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Cultures of American Modernism

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If He Can Do It, Why Can't I?: Women's Struggles into Early Automobility

In early 1900's copies of *Vogue* magazine, car advertisements start to appear intermittently with fashion articles. Some of them show women as mothers and caregivers, but most commercials took advantage of the newfound freedom of the flapper and promoted an independent woman. One advertisement heralds the title "I am the playboy" (Rabinovitch-Fox 389) while a woman drives a car on her own. While these advertisements seem like a freeing escapade for the early modern women, the early days of driving in America were a tumultuous time for female. Women in texts at this point in history, at the formation of cross-country roads and the birth of the road trip, were portrayed in a typically demeaning light, no different from the norms of society at the time. These stereotypes didn't hinder women from getting behind the wheel, but the general male viewpoint didn't do much to change as females demanding to commandeer their futures with cars. So then how did men view women fighting to travel independently for the first time in history, versus women viewing the closest thing to autonomy in their lives yet? In other words, what do men and women think about females driving, and how is that represented in how they talk about women?

The group that could have benefited the most from the invention of cars was the farmhouse families; lower and middle class families needed the mobility the most to expand their opportunities and move out of poor areas. That being said, only members of the upper class

could get access to vehicles. Chauffeurs were used heavily, so affluent members of society could enjoy the comfort of a car without being burdened by learning how to drive. This mentality was especially prevalent when it came to women using cars. It would sooner be acceptable for male strangers to escort them than driving themselves. However, just to keep women out of cars, there was a fabricated fear surrounding the interpreted sexual attraction of a man behind the wheel. Media formats, namely novels and short stories, crafted tails of “the woman passenger as a sexually suspect figure all too vulnerable to the erotic power of her driver” (Scharff 20). Times changed, and the chauffeur became her own husband escorting the family. The idea of immense, uncontrollable sexual attraction was somehow less scandalous because now she belonged to him. A seamless transition happened within “an archetypal configuration: a man behind the wheel, a woman in the passenger's seat, children enjoying the ride in the back” (“Taking the Wheel” 52).

The upper class women who managed to beat the stereotypes often made a social pilgrimage in their new cars, often with a job in mind. While the masculine-driven texts of the time retain more faithful followers, like Horatio Nelson’s autobiography, for example, the texts by women have an undeniable fire behind them; “No longer relegated to waiting, women wrote increasingly about journeys, about mobility, and about the power inherent in this increased freedom” (“Domesticating the Car” 1). Alongside that fire, however, women knew they couldn’t take as many liberties as men could in their works. Women had to find gentle workarounds for their thoughts, so they could be heard and not attacked. These trailblazing women understood and commenting on “the possibility of freedom and the constraints of domesticity” (2).

The first woman to travel cross-country in a car was Alice Huyler Ramsey in 1909, and to do so was considered a commercial opportunity to most, but a defining personal moment to

her and her crew of women. She was approached by an automobile firm looking to to put their name firmly on top in a fast-growing industry. The company addressed the task they asked of her as “the spectacle of four women driving across the country over practically uncharted wilderness was a golden opportunity for building up their own prestige in the automobile industry” (Ramsey and Franzwa 18). What was a landmark occasion for her and her loved ones was simply a ploy for money and publicity for the company, further reassuring the idea that women driving was nothing more than a novelty. Whether Maxwell intended to make an example of Ramsey is unknown from her memoir, but she does point out how newspapers called her voyage “dangerous and ridiculous and beyond the capabilities of women drivers” (9). However, she sees it as more of a challenge than deterrent, and heads out West with her car packed full and her head held high.

Ramsey faced a lot of unnecessary questions from men of all professions before her journey out. Whether it be reporters or gossipers, a lot of men felt the need to warn her how dangerous this would be for a woman. It could be assumed that their shock came at her decision to travel on her own without her husband. She responds to the group of confused men by saying, “‘Why not?’ said I, ‘if Bone wouldn’t object to my going. It’s been done by men and as long as they have been able to accomplish it, why shouldn’t I?’” (8). Her husband and father both support her decision to go, teaching her how to maintain a car and helping her prepare. However, the fact that it is still deemed necessary to get a male’s blessing to travel shows the negative attitude towards women commanding their own lives and choices at this point in history. Ramsey sets the precedence of female determination, paving the way for more women to follow in her tire tracks.

One interaction she has in particular involves two vastly different questions. She first is asked if she is bringing any guns to protect herself, which could be a perfectly reasonable question. Heading out into unfamiliar, uncharted territory poses a certain threat to anyone of any gender. However, the next question Ramsey receives is about whether or not they're bringing pillows. She responds with, "'Pillows?' I echoed with perhaps a touch of scorn, 'If one of us needs a pillow, I guess she'll have to board a train to the next stop!'" (8). It would make sense for anyone to be nervous and want to bring something to defend themselves. But why would she need pillows for this journey? They are, by no means, a necessity, but these men are assuming she needs frivolous items to journey out alone. This assumption of comfort traveling and women avoiding challenging or uncomfortable situations can be echoed in many other texts written by women driving long distances during this time.

The second notable text by a woman to travel to the West coast is *By Motor to the Golden Gate* by Emily Post. She is another woman bogged down by questions of comfort travel. Post eventually reaches Santa Fe on her road trip, and becomes enamoured with the idea of Native Americans and Mexicans. In one short chapter, she compares the landscape to that of a young Indian girl living during the European conquest. She weaves a story of the "little sister of yesterday," and comments in an indirect way of the savage treatment of native peoples; "But then the dream becomes a sad one of injustice and cruelty; of long, long miserable years under the oppression of a dissipated gambling tyrant who put her family to the sword or made them slaves" (Post 158). Post points out the forced marriage, enslavement, and brutality under the Europeans, something most people shied away from. But why did she have to hide behind a metaphor to tell her story?

