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Citation: Alam Y (2013) 'Hello, Jav, Got a New Motor?': Cars, (De)Racialization and Muslim Identity. In; Alexander C, Redclift V and Hussain A (eds) The New Muslims. Runnymede Perspectives. London: Runnymede Trust.

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10. 'Hello, Jav, Got a New Motor?': Cars, (De)Racialization and Muslim Identity

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Introduction

Diary Entry, 21 June 2012

I'm picking someone up from their work and waiting in my car. I see a white Subaru Legacy estate crawl past me. It's a late nineties model but it's in very good nick. More than that, it looks like someone's spent a lot of money on customizing/modifying it: Arctic/Polar/Brilliant white paint job with colour-coded bumpers, wing mirrors, front and rear spoiler and black tinted-out windows. Deep dish, black gloss-finished alloy wheels and thin, low-profile tyres. Small number plate on the back suggests it's an import... probably has a 2.0 or 2.5 engine with a huge turbo adding more horses than seem possible; same sort of performance as the Ferrari beating Imprezzas... I should get out and introduce myself to the driver and tell him about my interest and research in cars and car culture... I imagine he's some young kid, maybe early twenties, all tracky bottoms and Rockport boots, tramlines in his hair and a bit of bling on his hands. Not a thug, but probably sees himself as a bit bad-arse, him having such a bad-arse ride. I get out of my car and start to walk over, rehearsing an introduction, apologising for intruding on his time, but then stop and stare. The driver's door of the Subaru opens and out steps a figure in black. For a second I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's a woman in a burqa and she opens the boot and pulls out a pram. This doesn't seem right. A woman? Never mind a woman, a Sister? She does not fit the profile and I tell myself it's not her car, but her brother's or her husband's. There is no other explanation.

Automatic Transmission: Ethnicity, Stereotypes and Cars in a Northern City

The car is a symbolic presence at the heart of the everyday experience of multi-ethnic coexistence. Exploring the potential significance of car ownership among members of the Pakistani/Muslim population in Bradford has an inherent interest and virtue, but more acutely, it can shed light on social relations where class, gender, religion and ethnicity intersect. The 'young Asian/White/Muslim/Black male driver' has acquired a certain meaning and reputation which has largely negative associations across Britain. However, once stereotypes such as the ones at play in the diary entry above are unpicked and engaged with, meaning becomes more nuanced and complicated, but no less vital. Indeed, the research upon which this paper is based suggests that car culture offers insights: first, into how some aspects of broader 'British Muslim' identity are framed; and second, that often negative, exoticized and racialized aspects of identity can be detuned and thus made less potent markers of racialized thinking.

Alongside its passengers, the car carries a range of other connotations tied with class, gender, generation and, powerfully and complexly, with ethnicity. The car has a myriad of layered meaning above and beyond the scope of transport and mobility. Indeed, over the decades, it has become even more acutely tied into the realm of popular culture and consumption and is therefore, certainly today, a powerful symbol which can both flatten and homogenize identity, on the one hand, while allowing identity to become interwoven with very sophisticated levels of nuance and individuation on the other. For example, while 'Mondeo Man' became shorthand for *Mister Average*, the world of car customization, tuning and enhancement can

inscribe the same vehicle with distinctive, personal aesthetics and contemporary forms of working-class artisanship and creativity.

Within my previous ethnographically grounded research with young Bradfordian Pakistani Muslim men (Alam, 2006; Alam and Husband, 2006), a regular feature was the significance of and meanings associated with cars/car ownership. For some of the participants, a 'nice' car was important not only as a symbol of personal economic success, but as a means of expressing identity: car manufacturer, model and the presence of after-market modifications resulted in either a high- or low-value commodity as defined by an 'imagined' community of drivers with its attendant, but fluid, tastes and preferences. In more recent research (Husband et al., forthcoming), several of those who prided themselves on modifying their vehicles, and in some cases owning unadulterated prestige or sports vehicles, were aware that the nature/look/sound of their car attracts particular attention from members of the local community or the police. Often, such car owners are conscious of the risks: of being labeled as or perceived to be corrupt or criminal. As one respondent, S.J. (a 30-something businessman), stated:

In Bradford, it (the Range Rover model) does have that gangster image so a few people have said to me 'Why you driving a gangster car for? You should have a respectable car.' I mean, what is a respectable car? The gangsters have them all! Everything what you drive in Bradford, above a certain price tag, it's a gangster car.

