a hub of transnational capitalism, it is also a place that, in Sembène’s words, “symbolizes the energy of life.”<sup>20</sup> What we do not see, however, is the broken-down cars that often rest

and await maintenance in the median of the boulevard (dubbed Champs-Élysées) where the Total Point E is situated. An observant viewer may catch a glimpse of these cars in the background of a few shots, but the camera does not pay them any attention. As he strives to portray a side of Dakar in which things work, Sembène turns a cinematic blind-eye to these broken-down automobiles. *Faat Kiné* is, after all, a film about a woman whose name evokes the *ciné* itself: it is a film in which things are constantly in motion.

*Faat Kiné* depicts, for better and for worse, Sembène's vision of a changing and dynamic Dakar. It is a film about women with business acumen seeking to produce, consume, and exchange outside the phallic economy. It is about women who at times defy and at other times embody the dissolution of human relations that defines capitalist society. Although *Faat Kiné* works hard to support and educate her family, life has hardened her. In *Faat Kiné* the *déesse* is certainly dead: she's been replaced by the gas-station manager and integrated into the world of hatchbacks, condoms, and cigarettes. The mother that Sembène holds out as his everyday hero is hardly perfect, and just as the consumer society she inhabits is not likely to rescue most Senegalese from their condition of chronic poverty, the automobility she has been able to obtain for herself will certainly not be available to all who seek it. But *Faat Kiné*, along with *Amy* and *Mada*, have been able to effect "mobile and transitory points of resistance" (96), as Foucault says, that help to produce cleavages and new types of power in a shifting society. What is unfortunate is that these points of resistance – which, of course, are never enough by themselves – also come with the tacit endorsement of car culture. Thus, while *Faat Kiné* provides us with a vision of women who have resisted their own circulation as objects, it does not offer us any comparable demonstration of women who have resisted the system of automobility.

## Conclusion

Both Barthes and Baudrillard, in their discussions of the domesticated car, show that while commodity fetishism is typically considered to be a situation in which objects and their mystical aura dominate people, there is in fact not always a clear separation between subjects and objects: the car and the driver exist in a shared matrix of everyday social relations. Barthes suggests that it is therefore no longer a mythology of the automobile that one must write, but a mythology of driving. Pushing this notion of human-machine integration even further, Donna Haraway – who “would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (181) – reminds us: “The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, *our* process, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us” (180). Recently, a number of social scientists have used Haraway’s notion of the human-machine collaboration to examine the notion of the car-driver as a hybrid assemblage of humans, machines, roads, buildings, and signs.<sup>21</sup> Their aim is to understand how modern social life is constituted by the ways in which people dwell and move through space in and as their automobiles. In this dissertation, I have been less concerned with articulating any universal phenomenology of inhabiting the car and focused instead on reading the contradictions of the discursive formations through which automobility is rendered legible in West African cultures.

However, what the above chapter has argued is that in a society where women’s autonomy is constrained and limited by patriarchal regimes, the car-driver coupling can, in certain cases, instantiate new sources of power and pleasure, as Haraway suggests. Cars – like other technologies – allow women to recode themselves as “disassembled and

reassembled” subjects (Haraway 163) in order to evade both sacralization and other less benign forms of control. And yet, it must be clear that while automobiles enable a temporary transgression of physical and social barriers that might otherwise prove difficult to surmount, they do not, in either text, enable women drivers to become the autonomously mobile figures of an ideally imagined automobility. Thus, although automobility may be consumed as a code through which women resist domination, it is certainly not a form of resistance capable of altering the phallocratic model of exchange and mobility upon which society is based. As in all forms of consumerism, the code that one consumes is often quite different than the goal one achieves. Even though both *Changes* and *Faat Kiné* celebrate the transgressive possibilities of the car, they make the limitations and ambiguities of its potential abundantly clear. Esi Sekyi realizes that there are no individual answers to the problems that she faces. She sees her new car from Ali as a way to immediately improve her own day-to-day mobility, but she knows that the problems of government neglect, uneven capitalism, and highly stratified gender division will in no way be addressed by her new possession. Thus, as the novel closes, she clearly fails to embody the free, autonomous ideals that one typically associates with automobility. Although *Faat Kiné* also depicts the many constraints placed on African women, Kiné is, compared to Esi, more successful at becoming an auto-mobile woman. And yet, it is important to note that she does so in a film where the dominance of the car is mitigated by the multiplicity of other forms of equally valid mobility. Kiné’s success at resisting modern patriarchal social formation therefore has less to do with her car and more to do with her own, internalized self-mobility.

While both *Changes* and *Faat Kiné* thankfully refrain from tying any sort of postcolonial gender revolution to the possibilities of automobility, neither text offers us a way of thinking that moves beyond automobility entirely. In this sense, they are like the Nollywood films that fail to reject outright any solutions that center upon a machine that can only have devastating effects on community life. Unfortunately, these texts, like automobility itself, are products of an era in which the neo-liberal credos are encouraging private, individualistic solutions to problems that are often better addressed by society as a whole. What we hope for is that the overdetermined contradiction of automobility might provide a rupture, a new way of organizing mobility in a globalized world that cannot possibly sustain the current system. What we have at the moment, however, is a veritable roadblock.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Debord argues that the dominance of image-value corresponds to the total erasure of use-value that is an integral part of capitalist development (31-32).

