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# **Automobility and 'My Family' Stickers**

Kylie Doyle<sup>#</sup> and Kieran Tranter

## **Abstract**

In this paper we explore the phenomena of 'My Family' stickers; the growing trend of stick-figure decals affixed to the rear window of motor vehicles. We suggest that the 'My Family' equipped vehicle generates excessive meanings about family, about road culture, about success and about forms of Australian belonging. It is argued that to represent 'My Family' on a motor vehicle is to stake a claim for belonging in a context where that belonging is challenged. Scaffolded by the semiotics of the motor vehicle we highlight how 'My Family' stickers demark a desire to belong: to a specific family unit, to a vision of feminine success, to white middle Australia – yet at the same time highlight the lack. Ultimately, we speculate that the placement of these decals on a vehicle shows a wanting to belong but also exposes anxieties about that belonging.

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the phenomena of 'My Family' stickers. 'My Family' stickers are quasi-stick-figure decals representing adults, children and pets that are affixed to the rear windows of a motor vehicle; usually with the textual accompaniment of 'My Family.' The suggestion, at least in the marketing surrounding the stickers, is that the figures represent the 'family' associated with that vehicle. At a cursory level these stickers seem banal and innocuous; middle Australia personalising their SUVs. However, in this very dismissal the complexities of 'My Family' stickers can be glimpsed. The circulating through suburbia of a 'My Family' equipped car generates excessive meanings about family, about road culture, about success and about forms of Australian belonging. We argue that 'My Family' stickers demark a desire to belong: to a

specific family unit, to a vision of feminine success, to white middle Australia – yet at the same time highlight the lack. In this way ‘My Family’ stickers show an anxiety of belonging. There is a narrative of threat in the ‘My Family’ stickers, threats to the ideal of family, to the safety of children and to self-image. We speculate that they show a wanting to belong yet at exactly the same moment highlighting a series of anxieties about that belonging.

This paper is in two sections. The first section locates the automobile as a physical and cultural feature of suburbanised automobility. In particular we locate our readings of the ‘My Family’ stickers within examinations of the semiotics of motor vehicles and the existing literature on ‘bumper stickers’. The second section explores the meaning making that arises from ‘My Family’ stickers. At first glance ‘My Family’ stickers seem highly nostalgic – a hankering for a heteronormative past of nuclear families and gender stereotypes. However, they are not like the bumper stickers that proclaimed an allegiance to a club, political cause or consumer product, nor are they a banal piece of ‘dirty’ nonsense (Noble and Baldwin 2001). ‘My Family’ stickers are a demand to be known. However, represent ‘My Family’ is to stake a claim for belonging in a context where that belonging is challenged. This reveals the slippages surrounding the ‘My Family’ stickers. They are not purchased as a ‘family’ but rather are sold as individualised collectables. ‘My Family’ is not bought off the shelf; it is constructed from individual icons whose relationship on the rear window, or more widely with the vehicle and its inhabitants, is more ambiguous.

## **Automobility and the Semiotics of the Motor Vehicle**

That the motor vehicle has come to dominate everyday life in the contemporary West is generally seen as a truism. The expectations of mobility on Western citizen-consumers, the way that roads and motor vehicles have become concreted into Western geographies (Merriman

2004) to the detriment of effective public transport systems (Butler 2008) and the place of the car in Western cultural imagination (Dowling and Simpson 2013, 423) assemble together to make motor vehicle use and ownership less of a choice and more of an expectation (Freund and Martin 2009). In short to live in the West is to live with motor vehicles (Urry 2004, 28).

However, the thinking of life with motor vehicles has often been left to the technocrats – the planners, the engineers, the economists and the marketers – whose focus has often been to measure, calculate and plan for certain motor vehicle futures. The idea that these structural components of infrastructure, of vehicles, of exchanges, of desires form a background to living within a system of automobility has only more recently emerged.<sup>1</sup> John Urry defines ‘automobility’ as capturing:

...a double sense, both the humanist self in the notion of autobiography, and of objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as in automatic and automation. 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 (Urry 2004, 26).

Urry connects the familiar structural ‘things’ of the automobile system – the vehicles, the roads, the legal and policing networks – with the humans who live through and within this system. Within Urry’s definition of automobility there is a focus on self-narration and agency with the idea of autobiography. In this ‘automobility’ is a well prepared lens through which to examine some of the ordinary everyday details of car culture such as bumper stickers.

