Interstate Interstitials: Bumper Stickers, Driver-Cars and the Spaces of Social Encounter on
Contemporary American Superhighways

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Abstract

Since the turn of the 21st century, it has been the established aim of mobilities scholars to investigate the ways in which contemporary life is conditioned and carried out through the movements of people, things and ideas. Despite concerns over global climate change on the one hand, and the heyday of peak-oil receding quickly into the rear view mirror on the other, the primary vehicle of mobility in the United States remains the personal automobile. Contemporary American notions of self and identity are frequently interpreted through the individual's relationship(s) to cars and driving, and while cars themselves are mass-manufactured items, they afford a number of many non-technical practices of customization as modes of individuation. Perhaps most commonplace of these practices is the use of bumper stickers.

This thesis is a critical examination of the type of everyday cultural construction and social encounter that may emerge from reading bumper stickers in motion. Such a practice is informed by both the structural and systemic conditions of American superhighway automobility, as well as by the phenomenological effects of isolation and speed on the road these conditions produce. An embodied subject, emerges through participation in the regime of automobility, but the body I have in mind is not, strictly speaking, the unitary, human body. It is, rather, a performed, materially-heterogeneous assemblage: a reader-car, through which unexpected—often asymmetrical and asynchronous, but nonetheless *social*— spaces of interaction coalesce and extend.

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I would like to thank the faculty and staff in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology with whom I've had the opportunity, pleasure and good fortune to learn and work beside these last few years. I would specifically like to thank the members of my examining committee, Drs. Katja Neves and Daniel Dagenais for their critical attention to this project. Above all, I owe something significant to my supervisor, Dr. Bart Simon, whose particular style of chilled-out rigorousness (accessible brilliance? wry support?) would defy any attempt to fit it on a bumper sticker.

And, of course, to Maya, Henry and Esther: **I ♥ You.**

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Introduction

In 1914 the American motorist Effie Gladding set out on a trans-continental road trip, from California to New Jersey (Gladding 1915). She was not the first to drive across America— a feat accomplished more than a decade earlier by Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson and Sewall K. Crocker—[1] and replicated by many others in the intervening years. Nor was Gladding the first woman motorist to make the trip. That was Alice H. Ramsey, who did so in 1909 (Karnes 2009, 18). Rather, Gladding's most significant contribution to early American automobility was the memoir she wrote of the trip, in which she describes conditions on the road and the running of her car (she had to switch rides in Denver, a Studebaker for a Franklin); roadside attractions and landscapes; local events and politics; food, provisioning and hospitality; road kill and bumper stickers.

Actually, Gladding does not say anything about bumper stickers, but she does describe what I take to be some of the earliest forms of American automobile inscription, of writing-on-the-road:

> The devices and pennants with which motorists advertise themselves and express their enjoyment are very interesting. Some carry pennants with the names of the towns or the States from which they come. Others carry pennants with the names of all the principal towns which they have visited. Whole clusters of pennants are fastened about the car, and float gaily in the wind. Some carry a pennant across the rear of the tonneau, which reads, "Excuse my dust." Others carry a pennant in the same place which reads, "Thank you."
>
> We infer that this must be by way of courtesy to those cars which turn out for them to pass and fly on ahead. We meet many tourists in the Middle West who have been for more or less extended tours in the States near their own. (Gladding 1915, 82)

The story of this particular research begins nearly century later. A family vacation in Maine, driving from the beach to the house at which we were staying one sunburned afternoon: stop-and-go traffic, kids bickering and threatening car sickness in the back seat, my wife and I amusing each other by pointing out the best examples of a veritable literature-on-wheels: bumper

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1 Jackson and Crocker undertook the trip as the result of a $50 wager. The trip took 63 days to travel from San Francisco to New York City, via Oregon and Nebraska (Swift 2011, 18; Karnes 2009, 18).

stickers, window decals, vanity plates and all other manner of tchotchke and accessory stuck, clipped, bolted or magnetized to the outside surfaces of the cars around us.

As citizens and residents of the U.S. for most of our lives we knew bumper stickers were a fact of life on the American road. But when we moved to Montreal several years earlier there seemed to be fewer cars bearing bumper stickers— the odd Bébé à Bord, but nothing like what we had been used to seeing. Of course, we drove less, too, using public transit to get around the city for the most part. The "fact" of the ubiquitous presence of bumper stickers and other forms of car inscription— as well as the pleasures (and frustrations) of encountering them on another car— had drifted from our consciousness until that afternoon.

We continued to look out for "good ones" for the rest of our trip: the unexpected, vulgar, funny, maddening, indecipherable; some strictly textual, others graphical, many incorporating both. According to the discursive sensibilities by which we read them some combinations of signs and messages were self-referential, reinforcing and coherent, while others seemed evidently divergent, contradictory, or polyphonic. Certainly not all the cars we saw were written upon, but many were. Some had multiple messages, others a single inscription.

Vacation ended (it always does) and we traveled home, tracing I-95S at better than a mile a minute. Crossing the great green steel parabola over the Piscataqua River, the border between southern Maine and New Hampshire, an unremarkable late-model sedan passed. Unremarkable in that it was more or less new, it wasn't tricked-out or obviously damaged, its make and model were abstract concepts for lack of real differentiable features given the swarm of other cars around it. And its colour? Something pale: dirty white or tan, maybe grey? Unremarkable that is, except for the sticker on its bumper. *That* caught my eye.

The background of the sticker was clear or more-or-less the same indistinct colour as the car, its borders indistinguishable against bumper to which it was stuck. The text was comprised of small black letters divided in two centred rows and was, at least initially, illegible to my eye. I sped up enough to close the distance between the two cars, wondering out loud why someone would put a sticker on their car that was, practically speaking, unreadable. As we approached I was able to make out:

WHEN THIS BABY HITS 88 MILES PER HOUR
YOU'RE GONNA SEE SOME SERIOUS SHIT!

I was puzzled. My wife wasn't any clearer. Not only was the text virtually impossible to read, its meaning was obscure. We agreed it was a joke. But was the reference deictic? The sedan hardly seemed worthy of the sobriquet *baby*, and so what if it hit 88 miles per hour? We were practically doing that anyway. It seemed more likely a reference to an elsewhere— probably cultural, but possibly historical or other— that eluded us. In any case, we all thought it was funny even if we couldn't pin down why it would be funny to a reader who actually got it. The kids repeatedly chirped the lines, with particular emphasis on some *serious shit!*, and hilarity ensued for several minutes.

Sometime later, one wintry weekend evening the kids and I cozied onto the couch to watch *Back to the Future*, a film I had last seen in the 1980s and one the kids had never watched. A few minutes in, Marty McFly arrives at the midnight-empty Twin Pines Mall parking lot to find Doc Brown rolling out his latest invention, a Delorean-[2]cum-time-machine bearing the California registration vanity plate OUTATIME. As they prepare the first test, Doc tells Marty "If my calculations are correct, when this baby hits 88 miles per hour, you're gonna see some serious shit" (Zemeckis, 1985). As the three of us laughed, a mutual realization dawned: We knew that line, but from where? And then: it was the mystery bumper sticker text from the trip home all those months earlier and miles away. In an instant, if only for an instant, I was back at the wheel that evening, speeding up, squinting in the sharp, late-afternoon sun refracted and fractured across the imperfect windscreen, trying to make out those words. Then asking myself *who would put that on their car?*

Most American drivers I've spoken with, informally or as part of various research projects, have at least one story about a memorable encounter with a bumper sticker on the open road. I will recount some of these, as well as my own, in the course of this thesis. But for the moment, I would like to let the preceding anecdote stand as a contextual backdrop to the introduction of the questions that underpin my current research project. Specifically, does the moment of one car passing another on the highway constitute a social encounter between two drivers, otherwise ensconced in their cars, mobile subjectivities unknown and apparently unknowable to one another? If so, what are some of the possibilities and limitations of such an encounter?

My answer to the first question, briefly and unequivocally, is "yes." I will attempt to substantiate this assertion inductively, through the exploration of the second. In any case, I find

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2 Marty is fascinated by the Delorean, which was a car-geek symbol of the era.

this latter question more compelling as both researcher and driver, and the attempt to examine what kind of socio-cultural work may be accomplished during such an encounter has guided the unfolding of this research project.

In what follows, I argue that forms of car inscription and writing-on-the-road—including, but not limited to bumper stickers—enable unexpected and expanded possibilities of the experience of time and space, for the driver(-car)[3] beyond the immediate present (i.e. driving down the highway). Furthermore, practices of differential identity work are at play, exercised through processes of interpretive othering. These possibilities are contingent, fleeting and largely unverifiable in their realization, and necessarily engendered through a complex background of more-or-less objective resources such as discursive and technological schemas, as well as more or less subjective ones, such as affect and imagination.

A Roadmap

Broadly speaking, I understand this thesis to stand as a contribution to the growing body of mobilities literature, which is itself the productive output of the mobilities turn in the social sciences taking place since the turn of the millennium[4]. John Urry (2007) succinctly defines the aims of mobilities literature as the "analysis of the role that the *movement* of people, ideas, objects and information plays in social life" (17; *italics* original). My own thesis emerges from the intersection of a number of existing interrelated, theoretical and empirical concerns within the mobilities turn. I discuss each of these concerns in greater detail in the chapters that follow, however, a brief summary of each will suffice at present:

- Practices of "inhabiting the intelligent car" (Urry 2004, 124), which in turn discipline bodies through human/automobile assemblages; what Tim Dant calls the *driver-car* (2004) and the perceptual and affective effects of such assemblages (Katz 1999; Sheller 2004)
- Critical examinations of space, place and the social, ranging from theorizations of movement-space as ontological alternative to space-time (Thrift 2004b; Merriman 2012) and empirical non-place (Augé 2008), as well as critiques of the social (Latour 2005) and postulations toward a "sociology beyond societies" (Urry 2000)

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3 See Chapter 2 for an explanation of the concepts of assemblage generally and of the driver-car specifically.
4 See Chapter 1 for a more comprehensive review of the mobilities turn.

- Formations and negotiations of automobilized subjectivities (Seiler 2009), realized through the car and the "system of automobility" (Urry 2004), as well as rematerialized forms identity performance capable of spanning time, place and socio-cultural imaginaries (D'Alisera 2001)
- The significance of the automobile and automobility as "simultaneously immensely flexible and wholly coercive" (Urry 2007, 119) material and symbolic actors in contemporary western cultures

Main Arguments

- Notions of self and identity in contemporary America are commonly interpreted and performed through the materiality of cars and driving; writing on cars, or car inscription, such as displaying bumper stickers is an example of this type of performance;
- Contemporary practices of car inscription are different from older ones in terms of their modes of production and referentiality, and consequently the resources and strategies required to decode and make use of them;
- Such decoding strategies frequently require non-trivial reading acts that draw not only upon discursive and linguistic resources, but also the activation of ubiquitous or background technological networks and logics;
- These strategies are increasingly facilitated through the hybridization of drivers, cars and ubiquitous computing hardware and software;
- Such reading practices enable unexpected and expanded possibilities of the experience of time, space and interaction for the driver-car beyond the immediate present, i.e. driving down the highway;
- Last, these practices constitute a form of identity work, one that is differential, relies on a reciprocal othering and that is accomplished at the nexus of material and virtual spaces;

Chapter List

In Chapter 1, (Auto-)Mobilities, I discuss the mobilities turn in greater detail, including the conditions of a rapidly globalizing world that are the backdrop to its ontological and

epistemological orientations and preoccupations. I also discuss theorizations of the systems organized around the automobile and the types of subjectivities produced through regimes of automobility. In Chapter 2, The Superhighway Driver-Car: Inhabiting American Interstate Automobility, I present an empirical account of the contemporary American superhighway, in order to situate the claims I make in later chapters. First, I outline the possibility of *driving as method*, in theoretical terms as well as the specifics of my own attempt to use this approach in my thesis. Second, I examine the material conditions of the American Interstate Highway System (IHS), one of the fields of my research. Third, I discuss the phenomenological effects produced through the assemblage of the superhighway driver-car, drawing on several different threads.

In Chapter 3, Cars and Identity, I review literature related to the multiple and varied ways in which drivers the world over have negotiated and performed senses of self through their automobile entanglements including brand association, car modification sub-cultures and earlier research done on bumper stickers. In Chapter 4, Bumper Stickers: A Material-Cultural History, I argue car inscription has existed as a significant cultural touchstone for almost as long as Americans have been driving. To support this claim, I present a brief history of the evolution of car inscriptions in America through a survey of newspaper articles and patents. In Chapter 5, Bumper Stickers: Classic and Contemporary, I continue my analysis of bumper stickers as culturally significant objects, but shift the emphasis to a comparison of characteristic differences that have emerged in sticker manufacturing and thus referentiality/ intertextuality in the last decade or so. This discussion sets the stage for the claims I make in Chapter 6, Interstate Interstitials: Writer-/Reader-Car Encounters, about the type of socio-cultural work that may be accomplished in, and extend from the momentary encounter of passing cars on the highway.

In closing, I would like to make a brief comment on style. Recently, John Law (2004) has critiqued the readability of much academic writing in comparison to the writing found in poetry and novels:

> The textures along the way cannot be dissociated from whatever is being made, word by word, whereas academic volumes hasten to describe, to refer to, a reality that lies outside them. They are referential, ostensive. They tell us how it is out there. How, then, might we imagine an academic way of writing that concerns itself with the quality of its own

writing? With the creativity of writing? What would this do to the referent, the out-thereness? (11-12)

I have attempted, in my own limited way, to accept Law's critique and use it as my guide. Certainly, my choice of object has helped. Bumper stickers are often glib, funny, crass, clever and literate in unexpected ways, much like the contemporary culture in which so many Americans live and drive. If bumper stickers were anything less, I can only imagine they would have already lost relevance, the ability to catch a reader's eye. To write about them with the dry tongue of "objectivity," to count and typologize, to keep them "out-there" may have a place in the annals of academe, but to me it would seem a shame of misapprehension.

Similarly, my own long history of driving and life among the cars has influenced my choice of what to say and how to say it. As many others do, I suspect, I live and drive in a sort of post-rational, pseudo-solipsistic smog of reflection, memory and projection. This may not appear a sociological insight *per se*, but it is the inescapable precondition of any effort to exercise the contemporary sociological imagination. I can only hope that the reader finds these efforts bring them closer to, and not further away from the textures of the concerns at hand.

1. (Auto-)Mobilities

You sit in a café, gazing out the window. A cyclist rides by, sleeping bag stuffed and slung over his shoulder, mobile phone pressed to his ear. A woman passes, carrying a large, just purchased bottle of water, the muggy afternoon still condensing along its sides. Delivery trucks pass, cars, taxis; the distant rumble of jumbo jets beginning their far-arcing treks. Inside, a man sits across from you surfing the internet on his iPhone, the barista grinds espresso beans grown halfway around the world. It's an unremarkable scene. Every day, any day, maybe even cliché: it seems contemporary life is all movement, activity, disruption and upheaval, consumption and progress, people and things from elsewhere, a whole world always seeking new elsewheres … And yet this is your neighbourhood, in your city (it doesn't matter you're not a citizen of the country). It's your place: a good, family-friendly neighbourhood. Your kids go to school a block away from where you sit. The café is chill, dog and breast-feeding friendly. A mom and her shirtless son enter. You know these streets, these patterns. The scratch of cracked vinyl upholstery of these chairs against the back of your elbow, the slight tackiness of the table paint in the humidity, the herbal scent of the washroom hand soap. It's relaxed and comfortable, familiar. In fact, just now, a friend slopes by, shirttails un-tucked, dog on a leash. He doesn't see you though, eyes angled down slightly, fixed on the screen of his mobile. The mother and son leave. She buckles him into his car seat and they drive away, drawn into the tuneless thrum of a subterranean, six-lane freeway two blocks east of where you sit.

How to begin deciphering the meanings and possibilities layered in this palimpsest of everyday life, its people and things, the apparent embedded and performed tensions between movement and place, agitation and repose, authenticity and freedom? There are unique and novel features of contemporary mobilities that demand attention. These include the dematerialization of social, political and economic connections across virtual networks that are, in large part, achieved through the re-materialization of the human body in connection with mobility-enhancing machines (Urry 2007). Thrift (2004, 592), for example, discusses the possibilities for "new apprehensions of space and time" realized through a "new calculative sense," itself a result of a virtual and ever-present "qualculative" background—[5]for the time

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5 Clearly, this background is not uniformly spread, or uniformly accessible over the surface of the globe. Differential access to the qualculative background, and the possibilities it opens, is an emerging field of political contestation.

being, in basic terms, think internet—that humans access through ubiquitous computing devices (e.g. "smart" mobile phones), and which are becoming increasingly integrated into the human body. This last idea is particularly important to my research, in which I focus on the possibilities opened up through another combination body and technology—the human and car— an assemblage Tim Dant (2004) refers to as the *driver-car*. When conceptualized as an assemblage, new ways of thinking about embodied mobility become possible, distinct from those that conceive of the driver as a human subject situated in (driving, passengering), but materially, cognitively and emotionally distinct from the car.

The Mobilities Turn

> *The starting point is that the analysis of mobilities transforms social science. Mobilities make it different. They are not merely to be added to static or structural analysis. They require a wholesale revision of the ways in which social phenomena have been historically examined.*
> John Urry*, Mobilities*

> *The slippery and intangible nature of mobility makes it an elusive object of study. Yet study it we must for mobility is central to what it is to be human.*
> Tim Cresswell*, On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*

In calling for the development of a "sociology beyond societies," John Urry (2000) challenges the appropriateness of any contemporary association of social action with society per se, arguing that myriad, global/izing mobilities are in process of "materially reconstructing the 'social as society' into the 'social as mobility'" (2). Urry further suggests that while historically speaking, society has been "central to sociological discourse," (5) it has never been the key concept of sociology, suggesting instead "meaningful action, agency, interaction or world-system" (2) have been more salient, or at least analytically productive concepts.

The notion of a "society" that is more or less coterminous with the modern nation-state dates from the founding of the discipline of sociology in the 19th century. At that time, the bureaucratically centralized, ideologically nationalist (or imperialist) and materially bounded

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Thrift's discussion is largely limited to the 'global north', where access is generally widespread but not universal. As such, a politics of in- / exclusion is also at work there.

European and North American nation-state was becoming more or less established through the consolidation of smaller, independent political units (Mason 2011, 83).

The wars of the first half of the twentieth century, and their aftermaths, demonstrated both the fixity and the malleability of the formation of the nation-state. However, the emergence of the "network society" (Castells 1996, 2007) in the later 20th century and the resultant set of trans-national phenomena loosely grouped as "globalization" have come to challenge the stability of the idea of the nation-state, and therefore the association of a more or less stable society with a given state.

On the one hand, the ontological statuses of "social" and "society" are contestable even if one does attempt to assign them stability (Latour 2005); on the other hand, the empirical realities of contemporary flows of people, things and ideas across borders seriously challenge any attempt to reify such stability. This latter point is one of the jumping-off points for Mirchandani's (2005) call to move past the epistemological tail-chasing of the latter part of the 20th century, to postmodern sociology of the empirical, which is itself in keeping with Latour and Urry's critiques of the social and society, as well as the orientation of the mobilities turn more generally speaking.

Mobilities Literature

From the outset, it must be said that studies on mobilities are not entirely new. *Social mobility*, for example, as a concept and object of sociological study, is traceable through 19th and early 20th century social theorists ranging from Karl Marx to Pitirim Sorokin. Georg Simmel (1971) famously wrote about the subjective, socializing and phenomenological effects of making one's way through the sensory bombardment of the early 20th century city. De Certeau (1984) and Lefebvre (1991) have both discussed how movement produces social space, and Schivelbusch (1979) has discussed how the mid-19th century railway expansion in Europe and North America not only altered the landscape and patterns of mobility across it, but travellers' very perceptions of space and time.

Before proceeding, it is important to note two things. First, even this short list of texts indicates, broadly speaking, how mobilities studies may be approached from a macro-perspective—e.g. social mobility in the 1920s, or patterns of globalization in the 2010s— or from more subjectively oriented, micro-perspectives, such phenomenological or interactionist ones.

The work of Simmel, de Certeau, Lefebvre and Schivelbusch fit this latter category, as do contemporary empirical accounts of embodied mobilities ranging from dancing to driving. I position my own work, broadly speaking, in the latter category.

Second, while each of the works I've mentioned above are significant theoretical references for many contemporary mobility studies, the arc of the mobilities turn is not simply a linear projection of these earlier works. That there have been previously unimaginable social changes and profound historical passages since the nascent rail age of the 1840s, or the heady, fin-de-siècle modernity of Simmel may seem not much more than a truism. It is, however, the intervention of sweeping techno-cultural changes of the last twenty-five years —those which Urry (2007, 161) identifies as marking the "rapid development of the networked mode," that have in turn engendered the conditions and experiences of global/izing mobility that have become the objects of contemporary mobilities studies.

Kaufmann (2002) distinguishes three substantive ways in which contemporary uses of metaphors of fluidity differ from those used in classical 20th century work. First, whereas classical accounts of fluidity examined the *vertical* movement of socio-economic /class mobility, contemporary mobilities are equally understood (if not more) to constitute *horizontal* movement. Second, contemporary accounts of fluidity focus on "transport and communication systems as actants or manipulators of time and space" (4), rather than more static, functional social institutions. Third, contemporary studies go beyond the role of work as a vector of socio-economic status and mobility to incorporate other factors such as lifestyle. Kaufmann summarizes these differences, noting the "fluidification debate is much more far-reaching than the simple question of transferring from one social category to another" (4).

A caveat: not all contemporary work on social flows should be taken as part of the mobilities turn. For example, while the vein of more or less recent theoretical preoccupation with tropes of nomadism and flow—including rhizomatic proliferation (Deleuze and Guattari 2009), dromology (Virilio 2005) and liquidity (Bauman 2003)—provide useful and sometimes powerful metaphors for the destabilized "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) of contemporary life, particularly as it is lived in the global north. They do not, however, share the same focus as mobilities studies has on the empirically oriented investigations of the multiple, differential and often embodied experiences of contemporary mobilities.

John Urry (2007) argues the mobilities turn contributes to an already established, but ongoing critique of mind/body and human/material-world binary oppositions. In this way it shares analytic concern with both affect-oriented theorizations of embodied experience recent years (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Katz 1999; Ahmed 2010), as well as actor-network and material-semiotic theorizations of human/non-human interplay (e.g. Law and Hassard 1999; Mol 2002; Latour 2005). Mobilities studies also pay particular attention to the spaces (movement-, non-, material- and virtual- amongst others) that are theorized variously as the *settings* in which mobile social practices are performed, as settings that are themselves materialized through such practices, or as effects of the pre-positional potentialities of movement (Thrift 2004; Urry 2007; Augé 2008; Merriman 2012).

Scholarly interest in this new(-ish) "network society" (Castells 1996, 2007)/"network mode" (Urry 2007) engendered experience of mobilities is relatively recent. It was less than a decade ago, for example, that Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) published an essay entitled The New Mobilities Paradigm. Citing the emergence and mass-adoption of a number of important socio-technical systems in the last decades of the 20th century—for example, the internet and just-in-time manufacturing techniques amongst others—the authors sketch one possible version of the theoretical and methodological bases of the mobilities project, arguing "accounting for mobilities in the fullest sense challenges social science to change both the objects of its inquiries and the methodologies for research" (208).

Sheller and Urry outline six theoretical bases for the mobilities paradigm, of which the work of Georg Simmel, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and a mobilized version of the relatively recent spatial and affective/embodiment turns in the social sciences are relevant here, and will be discussed throughout this thesis. The authors also suggest a number of specific methodological approaches and concerns, including: forms of mobile- and cyber-ethnographies (217-218); explorations of imaginative forms of travel (218); "travelling objects," important to the "active development and performances of 'memory'" (218); and, lastly, the "places of in-between-ness" (219) emergent through the mobility of people, things and information that are qualitatively different from the traditional places of social inquiry. What draws together these disparate theoretical and methodological influences is the overarching concern with the "patterning, timing, and causation of face-to-face co-presence" (217) that are mutually constitutive of many contemporary, global/izing socio-technical systems.

The Politics of a Global/izing World: Movement, Motility, Mobility

Several distinctions between motility, movement and mobility emerge from the mobilities literature, first amongst which is that between movement and mobility. Rather succinctly, Cresswell (2006, 3) defines mobility as "socially produced motion," a hybrid product. As Cresswell points out, "raw motion" (read: motion without socially produced meaning) is an abstract concept rather than a practiced reality. There is something more to these forms of motion I have enumerated than the abstract interplay of physical vectors, Newton's mechanics, and Einstein's relativity. This something is the over-determined, constitutive, causative, characteristic (or, indeed, unexpected) and resultant effects and meanings… the *whys* and *becauses* of motion that emerge through the productive accounting for their existence.

Mobility Potentials

Kaufmann (2002, 1) defines *motility* as referring to the "system of mobility potential. At the individual level, it can be defined as the way in which an actor appropriates the field of possible action in the area of mobility and uses it to develop personal projects." Kesselring (2006) develops a typology of *mobility strategies*, which he describes as the ways in which "mobile people orientate themselves under conditions of uncertainty, insecurity, and the ongoing shrinkage of time and space and the globalization of Western societies" (270). But the politics of mobilities should also be understood on a more macro-, or indeed global/izing scale. At the extremes, the differential expression and experience of mobilities follows utopian (cosmopolitan)/dystopian (medieval) readings of an increasing borderless world (Urry 2000, 13), in which global mobility *haves* enjoy the possibilities, perquisites and privileges of trans-national mobilities (the world is their oyster), while global mobility *have nots* do not (the world is a mud flat).

Two different examples illustrate this last point: first, in 2003, twenty-three undocumented Chinese cockle pickers drowned in the fast-moving tides and quicksands of Morecambe Bay, Lancashire, UK. The victims were part of a work gang run by one of several organized crime syndicates, which have been in competition for the last two decades with local fisheries workers, for whom the work is often an inherited trade (Watts 2007; Hsiao-Hung 2014). Such migrant workers trace illicit mobility flows, halfway around the world in search of "opportunity," at great financial cost and physical peril to themselves and the families they leave behind. In the case of

the Fujianese workers who died in Morecambe Bay, the syndicates who formerly employed them continue to harass the workers' families to repay the "debts" associated with the trafficking costs of getting them from China into England.

Second, the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky (www.edwardburtynsky.com) represents the effects of industrial production and waste across the global landscape (although largely in the global south), including the shipbreaking work done on the coast of Chittagong, Bangladesh (see also *Manufactured Landscapes*, a 2006 film by Jennifer Baichwal et al. on Burtynsky's work). These workers do the physically dangerous, and generally toxic, work of dismantling and recycling of obsolete container and tanker ships. They manage this industrial-scale work on an open beach, largely by hand: cutting ship hulks with acetylene torches, dragging the rendered steel across the mud. Even though these workers are unlikely to ever travel beyond the limits of their homes and the breaking beaches, they play an important, albeit largely invisible, role in the production of the global mobilities, by acting as waste sinks for the detritus of contemporary western consumer societies[6].

Automobilities

The term 'automobility' captures a double sense, both of the humanist self as in the notion of autobiography, and of objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as in automatic and automaton. This double resonance of 'auto' demonstrates how the 'car-driver' is a hybrid assemblage of specific human activities, machines, roads, buildings, signs and cultures of mobility
John Urry*, Inhabiting the Car*

Can we name the subjectivity produced by the apparatus of automobility? With some apprehension, I propose calling it American.
Cotton Seiler*, Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of the Automobility in America*

Contemporary automobilities research— consistent with that of the wider mobilities turn—is both multi- or trans-disciplinary, engaging sociology and anthropology, critical geography and communications studies, and roughly divisible along lines of macro-/systemic orientations on the

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6 Burtynsky notes he learned about the breaking beaches in Chittagong and elsewhere along the Bay of Bengal following the 1989 Exxon Valdez tanker disaster in Prince William Sound, Alaska (see http://www.evostc.state.ak.us for details about the spill). According to Burtynsky, the Valdez spill prompted the scrapping of many single-hull design tankers, of which the Valdez was one—although it was not scrapped until two decades after the spill (Black 2012)— that subsequently ended up on the beaches of Bangladesh and India.

one hand, and micro-/subjective and phenomenological orientations on the other. Of course this is, to some extent, a distinction of convenience. As I have already tried to demonstrate, in its commitment to what Mirchandani (2005) calls empirical postmodernism, mobilities research is an attempt to bridge the classical macro-/micro- divide.

As part of the wider mobilities turn, significant interest in automobilities research has developed through multi-disciplinary combinations of sociology, anthropology, critical geography, STS and cultural studies during the last decade or so. In 2004, the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* published a special issue on automobilities. The articles in this issue include: theorizations of the system of automobility (Urry 2004) and the driver-car assemblage (Dant 2004); cultural histories of the M1 motorway in England (Merriman 2004), the symbolic significance of Mercedes automobiles in Germany during the interwar period, and the co-evolution, over the course of the 20th century, of dominant cultural and economic logics of the car (Gartman 2004); sensory (Bull 2004) and affective (Sheller 2004) performances and experiences of driving.

Two years later, *The Sociological Review* published a special issue under the theme "against automobility,"[7] in which a similarly diverse group of papers appeared. Also that year, the journal *Mobilities* was launched, and has since published a substantial and varied body of automobilities literature. Other significant monographs focused on automobilities, or that include substantial sections on automobilities include Cresswell, *On the Move* (2006); Urry, *Mobilities* (2007); Merriman, *Driving Spaces* and *Mobility, Space and Culture* (2007, 2012) and Seiler, *Republic of Drivers* (2008).

In the remainder of this section I will review two important themes in the multifaceted body of automobilities literature: first, critical theorizations of the system(s) of automobility; second, studies of the hybrid/izing combinations of people and cars, the phenomenological effects of driving including the affective and sensory embodiments afforded through automobile hybridities.

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7 Both *Theory, Culture and Society* 21(4/5) and *The Sociological Review* 54(Supplement 1) were subsequently published as monographs: *Automobilities* (Featherstone 2005) and *Against Automobility* (Böhm et al 2006), respectively.

Automobile Subjectivities

Beckmann (2001) claims "[a]utomobilisation[8] as a modern mobility paradigm is interwoven into the tissue of contemporary society. For many of us it provides 'normal spatial mobility', that is, the type of spatial mobility routinely exercised day after day" (593). He defines and analyzes automobilisation through three constitutive dimensions, which include its spatial-temporal contexts, its subjects and its vehicles (597). Following Schivelbusch (1979), who examined the novel phenomenological effects experienced by 19th century train travellers, Beckmann claims, "[a]utomobilisation has introduced new spatiotemporalities" (598), which are themselves partially productive of particular subjective experiences.

In terms of its vehicles, automobilisation is more than the numerical aggregate of millions of cars on the road; it has developed— partly through design, partly through self-organization— a large technical and organizational infrastructure to support it, the auto-LTS (large technical system; citing Kuhm 1997). However, Beckmann (2001) points out, following Social Construction Of Technology (SCOT) theorists, there are also key ways in which drivers interact with, and ascribe meaning to experiences of automobilisation that are not accounted for in systems-only analyses. This is because the driver inhabits the phenomenological, systemic and socially constructed dimensions of automobilisation at once: "[a]ll three dimensions of automobilisation are interwoven. Together they form a mobility paradigm, where a car-driver hybrid is grounded in auto-space" (603).

The System of Automobility

Urry (2000, 57) theorizes the system of automobility as the "hybrid social and technical system of the car." As such, the car is "a way of life and not just a transport system for getting from one place to another" (2007, 115). Urry specifically identifies a number of "interlocking dimensions" (2000, 57), that "in their combination generate and reproduce the 'specific character

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8 Beckmann prefers the term automobilisation to automobility, commenting the "[t]wo terms are often used synonymously: automobility and automobilisation. As far as it concerns this paper, I have predominantly chosen the term 'automobilisation' as it better reflects and signifies the dynamic nature of this paradigmatic type of mobility" (2001: 594). Except in this brief discussion of Beckmann's ideas, I have adopted the term automobility, following most other (auto)mobilities scholars. Insofar as Beckmann's argument for the choice of automobilisation over automobility is concerned, I would argue it is not dynamism per se that the former term indicates more clearly than the latter, but rather the ongoing regimes of subjectification produced through automobilized/-izing systems, practices and performances that is somewhat obscured in the term automobility. Below, I outline the critique made by Böhm et al (2006) of the language of systems of automobility, which is similarly concerned with the obscuring of effects of power in the analyses of such 'systems'.

of domination' that [the system of automobility] has come to exercise over the twentieth century" (2007, 115). These dimensions include (Urry 2007, 115-119):

- the car as "quintessential manufactured object;"
- the individual consumption practices realized through the car/driving;
- the technical, infrastructural and machinic-complexes that facilitate automobile practices;
- as the dominant form of mobility in the global north (and increasingly across the globe), a subordinator of other mobility-systems including public transit, cycling, etc.;
- dominant cultural patterns and an operational manifestation of the 'good life' in the age of advanced-capital, including as significant producer of literary and artistic symbols;
- resultant environmental effects and issues that automobility engenders; and
- the double movement that entails the "powerful combination of autonomous humans together with machines possessing the capacity for autonomous movement."

A small point of precision: while Urry correctly identifies this set of multiple, constituent *dimensions* of automobility, it would be more accurate to refer to the complex interrelations in the plural, as *systems of automobility*. First, the definite quality of system in the singular would appear to impute a more or less bounded, ostensive quality that obscures the largely becoming, performative aspects of automobilities. Latour (2005, 37) differentiates between ostensive and performative definitions thusly: the former includes things one may point to and say "that is a {such and such}" and that remain even when their observer disappears from its view; the latter "vanishes when it is no longer performed."

It is true that mobility systems depend on unquestionably material infrastructures that exist prior to, and following, discrete performances of mobilities. Automobility is no different, as certain material features of its infrastructures (i.e. roadways, production lines, toll booths, financing schemes, etc.) persist beyond the limits of discrete performance. Nonetheless, it is the ongoing interplay of cultural, commercial, legal, practical and preferential exigencies and desires

that inform, re-form and ultimately perform automobilities. Second, there are clearly multiple, interrelated, but at least partially distinct systems that co-constitute practices of automobility.

Urry refers to dimensions; however, I would argue, a more firmly empiricist investigation of these dimensions would expose the systemic character of the constituent infrastructures I've just enumerated. For example, the continued dominance of the individually owned car as means of mobilities, or the materialization (through ownership) of symbolic representations of the so-called good life, are inextricable from auto loan financing schemes that make such ownership possible in the first place. If potential buyers were required to pay cash up front to purchase a car, rather than paying for it over time, on credit, there would be substantially fewer American new car owners. It is also reasonable to postulate there would be much lower rates of car turnover amongst owners. In fact, American auto manufacturers realized this nearly a century ago: as early as 1915, the Guaranteed Securities Corporation (GSC) was formed in order to finance credit sales of Willys-Knight and Overland cars. By 1916, a reorganized GSC provided financing for sales on almost two-dozen auto makes (Flink, 1988). And it was not a coincidence that General Motors was the first manufacturer to directly finance sales of its own cars through its subsidiary, the General Motors Acceptance Corporation (GMAC) beginning in 1919, the same year tens of thousands of US servicemen returned home from the First World War (Karnes 2009).

Regimes of Automobility

Böhm et al. (2006, 2) note "[a]utomobility is one of the principal socio-technical institutions through which modernity is organized," suggesting that use of systems metaphors with respect to automobility correctly points up the "patterned and structured manner in which a range of social developments have operated to reinforce each other making the widespread use of automobiles both possible and in many instances necessary" (5). Clearly, analyses of systemic automobility mean to problematize both neoliberal-inspired, ideological encomia of the car as the symbolic vector of freedom (Lomasky 1997; Kazman 2001), as well as the automatic, everyday use of the car as the vector of mobility.

However, these authors argue discussions of systemic automobility tend to overemphasize the putative self-organizing character of such systems, such as Urry's (2004, 27) claim that automobility is an "autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads world-wide, and […] generates the preconditions for its own self-expansion." Rather, Böhm et al. (2006) advance an analysis the

18

systems of automobility in Foucauldian terms, as *regimes of automobility*, in order to account for the systemic aspects of automobility, while also emphasizing the power relations through which the system's recursively constitutive mechanisms are reified and potentially destabilized: "to avoid the sense of closure in the notion of system, where its internal relations, feedback mechanisms, create a closed loop reproducing its logics relentlessly" (6).

