

My Manifesto Doesn't Fit on This Bumper Sticker

by Jennifer Wernimont

I feel as if I know them. They have become characters in my life, easily understood by the writing they have stuck to their cars. They are openly inviting me into their lives, asking me to take a peek at the things that are important to them and asking me to be passionate about these same things. Based on the writing I see, I create little pockets in my mind and categorize these individuals. They have defined themselves just as I have defined them, and these conclusions remain intact as long as the stickers continue to drive along with their owners and support demographic consistency.

Parallel Oreo stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind the rusted pickup truck going ten below the speed limit. I have not yet learned the art of slowing down, and I am well versed in frustration. I am so close now that I can read his license plate and even make out the decal on his window. "keep honking...i'm reloading." The National Rifle Association decal says he means it.

At least he's consistent. I glance into the window. A cigarette hangs from his fingers, the remnants of a camouflage hat atop his head, and he's missing teeth. I could almost hear him speaking in my head, little slurs coming out through the gaps. He really does look like the kind of guy who would shoot a honker. I press the gas a bit harder.

"define yourself." Charles E. Case, a sociology teacher at Augusta College, does an in-depth examination of bumper stickers as they relate to personal identity. He states that we have the "desire to communicate symbolic messages to the persons who share our social environment" (108). These bumper stickers have helped each driver to claim a personal identity. Their display of symbols relays who they are and tells us where they fit socially (107-108). They apply bumper stickers to their cars for us to define them. We recognize what section of the world's people they fit into. In their desire to belong somewhere, we have complied by placing them in that somewhere that best fits our understanding of the world. Toothless honker-hater belongs in one of my previously constructed pockets.

Parallel barcode stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind a white minivan. "We Are Family" is playing, and I am embarrassed to say I sing along to it. After all, it's been a party staple ever since the sock hops from elementary school. The singing helps me deal with the fact that I am running late for school. The mom in front of me seems to care less about that than about leaning into the rearview mirror to apply lipstick. "sexy minivan mama" is right.

As I click on the blinker to go into the turn lane, I expect to see a woman whose role model is Samantha from Sex and the City, someone stuck inside a previous life, one before children. Instead, I face an older woman in the driver's seat. There are no car seats in the back, and no one but her occupying the vehicle. Besides her red lips, there is no color to her face. Clear water

gathers in wrinkles as it seeps from her eyes. I feel I have witnessed something private. I pay more attention to the road.

“misjudgment is haunting.” Jack Bowen, writer and philosopher, says that “in our habit of incessantly labeling, we wrongly assume that these labels actually exist in some way...” (6). We become stuck on the idea that we know someone as soon as we apply a label. The labels themselves become the people. They exist; they seem to contain breath and life.

Parallel salt and pepper stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind the bright yellow VW Bug. The color is blinding. As is the rainbow “don’t tell me who i can love” sticker they’ve proudly posted on their bumper. I wonder how many times people who hate rainbows have told him so. It is an intimidating thing to come out publicly, yet his anonymity between car doors gives him safety. He may realize that his bold sticker may have inspired the kid who loves rainbows but can’t yet reveal it.

“love is love.” According to Claire Potter, a professor at Wesleyan University, her campus’ sidewalks were common battlegrounds for homosexual students who expressed themselves via chalk (62). Chalking, for these students, serves a few specific purposes. It provides an outlet for self-expression, enables the chalker to address unwanted personal invisibility, and aids in retaliation. All of these things are paralleled in the use of bumper stickers on cars. The owner of the VW Bug no longer wants to feel invisible or even targeted. He wants to express himself freely and without harm. Like the chalkers at Wesleyan, his “expressions of love, difference and rage [are] explicitly at odds with other people’s rules” (Potter 66), and in communicating this so openly, he has the ability to encourage others. Homosexuality can be freed from the strict rules of society, and is not the only liberating declaration that can be stuck to cars.

Parallel newspaper stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind the beaten-up Volkswagen Bus. I do not care that the car is going so slowly because of the amount of reading material I have at my disposal. “teach peace.” “i believe in life before death.” “one solution appears every sunrise.” “play in the dirt.” I am now distracted by my thoughts. The drive has turned into an opportunity for life lessons, and it seems true that “the best advice often comes in the smallest packages, and it doesn't get much smaller than the pithy sayings plastered to the backs of Toyotas and Kias” (Jasheway-Bryant 46). This person is actively engaged in road conversation. Does her road conversation translate into actual conversation with people she knows? Does she live this active and engaged lifestyle? Of course she does, because a whole life can be stuck onto a bumper.

Parallel penguin stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind the electric car, light green in color. “go green.” Plus the inevitable Greenpeace member identification sticker.

Parallel Dalmatian stripes line my peripheral vision as I follow closely behind the shiny BMW. There are no markings on it this time, and the radio has decided to offer me no form of music for entertainment. All that comes on is a talk show discussing...zone out now.

Parallel zebra stripes...

Parallel dice stripes...

Parallel piano key stripes...

Black and white stripes enclose me so that I cannot see anything beyond the decals and words stuck to the car in front of me. I am forced to read and apply labels.

Singer Matt Bowen puts into lyrics that "If you see the world in black and white, you're missing out on all the beautiful colors."

Parallel yellow stripes swerve and my car follows them just as it follows a car as plain as mine.

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Finally.

Works Cited

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