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SAVING CADILLAC: HOW AMERICA'S RISING BLACK ELITE RESCUED AMERICA'S GREATEST LUXURY CAR

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Introduction

Before German engineering became synonymous in America with the quality craftsmanship of brands like Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz, and before Italian automobiles became the pinnacle of style in the form of Lamborghinis and Ferraris, Cadillac reigned. In the early 20th century, the American luxury automobile market was firmly domestic, and by 1963, America's top luxury car brand, Cadillac, outsold its nearest competitor five to one.[1] Cadillac was not just an economic success: it was also a cultural icon that had an outsized presence in the American imagination. More than one thousand songs have been cataloged with the word "Cadillac" in the title, representing Cadillac's powerful place in American culture as a symbol of success and what it means to be cool.[2]

Cadillac's success was something of a miracle because as America entered the Great Depression, its parent corporation, General Motors, believed that its high-cost approach to luxury was

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no longer feasible.[3] This paper explores how Cadillac survived the economic turmoil of the early 1930s and emerged as the strongest luxury automobile brand in America. It argues that Cadillac survived because of a plan developed by a German-born mechanic that focused in part on selling cars to black Americans. That plan succeeded because some black Americans had thrived following the American Civil War, developing a strong economic elite with the means and desire to drive America's icon of luxury driving.

This paper explores this idea by tracing the twin histories of Cadillac and the rise of a black economic elite that would become a major market for the brand's vehicles. Cadillac rose to prominence as a luxury brand throughout the first three decades of the 20th century before facing potential insolvency during the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Nicholas Dreystadt, a mechanic at Cadillac who had risen to become the company's service manager, outlined a plan to save the company by improving production efficiency and eliminating the company's policy against selling its cars to black customers.

At the time the "Dreystadt Plan" was put into action, it flew in the face of conventional wisdom, which held that selling luxury goods to black Americans would lower a brand's value in the eyes of white consumers. However, since the Civil War, a growing black elite had developed that had the desire to travel and the means to purchase luxury vehicles despite the widespread obstacles they faced when they attempted to engage in free and equal travel. These black Americans purchased Cadillacs in droves, driven by a twin desire to display their wealth in ways that mirrored white consumption patterns and to engage in economic activism to protest racial hierarchies of the time.

In the end, the Dreystadt Plan and the rising economic power of black elites combined to help Cadillac weather the storm of the Great Depression and eventually become the premier luxury car in America. By 1934, Cadillac was again making a profit, this time thanks to an alliance with black Americans who still feel an exceptional connection to the brand to this day, providing an important if imperfect lesson on the power of inclusion.[4]

The Rise of Cadillac

In 1900, Ransom E. Olds built the first automobile factory in Detroit, Michigan, and though that Oldsmobile factory would ultimately fail, it marked Detroit as a destination for manufacturers, ushering in the age of the automobile and foreshadowing Detroit's position as the "Motor City" it would become.[5] By the time Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1908, he had long since brought the cost of owning and operating an automobile well below the cost of keeping a horse and buggy. Ford's approach to manufacturing automobiles focused on more efficient techniques of manufacturing that would allow him to craft the least expensive automobiles possible without sacrificing reliability.[6]

But the Ford method of manufacturing, which made him the richest man in the world, was not the only approach to building automobiles. In fact, out of the ashes of Oldsmobile's first failed attempt at building an empire in Detroit, rose another vision of what a car could be. Engineer, machinist, and former Oldsmobile employee Henry Leland founded Cadillac in 1902 on the remains of an early Ford factory that had been slated to be decommissioned.[7] Leland and his partners named the company after the French explorer and founder of Detroit, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, signaling their desire to create a pioneering car company.[8] Over the years that followed, Leland and the Cadillac company would—unlike Ford—seek luxury instead of affordability and exclusivity instead of accessibility.

