

“American Automobility: Motoring, the Open Road, and Race.”
Fon L. Gordon

One of the most prolific scholars of American automobility, James J. Flink, was affiliated with the Institute of Transportation Studies and Professor of Comparative Culture at the University of California, Irvine. In my study of the motor age in the New South, I have been, metaphorically, in conversation with Professor Flink; so it seemed appropriate to remark the nexus of the historiography of American automobility and the on-going engagement of these ideas at the University of California, Irvine.

Professor Flink characterized American automobility as the “combined impact of the motor vehicle, the automobile industry and the highway plus the emotional connotations of this impact for Americans.” His recognition of the importance of the emotional connotations of the automobile in American life corroborated W.E.B. Du Bois’s analysis that the “problem of the twentieth century [was] the problem of the color line” and the hegemonic claim that African-Americans were outside the technology of modernity. I suggest that the automobile was the most compelling American icon of the twentieth century but car culture could not avoid the inscription of race. Indeed, car culture re-inscribed racial distance and segregation. Memoirs, literature, automobile advertising ephemera and automobile industry publications, and state and local documents and publications demonstrate that race was an essential condition in making American automobile discourse. This presentation suggests some of the ways of American automobility.

Brief Biography:

Fon L. Gordon is a Southerner and a scholar of the twentieth century South. She is working on a social history of the automobile in Florida as symbolic of the New South and the nation. She is an Associate Professor in the History Department at the University of Central Florida at Orlando (1963).