

Chapter 12, National Day Celebrations in Doha and Abu Dhabi: Cars and Semiotic Landscapes in the Gulf.

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The shape of modern cities is largely dictated by one technology: the personal automobile. As the cultural theorist Raymond Williams has argued, “traffic is not only a technique; it is a form of consciousness and a form of social relations.”² The personal car has made a tremendous impact on the built form of cities, but urban scholars have considered “automobility” as a much broader cultural, political, and economic complex.³ From this perspective, cars are not simply a mode of moving from one location to another. They have wide-reaching implications for urban residents’ lived experiences of time-space, and they are often used and interpreted as a form of self-expression. For example, a person’s vehicle choice can be ‘read’ as an indicator of his or her socioeconomic status, personal taste, adherence to a particular subculture, and even their national identity.⁴

As people in diverse settings around the world develop their own modes of interacting with and interpreting the significance of the personal automobile, scholars have noted the rise of “car cultures.”⁵ While they often follow state-defined borders, car cultures are not isolated: they interact across borders and are influenced by global norms, imaginaries, and political economic forces.⁶ When scholars look at how these car cultures embody and contribute to how individuals imagine the ‘nation,’ they typically look at the car preferences of certain national groups, nationally-defined stereotypes about the way people drive or relate to cars, or assumptions about which national groups drive (or should drive) certain cars. In short, they ask how national identities are narrated in the way that people relate to the use of cars, as well as the symbolism accorded to their make and model.

In this chapter, I take a different approach to car culture and nationalism, exploring two interrelated sites of analysis: cars in nationalist celebrations and nationalist decorations on the body of cars. I do so through a comparative study in the two small Gulf monarchies, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is hard to exaggerate the degree to which cars are fetishized throughout the Arabian Peninsula.⁷ The local fixation with cars is rooted in a long history of importing foreign cars, which began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, just as regional leaders were discovering the massive oil and gas reserves that lay beneath their shallow shorelines.⁸ Escaping the poverty that prevailed prior to the exploitation of this resource wealth, the personal car was quickly seen as a key marker of progress and a status symbol – as is common in other parts of the world undergoing rapid socio-political transformation.⁹ While cars have important links to the nonurban spaces of the Arabian desert – especially in the popular local pastime of ‘dune bashing’ – the focus of this chapter is on cars in the Gulf city.

Cars and Nationality in the Gulf

Qatar and the UAE are among the most highly urbanized countries in the world: those living in cities comprise 98.8 percent of the population in Qatar, and 84.4 percent in the Emirates. This means that the symbolic display and interpretations of car ownership typically unfolds in the space of the city. Urban space is also an important venue and medium for the production of nationalism in the Gulf. The city is not just the place where ethnic Qataris and Emiratis meet one another and come to see themselves as part of a broader national community. It is also a place where they encounter many other national groups. In fact, the ethnic nationals represent only 13 percent of the entire population in both countries. The remaining 86 percent of the 2.2 million residents in Qatar and 5.6 million in the Emirates are non-nationals and, because of the citizenship laws, non-citizens. Like other Gulf states, Qatar and the UAE have strict *jus sanguinis* (‘right of blood’) laws, meaning that citizenship is not determined by place of birth, but by ‘blood.’ In this case, only people with *both* parents of the official nationality (e.g. Qatari or Emirati) have a juridical right to citizenship. Non-Qataris and non-Emiratis have effectively *no* possibility to naturalize and gain citizenship in their adopted homes.¹⁰ This also means that, on the basis of their national identity alone, 86

percent of the countries' residents do not have access to many of the state's social welfare benefits that are accorded to citizens, such as free education, free healthcare, near-guaranteed state-sector employment, and much more. Given the privileges afforded by the extraordinary oil and gas reserves of both countries, citizen-nationals are almost uniformly well off and are keen to preserve their privilege through strict citizenship regulations.

This notwithstanding, Qatar and the UAE have been promoting the rapid development of their urban centers and this effort has relied on large numbers of migrant workers. The Gulf city is, therefore, a place where these individuals come to interact and know one another, form communities, and to understand their place as non-citizens (or 'expats' in the local parlance) in their place of residence. Non-citizens are only accorded temporary work permits, even though many were born in the Gulf and have even been there for multiple generations. These temporary laborers come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including highly-paid 'knowledge economy' workers from other Arab countries, Europe, and the Americas, as well as India and other parts of South Asia. At the lower-paid ranks, for example in the construction or tourism sectors, migrants come from all over South and Southeast Asia, including countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or the Philippines.