This is the point from which a critical politics of automobilities—and ultimately other-mobilities— might emerge, which is the manifest project of Böhm et al.'s volume. Nonetheless, while Urry and other mobilities researchers frequently use the language of systems, autopoeisis and lock-in these arguments are not techno-deterministic, or Parsonian functional-structuralist ones. Urry, in particular, focuses on the importance of accounting for the systemic complexity of the contemporary global/izing world in his analyses (especially 2005; also 2000, 2007). Power, Urry (2005) argues, elaborating Foucault (1990) by way of Bauman (2000),

> runs in, and especially jumps across, different global networks and fluids […] Power is significantly mediated and this functions like an attractor. Within the range of possibilities, the trajectories of systems are drawn to 'attractors' that exert a gravity effect upon those relations that come within its ambit. (248-249)

Foucault (1990) has demonstrated the shift from a juridical model of power, exercised by a sovereign figure through "deduction (prélèvement) and death" (89), to a productive one in which a "multiplicity of force relations […] operate and which constitute their own organization" (92). Multiple of relations of power—and the conditions of intelligibility and possibility they produce— inform not only the apparent hegemonic character and dominant status of automobility amongst other mobilities systems, but also processes by which this dominance may be challenged and changed in the future.

Such potentials for change are, however, contested. Along with concerns over the moment of peak-oil, peak- and post-car discourses have also emerged. To some degree, positions within these discourses vary according to positions on whether automobility is more correctly analyzed as a system or regime. The two are not mutually exclusive, of course. Having said that, while Böhm et al. emphasize the power relations within the regime of automobility in order to emphasize possibilities for subject-driven change, in some sense informed by, but also counter to the dominant logics of the regime. Urry, on the other hand, shades his analysis in the other

direction, holding open possibilities for other automobilities futures, but ones largely circumscribed by already existing systems and subject to the vagaries of the wider, increasingly complex and global/izing world. I incline toward the language of regimes, understood as partly constituted by (socio-technical) systems when qualifying automobility.

Automobility as Governmentality

Nikolas Rose (2010) elaborates Foucault's analytics of productive power in terms of governmentality. The word play here is both irresistible and instructive: governmentality/govern-mentality may be understood as the internalization by the individual (citizen) of the mentalities (dispositions) prerequisite to the extension of governance through subjectivity. It is a "certain kind of reason" that "makes possible both the exercise of government and its critique" (7), but it is also the self-reflexive critique and articulation (exercise of self-awareness) by the subject, performed upon him- or herself, that is a definitional feature of subjectification in such regimes of governmentality.

Rose cites Foucault's maxim that governmentality is the conduct of conduct, which operates through processes of formal rationalization and informal (or less formal) articulations while always necessarily presupposing the governed subject as being free: "To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one's own objectives" (4), or as Seiler (2008, 130) puts it, the "legitimacy of modern liberal societies depends to a large degree on their capacity not merely to tolerate but to enable performances of self-determination." The state, the modern governmental apparatus par excellence, now numbers but one of several elements in "multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces, within a whole variety of complex assemblages" (Rose 2010, 5).

Following Urry (2000, 2004, 2007), Seiler (2008) and others, I include automobility amongst these assemblages, acting as it does to form linkages between large-scale social features (e.g. territory and population) and cultural apparatuses (e.g. value systems), and the "micro-technologies for the management of human conduct" (Rose 2010[1999], 5).

In conclusion, automobility is not simply some vague theoretical area triangulated by driver, car and road. It is a material-semiotic network of the highest degree of elaboration, comprising drivers, cars and roads, but also subsidiary systems and processes that may be historical, contemporary or speculative. These systems and processes help account for the

presence of the roads (including technologies of civil engineering and construction, Cold-War ideologies and debates over Congressional appropriation and efficiency standards), and the presence of the cars (including the long history of Fordist and post-Fordist systems of automobile production in the United States, global economic interests and power struggles over fuel type and supply, the environmental consequences of auto proliferation).

Put another way, the embodied experiences of automobilities are the result of more than people driving cars, they are produced through the extenuations of complex social, cultural and material systems, the combined effects of which come to bear upon and are worked through human "bodies." What is missing from the preceding discussion, however, are empirical accounts of the historical and phenomenological experiences of driver and car hybrids produced through, and productive of the systems of automobility.

The Driver Car

> *Bodies are not empirically fixed and given but involve performances to fold notions of movement, nature, taste and desire into and through the body. Bodies sense and make sense of the world as they move bodily in and through it, creating discursively mediated sensescapes that signify social tastes and distinction, ideology and meaning.*
> Büscher, Urry & Witchger, *Mobile Methods*

Tim Dant (2004, 61) comments on the conspicuous absence of examination of the automobile as a "component of social being and social action in late modernity," and argues that the assembly of the *driver-car* deserves particular attention as a "species resulting not from chance mating but a product of human design, manufacture and choice" (62). As I have suggested above, this assembled "species" is a certain kind of materialized effect, one that emerges through iterative, citational performances (Butler 2011 [1994]), particular to a certain type of regime of governmentality. Such a regime requires a highly elaborated system of automobility predicated upon a mobilized subject, which is to say a subject that is produced/materialized in mobility.

Dant's theorization of the assembly of the driver-car rests upon the paired concepts of affordances and embodiment. Affordances are relational potentialities through which material-semiotic networks are made extensible. They may also be, depending upon the immediate state of the normative frame of a given discursive regime, construed as positive or negative.

21

For example, I frequently rent a car to make an obligatory monthly trip. Having completed the journey, but before returning the car to the agency, I might decide to run an errand or two, driving, that I would ordinarily accomplish walking or riding public transit. On the one hand, the affordance of efficiency is exposed, but on the other I will have contributed to the pollution of the planet. In this example, pollution would be a negative affordance and efficiency a positive one.

In fact, more times than not, efficiency is the motivating affordance behind the rental in the first place; a Greyhound Bus would also get me to my destination. The bus affords a lighter environmental impact, when the stream of partially-combusted hydrocarbons it emits is divided by the total number of passengers and aggregate distances travelled. On the other hand, the bus only runs on certain, inconvenient schedule (a decidedly negative affordance).

In the North American context efficiency is generally a token of intelligibility, whereas the consequence of pollution is not (or at least not yet). Lastly, affordances are not 'natural' qualities of an object. The brief application of the "genealogical imagination" should bear this out; the things in question are artifactual, which is to say human-constructed. The wide-open spaces of the American west might appear to contradict this assertion, in which geographical distance might appear to be an affordance of 'place', but those spaces are always only (have always only been) traversed by subjects of a particular regime of mobility.

This does, however, raise the question as to whether, or perhaps rather to what degree are the naturalization/obfuscation of relations of power-knowledge affordances of technical systems? I do not have more than a provisional answer, but in very general terms the work of Butler, Foucault and Rose, as discussed above, would appear to support the claim.

Dant draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty in the elaboration of embodiment as the second key concept in the formation of the driver-car. Embodiment is a form of orientation, communication and connection to one's surroundings that:

> human beings carry into each moment […] not simply given at birth but is perpetually modified […] an orientation of the whole body to the world through which it moves. What is perceived in the visual field is complemented by the kinaesthesia of the body and its trajectory as a whole (72)

The weighted sensation of settling into the seat during a brief, powerful acceleration, or the slight accumulation of g-forces while rounding a corner at speed attest to the pleasurable possibilities of the embodied driver-car. On the other hand, assemblage into the driver-car exposes the sensorial body to other applications of power that are not at all pleasurable or "empowering." The sickening sensation of being late for an appointment and pulling into a street blocked by a garbage truck on its rounds attests to this.

Similarly the frustration of running errands here and there, getting in and out of the car every few minutes (perhaps buckling and un-buckling the kids) draws attention to the corporeal displeasures felt when the embodied connections of driver-car are destabilized. Finally, the most salient effects of the embodied driver car, this automobilized subject into which these particular formulations of power have been enfolded, may be felt if only momentarily while accelerating along an entrance ramp into freely-flowing highway traffic, that the system and all its possibilities for the realization of freedom become available to the driver-car. At this moment it

would seem no place in the network is inaccessible to rational calculation; from Montreal to San Diego is only so many hours, so many gallons of gas and so many turns (or prompts from the GPS) away. But the particulars compress, it is the sensation of freedom and possibility that is evident. Such a moment is true. It is coherent within a certain regime of automobilized subjectification, and yet is also an effect of the subjectifying processes themselves.

To recap, the driver-car assemblage is not itself molar, but rather a group of coalescing effects produced not only through the joining of human body and automobile, but also dependant on what Urry (2000, 2004, 2007) calls the wider "system of automobility," the "hybrid social and technical system of the car" (2000, 57).

Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1977) has famously analyzed the phenomenology of rail travel in the 19th century, demonstrating the ways in which certain modes of mobility may reorganize human perception of space and time. For example, Schivelbusch argues the traveler, looking out from the train car window, no longer perceives herself to be part of a foregrounded, pre-industrial era space that would articulate the erstwhile traveler's sense of connection to the life and landscape through which a coach passed. Rather, the rail traveler embodies the immanent speed of the train, the erasure of foreground and the "mobility of vision" critical to the appreciation of the panoramic view (65-66).

As train travel once did, so has automobility reconfigured long established experiences and expectations of time and space. However, the perceptual experiences of mechanized railway and early automobile mobilities differed in at least one crucial aspect: then as now, passengers do not control the vehicles that bear them along. Control, as a form of human-machine combination affords a different set of perceptual relations, or form of inhabitation, than passengering does:

> In contrast to the passenger, the driver, in order to drive, must embody and be embodied by the car. The sensual vehicle of the driver's action is fundamentally different from that of the passenger's, because the driver, as part of the praxis of driving, dwells in the car, feeling the bumps on the road as contacts with his or her body not as assaults on the tires, swaying around curves as if the shifting of his or her weight will make a difference in the car's trajectory, loosening and tightening the grip on the steering wheel as a way of interacting with other cars (Katz 1999, 32)

Supporting these claims, Sheller (2007, 176) argues the ubiquity and banality of the automobile contribute to the reshaping of "corporeal existence, material environments and social temporalities in diverse and complex ways," but ones that go largely unnoticed in everyday life. Cars are around us, we are in cars, we *are* driver-cars to the extent that not only our expectations of time and space, but also our world views (literally and figuratively), sensory and emotional experiences and very senses of self become inextricably bound up in our automobile incorporations.

Friedberg (2006) argues the visuality of the car windscreen has become more akin to that computer and television screens— abstracting, virtual— than that of the window. Sheller describes the intersection of "motion and emotion" in the driver-car hybrid, "kinaesthetically intertwined and produced together through a conjunction of bodies, technologies and cultural practices (that are always historically and geographically located)" (2004, 227). Discussing car/freeway culture in Los Angeles, Katz (1999, 42) argues "people must in a sense 'confuse' their identities with their cars in order to drive them […] cars seduce drivers into a metamorphosis that is in many respects a literal process of transforming the practically useful vehicle of the self." In material terms, the metamorphosis of the driver and car into the driver-car is facilitated by increasing attention to ergonomics (Thrift 2006) and embedded software features (Thrift 2006; Sheller 2007) in car design processes themselves.

In both material and symbolic terms, Seiler (2008, 140) argues, "[c]omplementing, not negating, driving's sensations of agency, feelings of self-abstraction, anonymity, isolation, and submission to determining structures are central to the American fascination with automobility." In sum, the driver-car as negotiated and performed *effect* stands as a critique of the utility hypothesis of American automobility (i.e., Americans drive cars simply because they are the most efficient way to get around). Drivers *become with* cars; the driver-car is a rather messy, hybrid assemblage whose immediate and lasting effects come to bear on an individual's experience of the world in sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious ways. In the following chapter I attempt to characterize the effects of the driver-car hybrid as they are conditioned through driving on contemporary American superhighways, primarily those of the Interstate Highway System (IHS).

2. The Superhighway Driver-Car: Inhabiting American Interstate Automobility

Figure 2: I-75, Georgia (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

It is hardly novel to claim representations of cars, driving and the freedom of the road permeate American culture; Seiler (2008, 6) goes a step further, perhaps, tentatively eliding the "apparatus of automobility" and the characteristic subjectivity it conditions as simply *American*. A substantial body of critical literature analyzes how popular music, literature and film have represented American automobility throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries. Primeau (1996, 15), for example, identifies four primary tropes in American road literature, including "protest, the search for national identity, self-discovery, and experimentation or parody." Mills (2006) charts the trope of the rebel on the road, while the essays in Slethaug's (2012) edited collection deconstruct the totalizations implicit in many representations of American automobility, offering a number of feminist, queer and post-colonialist readings. As I discuss below, many observers have remarked upon the co-evolution between technologies of the car and

the cinema (Virilio 2005; Mills 2006; Merriman 2012), and the ways in which their modes of visuality mutually reinforce one another.

Of course, cinematic representations of the *open road* and the *autonomous driver* are largely inverted, negative fictions of American automobile realities. Road race, road trip and more recently road-oriented, criminal thriller films[9] largely represent American automobility with a greater degree of personal encounter, success, pleasure and danger—to say nothing of cohesive narrative purpose—than the average driver normally experiences through automobility. In short, the conditions of superhighway driving are everything a Hollywood film is meant not to be. Rather, the expressway is the contemporary complement to Simmel's turn-of-the century *metropolis*; automobility an apotheosis of isolated, asocial alienation achieved through repetitive, monotonous and disengaged acts of a-narrative driving.

Different authors have analyzed the changing relationships between American drivers, cars and roads during the first century of American automobility, including Flink (1988), Gartman Friedberg (2004), Volti (2004) and Urry (2007). What each of these analyses share is the recognition that over time, as roads and automotive technologies have improved and car ownership has expanded, the driving experience has become increasingly mundane, the psychology of driving ever more blasé. At the turn of the 20th century, automobility was an adventure embarked upon only by wealthy and mechanically savvy thrill-seekers. By mid-century, it had become a background assumption of day-to-day life and regular mode of recreation. Today, as Jakle and Sculle (2008) suggest, it approaches a form of social pathology.

In the rest of this chapter I present an empirical account of the contemporary American superhighway, in order to situate the claims I make in later chapters. First, I outline the possibility of *driving as method*, in theoretical terms as well as the specifics of my own attempt to use this approach in my thesis. Second, I examine the material conditions of the American Interstate Highway System (IHS), one of the fields of my research. Third, I discuss the phenomenological effects produced through the assemblage of the superhighway driver-car, drawing on several different threads. These include recent research in traffic/cognitive

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[9] Some race films include *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1966); *Vanishing Point* (1971); *The Gumball Rally* (1976); *Cannonball!* (1976) & the *Cannonball Run* series (1981-1984). Road trip films include *Easy Rider* (1969); *The Muppet Movie* (1979); *Vacation* (1983); *Broken Flowers* (2005); *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006); *Bad Grandpa* (2013). Road films with a criminal bent include *The Fast & the Furious* series (2011-2013); *The Transporter* series (2002-2008); *The Italian Job* remake (2003); *Drive* (2011). Some films, such as Thelma & Louise (1991) bridge this admittedly oversimplified classification.

psychology, the work of Virilio on speed, and various accounts of driving as well as my own photographic data/representations of driving on the IHS.

Driving as Method

Rather than attempting to grasp US society through reading the works of sociologists and intellectuals (beginning with the pioneering contributions of Alexis de Tocqueville), perhaps a more effective approach is simply to go for a drive

Mathieu Flonneau, *Read Tocqueville or Drive?*

In his essay on Los Angeles freeways, Brodsly (1981, 2) suggests "any anthropologist studying our city would head for the nearest onramp, for nowhere else would he or she observe such large-scale public activity." Flonneau's (2010) question to "read Tocqueville or drive" is a reinterpretation of Reyner Banham (1971) and Jean Baudrillard (1988), both of whom have explicitly claimed the practice of driving as a critical resource in their projects of American cultural interpretation[10]. Each of these authors is European (Flonneau and Baudrillard, French; Banham, English), and for them learning to drive in America was akin to learning a second language[11]. By contrast, the vernacular of my native automobility is American, and I've known the idiomatic inflections of the American interstate highway almost since I could speak. Before I owned a car, was granted a license or had even a clue how much gas it took to fill a tank, I already knew the sensations of driving at speed; joined with a car, the thrill and freedom of rolling down the interstate.

As with the majority of existing literature on bumper stickers and other forms of cosmetic car detailing and decoration (Case 1992; Chiluwa 2008; Chattopadhyay 2009; Lilley et al. 2010;

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10 For Banham driving is the native language in which Angelino culture is written; Baudrillard, who cites Banham, claims "Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together" (1988, 54-5). While it is the last sentence of the following that Baudrillard cites, and provides the tidiest and most memorable quote, the entire passage is instructive on the point of apprehending the world through (auto-)mobility:

> How then to bridge this gap of comparability. One can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree, as Richard Austin Smith pointed out in a justly famous article in 1965, and the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture, cannot go with the flow of its unprecedented life. So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original. (Banham 1971, 23)

11 I do not know if Banham, Baudrillard and Flonneau learned to drive in America, or if they learned to drive in America. In either case, the cultural differences encapsulated in, and exposed through the experience(s) were significant enough to each author to warrant their use of a driving-as-language metaphor.

see Chapter 3 for a more comprehensive review of this literature), my own previous research on bumper stickers (Goettlich 2009, 2011) has been, for the most part, methodologically static. By this I mean it was organized around the observation and recording of fixed objects from fixed vantages. The stickers and other inscriptions I observed were attached to or otherwise part of parked cars that I observed, counted and photographed from a certain point of view, almost always standing still (or squatting), positioned a few feet behind a stationary car's bumper.

Similarly, I conducted interviews in parking lots, next to an owner's parked car, where he or she could make reference to and give an account of the vehicle and its inscriptions, but at a reflective distance. There were obvious advantages to working this way. First, as I've indicated above, as an established approach, used by other researchers in the course gathering data for what would subsequently become published work, it carries with it a certain suggestion of methodological reliability. Second, assuming this reliability, and the validity of the execution of a study according to these methods, my intention was to compare my results to other studies conducted a decade or two earlier, and in different parts of the world. Third, in terms of the accuracy of counting and clarity of photographing stickers, it is less complicated to observe and record a stationary than a moving object.

There are, however, limitations to such an approach. Primary amongst these, and the one I hope to move beyond in this thesis, is way in which the treatment of stickers as inert objects and collecting examples of them as data, either quantitative or qualitative, lends itself to the development of statistical and/or taxonomic classification systems and theoretical typologies. However useful a typological approach may first appear, either in a specific application to material culture research or sociological research more generally—many classical and recent post-positivist sociologies rest heavily on the development and analysis typologies—alone it is incapable of adequately addressing the active, sensual, ramifying and increasingly *mobile* entanglements of people, systems and things that I understand to be constitutive of contemporary social life.

Originally, I envisioned this research to be conducted as a series of drive-alongs, car-specific variations of what Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) calls the go-along. The go-along is an ethnographic method entailing mobile, in situ interviews (e.g. going with an informant on his daily walk around the neighbourhood) that she advances as a way to explore "how individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life" (456). Eric

Laurier's (2011) contribution to the recent volume *Geographies of Mobilities*, for example, combines a drive-along with video recording. Given the relatively limited scope of this thesis, and following the advice of my supervisor, I made the decision to engage in a sort of self-reflexive driving practice rather than soliciting the reflections and observations of other driving informants: the road trip as method, a superhighway driver-car ethnography.

In actual practice I drove through parts of 21 of the 25 states east of the Mississippi[12]. I covered more than 10,000 miles (16,000km) in the course of three longer (greater than 1,000 miles) and a handful of shorter trips. During the majority of this driving I was alone, although during a number of the shorter trips I was accompanied by various combinations of family members including my wife, one or both of our children, my brother, mother, father, father-in-law and/or cousin. These shorter trips were entirely limited to driving on highways in the New England region. The photographs that follow in this chapter, and the photos and accounts in Chapter 6 are taken primarily on the observational data I collected while driving solo on the longer trips.

The Interstate Highway System

The United States Interstate Highway System (IHS) is currently the world's largest and highest-use national highway network (AASHTO 2005). A web woven of 47,000 miles of asphalt filament, it is cast over, draws together, *captures* nearly four million square miles of American landscape. The IHS carries more than 245 trillion vehicle-miles annually[13]—one quarter of all American traffic— while comprising only 1% of all U.S. highways by length (AASHTO 2007). In 2012 the U.S. federal government allocated more than five billion dollars for regular maintenance of the system[14]; that same year, nearly 4,000 people were killed driving on the IHS[15]. What these sheer size- and use-metrics cannot convey, however, are the phenomenological effects characteristic of driving on the IHS. These include the unlikely interrelations of monotony and anaesthesia through speed; anonymity and isolation through

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12 Those states I drove through include: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia and Wisconsin.
Of the states east of the Mississippi River, I did not drive in Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi or Rhode Island. For a list of my trips and tracking details see the project website: https://interstateinterstitial.wordpress.com
13 http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2012/vm202.cfm
14 http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2012/fa3.cfm
15 http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2012/fi210.cfm

freedom and autonomy. Above all it is the tension between the immanent, serial occupation of space and an ineffable feeling of placelessness that describe the experience of the contemporary American superhighway.

Space & Place

Critical analyses of the multiplicity of spaces through which people, things and ideas move—and through this movement how such spaces are (re-)created—are central to mobilities research. While this may appear a circular statement, it is meant to indicate the co-constitutive nature of the interrelations between *mobilities* and *space*. Perhaps Peter Merriman (2012, 1; italics original) articulates the point more clearly, suggesting movement and mobility should be understood as "not simply occurring in or across space and time, but as actively shaping or producing multiple, dynamic spaces and times." With respect to mobilities research, space/place is not given, however, neither is it immaterial.

Movement-Space

One important example is the attempt by several theorists to theorize movement-space and its interrelation with mobility. Drawing on the work of Serres, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, Merriman moves to challenge space and time as the ontological (and therefore epistemological) predicates of movement and mobility. Citing Massumi (2002), Merriman (2012) suggests instead the possibility of embodied movement-space(s):

> the unfolding of events being characterized by a prepositioning and turbulence; by
> material, experiential and relational effects of spacing, timing, movement, sensation,
> energy, affect, rhythm and force. This unfolding is manifested not in multiple socialized
> non-Euclidean or neo-Cartesian space-times, but rather in the eruption of movement-
> spaces, rhythmic intensities, vibrant materialities, energizing affects (43)

Thrift (2004) also theorizes movement-space, demonstrating how novel embodied tactics of mobility, are engendered through the development of, and interface with, what he terms a "qualculative" background, itself made possible through advances in computing power and the resultant ubiquity of mobile computing devices. More specifically, Thrift argues changes in background, the largely unremarkable and unremarked-upon "[s]urface on which life floats"

31

(584), comes to bear upon—in critical and formative ways— our embodied experiences in/of space and therefore our epistemological frameworks.

The argument is not simply that the use of certain technologies may aid us in the efficiency with which we traverse space or organize time, which are treated as effectively absolute. Rather, if they are produced as effects of movement, space and time are necessarily relative, and the modes / assemblages through which one moves— their mobilities— at least partially constitute how one comes to know the world, and what one might come to know about it. This further suggests the mutability of embodied perceptual apparatuses, such as one's culturally (in-)formed sense of direction or vocabularies of spatial configuration (600). Along these lines, Merriman (2012, 60) suggests it is the "distinctive relational co-presence of atmospheres, rhythms, materialities, forces, affects and bodies, which give rise to distinctive sensations of spatiality and placing, rather than vice versa."

The IHS as Empirical Non-Place?

> *On the road we mourn the loss of the old stretches of highway, the disappearance of distinct regions, the homogeneity and commercialization of the individual. Road narratives invite us at the same time to celebrate heroes and places and values that were never there except in our hopes, our imaginations, and our ability to construct myths.*
> Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road*

In *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Augé (2008) attempts to address what he views as the critical issues facing anthropology as a discipline and ethnography as a method in the contemporary, supermodern world. Supermodernity is defined positively, in terms of its excesses— time, space and the individual — as the inverse of, and against the negative definition of post-modernity (end of meta-narratives). According to Augé's argument, the excesses constitutive of supermodernity complicate the definitional terms of the principal, long-established anthropological object of study, the other, as written into anthropological space. Anthropological space is the

> concrete and symbolic construction of space, which could not of itself allow for the vicissitudes and contradictions of social life, but which serves as a reference for all those it assigns to a position, however humble and modest […] a principle of meaning for the

people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it. (42)

Such spaces share three common, interlinked characteristics: they are places of *identity*, *relations* and *history* (43). However, while anthropological place "can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity" (63), it is also itself dependent on a metaphysics of the near and elsewhere: the western here is defined in relation to a distant elsewhere, the temporal now in relief of an antecedent then, and anthropological space emerges through the writing of contrapositions.[16]

To summarize, non-places— including airports, malls and highways— are the inverse of anthropological places: They are spaces that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity," spaces of "solitary individuality," of wordless, gestural and abstract (often commercial) interaction (63). The challenge facing contemporary ethnographers, according to Augé, is an old problem, newly situated: how to "best integrate the subjectivity of those they [ethnographers] observe into their analysis: in other words, how to redefine the conditions of representativeness to take account of the renewed status of the individual in our societies" (32), the empirical non-place of the western here and now as opposed to its many exoticized elsewheres.

Augé (2008, 86) describes what he calls the "paradox of non-place," the effect through which a passing stranger "can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains. For him, an oil company logo is a reassuring landmark." Schwarzer (2004, 111) notes how "expressways have helped to generate the contemporary notion of place as a temporary, changing, and restless conglomeration of individuals," while Jakle and Sculle (2008, 3) argue the "modern American roadside has been structured in ways that fully reflect the cognitive realities of motoring."

Before the development of the IHS, the proliferation of roadside attractions, restaurants and motels along American highways afforded the traveller "[h]ighly personalized interactions not just with strangers but also with locals" (Jakle and Sculle 2008, 219). For example, less than a

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16 Anthropological places are therefore at once lived, observable realities and realities observed and written into existence: "The place held in common by the ethnologists and those he talks about is simply a place: the one occupied by the indigenous inhabitants who live in it, cultivate it, defend it […] The ethnologist, on the contrary, sets out to decipher, from the way the place is organized […] the group's economic, social, political and religious geography." (35)

decade after the first motel appeared in San Luis Obispo, California (Volti 2004, xv), there were more than 30,000 largely individually owned and operated motels and roadside cabin establishments lining US highways (McCarthy and Littell 1933). As Jakle and Sculle point out, these establishments provided travellers points of personal contact—however fleeting—with the regions through which they passed and the people who lived there. By contrast, following the advent of the controlled access highway and the concurrent development of corporatization of the hospitality industry in the second half of the 20th century, motels have become non-places in their own right.

Figure 3: Gas Station, Anywhere / I-95, Virginia (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Despite the geographic, political, historical and cultural diversity across the United States, in many areas, particularly those east of the Mississippi, the driver-car travels the IHS almost entirely insulated from these differences. Networks of service areas on toll roads, spread out in thirty to fifty mile increments incorporate a set of standard options: gas stations, burger joints, cafés, mini-marts: McDonalds, Starbucks, Sbarro Pizza, Burger King, DQ, Subway. On non-toll sections of the highway system off-exit oases offer a similar array of franchised services, but with

the addition of sit-down restaurants: Friendly's, Bob Evans, Cracker Barrel, as well as motel chains: Super 8, Motel 6, Econolodge, Red Roof Inn. The interstate highway network is an ecosystem, or in the very least, a complex whose provisioning infrastructures afford its users (driver-cars) the possibility of virtually endless mobility.

Figure 4: Provisions Ahead / I-91, Massachusetts (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

The Design & Material Conditions of the IHS

The IHS was conceived as a federally-funded, national (trans-continental), uniform and de-localized system of roads (Karnes 2009; Swift 2011), and by the 1950s, the days of road conditions that reflected local, geological specificities were already receding into the memory of an earlier generation of drivers.

In 1956 American president Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Road Act that was a critical to the funding and construction of the IHS (Karnes 2009; Swift 2011). Some 35 years earlier, Eisenhower took part in the Army Motor Transport Expedition, the first motorized convoy to drive across the U.S. The road conditions encountered during the trip were largely

impassable, but impassable in a myriad of locally- (and geologically-) specific ways: over the prairies, the convoy encountered sucking mud everywhere it rained; in the deserts of Utah, as much as two-foot deep drifts of alkali dust. While the construction and paving techniques used on the IHS may vary from one region to another, the overall result is a uniform roadbed that is meant to insulate the driver from the particular inconveniences of local geology, history and identity. A driver may marvel at the beauty of the red dirt tracks winding next to I-75 in Georgia, or the granite escarpments that sections I-91 cut through in north eastern Vermont, but the surface under-tire is, by and large, indistinguishable.

The construction of tens of thousands of miles of smooth, straight, high-speed roads that make up the IHS during the second half of the 20th century further engendered this shift. In *America*, Baudrillard (1988) makes much of the desiccated, mineral qualities of the Californian desert, the speed and heat of driving its mirage-like highways in the production of the American hyperreal. Generally speaking, the geographies and geologies of the western US are dramatic and varied, as compared to those east of the Mississippi. Without overstating the case, a driver plopped down in an unknown location along the I-95 corridor, or I-80 anywhere east of Chicago, would likely have trouble figuring out exactly where they were based on the landscape alone.

The IHS is a network of *controlled-access* and *limited-use* roadways. With respect to actually driving on these highways, these terms indicate two primary forms of constraint. First, controlled-access highways are built with relatively few, and explicitly designated points of entrance and exit, at a separate grade (height) from intersecting railways and local roadways, and are bounded by fences that separate the outside verges of each lane from the land beyond the highway right of way (AASHTO 2005, 2). Access to opposite direction lane ways (the sets of north- / south-bound or east- / west-bound lanes) is also controlled by a minimum 12m wide median (4), often landscaped with a concave or convex contours, planted with trees or other shrubbery and bordered by steel guardrails, concrete barriers and rumble strips in order to further prevent crossing between lane ways. Access lanes connect the lane ways at intervals, but the use of these is reserved for 'official' vehicles, i.e. road maintenance trucks, police cars and emergency vehicles. Second, limited-use highways are restricted in the types of activities and vehicles that are allowed on them. Passenger cars and trucks, motorcycles and tractor-trailers are generally allowed, while pedestrians (including hitch-hikers), ATVs (3- and 4-wheelers), snow machines, skateboards and other vehicles are prohibited. One reason for such exclusions is that

none of these vehicles is designed to safely travel at the minimum standard speed on the IHS of 45mph. Furthermore, while all states have long-established bureaucracies of car registration and inspection, and driver licensing, those systems generally do not extend to motorized 'off-road'

vehicles such as ATVs or snow machines. When they do, the registration, inspection and / or licensing processes are not as stringent as those for passenger cars. In any case, being outside of a car, a fracturing of the superhighway driver-car assemblage renders a dramatic reminder of the speed, power and violence that freeway driving incorporates (in a literal sense, as the driver-car), and the potential mortal danger of commingling disparate vehicular species.

Figure 5: Controlled Access / I-89, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

These designed and legislated access and use constraints exist, in the first instance, to insure roadway safety. But because of the patterns of discipline they impose on the flow and constitution of traffic they also result in certain phenomenological effects that are more or less characteristic of driving on the interstate (see below). Traffic flow tends to be self-organizing and, barring an accident or other unusual event, unidirectional, continuous and vehicularly homogeneous along a given lane way. With the exception of cases of extreme congestion[17] (rush-hour or road construction), it is also fluid and fast.

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17 The number of lanes on any new or rebuilt section of the IHS is determined according to a metric known as the design hourly volume, or DHV. This metric corresponds to the 30th largest hourly volume of traffic on that section

By comparison, traffic flow on a local street (city or town; rural areas are often somewhere in-between) is usually multi-directional (there are no medians between lanes, and streets intersect each other at various angles), discontinuous (traffic lights and stop signs, narrow streets, crosswalks and intersecting traffic all require interruptions in flow) and heterogeneous (cars mix with pedestrians and bicyclists, public transit buses and pets). As a consequence, city traffic moves rather slowly. Even so, because of the sheer volume and variety of discrete fragments of information the city driver must process in order to avoid a collision (*Was that a ball or a bird? Is there a kid running after it? Is that car going to pull out? Is that a space? How long has that light been yellow? Can I squeeze through?*), it is cognitively and emotionally taxing— a mania of hyper-vigilance and split-second decisions— in ways interstate driving rarely is.

Furthermore, local traffic tends to put driver-cars in closer proximity to one another. This is in part a consequence of the multi-directional, discontinuous and heterogeneous qualities I've just outlined, but also because of the resultant slower travel speeds, and closer proximity of the driver-car bodies themselves. In a sense, one is a function of the other: Slower speeds afford smaller vehicular separations in order to avoid a collision for a given reaction time. At a stoplight, cars line up bumper-to-bumper, door-to-door. But also, slower speeds afford a driver the possibility of rolling down the windows without the disadvantages of airflow noise and buffeting.

Lastly, the number of close vehicular encounters in local traffic mean that drivers must often directly interact with other users of the street, for example to signal a pedestrian to cross or another car to pull out, to shout down an erratic cyclist, or to compliment another driver's ride. In these ways the experience of one driver-car may commingle with another, and forms of sociability— different from, but in some ways similar to 'unassembled,' unadorned flesh-and-blood 'human' interaction— play out[18].

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during a given year (AASHTO 2005, 1). Of course, volumes increase over time, and so, for many sections of highway, particularly in suburban and urban areas, traffic jams are a daily feature of IHS driving.

18 Writing on the experience of freeway drivers in Los Angeles, Jack Katz notes the "aggravating dumbness of driving is exacerbated by the asymmetry of communicative interaction among drivers" (1999, 26). This 'aggravating dumbness' is largely due to the limited modes of direct communicative articulation between cars, which include honking horns, flashing headlights, tailgating, sudden braking, hand gestures (e.g. 'flipping off') and, for one respondent, flashing hand-made cardboard signs. But it also results from the feeling of being isolated from other drivers on the highway, where closed windows and high speeds result in serial, momentary propinquities (except in traffic jams, which are endemic to L.A.). So, even if the 'speaker' (honker, flasher or bird-flipper) profits from the expressive catharsis of the gesture (often they do not), they rarely see evidence that the message arrives at the intended recipient, or receive a response, except, perhaps briefly, in kind.

Unlike a maze of city streets or web of smaller local roadways, there are relatively limited possibilities for entering and exiting or changing direction on a divided, controlled-access superhighway. Exit frequency correlates roughly to the population density of the area through which it passes, although the minimum interchange spacing standard is one mile in urban areas and three miles in rural ones (AASHTO 2005, 5). On sections of rural interstate highway the distance between exits frequently spans ten miles, and may be more than thirty miles in extreme cases.[19]

Depending on the sections of interstate travelled, the driver-car may follow the same roadway for hundreds or thousands of miles, hours or days: as a child I would travel between my home in Vermont and that of my cousins' in Connecticut, a trip of some 300 miles, almost entirely on I-91. My second long trip for this project was a drive down the I-95 corridor, nearly 1,000 miles between New York City and Jacksonville, Florida. An ambitious driver might cover the 3,000 miles between Teaneck, New Jersey and San Francisco, California— a continent's breadth apart— on I-80 alone. As such, superhighway navigation is a relatively uncomplicated task. It is one that effectively requires the driver-car to point itself in a direction (there are usually only two choices: east or west; north or south), and *go*. It is largely passive, automaticized, reactive.

In summary, the IHS was designed and constructed as a uniform, de-localized system of roadways. George Ritzer (2011) has persuasively analyzed causal factors that lead to what he terms the *McDonaldization of society*[20], while Augé (2008) remarks on the reassurance offered the road-wearied driver by the sight of a familiar logo, an identifiable point of reference in largely a-contextual, a-historical *non-place*. Without a doubt, the uniform, *McDonaldized* spaces of the IHS are a significant influence on the experience of the superhighway driver-car. There is, however, a risk of overstating the commercial-infrastructural conditions of the IHS if it results in the exclusion of an examination of the phenomenological effects produced through the assemblage of the driver-car within those conditions. Put another way, the spaces of the IHS partially *condition*, but do not *define* the superhighway driver-car experience.

[19] http://content.usatoday.com/communities/driveon/post/2011/08/ longest-distances-between-exits-on-US-freeways-415029/1#.VLlInpjSrNk.

20 As I have discussed above, a critique of reified notions of society / the social is central to the mobilities turn. Without getting mired in an analysis of Ritzer's use of society, I would simply (re-) acknowledge the importance of this critique in mobilities literature, while also acknowledging Ritzer's important insights into contemporary processes of cultural homogenization.

Figure 6: Highway Fatalities, Facts & Figures / I-75, Tennessee (Walter Goettlich 2013)

The Phenomenology of the Superhighway Driver-Car

As an assemblage, the superhighway driver-car produces its own subjectivizing conditions as form of inhabitation, particularly through effects of speed, encapsulation and the visual mediation of the world through the windscreen. Citing Baudrillard (1996), Inglis (2004, 211) captures the complexity of these interrelations, noting the "ambiguity of the car rests in its simultaneous ability to be both 'a projectile ... [and] a dwelling place'." In this section I discuss these conditions and effects, drawing on a number of theoretical and empirical accounts of driving, including my own fieldwork.