The first Cadillac was based on a design that Leland had created for Oldsmobile, but from early on, Leland intended to innovate constantly.[9] Leland was ambitious, and he pushed his workers hard to design superior technology and manufacture cars with a high degree of precision.[10] His dedication paid off in a series of successes that soon gave Cadillac a reputation for quality craftsmanship and cutting-edge engineering.[11]

Cadillac grew rapidly throughout the early twentieth century based on a series of technological innovations that placed it at the forefront of the industry. In 1908, Cadillac became the first American car company to win the Dewar Trophy—a presti-

gious award for excellence in automobile engineering—for its interchangeable manufactured parts, which had been inspired by Leland's time working at the Colt's Manufacturing Company, a famous producer of firearms.[12]

In 1909, General Motors, a conglomerate that had been founded with the intention of merging the main players in the automotive industry, purchased Cadillac to serve as the company's luxury division.[13] Cadillac adopted the slogan "Standard of the World" and continued to develop its technology aggressively. In 1912, Leland and fellow Cadillac engineer Charles F. Kettering introduced the first electric self-starting car with a new lighting system, replacing the awkward, strenuous, and even dangerous process of a crank-start engine with a simpler, safer operation.[14] Because of this technology, Cadillac became the first company to win a second Dewar Trophy, and by 1915 all Cadillac models were equipped with the first mass-produced, water-cooled V8 engines, which would become foundational technology for modern-day automobile manufacturing.[15]

Nevertheless, Cadillac's exceptional quality and cutting-edge technology came at a cost. By 1921, the "Type 9" Cadillac bore the hefty price tag of $5,190, making it General Motors' most expensive vehicle.[16] To justify the cost of its vehicles, Cadillac had to provide more than great engineering. So, in 1927, Cadillac released the LaSalle convertible coupe, a car whose development had been guided by the designer Harley Earl instead of by an engineer.[17] The LaSalle defined a new era of luxury cars, encouraging consumers to focus on more than mobility and engineering.

With the introduction of the LaSalle, the Cadillac became the definitive symbol of automobile opulence.[18] At a time when American purchasing power was growing, Cadillac promised a sort of social transcendence: by driving a Cadillac, consumers would become part of a growing American aristocracy, indulging not just in functional engineering but in a concrete representation of superiority.[19] Americans were happy to take advantage of Cadillac's aspirational image, and for years Cadillac reaped the rewards of its luxurious offerings.

The Great Depression

Despite its engineering excellence, Cadillac's early financial success was short-lived. In 1929, as American markets crashed and incomes plummeted throughout the Great Depression, the entire automobile industry suffered. Car sales fell 75% between 1929 and 1932, which in turn led to a drop in production from 3.8 million cars to a mere 1.1 million cars.[20]

The Great Depression followed in the wake of incredible technological advancements throughout the entire automobile industry. Henry Ford had perfected the assembly line by 1913, and the ensuing era of mass production led to an economic boom as lower prices greatly increased the effective purchasing power of American consumers.[21] As mass production encouraged mass consumption, manufacturing companies faced a new challenge: the need to keep customers "dissatisfied" so that they would keep consuming even after their basic needs were met.[22]

Continued mass consumption required the American working class to maintain sufficient income to purchase new goods, but over the 1920s American wealth streamed to the wealthy and away from the middle and lower economic classes. By the end of the 1920s, the richest one percent of Americans had increased their share of the national income from 12% to 19%.[23] Despite manufacturing advancements that increased worker productivity, the restructuring of the economy led to a decrease in workers' real wages and an increase in the ranks of the working poor, who could no longer contribute as consumers to an economy that depended on their consumption.[24] The American economy teetered on the edge of collapse.