Given the striking demographic balance of citizens to non-citizens, national identity takes on a special significance in the Gulf. Social, economic, and political divides in the region tend to revolve around the conjoined issue of nationality and citizenship status. As I argue here, one central way that people come to understand and enact these divides is through cars and car culture. Automobility in the Gulf is a particularly useful lens for understanding how belonging and identity are envisioned and performed in and through urban space – and how these narratives are always in flux. Toward this end, this chapter analyzes the role of cars in the celebration of National Day, which is a yearly holiday in both countries in December to mark important dates on the path of Qatar and the UAE to independent statehood in 1971 after the British government ended their 'protectorate' treaties with the Eastern sheikhdoms of the Arabian Peninsula. First, I examine how people decorate the body of their cars for National Day celebrations. Second, I consider the enormously popular car parades, which are the culmination of these holiday events.

This chapter is informed by my ethnographic research on the capital cities, Doha, Qatar and Abu Dhabi, UAE since 2012. I spent two consecutive years, from 2013-2014, documenting the transformation of the urban landscape and the rhythm of the cities as they prepared for their National Days. I also engaged in participant observation of the numerous events in the capital in the days and weeks prior to the holidays, including the car parades that take place on the actual holiday. Participant observation is a necessary tool in studying nationalist spectacles because they are both ephemeral and emotive: they do not last and they must be personally experienced to grasp the celebratory spirit and emotions they are designed to promote. These observations must also be accompanied by a close textual analysis of the various signs and symbols surrounding the events, which, in this project, included the decoration of urban space, news reports, advertisements, and, yes, cars. A database of these multi-media texts and images is available online.¹¹

Cars as Sites to Narrate Gulf Nationalism

Geographers have been leaders in exploring the production of nationalism in urban public space. This work has amply illustrated that urban landscapes, especially when connected to spectacle, are highly effective at building up collective memory, promoting a sense of place, and thus sustaining "a sense of nation."¹² They are also central in their ability to provide the 'masses' with a sense of inclusion in the national project, converting otherwise exclusionary political and spatial arrangements into "participatory landscapes."¹³ In this section, I stretch beyond geography's traditional geographic focus on monuments and other built structures to consider how nationalist discourses are produced and constituted through the wider semiosphere of the city. This is because, in considering any nationalist spectacle, such as the Qatari and Emirati National Day holidays, it is clear that many other surfaces, such as billboards, advertisements, clothes, print and electronic media, the painted cheeks of children, and novelty food items are all important sites for narrating the nation. Kitschy as they may be, when taken together, these multiple-scaled and often ephemeral performances contribute to the construction of "semiotic landscapes," defined "in the most

general sense, [as] any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making.”¹⁴

Semiotic landscapes have both ‘fixed’ and ‘unfixed’ dimensions.¹⁵ Unfixed or ‘mobile’ texts, Mark Sebba argues, are not isolated from less transient texts, but are actually part of a wider set of inter-referencing patterns that link symbols and their references. “What is more,” he adds, “mobile texts require ‘reading’ in the same kind of way as fixed texts – for example, authority and authenticity are indexed in the same (or similar) ways.”¹⁶ So for example, the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty are central French and American nationalist icons, but their miniaturization and diffusion on all sorts of trinkets, advertisements, and verbal references are just as important in producing nationalist iconography as the monuments themselves. Accordingly, this section considers nationalist imagery inscribed on car bodies as ephemera – but in their transience, they are no less powerful than fixed urban landscapes and texts in determining how Gulf nationalism is narrated, by whom, and with what political effect.

National Day celebrations are concentrated in the span of a week or more, but culminate on December 2 in the Emirates and December 18 in Qatar. Official fanfare and entertainment abounds throughout this time, but the most anticipated event in both countries is the unofficial car parade that takes place on National Day itself, from late afternoon until the early hours of the morning. While other cities in the two countries have car parades, the spectacle is largest in the capitals of Abu Dhabi and Doha. In both cities, the parades follow the seaside promenade, which becomes so packed with cars that traffic moves at a snail’s pace. The cars are usually full of people, who are waving flags, shouting, and cheering, and the drivers beep the horns endlessly – sometimes in synch with one another. Most of the cars themselves are carefully decorated, and many have been professional ‘wrapped’ with images of the monarch, or sheikh, or covered with decals like ‘I love Qatar’ or ‘UAE!’ (figure 12.1).

Figure 12.1. Car decorated for Qatar National Day in Doha. Photo by Natalie Koch.