If there is, as has been widely agreed, a form of compulsion of motor vehicle ownership and use – that the Western subject is thrown into a motorised world where the motor vehicle

forms an essential mobility horizon – it is tempting to see automobility as giving rise to a grey, homogenous, mass produced, de-individualised culture. A culture of utilitarian necessity; with any colour ‘so long as it is black’ (Ford and Crowther 1922, 1972, 72). However, the motor vehicle, as Roland Barthes so elegantly outlined in his review of the Citroen DS, is highly invested with desires, colour and dreams; where function runs second to form and style (Barthes 1973, 88-90). Motor vehicles generate affect; become tied into an individual’s sense of self and thus into their ‘autobiography’ (Tranter 2013). While wealth, resources and responsibilities do determine what car a subject drives, when and with whom; within this determined space there are opportunities for a degree of ‘self-fabrication’ (Leask 2012, 64). It is possible to suggest that as an ‘entrepreneur of oneself’ (O’Malley 2011, 13) consumptive choice like vehicle type, colour and adornments play a role in self-assertion.

The road is not a private space of habitus where the self is flagged and reinforced by the material trinkets that form mnemonics for the continual constitution of the self. While the detritus of living can accumulate within a vehicle and the familiar light and views of a regular commute can give rise to affirmations of being;<sup>2</sup> the outside of a vehicle forms a public declaration. As Rod Giblett suggested motor vehicles are a medium of communication (Giblett 2000). Urry’s definition of automobility was careful in its affirmation of ‘hybrid assemblages.’ Cultures of mobility and their signs are forged within a continual movement between personal desires and mass produced possibilities. In this space social semiotics has identified that motor vehicles are bearers of collective social meaning (Gjøen and Hård 2002; Heffner et al. 2006). Certain vehicles suggest certain traits of the owner/driver. In North America a pick-up truck suggests that the driver is a male with a conservative outlook (Hirschman 2003), while a hybrid vehicle suggests a tertiary educated driver with progressive inclinations (Heffner et al. 2007). Particular makes and models are considered as belonging to and representing different demographics. In his book length study of Corvettes in North American culture, Jerry Passon

identified how middle-aged men and certain young women became drawn to the perceptions of power, speed and attention from others that might come with owning and driving a Corvette (Passon 2011). While in Australia a series of researchers have also identified the significance of Australian made V8 sedans to young men from the outer suburbs of the major cities (Walker 2003; Walker et al 2000; Walker 1999; Redshaw 2008). Similarly, there is a common perception that Volvo drivers “purchased a Volvo because it gave them a better chance of surviving their own poor driving practices than other vehicles may have done” (Svensson et al. 2006, 438). Additionally, the North American racism of the Cadillac driving ‘Welfare Queen’ (Cassiman 2008; Myers and Dean 2007) raises the suspicion that any Afro-American women driving certain prestigious General Motor vehicles are engaged in social security fraud. One of the authors has recently suggested that these discourses of social meaning, partial and prejudicial though they are, travel beyond the roads and parking lots of the West to inform governmental decision making (Tranter 2014).

Not only can it be seen that there are a host of social meanings that are imposed on a driver depending on the make and model of their motor vehicle but there are a myriad of opportunities to further project self through modifying the vehicles’ appearance. Leaving to one side the highly specific masculine project of vehicle customisation (Moorhouse 1991), individuals are able to ‘personalise’ their vehicles through colours and accessories. This kind of personalisation includes car seat and steering wheel covers, novelty mats, and various dash adornments. One of the most inexpensive and accessible ways to personalise a motor vehicle is the use of bumper stickers.

There has developed a small research field into bumper stickers which can be broadly split into three foci. The first and earliest approach has been to use bumper stickers to identify a

group within the population to be studied. For example Wrightsman identified Republican or Democratic supporters through bumper stickers that displayed support for certain presidential candidates in the 1968 election and connected that to whether the vehicle also displayed an unpopular County requirement to display a registration sticker (Wrightsman 1969). Wrightsman's focus was on the bumper sticker as a means of identifying a population group, rather than studying the bumper stickers themselves. A second approach, that took greater heed of bumper stickers directly, was to focus on slogan or support stickers. The tension identified in this research concerned whether affixing a support bumper sticker was a sign of individuality (Case 1992) or a sign of group identification and affiliation (Endersby and Towle 1996). A particular emphasis has been national usage of support stickers with studies of Slovene independence stickers (Kriznar 1993), religious stickers in Nigeria (Chiluwa 2008) and a series of studies looking at political bumper stickers in Israel (Bloch 2000a, 2000b; Salamon 2001). A third approach has been to focus on stickers that are emotional, humorous or offensive (Newhagen and Ancell 1995; Stern and Solomon 1992).

