Deborah Clarke. *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

By Christine Photinos, National University, USA

1 An association between automobiles and masculinity has existed in American popular mythology since the earliest days of motoring. The association relies upon understandings of gender that have been subject to negotiation throughout the twentieth century — in part due to social changes linked to the rise of car culture. Deborah Clarke's *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* examines how cultural portrayals of women and cars have registered and participated in shifting conceptions of female identity and female agency.

2 Clarke begins her study with an examination of the first decades following the invention of the automobile. Driving may have initially been understood as a male activity, but women "were quick to claim its potential" (10). Among the automobile's disruptions to traditional gender categories was the way it further destabilized the separation between private and public space: "No longer relegated to the home, women now drove into the public sphere, exercising control over the latest technology" (10). Clarke's analysis of automobile advertisements of the era reveals an effort to reassert gender difference by, for example, marketing certain kinds of cars to women only. The myth of the incompetent woman driver (repeatedly debunked by insurance company statistics) emerged during this era and mitigated anxiety about female incursion into male territory.

3 While the automobile industry has often presented essentialist understandings of female identity in its marketing, women writers, Clarke argues, have offered more complex portrayals of women's relationships with cars. For example, she examines ways in which women's road narratives disrupt "the old associations of woman as home, woman as place" that are so central to classic road stories such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (117). They do this not by merely putting a woman in the driver's seat, but by restructuring the standard narrative itself. In the stories Clarke discusses, women motorists "do not escape attachments, domesticity, or responsibility. They cannot head out wherever their fancy takes them, with a blithe disregard for money or family, as does Dean Moriarty, leaving wives and children (four by Sal's last count) behind" (117). In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, for example, the protagonist may drive away from her small Kentucky hometown; however, as Clarke notes, she is not enacting the classic romantic American escape narrative of a free-roaming self

liberated from all social constraints and commitments. Kingsolver's protagonist experiences material limitations on her freedom (e.g. she does not have much money, and her car is prone to breakdowns) and maintains familial bonds. She remains strongly attached to her mother and becomes a mother herself when she adopts a Native American child she finds abandoned in the front seat of her Volkswagen Beetle.

4 One of the main strengths of Clarke's study is that it examines familiar territory from a productive new angle. For example, Clarke analyzes press coverage surrounding an auto race between Jack Johnson, fresh from his famous 1910 boxing victory over Jim Jeffries, and auto-racing champion Barney Oldfield. Johnson's defeat of Jeffries had created a kind of racial hysteria: if the boxing championship represented the highest achievement of the male physical body, what did it mean that the white Jeffries could be defeated by the African-American Johnson? Oldfield's later defeat of Johnson on the racetrack was widely heralded as a reaffirmation of white male superiority — but not, Clarke argues, without attendant anxieties. There were undeniable differences between a boxing match and an auto race. Clarke writes, "the car opened the door to rethinking the very boundaries of race and gender by driving a wedge between identity and the physical body" (58). It was, in other words, not merely Oldfield's body that defeated Johnson. The victory he achieved for white masculinity was one involving body and car. The victorious figure of Oldfield fused the white male body with technology — technology that was also accessible to African Americans and to women.

5 To climb behind the wheel of an automobile, Clarke thus argues, has served as a means of blurring boundaries — between public and private, male and female, white and nonwhite. Clarke seeks to demonstrate that American women writers have long been attentive to this potential — and to its limitations. In developing this argument, she references a large number of women writers, including Dorothy Allison, Julia Alvarez, Joan Didion, Louise Erdrich, Jessie Fauset, Cristina Garcia, Zora Neale Hurston, Cynthia Kadohata, Barbara Kingsolver, Erika Lopez, Bobbie Ann Mason, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O'Connor, Marge Piercy, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mona Simpson, Jane Smiley, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton. While most of these authors are contemporary, Clarke draws upon works spanning a century of American literature, from the Motor Maids and Motor Girls stories of the 1910s to Erika Lopez's 1997 lesbian biker novel *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing*.

6 Clarke's insistence on the importance of women's relationships with cars to our understanding of twentieth-century American culture is affirmed both by her nuanced readings and the sheer number of texts addressed in her study. Driving Women combines

breadth and depth to offer a compelling examination of gender and American car culture. It merges and adds to the large number of studies on American mobility narratives and gender and technology that have been published in recent years.