This economic insecurity decimated faith in the American economic system. As a result, throughout the last weeks of October 1929, the markets went through a series of turbulent shifts that took a sudden turn for the worse with a rapid selloff of automobile stocks on October 23.[25] The weeks that followed saw an unprecedented collapse of the markets. Bank customers withdrew funds in response, leaving many of the country's most important financial institutions insolvent.[26]

With the economy brought to its knees, America's core industries suffered as well, and the automobile industry was no exception. During the early 1930s, automobile sales cratered, and the sales of luxury automobiles were decimated.[27] So, while Cadillac's parent corporation, General Motors, managed to remain profitable throughout the Great Depression by cutting costs aggressively, Cadillac was not so lucky. Cadillac was so unprofitable, in fact, that General Motors saw only two options for dealing with its luxury division: closing it down entirely or holding on to the Cadillac name and attempting to weather the economic storm without investing further.[28] To an outsider, it looked like Cadillac was doomed either way.

The Turnaround Plan

Those appearances proved deceptive, however, when an unlikely force within Cadillac developed a plan to save the company. That man was the German-born mechanic Nicholas Dreystadt, and his plan was to save Cadillac by selling to black Americans for the first time.[29] Dreystadt had started in the automobile industry at only thirteen years old as the youngest apprentice on the Mercedes Racing Team. He emigrated to the United States and joined General Motors in 1912 at twenty-two years of age.[30]

Dreystadt did not have the markings of a successful executive. His habits were untidy and he lacked a formal education. He spoke English with a heavy accent from his native Swabian region of Germany, dressed in casual tweed jackets decorated with burn marks, and often wore mismatched shoes to work.[31] Despite his slovenly habits and lack of formal education, Dreystadt proved himself a gifted mechanic and earned a reputation as a skillful and dependable worker. As a result, he rose through the ranks into management, combining effective skills in leadership with intimate knowledge of the engineering that had brought Cadillac its success.[32] His reputation as a tough but kind manager brought him respect, and by the time the Great Depression had begun, he was Cadillac's service manager, a middle-management

position in which he had no real influence over the direction of General Motors.[33]

The Great Depression changed General Motors. To save costs, the company consolidated its Buick, Oldsmobile, and Pontiac lines under a single management structure.[34] The executive committee originally planned to liquidate Cadillac because they did not believe that its luxury line could become profitable again. Dreystadt believed in Cadillac, however, and found an opportunity to give a ten-minute presentation on how he believed Cadillac could be salvaged in just eighteen months, an audacious move that was compared to a monk lecturing the College of Cardinals on who should be elected pope.[35]

Despite the boldness of Dreystadt's proposal, it was convincing. Dreystadt's outsider perspective—which allowed him to boldly pronounce his plan to the board—also allowed him to see that black Americans could and should be an important segment of Cadillac's market. He recognized that black doctors, entertainers, and professionals already comprised a large number of Cadillac's 'prestige market' even though Cadillac had an unwritten rule not to sell vehicles to black people.[36] Dreystadt believed that this tacit rule, intended to protect the brand's image by conforming to racial hierarchies of the time, was limiting the company.[37]

At a corporation that had historically avoided courting black customers and had even prevented them from buying Cadillacs directly, Dreystadt's pitch should have failed. Under the pressure of the Great Depression, however, and due in part to Dreystadt's formidable reputation, the board was persuaded.[38] Dreystadt was quickly given an executive position, and he set to work right away, reshaping Cadillac as an affordable prestige product available to all. The so-called Dreystadt Plan was bold, and its success was far from guaranteed.

The Rise of Black Purchasing Power

The Dreystadt Plan seemed unlikely to succeed because it was based on two assumptions that appeared doubtful at the time. First, it assumed that there were enough black Americans

with the financial means to buy Cadillacs, and second, it assumed that black Americans wanted to buy Cadillacs. Historically, the first assumption was particularly unlikely because prior to and throughout the Civil War, most black Americans had been enslaved.[39] Even after the emancipation of slaves, black Americans suffered from pervasive obstacles to obtaining wealth and were often restricted from accessing luxury goods like the Cadillac by implicit and explicit barriers. Finally, as the Great Depression deepened, black Americans found themselves last in line for every form of governmental support and relief as they attempted to eke out their livings.[40]