On the road the driver-car's progress is marked internally by the irresistible wheeling of the odometer (or now, digital upward ticking), but also externally, by the regular appearance of highway signage indicating the number of miles to the next city, point of tourist interest or major highway intersection. On long trips a sort of constant mental calculation sets in, so many miles, such and such rate of speed, so many more hours to go. The nuts and bolts of this calculation may be augmented, or replaced, by GPS updates, but the awareness of the depth of space and time to

come, inescapable if arrival is to be realized, anaesthetizes the superhighway driver-car. Shorter trips, commutes for example, are perhaps more characterized by a calculation of a different sort. Distance, speed, but also density of traffic, flow rates.

Electronic signs indicating distance and time to important waypoints, admonitions to drive safely and up-to-date collision and fatality statistics are common around large cities. These signs are updated as traffic conditions change, fed by systems of surveillance that account for the individual driver-car, but for the most part only in aggregate (Sheller 2007). Automated toll systems, such as *EZPass* in the northeast and *SunPass* in Florida register and account for each car that passes a tollbooth. The call-and-response type positioning technology of GPS and cellular communications, as well as subscription based emergency services such as the GM *OnStar* and Mercedes-Benz *mbrace* also account for the driver-car's position in real time.

Inhabitation

Urry (2007) advances a periodization of *dwelling in* or *inhabiting* the car in order to elaborate and historicize the material, embodied interrelations of drivers, cars and the spaces of automobility. Drawing upon Heidegger's (2008) concept of dwelling in space, Urry argues a "person is not a separate 'encapsulated body' since such a person already pervades the space of the room they are about to enter […] To dwell we might say is always to be moving and sensing, both within and beyond" (31). In this sense, dwelling in the car, as the driver-car, is a form of permeation and possibility that has evolved together with developments in car and road design and construction. Urry's four periods are *inhabiting unmade roads*: ~1890 to 1919; *inhabiting paved roads*: ~1920 to 1945; *inhabiting the car*: ~1946 to 1999; *inhabiting the intelligent car*: ~2000 to present (2007: 125-130). For the purposes of this thesis I ignore the first two periods, as their characteristic modes are of some comparative but not analytical value.

Following the end of the Second World War, the car increasingly became an encapsulation of its driver: "[a]t this stage the car-driver in the west comes to dwell-within-the-car rather than on the road" (Urry 2007: 126). Massive post-war suburbanization in turn necessitated commuting and the quotidian dependence on the car Urry terms "auto sprawl syndrome" (126). Commuting, in particular, placed new demands on the interior spaces of cars, which increasingly became "room[s] stimulating particular senses and emotions" (127), mobile, hermetic spaces of bodily encapsulation and passivity, but also centres of efficient control of the hybrid machinic-body of

the driver-car. Urry argues the period of *inhabiting the car* lasted up until the early years of the 21st century.

In recent years the proliferation of embedded and networkable micro-computing technologies in cars, and the ubiquity of such handheld devices has begun to re-articulate the terms of the driver-car inhabitation: Those of us driving web-enabled cars along the superhighways of the Global North live in the era of *inhabiting the intelligent car*, a shift whose significance I discuss in Chapter 6.

Encapsulation

The characteristic conditions and effects of inhabiting contemporary automobiles have resulted from technological developments to cars on the one hand, and adaptations to these developments by their drivers on the other. Contemporary cars are designed to encapsulate their drivers to an unprecedented degree. Elaborating the automotive technologies that 'cocoon' and 'protect' contemporary drivers, Jakle and Sculle (2008, 220) note how "today's motorcars provide greater protection from road hazards than ever before. But they also more fully insulate or isolate motorists." The authors list "computerized power brakes, power-assisted steering, improved headlights, seat belts, padded dashboards, and front and side airbags," as well as "sophisticated computer-assisted suspension systems," passenger compartment insulation and glare-reducing glass treatments amongst these technologies (200).

Computerized systems have only become more-or-less standard equipment in the last several decades, however. Flink (1988), for example, notes how American car models were technologically stagnant for much of the post-war period, until the early 1980s when Japanese imports began to dominate the U.S. the domestic market. As Jakle and Sculle's litany indicates, embedded, ubiquitous computing systems account for a degree of this increased encapsulation. Sheller (2007, 176) expands this idea, examining how "new technologies of mobile data processing, information transmission and wireless communication […] have been brought into the 'banal' performance of car driving."

The cars I drove during this research were new. Some had as little as two or three thousand kilometres— none more than twenty— on the odometer when I drove out of the rental lot. They ran smoothly, accelerated with a reasonable alacrity, and did not shake or shimmy, or leak air or drip rainwater through desiccated door seals. The stereos played at high volume without

distortion or speaker vibration. They were not malodorous palimpsests of muddy pets, chain-smoking friends and carsick children. Their seats were multiply adjustable—*configurable,* even— upholstered in soft-to-the-touch velours and leather; various knobs and switches encouraged the play of fingertips over their subtle indentations.

Each car was a sort of *tabula rasa,* attending a driver's (*this* driver's) bodily impression. I want to bring attention to the overall *smoothness* of my project cars because the combination of efficient mechanical function and refined ergonomic design afforded what I would characterize as a less obviously mediated experience of the road. This may seem contradictory at first. The car is nothing if not a medium of human mobility. But as I will explain, the elision of speed (and its violent consequences) is characteristic of the way contemporary certain visions of American automobility are designed to be experienced. In a sense, this encapsulated smoothness obscures the constituent elements of the driver-car in their pre-assemblage: the driver becomes one with the car and road. Irregular vibrations, a rotten muffler or a stereo on the frizz all break the spell of hybridity. I am *driving* this car; I *am* this car. Note, for example, Baudrillard's (1988) combination of metaphors of power and fluidity in the following passage:

> The way American cars have of leaping into action, of taking off so smoothly, by virtue of their automatic transmission and power steering. Pulling away effortlessly, noiselessly eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump (the surfaces of highways and freeways are remarkable, matched only by the fluidity of the cars' performance), breaking smoothly but instantly, riding along as if you were on a cushion of air, leaving behind the old obsession with what is coming up ahead, or what is overtaking you. (54)

Encapsulation, however, is not limited to the material, mechanical systems of the car. Bull (2004) demonstrates how individually curated soundscapes further mediate the driver-car's relation to the non-places of the modern superhighway:

> The meaning of these non-places is overlaid by the mediated space of the automobile from which meaning emanates. Drivers can choose the manner in which they attend to these non-places, or indeed transform these spaces into personalized spaces through the use of their sound technologies. (253)

Through the individual management of their aural environments, Bull argues "[a]utomobiles thus become spaces of temporary respite from the demands of the 'other'," a form of "illusory control of their environment" (248-249). In this case, "control" is achieved through sonically induced psycho-cognitive isolation.

Monotony

The effects of superhighway driving have interested cognitive scientists, cultural critics and social theorists for as long as the IHS has existed. As early as the 1960s, the psychologist Griffith Wynne Williams (1963) captured the increasingly minimal-effort experience of automobile inhabitation:

> The seats are designed for maximum comfort but the same posture must be maintained for extended periods. Little steering is required, particularly on the straight, broad stretches, while the steering mechanism is designed for 'finger-tip control.' The engine hums smoothly and a muffled purr accompanies the hum of the tires; the body is so suspended that jolts and vibrations are reduced to a minimum. (143)

Based on data gathered from a number of first-hand accounts, Williams theorizes a condition he terms *highway-hypnosis.* The comfortable, encapsulated inhabitation of the modern automobile in combination with the speed and lack of distractions characteristic of superhighway driving produce trance-like/amnesiac states that, while different from sleep, pose significant dangers on the road:

> Both monotony and bright points of fixation are part of the repertory of hypnotic induction. They are not only ancient features, but contemporary and very effective. Monotony induced by drum beats, swaying, […] has been utilized to induce a trance state throughout recorded history (1963, 144)

Karrer et al. (2005) find what they term *driving without awareness* (DWA) is related to episodes of micro-sleep during long, monotonous drives, and was experienced by nearly 20% of drivers in their study. While fatigue and/or falling asleep at the wheel is not a contributing factor in most accidents, it "plays a part in a reasonably large proportion of fatal ones" (Hole 2007, 114). Charlton and Starkey (2011) theorize the cooperation of operating and monitoring cognitive

processes that "work in tandem to guide and maintain driver behaviour" (469). The authors argue the monitoring process runs continuously while we drive, activating "attentional pathways" required to stimulate the operating process only when encountering novel or challenging driving situations. In this model there is a modality of psycho-cognitive energy conservation at work that most experienced IHS drivers would recognize instantly.

Plainly stated, driving is monotonous—some would say boring—rarely to death but often a trance-like state. The effects of encapsulation and monotony do not always result in deleterious consequences for the driver-car, however. Lynne Pearce, for example, captures something of the effect of psychological interiority produced through the combined effects of highway monotony and the possibilities of individually curated sonic encapsulation:

> When I drive, I listen to music. Hours and hours of it. […] A long journey, then—such as the one down here—becomes an emotional palimpsest of past and future, in which events and feelings are recovered and, most importantly, rescripted from the present moment in time. Listening to the music, re-telling my stories and re-writing their endings, thus grants me unique, if temporary, imaginative empowerment. Between there and here, between then and now, I feel suddenly—impossibly—in control of my destiny. By the time I arrive at the fixed point of 'home' (that is the home of my imagination), past, present and future have been rendered coherent by the narratives I have forged. The causal threads so wildly flapping in our day-to-day experience of being in the world are now securely knotted. Everything makes sense of everything else, no matter how painful […] Until, that is, the moment the car stops, the doors open, and I am swept back into the darkness of my 'real' home: the space and place where there is no narrative, no sequence, no necessity—and the proverbial smile is smartly wiped off my face. (Pearce 2000: 163-164)

The enforced, buckled-in *immobility* of the human body in assemblage with the *mobile* driver-car affords not only a particular set of physical sensations, but also engenders a sort of psycho-cognitive interiority, reflexivity, even reverie. Pearce can make sense of her life story— past, present and future—through driving in ways that are never possible once she breaks the assemblage of the driver-car and the specific forms of dwelling on the road, and liberating, monotonous mobility it affords. By 'liberating' I mean to express a form of detachment from the

requirements and consequences of the a-narrative, 'wildly flapping causal threads' of an individual's everyday experience.

As I demonstrate in Chapter 6, such liberating psycho-cognitive effects produced through the superhighway driver-car are not limited to a purely self-reflective state: they may also be re-trained upon, and in fact stimulated by the world at large. But in terms of sensual perception it is the visual, not auditory, that most accounts for both the monotonous effects of superhighway driving, and ultimately the possibility for social interaction in the empirical non-places of the IHS.

Speed & Dromoscopic Visuality

Hole (2007) notes, from an evolutionary standpoint it is remarkable that we are able to drive at all:

> We take a visual system that is optimized for finding ripe fruit and deciding whether or not a branch is in reach, and expect it to be able to judge the speed of ourselves and approaching vehicles, estimate the distance between us and other road users, and provide correct information about what is in our environment—at speeds of 70 mph or more. (22)

Paul Virilio (2005, 45) has analyzed the historical evolution and social consequences of speed, arguing the "progress of speed is nothing other than the unleashing of violence." According to Virilio, this progress of speed has been realized through a series of technological revolutions including *transportation* (i.e. the development of engines: steam, internal combustion, jet, rocket), *transmission* (i.e. the development of radio, television, telephone and information technologies) and *transplantation* (i.e. the miniaturization of transmission technologies such that they have become 'physically assimilable') (Armitacge 1999, 49).

Baudrillard (1988, 6) claims speed is a "pure object," that "cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points." It is a "rite that initiates us into emptiness" (6), through which driving becomes a "spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (9). Similarly, Jakle and Sculle (2008, 3) note the highway itself, acting as a "forward trajectory, reinforced by the sidelong blur of the lateral roadside, can become hypnotic, an invitation to reverie divorced from immediacy."

I refer to this contradictory combination of hypo- (monotony) and hyper- (speed) stimulation *dromoscopic anaesthesia*. Virilio defines *dromology* as the "science of the ride, the journey, the drive, the way" (Armitacge 1999, 35). *Dromoscopy* is the resultant mode of visuality. According to Virilio (2005), the driver becomes a

> director-composer of the trip [who] will in effect compose a series of scenes of speeds
> that play surreptitiously through the transparent screen of the windshield […] In the speed
> of the movement of the voyeur-voyager finds himself in a situation that is contrary to the
> viewer in the cinema, it is he who is projected, playing the role of both actor and spectator
> of the drama of the projection in the moment of the trajectory, his own end. (106)

Like the succession of frames that make up a reel of film, the driver-car inhabits the spaces of the American superhighway serially, as a "corridor for movement experienced sequentially" (Jakle and Sculle 2008, 2). Likewise, Baudrillard (1988, 1) remarks the "fascination of senseless repetition is already present in the abstraction of the journey. The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film."

 Merriman (2012, 87) points out the cultural significance of the contemporaneous development and association of automobile and cinematic technologies as far back as the turn of the 20th century, while Mills (2006, 40) notes within several decades cinematic and automobile visualities had already begun to merge: "[i]n other words, the landscape traversed by the Beats was no longer a completely open road—it was already a 'cinemascape,' a landscape defined by prior literary representations and cinematic images."

The greater speed of the interstate driver-car enhances the effect of dromoscopic projection. Mitchell Schwarzer (2004, 100) claims expressways are the "ultimate venue for dromoscopic projection." Citing Lackey (1997) he continues, "speed turns the city seen through the windshield into a surface of motion, a stream of form that somehow eludes the consciousness of form" (Schwarzer 2004, 71)

While Schwarzer is primarily concerned with the visual perception of urban architecture, I argue the high-speed passage of any expressway, urban or rural, produces through the driver-car an "automotive zoomscape" (87) of dromoscopic free-fall. At the wheel, staring into the windscreen, dromoscopy dims ontological acuity: the passage of time and distance drift, lag and compress. Eighty miles along I-90 evaporates in the length of a top-40 hit, a spare few miles

between exits on I-81 span half the night. After a few hundred miles it becomes difficult to reckon the time of day, after a few thousand, the date, or even day of the week.

Figure 7: Dromoscopic Free-Fall, Night / Cross-Bronx Expressway, I-95, New York (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

But if speed is anaesthetic, its absence may become an aggravated craving. To inhabit the driver-car at speed is to experience a form of *freedom*. This is not the broadly ideological freedom of grand narratives, but rather as a specific form of bodily expansion and possibility. It is the freedom to occupy another space, to move at speed toward an always-receding spatial and temporal horizon (Virilio 2005) or vanishing point (Baudrillard 1988), in order to sustain the dromoscopic anaesthesia. Encountering roadwork, rush hour congestion and even other driver-cars on an otherwise clear highway can break the dromoscopic spell. Anything, in effect, that requires the driver-car to slow down and pay acute attention; occasionally, breaking the spell may have unexpectedly strong emotional results[21].

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21 For a more in-depth analysis of the emotional life of rush-hour drivers see Katz, "Pissed off in L.A.," How Emotions Work (1999)

As Urry (2007) points out, the car is generative of, and central to, symbolic representations of success and freedom in American cultural identity. The history of such representation spans the better part of the 20th century, through American popular culture, especially film and music. As I drive, I am at once living a discrete, kinaesthetically and cognitively functional experience of driving. But I also act as the *director-composer of my own automobility* (Virilio 2005; see above), who draws upon a vast store of prior cultural consumption and discursive resources to perceive, frame and make meaning of my passage as an already viewed *cinemascape* (Mills 2006).

A certain effect of imprecision results from this confused interiority/exteriority in which the driver's corporal body inhabits the machinic body of the automobile. The assemblage perceives, performs, occupies and consumes highway space as though they were one in the same: the driver, the car and the highway. At the same time, the material, three-dimensional and consequential spaces of the superhighway are stereographically compressed, contorted into the virtual, two-dimensional and imaginative ones of the automobile windscreen (Friedberg 2006).

On the one hand, the relationships of place and locale, history and people through which the IHS cuts—heedlessly, remorselessly—are invisible to the roving, consuming eye of the driver-car. On the other, the exigencies of safe conduct mandate the spatial separation and personal dissociation of driver-cars themselves. As Jakle and Sculle (2008, 2-3) note, the "highway is a place where strangers engage one another superficially, relating but readily disconnecting, with social engagements that tend to be transitory and anonymous." They continue:

> as a medium of isolation, it [the automobile] also makes for self-absorption and even self-indulgence. Today's motorists live in a fleeting, distanced, and largely visual world where social interaction is highly impersonal […] Might a social pathology of motoring be evolving? And, if so, what might it symbolize for America's future? (224)

Indeed, in this chapter I have attempted to present some of the conditions and effects produced through driving on the American Interstate Highway System. Following the work of George Ritzer (2011) and Marc Augé (2008) amongst others, I have presented the spaces of the IHS as homogenized, impersonal, *McDonaldized* non-places largely bereft of the possibility of social interaction.

At the same time, I've attempted to present the phenomenological modes of dwelling within the driver-car assemblage as apparently further limiting such possibilities. And yet, as I hope to demonstrate in the following chapters, despite the evident barriers to "human" social susceptibilities (Cooley 1926) and classically conceived forms of social interaction on the IHS, I argue there are nonetheless interstitial conditions of possibility for social connection between driver-cars.

The silver S.U.V. in the first photograph in this chapter (Figure 2 above) hints at one of those possibilities. Specifically, I'm thinking about the way a bumper sticker permits an opening or connection of the visual field of the driver-car to wider social, cultural and discursive fields within which American automobility is situated. First, however, in the following chapter, I present a review of scholarly literature related to the symbolic economies of automobiles.

Meantime, while driving, I keep an expectant eye out for an imagined Virilio and Marx inspired bumper sticker, a sentiment for the 21st century that would read:

SPEED IS THE OPIATE OF THE (AUTO-)MOBILE MASSES

3. Cars & Identity

There is a sociology of everything. You can turn on your sociological eye no matter where you are or what you're doing […] Caught in a traffic jam, you can study the correlation of car models with bumper stickers Randall Collins*, The Sociological Eye and its Blinders*

There is a fairly extensive scholarly literature that addresses the interrelations of identity performances and subjectivities on the one hand, and various forms and practices of automobility on the other. In this section it is my aim to examine three groups of academic literature related to these concerns in order to contextualize the claims that follow. First, there are those studies related to brand representations; second, those related to mechanical modifications; third, those related to superficial customization.

The clean division of studies in this way is not meant to suggest that these three modes of automobile-identity practices are somehow distinct from one another, nor that they are comprehensive in terms of the ways drivers express themselves with and through their cars. Rather, it is an analytical categorization that, as much as anything, follows the *how* of each modality. Cars roll off the production line and into the showroom under the banner of a brand, and in many cases cars drivers choose their (new) cars based on the symbolic associations those brands are perceived to afford. Mechanical modification cultures, by contrast, emphasize a certain technical knowledge, if not always know-how, a fair amount of disposable cash and generally entail a desire to participate in sub-cultural groups related to specific types of cars and/or mods. I divide superficial customization practices along lines of *custom art* and the *mass-produced*. The former generally involve elaborate craft practices, the permanent results of which often effectively envelop the vehicle, whereas the latter are characterized by the display of more or less discrete consumables, often but not always mass-produced, such as bumper stickers, vanity plates, pennants, etc. In what follows, I give a cursory examination of the first two groups, and a rather more comprehensive review of the third, with specific focus on literature related to bumper stickers.

Stock Cars: Makes & Models

Last summer, while sunning on Wells Beach in southern Maine I overheard a group of friends ribbing and teasing each other, when one of them shouted, "What has California done to

you, man?!? You drive a Prius now? Fuck!" I don't know these young men personally, but as their family owns one of the cottages along the length of shore I customarily visit, I often see them and the large trucks they drive, one summer to the next. I wouldn't have figured any one of them for a Prius driver either. What might this suggest about the types of associations a given brand of car affords its driver, both directly, as desired and interpreted herself, and to a degree indirectly, through those who "read" the driver through their car?

The early years of American automobile manufacturing were predicated on the philosophy market creation through affordability, which itself was realized through the standardization of mechanical processes and worker activities yielded lower unit costs, economies that were passed on to consumers through lower prices (Volti 2004, 51). To oversimplify in the name of brevity, the symbolic values associated with cars during this time were effectively binary: you had one or you didn't. The conversion of have-nots into haves was the goal of the Fordist model of production and sales.

The General Motors (GM), or Sloanist model, by contrast, was oriented toward the development of a "purchasing hierarchy" (Volti 2004, 52), in which buyers were expected to "buy up" as their affluence and aspirations increased. GM introduced the first annual "model year" in 1923, institutionalizing minor aesthetic changes to its models annually, while making more comprehensive cosmetic overhauls every three years (52). Through most of the 20th century, GM was the largest manufacturer of cars in America, and the Sloanist model was attuned to, and conditional of, the trend toward realizing individual identities through consumer choices. As a result, a proliferation of symbolic values and readings became associable with given make, model and year of car. The introduction, and eventual dominance of the American market by non-domestic makes only increased these symbolic values, associations and readings. Kwon (2004), for example, notes:

> during the economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s, purchasing foreign cars was seen as anti-American as noted by the editors of A.Magazine: "For most of the 1980s, buying a Japanese car was considered downright unpatriotic by those sympathetic to the American auto industry." (10; citing personal interview)

Gartman (2004) argues that each era in his periodization of automobility entails a certain characteristic relationship linking the logics of automobile production and consumption,[22] and that these relationships are (partially-)generative of the symbolic economies particular to the periods in which they operate. A couple of recent studies illustrate these ideas in contemporary American culture. Jeremy Schulz's (2006) examination of the Hummer H2 illustrates the complex range of motivations for owning, and the symbolic power associated with, driving the high-end Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV), balancing the work done by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) on class distinction with that of Herbert Blumer (1969) on the "fashion mechanism," understood as "the desire to align oneself with the preferences that have been anointed as the ones to best capture the zeitgeist" (Schulz 2006, 60). The study, based on a set of interviews conducted with H2 owners and dealers in California, finds at least three different sub-sets of H2 owners, each of whom is characterized by a different set of material and symbolic relations to the car.

Garland et al. (2013) pick up the theme of multiplicity of signification in their interpretive examination of Toyota Prius advertisements. The authors find not only do the advertisements promote certain symbolic representations of the Prius as more environmentally-friendly, they actively invite the prospective consumer to imaginatively participate in the symbolic construction of the car. It is a two-way street in a sense, in which the driver imagines herself through the symbolic representation of the car, but also (re-)imagines the car—and more significantly, a less polluted world—with herself at its wheel.

However, as Ozaki et al. (2013) point out, Toyota's representations of the Prius, and by extension, imaginative consumers' representations of the car, are effectively limited by a technologically deterministic point of view: driving a hybrid is environmentally sound practice. The authors' argument, however, is that sustainability is co-constructed in the practices of driving the car, specifically through the ways in which drivers must adapt to the Prius' systems in order to realize its potential efficiencies. The notion of an adaptable driver begins to call into question that driver's agency, and contrasts sharply with the dominant symbolic associations of the H2 with an aggressive, libertarian version of agency.

During the course of my own research, as a consequence of not owning one, I have rented and driven many cars. By and large, I was not overly concerned with what I perceived as the

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22 These periods are: *the age of class distinction* (~1895 to 1920), *the era of mass individuality* (~1920 to 1945) and *the era of subcultural difference* (~1965 to present).

symbolic affordances of these cars for two reasons. First, many of the cars were fairly similar nondescript, late-model, compact and mid-size import sedans: Hyundai Elantras, Kia Rios and the occasional Volkswagen Golf or Jetta. I liked driving some better than others but, unless they had a sunroof or lacked cruise, they were rather indistinguishable; and anyway, having a sunroof or not is hardly a major signifier. Second, because none of these cars was properly mine, they couldn't *be me*. I hoped other drivers would take notice of my project bumper sticker (see Figure 54), but beyond that, I was largely unconcerned with the symbolic associations of driving a Chevy Cruze down the highway. I did, however encounter a few exceptions: several times early on I was given a Fiat 500 which was, at that time, still relatively new on the North American market. A number of other drivers gave me the thumbs up on the road, or asked me about the car when the car was parked. I began to feel somewhat self-conscious about driving what I increasingly perceived to be something of a hipster mobile.

More recently, I was upgraded to a Dodge Durango SUV, which proved to be quite a nice ride once I got over feeling like a road-hogging, gas-guzzling asshole. Most significant, however, was the afternoon my regular agent—who knows me quite well after several years and dozens of rentals—winked and dangled a BMW key fob over my outstretched hand. I drove the car as much as I could in those 24 hours, adding a hundred extra miles to my planned trip just so I could revel in the pleasure of driving the car and the pleasure of being seen driving it.

As is the case with many drivers, I do not have the financial wherewithal to buy a car because I think it's cool and reflects the spirit of the age, or because it fits my vision of a greener planet. That's not to say I wouldn't if I could, nor to disparage those who can and do. Last, that I don't own a car carries with it a certain set of symbolic associations, albeit ones that are largely invisible to other drivers on the road, and really only become visible, interpretable by other drivers in conversation, away from the road.

While not providing an exhaustive account of literature related to car-branding signification, this section should give the reader a sense of the importance of the symbolic economy of car makes and models. In conclusion, every car bears the brand of its manufacturer and the symbolic economy in which these brands circulate is subject to multiple instantiations and interpretations both by a car's owner and external observer-drivers. At the same time, certain symbolic associations are more dominant than others; in some sense, for instance, this accounts for the intelligibility of the irony in this well-known Don Henley lyric:

54

Recounting the origins of the lyric, Henley is quoted as saying: "I was driving down the San Diego freeway and just got passed by a $21,000 Cadillac Seville, the status symbol of the Right-wing upper-middle class…and there was this Grateful Dead 'Deadhead' bumper sticker on it!"[23] The contrast seems clear enough. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate in what follows, there is plenty of room for symbolic play when it comes to cars and the stickers affixed to them.

Figure 8: Deadhead Sticker on a Mercedes-Benz[24] / Burlington, Vermont (Walter Goettlich 2011)

Hot-rods, Low Rides & Import Mods

Briefly defined, car customization entails sub-cultural communities organized around the mechanical and aesthetic re-building of stock production automobiles. In addition, as Gene Balsley (1950) identified when writing about American hot-rod culture in the immediate post-war era, modification practices involve both practical, mechanical achievement, as well as significant symbolic implications:

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23 http://www.americansongwriter.com/2012/06/the-boys-of-summer-don-henley/; citing an interview with Henley in the New Music Express (February 23, 1985)
24 The owner of this car told me she was "thinking about putting an I ♥ EDDIE [Vedder, of the band Pearl Jam] sticker on too"

When the hot rodder rebuilds a Detroit car to his own design, he is aiming to create a car which is a magical and vibrant thing. Yet, back of his dream design we can see the workings of the practical engineering standards that dominate hot-rod culture. (355)

In many modification sub-cultures, the souping-up of classic American muscle cars—including its particular inflection in the Chicano low-rider sub-culture (Gradante 1982; Bright 1998)—the restoration of British MG sports cars (Leigh et al. 2006), the Asian import/tuner scene (Kwon 2004) and the salvage and reconstruction of other rare or obscure cars such as the 1940s Czechoslovakian-built Tatra (Delyser and Greenstein 2014), the make and model of the car as it rolled off the production line is significant. There is a tremendous body of knowledge circulated through these subcultures related to the original specs on these cars, which inform comparisons of the original to the current state of a modified car. In some cases this comparison is made to scrutinize the authenticity or fidelity of the restoration, while in others, knowledge of the original serves as a differential basis to appraise the modified state. These cars are often driven to meet-ups, drag- and drift races and are displayed at car shows, where owners prize encyclopaedic knowledgeability, not only about their own car, but also of those considered within the limits of their particular sub-cultural ken.

But if a car's nameplate is a slate onto which its initial symbolic potentials are marked, the practitioners of certain customizing sub-cultures attempt to strip away these associations from their cars as a symbolic means of starting their modified creation *tabula rasa*. Brownlie et al. (2006) and Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007), for example, describe the practice by modifiers of "debadging" their cars—removing make insignia, model name and other textual information about the production vehicle—in order to prepare it for the process of reconstructing it as a unique representation of themselves. Critically, the authors argue, cars that are deemed "feminine" or "chick-cars" are debadged not only to strip away the explicit signs of it being a mass-manufactured object, but also to re-gender the car in line with the desired/practiced masculine identity of the modder.

There are certain characteristics that appear more or less generalized across modification sub-cultures, and which set these sub-cultures apart from the mainstream cultures of automobility in which they are situated. First, participation in each of these sub-cultures requires a (developed) set of mechanical competencies and technical knowledge that far exceeds those of the wider

56

driving public. Second, the time and financial resources required for a serious, cash-funded modification project preclude the participation of the financially precarious.

Figure 9: it's jdm yo! An example of Asian import scene-type modification, with JDM window decal. [25]

Examining the Chicano low-rider cultures practiced in the southwest US, Bright (1998) finds an exception, noting that many individuals may contribute something to the building of one of these cars, and the cars themselves may be handed down from one generation to another. By contrast, Kwon (2004) finds that many project cars in the northern California Asian import scene are effectively funded by the tuners' parents. Or, where parents do not directly fund their car—as Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007) also find—many working tuners live rent-free with their parents, thus allowing most of their income to go into their cars.

More generally, the pay-as-you-go model for parts and materials for modifications is structurally and philosophically different from the (mini-)mortgage-like auto loan, which allows most contemporary Americans to fund the materialization of their own automotive desires. Third, the various specificities of each sub-cultural practice serve to articulate a differential group identity to that of the mainstream. For example, as Kwon (2004) notes:

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25 Wikimedia Commons, 2011: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:It%27s_JDM-YO_Car_Show_2011.jpg

The import scene seems to offer Asian American youth a cultural space in which to create new and creative identities. In the practice of "autoexoticization,"[26] these Asian American youth produce alternative Asian American identities that contest dominant representations of themselves as the "model minority." (5)

Gradante (1982) identifies a similar theme amongst low riders in the American west:

Salazar is quick to point out that his car is not only literally clean but also immaculate in that it is a work of art, a moving symbol of his personal dignity and pride in himself, his family, his club and his heritage as a Texas-Mexican. Low riders are in no way ashamed of their generally lower- to lower-middle class backgrounds and are rightfully proud of their hard work ethic. (30)

While Hewer et al. (2008) remark on the ways in which certain British cruisers attempt to define their experience as something apart from that of the undifferentiated mainstream:

Consumption practices then become the flip-side of logics of appropriation and re-appropriation which cruisers (or similar tribes) employ to capitalize on their difference and pursue strategies of authenticity, largely through the creative re-working of available resources to forge not only their own identity but also to rework and reconstitute the social world as something other to its mundane and everyday form. (436)

Superficial Customization

As I've suggested above, there is some overlap between the categories of inscription and customization as I have defined them. As well, my use of "superficial" to describe the final category may appear something of a misnomer for at least two reasons. First, while many modding sub-cultures prize souped-up mechanical performance, and especially the technical skills that afford such improvements, there is also a strong dimension of the aesthetic about such modifications (Bright 1998; Kwon 2004). Jack DeWitt (2009) expresses this combination wonderfully when writing about mid-century American hot-rodders, remarking:

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26 Drawing on the work of Marta Savigliano (1995), Kwon defines autoextocism as "when colonized people reproduce their own exoticism by looking through dominant Western paradigms." Kwon continues: "By appropriating and exoticizing 'Asian' symbols such as 'Asian; (Japanese) cars, written Chinese characters, and 'Asian-sounding names for import car crews—all of which I refer to as an assertion of Asianness—youth in the import scene create a unique Asian American cultural space." (2004: 3).

They were generally just car nuts, or grease monkeys, or, in some cases, mechanical magicians. They loved machines and were skilled at working on them, at figuring out how to get them to go faster and look better […] What they did was create a culture centred on home-built, handmade works of automotive art that ran fast, looked beautiful and sounded like a Futurist symphony. (16)

In other words, even within the category of mechanical customization there is an important emphasis on the external appearance of the car. Second, as I discuss below, the communicative dimensions of bumper sticker inscriptions go well beyond "superficiality" in the vernacular; just because something is morphologically superficial does not mean it's connotatively or implicationally vacuous. I have, therefore, a very specific and limited definition in mind when I use the term *superficial*: these are modifications made to the external surfaces of a car, without any corresponding changes to the car's driving characteristics or function, or the symbolic meanings that would derive from such changes.

Figure 10: Jesus Loves Country / I-84 Connecticut (© Judy Davidson 1987)

I divide superficial customization along the lines of the custom and mass-produced, where the former generally entail craft practices, especially painting, sometimes done by a professional artisan, the results of which more or less envelop the vehicle. By contrast, the latter tends more toward consumers buying and affixing inexpensive commodities to their cars that require little technical proficiency beyond peeling the paper backing off a sticker, and are generally limited to small and discrete spaces on the back of a vehicle. Based on the evidence of my fieldwork, contemporary American inscription practices tend away from the custom and more toward the mass-produced. There are exceptions, of course. But even those tend to blur the boundary between scope rather than materials, i.e. they may cover most or all of the car's external surfaces, but are rendered through the accumulation of mass-produced media (see Figure 10 above).

Custom Art

Outside of the spray art work done on certain modded cars, such as in certain Chicano low-rider sub-cultures (Bright 1998), examples of custom art cars on American roadways are quite rare, and where they do appear are something of a curiosity. In *The Art Car Manifesto*, James Harithas notes the relatively recent emergence of an American art car movement, which traces its lineage to other American modding sub-cultures such as hot-rodding, but also the hand painted hippie vans emblematic of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s. Harithas defines an art car as:

> a motor-driven vehicle which a car artist alters in such a way as to suit his own aesthetic […] The content and meaning of these changes vary with each art car and may express either political, social, personal or purely decorative objectives […] The art car is revolutionary in the sense that it reclaims the vehicle for the individual and proclaims an independence and diversity which is in sharp contrast to the increasingly conventional and impersonal automobiles and trucks which are currently being produced[27]

In this sense, the ethos of the American art car sub-culture is quite similar to that of various mechanical modding sub-cultures: a desire by its members to set themselves apart from the perceived totalizing and homogenizing conditions, logics and effects of the contemporary regime

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27 This was originally included in Art Cars: Revolutionary Movement (Roberts et al 1997); I have retrieved the text from the Art Car Museum website, where the Manifesto is reprinted:
http://www.artcarmuseum.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=69

of American automobility specifically, but also those effects as wrought on American culture more generally. While art car events, such as the annual Houston, Texas Art Car Parade, and the recent documentary that chronicles it (Ahrens and Gunter 2012) may expose a wider audience to this sub-cultural practice, it is still quite a way outside of mainstream American automobility.

By contrast, in other countries and cultures, particularly those outside of the global west/north, custom vehicular art practices are more common. Jack Pritchett (1979), for example, examined custom vehicular art practices in northern Nigeria, particularly on lorries and private taxis, where he found appropriated film images of violence and power, paintings of mosques and macabre mottos[28] all reflected a "particularly Nigerian view of life and death" (27) vis-a-vis the mortal dangers of driving on local roads.

Many of the matatu minibuses careering over the roads of Nairobi, Kenya bear similarly fatalistic slogans and feature "paint jobs ranging from sombre black to a Rubik's cube assortment of colours, or the sort of airbrushed creations normally reserved for prison tattoos or subway graffiti, they look like anything but assembly line products" (Mutongi 2006, 550). Professional artists (called *designers*), many of whom have received formal fine arts training, execute matatu *designs*. Mungai and Samper (2006) further note design influences and themes run the gamut of contemporary global mass-culture:

> […]the Marlboro cowboy and cigarettes, whales, American football and basketball team logos, British soccer team logos, portraits of world celebrities, and professional wrestling figures; however, since about 2002, the visual symbols or names of matatu have predominantly come from African American hip-hop culture, including fashion labels, hip-hop groups and stars, and song titles. The pithy name of one matatu—clearly visible on its side, front, and back—sums up the world of the matatu: No Mercy, No Remorse. (53-54)

These designs are meant to represent the swaggering individuality and dangerous guile of the matatu driver-proprietors, a particular articulation of the *matatuist* ethos that carries over into Nairobian culture more generally: "the philosophy of the matatu, or matatuism, [is] a credo that encourages people to flout the laws, to do whatever it takes to get ahead in life" (76).

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28 Pritchett cites scenes reproduced from popular kung fu and spaghetti western and James Bond movies of the era. The most darkly comic (and my personal favourite) of the mottos he cites is 'dafa duka,' which Pritchett translates as "'cook everything,' a reference to fiery crashes" (30).

