

Miller, D; (2007) *Foreword: Getting behind the wheel*. In: Cardenas, E and Gorman, E, (eds.) *The Hummer: Myths and Consumer Culture*. (vii - x). Lexington Books: Lanham, Maryland

## BOOK CHAPTER

### Getting behind the wheel

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When teaching anthropology to students the stress is usually laid upon the importance of understanding people who are very different from oneself. When this refers to a tribe in New Guinea the issue was really one of distance, but applied to the understanding of our own society it would seem most obviously translated not simply as people from a different class or location, but above all people who hold entirely different values and tastes. If anthropology is concerned with otherness then the ideal anthropology back home is the study of those one really can't stand to be in the same room as. The intention remains empathetic. It's certainly not that you want to share their values. Its just that part of what we do in academia is try to recognise why fellow human beings, be they Nazis, Fundamentalists or Terrorists happen to sincerely believe that their values are right and our own are wrong. In my own fieldwork in London, where I tend to work with whoever I can find on a particular street that I designate as my fieldsite, I inevitably find racist or misogynistic individuals who in another context I might cross the street to avoid. But in this context the challenge is to try and come as close as possible to understanding how and why they hold these views, which means apart from anything else spending quite a bit of time drinking and talking with them.

The Hummer seems to cry out for this kind of empathetic analysis. The response to the car lends itself to the kind of outrage that spills across many of the papers collected in this volume. I obviously did not expect the contributors to share the militaristic nationalism that Packer ascribes to possession of the Hummer or that the writers would wish to emulate Dillman's Terminator on wheels. They probably wouldn't feel too proud to be associated with the Hummer's anti-environmentalist greed for fuel. Social scientists and students of cultural studies are hardly likely to share the Hummer's 'fuck you' individualistic preference for the safety of its own driver over that of any one that gets in its way. Indeed the Hummer is about as 'in your face' as a vehicle can be without actually running you over. I think it is entirely to the credit of the contributors here that they have decided to cruise alongside for a while and try and make sense of these ungainly beasts. Perhaps not surprisingly it is the most ethnographic of the papers, that by Lukas, which comes closest to actual empathy with the owners of the Hummer, and I feel there is a lot to be gained by going down that particular road as far as you can stomach it. But overall there is a general sense that academics can face up to their own cultural values and realise there is often an urgent need to know your enemy, up front and personal.

Most of the contributions to this volume are not in fact seeking to understand the Hummer through ethnography and empathy. Rather they are developing a critique of the car through situating it within the larger ideological regimes that appear to be its semiotic setting, whether gated communities or hip-hop. Nevertheless it may be useful to reflect for a moment that from the outsiders perspective there is something to be gained by transcending the opposition of the Hummer and its critique and looking at the still wider setting within which the relationship of opposition between them hints at a still larger ideological commonality.

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There is perhaps more in common between the car and its critics than either would probably like to acknowledge. The reason for this is that they are both so characteristic of the land they share. What emerges most clearly from this collection is the sense of the localisation of the car. Something close to the theme of my own collection *Car Cultures*. We constantly think in terms of globalisation, Americanisation, neo-Imperialism, corporate capitalism and other forms of transnationalism. Indeed these have been associated with the same elements of American military and commercial power which are discussed in this volume. But actually in many respects the theme of this book is entirely the opposite. What this book reveals is how far a car may become an instrument of something that is in direct repudiation of this internationalism by developing into a potent symbol of retrenched nationalism. The point about the Hummer is just how American it is. While these cars can be found as imports in the UK and known to the cognoscenti, so far I have only come across a single locally born Londoner, who in response to my questions, has actually heard of them. If the papers are seen as a collection they resonate with a particular aesthetic configuration that ranges from music, to settlements, since after all both hip-hop, and the gated community are viewed as essentially US creations that are amongst the recent exports from that region. They are part of a general export of US popular culture that ranges from Grand Theft Auto to neo-conservatism. But there is also a long history in particular to the road associated Americana from 1950's Cadillacs through to the merry pranksters.

What the example of the Hummer suggests is that notwithstanding the effects of American models on Globalisation, the area continues to generate its own particular contemporary forms. The Hummer is presently more a sign of the considerable distinction between the US and the rest of the world rather than of global homogeneity. This is partly because the car is associated with a particular form of American individualism, one that was fostered by a long term and conspicuous association with the car itself as a generic object. This in turn is associated with the paraphernalia of all those road movies, and highways through the the wide open spaces that make up the US.

This spirit is revealed in an anti-establishment tradition that can found equally in the owners of the Hummer and the critics of the car represented in this book. This is, at one level, a fighting book, by academics who don't want to just roll over and become roadkill. The car is strongly associated with the power of the current political establishment that seems to enclose the US in its jaws from Bush in the East to Schwarzenegger in the West. The papers are written as acts of exposure and thereby resistance. But the car owners too very likely come out of this same sense of an anti-establishment. In their case they may well see the car as their acts of resistance to what they perceive as a liberal, pinko, environmentalist establishment which they believe remains the real power in the land contrary to all appearances. Perhaps well exemplified by forces such as cultural studies. They too are fighting back with their gas-guzzling, gung-ho vulgarity of the common American man. Indeed as Cardenso's paper notes while they are sometimes serious, they, like their critics, can also take on quite a playful and ironic mode, with bright colours and unexpected appendages to the car. This is localisation first to the nation and then often to the individual's own personal appropriation of this car.

This book then stands as an excellent introduction to American cultural studies as itself part of American culture. Both a critical culture determined to expose anti-social, environmentally destructive, selfish forms of individualist aggrandisement. But also another kind of anti-establishment aesthetic that matches military with day-glo, bulk with hip-hop. Perhaps it is, as Walker implies, the very vulnerability of the de-socialised individual that needs this extra-hard body. The new exoskeleton to the

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rugged individualist of contemporary America. The book is therefore also valuable because as a singularly American phenomenon there is a great deal here that to the outsider is strange and hard to understand. But most people feel that a better comprehension of the US is important for everyone right now. In this collection the contributors to this volume have made a strong case for suggesting that for a seer in search of understanding contemporary America, a good place to start might well be behind the wheel of a Hummer.