Greg Noble and Rebecca Baldwin's examination of bumper stickers observed in Western Sydney shied away from a linear focus on support stickers to what they identified as shifting focuses:

first, more humorous messages and then, to more ambivalent decals – to black humour, to more aggressive and offensive statements, to greater but more ambiguous forms of self-referentiality' (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 79).

They argued that nonsense stickers and particularly sexualised stickers attached to cars driven by young women are imbued with contested and multiple meanings. First, attaching such stickers is a strategy of individualisation, as Nobel and Baldwin argue: "the best way to make yourself visible is to transgress conventions" (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 86). Secondly, the

sexualised stickers on young women's vehicles could be seen as a strategy of empowerment; an appropriating of freedom traditionally associated with men in public space (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 85).<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, they suggest a two-way process underscores the motivation to affix stickers to vehicles, that being:

to contain the terrifying ordinariness of our lives, by pointing to the terrifying ordinariness of other people's lives...we are personalising and subjectifying ourselves...even if that is at the risk of de-stabilising the foundations of that subjectivity (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 87-88).

Noble and Baldwin's identification of a shifting subjectivity – of a dynamic negotiation of the external and internal through mobility, cars, words and images – suggests a continual process through which automobility establishes and communicates the subject. Their study suggests that within a car infused culture such as Australia the banal everydayness of bumper stickers takes on a more profound significance as a site where the contours of the subject can be explored. This paper conducts a related exploration through an analysis of 'My Family' stickers.



Figure 1

The 'My Family' stickers were created by a Gold Coast (Australia) couple in 2005 and are sold both nationally and internationally (Webb October 26 2011; The Sticker Family 2010). The creators developed the stickers as a way of allowing people to display to the world: "this is my family, I love them"(Webb October 26 2011). Millions of the stickers have been sold and they



can be seen regularly on vehicles throughout Australia, particularly on the Gold Coast. There are many permutations of the 'My Family' stickers which allow for multiple combinations to suit the make-up of the driver's family. At the time of writing there are 33 different 'Mother' stickers; 34 'Father' stickers; 55 'girl' and 53 'boy' stickers; and 11 'baby' stickers (The Sticker Family 2010). There are also disabled, grandparent, pet and deceased (with a halo) permutations available. Everyone is happy and reasonably skinny in 'My Family' world; every human figure features a cheesy smile and stick-like body. At least around the Gold Coast the most common combinations are the Father with BBQ (Figure 1) or Father with surfboard; the Mother with a computer and mobile telephone (Figure 2) or Mother with shopping bags (Figure 1); and then a combination of any amount of children doing numerous extra-curriculum activities, such as tennis, football or ballet (Figures 1 & 2). A fundamental feature that we have observed with the 'My Family' stickers is that they are overwhelmingly attached to vehicles driven by middle-aged women and although we have observed them on a wide range of makes and models of vehicles, the natural habitat for the 'My Family' sticker seems to be the rear window of a late-model SUVs.

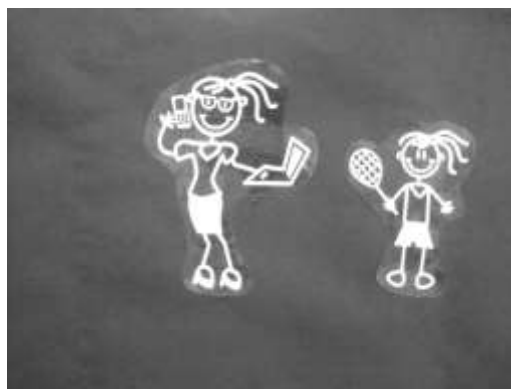


Figure 2

The 'My Family' stickers are remarkably different to the earlier generation of bumper sticker that the social semiotics literature has examined. While they do advertise allegiance like the support stickers that have been most studied, the allegiance is not to a political party, ideological statement, religious group or corporate logo, as is usually the referent of a support sticker. It is not something public rather it refers to the domestic and private; the 'family' that