Examining jeepney[29] driver sub-culture in the Philippines, Meñez (1988, 38) also explores the relationships "between the characteristic life-style of a group of drivers and their expressive behaviour." Here, the author finds a range of hand-made objects and paintings ranging from

> Chrome miniature wings, missiles and winged horses on the hood, paintings of birds and airplanes on the sides, and long colorful plastic streamers that fly in the wind as the jeep zooms in and out of traffic […] At the same time, traditional themes are still prominent. Paintings of rural scenes often commissioned by the owners,[30] and curtains crocheted by the women, are reminiscent of village homes." (40)

Common jeepney art themes also include love, sex and extramarital affairs, financial success, drugs, religion and emigrant experiences, while overtly political messages are rare (41). Meñez finds that through the linguistic play of their ever-evolving inscriptions, which often includes double- and triple-entendres employing both Tagalog and English, jeepney drivers are important "creators and users of urban slang" (42). As with that of the matatu in Nairobi, jeepney drivers favour a particular masculine ethos of flamboyance and one-upsmanship reflected in their vehicular art, economic aspirations (which are, in many cases, day-to-day survival) and driving style. Furthermore, there is a certain feminization of jeepneys by their drivers that reflects the state of gender relations in the culture at large. For example, Meñez quotes drivers as saying "[a] jeepney is just like a woman who loves beautiful clothes. If we do well we dress her up," and "[a] jeepney without a driver is like a woman without a lover" (44), and aggressively sexist inscription language is not uncommon. In all, Meñez attempts to go beyond the treatment of jeepney art as a simple "visual encapsulation of Filipino culture," in order to examine the importance of the characteristics of the occupational sub-culture of jeepney drivers— largely lower class urban men— on the form and content of jeepney art (39).

Examining the inscription practices of privately operated public buses in contemporary Calcutta, Swati Chattopadhyay (2009) finds vehicular art acts as a form of everyday resistance that "constitutes one way by which the marginalized populations of the city have created their

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29 Meñez cites The Webster Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (1971) entry for jeepney as "a Philippine jitney bus converted from a jeep," and traces the origins of the jeepney to conversions of U.S. Army surplus vehicles following the Second World War (39-40).
30 Who are often not the drivers; Chattopadhyay (2009) also finds this is a common arrangement in her study of privately owned public buses in Calcutta (see below), leading her to pose the question "exactly whose voice—the owner's, builder's, artist's or bus operator's— the bus art represents is not easily resolved" (109-110)

own space in the city - physically, economically, culturally" (135). Chattopadhyay argues that the spatial reorganization of the city over the course of the 20th century—a locally inflected project of Hausmannian rabble-clearing, largely realized through the displacement of street-based life and informal economic practices—has resulted in the marginalization of many working middle- and lower-class Calcuttans.[31]

This spatial reorganization has extended to a uniform colour scheme for public buses as part of a nation-wide initiative "to make the public sphere and public spaces more 'legible' by discouraging visual heterogeneity" (117). Nonetheless, custom art practices persist, albeit in a more subdued form than seen elsewhere on the subcontinent. Much of the custom art of these buses is rendered on the inside, around the driver's cabin, although the external inscriptions, particularly on the back body surfaces, rear bumper and mud flaps are also prominent:

> What makes them interesting is the relation between words and image […]. The design motifs consist of floral patterns, natural landscapes, images of gods and goddesses, figures that ward off the evil eye, and topical images such as world cup soccer, or the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The most common image is a mask-like 'monster' face: an apotropaic image, it is meant to ward off the evil eye. (125)

As these buses move through the re-organized public space of contemporary Calcutta streets, they push back a bit; invite the marginalized to identify with their irregularity through the unique, pastiche renderings of religious and popular culture themes, as well as deictic references such as STOP! and DANGER! Chattopadhyay concludes:

> vehicular art as a mode of communication expresses social relations, ideals, and differences in a subtle, largely non-confrontational, and even pleasurable manner. Here we have a form of everyday resistance that enables us to think of the relation between elites and subalterns in complicated spatial terms (135)

To conclude this section, the practice of custom vehicular art is a sub-cultural phenomenon found in many different cultures of automobility, worldwide. I have discussed a few local practices here, but readers may be familiar with others. As visually rich and culturally significant

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31 The owners and operators of public buses number amongst this marginalized group, as do the artists who inscribe the buses themselves.

as these practices are, they are nonetheless quite different in a couple of important ways from the mass-produced forms of superficial customization that I discuss below.

First, each of the practices I've discussed above are sub-cultural practices: much like mechanical modding sub-cultures, they belong to groups that are (in some cases self) defined in various ways as a subset of, or in some way marginal to the mainstream and dominant cultural norms. The American art car movement, for example, is organized around a self-reflexive philosophical critique of mass-consumption, while the owners, drivers and artists of Calcutta's public buses represent a subaltern class whose resistance to the social- and spatial re-engineering initiatives of the Indian power elite are played out on the backs of their vehicles. In a twist on this relationship, both the ethos of *matatuism* in Nairobi and one-upsmanship amongst jeepney drivers in the Philippines have spread to some degree into the wider cultural consciousness of their respective societies.

Second, while many of these customization practices figure into the everyday transportation experiences of those living the societies in which they are found, they are for the most part found on shared and commercial vehicles: lorries, busses and taxis. The drivers of these vehicles, to say nothing of their passengers, are not necessarily the vehicle owners. The popularity of matatus, jeepneys and public buses as a mode of transportation—despite, in many cases, the mortal risks they pose their passengers—is in large part due to the relatively low private vehicle ownership rates in these countries. This is a much different arrangement from that in the contemporary US, where more than 90% of households own at least one passenger vehicle, and nearly 25% own three or more (Memmott 2007). For at least a decade there have been, on average, more vehicles per American household than licensed drivers (Volti 2004). While the most common forms of superficial customization of American cars are certainly less aesthetically flamboyant than those found elsewhere, they are, nonetheless, culturally significant practices, for a number of reasons that I illustrate below.

Mass Produced / Commodity Inscriptions

This thesis is most concerned with forms of superficial customization accomplished through the application of simple, inexpensive and reversible—although not necessarily temporary—commodity items. By mass-produced/commodity I mean to distinguish those items that are more or less discrete (as opposed to forms of art customization that envelope a car), made

by a manufacturer and (usually) available for purchase. In most cases they are not hand-made or artisanal creations such as those I've described above. The majority of the inscriptions I have observed on American cars are of the mass-produced variety, which is, in part, an indication of their ubiquity. They are for sale at gas stations, tourist attractions, arts and crafts stores, sports shops, supermarkets, restaurants and ice cream stands. They are given away at events, sold as fundraisers and packaged along with a wide range of commercial goods from laptops to athletic tape. All of which is to say nothing of what can be found via the Internet.

More generally, the prevalence of this kind of car inscription is also a reflection of contemporary patterns of American cultural consumption, in which buying mass-manufactured products, rather than creating or commissioning artisan items is the norm. Much in the same way mid-century American cars were made to be more or less "unique" through the combinatorial possibilities of different options afforded by flexible mass production techniques (Flink 1988; Gartman 2004), the sheer variety of different mass-produced items, in combination with different makes and models of car, yields a virtually infinite set of possible inscription sets. Each one of these sets satisfies at least a logical definition of "individuality" or "uniqueness."

Insofar as they are concerns of the drivers who inscribe their cars with these kinds of items, the effects of individuality and uniqueness are achieved, for the most part, through combinations of self-adhesive decals or magnets, vanity and speciality license plates, license plate frames, truck hitch plugs and various other tchotchkes. In practice, these items may be placed, screwed, dangled, affixed or glued to any of the inside or outside surfaces of a car. My research, however, is focused on those displayed on the outside surfaces of a car, and that are easily visible to other driver-cars and passers-by. I review the body of scholarly literature related to what I've characterized as superficial, mass-produced customization practices in what follows.

Mass-Manufactured Inscription as Marker of Individual / Group Identity

While I trace American popular media attention to forms of superficial, commodity-based car inscription to the early 20th century (see Chapter 4), scholarly interest in the subject has been more recent. The first wave of studies on bumper stickers was published the early 1990s. These include Case (1992), who examined individual expressions of identity through the frequency of types of bumper sticker messages found on Californian cars. The author tested these types and frequencies against car makes, models, ages and values, finding older and less expensive vehicles

were more likely to bear car signs than newer, more expensive ones. Furthermore, Case categorizes messages into groups that include *self-identity*, *commercial*, *philosophical* and *ideological/political* expressions (in descending order of frequency).

Stern and Solomon (1992, 169) examine the ways in which Americans use their cars as "expressions of individualism […] a canvas for personal statements," both through the make and model they drive, but also the ways in which they inscribe their cars with bumper stickers and other objects. Similar to Case (1992), Stern and Solomon (1992, 171) attempt to construct a taxonomy of inscription messages around a two-dimensional "theme-referent matrix." Themes include *doing*, *being*, *feeling*, *metonymic* and *other*, while referents include *self*, *collective /others* and *abstract*. Some examples of theme-referent combinations include *Doing-Self*: I OWE, I OWE, SO OFF TO WORK I GO; *Doing-Abstract*: SHIT HAPPENS; *Being-Self*: I SUPPORT GREANPEACE; *Feeling-Abstract*: VERMONT IS FOR LOVERS; and *Metonymic-Abstract*: NIAGARA FALLS. The authors also examine the focus/valence of message content, which is similar to the categorizations developed by Case (1992).

In a study that encompassed forty Washington, DC area neighbourhoods, Newhagen and Ancell (1995) test for potential relationships between the emotion tone of the bumper sticker language and social status, finding significant relationships between intensity and positive/negative valence, and race[32] and class status proxies. Generally, the authors argue, "bumper stickers provide a paradox as a medium for public expression;" they are more or less personal and permanent, and yet largely anonymous, allowing the "expression of highly personal opinions about strongly held views to a large audience without any real commitment to interact with them" (313). However, Newhagen & Ancell note a number of specific relations between different class and racialized groups: income and number of stickers co-vary negatively, regardless of race, which is a similar finding to Case (1992); emotional valence varies positively with income in both black and white neighbourhoods (Newhagen and Ancell 1995, 320); emotional intensity, however varies negatively according to income in black neighbourhoods, but positively in white ones (319).

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32 The reader should not understand my use of the word 'race' here as a presumption of my position with regard to the concept of race. Newhagen and Ancell use the terms "race", "blacks", "whites" and "African Americans," but they do not address the concept of race or practices of racialization as such within the scope of their paper. Following the terminology used by these researchers, I have used the terms 'white' and 'black' in my discussion of their study.

Endersby and Towle (1996: 307) attempt to answer three interrelated questions regarding American bumper sticker use in the run-up to the 1992 U.S. Presidential election: How frequent is bumper sticker expression? How much is politically oriented? And what expressive patterns emerge? The authors examined more than 5,300 cars in parking lots in Missouri and Maryland,[33] finding more than 20% of all vehicles bore at least one bumper sticker, the most common type of which was educational (7.9%; especially local colleges and universities), followed by associational ones (6.4%; the most common examples included American Automobile Association and fraternities and sororities).

Most important amongst Endersby and Towle's findings is the "display of bumper stickers often is an expression, not of individualism, but of group affiliation" (308). As I discuss below, and this is a point that holds more generally for much of the literature reviewed in this section, the types and categories developed by these researchers sometimes overlap, or are, in the least, not mutually exclusive. The name of a university may be metonymic (Stern and Solomon 1992) as well as associational (Endersby and Towle 1996), according to the work done by a reader.[34]

Using a set of multi-level regressions of data collected from twelve states,[35] Lilley et al. (2010) have examined relationships between political affiliation and the display of magnetic ribbons on cars, finding—perhaps unsurprisingly—a positive correlation between the presence of war related ribbon (WRR) inscriptions and those espousing conservative political philosophy and American patriotism, and support for the George W. Bush administration. Unlike Case (1992), who found an inverse relationship between car value and number of inscriptions, these authors found no support for the hypothesis that county-level mean income measures would be a significant (negative) predictor of WRR inscriptions.

This could be for a number of reasons two of which include the following. First, while both studies use proxy indicators to measure socio-economic status, the operationalization of this

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33 Endersby & Towle conducted three distinct sets of observations: two in Columbia, Mo., and one in Frederick, Maryland. The larger of the two Columbia observations took place on the weekend before the 1992 general election and encompassed approximately 4,300 cars. The other Columbia observation took place in August 1992 and the Frederick observation in October 1992. Both included approximately 500 cars. The authors note there were some differences between each sample in terms of the overall ranking of the most frequently occurring types, however education and associational stickers were the two of the three most common types across all three samples. The authors base much of their analysis on the Missouri general election sample.
34 It is important to keep in mind that the researchers who have developed these classifications are themselves readers, engaged in readerly acts of interpretation, a point I return to in Chapter 6.
35 The authors note that their dataset encompassed more than 8,100 vehicles, from 49 cites in these states; they do not, however indicate which states are included in this data. In any case, they rightly point out that the geographical scope of their study exceeds that of other research into American car inscription display. (Lilley et al. 2010: 315)

variable is accomplished using different bases for the proxy, one of which is a micro-level measure and the other a macro-level one. Second, these studies were conducted more than a decade apart and social norms may have changed in the intervening period.

While I have not attempted to operationalize or control for a measure of socio-economic status in the present research design, I have observed inscriptions on a range of car makes, models, ages and conditions that effectively runs the gamut, with the exception of ultra-high-end "super-cars," such as Ferraris, Maseratis, Bentleys and the like. More generally, however, Lilley et al. (2010) theorize that car inscriptions act as a "new form of symbolic participation informed by shifts in the larger socio-cultural context," which include the professionalization of fundraising and awareness building in American culture, marking the "trend of political participation via consumption" (319).

Kriznar (1993), D'Alisera (2001) and Chiluwa (2008) each examine the ways in which different forms of car inscription afford associations with, and performative creation of various national and religious identities. Kriznar (1998) writes about the ways in which Slovenians articulated and negotiated their views on statehood in the wake of the break-up of the former Yugoslavia through the use of car inscriptions. The author notes the variety of modifications to Yugoslav license plates and oval YU country identifier stickers, as well as the creation of new stickers employing the historical national symbols including as the linden leaf, the black panther and Mt. Triglav, some of which were eventually incorporated into the 'official' state symbols like the national flag. New symbols were also created on stickers, such as the abbreviation SLO that eventually replaced YU as the official European highway, and United Nations country designation for Slovenia.

Examining contemporary bumper sticker texts in Nigeria, Chiluwa (2008, 384) finds such texts are not only reflective of individual identities, but that they activate and are activated by wider cultural discourses that "reveal institutional practices and system[s] of beliefs as well as help in moulding our perception[s] about Nigerian religious practices." Like Heeren (1980), Chiluwa traces the bumper sticker's historical antecedents to forms of graffiti, noting however, that while the graffiti writer inscribes a surface in their own hand, "[i]ndividuals simply buy the types [of stickers] that appeal to them or that best express their thoughts and situations" (372). These stickers are most frequently commissioned by organizations such as religious groups, and designed and produced by specialists. It is through this model of production and procurement that

the established interests of the groups that commission such stickers condition the discursive possibilities and limits of the practice itself, as well as the intelligibility of the messages on those stickers.

D'Alisera (2001) describes how certain immigrant Muslim Sierra Leonean workers in the Washington D.C. area inscribe their work places— largely taxis and food stands— with various religious commodities including bumper stickers,[36] as a means of "transforming a physical space into a space of cultural identity" (91). Using these commodities, D'Alisera finds individuals negotiate and perform what it means to be "Muslim," "Sierra Leonean," and "immigrant" within the American context, and the complex interrelations therein:

> For transmigrant Sierra Leonean Muslims, these commodities serve to reorder fragmented experience. Symbolically, they connect disjunct social space, constructing and announcing that 'I am a Muslim.' […] Many Sierra Leoneans also assert that the bumper stickers or decals they display […] are intended for the outside gaze— of Americans, Christians, non-Sierra Leonean Muslims in general— and that they contribute a special set of categories by which presence is inscribed. Utilized in such a context, the inscriptions cry out in multivocal tones: I am a Muslim. I am a Sierra Leonean Muslim. I am here, like it or not! I am here, whether I like it or not! (98)

The "disjunct social space" of which D'Alisera refers is that of partial self-location: Of being an immigrant in a 'foreign' country/culture; a Sierra Leonean outside and far away from their homeland; a West-African-American Muslim in the wider imaginings of global Islam (93). The complexity of these experiences undoubtedly reflects those of other groups of trans-global migrants, and in some sense, more recent understandings of identity as performative and situated rather than essential (Butler 1994).

Following D'Alisera's argument, what I think this points out is one of the ways in which individuals may work to symbolically and performatively "place" themselves across disparate geographical and imaginative spaces through the use of various forms of inscription, which are themselves oriented to the gaze of another. In fact, as I will argue below, it is through the taking up of this invitation to be seen, acknowledged and/or imagined that the reader of such

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36 Amongst other sticker texts, D'Alisera cites examples such as Qur'anic verses in Arabic and English, I ♥ ISLAM, I ♥ ALLAH and ISLAM THE RELIGION OF PEACE AND SECURITY. This last text, however, was observed on a car one of D'Alisera's informants imagined must belong to "very pious people. Probably Pakistanis" (2001, 96).

inscriptions facilitates the cultural work initiated by the act of inscription. There is, certainly, a politics of who and how a particular subject is allowed to be seen and imagined, and I would speculatively offer that this might well have changed for the people with whom D'Alisera worked following the events of September 11, 2001.[37]

Communicative & Semiotic Dimensions of Prefab Inscriptions

While the preceding section dealt primarily with research that focuses on mass-produced car inscriptions as a mode of individual and group identity expression, performance and negotiation, another group of studies examines bumper sticker inscriptions and the like primarily in terms of communicative acts and literary concerns. Battistella (1995), for example, discusses a federal lawsuit in which the owner of a pickup truck bearing the sticker HOW'S MY DRIVING? CALL 1-800-EAT-SHIT claimed then-recently enacted decency laws in Alabama had impinged upon his civil rights. Battistella acted as a consulting expert witness in linguistics on the case, and discusses the idiomatic and parodic referentiality that is often at work in bumper sticker texts, noting as well that their meaning is most frequently and necessarily "determined in context, the details of the particular usage in question, and the structural framework of the context as a humorous genre" (439). In terms of the semiotics of bumper stickers, Battistella claims, "like buttons, badges, and billboards, are semiautonomous communication systems with their own typical message types and forms" (438).

Similarly, Smith (1988) groups bumper stickers along with other "recursive systems" such badges, buttons and t-shirts. These systems are those, akin to poetry, for which equal attention is paid to form and content, and whose "analysis requires the reader-viewer to reread and review formal content in several explicit and implicit contexts in order to decode them" (141). Smith further traces the basis of such systems to the badge, whose role is to represent an authority at a distance, or in replacement, thus producing a "semantic confusion" through the "basic act of iconographic *mis*representation: the replacement of the signifier by the signified" (141). But in resistance to the authoritative "humourless[ness]" of badges, Smith claims, a wide variety of

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37 D'Alisera conducted her fieldwork before the events of September 11, 2001 (her article was published in November, 2001). It is impossible to say how these practices may have changed in the Islamiphobic climate that has characterized certain aspects of American culture in the years since that event. It is, nonetheless important to note the temporal relation of this research to those events.

other inscriptions and representations— ranging from buttons to bumper stickers— produce a parodic, "humorous, semantically and semiotically sophisticated […] revolt" (142-143).

Smith identifies certain stickers that rely upon contextualization through deictic reference, an analytic theme that is elaborated by Kurzon (1997):

> Deixis is perhaps the prototypical class of linguistic signs that function as indices. These signs are used to point to elements in the context of a situation in which a linguistic event occurs. Deixis is central to a theory of signs, especially in the context of a more pragmatic approach to language in which language is regarded primarily as a communication device. (347)

In other words, implicit situational deictic indices allow the reader/hearer of a text or speech act orient themselves to the *who*, *what*, *where* and *when* of the utterance message. BABY ON BOARD stickers are a well-known example of deixis, as is one of the stickers on the truck in Figure 11. However, it is clear that bumper stickers texts do not operate through deixis alone. Kurzon (1997) notes that a familiarity with encyclopaedic background knowledge is necessary to decipher many sticker texts, while Smith (1988) argues that as a bumper is akin to a mobile billboard,

> we should not be surprised that most of the texts generated to fill it have no particular relationship to the context of the bumper. Such is indeed the case. For every bumper-appropriate text today there must be hundreds, perhaps thousands of texts that have no particular reason to find themselves on an automobile bumper. (147-148)

I discuss the notion of background knowledge and some of the challenges associated with the decoding of contemporary bumper sticker messages below.

Paper (1985) notes the polyvalence and contemporary popularity of certain logograms, in particular ♡ (the heart symbol) on bumper stickers. Used as a substitute for the verb 'to love,' the heart symbol is a form of cultural background knowledge. I would speculate many, if not most, Americans are familiar with the I ♡ NY logo developed in the 1970s by Milton Glasser,[38] which has served as a template for many a derivative bumper sticker rebus, ranging from I ♡ ISLAM (D'Alisera 2001) to the one in Figure 12, which I observed on I-87 in New York, appropriately enough.

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38 http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/emblems/iluvny.htm

Figure 11: Watch Out for the Idiot / I-78, Pennsylvania (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

More than being derivative in the pejorative sense, however, these (and many other) sticker texts rely on the pun as an important literary device and feature of post-modern discourse, as Haussamen (1997) notes. Citing Myers (1994), Haussamen argues that beginning in the early 20th century, "humorous advertising has gradually become more common," as industry strategies evolved, not just to "sell a product or a brand, but a way of life," (1997, 56).

By the 1960s, advertising campaigns began to be designed to access the increasingly jaded psycho-cognitive state of the consumer through humour. As well, this period corresponds roughly with the rise of the bumper sticker as an American cultural phenomenon between the late 1950s and the 1970s (see below). Haussamen notes "[o]nce the 'pages' of the back end of an automobile and the front end of the human chest had been discovered, the genre of the pun, the

parody and the rebus license plate could be refined" (57). In effect, Haussamen argues, given the ambiguous and messy interplay of consumption and identity work that characterizes contemporary American culture, the "pun itself is the essence of two-sided language, of controlled ambiguity, of enthusiastic contradiction" (61).

Figure 12: I ♡ VAGINA / I-87, New York (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

The distinction I've drawn between the literature that examines superficial, mass-produced car inscription practices as expressions of individual or group identity, and that which examines these practices as communicative, linguistic or semiotic phenomena is more a dashed line than continuous and clear division. Both Kriznar's (1998) and Chiluwa's (2008) studies, discussed above, straddle the distinction, as do those by Kas (1991) on the linguistic structures of English-language bumper stickers in Turkey, and Salamon (2001) who analyses Israeli bumper sticker inscriptions as a form of modern folkloric practice.

Using Hymes' (1974) S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model,[39] Bloch (2000a, 49) attempts to "ascertain whether or not these slogan-like messages constitute a form of discourse with a recognizable structure." Working through each aspect of Hymes' model, Bloch finds "[t]his mode of

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39 S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. is a mnemonic for the various dimensions of Hymes model, which include: setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre.

interaction [bumper sticker inscription], so common as to be taken for granted within the society, conforms to rules, norms, and practices, qualifying it as a communication event, the written equivalent of Hymes' 'speech event'" (72). Furthermore, Bloch identifies an "extensive interaction between the messages on the stickers, so that this communication event takes place as an ongoing dialogue" (73).

In other words, the design, production and display of these bumper stickers is carried out with a particularly intertextual sensibility, making reference not only to the political conditions of the moment, but also to the messages that appear on other cars. Bloch (2000b) extends the analysis of Israeli sticker inscription, examining how such uses of "political bumper stickers creates a new arena where ordinary individuals can air their views before the wider public;" a mobilization of the public sphere (433). Citing Habermas (1989), Bloch (2000b) acknowledges this form of the public sphere, is not the "realization of reasoned, unconstrained discourse leading toward the shared understanding of the ideal communication situation" (450). Rather, what is at work is a highly dynamic and somewhat messy communications system that relies upon both consumption practices and the physical mobility of cars to underpin its "ongoing dialogue and the renegotiation of meanings that ensues as a result," (451) through which otherwise muted Israeli citizens find public voice.

The aim of this section has been to give an overview of some of the academic literature that has attempted to address various practices of car inscription, and those related to the cultural-symbolic values associated with cars more generally. Such practices range from the primarily mechanical/structural to the superficial, and include unique, mobile works of art and mechanical ingenuity, as well as the everyday, nondescript production models that may bear a sticker or two.

In the following chapters, I focus the discussion on the bumper sticker in two ways. First, I trace a brief history of bumper stickers as a feature of American automobility. Second, based on certain elements of this history, I advance a distinction between two groups, the "classic" and the "contemporary" mass-customized sticker. Unlike the typologies advanced by other researchers I have discussed above, the distinction I suggest is not based upon sticker content themes. Rather, it corresponds to the types and qualities of referentiality— and by consequence, intelligibility— that result from the interplay of dominant patterns of production and consumption in a given period, and increasingly, the techno-cultural practices of "readers" themselves.

4. Bumper Stickers (1): A Material-Cultural History

One of the more obvious signs and surely the most mobile scenic wonder of America is the automobile bumper strip, a 100 per cent American advertising gimmick which annually introduces millions of motorists to thousands of "natural wonders," "historic sights," "amazing attractions" and firemen's bazaars.
The New York Times, June 15, 1952

Next year, presumably, the sticker will be a national institution
The New York Times, September 26, 1926

Bumper stickers are often thought of, when they're thought of, as a sort of dumbed-down mode of articulation, and by extension cognition: if you've seen it on a bumper sticker it's probably a cliché… or worse. As a material object, bumper stickers are some of the cheapest, most throwaway stuff, and that's really saying something in a culture of hyper-consumption and disposability. Yet there are compelling questions to ask about bumper stickers: about their commonness, more pronounced in some places than others; the sheer variety of forms and ways in which they are displayed and the subjects they address and symbols they deploy; the ways in which bumper stickers refer to and act as instances of other ideas in order to talk about the self and the wider world, and in particular their mobility, their mobilization of these discursive resources.

In what follows, I offer a selective history of car inscription on American highways. There is not, to my knowledge, a comprehensive text on the subject. In lieu of one, I have done my own historical research based on searches of the US Patent Office databases accessed through the Google Patents search engine[40] and the archives of the *New York Times* (accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers). While I acknowledge the limitations of using only these two data sources, the scope of this thesis does not permit a more comprehensive approach. Nonetheless, I think it should at minimally demonstrate that practices of car inscription have been a cultural concern of Americans for almost as long they have travelled American roads.

The Evolution of Car Inscription in America

To begin, recall the early trans-continental motorist Effie Gladding (1915, 82), who observed, "[w]hole clusters of pennants are fastened about the car, and float gaily in the wind.

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40 www.google.com/patents

Some carry a pennant across the rear of the tonneau, which reads, 'Excuse my dust.'" American automobility was barely two decades old at the time of Gladding's observation, but keen inventors and entrepreneurs had already begun to imagine— and patent— car inscription accessories. The first of these were, as Gladding suggests, related to the display of pennants.

In 1912 Oscar S. Fitzsimons patented a *Flag-Holder Attachment for Automobile-Radiators &c.* (US Patent Office #1022360), as did Frank Loungley for a *Pennant-Holder for Automobiles* (US Patent Office #1138964). In 1926 David Fliegelman and Horace M. Bridgewater invented a *Holder for Flags or the Like*, (US Patent Office #1571581) and in 1937 Kenneth Hayes patented a windsock-like variation on the theme (US Patent Office #2090121).

Figure 13: Detail from Fitzsimons (US Patent Office #1022360 1912)
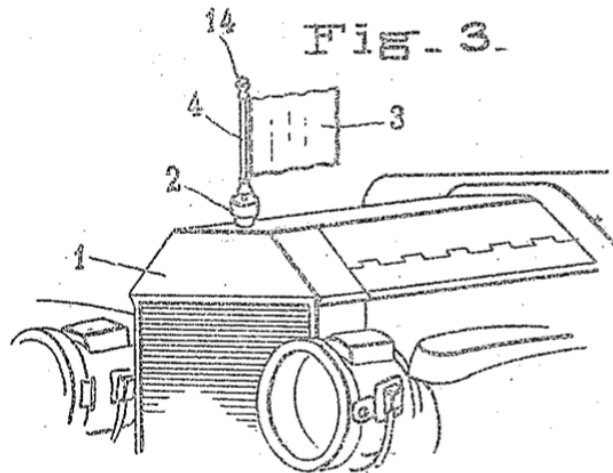
By the 1920s, at the latest, decalcomania and self-adhesive stickers were common enough on American car windows that the *New York Times* published an article whose title blared "Motorists Face Sticker Menace" (September 26, 1926). The article bemoans the emerging trend of automobiles "besplattered" with tourist and marketing stickers; cars "so heavily plastered on all four sides its occupants could look out with only one eye at a time."[41] Its author concludes:

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41 The reported inventory of stickers on this car included:
Black Hills, National Forest
Days of '76, Deadwood
Pine Crest Tourist Camp
AYP (Atlantic Yellowstone Pacific Highway
Homestake Golden Jubilee at Lead, S.D.
Wind Cave, National Park
Black Hills Visitor
Crystal Cave
I Have Seen Homestake, World's Largest Gold Mine
Hot Springs in the Black Hills
Custer, S.D., Scenic Hub of the Black Hills
Spearfish Camp
I Put My Campfire Out

Next year, presumably, the sticker will be a national institution, to be listed not only as a prime example of American lunacy but as a foremost cause of automobile accidents. Any suggestion for dealing with the nuisance may properly come from the National Park Service, which began it.

As to the issue of safety, within a few years, window sticker use was limited by law in a number of states, including New York,[42] although special government-sanctioned dispensations could be obtained (August 10, 1933). Two decades later, exceptions were eliminated in New York as a ban on all window decals was reported to have come into effect (December 24, 1952). This article cites municipal and state use tax stamps, auto club emblems and defence plant worker identification stickers amongst the common variations at the time.

By contrast, special emblems and bumper stickers have also been designed and affixed to cars as part of numerous state-sponsored driving safety initiatives through the 20th century. Amongst these were the Pennsylvania Governor's Highway Safety Council initiative in 1936 (November 29, 1936), the distribution of 85,000 COURTESY IS CONTAGIOUS bumper stickers by the

Knights of Pythias fraternal society (November 17, 1955) and the 1969 State of New York "Saved by the Belt" program that recognized crash survivors who were wearing seat belts at the time of their accident (August 25, 1969). Seat belts themselves had only become federally mandated equipment in new cars in 1968 (Volti 2004).
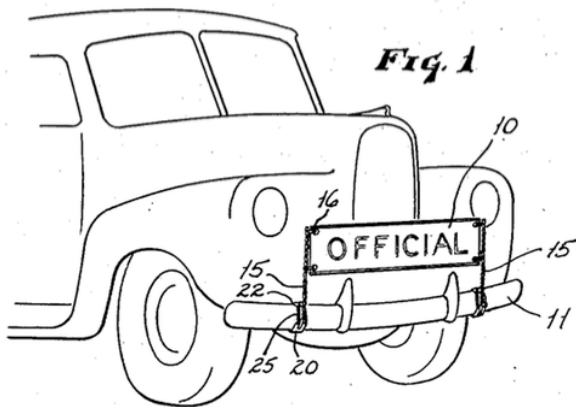
Figure 14: Detail from Carleton et al. (US Patent Office #2431108 1947)

42 Eighty years later, Part 375. (b). (i) of the New York State Vehicle and Traffic Laws states: "The use or placing of posters or stickers on windshields or rear windows of motor vehicles other than those authorized by the commissioner, is hereby prohibited" (http://www.safeny.ny.gov/equi-vt.htm).

Whether or not car inscriptions qualify as lunacy, or if there's a positive correlation between inscribing a car and the likelihood of having an accident— Hemenway and Solnick (1993) find there is not,[43] at least as far as bumper stickers and fuzzy dice are concerned— bumper stickers and other forms of car inscription have certainly become something of a national institution. Between the window sticker craze of the first part of the interwar period and the development in the 1950s and 1960s of what one would recognize as a bumper sticker today, there was a period in which the dominant form of car inscriptions was the bumper strip. For a time, these waxed cardboard strips were tied to bumpers. In 1947, Carleton et al. patented a holder that would act as a "means for supporting a card for display purposes in a vertical position above a bumper" without relying upon twine or clip fasteners (US Patent Office #2431108). While the authors of this patent do not comment specifically on the types of messages one might have encountered at the time, one of the drawings that accompanies their application indicates it might be for 'official' rather than personal purposes (Figure 14).

During 1950s Americans were settling in what would become three decades of post-war prosperity, and experiencing a way of life increasingly inseparable from the affordances of automobility. Armand Schwab examined the revival of car inscription culture in a 1952 *New York Times* article entitled Bumpers Tell Tourist's Story (June 15, 1952). In it Schwab traces the origins of the bumper strip to billboards, linking the two as a related forms of highway advertising. This is at least in part because most of the strips at that time were related to the promotion of tourist destinations, at many of which strips would be affixed to cars without the owner's permission. At the time, for example, the Royal Gorge in Colorado employed a staff of five whose job it was to tie these strips to bumpers while the owners walked across the "world's highest bridge."

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43 The study is based on a 1989 Los Angeles Times sponsored phone survey of 1,800 drivers in southern California, which found "[m]otorists with fuzzy dice or bumper stickers do not behave much differently on the road from the typical motorist and are involved in a similar number of accidents" (Hemenway & Solnick 1993: 168). In a 1974 New York Times article, a spokesperson for the National Safety Council is reported to have been unaware of any lawsuits related to bumper stickers being "disconcerting to drivers" (April 21, 1974). As an amusing counterpoint, see the discussion of DIAL 1-800-EAT-SHIT stickers above (Battistella 1995).

Typical bumper signs.

Campaign materials issued by the Republicans and Democrats this year include buttons, stickers, placards, car-bumper cards. Here are some examples.

CARRY ON IKE'S CRUSADE

DON'T TELL ME YOUR TROUBLES! I VOTED FOR STEVENSON!!

I'm Satisfied! I'LL VOTE REPUBLICAN

HAD ENOUGH ? VOTE DEMOCRATIC

THE ELEPHANT DIDN'T FORGET

DON'T BLAME ME—I VOTED DEMOCRATIC

Figure 15: Bumper Strips: From 'Bumpers Tell Tourist's Story,' New York Times (June 15, 1952)

Figure 16: Bumper Strips: From 'Political Ammo,' New York Times (October 17, 1954)

The use of stickers for commercial purposes, well established since at least the 1920s has carried on up until the present day, although the types of inscription ads has widened from the tourist-oriented ones, advertising attractions and gas stations in the first half of the 20th century. In the mid-1970s, the William B. Tanner Company of Memphis for example, was reported to offer an integrated promotional package to major market radio stations, including large format, stationary billboards *and* small, highly mobile bumper stickers (November 13, 1974). Today, a reader-driver may encounter the logo of about any product imaginable affixed to a car.

In the early 1950s, however, Schwab notes bumper strips were having what he called an "adjustment problem." Their proliferation meant new ways had to be devised to make one stand out from the pack— he cites the use of newly developed Day-Glo fluorescent inks on some strips— and perhaps more importantly getting them to last. At the time, the effective life of cardboard bumper strips was limited to a few weeks, after which time they would become untied and fall off, or simply disintegrate. Schwab identifies a new form of strip:

> the trend these days is to melt them into the car body […] So more and more strips are being printed on an adhesive-backed paper that can be neatly stuck to the bumper and this will presumably keep bumper strips in business long after bumpers themselves have completely disappeared

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Figure 17: Durability. Quebec (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Issues of durability would eventually be addressed by the development of more resistant plastic and paper laminated self-adhesive label stocks, such as that created by Frank Avery in the mid-1950s (US Patent Office #2783172). A decade later, a type of polymer film laminate was developed whose intra-layer tensile strength is lower than that of its adhesive to substrate bond (US Patent Office #3623944); it is, in effect, tamper-proof. As a consequence, many a car owner

who has since tried to remove a bumper sticker only to have it shear into little bits has Irwin J. Davis, the inventor of this type of laminate to thank. Numerous other inventors have tried to solve the problem the durability / unwanted permanence dilemma by designing various sticker holder accessories that attach mechanically so that a sticker would not be directly adhered to a car (US Patent Office #s 3350805[1967]; 237250 [1975]; 3908296 [1975]; 4453328 [1984]), and the first magnetic bumper sticker was patented in in 1990 (US Patent Office #D308544 S).
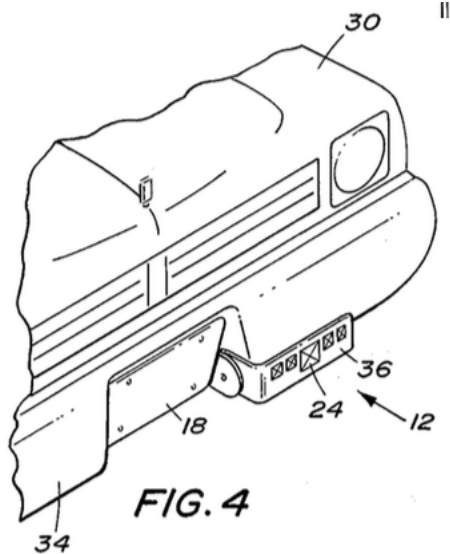
Figure 18: Detail from Method and Apparatus for Displaying Decals (US Patent Office #3908296)

Bumper Stickers in the News

Car inscription emerges as a discursive concern in the post-war era, most dramatically in the 1970s and later. Figure 19 demonstrates this trend, showing the number of articles mentioning bumper stickers and related car inscriptions appearing in the *New York Times*, by decade, since 1900. In the period beginning with the 1950s, relatively few of these articles feature bumper stickers as their object *per se*. Most, rather, use a sticker message as a lead-in device or parting thought, an indicator of the prevalent mood— political, cultural and emotional— the story means to capture.