Meanings and connotations weaving both class and ethnicity can be seen within the 'motoscape' of a multicultural city such as Bradford. At a very fundamental level, this can be interpreted to be a repetition of the oft-cited claim that cars can both carry and project high or low status. Because there are associations between a place and its wealth, its residents and their income, as well as ethnicities and 'behaviours'/cultures', it is arguably convenient to make mental shortcuts that end up becoming established routes to understanding. Once existing racial codes and thinking are internalized in such ways, the race thinking narrative becomes

normative and therefore all the more difficult to overcome.

However, cars offer much richer and vibrant forms of data which connect with issues linked with the realms of economy, employment and identity; as well as aspiration, leisure, conflict and art, and with a range of human emotions which the car facilitates and conveys: data drawn from individual car owners provides texture and depth, allowing our insights to become more nuanced and grounded and less prone to drawing, for example, racist conclusions. The car, and car culture, allows us to explore not only how and where patterns of racialized discourse take place, but also to deconstruct, resist and, ultimately, to allow processes of deracialization to become normative and everyday. To that end, what may seem to be a nerdish interest in car culture yields deeper exploration and understanding of identity and diversity at an historical moment where such facets of human life – for academic, policy and public discourse – appear to have become less important than fixations with extremism, fear and insecurity.

Conclusion

Diary Entry, 12 September 2012

As I fill my car, a red Mitsubishi GTO pulls up in the next bay. It's a stunning car, looks like it's just been washed and maybe even detailed. It's low to the ground and the large, black wheels give it almost an unreal, impressionistic feel on the eye. It's ten plus years old but it still looks good; all curves and scoops and bulges. A young Asian, Pakistani I'm predisposed to assuming given where we are and what I know about these sorts of cars, gets out to refuel.

I wait in the queue to pay and the driver of the GTO stands behind me. I keep stealing a look at his car and keeping thinking about turning around and speaking to him, getting a foot in, introducing myself and asking him about his car. But I feel like a whore because I've doing a lot of that, lately and it kind of gets wearing after a while. But... these cars, they don't come along every day so eventually I do the usual introduction and he seems genuinely

interested in what I'm saying. We move our cars out of the bays and continue our conversation which includes some mention of stereotypes: You know, some cars seem have different meanings when certain types of people are in the driving seat. He asks me to elaborate. Well, some people might think that a young guy like you wouldn't be able to afford to run a car like this. I mean, you're how old? Twenty-seven, he tells me. You're twenty-seven, you're from Bradford and you're Asian or Pakistani and you're driving a three-litre sports car? How does he afford that? So people jump to conclusions about what you do. Maybe he deals drugs or something else a bit dodgy. You know how it is, right? He knows what I mean and we make some more talk about some of the hassle he gets from people about his choice of car, and the fact that he loves his cars, especially Honda CRXs. But then he puts me on the spot: What do you think I do for a living? Now me, not being one to make judgements or be stereotypical in my process, I'm keen not to commit. But he presses me. So I tell him. Well,

I don't really know but if I had to guess, I'd say maybe you work in an office, maybe in a factory or warehouse or something? I exaggerate the upward inflection at the end of the sentence so I sound like some California Valley school girl just to make sure he knows this is not me saying this. He smiles and then hits me with: I'm a Consultant. I work at LGI [Leeds General Infirmary]. Fuck. Who'd have thought? I mean, seriously.

References

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