belongs to the vehicle. They are also different to the nonsense and sexualised stickers studied by Noble and Baldwin (2001). On first glance they are remarkably non-ambiguous. They strongly denote that this is 'My Family'! They also are not going for the 'strange' or counter-conformity of the decals observed by Noble and Baldwin. Instead there is a desire for the mainstream conformity of the nuclear family. Like the Christian fish symbol, which shares a similar aesthetic, 'My Family' stickers are different from the other bumper stickers that have been studied in that there is a mainstream, 'normal' suggestion of belonging. There is more than a hint of nostalgia about the denoting of normality in the affixing of 'My Family' decals. This drives the analysis forward. The next section focuses directly on the meaning making of 'My Family' stickers, beginning with this nostalgia.

## **Nostalgia, Known and Slippages**

There is a double, perhaps over signification occurring where 'My Family' stickers are attached to an SUV. SUVs have replaced the station or estate wagon as the vehicle of choice for people with children. In Australia SUVs have come to be seen as family cars and this pervasive association has been reinforced in the marketing of SUVs with images of active families – adults and children happily travelling and adventuring together. The marketing touchstone is space. SUVs are marketed as having the internal space to accommodate adults and more than one child in comfort and the technological capacity to give the family 'more space' beyond the city allowing adventuring to 'nature': whether that is the country, the beach or the mountains (Gunster 2004). Given this cultural assumption about SUVs as family vehicles the practice of then adding 'My Family' stickers seems excessive. What additional desires of signification are trying to be communicated? We suggest the most obvious message communicated is the heteronormative nuclear family.

Interestingly, 'My Family' stickers are sold as individual icons. The purchaser chooses which adults, children and pet icons to buy. 'My Families' do not come pre-packaged. It is more than possible to queer up 'My Family' stickers – two Mothers or two Fathers and the kids<sup>4</sup> or to proudly declare single parenthood with only a single adult icon (Figure 2). It is also possible to denote childless coupledness with two adults or the occasionally observed and intriguing Japanese or Korean made hatchback with just a Mother figure and a cat. Age is also not a barrier to 'My Family' identification. At the time of writing there were four Grandma and four Grandpa icons available for purchase. However, this diversity of domestic arrangements is not the norm for 'My Family' stickers. The overwhelming use of 'My Family' stickers is a grouping of Mother, Father, more than one child and various pets. Notwithstanding the known diversity of family forms in Australia, the 'My Family' stickers are being purchased and used by, what can be assumed to be, 'traditional' middle-class nuclear families. They are vehicle bling for those wanting to be seen as members of former Prime Minister John Howard's 'mainstream Australia' (Ahluwalia and McCarthy 1998). Or perhaps more precisely, given the high frequency of the Mother with laptop computer and mobile telephone figure (Figure 2), the use of the stickers shows identification with another Prime Minister's slogan of 'working families' (Younane 2008). Notwithstanding, the contemporary SUV as canvass and images of contemporary technological living often represented with an individual figure (laptop computers, mobile telephones, gas BBQs, game console controllers), there is an obvious nostalgia at play in the 'My Family' stickers for an affirmation of a society composed of heteronormative families that spend time together. Like all nostalgia this is a romance for a past that never was nor is actually desired (Boym 2001). 'My Family' figures are not the direct contemporary equivalents of a domestic 1950s Mother in an apron busy with an upright electric cooker nor a spanner wielding blue collar employed Father. Interestingly, the public and private spheres are generally reversed. Father icons are usually shown, not according to their work but with the images of leisure and domestic activity – surfboard, fishing rod, BBQ, gym equipment – while Mum icons seem to be more public focused with IT appendages or the shopping bags. Notwithstanding these gestures

to gender role change, the overwhelming impression from a 'My Family' sticker is a strong affirmation of the nuclear family.

Michael Billig's work on banal nationalism has a resonance at this point. Billig examines how 'unwaved' icons of nation circulate in everyday life. These 'flaggings' of nation, outside of obvious ceremonies and celebrations, create an ever present affirmation of nation and sense of belonging to nation. This 'banal nationalism' communicated in the flags in service station forecourts, reproduced on consumer packaging and in the assumed 'we' of media discourse stabilises the nation as much as the 'hot nationalism' of fiery rhetoric of politicians and patriots (Billig 1995, 91-127). The affixing of 'My Family' stickers can be seen as a familial analogy to banal nationalism; a minor public affirmation not to nation, but to domestic arrangements. However, just like banal nationalism in which the banal refers to the everydayness of the images and strategies (Billig 1995, 42), not the effects, the 'My Family' stickers present this belonging through a rather unsubtle set of exclusions. The mostly absence of gay or lesbians families in the mainstream use of the stickers appears as an immediate exclusion. However, this opens to a deeper question as to why at this particular moment in Australia has this flagging of the heteronormative family – along with the obvious exclusions – on late model SUVs flourished?