It could be assumed, especially looking at the blatant sexism she experiences before heading out for her journey, that she knows she can't be explicit. The amount of men discouraging her before she even got behind the wheel is the dominate attitude at the time; women should stay home and be safe. An uncensored woman thinking and writing independently poses a certain threat to societal norms. By using a young girl trapped in a marriage, she also in a way in sympathizing with women of the time. Post may be sympathizing with not only the Native Americans forced out of their homelands and customs, but also the modern woman stripped of a voice and decision. She knows her journey is a building block towards women's freedom, and she understands that most females during this time will never be able to experience anything like this. Her passage about her stop in Santa Fe is a true show of her intelligence as a writer and of her drive as a traveling woman.

At some point after Emily Post's pilgrimage, there was a shift in advertising approaches. After the era of the flapper, women were forced back into the housewife roll. However, they would prefer having a car over appliances or other necessities for the house, since they understood their importance in a rapidly advancing society. While still not socially acceptable for all women to drive, car companies started marketing towards females, namely mothers, in a very direct way. Feeding into the idea that women were dangerous drivers wouldn't sell cars, so "the auto industry has been reluctant to offend them. To take a hard line that women are dangerous drivers does not help sell more cars" ("Driving Women" 15). Advertisers and car companies struggled with depicting housewives and early 1900's women "as modern women, as car owners, and as independent beings, conveying a more complex interpretation of what defined modern

motherhood in the 1920s” (Rabinovitch-Fox 392). Women were independent, but not too independent.

Despite the tone of the advertisements and the general public at the time, not every male figure during this time was out to directly oppress women. Sinclair Lewis’ *Free Air* is the story of a young Claire Boltwood escorting her father out West, taking all the hurdles and hatred in stride and managing to fall in love on the way. However, his seemingly empowering text hides issues of the times within interactions she has as well as the way he decides to portray Claire. While attempting to maneuver the rough roads, Lewis decides to describe her as “dainty of habit” (Lewis 9). There’s plenty more examples of his subtle sexist view, but he also describes a scenario all too familiar and terrifying to women of any decade. Claire develops a habit of picking up hitchhikers, and one of them isn’t as innocent as she’s used to. He harrasses her and her father for money, and when they prove to him they can’t pay up, he decides to make her uncomfortable: “That right hand slid behind her. She could see its warmth on her back. She burst out, flaring, ‘Kindly do not touch me!’ ‘Gee, did I touch you, girlie? Why that’s a shame!’ he drawled, his cracked broad lips turning up in a grin” (70). He resorts immediately to sexualizing her, touching her repeatedly and playing it off as accidents, wondering why she’s getting so mad. Women nowadays are told to carry pepper spray, walk in groups, never pick up hitchhikers, even keep blunt weapons in their cars and park in well lit areas unless they’re looking for trouble. A man writing this book wouldn’t necessarily or immediately understand the lingering fear afterwards, much less the immediate panic and embarrassment from an event like that. What Claire experienced is almost entirely unique to a woman’s experience, and is nonetheless instituted by overt masculinity.

John Williams' *This is My Country Too* had a lot on irony within how he decided to write women; his story was a magazine project turned social statement about a black man in the 1960's recording every racially-based interaction he had throughout our country. His journey across the country, while in a much more modern setting, was eerily similar to the trips women took to write in the early 1900's. However, Williams understood there were places he was not welcome, and was shown the ugly underbelly of this country. He still expresses a severe lack of sympathy towards women, though, despite being a minority. At one of his stops to a college, Williams diagrams what a young person needs to be successful during this time period in terms of status symbols. Men, on top of education, needs a high-powered car and a girl to make him look affluent; "a sharp enough girlfriend, one who is able to echo him if he is going into a profession" (Williams 42). This paints a superficial picture of how a woman is to behave. She is nothing more than an accessory to his success, and that is all she will amount to. The model for women to follow is "a handsome escort, quick with a quip but intelligence to call upon" (43). She needs a man who can carry his own, whereas she doesn't have to contribute. Being a minority himself, he should have attempted to see the intersectionality of the issues between women and any person of color, instead of further pushing women of any color into a corner. It's also worthwhile to note that the man needs a sports car with an obscure name, whereas it's a suggestion for a female to have a car. It's a requirement for a man to drive, and a novel idea for a woman to.

It doesn't take much research to find sexism prevalent still in modern car commercials. One video in particular uploaded to YouTube by The Car Media has dubbed just a few of these commercials as the "hottest" advertisements, oblivious to the issues within the frames. The first one barely shows a woman's face, focusing more on her body and the scorpion on her back that

cuts her bikini strap. The third video is a man ogling a woman in the street, only for her to slap him, kiss him, and then turn into a car. All of these advertisements make women accessories to cars or to men. The only reason she is in the commercial is to sell the car rather than drive it herself. Car commercials are a compelling yet subtle way to show how even though women driving is now a popular sight, they're still limited in how and what they drive, as well as how they look and are expected to behave. Just because we have moved past the attitude of the early 1900's does not mean that truck commercials aren't still starring manly men driving in seemingly endless mud fields, and minivan advertisements always feature a mother behind the wheel. Women don't belong in the passenger seat of a man's midlife crisis or his overly masculine escapade. They have long been fighting for the right to freedom and autonomy through vehicles, and while we've come a long way since the days of Alice Huyler Ramsey and Emily Post, we still have a lot of work to do to destigmatize women driving and controlling their own futures.

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