Fortunately for the Dreystadt Plan, though, a growing black elite class had developed that hoped to emulate the material signs of wealth available to wealthy whites. That black elite had developed despite the historical lack of basic civil rights that black Americans possessed. The development of a black elite was possible because, by the 19th century, roughly ten percent of a population of approximately one million black Americans had achieved freedom. Black people in America could be free if they were born free, had the means to purchase their freedom, or received manumission from their owners.[41] During the pre-Civil War period, characteristics of ancestry, freedom, expertise, literacy, and ownership of property laid the foundation for the black elite.[42] Once black Americans were freed, they strove for financial success.

In the North, the main basis of black financial success prior to the Civil War stemmed from black ownership of land, which predominantly developed as black Americans acquired land that was considered less desirable in states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.[43] In the South, free black Americans and high-status slaves generally had fair complexions and were of mixed white and black ancestry.[44] Often the offspring of slave women and their masters, so-called "mulattoes" had physical characteristics of light skin and smoother hair texture.[45] While aspirations of inclusion into white society forced mixed blacks to uphold white aristocratic standards, upper-class white society nonetheless generally rejected black elites from entering white social institutions.[46]

In 1865, following the abolition of slavery under the 13th Amendment, black Americans gained access to further educational and economic opportunities. During the Reconstruction period, organizations such as the Freedman's Bureau instituted public education for freed slaves.[47] Education then became a route to joining elite black circles, with a small proportion of blacks attending prestigious colleges during the Reconstruction period. By 1900, over 2,500 black Americans held college degrees, with approximately 400 graduating from prestigious northern institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Oberlin.[48] Several black colleges, such as Howard University, were established under Congressional approval.[49]

Some elite blacks also gained status through industry as they gained expertise in the garment, shoe, and hairstyling trades, among others.[50] Other elite blacks pursued leadership positions in their local communities through black churches or schools, sometimes gaining wider political power like Blanche K. Bruce did when he became a U.S. senator in 1875.[51] By that point, a base of black political and financial power had developed. Indeed, in the fifty years following the Emancipation Proclamation, black Americans developed personal wealth amounting to $700 million, and the black literacy rate leaped from 5% to 70%.[52] This wealth continued to grow, primarily through the efforts of upper and middle-class black businesspeople.[53]

Aspirations of the Black Elite

Over the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, the number of wealthy black Americans increased significantly.[54] Even during Reconstruction, however, the social status of black elites was mostly dependent on their ties to powerful white Americans, and they demonstrated that status through consumption patterns that mirrored those of dominant white culture.[55]

The black elite class often valued traits of "whiteness" within their own circles.[56] One of the most exclusive organizations in Charleston, South Carolina, for example, only accepted elite "mulattoes" into its membership. The emulation of white class pat-

terns was not accidental: the black educator and inventor Booker T. Washington himself espoused a philosophy of "racial uplift" under which he argued that black Americans were not ready for the responsibilities of citizenship and needed to develop through self-help and cultural evolution to integrate into modern civilization.[57] In Charleston, the members of black elite circles utilized racial uplift ideology to engage in economic activism following white patterns of activity by creating a credit union and investing in property and education.[58]

Barred from participation in white institutions, black elites mirrored those institutions through club activities that flaunted the wealth of members through grand parties, dinners, and teas under the firm belief in white gentility as the marker of elite status.[59] Like the members of the Charleston club, many elite blacks of the 1930s and 1940s worked with the NAACP, the Urban League, Greek life, and other community advocacy groups.[60] In order to maintain the prestige of such groups, exclusive black clubs promoted marriage within the community rather than allowing new members to join.[61]