Here bumper stickers began to be treated as an epiphenomena, corollary to wider socio-cultural struggles and experiences, including political elections, the Civil Rights Era, the Vietnam War, as well as what it meant, and who was allowed to be an *American*. This corresponds rather well to the beginnings of the counter culture in America: the Beats in the 1950s (Kerouac's *On the Road* was first published in 1957); the hippies and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s; the increasing visibility of LGBTQ culture in the 1970s and the consequences that have come from these events and passages.
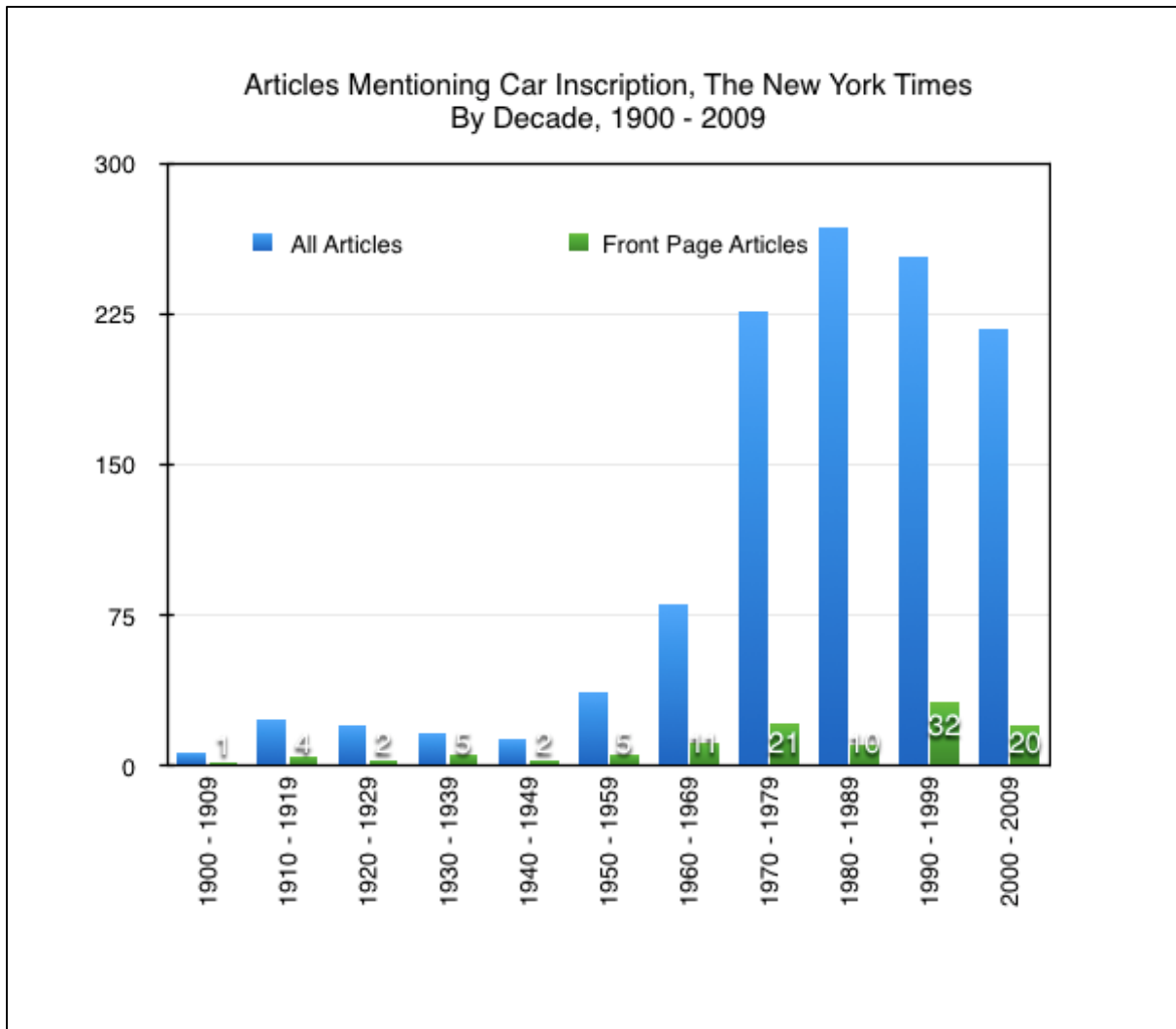
Figure 19: New York Times Articles Mentioning Car Inscription Terms, 1900 – 2009

Writing in the New York Times, Robert Dunphy notes an increase in bumper sticker message types and production dating to the late 1960s, both by large-scale printing companies and "underground" producers (April 21, 1974). Nearly two decades earlier, though, the importance of the automobile as a mobile campaign text corresponds with the rise of post-war, suburban car culture: A 1954 article (Figure 16) displays the variety of campaign stickers then available voters, including CARRY ON IKE'S CRUSADE and DON'T BLAME ME—I VOTED DEMOCRATIC (October 17, 1954). Along these lines, a 1956 article observes:

> The automobile, heretofore nonpartisan, is clearly going to be mobilized in the
> Republican cause this year. Stickers of every variety ("Stick With Ike") have been provided,

not to mention a wide range of rubber bumper guards that carry the legend: "Don't Bump a Good Man Out of the White House. (April 17, 1956)

For sheer campaigning chutzpah, an August 8, 1968 (dateline August 7) dispatch from the Republican Party National Convention notes Nixon aides had already begun distributing RE-ELECT NIXON '72 stickers… a day before Nixon had received the G.O.P. Nomination for the 1968 election. Nixon would go on to be re-elected in 1972, but the consequences of the Watergate scandal stemming from that election would ultimately result in his resignation in 1974.[44]

As Bloch (2000c) discusses, politically/culturally (and by consequence, *emotionally*) intense passages in a nation's history may result in a flourishing of bumper stickers. The Watergate scandal and Nixon's subsequent resignation proved thus, with stickers ranging from IMPEACH NIXON (March 8, 1974), HONK IF YOU THINK HE'S GUILTY, JAIL TO THE CHIEF and NIXON FOR EX-PRESIDENT (April 21, 1974) to PROTECT OUR PRESIDENT FROM LIBERALS AND TRAITORS (April 21, 1974), NOBODY DROWNED AT WATERGATE[45] (September 25, 1974) and IMPEACH CARTER[46] (February 15, 1977).

Elsewhere, stickers were cited as reflecting the mood in Little Rock, Arkansas, following the Little Rock Crisis of 1957,[47] which saw sticker texts ranging from OCCUPIED LITTLE ROCK and WE LIKE FAUBUS to the more moderate BOOST THE CENTRAL HIGH TIGERS (December 15, 1959). In 1965, in an article discussing tensions in Mississippi over the recently passed Civil Rights Act,

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44 A directly linear and undisputedly unbroken chain of events that clearly demonstrates the existence of bumper sticker karma, which in this case most certainly ran over Nixon's dogma.

45 This is in reference to the roadway death of Mary Jo Kopechne in the so-called Chappaquiddick Tragedy of 1969. The former U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy (now dead), brother of John F. and Bobby Kennedy (both assassinated in the 1960s), drove a car in which Ms. Kopechne was a passenger off a bridge connecting Chappaquiddick to Martha's Vineyard, MA. Kennedy subsequently left the scene of the accident. The episode has subsequently become metonymic of Kennedy's putative irresponsibility and unfitness for the office of president; and Kennedy himself metonymic of a wider lack of moral fibre in the Democratic Party at large, at least as far as its politically right-leaning critics have been concerned.

46 Jimmy Carter was the first Democratic Party candidate elected President (1977-1981) after Nixon's resignation. Gerald Ford, Nixon's Republican Vice President at the time of his resignation, served as appointed President in the intervening years (1974-1977).

47 Briefly, in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education, struck down the 'separate but equal' basis of Jim Crow-era racial segregation the American south. The Little Rock Crisis followed when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to abide the ruling by enforcing access by black students (the Little Rock Nine) to the previously white-only Central High School. Several black students were prevented from entering the school by protesters and the Arkansas National Guard, which had been mustered by Faubus. In response, President Dwight Eisenhower took control of the Arkansas National Guard (normally under the purview of the Governor) and deployed soldiers of the U.S. Regular Army to escort and protect the students during their integration.

DON'T BLAME ME—I VOTED G.O.P. stickers were reported as reflecting anti-integrationist sympathies (March 3, 1965).

Around the same time in California, some cars bore IS BROWN PINK?[48] stickers in response to Governor Edmund Brown's plan to cut taxes for the state's lowest income bracket (August 26, 1962), a war-veteran bearing a RID RUTGERS OF REDS sticker protested outside a Marxist-professor's teach-in (April 20, 1966), and wall-of-sound producer Phil Spector's limo was reported to have a SEND BATMAN TO VIETNAM sticker on its rear bumper (July 10, 1966). A the height of the Vietnam era tensions, satirist Russell Baker made a number of references to bumper stickers in his column *Observer,* particularly on the theme of the ever popular AMERICA—LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT:

> Carruthers has a related problem. He saw a bumper sticker the other day that shouted, "America!" and then commanded him to "Love It or Leave It!" Carruthers says he is very fond of America but is too egocentric to love anything but himself, and therefore must leave it. Now Carruthers does not know where to go (October 1, 1968)

> What a strange city. Cars everywhere and not a single one in all London seems to have a Union Jack decal on the windshield or a bumper sticker making hortatory noises in traffic. No "Love Britain or Leave It." No "Free Oscar." No "Boycott France." (August 9, 1970)

> Harry realized that due to the incomplete state of his emotional relationship with America, there was nothing he could do in good conscience but leave it. Unless, of course, he wanted to be in contempt of bumper stickers (August 25, 1970)

As if to capture two of the most problematic issues in American culture and history in a couple of short phrases, a dispatch from Wheatland, Wyoming (ostensibly about an impending US Postal Service workers strike) reported stickers reading THERE ARE NO BLACKS IN WHEATLAND and THE WEST WASN'T WON WITH A REGISTERED GUN (March 22, 1970). Later that year, President Richard Nixon was reported to have received a bumper sticker from the Cheektowaga, N.Y.

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48 This article was published at the height of the Cold War and pink, in this case, is used as an epithet against perceived communist sympathizers. McCarthyism, a period of high-profile U.S. Congressional and Senate hearings on purported communist and 'un-American' activities during the 1950s had ended only a few years earlier, and the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam was imminent.

Rotary Club which read I'M PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN (April 25, 1970), while GOD, GUNS AND GRITS MADE AMERICA GREAT (November 2, 1986) expresses a certain— certainly not universal— version of what it means to be American and great.
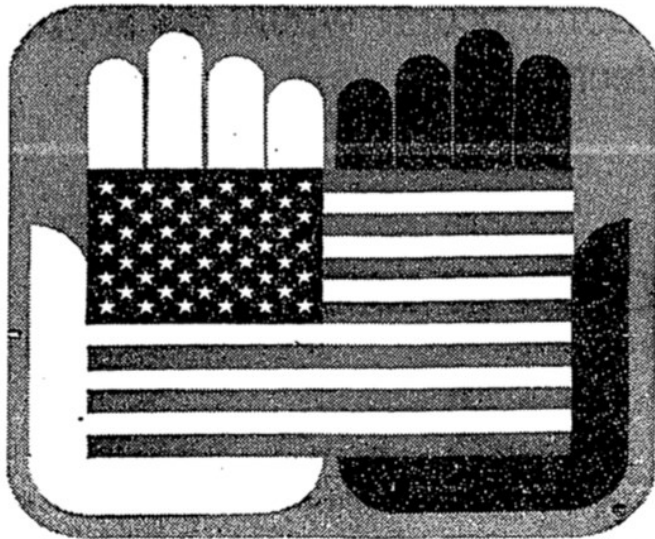
Interracial Americanism—A bumper sticker by Save Our Flag, Inc.

Other, more local, issues of control and identity have also been reported to play out across car bumpers. Stickers like VOTE TO STOP OLYMPIC TAXES and DON'T CALIFORNICATE COLORADO commented on the proposed 1976 Denver Olympic Games and fears of California-like development in the state (November 6, 1972 and March 11, 1973, respectively). KEEP CALVERT COUNTRY stickers appeared in Calvert County, MD in support of higher local gas taxes as a means to prevent suburbanization of the area (April 25, 1977).[49] In my home state discourses of "authentic" Vermonter identity played out as part of a political campaign against the legalization of civil unions,[50] which produced the ubiquitous TAKE BACK VERMONT bumper stickers and signs of the time (September 3, 2000).

Less overtly political stickers also feature. Fundraisers in Westchester County, NY were reported to have sold stickers promoting the Olympics in order to raise money for US athletes travelling to the Games later that year (August 11, 1956). An article on the upcoming NFL season noted "[w]herever you see a Wisconsin license plate you're likely to find a green and yellow bumper sticker saying: 'The Pack be Back'" (August 9, 1969); another in a review of new Chrysler models a decade later read IF YOU AIN'T A SPRINT-CAR FAN, YOU AIN'T NUTHIN' (September 16, 1979).

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49 Ironically, the one of the organizers of the campaign, Peter Vogt, reportedly commuted 100 miles every day to his Washington D.C. area job.
50 Civil unions were a precedent to the more recent legalization of same-sex marriage in many states in the U.S.

A 1985 article describes a recently formed Freeway Singles Club, whose goal was to "to help single commuters recognize each other by a club decal on their car windows or bumpers" (December 22, 1985; August 31, 1986), while another on aging and sex cites a septuagenarian whose cars sports the tag I'M NOT A DIRTY OLD MAN, I'M A SEXY SENIOR CITIZEN (January 20, 1974). Other articles from the late 1980s describe the act of reading another car's stickers (October 24, 1987 and May 21, 1989). The relatively new phenomenon of IN LOVING MEMORY stickers was profiled in a December 11, 2005 article (see Figures 21 and 47), while another piece published under the write-in gripe feature called "The Complaint Box" bore the snarky title You Vacation. And Have Kids. Must You Advertise It? (March 21, 2010).

Figure 21: In Loving Memory / Williston, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2011)

The mention of bumper stickers has also been used in various crime and *faits divers* reporting, to varied effect. A report on a carjacking in Times Square that left one dead and twelve

86

injured notes the car displayed a "University of Vermont fraternity sticker" (December 6, 1977). In this account, the UVM sticker reinforces the characterization of the owners of the car as being young (honeymooning), rural and college-educated— in sum, a bit naive— all of which contrasts sharply with the mean-streets account of the carjacking and murderous joy-ride that followed.

Another report that year, on a multiple murder and suicide notes that the shooter, who was also a purported neo-Nazi, had an IMPEACH CARTER sticker on his car (February 15, 1977). This had been interpreted by friends and neighbours, before the crime, as "another one of his harmless eccentricities," but its mention in the conclusion of the article serves to emphasize the apparent uncertainty of contemporary life: *Yeah, sure, the guy had a sorta crazy bumper sticker, but who woulda guessed?*

More recently, events around the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013 were sensationalized by reports that the bombing suspects had carjacked an SUV bearing a COEXIST bumper sticker (see Chapter 6), with the implication that both liberals in general, and a philosophy of tolerance in particular, are jejune in an era defined in so many ways by conflict; including the so-called culture wars, the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993) and the war on terror.

The fires of the culture wars discourse were stoked by recent reports of a soldier who has filed a lawsuit against the US Army, claiming to have been wrongfully punished for refusing to remove anti-Obama stickers from his car.[51] A sense of generalized distrust and insecurity was only further encouraged by recent reports of police warning against the display of stick figure family stickers.[52] In one interview,[53] an officer states:

> Our stance, or our view is that the least amount of information that you advertise about yourself, your personal life, your family, the least opportunity that, you know, something is going to occur, by someone stalking you or a predator out there.

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51 An Army Times article (http://www.armytimes.com/article/20140807/NEWS/308070079/Lawsuit-Master-sgt-kicked-out-anti-Obama-religious-views
lists these as including: NOBAMA, NOPE 2012, THE ROAD TO BANKRUPTCY IS PAVED WITH ASS-FAULT (including a donkey, the animal symbol of the Democratic Party)
PRAY FOR OBAMA - ECCLESIASTES 10:2 (cited in the article as "a wise man's heart tends toward his right, but a fool's heart tends toward his left"). See also:
http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/7/us-soldier-army-tossed-me-opposing-obama/
http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/08/06/lawsuit-soldier-forced-out-army-for-serving-chick-fil-reading-hannity-book/
52 For example, see: http://www.theweathernetwork.com/news/articles/police-advising-families-to-remove-popular-stick-figure-car-decals/28558/?cid=social_20140530_25013446
http://www.indystar.com/story/life/2014/06/10/stick-figure-families-on-cars-dangerous/10283741/
53 http://1079ishot.com/police-stick-family-decals/?trackback=fbshare_top

And in another, the Harrisburg, PA Chief of Police was quoted:

> The stick figure family may divulge too much information as to how many children are home, what ages they are, if you have a dog, if you don't […] Be cautious about what you're putting on your vehicle. Be aware of what the ramifications may be.[54]

The second article concludes, "[p]olice also warn that parking stickers can give out information, like when you're not at home and where you work."
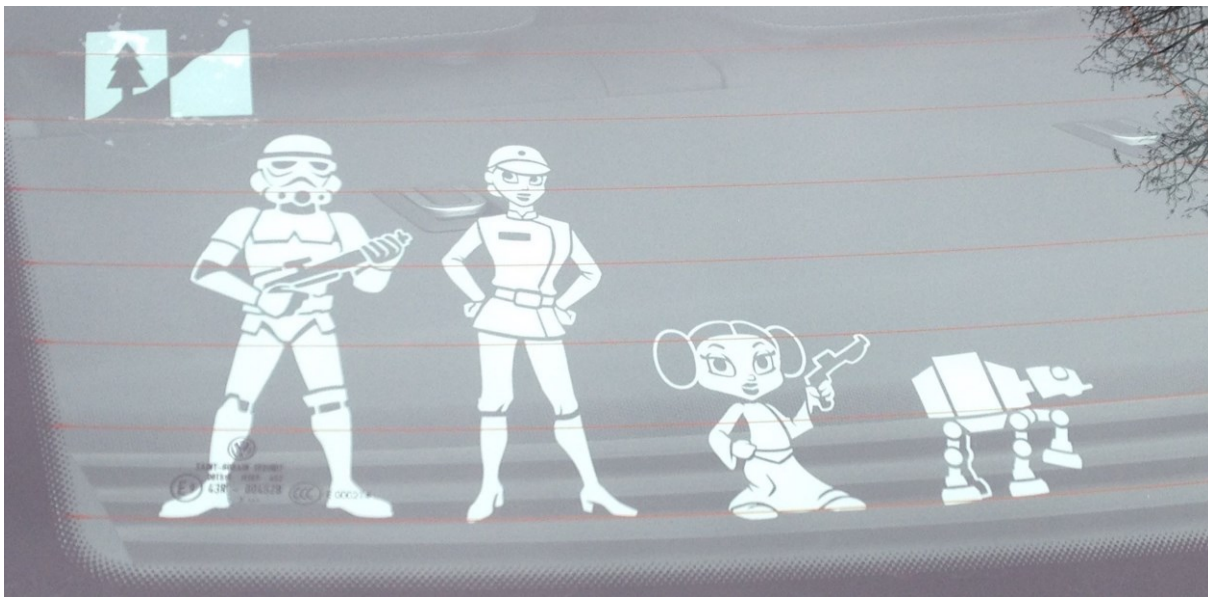
Figure 22: Looks Like the Bad Guys Got there First / Williston, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

I conclude this section by returning to the issue of car inscription and safety, nearly a century after the 1926 Times article that first identified the "sticker menace" facing contemporary motorists. That article, however, was written at a time when mass-automobility was still a new feature of American culture and it reflects a certain relationship to the safety of a relatively novel technology that had not yet been fully exploited as a means of self-expression.

By contrast, concern over stick figure family stickers— whether it is real or imagined— has a particularly early 21st century inflexion. For, while one report notes,[55] it is still illegal to put

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54 http://www.wdrb.com/story/25225588/penn-police-warning-drivers-about-family-members-car-stickers
55 http://www.weau.com/home/headlines/Family-stick-figure-decals-could-lead-to-danger-police-say-261175581.html

stickers on a car's windshields, for the most part the police are no longer concerned with this 'safety issue'. Rather, they are preoccupied with the fidelity of a sticker set's representation of a real family: its members, interests, patterns of movement, etc., and the possibility that a dangerous character could use that information to aid in the committing of a crime against the family.

Similar to earlier periods, as I've outlined above, when stickers were used as a short hand, as a sign of the times, the reflection of a prevailing cultural mood or social tension; so too, now are a host of concerns, ranging from what it means to be a contemporary family to a generalized fear and distrust of the *other* played out through these seemingly insignificant objects. Of course, the perceived fidelity of the figures as representations is due in large part to customizability of the stickers themselves, which brings me to the next section.

Bumper Stickers in the Age of Mass Individuality

Gartman (2004) theorizes the period of automobility between 1965 and 2004 as the *era of subcultural difference*, pointing up what he argues are its dominant, post-modern/ post-Fordist characteristics. Gartman's analysis is limited to the interrelations of car production and culturally conditioned consumer expectations about the car as manufactured object. However, widening the scope to include the various car inscription adornments produced and used during this period (and indeed its antecedent, *the era of mass-individuality*), as well as in the decade since Gartman proposed this theoretical temporalizations, may also be an instructive analytic.

Through the 20th century, bumper stickers and other related car inscription accessories were produced in large enough quantities to achieve justifiable economies of scale. As I detail below, mass individuality was achievable through the combination of a large number of pre-fab options (pennants, window decals, bumper strips and eventually stickers and other accessories). Sub-cultural difference, similarly, was made possible through the widening of the range of messages, themes and subjective positions and that appeared on a stickers, reflective of wider socio-cultural transformations.

But, by and large, they were still limited to pre-fab options[56] and as a consequence, the types of these items available to consumers have been limited to those that would have been appealing, and meaningful, to mass, or in any case relatively large segments of the driving public. Nonetheless, a certain concern with personal customization is evident in a number of bumper sticker related inventions. The problem is summarized neatly by Norris and Wasserman in their 1976 patent application:

> Notwithstanding the popularity of bumper stickers, it has heretofore not been practical to use bumper stickers for the display of custom messages. This is because it has been necessary to use on the various printing processes in order to make bumper sticker. As is well known, whenever printing is involved it is necessary to amortize relatively high set-up costs over a large number of copies if the total cost per copy is to be kept within reasonable limits. (US Patent Office #3959906 A)

By way of addressing this limitation, both Jorgensen's 1967 patent (US Patent Office #3350805 A), and the Norris and Wasserman design combined a bumper sticker backing template with a set of removable letters and numbers that could be affixed to the template:
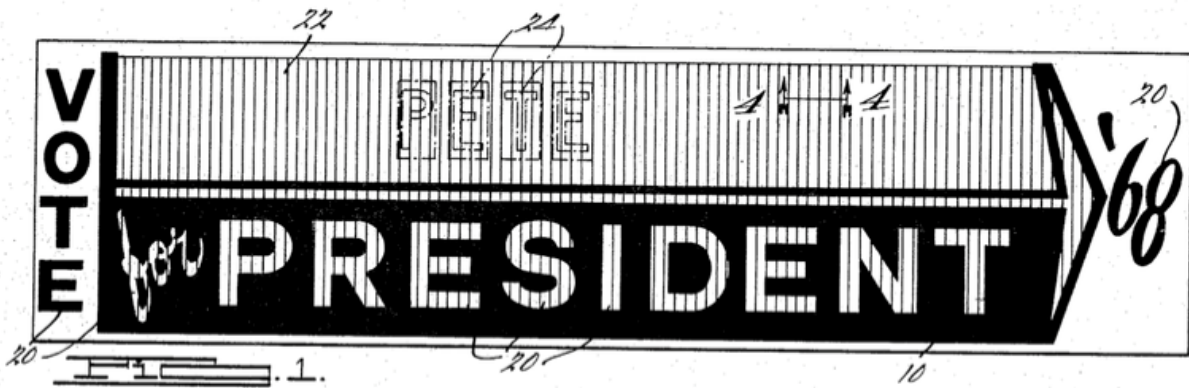
Figure 23: Detail from Jorgensen (US Patent Office #3350805)

As late as 2004 Hudgins had patented a similar customization device to those of Jorgensen, and Norris and Wasserman, although it would have employed a stencil and felt marker instead of a set of self-adhesive letters. This device is somewhat anachronistic, however, as far as bumper

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56 This continues to be the case, however the advent of mass-customization production techniques developed in the last decade and further expansion of intra-auto communicative possibilities entailed by the smart-car connectivity and social networking have begun to change this. I discuss these ideas more fully below.

sticker customization is concerned. For, as micro-electronic technologies made huge advances in the last decades of the 20th century, the modalities of bumper sticker customization would become increasingly virtual.
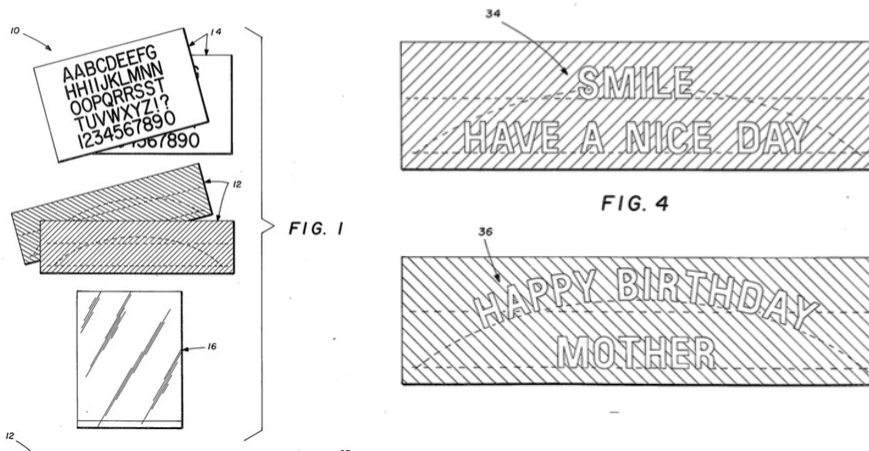
Figure 24: Detail from Norris & Wasserman, *Message Display System* **(US Patent Office #3959906)**

In 1996, Drake et al. patented a video arcade game style console that would allow a consumer to print their own custom stickers. This was also the dawn of the internet-era, or network-mode (Urry 2007), at least as far as much of the American population was concerned. Mainstream broadband internet access not only allowed individuals to browse the ever-widening web, it also began to open new possibilities for online-enabled consumption. The Dotcom boom and bust of the late 1990s attests to this (and, of course, the limits of those possibilities).

But more important, the early 21st century also saw the development of new forms of web-enabled, mass customized production and consumption. Vistaprint and CafePress, two leading online mass customization retailers, were founded in 1994 and 1999, respectively. The production models of these companies, and others like them such as zazzle.com and shapeways.com (a 3D printing service) are oriented to small- and single-item runs. The largely virtual mass-customization model of sticker printing has therefore rendered obsolete the kind of material customization devices discussed above (if they were ever actively produced or used), while at the also opening new possibilities for the individualization of car inscription. At the same time, the move away from shared cultural references to increasingly individual and/or obscure ones poses new interpretive problems for the contemporary reader of stickers. I am, however, getting ahead of myself. First, I will attempt to more clearly delineate classic, pre-internet era and contemporary bumper stickers.

5. Bumper Stickers (2): Classic & Contemporary

Figure 25: VW N7 HRC / Point Loma, California (Nathan Goettlich, 2014)

There is, at first, an idea. A synaptic flash of association, invention or recollection; a riff, creative insight, marketing shill or blatant rip-off (*every poet is a thief*)[57]. A Biblical verse or film one-liner, a quotable quote or cliché; a baseball team, hunting rifle, computer company, video game or band logo; a national flag, local elementary school crest or military badge; a comic book character likeness or presidential candidate's name; initialisms, rebuses and graphical metonymies; deictic, topical, vulgar and inscrutable humour; suggestions about what the driver

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57 U2, The Fly (1990), a lyric which itself borrows/steals (the reader may decide for herself) T.S. Eliot's often paraphrased comment "One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest. Chapman borrowed from Seneca; Shakespeare and Webster from Montaigne." (1922)

would rather be driving or doing, who's on board and considering that, how *you* should drive; or, alternately who, owing to the inescapability of death, no longer rides along.

Whatever the source of these fragments of inspiration, most slip through the dentriditic cracks, between the cognitive couch cushions, as it were, never to be retrieved, never to be translated materially. But others, through a complex of individual and corporate (institutional) motivations and opportunities do enter the world of things. I will not attempt to account for why some of these ideas are materialized in the form of stickers, nor how or why any given individual has decided to plaster one on their car. I am more interested in talking about what happens (what may happen) after someone has stuck one on their car and someone else encounters it on the road. Many of these things— at least stickers, the ones I'm most interested in— are materialized into a form barely more substantial than their generative notions. They are printed self-adhesive vinyl substrates less than a millimetre thick, coated with ink droplets measurable in picolitres and microns, dried in a layer barely thicker than a human red blood cell.

At the same time, they rely upon the activation and interplay of globally distributed, complex virtual and physical networks in order to realize the translation from ephemerality to durability, visibility and readability. This apparently insignificant materiality of stickers affords hyper mobility: both in terms of putting them on cars and their production. In what follows, I will argue that this materialization is a notional waypoint, a moment of apparent stability in a succession of ramifying and uncertain translational possibilities. For the time being, however, I want to focus on the apparent object of the bumper sticker, and other forms of car inscription more generally.

Classic/Mass-Manufactured Bumper Stickers

Broadly speaking I divide bumper stickers into two categories, each with a more or less specific set of characteristics in terms of their form, modes of production and procurement, content and types of referentiality and— critically, as I will discuss in the following chapter— the interpretive resources required to read and make sense of them.

The first of these types is the pre-internet era or "classic" bumper sticker. They are printed on plasticized paper laminate or vinyl stock with a self-adhesive backing. Before the development and widespread availability of digital printing processes in the late 1990s/early 2000s, which has proven more economical for small-run production, these stickers would have

been printed using a lithographic or flexographic, offset web process in a large enough quantity to achieve the required economy of scale.

The stickers would then be distributed to points of sale (specialty shops and/or catalogues, tourist destinations, etc.) in the same way any other mass-manufactured item would. The classic type generally holds to certain spatial and design conventions, themselves partly conditioned by the production process: they are made using rectangular stock with an aspect ratio of approximately 1:4 (roughly 3" high x 12" wide); a single sized font with a single message, or a primary message with a secondary specification in fairly fixed proportions of 2:1, horizontally divided; a primary text displayed in a larger font either above or below the specifying text; no or few graphical elements; text rendered left to right:

My humanity is bound up with yours; for we can only be human together.
—Desmond Tutu

©2011 Northern Sun Merchandising   Minneapolis, MN 55406   www.northernsun.com   800.258.8579   7265
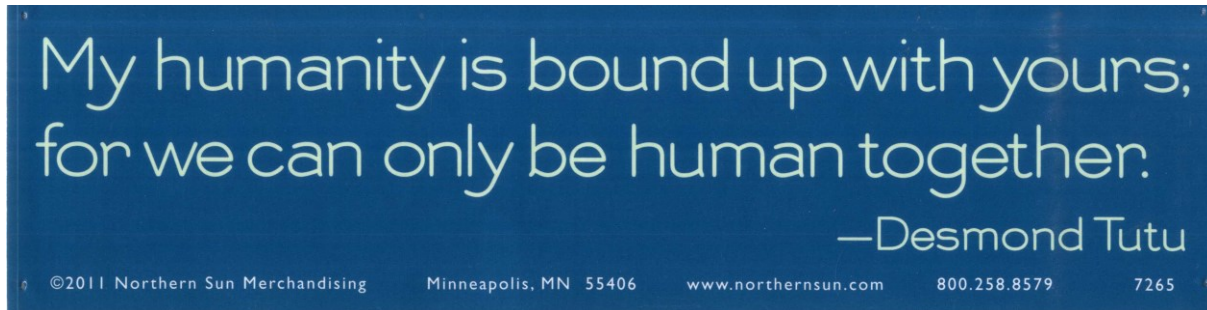
Figure 26: My Humanity & Yours (Walter Goettlich, Collection)

The messages on these stickers— their content and the type of referentiality they employ— are for the most part self-contained, deictic and/or limited to widely shared, "background" cultural knowledge (Kurzon 1998). The quality of being self-contained implies that nothing more than a basic linguistic competence and functional literacy[58] is required to make sense of a given text. This type of message may be in sentence form, but in the very least work as a more or less a whole thought. Examples of self-contained messages include: A MIND IS LIKE A PARACHUTE: IT ONLY FUNCTIONS WHILE OPEN; WELL-BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY; LIFE IS HARD, ICE CREAM HELPS; KILL YOUR TELEVISION.

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58 As I am talking specifically about stickers in the US, the language in question here is English. For my purposes I will specify only that basic linguistic competence and functional literacy implies that a reader would be able to decode the syntactical structures and conventional or denotative meanings of the words on the sticker. In some cases, a self-contained sticker message may also employ wordplay, such as double entendre or connotative subtleties that require a higher degree of linguistic competence.

Clearly, each of these examples uses the already extant symbolic system of language to communicate ideas about the wider world; in this sense, external referentiality is clearly inescapable. These texts are all references to more or less abstract, signified objects: a parachute, humanity, ice cream, life. The point is not that self-contained sticker texts refer to nothing but themselves (more on that in a moment), but rather the contained quality of their referentiality is bounded by the necessarily referential functions of the language through which they are expressed.

While self-contained texts make minimal reference to the outside world, deictic ones refer to the immediate temporal, spatial or interpersonal contexts in which they are encountered (Kurzon 1997, 347). Examples include: IF YOU CAN READ THIS YOU'RE IN RANGE; NOSY LITTLE FUCKER, AIN'T YA?; BABY ON BOARD KEEP DISTANCE; THIS IS A BUMPER STICKER; WATCH OUT FOR THE IDIOT BEHIND ME (see Figure 11).

The first two examples are typically printed in a relatively small font size in order to emphasize— albeit implicitly, through the required too-close proximity— the relationship in space between the reader and the text.

Variations on the very common BABY ON BOARD theme rely on deictic reference to the passengers in the car bearing the sticker (we're in here) with a deictic admonition (you keep back there). In the text above, the admonition is explicit, although many texts omit the additional "keep distance," but the implication that others drivers should guard their distance and drive cautiously is hardly less clear.[59]

Classic bumper sticker texts are not limited to self-contained ideas or deictic relations. They also frequently employ a wide

Figure 27: Dude Baby on Board / South Burlington, Vermont (Walter Goettlich 2014)

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59 While driving between Montreal and Burlington, Vermont recently I encountered a large, late-model SUV with a Baby on Board sticker in the yellow lozenge of a roadside caution sign in one corner of the rear windshield. In the opposite corner, printed on a similar caution sign motif was another that read "Crazy Driver on Board". One way or another the message was clear: keep your distance.

range of discursive, metonymic and intertextual referentiality, which may include anything from the name of a university, a political candidate or the American flag. But the objects of such references are generally limited to those that are part of shared, background cultural knowledge:

> Background knowledge is regarded in the present context as a subclass of shared knowledge, which is the set of assumptions made by the participants about facts and generally held opinions behind what is being said [...] It is encyclopedic in essence, picked up by anyone in the course of his or her life [...] Information about types of cars and their condition and status is a type of background knowledge. So is intertextuality. (Kurzon 1997, 348)

I will address the issue of dominant and alternative readings, and the role of the reader (driver-car) in greater depth in the following chapter. However, for the moment I should note that the attempt to define what might constitute "shared" cultural knowledge is a highly problematic, if not impossible, one. In fact, the proliferation and ramification of texts—and as a consequence the possibilities for intertextual (re-)reference and (re-)combination—in contemporary global(-izing) culture is one of the conditions of possibility that informs the distinction I am now trying to draw between classic and network-mode stickers.