Meanwhile, throngs of onlookers crowd the edge of the roadway during the parade to check out the impressive car ornamentations, as well as the spectacle that unfolds between and among onlookers and participants. In Abu Dhabi, many of the spectators have cans of silly-string, which they spray at any inattentive passenger as the cars crawl past. In Doha, the silly-string wielders are not the spectators, but gangs of boys who jump out of a friend’s car to attack a neighboring car. As in Abu Dhabi, they sometimes snake through the cars on foot, hoping to catch someone off guard and cover them with the sticky white, green, red, or yellow compound (figure 12.2).

Figure 12.2. Scene from the UAE National Day car parade in Abu Dhabi. Photo by Natalie Koch.



To grasp the political significance of these scenes, one must ask who is participating in these nationalist rituals on National Day. Locally, Qatari and Emiratis claim a distinct *khaleeji*, or Eastern Arabian, culture and habits. In fact, Qatar was originally planning to join the federation of emirates that are today represented in the UAE, but reversed course shortly before the British protectorate treaties ended in 1971. The supranational identity narrative remains important in how Gulf nationals imagine themselves as sharing a commonality with their neighbors, but the governments have overseen the development of strong, state-based nationalisms since independence. So while the holidays are largely about celebrating the *khaleeji* culture of the citizen-nationals, they are also about celebrating the territorially-defined state. The stark differences between the state symbols of Qatar and the UAE are abundantly clear in figures 12.1 and 12.3. The logos, the flags, the magenta and white of the Qatari color scheme versus the red, green, white, and black of the UAE – the iconography is clearly distinct, as are the images of the ruling sheikhs whose faces become icons to adhere to one's car for National Day.

Figure 12.3. Car decorated for UAE National Day in Abu Dhabi. Photo by Natalie Koch.



But who is adhering these various nationalist icons to their cars? Many non-citizens will decorate their cars if they plan to participate in the car parades, but they tend to do so shortly before the event and these decorations tend to be less permanent than the most elaborate body-wrapping jobs undertaken by others. In local supermarkets, one can find many inexpensive National Day decorations for cars, seen for example in the UAE banners, rear-view mirror wrap-arounds, and magnetic portraits of the late Sheikh Zayed pictured in figure 12.3. Or in Qatar, shortly before the holiday, employers will sometimes distribute free flags to their employees, which are specially designed to mount on one's car.

Outside of these short-lived decorations for the parade, however, the effortful and expensive practice of having one's car windows and body fully decal'd is generally understood to be the realm of citizen-nationals only. This too is temporary, but the most dedicated decorators have their cars prepared at least a month ahead of the holiday, daily "flagging the nation" as they drive through the city streets.¹⁷ For the citizen-nationals who decorate their cars for National Day, this nationalist flagging is not a banal practice which unites all residents in Doha and Abu Dhabi. It is more fundamentally an act of flagging that sociologist Amélie Le Renard has called "national distinction" – a practice seen across the Gulf states whereby citizen-nationals mark their special status vis-à-vis the non-citizen foreigners.¹⁸ Performing national distinction on the city's streets is actually part of a larger set of practices that relate to the particular configuration of Gulf cities, where urban space is particularly subject to the hegemonic dominance of the automobile.¹⁹

The highly circumscribed spaces of public interaction in Gulf cities is such that, as many Gulf residents will emphasize, people of differing socio-economic and national backgrounds seldom come into direct contact with Gulf nationals outside the space of the cities' streets. One of my interview respondents in Doha, for example, argued that many expats have prejudicial attitudes toward Qataris because, lacking more sustained avenues for interaction, "the only place where you have contact with them, unfortunately, is the worse place of all: which is the roads. ... And most expats here have just the image of the aggressive Qatari [driver] that just flashes white lights to say, 'I want to go first!'" The city streets are thus one of the few places where Qatari and Emirati citizens publicly narrate their identity as nationals. Though it is outside the scope of this chapter, the make and model of individuals' cars is one way of doing so, but in the lead-up to National Day holidays, car decorations become yet another semiotic layer to 'flag' ones' ethnic privilege in the city.