Eventually, the behavior and consumption patterns of the black elite drew closer and closer to those of the white elite, and the gap between middle-to-low-income blacks and the black elites widened. Nevertheless, white publications frequently mocked the idea of a black elite or "black aristocracy," with major publications like *Harper's Weekly* running satirical cartoons that lampooned what many white Americans considered the ridiculous pretensions of well-to-do black Americans.[62] Nonetheless, because almost all power in the United States before the Civil War was based at least in part on whiteness, black Americans had little choice but to strive after the values, behavior, and appearance of whiteness. For very light-skinned black Americans, imitating white behaviors could even lead to the opportunity to pass as a white person and escape slavery altogether.[63]

Although racism persisted in full force after the war, whiteness was no longer a prerequisite for black success. An emerging population of affluent black Americans represented a shift in black

society as black Americans started to excel on the basis of their own hard work, education, and economic progress.[64] Elite black Americans came to be delineated by income, educational backgrounds, and occupational prestige, and over time, the "colorism" that had been a marker of the black elite prior to and in the early days of Reconstruction gradually became secondary to economic success that was becoming more widespread.[65] Nevertheless, the patterns of consumption that had defined the habits of the early black elite remained for some time to come.

Black Travel in Jim Crow America

One of the key patterns of consumption for white Americans in the 20th century was travel. During the early decades of the century, cars became more common and white Americans started to move out of cities and into suburbs, where cars were a necessity and travel by automobile was a part of daily life.[66] For black Americans hoping to pursue the patterns of life available to the white middle class, however, travel was more expensive, more difficult, and less straightforward.[67] On the one hand, automobiles represented an escape from the segregation they faced on trains and buses, allowing black Americans to take control of their movement through the country.[68] On the other hand, travel was fraught with difficulty. As one black journalist noted, "it used to be that people only took a trip [if] some body had died or was dying."[69]

One of the most obvious barriers to black travel was a set of legal obstacles known as Jim Crow Laws. During the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, a series of laws were written that restricted the rights of black Americans. The term 'Jim Crow' was coined from the eponymous character of a foolish country slave who was a staple of blackface minstrel shows as early as the 1790s.[70] 'Jim Crow' was used to refer to blacks at large and then specifically to the laws that limited the rights of black Americans. Jim Crow Laws resulted from a reaction against the post-Civil War empowerment of black Americans. Many Americans strongly opposed black equality and passed Jim Crow laws based on the

"black codes" that had been created by former Confederate states to maintain white control over black Americans.[71]

Jim Crow laws varied throughout each state and mainly served to formalize distinctions between black and white Americans. For example, where Arizona banned intermarriage between the races, other states wrote laws that segregated public accommodations including toilets, public transportation, restaurants, and places of leisure, such as movie theaters.[72] Restrictions on leisure activities were widespread, with one of the most obvious difficulties being the legal barriers that Jim Crow Laws presented to black Americans when they attempted to travel.

One prime example of restrictions on black American travel was a series of laws that officially segregated train cars based on race. The first of these—believed to be the first Jim Crow law in the country—was passed in 1881 in Tennessee.[73] Louisiana's identical Separate Car Act of 1890 required passenger trains to have separate train car accommodations for black and white passengers. Many elite black Americans reacted to the separate car laws as a "white scheme" forcing "respectable" black Americans to associate with poorer blacks.[74] More importantly, however, Jim Crow Laws intentionally separated black Americans from white society to create a thoroughly humiliating experience that required black customers to defer to white customers and employees at every moment.[75]

Jim Crow laws received the blessing of the federal government in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 after Homer Plessy, a man of mixed descent, was arrested for taking a vacant seat in the "white" train car.[76] Plessy sued, arguing that the Separate Car Act violated the Fourteenth Amendment, which states that "any person within [the states'] jurisdiction has the equal protection of the laws." However, the Supreme Court ruled that the 14th Amendment only applied to political and civil rights and legalized the concept of "separate, but equal" as a constitutional justification for segregation.[77]

With the support of the Supreme Court, Jim Crow laws proved persistent. They were only gradually dismantled, first

through another decision of the Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education*, that tackled the issue of school segregation in 1954, and later through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[78] In the meantime, however, black Americans faced widespread and pervasive discrimination that had a powerful effect on what they could buy, where they could go, and what services they could use.