Furthermore, forms of cultural overstimulation, information overload (Gitlin 2001; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2010) and choice overload (Schwartz 2004), were discerned by Simmel (1971) as characteristic of modern life more than a century ago. Last, as I will argue in the following chapter, intertextuality is not necessarily a form of background knowledge as Kurzon claims, but also a practice of active meaning-construction on the part of the reader.

For the moment, however, I will bracket these problems and take the claim of shared cultural knowledge at more or less face value; examples of this kind of sticker text referentiality include: I OWE, I OWE, SO OFF TO WORK I GO; BABY ON BOARD; DOG IS MY CO-PILOT; HARVARD; MY OTHER CAR IS A HARLEY; MY SON FIGHTS FOR OUR FREEDOM; THIS CAR CLIMBED MT. WASHINGTON; DON'T BLAME ME, I VOTED FOR THE AMERICAN.

The first text, cited by Case (1992, 117) is functionally self-contained; in effect, you've got to work to pay off your debts. It also makes intertextual reference to the well-known song sung by the seven dwarves in the 1937 Walt Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.* By replacing "heigh-ho" with "I owe," however the light-heartedness of the original, a work-

Figure 28: My Son Fights for Our Freedom (Walter Goettlich, Collection)

Figure 29: 1-800-HANOI (Walter Goettlich, Collection)

commute song sung by the seven dwarves, becomes an ironic and fatalistic commentary on working life in contemporary America.

BABY ON BOARD is commonly found printed on a sticker in the form of a yellow or orange lozenge evocative of a work-zone caution sign. DOG IS MY CO-PILOT is an intertextual reference to another sticker text, GOD IS MY CO-PILOT. Whatever the multiplicity of realities lived by the individuals who work and study at Harvard, its name is metonymic of scholarly and academic excellence, cultural exclusivity and socio-economic privilege, such that various other colleges and universities are referred to (with greater or lesser seriousness) as the Harvard of the Midwest, of the south, of Canada, etc. MY OTHER CAR IS A HARLEY requires the reader to know "Harley" refers the Harley-Davidson brand of motorcycles (which are patently not cars). Similar to the metonymic use of Harvard, this sticker relies on the referential activation of symbolic values associated with Harley-Davidson motorcycles: a mix of rough and ready, leather-and-denim

97

hirsute hyper-masculinity in active communion with the open road as an expression of a "free" and "authentic" American spirit.

THIS CAR CLIMBED MT. WASHINGTON makes both a deictic reference to the car to which it is affixed, and an encyclopaedic reference to Mt. Washington, the highest peak in New England.[60] The summit of Washington is accessible in the summertime by car via a steep and twisting road, and the sticker is only available as part of the registration packet given to drivers who pay to drive up the road. It is not, at least in its official incarnation, sold as a souvenir:[61] In order to obtain one of these stickers a driver must actually make the drive up the mountain. The Mt.

Washington Auto Road website has a page dedicated to the sticker, including photos taken in a variety locales of drivers with the sticker on their cars.[62] A writer-(driver-)car bearing one of these stickers signals membership in an exclusive group, being part of which is tied to a specific place and accomplishment.

Figure 30: This Car Climbed Mt. Washington / South Burlington, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

DON'T BLAME ME makes reference to the so-called birtherist controversy in American politics, dating from the Democratic primary race for the presidential elections of 2008. The primary—and, it must be noted, factually incorrect and legally unsubstantiated— claim of which is that Barack Obama's birth circumstances preclude him from holding presidential office.[63] The

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60 It may be argued that the inclusion of Mt. Washington in the category of shared cultural knowledge is limited to New Englanders.

61 This is in part because every year, on the anniversary of the opening of the road, cars bearing the sticker permanently (i.e., having the sticker affixed to a surface rather than propped up in the window) are allowed up the road without paying the customary access fees (Personal communication, October 23, 2014)

62 http://mtwashingtonautoroad.com/drive-yourself/the-bumber-sticker/

63 Briefly, the claims of the birtherists centre on what it means to be the (most) right kind of American, i.e. someone who can legally be elected to the presidency of the country based on their birth place and parental citizenship. This

claim that Obama is not an American bears echoes of other such claims made on American bumper stickers through the second half of the 20th century (outlined above), and is one that many American voters would at least be familiar with in name if not detail.

As well, the re-appropriation of the Obama campaign logo O in DON'T activates another commonly circulated contemporary signifier. However, as my footnote indicates, there is a substantial amount of legal-historical specificity elided by DON'T BLAME ME, that I'm not altogether convinced qualifies as "shared" background. This is particularly the case given Americans' tendency to have misinformation guide their political-philosophical outlooks (Ramsay et al. 2010) and a widespread ignorance about the Constitution itself.[64]

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claim is itself informed by an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 1, Paragraph 5 which states: "No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any Person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States" (United States 2007). See also:
http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/07/trump-sends-investigators-to-hawaii-to-look-into-obama/
http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/apr/25/barack-obama-donaldtrump
64 Ignorance about the U.S. Constitution is a common theme in American political discourse, with recent figures indicating up to 70% of the American citizenry has never read document, nor is able to cite its s
http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/our-constitution-how-many-us-know-it
http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/aug/27/embracers-of-the-constitution-are-baffled-by-whats/?page=all

By way of segue into a discussion of the internet era sticker type, and to further demonstrate the muddiness of trying to determine what might be considered "shared" knowledge, I return on the genre of MY OTHER CAR [...] stickers for a moment: this is an often rehashed genre, whose polyvalence owes in part to the ease of semantic substitution of the "other ride" object[65] and is facilitated by the chain of intertextuality that prefigures each new iteration. I don't know what the original version of this type of sticker was, but Case notes MY OTHER CAR IS ALSO A PIECE OF SHIT (1992, 113), and I have seen variations ranging through MY OTHER RIDE IS A SURF BOARD / F-16 / HOG / YOUR MOM. The last of these I have never seen on a car, but I did purchase one in a gas station off I-75 in Georgia.

Figure 32: My Other Ride is Your Mom (Collection)

Within the last two decades, significant changes in the dominant mode of sticker production have enabled not only a proliferation of variations on the MY OTHER theme, but expanded the range of forms, content and types of referentiality far beyond those permitted by what I've been describing as the classic sticker.

Figure 33: My Other Ride is the Normandy (Collection)

http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/tea-party-enthusiasm-surveys-find-ignorance-us-constitution/story?id=13206667
http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/survey-u-s-admires-but-hasn-t-read-constitution/article_a4d58bd4-3e2d-50e3-859b-fcede87ec145.html
65 By comparison, try the do the same with A MIND IS LIKE... ICE CREAM.

Contemporary / Mass-Customized Bumper Stickers
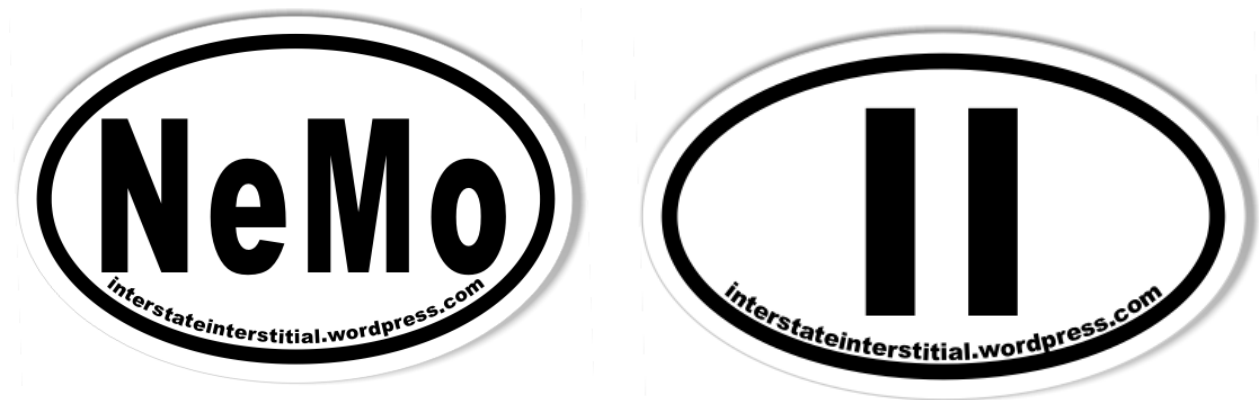
Figure 34: NeMo & II Euroval Design Proofs (StickerCafe.com / Walter Goettlich, 2014)

To review, briefly, I've characterized pre-internet era, or *classic*, bumper stickers as those in terms of their form (horizontally oblong rectangle), design and content (primarily text), production and procurement model (economy of scale, point of sale) and modes of referentiality (linguistically self-contained, deictic, shared cultural knowledge). The characteristics of contemporary stickers—I've termed these NeMo[66] stickers, as a form of short hand and word play—differ in significant, although sometimes subtle ways from those of classic stickers.

My argument is that such differences are linked to the emergence and profound expansion over the last two decades of the Internet as a condition of everyday life. In addition, the advance of mass customization-oriented production techniques and sales models, themselves largely conditioned and facilitated by internet-age logics and practices, play a significant role in the development of this newer type of sticker.

A caveat before proceeding, however: the distinction I draw between classic and NeMo stickers is one of comparative analytical categories, informed by events in recent history, my own empirical observations and the work done by earlier researchers. As I will discuss in the following chapter, making sense of any sticker is a complex interpretive exercise; to the degree these categories are based on my own interpretive acts, they themselves must necessarily be open to (re-)interpretation. Put another way, there is a certain fuzziness, an estuarial quality along the

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[66] NeMo is short hand for Urry's 'network mode,' a term he uses in his analysis of 'virtual travel' in the internet age (2007: 159-169). Here, Urry draws on the work of Castells on the 'network society,' (1996, 2006 & 2007) and Thrift on the 'qualculative' background of 'movement spaces' (2006).

meeting boundaries of these types. In any case, it is necessary to discuss what I view as the defining characteristics of the network-mode type.

To begin, examine Figure 34. It is a composite of two graphics interchange format (.gif) image files, embedded in the document I am presently writing, and that will have materialized in the form of a toner on paper in the reader's hands. The images represent euroval format bumper stickers bearing the texts NEMO and II, and come from the custom sticker storefront StickerCafe.com. Neither of these designs were already included in the StickerCafe catalogue, nor readily available at Zazzle.com or CafePress.com, although these other sites offered 337,081 and 26,400 'related' designs, respectively. The images are proofs, created by a human designer at StickerCafe according to customization requests I made via a web form. The electronic files that represent the appearance of these images, and the related parameters that describe other of their characteristics such as product reference number, size, cost per unit multiple and sales history are stored in a database. This database is accessible through a web-enabled application that produces various configurations of the StickerCafe web pages on an as-requested basis, and through which material stickers bearing the design(s) may be purchased.

In terms of the stickers themselves, rummage your memory: have ever encountered either one bearing the text NeMo or II while driving? What might they mean, or at least could they refer to? Do they even exist as stickers? For my part, I have not, or at least do not recall ever seeing these stickers on a car. Nor do they appear in my database of sticker photos which, while not exhaustive, numbers in the thousands. A quick bit of Googling indicates NeMo (in its various forms of capitalization) may be a reference to the Latin for no one; characters from Charles Dickens and Jules Verne novels, and a Pixar/Disney film; bands in America, France and Belgium, as well as a sporting club in Ireland; a Linux file manager, a particle physics experiment, a winter storm, a Finnish professional hockey player and a compact commercial truck.[67]

Drawing on my own inventory of 'shared' cultural knowledge and imaginative resources, II might appear to represent either the integers two or eleven, the former World Trade Center Twin Towers (in which case 11 has double resonance) or the standard pause icon found on most media players. Of course, the URL on each sticker points to the desired referents, which in the cases of NeMo or II, are not included in the possibilities I have listed above. At the same time, a URL is

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67 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nemo

simply a more or less user-friendly mnemonic for the four numeric blocks of an IP address that allows a user to reach a point in virtual space. Even if a given domain name is well-registered in the DNS of shared cultural knowledge, it does not tell its reader what they will find at that point in virtual space.

Lastly, before I ordered a small batch of ‖ decals, I cannot say if either it or NeMo had previously existed in material form. This is my point, however; the present material existence of a contemporary, mass-customized sticker is irrelevant. It *could* exist, even if it does not exist *yet*, because in all likelihood *it will exist soon*. The condition of the materialization of almost any contemporary sticker is little more than the electronic passing of a few bytes of personal data and an online payment. In fact, virtually any idea that might cross anyone's mind is only a step or two removed from materiality of this sort. A few minutes filling in a form at StickerCafe or playing with the CafePress custom design application and a new sticker enters the world.

What does a cursory attempt to answer these questions say about the differences between classic and NeMo stickers? First, the development and spread of relatively new manufacturing technologies has resulted in a commensurate expansion of the content and form NeMo stickers can take. These technologies include digital printing and flexible precision cutting systems whose hardware is designed to be programmed, through file upload, in order to produce a range of product shapes, sizes and designs with a minimum amount of set up.

CafePress, for example, stocks hundreds of pre-made items to be used for custom design printing substrates. These range from baby bibs to coffee mugs, thong underwear to a range of bumper stickers formats and sizes. Other mass-customization manufacturers allow the production of custom shaped stickers in addition to the printing of custom texts. The first consequence of this is that stickers no longer have to appeal, or even make sense, to a wide-enough range of consumers to justify the cost of an economy of scale production run. In fact, many custom mass-manufacturers actively solicit new designs for products.

Second, as I mention above, stickers do not have to exist in material form in order for a consumer to purchase one. CafePress and similar sites, for example, allow users to upload their designs in digital format, where they persist as a group of data bits until called upon by a consumer to enter the world of tangible things. Third, as the inverse of the first consequence, because there is effectively no bottom limit on the size of production run, virtually anything, no matter how obscure or personal, material or virtual may now appear on or be referred to through

a bumper sticker. This poses certain challenges to the reader, which I will attempt to address in the following chapter.

Last, whereas formerly one would have to go to a store (possibly a catalogue), a tourist attraction or political rally to get a sticker, with a few exceptions that is no longer a requirement. Taking for example the brief discussion of THIS CAR CLIMBED above, it is not possible to get the "official" version of this sticker except by actually driving up the Mt. Washington Auto Road. It is possible, however, to create a reasonable facsimile, or find a personally appropriate variation on the theme without setting foot (or tire) in the White Mountains:[68]

Figure 35: This Hiker Climbed Mt. Washington (Sales Proof, Zazzle.com) [69]

The implication here is that the strength of the link between what a sticker refers to, and how it represents the experiences or beliefs of the driver on whose car it appears may be weakened in contemporary mass-customized stickers as compared to classic ones (I discuss the reader's role in making sense of this ambiguity in the following chapter). Also, while there may be an "official" or "root" version of a sticker, mass-customization allows the hyper-proliferation of intertextual referentiality such that the so-called "official" or root version is at least obscured, if not lost.

Baudrillard & Jameson: A Postmodern Parable of Fishes

Jean Baudrillard (1994) has argued the progressive *involution* of modernity to postmodernity is paralleled and characterized by four phases in the changing relations of the *signifier* to its *signified*, the *image* to the *real*. In the first phase the image is a more-or-less accurate "reflection of a profound reality," while in successive phases the image "masks and denatures" reality, then masks its absence, and ultimately "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" (6).

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68 Clearly, the explicit claim of these stickers is to have set foot on Mt. Washington.
69 http://www.zazzle.com/this_hiker_climbed_mt_washington_bumper_sticker-128092597094732073

This final phase is one of "pure simulacrum," or *hyperreality*. On the one hand, in the absence of relation to an "authentic" referent, hyperreality demands its inhabitants perpetually "recycle" lost faculties, bodies, and sociality (13). On the other, its structural apparatuses work incessantly to circulate similarly recycled images of its own phantasmagoric power in order to simulate what they not only no longer possess, but that no longer even exists (5).

In a related critique, Frederic Jameson (1984) claims *pastiche* has eclipsed *parody* as the dominant form of postmodern stylistic mimicry. For Jameson, cultural forms in modernity are characterized by the unique and immediately recognizable styles of canonical "masters" (64). Parody "capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation that mocks the original" (1991, 4); at the heart of parody is the mimic's appreciation, or "sympathy" for the unique, *authentic* qualities of the original (4). But through the same dynamic of unchecked, untethered proliferation of signs Baudrillard

attempts to capture in his theorizations of simulacra and hyperreality, Jameson sees a proliferation of mimetic derivations, ever more attenuated from both a stylistic authenticity and the sympathetic appreciation it engenders in the mimic. Jameson is worth quoting at length here:

> Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes: and that the stupendous proliferation of social codes today into professional and disciplinary jargons, but also into the badges of affirmation of ethnic, gender, race, religious, and class-fraction adhesion, is also a political phenomenon, the problem of micropolitics sufficiently demonstrates […] In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs. (1984, 65)

Like Baudrillard Jameson argues, through pastiche, producers of postmodern culture are compelled to recycle these endlessly circulated and endlessly attenuated referential bits and pieces, to the "point where the norm itself is eclipsed" (65). Perhaps unsurprisingly, bumper stickers have proved able abettors to the postmodern dynamics of hyperreality (see also the discussion of the Boston bomber COEXIST sticker in Chapter 6) and pastiche. Consider, for example, the *ichthys*, a sacred symbol in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures (Dunnigan 2005). Appropriated by early Christians nearly two millennia ago, ichthys decals have appeared on American cars for the last several decades (see Figure 37, below). Recently, however, as cultural debates over the validity of different beliefs on evolution rage, pastiche derivatives of the ichthys have proliferated.

A recent Gallup poll has found most Americans are familiar and concerned with the so-called *creationist* debate, in both its discursive and literal forms.[70] Briefly, the doctrine of

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70 Data was conducted from May 8-11, 2014, using a telephone survey that encompassed 1,028 adults representing the 50 states and Washington D.C. The survey found 79% and 76% of Americans were familiar with the theories of evolution and creationism respectively: http://www.gallup.com/poll/170822/believe-creationist-view-human-origins.aspx. See also:
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/04/bill-nye-science-guy-evolution-debate-creationists
http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/02/04/creation-museum-debate-nye-ham/5215173/

"scientific" creationism argues the physical universe was "supernaturally created by a transcendent personal Creator who alone has existed from eternity,"[71] and that this theory should be taught on an equal footing with evolution in American schools.

This debate is part of the wider scienticism and humanism vs. Christian fundamentalism, liberal vs. conservative "culture wars" in contemporary American, a point which the founders of evolvefish.com emphasize in their mission statement.[72] The DARWIN, EVOLVE and SCIENCE versions of the fish emblem may all be read as direct counters to a presumed discursive position that advocates creationism and for that reason arguably fall within the realm of 'shared' knowledge.

The GEFILTE, LUTEFISK and N' CHIPS derivations are also related, albeit a degree removed, a form of nonsensical parody as meta-commentary on the debate. Others, however, such FSM, CTHULU and perhaps PHISH— while still mimetic of the root form of the ICHTHYS (stamped chrome-style emblem,[73] central *vesica piscis* in which the identifying letters are placed) and the wider discourse on theories of evolution— point to increasingly obscure referents. Most obvious, PHISH ostensibly refers to a Vermont-based jam-band which developed a nomadic, Grateful

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http://abcnews.go.com/US/things-missed-bill-nyes-evolution-creationism-debate/story?id=22373841
http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/06/272535141/who-won-the-creation-vs-evolution-debate
71 http://www.icr.org/tenets
72 All of these examples are available to be purchased from http://www.evolvefish.com, a website whose goal is to "counter the destructive aspects of religious zealotry and rampant unreason. […] peddle rationality and promote peace" through the sales of these and related car emblems and bumper stickers (http://www.evolvefish.com/fish/AboutUs.html).
73 These emblems are, in fact, made of plastic with a chrome-like foil laminate: http://www.evolvefish.com/fish/emblems.html.

Dead-like following in the 1980s and 1990s. This emblem uses the band's logo, which breaks from the vesica piscis as the central shape, but maintains the stamped-chrome aesthetic and, of course, literally spells-out the signifier of the root form, albeit substituting the phoneme *ph-* for *f-* as in "*ph*at." Certain readers of science- and weird-fiction will recognize H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulu*:

> [a] monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind[74]

In all likelihood, however, the CTHULU emblem will be less intelligible to the majority of the 75% of Americans who profess some familiarity with the evolution debates. Similarly, FSM or Flying Spaghetti Monster and what it purports to represent may not be intelligible to many American drivers. Briefly, FSM is the intelligent deity of Pastafarianism, a religion that includes an alternative intelligent creationist theory of the origins of the universe.[75] While Pastafarianism may seem a lark to the uninitiated, it has been treated seriously in scholarly literature (Van Horn and Johnston 2007; Simpson 2011; Vidal 2012).

Variations on the Ichthys are not limited to those of the stamped-chrome variety. There are many available through custom printers online, rendered on rectangular and euroval sticker stock. As I have discussed above, this relatively simple manufacturing process allows an effectively infinite set of possibilities to the consumer, through processes of pastiche and paradigmatic, or syntactic substitution, i.e. one or more elements may be replaced while still maintaining certain structural characteristics of the design. This type of substitution is at work in most of the chrome-style emblems in Figure 38, above. Another example of syntactic substitution relates to the relatively recent genre of family stickers (discussed above). Figure 39 shows an example of a

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74 http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cc.aspx
75 Bobby Henderson, de facto founder of Pastafarianism, first proposed the FSM in a letter to the Kansas State School Board in 2005. At that time, the Board had recently approved the teaching of alternative 'theories' on the origins of the universe and human evolution such as those espoused in scientific creationism and intelligent design. See also:
http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/29/arts/design/29mons.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%222%22%3A%22RI%3A17%22%7D&_r=0
http://www.thespectrum.com/story/news/local/2014/11/16/church-flying-spaghetti-monster-pastafarian-makes-statement/19123337/

thematic pastiche of such stickers, in which a slasher-film monster (Jason/Leatherface mashup)[76] chases a nuclear family of stick-figure stickers.
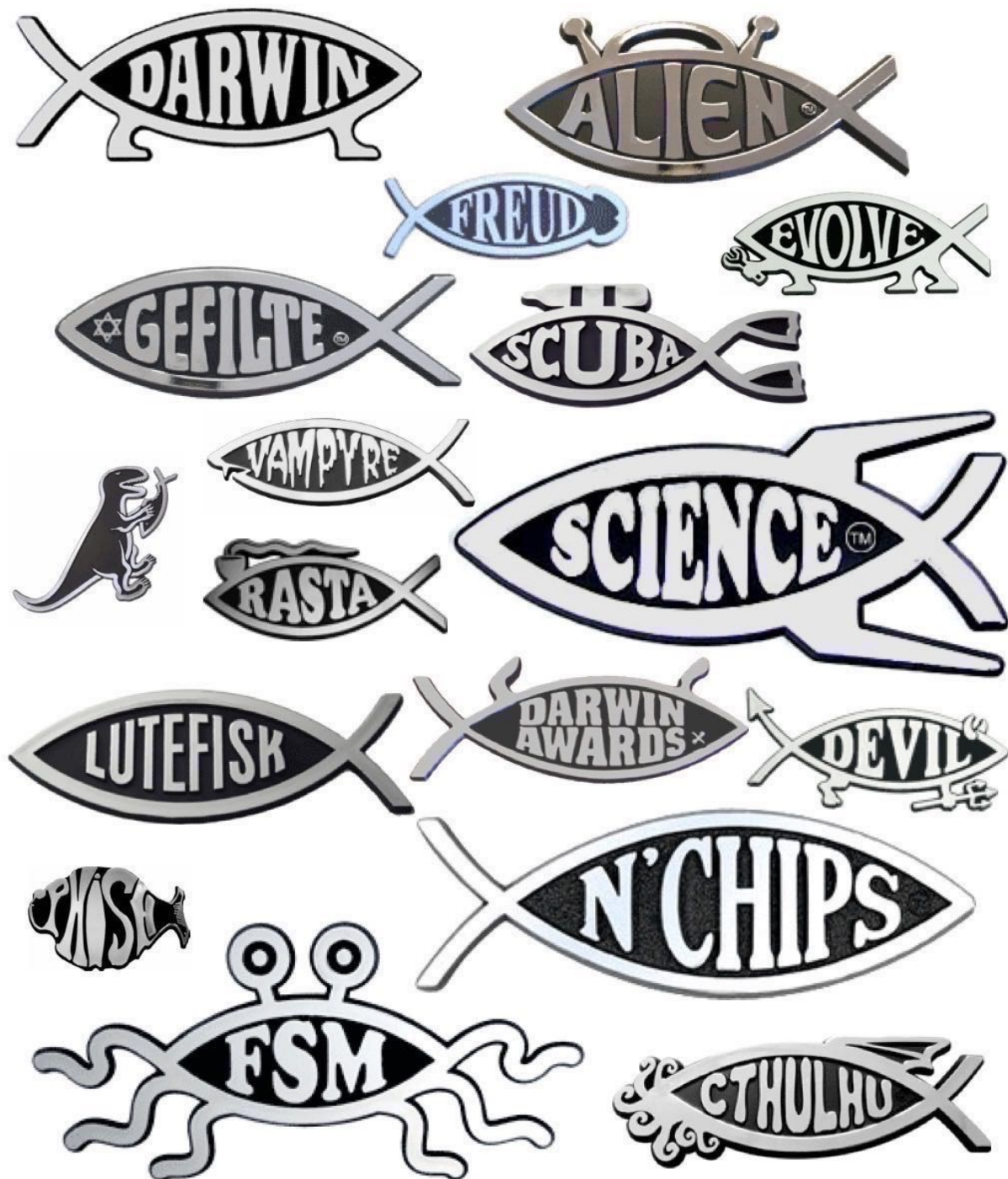
Figure 38: Pastichthys

76 These characters appear in the horror film franchises Friday the 13th and Texas Chainsaw Massacre, respectively.

Figure 39: Nobody Cares / Montreal, Quebec (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

Figure 40 shows examples of paradigmatic substitution, in which the visual syntax of the NOBODY CARES parody is maintained through the substitution of a monster truck for Jason/Leatherface, a fighter jet (flown by Jason) and a T-Rex, all of whom are in the midst of destroying the families after their own fashion. The sub-genre of NOBODY CARES stickers is, furthermore, algorithmically legible: having taken the photo in Figure 39 using my phone, I immediately uploaded the image using the Google Goggles visual search app. The first result the search returned was the left-most variation in Figure 40[77]. Subsequent searches turned up the centre and right-most variations in the triptych.

Figure 40: Nobody Cares Triptych (StickerCiti) [78]

NeMo Stickers & Symbolic (Global) Brand Consumption

The circulation of international symbols, brands and experiences is another factor that complicates the definition and delineation of shared cultural knowledge. Certain corporate brands

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77 I saved the link to the Interstate Interstitial project blog at the time:
https://interstateinterstitial.wordpress.com/2013/04/15/sticker-array-4-detail/.
However, the link is now broken: http://www.google.com/goggles/a/moments/zFtqVvpNirXC-MUhoKOgiHA?ogi=10374147335453707831
78 Left to right, these stickers are available from the StickerCiti storefront on Amazon.com:
http://www.amazon.com/Monster-Nobody-FIGURE-FAMILY-Sticker/dp/B007PLZ5RA
http://www.amazon.com/Fighter-ChainSaw-Nobody-FIGURE-Sticker/dp/B008861Y8K
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00EI6CKVE/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_dp_ss_1?pf_rd_p=1944687762&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=B007PLZ5RA&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=12MGAZHS5F2RW2MMJKHH

are global: Apple (the logo of which is visible on the lower left corner of the rear windshield on the car in Figure 36), Coca-Cola, Mercedes and Disney, for example, are frequently listed amongst the most valuable— and recognizable— brands on the planet.[79] How any of these brands might be interpreted according to the dominant readings within any given cultural frame of brand literacy is not my concern per se, and in any case is outside the scope of this research. The point is, rather, that the logographs that represent these brands are, at a minimum, widely associated with the brand name and its associated product range(s). These are different, however, from the sorts of brands that are globally consumable, but not necessarily globally recognizable.

The teams, leagues, administrative organizations and supporter groups that make up the global network(s) of association football (soccer) would be such a case in point. Figure 41 represents a sticker array I observed on the back of a small SUV while driving outside of Indianapolis, IN. Clockwise from the upper left, the array includes what appears to be a samurai with a fork and knife on its back, an ENT euroval, a logo for the alt-/progressive-metal band tool,[80] and the badges for the Tottenham Hotspur and Juventus football clubs. Juventus is one of the most successful and well-supported Italian sides, while Spurs is a fairly popular English team, although not one of the three or four most globally-supported ones. Certainly the vertical black and white stripes of Juventus is one of the iconic football badges (even in its recently redesigned form) to those who closely follow European football. On the other hand the Spurs Cockerel will be familiar to followers of the English professional leagues, but not necessarily to the same degree as the Juventus badge would be to a wider public.

Having said that, one does not have to have grown up in Turin or North London to support either club: they are globally consumed and imagined brands (Bengtsson and Firat 2006). My brother and I, for example, are Spurs fans despite the fact that I have never been to support the club in person and he has only ever seen them play a North American exhibition match. We follow team news and results assiduously, watch matches on the television or online and each

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79 See:
http://www.bestglobalbrands.com/2014/ranking/
http://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2014/11/05/apple-microsoft-and-google-are-worlds-most-valuable-brands/
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/business/media/apple-passes-coca-cola-as-most-valuable-brand.html
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/business/media/best-global-brands-report-has-coca-cola-on-top-and-apple-climbing.html?_r=0
80 http://www.toolband.com

own a Spurs kit. Consequently, either of us would immediately recognize a Spurs badge on the back of a car.

Figure 41: Juventus & Spurs / I-74 Connector, Indianapolis, Indiana (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Similarly, the BVB 09 (Borussia Dortmund) badge, left in Figure 42, will be familiar to followers of the German 1.Bundesliga and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League, but is certainly not as widely recognized as the circular logographs that represent Barack Obama or Mercedes Benz (Figure 8).

Figure 42: Borussia Dortmund and BVB in Chicago Supporter's Club Stickers (CafePress Sales Proofs)

If you were to draw a Venn diagram of the American driving public who recognize the Dortmund badge and those who recognize the municipal flag of the city of Chicago, the subset described by the overlap would be quite a small one, indeed: but they might just be able to make sense of the right-hand image in Figure 42, which represents one of a number of variations of graphical signifiers used by the BVB Dortmund fans in Chicago community,[81] and that are available through the International Fan Store storefront on CafePress.[82]

Not all network-mode sticker texts are related to commercial enterprises. Some may signify a place (national or regional flags) or practices more or less "foreign" or outside shared American cultural knowledge. For example, while travelling in northwest England in 2014, the bright red rose and yellow field of the Lancashire county flag caught my eye. To my disappointment, however, I was not able to find a bumper sticker of this design while I was visiting (that I thought to look for a souvenir of this kind says something about my enculturation as an American; recall Russell Baker's comments on the lack of stickers on English cars).

In a theme that should, at this point, be familiar to the reader, I was able to find a Lancashire sticker on Zazzle.com, with a heart-shaped background, which I bought to add to my collection of stickers. The sticker in Figure 44 is a 'wakaba' or 'shoshinsha' mark, used in Japan to designate a newly licensed driver, but also

Figure 44: I ♡ the Red Rose of Lancashire (Collection)

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81 https://www.facebook.com/BVBChicago
82 http://www.cafepress.com/ifsmerchandise

displayed on modded cars in the North American JDM scene.[83]

Other elements of NeMo stickers that limit their intelligibility may include the use of non-dominant languages (Figures 49 and 50), formerly important signifiers that have lost relevance or salience over time, such as Figure 45 (Vietnam Service Ribbon), local references removed from their geographic specificity such Figures and in memory of stickers (Figures 21 and 47).

Figure 45: Vietnam Service Ribbon (Collection)

Figure 46: The Spot / Burlington, Vermont and A. Schwab / Memphis, Tennessee (Collection)

On the one hand, most if not all network-mode stickers may be viewed as inside or sub-cultural references, signifiers of exclusive group (elective or not) and/or lifestyle-oriented identities. If new technologies of mass-customization production and the patterns of consumption they engender simply resulted in a proliferation of largely unintelligible, dead-end signifiers,

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83 See the discussion on custom mods above, specifically Kwon (2004). There are certain decals that signify inclusion (or desired inclusion) in the JDM scene, including the so-called shocker, which I discuss below.

these stickers would afford virtually no social, cultural or discursive work. Speaking about the transmission of discourse, Stuart Hall (1993) argues:

> [o]nce accomplished, the discourse must then be translated - transformed, again - into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption' […] Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. (91-93)

In other words, meaning-making through reading-/viewing- consumption practices is closely linked to intelligibility vis-a-vis dominant cultural and linguistic "codes." While some of these codes take on a naturalistic, given or apparently universal hue, Hall reminds us that these are nonetheless products of discursive practice (93). When Kurzon (1997) talks about "shared" cultural knowledge, he presumes a more-or-less stable encoding-decoding process (Hall 1993) as practiced by both the producer and consumer of a message.

Figure 47: In Memory of ABER / Montreal, Quebec (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

When I encounter a sticker message like the one in Figure 48, I can successfully decode it because I am familiar with various strains of contemporary American neo-conservative and libertarian anti-big-government and as sex-as-wellness-practice discourses; the conventional substitution (grawlix) of "***" for "uck"; the use of the verb "to fuck" as a metaphorical

expression meaning "to be taken advantage of." My successful decoding of the text— the meaning I make from it, and what I do with that meaning—has nothing to do with my philosophical (dis-)agreement with its sentiment. Rather, it has everything to do with the activation of certain interpretive, linguistic and discursive resources at my disposal, particularly those in mainstream circulation, i.e. those that might qualify as "shared" knowledge.

I DON'T NEED SEX...
THE GOVERNMENT F*S ME EVERY DAY!**

Figure 48: I Don't Need Sex (Collection)

However, practices of reading, decoding, interpretation and meaning making become less reliable as producers of intersubjective agreement as notions of shared knowledge (based on dominant encoding-decoding schemas) maintain less traction. Think for example of encountering non-official (or predominant) language texts such as in Figure 49 below, or the sticker text *РАЗВОЖУ!* which I encountered in Burlington, Vermont some years ago. It seems an obvious point, but for the literate Chinese, Arabic or Russian speaker, these stickers are linguistically decipherable in the same way most of the other stickers I have been discussing are to a literate English speaker. But for a majority of American drivers, not only do these sticker texts employ cultural resources with which they would not be familiar, but they also are written in scripts that are effectively indecipherable to non-readers of those languages. For this majority of drivers, any act of "reading" such inscriptions relies on the instantiation of the reader's symbolic associations with the linguistic-cultural nexus represented by the script, rather than actually decoding the linguistic structure of the text. This is what D'Alisera (2001) points to when she observes many of the Muslim Sierra Leonean immigrants in Washington, D.C. use bumper stickers and other items to attract the gaze of the culturally dominant *other*, in order that they be recognized as not

116

just different from this dominant group, but that this recognition be guided according to their own, specific terms.

So while a linguistic insider may decode any of these texts and get their meaning, an outsider (again, the majority of American drivers) will only be able to "read" their symbolic significance, e.g. *I am a Sierra Leonean Muslim, like it or not!* (D'Alisera 2001, 98). I return to this idea in Chapter 6, in my discussion about the role of the *reader-car*.

Figure 49: Other Voices / Montreal, Quebec (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate a how recent developments in the field of mass-customized production have significantly expanded the possibilities for individually authored bumper stickers. While many—if not most—bumper stickers continue to be mass-manufactured, the creation of individually authored stickers, and the application of custom/agile manufacturing techniques to the production of mass-manufactured stickers have expanded the communicative potential of stickers themselves. This is true in terms of the already established range of intertextuality afforded by these stickers (not only between stickers themselves, but in reference to all manner of other cultural texts). But it also includes newer forms of hyper-textual referentiality, through which additional— and in many cases, more elaborate—discursive and symbolic positions may be articulated.