It is the connection between 'My Family' stickers and SUVs that provides an immediate answer. Robin Croft has explained the rise and rise of SUVs as the family car in North America as a response to feelings of external threat. Like the gated community, the SUV with its illusions to rugged safety and fortress-like construction, cocoons and protects the modern family from a hostile world made unsafe by stories of criminals, predators and terrorists (Croft 2006, 1064-65). Like the SUV that most commonly sports them, the 'My Family' stickers can be seen as a response to threats. The freeways and roads of Australia have often been labelled as aggressive,

anonymous and unsympathetic zones (Simpson 2006; Lupton 1999). Australian road movies, the iconic *Mad Max* trilogy in particular, portrays a thanatological car culture where life is continually processed into bloody dead matter (Falconer 1997; Tranter 2003). Australian streets it seems are dangerous places for innocents, as their life can be brutally changed or extinguished in seconds. In this context the 'My Family' stickers can be seen as a strategy of rendering known. In this sense the 'My Family' vehicle is not some anonymous automobile but rather deserves to be treated with care and respect because 'My Family' is aboard. As such the 'My Family' stickers can be seen to be a development of the 'Baby On Board' or 'Mum's Taxi' decals; all attempts to counter the anonymity and aggression of Australian automobility.

Similarly, 'My Family' stickers could also be seen as a continuation of the sexualised stickers on young women's cars identified by Baldwin and Noble (2001). The aggressive anonymity of Australian automobile culture has been characterised as strongly masculine (Johnike 2009; Redshaw 2007; Walker 1999, 2003). Indeed, notwithstanding notable stories of women as mechanics, garage owners and race car drivers, particularly during the pioneering phase of automobility (Clarsen 2008), the defining gender of automobility in the West has been male (Lochlan Jain 2005). By bringing family and domesticity into the male space of the road, women driving 'My Family' affixed vehicles are presenting a radical challenge, potentially more radical than Baldwin's and Noble's young women driving hatchback with sexualised stickers. The strategy of contestation that they identified in the sexualised stickers was one of appropriation; taking, owning and subverting the misogyny often displayed in the decals on vehicles driven by young men. However, the 'My Family' stickers are not so subtle. They are a direct challenge to the soft-pornography of the 'UNIT' or 'Jetpilot' decals commonly seen on vehicles driven by young men. We suggest that 'My Family' stickers declare the basic social fact that men have to share the road with women as purposeful subjects and not objects.



Figure 3

This challenge has not gone unnoticed. Increasingly we have seen vehicles driven by young men with anti-‘My Family’ stickers. These crude and offensive responses take several forms. There are various stickers that proclaim ‘Fuck Your Family’ often accompanied with ‘My Family’ style figures hung on gallows (Figure 3), dismembered or being run over by a monster truck (Figure 4). A slightly more subtle anti-My Family sticker has a ‘My Family’ style female stick figure in a subservient sexual position in relation to a male figure. The brutal messages of the anti-‘My Family’ stickers are violence towards women and children and the sexual objectification of women. The appearance of anti-‘My Family’ stickers suggests that the challenge to the aggression and anonymity of Australian automobility that the ‘My Family’ stickers represent is being understood by the self-appointed custodians of that automobility. In the context where women with children are one of the largest categories of Australian road users (Bowling et al. 1999) the hyper-aggressiveness of the anti-‘My Family’ stickers suggests that the actual bearers of nostalgia within this particular exchange are the drivers of vehicles with anti-‘My Family’ stickers. In this way the anti-‘My Family’ stickers create an intertextual pause in the space between the intended meaning of the original decals and these parodies. While ‘My Family’ stickers herald the notion of pride and protection of one’s family, the anti-‘My Family’ stickers trivialise and invert this message toward an aesthetic of danger. By trying to maintain male power through hints of dangerousness, the affixing of anti-‘My Family’ stickers

can be seen as a sad expression of an automobile related masculinity that is becoming increasingly marginalised (Tranter and Martin 2013).



