

“Cadillac Flambé”: Race and Brand Identity

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The “storied” history of African-Americans and Cadillac illuminates the complex intersections of marketing, popular culture and racism in the United States. When General Motors first acknowledged African-Americans as an important market segment is in dispute. That dispute, however, does not diminish the importance of African-Americans to the iconic status of the brand in popular culture. Conversely, brand loyalty to Cadillac is critiqued by Ralph Ellison as a materialistic distraction for African-Americans from the inequalities and injustices of the day.

1990 TO THE PRESENT

New York at night: a Cadillac Escalade glides over the bridge to the heart of uptown. At the wheel, and alone in the car, a thoughtful Tiki Barber, famed running back for the New York Giants, muses that “some opportunities just come once.”

It seems unremarkable in 2006 that an African-American male is identified with the Cadillac brand. But the “long and storied history” between Cadillac and African-Americans is actually a tale full of mystery and denial, an extraordinary history which speaks volumes of the complex intersections of marketing, popular culture and racism in the United States (Wood, 2004). It is a story that has not been told, and maybe never can be fully known because the evidence is so contradictory. But some broad historical themes may be illuminated by the relationship between one brand and a target market so vital to its success yet which it denied for almost one hundred years. Indeed, Cadillac, probably the most frequently referenced brand name in U.S. popular culture¹, owes that iconic status, certainly in large part, to the fact that it has historically been the car of choice for African-Americans.

In one version of history, General Motors only started intentionally targeting African-Americans with its Cadillac brand in 1994. According to *Marketing News*, in April 1994 General Motors launched a campaign targeted at affluent African-American consumers whose brand loyalty was being eroded by luxury imports, especially Volvo, Mercedes Benz and Infiniti. In a J.D. Powers survey,

Cadillac captured 33% of African-American purchases of luxury cars at that time. The campaign focused on the characteristics of safety, reliability and durability. According to Trina Barton, marketing strategy analyst at General Motors at that time and quoted in the May 1994 *Marketing News* article, “Although Cadillac had been advertising in black-oriented magazines for a number of years this is the first time the company has targeted the market so specifically.”

Five years later, in 1999, Cadillac introduced the Escalade, “a full-sized SUV (based on the Chevy Tahoe) loaded with luxury and trimmed out with dramatic, knife-edge styling” (*LA Times*, March 9, 2004). General Motors was taken by surprise that the Escalade “quickly became the image ride for the brand-obsessed hip-hop culture,” identified especially with celebrity success of black men in the sports and entertainment industries (*LA Times*, “Bling of the Road,” 3/9/2004). Speaking on behalf of General Motors, Cadillac General Manager, Mark LaNeve told *Automotive News* that the success of the Escalade as ultimate, hip-hop cool “...has been a totally great surprise. In terms of generating anything that is targeted to that group, no we can’t take credit for it. We’re too busy to know what’s cool” (quoted *Oakland Tribune*, March 22, 2004).

Even as he spoke, however, General Motors was planning a marketing campaign, including product features, based on the car’s hip-hop appeal. In late summer 2003, according to *Automotive News*, General Motors invited 35 “of the biggest names in entertainment...trendsetting...tastemakers” to a private showing of the prototypes of the 2007 Escalade. The explicit purpose was, according to Jay Spenchian, Cadillac Marketing Director, “...to put the Escalade out in front of the people recognized as understanding ‘cool,’” so that modifications could be made before bringing the model to market (Stein, 3/4/05). The choice criteria, needless to say, had nothing to do with safety, reliability or durability. The rapper Xzibit was part of this VIP focus group. He suggested that the rear hatch window should be lower and that larger DVD screens should be built in to the car. In June 2005, Cadillac almost doubled its sales from the previous year: from June monthly sales of 10,584 in 2004 to 20,989 in 2005 (*Automotive News*).

It’s a fine irony that the host of MTV’s *Pimp My Ride* is quoted as an opinion leader for Cadillac purchase.

“Pimpmobile,” as with Xzibit’s show, now has almost a good-natured connotation, a shared joke as hip-hop occupies the mega-billion dollar main stream of popular culture. The after-market just for custom wheels is \$3 billion annually. But for most of the 20th century, the brand has labored under two, not just different, but oppositional reputations. “For all the talk about hip-hop going mainstream, you are not going to find white, middle-aged soccer moms swapping out their Sting CDs so that they can rattle windows with Youngbloodz’s “Cadillac Pimpin.”(Neil, part G).

