



Power Under Her Foot: Women Enthusiasts of American Muscle Cars

Chris Lezotte

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Interview with author Chris Lezotte (from 3:00) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3T1YEXS08U>

Review by Dorothy Woodman.

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American automobility is not just about transportation: cars are implicated in the ways in which gender, race, class, and national identity are idealized and consolidated. From the beginning cars represented American innovation, urban expansion, and new access to privilege. Marketing upheld gender narratives: cars signified masculine power, independence, and status for men, and achieving domestic goals for women. However, muscle cars, created in the 1970s, gave a primarily white, heteronormative male driver newfound speed, excitement, and access to women. Despite growing scholarship on car culture, the women car enthusiasts who found their way into a male enclave have been given scant attention.

Mobilizing her "Motor City upbringing," advertising career," as well as graduate and post-graduate research, Chris Lezotte documents a significant, yet largely

unrecognized, cohort in muscle car culture: women drivers and, later, owners. *Power Under Her Foot: Women Enthusiasts and American Muscle*, generously illustrated with advertisements and supported with testimonies by women themselves, spans three generations of muscle car history: 1964-1973, 1974-2004, and 2005 to the present. Lezotte's study cohort of eighty-eight "white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual, and overwhelmingly conservative in ideology" (13) Southeastern Michigan women offer "firsthand accounts of the passion, involvement, attachment, connections, influence, and empowerment the automobile contributes to women's lives" (5). Applying object- and conservative feminist theories, *Power Under Her Foot* explores how respondents' passions have been expressed, as well as limited and shaped, by car culture's hegemonic masculinity and how conservative feminist investments have enabled

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traditional domestic and familial responsibilities to coexist with car culture's opportunities for excitement, freedom, and individual expression. Opening with "The Generations," Lezotte provides an overview of muscle car history as a gendered social space and how women have entered it, first as girlfriends or wives of car owners, and later as owners themselves, without upending the gendered roles and social structures that muscle car culture represented. As demonstrated throughout the book, despite self-imposed restrictions such as deferring muscle car ownership to fulfill "domestic responsibilities" (59), women found car culture an opportunity for sharing mutual interests with husbands (31), even considering it "important to marriage stability" (31). Leaving these undisturbed, women could experience risk-taking, independence and newfound self-expression; as one representative respondent comments, one could "feel carefree and reckless and young" (54). More recently, muscle car culture's gender distinctions have softened somewhat. Divorced women now celebrate their new independence by purchasing a long-desired muscle car. Those with tomboy natures find expression through car ownership. Some describe their new public aggressiveness; as one woman explains: "for some reason that 'super bitch' emblem [on the hood] became me. Because all of a sudden people would get out of my way" (48). Yet, while the gender politics of the seventies shift somewhat, according to Lezotte, conservative values remain intact. "Women's Roles in Muscle Car Culture" provides an overview of women's changing relationship to and in car culture with liberal use of representative car ads and respondents' observations. Against stereotypes of women drivers as incompetent, ads targeting women for minivans and SUVs, and a car culture hostile to liberal or radical feminists, Lezotte's respondents

negotiate gender restrictions by incorporating their car interests into family culture and their roles as community-builders, transforming "a male-centric . . . space into a community" (78), thus introducing an acceptable feminine role into a male culture. By painting cars pink for example, and even developing "masculine" expertise such as mechanical know-how while maintaining clear gender markers, women have gradually gained access to a male-dominated social world.

As in the earlier section, Lezotte cautions the reader against single interpretations of women's roles. "Making Meaning Out of the Muscle Car" asks: What does this form of transportation *mean* to women as they increasingly enter traditionally masculine domains while juggling their roles in the domestic sphere? While they, she reminds us, share homogenous, conservative feminist politics, nonetheless, there are differences in the group about what acquiring a muscle, pony, or retro-muscle car represents. For some the car is an investment, while for others it is "a way to relive their youth, obtain something they longer for in the past, or celebrate the era in which American auto industry had presence and power" (113). They create means to participate that share, complement, and enhance car culture without challenging principles of gender, consumption, the nuclear family, and American national ideals. Those who challenge them are met with generally good-humored rebuttals by women and men alike.

In the final section, "The Woman Driver and the American Muscle Car," Lezotte details persistent stereotypes of women, who continue to be characterized as incompetent or distracted, as decorations and rewards, or are targeted for family-functional vehicles. Films reinforce hegemonic masculinity with car chases, and race tracks continue to be largely the domain of men (146). Lezotte's survey is important because it

demonstrates decades-long work to claim spaces for women in muscle car culture, thus forming a legacy on which contemporary women can build their own forms of interest. In practical terms, she encourages women to “become more auto-centric” and “more effective car consumers” (168), thereby creating greater employment opportunities. As a study of identity-formation and object-relations, Lezotte hopes her work will develop “new avenues of research” (168), particularly by including conservative feminism into “traditional feminist scholarship” (169).

Power Under Her Foot opens a window into an important world of American white, middle-class women’s history. For the most part a conservative feminist commentary built on objects’ roles in identity-formation, Lezotte’s study is a rallying cry to give serious attention to this part of American car history. It will be of interest to second wave feminists and the politically conservative. However, despite some brief references, her disinclination to substantially critique women’s complex and conflicted relationships with gender ideology and American consumption, nationalism, race politics, and conservatism, means one must look for such insights elsewhere.

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