Figure 4

However, the slightly pathetic attempt at stabilising a form of masculinity through what is essentially the school yard strategy of defacing an image of authority (Luke et al. 1983, 123) reveals the slippages surrounding 'My Family' stickers. In addition to the anti-'My Family' stickers there are a series of humorous alternative 'My Family' decals that respond to the seemingly direct need to be known but with more playful critique. We have seen on cars Zombie 'My Family' stickers (Figure 5), *Starwars* 'My Family' stickers with a Darth Vader Father and Jedi children and even a set of *Doctor Who* 'My Family' stickers with parent and children Daleks and the robot dog K9. These are often on the same types of family orientated late model vehicles that display actual 'My Family' stickers. What is missing from these latter decals is the linearity of 'My Family' stickers. Unlike the anti-'My Family' stickers discussed above, these more playful parodies arguably create an intertextual perversion at the intersection between themselves and the original 'My Family' stickers. While they are still a transgression of the cultural artefact, they do not invert the intended meaning of the original, but rather hijack 'stylistic fragments that they pry loose for their own purposes' (Ferrell and Sanders 1995, 178). What are these spoof stickers trying to communicate? That my family is undead? That my family are fan-geeks for certain science fiction franchises? Or that they are a piece of school car park visual politics that suggests that the desire to be known (that comes from the affixing of 'My Family' stickers on

vehicles) should not be taken seriously? At one level these parodies are easier to read than the 'My Family' stickers themselves. They could be seen as nonsense and incomprehensible. Noble and Baldwin suggest that constructing difference through using nonsense stickers is not a tactic of resistance but a tactic against banality (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 86). There remains a desire to be known in the parodies of 'My Family' stickers but that desire is a negative. It is a desire to be seen as *not*, or *other from*, contrary to what is signified by the 'My Family' stickers. However, there is also a form of tokenist displacement occurring with these parody stickers. The parodies represent difference through a buying into a commodified alternative. *Starwars*, *Doctor Who* and zombies might be more fun than the original 'My Family' stick figures, but they are hardly original and suggest a globalised culture where real difference has been sublimated into consumer choice. 'My Family' equipped vehicles and parody 'My Family' vehicles are both still buying-in.



Figure 5

This begs the question what exactly is being signified by buying-in to 'My Family' stickers? We have argued that they flag nostalgia for the heterosexual nuclear family and that they are a strategy to counter the aggressive anonymity of Australian automobility through wanting to be known. We have also suggested that this desire to be known, like the SUV that they are often affixed to, could be seen as a response to fears and uncertainties about safety and place in the world. It is this theme of uncertainty that we believe underlies the use of 'My Family' stickers and becomes evident through focusing on the slippages at the margins of the 'My Family'



semiotic field. Slippages occur because by attaching a bumper sticker to a vehicle the subject participates in the production of meaning for others. This production of meaning requires the outsider to make what they 'will out of what someone else has made available' (Noble and Baldwin 2001, 78). A relevant example of this meaning production was evident to one of the authors following an altercation at an intersection. The author had a bumper sticker on the vehicle supporting a well-known private school:

[window winds down at traffic lights] "Just because your kids go to private school and you sit around sipping lattes all day doesn't mean some of us don't have to get to work, fuck you Latte!" [window winds up].

Beyond the affirming of Australian streets as aggressive, this remark also indicates the manner in which the speaker made meaning of sticker displayed on the rear of the author's black SUV. By placing a sticker on the outside of a particular type of vehicle driven by a women, the car becomes a site for inscribing certain notions that the subject intends ('I value my children's education') but also a site for the appropriation of meaning that was not intended ('I am a latte Mum'). This slippage of meaning can be further exacerbated by the speed in which a bumper sticker can emerge and disappear on the road.