1970s to 1990

The association of Cadillac with sex dates to the 1950s and the origins of cross-over rock and roll, as documented in the recently released *Dreamgirls*. The more specific identification in popular culture with pimps dates to the 1970s, although Cadillac, according to the Milners, was always the car of choice for real-world pimps “in the life.” (162) “The pettifogging pimp in the Caddie quickly became a stock character in Hollywood, either as comic relief [Huggy Bear in *Starsky and Hutch*] or as a heavy, supplying target practice for Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson. In the blaxploitation films, *Superfly*, *The Mack* and *Wille Dynamite*, we meet the hustler as hero, the mack daddy as the wise and amoral trickster” (Neil). Interestingly, as the brand was being co-opted by the pimp in the caddie, images of professional black men and women begin to appear for the first time in Cadillac print ads. The earliest print Cadillac advertisement that we have found with an identifiable African American in a group of middle-class admirers is 1975.

During the 1970s the colliding reputations of Cadillac were front and center of popular and political culture. Reinforcing the apparently negative stereotyping of the pimpmobile was the “Welfare Cadillac” mantra of right-wing commentary. Ronald Reagan loved telling the story of the “Chicago welfare queen” who had 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and collected benefits for “four nonexistent deceased husbands,” bilking the government out of “over \$150,000.” The real welfare recipient to whom Reagan referred was actually convicted for using two different aliases to collect \$8,000. (<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0309.mendacity-index.html>.) In fact, the “Welfare Cadillac” was political shorthand for black “welfare loafers.” While the implied narrator [of *Welfare Cadillac*] was white, there was no mistaking its ugly racial intent” (Neil. G 2). Reagan was not the first to identify Cadillac negatively as part of the Republican “southern strategy” to attract the white southern vote with racist appeals. According to a Dan Rather news report on March 27, 1970, Richard Nixon requested Johnny Cash to sing Guy Drake’s song “Welfare Cadillac” for the singer’s visit to the White House (Vanderbilt Television News archives). Cash declined to sing another artist’s song.

The poor sales performance of Cadillac as a brand between the 1970s and 1990s can only partly be attributed to its identification with pimps and welfare queens. General Motors compounded the problem with lackluster styling, disastrous changes in product design and confused market positioning in a period of increasingly effective competition in the U.S. luxury automobile market (Bonsall, 148). Mercedes led the revolution in imports, soon followed by BMW, Lexus and Infiniti. But Ford also challenged Cadillac. And it’s the Ford challenge that is of particular interest to this discussion. Cadillac introduced its front drive “C” cars in the early 1980s, just as the luxury marketing was rebounding from the oil scares of the 1970s. Ford stuck with the Lincoln Town Car, revamped in 1985. As a result, Ford sold 119,878 Lincoln Town Cars in 1985, compared to 32, 839 sold in 1985. (Bonsall,150) At the same time, Ford ran its famous advertising campaign in which parking valets at an expensive restaurant confuse Buicks and Oldsmobiles with Cadillacs, but always knew the uniquely distinguished Lincoln Town car. By 1990 Lincoln almost outsold Cadillac in the U.S. market (Bonsall, 171). There was another consequence to the shift from the rear-wheel, traditional-size luxury sedan to the smaller, cheaper, undistinguished “C” cars. Cadillac lost its dominance—indeed, near monopoly-- of the “conversion” market to the Lincoln.

The limousine market was relatively small at the time—“several thousand units per year,” according to Bonsall, “but the prestige was...enormous.”(152) Cadillac was no longer the vehicle of choice for diplomats or, with much more significance to popular culture, of funeral directors.

1950s and the 1930s

If the 1970s to the 1990s represent the bleakest time in Cadillac history, the 1950s was a golden era. “Cadillac held a commanding position among luxury cars in 1951” because of weak domestic competition: Packard targeted the mid-level segment, Chrysler had failed to include automatic transmissions in its Imperial, and Ford phased out the K-series Lincolns. The Cadillac was technologically and aesthetically far superior to its competition. In addition, Alfred Sloan’s strategy at General Motors to develop brand loyalty across price points so that an owner of an Oldsmobile or a Buick could graduate to the Cadillac and remain in the General Motors’ fold was immensely successful. (Bonsall, 47-49) In 1956, the last year of the Packard and the first year of Elvis Presley’s meteoric rise to stardom, General Motors produced 154,577 Cadillacs. (Bonsall, 63). Elvis Presley represents the apotheosis of Cadillac ownership and its meaning in popular culture. His love of the cars was so legendary that almost thirty years after his death, he’s still appearing in a current advertisement, this one with Dolly Parton and a pink Cadillac. Hendry describes the “Golden Cadillac,” commissioned by Elvis in 1960 which included an ice