Having said that, this contemporary proliferation of highly specific sticker texts poses new problems for driver-readers. Increasing factors of specificity, as many of the examples above indicate, undermine the high-modernist inspired notion of what might constitute "shared cultural knowledge" (Kurzon 1997). And yet, for all the ease with which post-structuralist semiotic theories may treat the indefinite relationship(s) between a *signifier* and *signified,* on a day-to-day

117

basis I would suggest most driver-readers expect a sticker text to refer to and mean *something*, even if they don't know what that something is. In the following chapter I discuss some of the conditions and possibilities of reading-on-the road as socio-cultural practice.

Figure 50: This Man is Writing about Your Bumper Stickers (Walter Goettlich / Zazzle.com, 2014)

6. Interstate Interstitials: Writer- / Reader-Car Encounters

Figure 51: Got Toast? & Fuck Cancer Triptych / I-75, Georgia (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

The interstate highway, set apart from and above the landscape and local culture through which it cut, provided the spatial opportunity for the obscuring of one's identity from the scrutiny of others.
Cotton Seiler*, Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*

Drivers are part spectator, part actor, part artist. They are witness to the gallery of views, and they, too, become an observed object within this gallery.
Mitchell Schwarzer*, Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media*

Follow a car for half a mile and you find out more about the owner than an F.B.I background check
Barbara Klaus*, Driver, Thy Name is Vanity, New York Times, October 21, 1989*

A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author.
Umberto Eco*, The Author and His Interpreters*

I'm driving I-75 northbound, most of the way to Chattanooga from Atlanta, when the boxy black minivan appears in the driver-side mirror[84]. It passes quickly, allowing only a second or two of proximity to notice, read and attempt to decipher its array of stickers: on the rear-most passenger side window, a pink ribbon. On the back: GOT TOAST?; a family of three damaged-looking dolls (an adult woman and two children); a series of inset hearts; a pink ribbon with a heart-shaped inset cut-out; FUCK CANCER. Another car, another highway: A plump hand outline decal, with the ring finger folded down that might be taken for an inverted bird, or a rather

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84 The account given in this section is based on my field notes.

chipper gang sign. Stopped for groceries at a Woodman's supermarket off I-90 / I-94 / I-39, in Sun Prairie, WI: a black, late-model Dodge Avenger with a symmetrical array of stickers on it's trunk— IRQ, AFG and 26.2 eurovals, I AM PROUD OF MY CUB SCOUT, amongst others— and a Purple Heart medal specialty-issue plate.

Figure 52: Sticker Array / Off I-90, Wisconsin (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Back on I-95 in Georgia an SUV drifts by with the cryptic question WHO IS JOHN GALT? scratched across its rear bumper. On I-64 in West Virginia a monstrous semi with the equally cryptic iamsecond.com overtakes a Hyundai Elantra in a cloud of road detritus, arriving like a prehistoric roar from a long-extinct species. Across nearly 10,000 miles of American highway this car—a rental, and others like it—has borne a single inscription: a custom printed magnet representing an overlapping set of white and orange letters punctuated by a QR code (Figure 53). Like many other contemporary inscriptions it is a fragment, an indefinite reference, and an *invitation*.

The Superhighway Encounter as Space of Social Possibility

This sticker (Figure 53), the instrument with which I wrote the existence of my research project on the road could— or perhaps *should*— have read: MORE PEOPLE HAVE READ THIS STICKER THAN MY THESIS. And come to think of it, I may have one of those made. At least the reader of a …THAN MY THESIS sticker would have some idea about what's at the other end of the reference. More important than a clear chain of referentiality however, is how the combination of these fragmentary and indefinite aspects of contemporary bumper stickers, situated within the relative homogeneity of the superhighway roadscape affords the reader's curiosity room to play. Certainly, not everyone who reads a given sticker will attempt to make sense of it, and many will not even take notice in the first place. But for those who do, the practice of reading such inscriptions is not a trivial matter. In this sense, the inscription in Figure 54, the project blog it points to and this thesis as a production of that project represent a performative demonstration of the requirements to bumper sticker, and more generally *cultural*, literacy as a contemporary American practice.

Figure 53: Interstate Interstitial Sticker w/ QR Code. (Walter Goettlich 2014)

In Chapter 2, I characterize the American Interstate Highway System (IHS) as a movement space that affords automobility, but that is nonetheless a *McDonaldized/non-place* that occludes social relations. The goal of this chapter is a re-opening of the superhighway for consideration as a space of social possibility, through a synthesis of two sets of ideas I have attempted to present thus far.

First is the analysis of the subjectivizing regime of American automobility, particularly as exposed through the structural and phenomenological conditions of the superhighway driver-car. Second is the quirky plurality of mass-customized forms of car inscription—especially bumper stickers—widely observable on American highways. As I discuss above, certain affordances of these otherwise unremarkable objects make them particularly well suited to incorporation into the driver-car hybrid assemblage. In short, the phenomenological effects characteristic of superhighway driver-car embodiment that I discuss in Chapter 2 afford a certain contradictory psycho-cognitive receptiveness to noticing bumper stickers and imagining other driver-car subjectivities through these texts, even as this occurs within a gestalt of homogenization and alienation.

Through its incorporation of bumper stickers, I extend the concept of the driver-car in two dimensions, as *writer-car* and *reader-car.* These assemblages constitute important modes of cultural work and form the initial conditions for a certain type of (auto-)mobile social encounter. In bringing these arguments together I hope to demonstrate how forms of writing and reading on the road challenge the view of the IHS as a *non-place* of negligible social interaction (Augé 2008).

I also hope to demonstrate how residual *interaction spaces,* instantiated through these encounters, may extend beyond the immediacy and proximity of two cars passing on the highway, thereby expanding the social potential of such encounters. The encounter between writer-car and reader-car on the road may only last a second or two and rarely more than a few minutes, according to traffic flow dynamics and the relative speeds and routes of the driver-cars. Unlike many other social encounters, in all likelihood the writer-car and reader-car do not, and will not, ever be able to verify the potential inter-subjective meaning(s) they produce.

These encounters and the interaction spaces they produce may be, in various measures imaginative, technologically mediated, asymmetrical and asynchronous. They are, nonetheless, places of social activity, however different they may be from classical conceptions of social interaction and space.

Briefly and schematically, the encounters I'm describing play out as follows:

- The presence of a bumper sticker on the surface of the writer-car stands as a continuous transmission of an invitation to be seen, a sort of Goffmanian (1963) "opening move," but one that is ongoing, always taking place, rather than a discrete gesture.

- The moment of one driver-car passing another may be as brief as a second or two. As a consequence the reader-car may or may not become aware of the invitation; may notice but ignore it; may notice but unsuccessfully try to read it (passage is too fast, the sticker is faded or otherwise obscured); may notice and successfully read it. Success or failure here is determined by the corresponding subjective sense of the reader-car vis-à-vis the decoding of an intelligible message from the text(s).
- If the reader-car makes a successful reading of the writer-car, the imaginative interstice is opened, and the reader may engage in the sort of hermeneutic play that characterizes reading of other signs/texts in other circumstances, with the constraint that sticker texts are extremely economical in their expression.

Increasingly, as ubiquitous computing ("smart") technologies are built into cars or embedded in driver-car assemblages via mobile phones and other after-market products, the reader may attempt to resolve semiotic and referential ambivalences through the use of these technologies. By doing this, the reader-car effectively extends the largely imaginative, on-the-road encounter, to a more complex interaction space, which may include virtual and material dimensions. In this case, the reader (who may no longer be part of the reader-car assemblage) has engaged in a non-trivial attempt to construct meaning from the bumper sticker text they originally encountered. And yet, the possibility of an extended *interaction space* of textual exchange, literacy, imagination and action opens through this encounter.

These encounters are literally framed in space between the two cars, but also metaphorically framed by unique yet complimentary acts of writing and reading. Outside of a purely expressive function, the writer-car generally presumes a reader; the reader-car is in perpetual search for the invitation to read. I discuss writer-car and reader-car in greater depth in the two sections that follow.

The Writer-Car

In a bureaucratic-administrative sense, the license plate is meant to be a unique, external identifier for the car. In the US, state-level agencies are responsible for issuing license plates. Except in cases of fraud, every combination of alphanumeric plate code and plate type is unique.

This constitutes a serviceable definition of *identity*, at least in an abstract, schematic sense as a unique token of locatability or intelligibility for an object or individual, within a given domain.

Clearly, however, the domains of highway administration and contemporary identity construction are not interchangeable. So while any driver-car is uniquely identifiable through its system registration, it does not necessarily bear a relationship to the person who may be seeking some form of recognition as an individual *per se*, at least in subjective terms. Scholarly literature that examines identity representation, construction and performance through the automobile is fairly extensive, and as I have made at least a cursory survey of this work in Chapter 3, I won't belabour the point here. Nonetheless, I reiterate that on American highways, one of the most common, varied and *noticeable* automobile identity practices is the use of bumper stickers as a means to write oneself onto the world.

It is important to keep in mind that the bumper stickers I'm talking about are those on moving cars, driven at speed across an elaborate and enormous network of interstate highways and other highway-oriented infrastructure. The driver of the car does not necessarily see or read the world in the same way as the pedestrian, or the reader in a café or library. Sticker texts are written across the system of automobility by means of their mobility, which is to say it is not the printing or putting on of bumper stickers that creates the encounter I am speaking of, rather it is the presence of the sticker on a moving driver-car in proximity to another moving driver-car that creates the space. Stickers appear on driver-cars, they are put in motion within a certain set of conditions proper to American automobility, and thereby become part of a writing instrument I call the *writer-car*[85].

Figure 54: Enough Chit Chat (© Dan Piraro, 2014)

The logic of the writer-car is effectively one of individuation through customization. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the cultural landscape of American superhighway automobility is largely one characterized by undifferentiated mobile masses and homogenized consumption possibilities. By contrast, in Chapter 3 I discuss a

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85 I've extended the syntactic structure of the driver-car assemblage here, borrowing the concept of inheritance from object-oriented programming. In short, the writer-driver-car inherits the affordances and embodiments of the driver-car assemblage, but, by virtue of its inscriptions, also affords a specific form of readability not necessarily characteristic of the driver-car per se.

number of differentiation practices meant to individuate cars and their drivers. It should be clear, however, my object here is not the range of intentionality that underpins these practices. Rather, taking the presence of bumper stickers on American cars as given, I mean to examine the possibilities of social interaction opened through the desire of the writer-car to be seen/recognized by an indefinite social other, through their attempts at automobile individuation. There is a certain duality at play here in that the writer-car is both a surface to be written upon and an instrument that, through its mobility, writes itself upon the spaces of American automobility. Much of what I have said about bumper stickers in terms of their production and material qualities—they are inexpensive and easy to put on the car (and can be removed, if desired); they can be found almost anywhere; they are topically plural; and can be custom designed or self-produced—are affordances that facilitate the writer-car assemblage.

On the other hand, driver-cars afford writer-car assemblages in a number of ways as well. In the flow of traffic, both on city streets and interstate highways they are aligned front-to-back. As a consequence the mostly-vertical, rear-facing surfaces of one driver-car are oriented to the line-of-sight of the driver-car trailing it, and this line-of-sight must be at least minimally maintained to insure the safe operation of the driver-car.

In addition, driver-cars are not only public, but also *mobile*. The importance of this latter affordance is evident in comparison with other types of stickers, for example, those used by urban sticker bombers who tag public surfaces with their art. The ephemeral moment of engagement, or "public" (Warner 2002) created when a pedestrian passes a sticker on a signpost on a city street is different from the moment of two passing driver-cars in several ways, of which I will elaborate two.

First, in terms of combinatorial possibilities, the surfaces upon which stickers are affixed that the pedestrian encounters are for the most part fixed in place, whereas those encountered by the driver car are dynamic, and persistently variable. Given a pedestrian and driver-car each following a habitual route, the driver-car has virtually no control over the other inscription surfaces she encounters. On the other hand, while the surfaces a pedestrian encounters are more or less given (they do no choose where to put the sign posts), she does enjoy the autonomy of route choice. In this sense, the pedestrian is more likely to encounter the same inscriptions day after day than the driver-car, who is subject to an effectively infinite combination of inscriptions, car makes and models, etc. Second, the inscribed surfaces encountered by the pedestrian are in

the public domain— the issue of whether or not a sticker bomber is legally allowed to inscribe that surface notwithstanding— there for *de facto* public use and consumption. As a consequence, any number of different stickers, created by different individuals, may be affixed to these surfaces.

By contrast, while there is not necessarily a one-to-one relation between car inscription and driver, the set of inscriptions that appear on a car are less likely than a signpost to be a multi-vocal or anarchical palimpsest of representations. Corollary to this is the fact that while membership in the automobilized public is nearly universal in American culture, its practice still requires adequate financial resources, technical skill (albeit of a relatively low threshold) and bureaucratically certified and issued credentials. None of these is at issue when one walks down the street, or at least not yet. So while the processes of production and the material attributes of stickers afford different these types of use, the contexts of encounter and the practices of meaning making associated with each is not necessarily the same.

As compared to the unique identification afforded by the state-issued license plate, the intelligibility afforded through bumper stickers is achieved through a different mode of being seen, one that necessitates another external, subjective gaze in order to be accomplished. As Simmel (1971) rightly notes, the overstimulation of modern subjects (which has only increased in the century since Simmel wrote *The Metropolis and Mental Life)* produces in them a blasé attitude that makes attracting their attention all the more difficult.

To some degree this holds on the contemporary superhighway as well. On the other hand, the machinic body of the superhighway driver-car, and the contradictory effects of *over-* and *under-* stimulation it engenders, affords an equally contradictory state of in-/attention that at least partially renders the mobile blasé attitude more permeable. Perhaps the windshield is a carapace. But it is a transparent one, though which the driver is compelled to look, to see, to interpret and to imagine.

The Reader-Car

> *It was puzzling to me. What was OBX? An exclusive private school? A secret society? These letters were all*
> *over Bergen County, and inquiring minds (my own) wanted to know— what was OBX and how could I get*
> *some?*
>
> Anne Marie Valinoti, *You Vacation. And You Have Kids. Must You Advertise It?*

Dant (2004) discusses embodiment primarily in terms of the joining of the driver to the car through a set of affordances and the performance of mobility. However, embodiment may also be understood as a second order affordance itself, as an opening or connection of the visual field of the driver-car, articulated through bumper stickers (writer-cars), to wider social-cultural fields. In this sense, bumper stickers may afford the development of connections between the performance of American automobility and other discourses and networks of power. As a counterpart to the writer-car, I term the driver-car whose visual field is thus employed the *reader-car*.

To reiterate, cars that have been written upon also write upon the world as they enact the spaces of automobility. In this context, *writing* implies *reading*; a text as communicative event requires a *reader*. Rather than simply treating writing and reading as discrete technical processes, extended in the abstract to the writer- and reader-cars, I argue the writer- and reader-car *afford* one another. A writer-car without a reader-car is a monologue seeking an interlocutor, a soliloquy in search of a receptive audience.

Without the co-constitutive encounter between a writer-car and reader-car, a bumper sticker stuck on a bumper is a vanishingly thin, mute sandwich of various chemical compounds. In this sense a bumper sticker allows the writer-car to express itself, but does little cultural or communicative work beyond that expression. It is a one-way street, and it ends in a cul-de-sac. However, once mobilized, bumper stickers are rarely inert. Rather, acting as a sort of attractor against the backdrop of monotonous, *McDonaldized* spaces of automobility, bumper stickers open the possibility of an encounter, around which interaction spaces may coalesce and extend.

This encounter requires the gaze of a reader-car, but not just any gaze will do. To twist the well-known example of the interpellation of subjects through ideology (Althusser 1994), a highway patrol officer[86] may call-in a car's licence plate in order to verify the legal status of a driver-car (or a driver's licence number, if a traffic stop is made), which is analogous to the officer on foot calling "Stop, thief!" (or perhaps "Hold on a sec, I'm concerned your car inspection is expired"), but is activated through certain communications and information systems at their disposal. This is understood to be within the police officer's title of office and therefore scope of action. If, however, as an informant recounted to me, a driver-car is pulled over not because of a perceived traffic law violation but because of an inscription it bears, a different

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86 A cop cruiser is, after all, another specific extension of the driver-car, with affordances and embodiments enacted through the material and symbolic powers of law enforcement.

mode of "being seen" is at play—that of surveillance and profiling—than the one I am describing between writer-cars and reader-cars.

Therefore the gaze of the reader-car, implied in "being seen" through a writer-car's inscription, does not entail the stark power differentials of surveillance, nor the explicit inversion of such dynamics that characterizes the philosophical underpinnings of recent experiments in *sousveillance* (Mann et al. 2003; Mann and Ferenbok 2013; Mann 2014). Instead, to reformulate Bloch's (2000b) argument on the mobilization of the public sphere through bumper sticker discourse, the interplay of driving gazes presumes a power-dynamic of relative parity, realized through a reciprocal and generalized, if tacit, mutuality of visual identification.

In most cases, at least historically, this mutuality has been accomplished without any form of accounting—more or less permanent, more or less material. However, as I discuss below, the proliferation of ubiquitous computing devices and smart-car technologies on the road have begun to materialize or formalize such encounters. In any case, there are a number of ways individuals indicate that willingness to be visible through their car, including bumper stickers, vanity, specialty and novelty plates, tchotchkes, etc.

As a result, there is a sort of mental marking of writer-cars by reader-cars on the highway. This contrasts to the more visually homogenous aspects of highway driving. As compared to the apparent anonymity, and therefore illegibility or invisibility of the driving subjects of innumerable driver-cars, inscriptions serve a visual indices through which one driver-car or another may become familiar, either on a stretch of superhighway, or driving around town.

It might be tempting to believe bumper stickers go largely unnoticed. The accounts of the participants I have spoken with over the course of several projects and more than six years of research into car inscription indicate otherwise. Nearly everyone has a story about a bumper sticker: a favourite, one they've been looking for to put on their own car; one that drives them to the brink of rage whenever they see it or simply makes them shake their head with bemusement. For example, here is an excerpt from a rather jocular interview with two drivers (*V* and *D;* my part is indicated by the initials *WG*):

WG: So if you see a car with a YANKEES sticker?

V: You just know that guy's an asshole.

D: I don't care so long as they keep out of my way. Maybe you look to see where the car is registered, if it's New York, well that's a *fait accompli*, but if it's a Georgia plate, he's just a wannabe.

WG: How about something like a COEXIST sticker?

V: Maybe I kind of believe that [i.e. agrees with the sentiment], but I see those stickers and I'm like "it's a tree-hugger" […] but if I see a HARLEY sticker on a car— I have a Harley— I'm like "I know this guy's ok"

WG: What if you saw a COEXIST sticker with a ROMNEY sticker?

V: First of all, you'd never see that. But [even if you did] it would be such an anomaly that it wouldn't matter.

The interviewees were familiar with reading bumper stickers on the road to the degree that they could cite a specific example or type of sticker and what it represented in their interpretive schemas. Taking notice of bumper stickers plays out in virtual spaces such as well, such as on message boards on which interpretations of inscriptions may be solicited and debated, or via the circulation of images through Twitter, Facebook or other social media channels as with Figure 56. I explore this idea in more depth in the sections *A Shocking Case* and *Hyperreality & the Case of the Boston Bomber COEXIST Sticker*, below.

Figure 55: Of Course You Don't (via Twitter)[87]

Interpretive Modes of the Reader-Car

We may assume that the sticker is functioning as a communicative act between the driver in front and the addressee.

Dennis Kurzon, *Deixis and Background Knowledge in the Humor of Car Bumper Stickers*

As I discuss in Chapter 3, earlier studies on bumper stickers have explored the possible relationships between the identity of a presumed owner/driver of a car, and the stickers on their car. Several of these studies have developed typologies around various qualities of the sticker texts themselves (Case 1992; Stern and Solomon 1992; Endersby and Towle 1996; Goettlich 2009). Implicit to these typologies is either the assumption of measurable qualities, or the subsumption of readerly activity necessary to the categorization of sticker texts. On this last point, it's worth emphasizing researchers are readers, too, and the development of a bumper sticker typology is very much an act of readerly interpretation.

My present line of inquiry is somewhat different, in that I focus more explicitly on the work done by a reader to generate the meaning of a text, rather than presuming the sticker simply conveys that meaning. According to this argument, the key move in a writer-/reader-car encounter is made by the reader-car, in the decision to entertain possible meanings of the sticker(s) they have encountered. While I say "decision," I do not mean this in a conscious sense. Rather, if the inscriptions on a writer-car are understood to be an ongoing, tacit invitation to be seen/interpreted, the acceptance of this invitation by the reader-car may be equally tacit.

The acceptance by a reader- of a writer-car's invitation often comes by way of a subtle shift in the reader's thoughts or awareness. In other cases, it may be more dramatic, as in the case of the I ♥ WATERBOARDING encounter discussed below. Either way, once this move is made, the process of reading, decoding and making meaning of another driver-car's inscriptions entails a process of interpretation. Part of this process of interpretation is an act of imagination or projection of the interpretations back to a putative, *social other*. A moment of differential identity work follows this projection, in which the reader effectively asks herself, "Where do I stand when it comes to *that?*" For example: "That guy's got a YANKEES sticker (I'm a Red Sox fan), ergo he must be an asshole"; or: "N7 and HRC? Right on: Someone else who takes *Mass Effect* as an allegory for tolerance" (see Figure 25, above).

Further, the reader may chose (or not) to discursively re-activate the meaning they are in process of constructing by taking and sharing photos, searching online for meanings, talking with

friends, buying a related sticker (of similar or opposing view), or even writing a MA thesis. In this sense, a contemporary bumper sticker acts as a materialized waypoint, a moment of apparent stability in a succession of ramifying and uncertain translational possibilities. These possibilities materialize, idea to sticker; and mobilize, through American automobility. Once mobile, the process reverts: Sticker texts act as re-transmitters of discursive resources, whose (re-)translation begins through the various interpretive modes of the reader-car. In what follows, I use three metaphors to discuss these modes. It should be clear that these modes are not necessarily discrete, nor mutually exclusive of one another. Rather, they often overlap or complement each other in the work of the driver-car.

Labeling / Reification Mode

The bumper sticker is a label in the material definition of the word, a "slip of paper, cardboard, metal, etc. attached or intended to be attached to an object and bearing its name, description, or destination" ("label" OED Online 2014). In the figurative sense, labels have been analysed in classical sociological work primarily with respect to deviance (Tannenbaum 1938; Becker 1963).

More recently, material forms of self-labeling have been understood as a means of signalling individuation and/or group-identity (Heeren 1980; Smith 1988; D'Alisera 2001). It should not be surprising then that one interpretive mode of the reader-car is that of labelling. I use "interpretive" cautiously, however. If labelling and puzzling (discussed below) are thought of as modes along a continuum of readerly curiosity as closed/open possibilities, or reification/creative interpretation, labelling falls at the closed, reifying end of the scale.

Take, for example, the discussion with *V* and *D*, cited above. *V*, a committed Red Sox fan, effectively reduces the relationship of the label and its associated subjectivity (according to his schema) to a one-to-one basis: *Yankees sticker = asshole*. He does the same with writer-cars bearing Harley stickers, but with a positive spin on the relationship. Of course, *V* is not entirely serious when he makes these claims. On the road, however, he has a ready interpretive script to categorize other driver-cars.

Affective Mode

In some cases the predominant interpretive mode is more closely experienced through the affective response of the reader-car than the application of a labeling schema. Take for example the following anecdote: *H* was driving when he saw a bumper sticker that read I ♥ WATERBOARDING, a reference to one amongst the range of torture and interrogation techniques recently employed by the CIA and other U.S. government agencies and contractors on prisoners in the so-called *War on Terror* (Kreisher 2008). While recounting the experience, *H* suggested that on reflection he could not be certain the sticker was not meant ironically, but that at the time he was so angered by it that he accelerated violently, exceeding the speed limit in order to pass the other car immediately. When I asked if he recalled any details about the make and model, or its driver, he replied again that he was so overwhelmed with rage and the desire to get away from the other car he did not allow himself even to glance at it as he sped past.

Whereas in *V*'s labeling schema *Yankees sticker = asshole*, despite the strength of the label (he could have said "loser" or "jerk") his response to reading a Yankees sticker is not a predominantly affective one. Or at least the affective dimension of his interpretive response is not very strong. By comparison, *H*'s response to encountering I ♥ WATERBOARDING was a self-described, embodied rage. In his account he did not bother to label the writer-car, rather he expressed his feelings and actions at the moment of encounter. At the time of this encounter *H*'s vehicles bore military-veteran specialty plates, a U.S. Army window decal and a bumper sticker with the name of the U.S. Navy ship on which his son served. According to another interpretive schema, any of these alone—to say nothing of the array read as a whole—might be interpreted as representing a conservative, pro-military subjectivity, perhaps even one that supported the use of "extreme rendition" and "enhanced interrogation techniques," such as waterboarding as a means of "national defense."

Puzzle Mode

In an earlier study (Goettlich 2011) I discuss how an array of stickers on a given writer-car may be interpreted as self-contradictory, such as the presence of an F-35 Vermont euroval showing support for local implementation of increased national defense spending and TURN OFF FOX | BAD NEWS FOR AMERICA. According to my interpretive schema, the F-35 sticker corresponds with a conservative political position, while TURN OFF FOX corresponds with a more liberal one.

Furthermore, the array itself is a rather messy hodgepodge of grouped, decayed and overlapping stickers (Figure 57), some signalling consonance with F-35 and others with TURN OFF FOX.

Figure 56: F-35 Vermont - Turn off Fox News / Burlington, Vermont (Walter Goettlich 2011)

If I encountered a writer-car with either an F-35 or TURN OFF FOX sticker by itself I would most likely label it conservative or liberal, thereby further reifying my already established interpretive script. If, however, I recognize the appearance of the two on the same car as a challenge to my established interpretive schema(s), and if as a reader I am to continue in my attempt to resolve the apparent symbolic dissonance presented by the writer-car, I must engage a different mode of reading: a *cognitive*, or *puzzle-solving* one. In effect, this mode requires me to maintain a certain willingness to restructure my interpretive scripts in order to accommodate novel, or previously unimagined possibilities.

In the preceding example I use a deliberately simplified binary opposition of subjective positions: "conservative" vs. "liberal." The contemporary American news media is full of red-state/blue-state discourse that it hardly requires elaboration. But many writer-car inscriptions that require the use of the puzzle-solving mode are not so tidily categorized.

133

As a consequence of the recent flourishing of mass-customized stickers and the diminution of the relevance of so-called shared cultural knowledge I discuss in Chapter 5, the reader-car must increasingly engage writer-cars as open possibilities if they hope to make any sense of their inscriptions. Concurrent to the expansion of networked culture that affords mass-customized inscriptions has been the proliferate use of mobile computing devices that exploit the always-on, qualculative background of the internet as a means of making sense of the world (Thrift 2006). The text of a sticker in the form of the URL iamsecond.com is an entirely human-legible, referential move that invites its reader to extend the immediate moment of the highway encounter into virtual space. The design of my own research project sticker (Figure 54) included a deliberately ambiguous human-legible text and a non-human-legible QR code linked to the project website in order to elicit the use of a scanner application enabled web search by curious readers. Other stickers, whose designs do not include any written text, similarly afford use of reading through the puzzle mode. For example, the writer-car in Figure 25at the beginning of Chapter 5 bears two inscriptions, one that reads N7 and the other a purely graphical design reproduced in Figure 58. If, for the sake of argument, neither of these stickers were intelligible to me I could employ a combination of Internet searches to sort through their referential possibilities and orient my interpretation.

Using the CamFind[88] application on my mobile

Figure 57: CamFind App Search Results (Walter Goettlich, 2015)

134

phone produced the results shown in the two panels of Figure 58, directing my understanding of the symbol to the Human Rights Campaign for equal rights for LGBTQ people. A Google search for the text string "N7" yielded more than thirty-six million results, many of the first dozen few dozen point to pages detailing the video game series *Mass Effect* and related products. The mechanics of this kind of internet search as a technique of self-orientation in the world are banal practice for many contemporary Americans (and more generally, global Northerners). More interesting is the way in which a search assemblage of human social curiosity, hardware, software and its algorithmically-derived outputs condition acts of cultural interpretation and meaning making. I examine the possibilities and limitations of this process in greater detail in section Interaction Space, below.

Authorship & Veracity

Questions related to the authorship and veracity of a bumper sticker's claim(s) require a brief comment. Notably, Foucault (2003) has analyzed what he terms the "author function," as a culturally and historically variable complex of effects (383). Counter to modernist conceptions of the author as unitary genius, Foucault argues the author function is not reducible to the individual: "It is, rather, the result of a complex operation that constructs a certain being of reason we call 'author'" (384). Whereas analyses of discourse that presume an *author as individual* inevitably get caught up in questions of accountability, authenticity and originality, those that presume an *author function* are free to explore new types of questions no longer centered on the author as individual, particularly those related to the analysis of the "subject as a variable and complex function of discourse" (390).

While Foucault uses a number of literary genres to elaborate his analysis, bumper stickers are not among them. But by using Foucault's distinction between the author and author function as a point of departure, the question "who is the author of a bumper sticker text?" might be more productively framed along the lines of "what functions of authorship are at play in a mobile bumper sticker text?" Additionally, how does / should the reader view treat the credibility or truth-value? For example, Leitz (2011) notes:

> numerous antiwar blogs, interviews, bumper stickers, t-shirts, and protest banners have erroneously attributed the quote 'dissent is the highest form of patriotism' to Thomas Jefferson. Many in the U.S. antiwar movement incorrectly attributed this quote to

Jefferson likely in an attempt to call upon the patriotic imagery of a 'founding father' in order to define opposition to the war as patriotic. (241)

As I note in Chapter 5, DON'T BLAME ME, I VOTED FOR THE AMERICAN trades on the demonstrably false "birtherist" assertion that Barak Obama should be disqualified on Constitutional grounds from being the U.S. President. Other opinions and statements of belief are less factually verifiable and further cloud the issue. The reader-car interprets the writer-car's inscriptions, imagines a subjectivity that corresponds to those interpretations and—implicitly or explicitly—projects that imagined subjectivity back to the driver-car.

Figure 58: Feminism is the Radical Notion / Off I-89, Williston, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2011)

Of course, in some cases the individual driving the car is not the same individual who put the stickers on it in the first place. A number of years ago, for example, I encountered a young woman named *J* in a mall parking lot in Williston, Vermont whose car bore a sticker reading

FEMINISM IS THE RADICAL NOTION THAT WOMEN ARE PEOPLE TOO (Figure 59).[89] *J* inherited the car as hand-me-down from an older sister who had put the sticker on the car. She said in that part of Vermont (Burlington area), which is noted for its liberal politics, the sticker attracted little attention. But during a road trip through southern states she was surprised when strangers commented about it to her, effectively calling her to account for the text as its author. She told me she agreed with the statement, but wasn't sure if she would have put it on the car herself. In any case, when confronted about it on her trip *J* said she disclaimed the car as her sister's, as a means to distance herself from the authorship of the text. In the type of highway interaction I am concerned with this kind of face-to-face confrontation is rare, if not impossible. But the anecdote nonetheless exposes the associative act of linking sticker text-to-car-to-driver, or the writer-car *as* author.

In other cases, a driver may borrow an already-inscribed car, or an adolescent child may put stickers on a parent's car. The fact remains that the driving subject of the writer-car is not necessarily the author of the text in question. As well, the question of authorship can be traced further along the temporal path of the sticker, through its production (is Zazzle.com the author?) to its reputed source. This source may be a quotable individual, a corporate marketing team, and a government agency or a creative individual.

I treat the author as the writer-car who mobilizes the message, making it available to the interpretive and imaginative acts of the reader-car. According to my argument, neither the veracity of a text, nor the personal agreement of the individual driving subject who presently controls a writer-car with the text(s) they are writing, needs to be established in any objective sense in order for the reader-car to construct meaning. Veracity and authorship are established subjectively by the reader-car through the acts of reflective interpretation on the one hand, and projective imagination on the other.

Differential Identity & the Imagination of the Social Other

As I have indicated above, the experience of the driver-car generally, and reader-car specifically, is highly subjective: this is the reason an objective assessment of the veracity and authorship of a sticker is not all that important. Rather, whether or not the reader-car believes the

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89 The sticker was produced by the University of Vermont Women's Center, and includes a phone number and URL for the Center.

veracity of a sticker, what the reader-car believes *about* the sticker and that the reader-car imputes the meaning they construct to the writer-car are important, and constitute a form of differential identity work done by the reader-car through the creation of a social other.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir traces the contemporary basis of sexist categorization to the wider human cultural practice of *othering*, which is to say the definition of self/group in terms of non-self/non-group: "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought […] Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (1989: xxiii).

Discussing communities and community identity, Amit (2002) further notes "we could argue therefore that the relational character of community is as likely to be derived from the multiple attachments of its members as from contrasts with collectivities in which they are not members" (16). In this sense, the ontological state of an identity (being something/someone) is always construed relative to that which it is not[90]. De Beauvoir includes practices as widely varied as imagined train-compartment solidarity and anti-Semitism as forms of group construction and inclusion/exclusion.

On contemporary American superhighways, the reader-car encounters an unending stream of texts that serve as the bases of potential differential identity work: national- and global politics, sports teams and computer brands, religious beliefs and lifestyle preferences. How much of this work is reflexive, however, is an open question. Donna Haraway (1988, 583) comments "it [feminist objectivity] allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see." As someone who identifies as a white, middle class, heterosexual, university-educated American male with liberal politics (especially by US Standards) I have learned to see and interpret the world in particular ways[91]. This is significant in my role as researcher, but also as a reader-car. In other words, having those characteristics as influential conditions, I read and imagine other subjectivities through their stickers in specific ways, and do differential identity work on myself through those imaginings. As subjective as the acts of interpretation and imagination may be, certain, socially- and culturally-hegemonic, privileged positions condition the possibilities of writer-/reader-car encounters.

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90 This concept of differential definition has echoes in Saussurian semiotics, in which a given signifier / signified pair exists in relation to other pairs, and is defined through this relationality rather than by a positive quality of the pair itself.

91 Note Haraway's argument is not a deterministic one. Rather, it is a demand to acknowledge the conditions that contextualize and situate an individual's apprehension of the world.

For example, take *J*'s story, above, the sticker in Figure 60, and the discussion of the "shocker" sticker below. A pervasive and tacit cultural attitude of sex/gender inequality affords each of these examples. Admittedly I am speculating here, but it is difficult for me to imagine a (male) writer-car being confronted over a sticker that compares feminism to Nazism; evidently this is not the case for one that simply includes women as a subset of humanity.

In the anecdote with which I began this thesis I find myself asking: *who would put that on their car*? This, and the attendant *why?* are the fundamental questions posed by the reader-car. They are both highly speculative, and yet are also constructive in the sense they allow the reader-car to play an imaginative game of identity possibilities. Occasionally the reader-car will catch a glimpse into a passing writer-car, allowing the reader- a chance to tether this act of abstract imagination with the real person at the wheel of a passing car:

> On my way through South Dakota a few summers ago, I read a bumper sticker that transformed my teaching. It was displayed on the back of a van sputtering along the freeway and stated that Columbus didn't discover America, he invaded it. It seemed a rather odd message, and I was curious to see who might have posted this peculiar notion on his or her vehicle. As I pulled out to pass the van, I thought of my own rendition of the story of Christopher Columbus. Deeply etched into my memory were the facts that Columbus discovered America in 1492, was in charge of three ships (whose names I could call to mind more quickly than the names of old friends), and was credited with

92 I retrieved the sticker in Figure 59 from the mensrightsguy shop on Zazzle.com: http://www.zazzle.ca/femizazi_bumper_sticker-128867615016542313. While I have bought a number of stickers as examples for my collection from Zazzle, Cafe Press and other sites in the course of this research, I decided to use a screen-grab of this sticker rather than buy one; Call it the exercise of responsible personal consumer politics.

opening the doors to life in a great country. It made no sense to think of Columbus's discovery as an invasion until I caught a glimpse of the driver. Behind the wheel sat a Native American, and, suddenly, I felt ashamed […] The shame I felt after reading the bumper sticker was not from finding out that I was wrong about Columbus but that, until I saw who behind the wheel of that van, I had never considered anyone else's view but my own" (Finney 2003, 74)

Finney's account appears in a journal entitled *The Reading Teacher*, dedicated to elementary-level literacy education, in an article whose subject is the development of multi-perspective reading practices. Whether or not Finney's suggestions for developing such practices are effective, her account is significant for at least three reasons.

First, it demonstrates the kind of readerly act of imagination I have been attempting to describe: the author was driving on a freeway, she encountered a bumper sticker text that she didn't completely understand (or agree with; in any case something required interpretation) and attempted to make sense of it. This sense included reading the symbolic values of the vehicle in combination with those of the sticker text, in this case a "spluttering van," whose exhaust I can smell ten years and two thousand miles away.