While slippage of meaning is possible with 'My Family' stickers we argue that there is probably a strong and unsubtle set of meanings motivating the affixing 'My Family' stickers. We suspect that many 'My Family' equipped vehicles are an advertisement banner for a competitive 'supermum.' The woman in the SUV with the Mother figure busy with IT, the Father figure with a surfboard, one child in a karate uniform and another with a violin can be seen proclaiming a sort of contemporary female victory. It unsubtly declares: 'Not only am I a mum, but I work, I can hang onto my husband (who is fit and healthy) and my children are successful achievers'. There has been growing interest in the strategies and goals of female competition; with winning

femininity defined as having career, a manly husband and performing children as signs of success (Tanenbaum 2011). In this 'My Family' stickers encode a particular set of messages between middle-class women; that the woman in the 'My Family' vehicle is the better 'supermum' (Kaplan 1992, 188). But this reveals a fundamental slippage. While a career, husband and winning children might be the ego-ideal of success that the driver might want to project, it problematises the reality. Like good blemish cream the 'My Family' stickers are for public display, a form of putting on appearances. The 'My Family' stickers are self-representation, the product of consumer choice; they are not assigned by independent census. They immediately suggest that the figures on the rear window are what is desired, but *not* the reality (Choi et al. 2005, 117). Through this lens the 'My Family' stickers quickly can be seen as less representational and more aspirational.

A particular representation/aspirational slippages with the 'My Family' stickers concern the bodily image projected by the stickers. In the *Weight of Modernity* Cathy Banwell and others identify the 'rise of the automobility' as a factor in Australian obesity (Banwell et al. 2012, 105-127). From their interviews they found that post-war generations felt that they could not do without their motor vehicles. The SUV chauffeured family is, if the public health figures are to be trusted, most likely to be overweight. Yet the 'My Family' stickers are happy, skinny, active types; although Father with BBQ has a little bit of tummy on him. Significantly, there is no image of a 'fat' child with hand in the potato crisp/chip packet.<sup>5</sup> This exclusion of a bodily other within the very style of the sticker is a more essential exclusion than the exclusion that is practiced in the usual heteronormative arranging of stickers. While non-heteronormative families can be represented with 'My Family' stickers, and even people with certain physical disabilities can be included, the overweight are un-representable.

This observation makes way for another characteristic made un-representable by the 'My Family' stickers – ethnicity. Printed in white with facial features that lack any specific 'ethnic' referencing the 'My Family' stickers could be seen as neutral icons capable of representing many different families from different origins. Yet in the colour and the neutrality, 'My Family' stickers can be seen as 'whitewashing' race (Brown et al. 2003, Nielsen 2007). In their whiteness and neutrality 'My Family' stickers strongly suggest Anglo-Australians from a European heritage as the norm. It is possible to see flagged in the smiling 'My Family' figures, not only a conservative nostalgia for the nuclear family but also for a white Australia. In our travels and observations it does seem that 'My Family' stickers are generally on vehicles with drivers who appear to be Anglo-Australian.<sup>6</sup> In this can be understood that 'My Family' stickers demark a sovereign border of domestic happiness while moving from the suburbs, schools and shopping centres of 'middle' Australia. This slippage has the 'My Family' stickers becoming, not just an analogy of, but an actual contribution to a 'hot' Australian reactionary nationalism. While possibly appealing to a different demographic, the ethnic connotations of 'My Family' stickers appear similar to the decals of an Eureka or Australian flag with a 'Love it or Leave' caption; which have become more common since the Cronulla riots of 2005 (Noble 2009; Berns 2006). The not so subtle message seems to be : 'my family is white, active and happy together on the rear window, and don't you *others* disturb it!'

Further, beyond the feminine competition and unsubtle racism of the 'My Family' stickers, as a group who in person or whose personhood is desired by each of the individual figures? It is assumed that the figures are all from a nuclear family; the children the biological offspring of the parent figures. Yet even the 'My Family' creators were inspired to make the 'My Family' stickers in response to their mixed family; to present a mixed family as the same as a biological one (Webb October 26 2011). There is anecdotal evidence of single mothers adding a Father figure to their 'My Family' to project the security of a male presence. Further, there is the illusion of

togetherness; of the family together on the rear window even though each figure is usually represented doing an individual activity. In this 'My Family' stickers nicely represent the together-time poverty that has been observed of contemporary Australian families too busy with own pursuits to be together (Bittman 2002; Craig and Mullan 2010). We have also observed 'My Family' stickers with the residual outline of a previous Father or Mother icon; suggesting that it has been roughly removed from the vehicle.<sup>7</sup> Is this an honest, albeit angry, declaration of separation or just evidence of unsolicited and as yet unrepaired third-party damage? Then there are the slippages as the stickers fade. Has this meant that the family it represents has blistered with neglect or that the family's economic situation has meant that the vehicle has not been upgraded? What telling statements about status within a family are communicated when the child who was represented by a baby figure grows?