Ostensibly a celebratory act, when Gulf nationals mark their cars with the iconography of the nation and its leaders, they are also marking themselves as the unique and privileged class of individuals who are truly 'at home' on the Peninsula. Although non-citizens deploy many of the same nationalist icons when they participate in the holiday events, they tend to relate to those symbols more as a form of *kitsch* – something acknowledged to be garish or over-the-top but appreciated nonetheless – rather than as a reverential reference to some primordially-imagined nation. This is again apparent in the way that some Gulf nationals have their cars wrapped not with the simple color scheme of the UAE flag, but instead, venerating images of their leaders or Arabian desert landscapes. Some of these wrapping jobs are truly artistically inspired, and to the extent that they create a sacral aura around the nation, they are a way of narrating ethnic privilege and claiming the homeland in the space of the city's streets. By contrast, kitsch, as Laura Adams has argued in another context, is an "easy and automatic" cultural product that frees its users of "the need to engage in a critical creative process."²⁰ As a known entity, kitsch – in the form of pre-packaged car decorations for the holiday – is politically 'safe' for expats insofar as it short-circuits any potential political misstep that might arise from a more artistic engagement with national symbols. By respecting this unstated norm, non-citizens assent to an order whereby the creative use of nationalist symbolism is reserved for citizen-nationals alone.

The Car Parade as a Gulf Nationalist Ritual

The symbols on display during National Day are those of the hegemonic nationalist narratives in Qatar and the UAE, which are produced all year long. But in the lead up to the holiday and the actual day, they become discursively intensified to create the effect of spectacle. This is a ritual time-space: one of suspended norms and exceptional semiotics and performances. Spectacle has both spatial and temporal dimensions. Spatially,

it is point-based: meaning it is staged in one particular location. Temporally, it happens sporadically, occasionally, or only once. Overall, spectacle's singularity helps to produce the effect of 'carnival' or ritual time-space – a topic that has long been a significant subject in the social sciences.²¹ National Day celebrations operate as a form of spectacle at many levels, but this section focuses on the car parades, which are the undisputed highlight of the holiday in both Qatar and the UAE. These parades, I suggest, shed light on the shifting shape of nationalist narratives and citizen/non-citizen relations in the contemporary Gulf.

As we have already seen, though Gulf nationalism has a strong ethnic nationalist dimension that citizens use to narrate their privileged status, nationalist icons are also deployed by non-citizens celebrating the National Day holidays. In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, governments in both Qatar and the UAE have recently been developing a set of "civic nationalist" narratives that promote a place-based sense of belonging for non-citizens, encouraging them to imagine their place of residence as a "home away from home."²² These identity narratives are always mediated by another identity; the Arabian Peninsula is never framed as their 'primordial' homeland, but merely 'adopted.' This notwithstanding, the narratives are inclusionary in the sense that non-citizens are being taught to develop a particular attachment to the state and to believe in the goodness of the local rulers and their policies. Even though they can never personally claim 'ownership' of the state and its government, the expat population is actively invited to develop and internalize a sense of territorial belonging.

The move toward more inclusive nationalist narratives in Qatar and the UAE is readily apparent in the discourses surrounding the National Day holidays. In the UAE, the slogans of 'unity through diversity' and 'spirit of the union' have increasingly highlighted the diversity of the expat population, alongside the Emiratis. In Qatar, from 2013, state planners introduced the 'OneLove' theme to the holiday festivities – which celebrates the idea of citizens and non-citizens being united in their love for Qatar. The now-regularized theme includes the Qatar National Day logo, which depicts two differently-colored hands, to symbolize the Qataris and the foreign residents, forming the shape of a heart. These inclusivist identity narratives can be increasingly seen at work in the car decorations, for example, with many people around Qatar incorporating the 'OneLove' logo in their body-wrapping jobs (figure 12.4). Indeed, these narratives are increasingly evident in how expats are beginning to participate in the car parades – albeit in different ways in Qatar and the UAE.

Figure 12.4. 'OneLove' themed car for Qatar National Day in Doha. Photo by Natalie Koch.



During my 2014 observation of the car parades, Qatar's largest expat demographic – single East and South Asian men – were present as participants and spectators in relatively small numbers. This was in stark contrast to Abu Dhabi, where they were essentially the *exclusive* demographic of observers. There, the car parade was an especially important space for the expat population, especially of the lower economic strata, to come together and enjoy themselves. Most people were dressed casually in their regular weekend clothes, and a number had draped themselves with Emirati National Day scarves and other nationalist accouterments. Many strolled along the waterfront promenade and snapped endless selfies, while others were teeming at the edges of the adjacent road to watch the parading cars and, at times, could be spotted in the cars too. There was a great deal of laughter as spectators attacked one another and those in the parade with silly string.