machine, an electric shoe buffer and swivel television, the “bling” of its day. (357) Elvis, of course, transformed popular culture because he took the rhythm and blues (and all its symbols of financial and sexual success) from the southern African-American sub-culture, blended that music with country, and shook up white mainstream with rock and roll. In literally thousands of songs since then the car in general, and Cadillac in particular is celebrated. It’s what brown-eyed handsome men drive to chase Miss Mablelene. (Chuck Berry was, of course, driving a Ford and, according to the unlikely source *U.S. News and World Report* (70), Ike Turner may actually be the singer of the “most influential song you never heard”: the 1951 *Rocket 88*, (a reference to the V-8 Oldsmobile, but which was based on a 1947 song *Cadillac Boogie* by Jimmie Liggins. Bill Haley and the Saddlemen recorded a version of *Rocket 88*, also in 1951 and Little Richard “sampled” Ike Turner’s piano introduction in *Good Golly Miss Molly*. Cars as lyric subject reflect the much deeper meaning of the automobile in American culture. Much commentary and research has noted that “Americans generally ... have evolved special relationships with the automobile that transcend their mere utility.” Lewis Mumford critiqued the car as the “great symbol of advancement... a large share of the ‘American Dream’... a symbol of freedom.” (Goldfield, 116) For African-Americans, automobiles take on even greater significance in displays of wealth and status. Segregated housing, among many other consumption opportunities, limited conspicuous consumption for African-Americans to cars, clothes and jewelry. The meaning of automobile ownership for class and race relationships was recognized early.

As Arthur Raper concludes in his 1936 sociological study of two counties in North Carolina, “The opportunities afforded by the automobile provide a basis for a new mobility for whites as well as Negroes, *based upon personal standards rather than community mores – upon what the individual wants to do rather than what the community does not want him to do* [italics mine]. (174-175) Raper’s study suggests a surprisingly high level of automobile ownership in the rural south. In the two counties studied, Green and Macon, almost 70% of African-Americans who owned land between 1 and 20 acres owned an automobile versus 89% such white land owners. There is a similar disparity at the lowest end of the hierarchy, but even so the numbers are high for this the poorest economic group. Almost 41% of African-American share croppers in 1934 owned a car versus 58% white share croppers. “Only in automobiles on public roads do landlords and tenants and white people and Negroes of the Black Belt meet on a basis of equality.” (Raper, 174) The author goes on to describe the extraordinary freedom and democratization of individual car ownership: “Prior to the coming of the automobile, when landlord met tenant or when white man met black man, each knew his relation to each other and acted accordingly. But today when the landlord, speeding down

the road at forty miles an hour, sees an old automobile coming he does not know whether he is meeting his tenant or the richest planter in the county...” (Raper, 175) In addition to the expression of success and wealth shared by automobile ownership for all Americans, car ownership thus also very specifically freed African-Americans from the humiliating mores of Jim Crow, from having to sit at the back of buses, or step off sidewalks in deference to whites. Over time, these symbolic acts take on further political meaning. “For African-American populations seeking ways out of the lingering shadows of slavery, owning and using automobiles supplied one significant means to measure the distance traveled towards political freedoms and public respect.” (Gilroy, 94) Automobile ownership has always involved intense expressive consumption, “a social act producing symbolic meanings, social codes, political ideologies and relationships.” (Hopkins) It is this context that Ralph Ellison’s 1973 “Cadillac Flambé” epitomizes the social and cultural meanings of the link between Cadillac and African-Americans. “Cadillac Flambé” is a section of the unfinished novel *Juneteenth* that Ralph Ellison worked on for the last 20 years of his life. It is a sprawling tale about Adam Sunraider, a racist U.S. senator who is shot on the floor of the Senate sometime in the 1950s. “Cadillac Flambé” tells the story of LeeWillie Minifees, a successful jazz musician who, having made \$375.33 in gigs down in Chattanooga is driving home to Harlem in a “gleaming white Cadillac convertible,” when he hears the Senator from Richmond on the radio refer to Cadillacs as “coon cages.” In a recorded Washington committee session and replayed on the radio, Senator Sunraider paradoxically defended the American automobile industry by declaring:

We have reached the sad state of affairs, gentlemen, wherein this fine product of American skill has become so common in Harlem that much of its initial value has been sorely compromised. Indeed, I am led to suggest, and quite seriously, that legislation be drawn up to rename it the ‘Coon Cage Eight.’ And not at all because of its eight super efficient cylinders, nor because of the lean, springing strength and beauty of its general outlines. Not at all, but because it has now become such a common sight to see eight or more of our darker brethren together enjoying its power, its beauty, its neo-pagan comfort, while weaving recklessly through the streets of our great cities and along our super-highways.