Second, it demonstrates how the reader-car drew upon her own schemas of identity to make sense of a sticker text. The writer-car driver, we are told, was a "Native American[93]," although just how the reader- came to that conclusion is not made clear. What is clear, however, is that the reader's imaginative identification of the writer-car driver allowed the construction of meaning.

Third, the meaning that emerged from this encounter between writer- and reader-cars was powerful enough to induce in the reader-car an affective response, in fact *shame*, which as emotions go is a strong one. This emotional response was itself at least partially generative of a multi-modal interaction space that has spanned a decade a number of disparate intertextual dimensions, and a presumably wide, but ultimately unknowable population[94].

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93 I am not an expert in indigenous peoples' issues in the U.S., but I am at least generally conversant in the long history of exploitation, marginalization and genocide of indigenous Americans by European colonists and latterly, the U.S. government and 'mainstream' American culture. My point here is simply to acknowledge that the Finney's use of Native American is as a term of convenience, which is, itself, a valid object of critique.
94 Of these dimensions, this thesis is one; and of the population you and I both number.

Interaction Space: Two Cases

Space, Massey (2005) argues, is the product of interrelations (people, things, practices) through time; a multiplicity of interactions and spaces co-constitute one another and as a consequence, space is always "under construction […] never finished; never closed" (9). In other words, while space and interrelations are indissociable, they are not stable. Rather, they are twinned, productive conditions of possibility for new spaces and interrelations.

This is not to say, however, that all spaces engender all interrelations or vice-versa. At least from an analytical standpoint, it should be possible to group certain sets of interrelations and spaces, over time into virtual sets, or *interaction spaces,* in order to make sense of the world. In everyday life it is common enough practice to do this; think, for example, of an intimate relationship of one sort or another (familial, friendship or partnership/marriage). The very word "relationship" in this context serves a metaphor for a certain type of relatively cohesive interaction space. In this context, cohesiveness is accomplished through co-presence (both physical and emotional) over time. But as Urry (2007) notes, propinquity is no longer the basis of social relations, as it comes to be replaced through various forms of digital mediation, and through which less cohesive interaction spaces are produced. Increasingly important is the trace or smear, a residue persistent enough to cause an act of reflection, retrieval or response.

Relative to this my claim is the momentary encounter of a writer-car and reader-car may produce a largely virtually mediated interaction space. In this light, the momentary passing of a bumper sticker affords the possibility of such a trace or smear sticking, an opening move in the creation of an interaction space. The persistent background of qualculation, ubiquitous ICTs and Google-ability afford the extensibility of such a space. Discursive themes are (re-)activated through search algorithms, stimulating online discussion or awareness through virtual dissemination, which itself may result in the creation of creating a response or derivative sticker. Above all, the interaction spaces writer-/reader-car encounters spawn are asynchronous (poly-synchronous?) and asymmetrical (poly-symmetric?); unbalanced in their reciprocity. Perhaps, even in the main, they are imaginative, virtual.

In Chapter 4 I demonstrate and discuss the re-mediation of classic-type bumper stickers through a number of newspaper articles that appeared in the *New York Times* through the 20th century. The following two examples show how contemporary stickers are re-mediated through 21st century, internet-age technologies.

A Shocking Case

There it was: a red, turn-of-the-millennium Honda Accord coupe parked outside my house. A pair of fuzzy boobs dangled from the rear view mirror, a three-fingered salute stuck to its rear bumper. I've seen the decal several times subsequently, on other cars, up and down the I-95 corridor (never the stuffed breasts, though). One afternoon, trailing an unremarkable import sedan along an unmemorable stretch of interstate I noticed the sticker and my curiosity was piqued: *Siri, Google "three fingers up, ring finger down."* I put the phone down, and made a mental note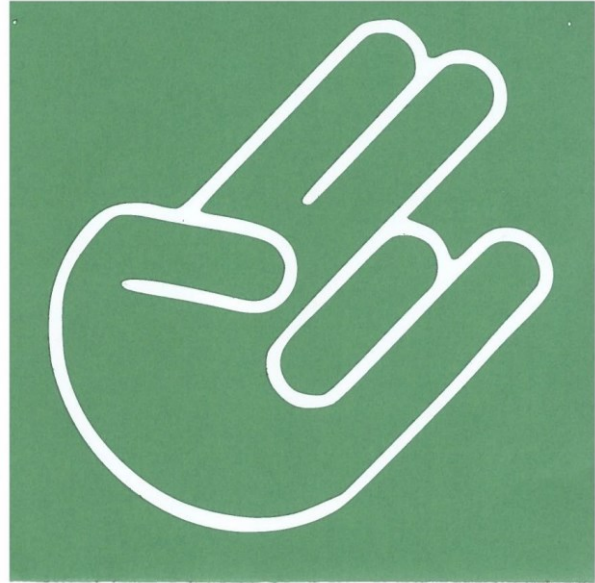 to check the search result when I next stopped. When I eventually remembered to do this I was surprised by what I found, to say the least. Each of the top search results directed me to one page or another treating the topic of "the shocker," a "sexual" manoeuvre involving the simultaneous, digital penetration of a woman's vagina and anus[95]. I've put the word sexual in quotations because the act is often described as being unannounced or unexpected. In the language of casual sexism and misogyny these read to me as a euphemisms for *non-consensual.* In fact, the term *shocker* derives its name from the reported (and championed) "shock" of anal penetration and not pleasure the experienced by the recipient/victim. Overall, the idea of the shocker in practice seems very much a puerile misogynist fantasy, a point sex columnists Alexis McKinnis[96] and Christine Borden[97] make. Along these lines, comment following an online *Savage Love* column imagines the genesis of the shocker:

> A frat boy […] sits around with other frat boys thinking of stupid/painful/degrading/dangerous/inane sexual acts (see: shocker, donkey punch) […] that he thinks would be 'hilarious' to surprise a woman with in middle of sex[98].

Figure 60: The Shocker (Collection)

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95 There are innumerable colourfully crass metaphors for the shocker. See: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=shocker
96 http://www.vita.mn/17243159.html
97 http://archive.dailycal.org/article.php?id=22706
98 See http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/SavageLove?oid=4787052 comment section #64 posted by user 'DarkSarcasm,' September 2, 2010.

But in terms of its automobility appearance, the shocker symbol appears to be primarily associated with JDM custom modding sub-cultures (see Chapter 3), although that association is clearly contested. For example, an article on one JDM enthusiast site notes the shocker is:

> one of the most popular and controversial stickers available. Not everyone will understand what it means. The ones that do may laugh, the ones that don't may get a little offended. Either way it's a sticker that will attract attention and is one of the most common jdm stickers for cars[99].

In a short essay on the site 7tune, Adam Zillin questions the association of the shocker with serious or authentic JDM practice[100]. As well, there are numerous JDM community board discussions of the shocker[101]. Many of the posts to these discussions also challenge the shocker as "true" JDM, while also citing their ubiquity. This ubiquity is frequently attributed to a demographic of white, male, 16-21 year-old American JDM enthusiasts.

I've elaborated my encounters with the shocker bumper sticker here as a way to illustrate two things. First is the way in which I went about constructing a meaning for this sticker through a series of Internet searches, following one link to another. My emotional response to the meanings I've constructed around the shocker has evolved somewhat, from outright repulsion to a sort of head-shaking bemusement. Both responses are relative to the speculative answers I provide to the questions who/why would put that on a car, write that text on the world? While I read an inescapable undercurrent of sexism and misogyny in the shocker, in my world view a perpetrator of sexual assault and a callow, trend-toady teen do not represent the same kind of problem. But, as Haraway (1988) rightly points out, this is the privilege (and limitation) of my own partial perspective. In any case, I have imagined a subjectivity that corresponds to the meaning I've constructed. Although it is a provisional one, subject to change with respect to future meanings I may construct as I read other mobile sticker arrays that include this symbol.

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99 http://jdmcars.org/jdm-stickers
100 http://www.7tune.com/editorial-these-dont-make-you-jdm-as-fuck-yo/
Zillin also challenges the association of wakaba (see Chapter 5) and momiji bumper stickers as 'authentic' JDM symbols.
101 For example see:
http://honda-tech.com/honda-acura-28/understanding-shocker-2661648/
https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080617165915AAuzi8u
http://www.driveaccord.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-41581.html
http://forums.nasioc.com/forums/showthread.php?t=1621989

Second, my discussion of the shocker is a demonstration of the way in which other readers have attempted to make sense of this sticker. The reader might question the veracity of the sources I've used: wikipedia.org, urbandictionary.com, sex advice columns and community discussion boards. What "objective" authority do any of these sources have? Some? None? I can't really say. But as I've discussed above, the abstract notion of objective authority is not a concern in the construction of meanings, imputation of subjectivities, or the extension of interaction spaces around bumper sticker texts. Rather, the freedom of a reader to examine, play with and expand their own worldview and sense of self is increasingly accomplished through access to (hyper-)mediated sources of uncertain and/or dubious veracity and authorship. Admittedly, this is more than a little problematic when considering the construction and circulation of knowledge-power, as the following section illustrates.

Hyperreality & the Case of the Boston Bomber COEXIST Sticker

Figure 61: Tolerance (Coexist Pastiche) / Off I-66, Manassas, Virginia (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

The Coexist Foundation is a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization that describes its mission as the advancement of "social cohesion through education and innovation[102]." Meant to confront a global "crisis of understanding," their programs include a number of initiatives meant to foster cross-cultural understanding and inclusion in areas where ethnic and religious differences have caused "prejudice, hate and violence."

The foundation's website includes an online storefront, the home page of which declares "when you buy Coexist products you support education for children in post-conflict zones[103]." The shop sells products ranging from direct- and fair-trade coffees to magnetic bumper stickers.

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102 https://www.coexist.org/about
103 http://coexistcampaign.org

One of these stickers features in my conversation with *V* (above), and has spawned a number of intertextual derivatives, as in Figures 61 and 63 Like these derivatives, the "official" sticker replaces each of the letters of the word COEXIST with a symbol meant to represent a different religious or belief system, as well as a foundation website URL and slogan:

Figure 62: Coexist Campaign (personal collection)

Events around the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013 were sensationalized by certain members of the American right-wing media who, in a binge of liberal-baiting, seized on the irony that the bombing suspects carjacked a vehicle with a COEXIST sticker on it. Speaking on the Fox News Channel show *The O'Reilly Factor* less than a week after the bombings, comedian and radio-show host Adam Corolla said:

> As far as the COEXIST bumper sticker being on the car that got carjacked, that makes me laugh […] It's basically a bumper sticker that shows all the different religions of the world and how we need to get along together, when that bumper sticker could be shortened quite a bit, to maybe just CO. It doesn't need half the religions that are on there. It's just part of the problem, which is, everyone's the problem. Everyone's not the problem. There's certain religions that cause more trouble than others, I think we know who they are and we need to focus on them, and not pretend like it's the Jews' fault as much as it's the Christians' fault, in this particular case.[104]

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104 I transcribed these comments from the Rollin' with Corolla segment of *The O'Reilly Factor*, originally aired on April 22, 2013. The segment is currently available to view on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QnxW4x92kI

Corolla finished his comments by asking the show's host, Bill O'Reilly, "COEXIST bumper sticker on your car or THIS CAR INSURED BY SMITH & WESSON? Which car would be more likely to be jacked?" to which O'Reilly replied, "Ok, I think we all know the answer to that." [105]

This theme was picked up by conservative bloggers, such as those on the *Conservative Hideout 2.0* website that ran a post entitled "Irony Alert! Muslim Marathon Bombers Carjacked Vehicle with 'Coexist' Sticker!"[106] and another on the *RedState* site entitled "Two Supreme Ironies of the Boston Terror Attacks."[107]

Figure 63: Right-Wing Coexist Pastiche

More mainstream commentators were also involved, such as Mark Steyn of the National Review Online wrote:

> And, in their final hours of freedom, they added a cruel bit of mockery to their crimes by carjacking a getaway vehicle with a "Co-exist" bumper sticker. Oh, you must have seen them: I bet David Sirota has one. The "C" is the Islamic crescent, the "O" is the hippy peace sign; the "X" is the Star of David, the "T" is the Christian cross; I think there's some LGBT, Taoist, and Wiccan stuff in there, too […] if it weren't for that Islamic crescent you wouldn't need a bumper sticker at all.[108]

I am going to bracket the arrogant, intolerant and, frankly, nonsensical character of these comments in order to examine the real irony at hand, which also points up the feature of this episode that is most germane to my research: the hijacked car did not, in fact, have a *COEXIST* sticker on it. Jason Torchinsky, writing on the car culture website Jalopnik[109], deconstructs

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[105] Similarly: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/3009698/posts?page=112, the source of the designs in Figure 63.

106 http://conservativehideout.com/2013/04/20/irony-alert-muslim-marathon-bombers-car-jacked-vehicle-with-coexist-sticker/

107 http://www.redstate.com/diary/6755mm/2013/04/23/two-supreme-ironies-of-the-boston-terror-attacks/

108 http://www.nationalreview.com/article/346146/'co-exist'-bombers

109 http://jalopnik.com/the-coexist-sticker-on-boston-bomber-carjacked-car-is-478736660

origins of the fallacy which apparently involved some Photoshopping and misrepresentation, juiced on social media and a willingness to believe on the part of many Americans; a Baudrillardian (1994 [1981]) precession of simulacrum, the map that prefigures the territory, the hyperreal. At the time of the search for the bombing suspects I had heard about this sticker (I don't remember how), and made a note to look into it. It was more than a year later, getting around to writing this section of the thesis, when I discovered I couldn't find any bona fide, mainstream news report[110] that validates the claims made by O'Reilly, Corolla, or Steyn.

Figure 64: Breaking News: Coexistence is a Hoax[111]

Above all, this episode illustrates how bumper stickers act as powerful symbols of certain imagined subjectivities, and how the interpretations of those symbols come to play in interaction spaces much extended from a roadway encounter. In this case, there was never any actual writer-/ reader-car encounter, although the scene in Figure 65 purports to represent such an encounter (albeit a rather unusual and complex one). In terms of differential identity work, the interaction space that extends around this fabricated encounter affords a critique of social liberalism in the

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110 I use the term mainstream advisedly here. Fox News, the network that airs the O'Reilly Factor is one of the major television outlets in America, even as it is a byword for one-eyed reporting (and that one is the right eye, but not in the sense of its correctness).
111 http://jalopnik.com/the-coexist-sticker-on-boston-bomber-carjacked-car-is-478736660

U.S., rather than one of the Boston Marathon bombing, its perpetrators, or terrorism more generally.

In other words, for a rather large part of the American population the COEXIST sticker has become metonymic of the imagined intellectual weakness and moral dissolution of another whole section of the population. The amplification of this sentiment, however, is afforded by the contemporary conditions of American automobility and digital culture. That a reader-car might be on hand to capture the moment of one of the Marathon Bomber's arrest is entirely believable, because many Americans know what it is to drive with a mobile phone in their hand (whether or not it is safe, legal or advisable). Furthermore, the solicitation of photos taken by "citizen reporters" at major events to enhance the verisimilitude of news reports is now commonplace. Taken in this light, the consequences of social interactions afforded by writer- / reader-car encounters, even in extended forms, take on a decidedly bleak hue.

Conclusion

In response to political pundits and social critics who lament declining public involvement, mass-mediatisation and a creeping sense of alienation in contemporary American society, Newhagen and Ancell (1995, 321) argue "bumper stickers represent a highly personal vehicle for the public discussion […] on a broad range of social issues outside the formal political system and beyond the reach of traditional mass media." The authors continue, discussing the act of reading stickers in traffic, "[a]t one level, looking at the language of the bumper sticker might seem a humorous, if trivial exercise. But at another, the stickers represent an important last outpost for the use of language as a tool to establish self-identity in public" (322).

Chattopadhyay (2009, 129) argues "vehicular art as popular culture allows us to think of mobility in more nuanced ways, not just as upward mobility, but also as passage from one cultural space to another, from one historical moment to another, from one vision to another." And importantly, Bloch (2000b) posits the potential for a mobile public sphere activated and sustained through the same affordances that have otherwise made bumper stickers a byword for the inconsequential: brevity, ubiquity, material flimsiness and rampant intertextuality.

Peter Merriman (2012) has recently suggested mobilities studies would benefit from increased attention paid to the "fleeting social attachments generated through the visualities of car windscreens" (60). I have written this thesis as a tentative response to Merriman's challenge. In it, I have attempted to examine one such form of ephemeral sociality: the momentary encounter of two automobile assemblages (driver-cars) on the highway, at least one of which is itself written upon and thereby writes upon the world through the instrument of its bumper stickers. I have attempted to describe the ways in which American identities are bound up with cars, as well as the intersection of systemic (macro-) and phenomenological (micro-) conditions of American superhighway automobility as they themselves condition writer-/reader-car encounters.

My central argument has been that the writer-/reader-car encounter does constitute a form of sociality, albeit one that is largely imaginative, virtual, asymmetrical and asynchronous. In this respect, writer-/reader-car encounters are quite different from classically conceived notions of social activity, which have tended to privilege co-present, personal interaction (Urry 2007) situated in locally distinct, "anthropological places" (Augé 2008).

By contrast, I have attempted to open the possibility of a different formulation of a multi-dimensional social space and encounter, an *interaction space*. In my view, the writer-/reader-car

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encounter, and any resultant interaction spaces that coalesce around and extend from it derive from the interplay between the contemporary experience of isolation and a type of hermeneutic play engaged in order to move beyond that isolation. These encounters are activated and extended, in large part, through the affordances and virtual spaces of the Internet age. But they are also re-mediated and re-materialized (in the form of new stickers) through those affordances and spaces. This argument draws from Linda-Renée Bloch's (2000b) theorization of a *mobile public sphere*, although when combined with ubiquitous ICTs and qualculative background (Thrift 2006) the discursive possibilities of such a sphere extend in previously unforeseen ways.

The history of car inscription is as long as that of American automobility, while bumper stickers have been a feature of the American driving experience since before the creation of the Interstate Highway System, nearly 60 years ago. But bumper stickers have changed over time, as has the kind of cultural work they afford. Concurrent with their increasing plurality and referential obscurity, it has become more difficult to construct meanings from contemporary bumper sticker texts than their classic antecedents. This is in part a result of the generalized loosening and ramification of relationships between the signifier and its signified characteristic of contemporary (postmodern) experiences of language and culture generally. But it is also afforded by the recent development of mass-customization techniques that ostensibly allow anyone with a car, a credit card and an Internet connection to create and mobilize their own texts.

In terms of the cultural work that happens around bumper stickers, the role of the reader is central. The would-be reader must frequently make a non-trivial effort, drawing upon substantial personal and background resources in the move to decipher, interpret and construct meaning from many contemporary bumper stickers. In other words, while the interpretation of classic stickers requires access to a set of background cultural knowledge, contemporary ones require access to a set of background tools. In this sense, social activity emerges through a combination of indexed searchability and readerly imagination.

Reflections & Limitations

There are a few reflections upon and caveats to the claims I've made in this thesis. First, I have done relatively little to address gender and race as constituents of American automobility or

driver-car assemblage[112]. While I have been at pains to qualify my claims as partial perspective, I must reiterate they emerge from my enjoyment of certain unmarked/privileged statuses. When I speak of an *invitation to be seen*, I have conceptualized that notion as someone who is effectively invisible to sexist/racist/ homophobic gazes and attitudes that are still all too common in American culture. The decision to write a political opinion or lifestyle preference on the back of one's car may have altogether different consequences for someone whose skin is not "pale" enough, whose immigration status is not assured or who also has an LGBTQ sticker sandwiched between 26.2 and Lobster eurovals.

Figure 65: Silly Boys / Off I-64, Kentucky (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

In this sense, it is worth asking whether or not I have simply described a process of stereotyping, albeit one that takes place at 70 miles per hour. I cannot account for the degree to which other reader-cars rely on their own pre-conceived notions (or prejudices) when imagining other subjectivities. It is clear that readers rely on their own subjective organizations of the world when they make meaning of a text. Otherwise the act of reading itself, never mind meaning making, would be impossible. As well, driver-cars do not have the opportunity to develop an inter-subjective reading of their encounter in the same way a friend and I might discuss a film or news story. The meaning a reader-car constructs is decidedly unidirectional and possibly

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112 Cotten Seiler (2008) analyzes the historical construction of gender and race through automobility, while Paul Gilroy (2001) writes about the contemporary phenomenon of "driving while black". Lynn Pearce (2000) gives a feminist account of the driver-car.

solipsistic. The extension of the encounter depends on forms of asymmetrical, asynchronous interaction in the form of other encounters in virtual and material space.

Figure 66: HRC, Rainbow, Peace / Off I-66, Manassas, Virginia (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

As far as dwelling in the driver-car is concerned, my claims are based on conditions that do not necessarily represent those of an everyday American superhighway traveller. First, I drove rental cars almost exclusively, and none of the cars I drove were mine. As I discuss in Chapter 2, these cars were basically brand new, mechanically sound and clean vehicles. In other words, they weren't "lived-in," and in that sense had not adapted to me as the driver. Of course, such adaptations are as often as not frustrating or worrisome: mechanical kinks and monthly payments that worry at the back of the mind, untraceable odours, a tendency to pull to one side or the other all change the way a driver "feels" the car, in both physical and emotional terms (Sheller 2004). I primarily drove through areas with which I was not familiar. In addition to the new, worry-free cars I drove, the roads I travelled were not layered with personal memory and emotion. As a

consequence, unlike most of the cars I've owned and *lived with* I remember few details of the ones I drove for this project. Nor do I recall most of the mileage I transited.

While my fieldwork was comprised of drives of several hours to a week in length, and during the project I drove for many reasons and through many areas, I never drove as a commuter, or as part of my day-to-day experience otherwise. My primary motivation for driving was the exploration of automobility through driving, whether I was en route to a friend's wedding or driving 1,000 miles to Florida for a few hours of late-autumn southern sun. There were times when driving was a drag, to be sure, but I cannot claim it was the same drag Atlanta commuters experience on I-75 twice a day, five days a week.

I cannot say how this may have influenced my attention to or reading of particular stickers, nor how it may influence my theorization of the writer-/reader-car encounter. I am certain, however, that while driving I was for the most part free of concern for anything but my immediate experience. This was especially the case during my two longest trips. My wife handled the every-day cares of domestic life, including our two kids, while I drove back and forth, up and down; lived on Starbucks and out of motels.

Figure 67: Evening Rush Hour / I-75 Atlanta (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Last, there are certain related technical difficulties that I've largely glossed in my discussions of the writer-/reader-car encounter. First, while it is not usually that difficult to read the inscriptions of a passing writer-car, capturing the moment of encounter photographically with any degree of fidelity proved nearly impossible. Many of the photos I took on the road of sticker texts were nominally legible, at best. As a result, many of the sticker photos I've included in this thesis are of parked cars or scans of stickers I've collected. This is not problematic *per se*, but I think it may introduce some question about the degree to which my familiarity with bumper stickers has been conditioned outside the writer-/reader-car encounter. On the other hand, most drivers will have encountered stickers in non-mobile contexts, and their sticker literacy will be similarly conditioned.

Second, to the degree that sticker references become increasingly specific (and in some cases not easily human-intelligible, e.g. those incorporating a QR code), reader-cars must draw upon novel tools and an objective space for their interpretation. This space is the Internet, and the tools comprise an array of everyday, mobile information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as smartphones, that facilitate a reader's access to this space.

It is important, however, not to overstate the current capacity of the driver-car to access the Internet as a space of interpretation while driving. Quite clearly, there is the issue of the safe operation of the car itself, which is inarguably compromised by the simultaneous use of a hand-held mobile phone (Ma and Kaber 2005; Hamilton 2014). Nonetheless, common onboard software such as Bluetooth that allows hands-free phone connectivity, and aftermarket hardware like navdy[113] are making the (safer) smart-driver-car more of a functional reality. While driving I frequently used the hands-free functionality of my iPhone (Siri) to photograph and Google sticker texts I encountered on the road. I could not, however, do anything with those search results until I'd stopped driving.

The Future of Driver-Car Social Encounters

There are technologies under development that would effectively tighten these forms of slippage in the material-virtual nexus that increasingly characterizes the interpretation of contemporary bumper stickers. For example, Zafiroglu et al. (US Patent Office #20140241585

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113 navdy is a dash-mounded heads-up display (HUD) that promises safer, hands-free smartphone-car integration, including GPS, entertainment and social media integration. The device is currently offered on a pre-order basis, and will reportedly ship later this year. See https://www.navdy.com

A1) have developed a system that would allow the "reading" by one car of another via radio frequency identification (RFID) hardware, while Stephans (US Patent Office #20120173316 A1) proposes a system that would facilitate social networking by "receiving and storing personal information from a member of a website" via a "publicly displayed identifier such as that individual's vehicle license plate number," or bumper sticker.

Stephans' proposal is reminiscent of the Freeway Singles Club[114] popular in the 1980s. Brewer (US Patent Office #US 20020121970 A1) proposes an "electronic vanity display device," that would afford the writer-driver-car the possibility of displaying self-authored compositions of "text, graphics, and digital photographs," as well as those downloaded from the Internet via a mobile phone connection and interface. And within the last year, Pereira (US Patent Office #2014/0141840 A1) has applied to patent a "mobile electronic display configured to display content, such as Web social media content, as selected by a portable electronic device, such as a smartphone or tablet," in effect a real-time, automobile social media feed, readable by other driver-cars.
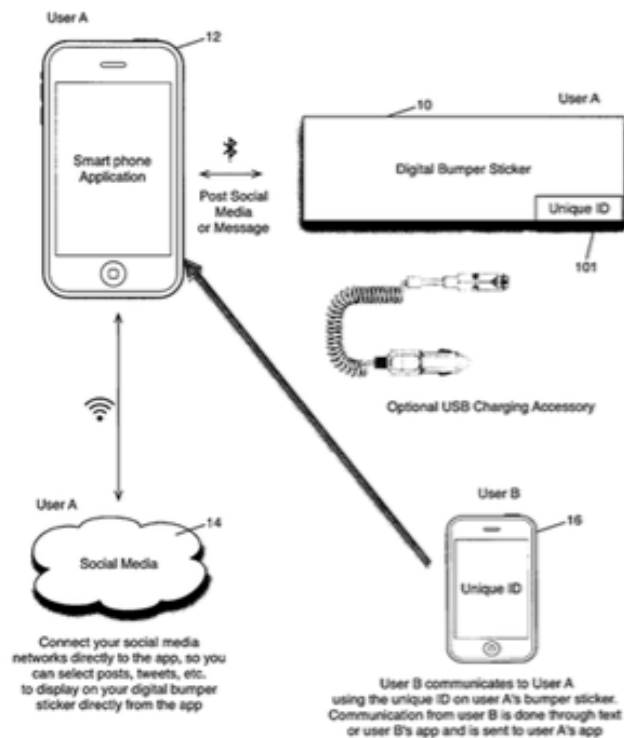

Figure 68: Mobile Electronic Display (US Patent Office #2014/0141840 A1)

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114 See Chapter 4.

Of course, none of these devices would absolutely solve the problems related to the potentially fatal fragmentation of a reader-driver's attention. It seems probable that there is no comprehensive solution to this problem, so long as a human remains behind the wheel. As the apotheosis of the so-called smart-car approaches, the *driverless* car will profoundly change the way the primary occupant inhabits her vehicle. The primary occupant—heretofore in the unique status of *the driver*, thereafter another passenger— will no longer actively embody the driver-car assemblage. As a consequence, the automobile may become another, albeit mobile, platform for media consumption, including through systems such as those discussed above. Certainly this would mean writing- and reading-on-the-road would take on a much different character than exists now: probably less fragmentary, more explicit and traceable. If this proves to be the case, perhaps it's for the best that the steering wheel will have been designed out of human hands. In the meantime, however, encounters between writer- and reader-cars remain ephemeral and fragmentary, asynchronous, approximate, and largely imaginative.

On Superhighways, Simmel & de Certeau: The Interstate and Mental Life

> *The most significant aspect of the metropolis lies in this functional magnitude beyond its actual physical boundaries and this effectiveness reacts upon the latter and gives to it life, weight, importance and responsibility. A person does not end with the limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanates from him temporally and spatially. In the same way the city exists only in the totality of the effects which transcend their immediate sphere.*
>
> Georg Simmel*, On Individuality and Social Forms*

Writing at the beginning of the last century, before the widespread use of automobiles and the evolution of the various techno-social-cultural apparatuses of automobility, Georg Simmel famously commented on the "mental life" of the urban subject, identifying what he called the "blasé metropolitan attitude" (14).

This attitude, he argued, is a particular cognitive-emotional response of urbanites to various then-contemporary social phenomena. These phenomena included general tendencies toward quantification, rationalization and the "predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective" (18). They also included the introduction of specific technologies and practices to these same ends, such as the pocket watch and market-oriented (versus consumer-specific) production.

Simmel's metropolitan subject, harried and over stimulated, adopted the blasé attitude, an intellectual distancing, as a means of mental self-preservation, but at the same time sought to differentiate herself from the flow and crush of her fellow citizens: "one seizes on qualitative distinctions, so that, through taking advantage of the existing sensitivity to differences, the attention of the social world can, in some way, be won for oneself" (18).

What does this have to do with 21st century American automobility and bumper stickers? To begin, as the epigraph suggests, Simmel identified an indefinite quality of his object of study and the phenomenological effects it produced. The metropolis is not simply the totality of its skyscrapers and streets. Its inhabitants are not free actors, the citizens of enlightenment-era narratives, nor (as Simmel comments himself) the self-prepossessing individualist of the Romantic poets. Rather, the metropolis is an aggregate of its physical structures, human inhabitants, social forms, cultural logics, technological processes and material artefacts. Its inhabitants are subjects as theorized in generally post-Foucauldian terms, produced through the combinatorial conditions of possibility and the enfolding of power into the body of the various structures, forms and logics that constitute their world.

Simmel's essay may further be read as prefiguring the eventual development of material-semiotic theorizations of human/non-human assembly and the types of experiential accounts produced in phenomenological anthropology. All of which, as I hope I have begun to demonstrate, is useful—if not uniquely essential—to an understanding of the systems of contemporary American automobility, and the kind of work bumper stickers afford within those systems.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, the uniformity of the road- and consumerscapes of the IHS not only contribute to a feeling of exchangeability and placelessness, but also further relax the driver's desire, and, in fact, their ability to precisely locate themselves in space in a schematic sense. Consequently, the inhabitation of the superhighway driver-car is a contradictory accumulation of effects. It is immanent, immediate: a question of the maintenance of velocity and direction, abiding the exigencies imposed by the parallel limits of the asphalt lane and other vehicles. It is the serial occupation of specific, mobilized points in space. But it is also approximate: a virtual suspension in transit between identifiable, *named* and *nameable* points; solipsistic, interior, and imaginative.

Employing de Certeau's differentiation between *tactics* and *strategies*, Cresswell (2006) argues the "tactic is the ruse of the weak—the mobile drifting through the rationalized spaces of power. The tactic is a nomadic art" (48). De Certeau (1984) begins his essay *Walking in the City* from a vantage atop the now collapsed World Trade Center Towers in lower Manhattan, taking in the city from above like a "solar Eye, looking down like a god" (92). This vantage renders the "complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text" (92). The result of the panoramic, god-eye view of the city is a "'theoretical' (that is visual) simulacrum" (93), one that renders space legible, amenable to the strategic exercise of power through surveillance, organization and administration.

Map renderings of the IHS—material and virtual—are, likewise, visual-theoretical simulacra. Even without a map or GPS, a litany of road signs, mile markers and billboards remind the driver-car of its objective location, rules of the road, navigational and consumer possibilities. By and large, however, the navigation of the driver-car remains an accomplishment of minimal effort; superhighway wayfinding an ongoing, passive acceptance of not being lost, rather than an active awareness of self-location.
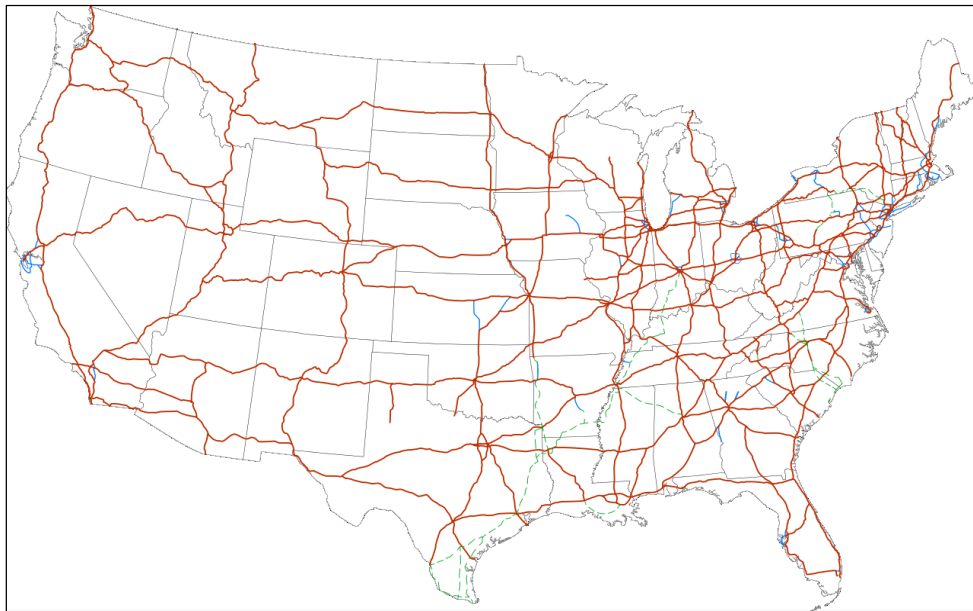

Figure 69: U.S Interstate Highway System[115]

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[115] By SPUI (National Atlas) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_current_Interstates.svg

Along these lines, de Certeau (1984) argues, "[e]scaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit" (93). On the one hand, the conceptual/named/ totalized/static interstate emerges as and through strategies of power. While on the other, the everyday/performed/dynamic tactics of the people on the ground (driver-cars) emerge through mobility. De Certeau further suggests "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life…intertwined paths give their shapes to spaces" (96-7). Driving and walking are *tactical* vectors of spatialization, performative speech acts that enact, render and spatialize the everyday city or superhighway "long poem[s]," that "manipulate[s] spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: [they are] neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them)" (101).

Clearly, there are important differences between pedestrian spatializations of the city and the automobile spatializations of the American Interstate Highway System. While the pedestrian (or driver of city streets, although to a lesser degree) develops a multitude of tactical vectors that spatialize the city in terms other than those of the map, the superhighway driver-car necessarily (re-)traces the strategic vectors of the map. Put another way, sidewalks *suggest* a pedestrian's possible path, while roadways *define* those available to the driver-car.

Through its hybridization with the automobile, the human body becomes more clearly subject to the maps and schemas of power. But examined more closely, there remain gaps in the apparent monotonous, material and socio-structural rigidity of IHS automobility. Superhighway driver-cars are not simply dull, asocial hybridities travelling in mute proximity to one another. In a sense, the combination of anaesthetizing characteristics and effects I've attempted to describe in this section affords the driver-car consciousness a productive opportunity for boredom, and ultimately imagination. Often, the catalyst of for such encounters of imagination come in the otherwise unassuming form of the bumper sticker.

Despite Augé's (2008) caveat that non-places "never exist in pure form" (64), and "in the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together" (86), his theorization of empirical non-place has been widely critiqued. Merriman (2012), for example, argues "places emerge as affective configurations or as complex, swirling assemblages, and it makes little sense to try to and categorise or divide places in a binary fashion,

as places or non-places, or as places and placeless spaces" (155). Kaufmann (2002) notes the importance of treating time, space and identity together such that mobilities research not "dissociate time, space and identity […] all mobility has repercussions on identity and, inversely, that an identity is built on mobilities." (21). Similarly, Urry (2007, 148) notes, "cities are becoming more like airports, less places of specific dwellingness and more organized in and through diverse mobilities and the regulation of those multiple mobilities."

These critiques, amongst others, are indicative of the move in mobilities studies to trace the dynamic emergence of identity-places through movement-spaces, to explain contemporary sociability and identity work as forms of becoming, rather than attributing potential identities as intrinsically related to (although, strictly speaking, not determined by) the historical continuities of certain places(s). Even in light of such critiques—with which I am, by and large, in agreement— there remains something apt, keenly felt, about Augé's conceptualization of non-places as a-political, historically untethered and in many cases geographically indistinct spaces of isolated circulation and mass-consumption. Certainly much of the experience of the thousands of miles I've passed living in transit of the American Interstate Highway System disposes me to think so. Nonetheless, as I hope I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, rather than remaining content with the notion of the IHS as a sterile non-place, bereft of social interaction, writer-/reader-car encounters do hold open the possibility of automobile sociability:

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Siri, Google INTERSTATE INTERSTITIAL.

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