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Ross links the timing of Barthes' pronouncement on the everydayness of the automobile to the decline of the French empire, and, specifically, to the loss of Algeria. Thus, the discourse of the automobile and of French modernization in general was fundamentally tied to the story of decolonization. Ross argues that the arrival of new consumer objects helped to initiate a break with the colonial past. It helped the French turn from the belief that "Algeria is France" to a logic in which a "backwards" and uncleanly Algeria could not possibly be the new, modern France.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard was also influenced by Henri Lefebvre who shared Baudrillard's insistence that the car was the epitome of everyday objects.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, of course, makes the same point in his discussion of the family as an Ideological State Apparatus.

<sup>5</sup> See his *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (39).

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<sup>6</sup>This also implies a critique of the gift/commodity split. While people like Baudrillard or Michael Taussing (see, for instance, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*) insist that the gift and the commodity occupy opposing roles – the first creating social bonds, the second eliminating them – the feminist critique of the woman as gift/commodity demonstrates that the two systems both bring the exchangers closer together.

<sup>7</sup> See Veblen's "The Economic Theory of Women's Dress" which appeared in the *Popular Science Monthly* in December 1894, as well as his classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

<sup>8</sup> Kristin Ross, for instance, notes that female novelists of the French postwar period who were writing in the realist mode, such as Françoise Sagan, Christiane Rochefort, and Simone de Beauvoir, "helped perform the slow integration of driving into the web of everyday, lived emotional relations, particularly those of the couple" (56).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the representations of polygamy in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* or *Juletane* by Myriam Warner-Vieyra.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 1 for a further discussion of the hum.

<sup>11</sup> Just after *Faat Kiné's* release, the Senegalese people voted out the Socialist Party that had been ruling the country for 40 years, since independence. When Abdoulaye Wade, who had been the leader of the opposition party for 25 years, assumed power he pushed through an agenda of liberalization. Although by the 2007 elections his popularity was waning amidst political scandals and ambivalence over his free market policies, he still secured 56% of the vote, while the Socialist Party received only 14%. In an interview with Stuart Klawans of the *New York Times*, Sembène links women like Faat Kiné to the move away from the socialist government, arguing that their leadership was pivotal during the presidential run-offs of 2000.

<sup>12</sup> See Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (31, 64).

<sup>13</sup> Ken Harrow, for instance, situates Kiné within a lineage of independent mythical female figures who are linked to power and through and prestige through their proximity to modern forms of transportation. Harrow also draws a link between Kiné and Mama Tekla in *Quartier Mozart*.

<sup>14</sup> The second film in the trilogy, *Moolaadé*, is about a woman who offers protection to four young girls who have refused to submit to the ritual of female circumcision. *Brotherhood of the Rats* was slated to be the third film, but Sembène passed away before the film went into production.

<sup>15</sup> Sembène, in an interview with Samba Gadjigo, explains that his emphasis on women heroes stems from his belief that Africa is the continent of the mother: "I think Africa is



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maternal . . . According to our traditions, a man has no intrinsic value; he receives his value from his mother. This concept goes back to before Islam: the good wife, the good mother, the submissive mother who knows how to look after her husband and family. The mother embodies our society . . . That said, to me, every man loves a woman” (191-192). Despite the fact that here Sembène seems to be valorizing and essentializing the idea of the good wife and good mother, his depiction of Faat Kiné reveals a much more complex understanding of the role of women in Senegalese society. Likewise, his heterosexism is somewhat undermined (although by no means excused) by the figure of the *gor-jigeeen* (literally man-woman) who is the mistress of ceremony of El Hadji and N’Gone’s wedding in *Xala*.

<sup>16</sup> Sembène makes the same observation in his interview with Mamadou Niang.

<sup>17</sup> In Lomé the Nana Benzes even have their own radio station, Nana FM.

<sup>18</sup> The film’s English subtitles translate Kiné’s statement, “Je l’ai déjà conduit” into “I have already laid him” rather than “I have already driven him,” and they do not translate the Wolof modifier “bu baxx.”

<sup>19</sup> See John Mowitt’s *Re-Takes* (127-129) for a discussion of the way in which Sembène repeats several of the same motifs in the two celebration scenes but rearranges the enunciative marks of the failed copulation in *Xala*.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Stuart Klawans, “FILM; African Cinema's Main Man Celebrates Women.”

<sup>21</sup> See John Urry’s “Inhabiting the car;” Tim Luke’s “Liberal Society and Cyborg Subjectivity: The Politics of Environments, Bodies, and Nature;” and Tim Dant’s “The Driver-Car.” Although Dant rejects the specificity of the terms “cyborg” or “hybrid,” he still talks about ways the car and driver are brought together as a human-machine assemblage that impacts the formation of modern societies.

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