These slippages highlight the instability and uncertainties that can be observed in the use of 'My Family' stickers. They communicate an uncertainty about family by trying to connect contemporary domestic arrangements back to some nostalgic nuclear bedrock of father, mother and their biological children. There is concern with the safety of the world and a challenging of the aggressive anonymity of Australian automobility. There is concern with being seen to be successful; particularly the trappings of feminine success that has been identified with 30-40 something women with children. And there are concerns with race; a projecting of white Australia into a cosmopolitan demographic sea. What these slippages suggest is that 'My Family' stickers demark *a desire to belong* - to white middle Australia, to a specific family unit, to a vision of feminine success - *yet at the same time highlight the lack*. 'My Family' stickers show an anxiety of belonging. We have suggested that there is an underlying narrative of threat in the 'My Family' stickers: threats to the ideal of family, to the safety of children and to self-image. The 'My Family' equipped vehicle represents a subject who is, ultimately, anxious: anxious for her relationships with others, anxious of the real or imagined threats from the outside; and for how others see her and her 'family'. They show a wanting to belong yet at exactly the same moment highlight the threats to that belonging. 'My Family' stickers reveal that the suggested

togetherness, happiness and success are ultimately images; only as permanent as the polymer adhesive sticking them to the glass. These fears emphasise change. In freezing 'My Family' onto a motor vehicle there is a clear affirmation that this representation is a fleeting snapshot of both 'My Family' and My Anxieties – both which carry the potential for change at each intersection of the urban grid. The static-ness of the images as they rush by only highlights the layers of mobility evident. The physical movement of the vehicle reveals the energy and resources required to keep up with representations of 'My Family' and to keep them away from the anxieties. In a set of simple white stencils the 'My Family' stickers seem to encapsulate the irony of automobility: all that movement, just to keep still.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we have reflected on 'My Family' stickers as a complex inscription on and about everyday Australian life. At a basic level the 'My Family' stickers it would seem uncontroversial that they are a simple affirmation of middle Australia. Reactionary and conservative, the images in white of a happy hetero-couple with kids, suggests an aggressive declaration into Australian suburbia of belonging. We have canvassed how there is a potentially progressive reading behind their deployment as a challenge to the traditional masculinity and misogyny of Australian automobility; a challenge that can be seen as being understood through the display of anti-'My Family' decals. However, we went on to suggest that the shiny and skinny boldness of the images through which these declarations of belonging are made ultimately slips. The connotations of family and of success projected by 'My Family' stickers disclose a lack of belonging. We suggest that underpinning the drive to affix 'My Family' stickers are a set of anxieties which herald Australian suburban byways and shopping centres are not inherently 'family' friendly, that around every corner awaits violence or a challenging *other* and that the actual family cocooned within the vehicle is not as successful, healthy and together as

represented. Ultimately what is flagged is the irony of Australian automobility; a continual blur of movement in gridlock.

## Notes on Contributors

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On various studies into automobility see (Böhm et al. 2006, Dennis and Urry 2009, Luckin and Sheen 2009, MacGregor 2009, Merriman 2009, Simpson 2006, Tranter and Martin 2013, Walsh 2008, Wetmore 2009)

<sup>2</sup> That is not in any way to deny the inner habitus of cars or the repeating of journeys as forming a home territory for the nourishment of the subject as beautifully told by Wise. See (Wise 2000).

<sup>3</sup> There is a question left open in Noble and Baldwin's study: What stickers would the Gen X woman that they found in 2000 driving a Hyundai Excel with a 'Shy but Sly' sticker affix to her vehicles 14 years on? The answer may be 'My Family' stickers.

<sup>4</sup> We have only seen one vehicle, a well maintained 1970s VW camper with 'My Family' stickers representing a same-sex couple with children. The vehicle also featured rainbow flag stickers.

<sup>5</sup> Although there is an image of a child holding a video game console controller. The child is a stick, skinny like the other 'My Family' stickers.

<sup>6</sup> The wonderful exception are Kia Carnivals driven by what seem to be Pacific Islanders whose rear windows are cluttered with 10 or more 'My Family' figures from grandparents through to babies.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the makers of the 'My Family' stickers have recently released a magnet range, perhaps allowing for easier removal during family change (The Sticker Family 2010).