LeeWillie drives to Sunraider’s estate, where the senator is hosting a barbeque, and, with high drama burns his own beautiful car as protest in front of a startled white audience. LeeWillie urges the crowd to sing “God Bless America” with him as the car goes up in flames. Instead, “some continued to shout threats in their outrage and frustration, while others, both men and women, filled the air with a strangely brokenhearted and forlorn sound of

weeping....” Why does LeWillie destroy his own “damned GOOD Caddy” which he “loved dearly” with its TAIL FINS and WHITEWALLS and fine ivory leather...his scientific dreamboat?” He flambés his car because he has just been robbed of the symbolic meaning of its ownership and consumption. “The Negro driving his own automobile is not so constantly reminded of the meaning of his color” (Raper, 175) except when he turns on the radio to listen “to hear some Dinah, or Duke, or Hawk” and hears instead Senator Sunraider calling his car a “coon cage.” Ellison is ultimately critiquing a reliance on materialism and consumption to compensate for society’s inequality and injustice. African-Americans and Cadillacs: it’s a combination at the heart of an apocryphal story in the history of Cadillac that has its origins in Peter Drucker’s autobiographical *Adventures of a Bystander*. According to Drucker, General Motors was about to liquidate Cadillac because it was losing money in the great depression. Nick Dreystadt, Cadillac’s service manager at the time gate-crashed the GM Executive Committee meeting to present a plan for saving the brand “by developing the Negro market” (269):

Dreystadt had come to realize that the Cadillac was the most popular car in the very small community of wealthy Negroes. An amazing number of big, new Cadillacs brought in for service were owned by black entertainers, black boxers, black doctors, black realtors. It was company policy not to sell Cadillacs to Negroes—the Cadillac salesman aimed at the white ‘prestige’ market. But the wealthy Negro wanted a Cadillac so badly that he paid a substantial premium to a white man to front for him in buying one....[A] Cadillac was the only success symbol the affluent black could buy; he had no access to good housing, to luxury resorts, or to any other of the outward signs of worldly success. And so Dreystadt, in the depth of the depression, set out to save Cadillac by developing the Negro market—and sold enough cars to make the Cadillac division break even by 1934.

A fabulous story (and one repeated frequently in the literature)—but is it true? Drucker gives no details about how exactly Nick Dreystadt set about targeting African-Americans, or how the sales force and distributors were retrained to sell to a despised target market. Neither Bonsall nor Hendry in their respective histories of the brand make any mention of Dreystadt’s marketing decisions. Indeed, Bonsall’s portrait of Dreystadt is quite different from Drucker’s, who describes Dreystadt as “warm,” droll” and “beloved.” “Nick Dreystadt was concerned with people, saw them, cared for them and understood them as individuals.” (268) According to Bonsall, however, Nick Dreystadt “was not, apparently, the type that made friends easily...he was as tough as nails...If his harried associates never exactly learned to like him, they clearly learned to respect him and the job he was doing for the division.” (10) That job was a thorough-going review of manufacturing operations which

created an incredibly efficient production process. This process innovation led in turn to the introduction of the Series Sixty, the most affordable Cadillac in many years. It is at this time, also, that General Motors started to “share bodies” among its product lines. In this version of history Cadillac returned to profitability, not by marketing to African-Americans, but by creating manufacturing efficiencies and thereby reinventing “the price/value relationships in the luxury field.” (Bonsall, 10).

Whether true or not historically, Drucker’s story of the Cadillac saved from extinction by African-Americans has metaphoric appeal to it. Certainly, if nothing else, it foreshadows the success of the brand in the 21st century when Cadillac embraced “bling” as a major selling proposition.

NOTES

¹ We hypothesize that Cadillac is indeed the most referenced brand in U.S. popular culture, but there is no empirical proof. Monroe Freidman’s 1999 study, now very outdated, has automobiles as the product category with the highest level of aggregation across all categories of popular culture. Overall, Cadillac ranked second in his study to Coca Cola as the brand name most mentioned in the forms of popular culture included in the survey. There is no comparable subsequent study, but in 2004 alone, according to Rob Kelley, Cadillac was mentioned 70 times in song lyrics, up from 46 the year before. The expanding range of popular culture media, including video games which frequently include the Escalade, must also be taken into account.

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