Although the authorities differentially regulate the parades – mostly to ensure the safety of participants – these were not formal, state-sanctioned events, such as the officially-planned parades in the morning of the holiday in Doha (in the UAE, the capital Abu Dhabi does not have a formal parade, but Dubai does). As more organic events, however, they still contributed to the overall sense of joyous celebration that state officials were keen to promote when they initiated these nationalist holidays. Spectacle is a favored tactic of government in nondemocratic states, such as Qatar and the UAE, in large part because it “has properties that enable elites to close opportunities for input from below, but without making the masses feel left out.”²³ As a space of ritual release, the evening parade was the highlight of the National Day experience and an important way that the expat masses came to know and understand the holiday – and by association, helping to promote the overarching sense of affinity for their ‘adopted’ homeland.²⁴

But the expat masses are by no means a homogenous group. Given that, as a woman, I was a prime target for the silly-string attacks in Abu Dhabi, and the subject of extensive catcalling in Doha, I was well aware that the car parade was a *male* event. It was a space of male bonding – bringing them together to socialize and enjoy themselves during their day off work. Not only were women conspicuously absent, also missing were non-Asian and upper- and middle-class expats. In both Abu Dhabi and Doha, my local informants who fit into these categories – primarily ‘knowledge economy’ workers who were white and non-white Americans and Europeans – warned me to stay away from the parades. They made it clear that they were a low-class, ‘South Asian’ affair and something that they themselves would never attend for pleasure – though they may have once attended for the ‘cultural experience.’ This sort of refusal to participate in the ritual is, as historian Nicholas Dirks has suggested, just as politically significant as the choice to actively join the celebration.²⁵ By not attending, these Gulf residents were also performing their own class- and nationality-based privilege – albeit with reference to other expats, rather than revolving around the citizen/non-citizen distinction, discussed above. For them, the annual ritual of watching gaudily-decorated cars parading down the seaside promenade would be considered *déclassé*. But low-paid or high-paid, foreign workers residing in the Gulf were clearly united by their understanding that the spectacle was optional because it was not their ‘own.’ Rather, it was an event that they could join if they wished, as the officially inclusive ‘civic nationalist’ language surrounding the holiday suggests. But as non-citizens, they can never claim Qatar or the Emirates as their homeland and, for this reason alone, they come to understand the car parades in a fundamentally different manner than the citizen-nationals.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that car culture is essential to understanding how national identity is imagined and performed in the contemporary Gulf Arab states. By taking a closer look at National Day celebrations in Qatar and the UAE, we can develop a better sense of how this works through a set of smaller practices and ephemera that contribute to the semiotic landscapes of the cities. Of course, it is inevitable that nationalist symbols come to acquire new meanings and interpretations, and for some, they become “nothing else but signifiers of the unavoidability and immutability of the official event.”²⁶ But even when treated as kitsch, the question that we must ask is: what do these symbols *do*? Their power, it seems, lies in their ability to mobilize diverse people around a seemingly coherent discourse, such as national unity, as in the case of the National Day celebrations considered here. But even though Qatari and Emirati nationalism has started to take on a more inclusive tone in recent years, the holiday symbols and events are also a means to reinscribe

social divides. I have argued that car decorations in the lead-up to National Day holidays, for example, are one avenue for citizen-nationals to narrate the ethnic privilege that is accorded to them by the states' official citizenship regimes, while the parades are also an important venue for certain groups to bond but not others.

In considering celebratory spectacles in nondemocratic settings, observers have often asked whether or to what extent participants actually 'believe' in them. But as many scholars have noted, spectacles in authoritarian contexts are less significant for their ability to conjure belief, but are more importantly about the leadership's ability to mobilize bodies. In this reading, "the body functions in them to substantiate rather than legitimate power. In other words, spectacles make power palpable, publicly visible, and practical. Bodies serve as the apparent and immediate site upon which participation is enforced."²⁷ This is an important point worth emphasizing, but we should be careful not to overlook the "view from below."²⁸

Celebrations like National Day are key to understanding the institutionalization of state power, but by focusing on the micro-political practices of the people, we see that such events can also institutionalize social, political, and economic divides – breathing life into the national identity narratives by making them as tangible as your car's new body wrapping job. In the Gulf case, the overarching effect of these 'mobile' texts is that of naturalizing the region's prevailing ethnically-based citizenship regimes and thus the privileges claimed by Gulf nationals. For a wide range of historical reasons, city streets and the bodies of cars in Qatar and the UAE have a special cultural and national significance. But the National Day spectacles and their accompanying semiotic landscapes only make sense as part of a wider set of practices and spaces in Gulf cities for different groups to interact and 'flag' their identities. In this sense, these two small countries are far from exceptional in the way that automobility and urban space are inextricably related to the production, performance, and contestation of nationality.

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