Redlining and Financial Discrimination

Discrimination against black Americans did not only take the form of laws that openly limited travel. Black Americans were also restricted in their luxury consumption by the practice of redlining. Although discriminatory financial practices had long existed to hamper the spending of black Americans, those practices crystallized into widespread, consistent limitations on black spending in the 1930s after the Federal Housing Administration, created to insure mortgages, defined financially "risky" zones marked in red on maps.[79] Banks then used those maps to avoid lending to people—generally black Americans or immigrants—who lived there. As a result, black elites, who might otherwise have been able to follow white Americans in their flight from cities to the suburbs, were unable to invest in larger properties.[80]

Although the term redlining only officially applied to mortgage lending practices, it also functioned as a broader restriction on access to credit, affecting consumers' ability to purchase big-ticket items, like automobiles.[81] Furthermore, unofficial forms of redlining developed that restricted black purchasing power, including redlining in automobile insurance prices, which subtly increased the cost of vehicle ownership.[82] Thus, black Americans who might otherwise have been able to afford luxury vehicles struggled to do so.

The Dangers of Travel

To make matters worse, traveling black Americans risked encounters with hostile locals, discriminatory law enforcement, and even violent mobs.[83] During the Jim Crow era, thousands of

American towns were "sundown towns," exclusively white towns that prohibited black people from being within the city limits after dark.[84] The dangers of travel thus made owning and using a car a potentially dangerous proposition, deterring many black Americans from traveling freely.

Indeed, merely driving a car as a black person in America could be risky, and middle class black Americans who owned a car often kept a chauffeur's cap in their car so that they could claim to be driving their boss's car if they were accosted.[85] Thus, the carefree act of travel that was so openly and freely available to white Americans in the 20th century was fraught for black Americans, who struggled to secure automobiles in the first place and then faced a dangerous landscape once they attempted to use them.

The Great Migration

Despite the obstacles to black travel in the United States, other forces were at work as well, forces that pushed black Americans to spread out across the country in an exodus from the American South. At the beginning of the 20th century, more than eight times as many blacks lived in southern states as lived in northern ones.[86] But life in the South was especially hard for black Americans, as it was the seat of America's Jim Crow laws and the epicenter of resistance to Reconstruction. Americans had long used travel as a way of demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the social order around them, and in the vast United States, flight had been a form of protest since the founding of the nation's first colonies, and black Americans proved no exception.[87]

From 1915 to 1964, over six million southern black Americans—from states like Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and Georgia—joined in this tradition as they moved to the Northeast and upper Midwest, mostly to large cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis.[88] The migration was born from the violent racism in the South and fostered by economic opportunities in Northern industry. The Great Migration was further fueled by a flowering of northern black culture, with publications like *The Chicago Defender* becoming one of the foremost promoters of

the Great Migration, reposting advertisements for housing and employment opportunities as well as publishing firsthand stories of newfound black success in the North. In the latter half of the 1920s, New York City's Harlem had a similar effect, becoming a cultural center of arts and intellect in the black American community and drawing black Americans from all over the country.[89]

As a result of the Great Migration, the early 20th century marked the transformation of the black American population from a largely rural Southern one to a more widely spread urban one that had already braved the dangers of travel.[90] The Great Migration thus created a black community in America with the knowledge they needed to travel, a desire to see the world, and an awareness of the hurdles that would face them when they did.

Black Leisure Travel and the Green Book

The experiences of black Americans who pioneered the Great Migration were vital in shaping the landscape of black travel in the United States. One of the most important foundations for black travel was the Green Book, a guide book developed to keep black Americans safe on the road.[91] By 1930, black Americans owned over 70,000 businesses, and the Green Book, first published by Victor Hugo Green in Harlem in 1936, tracked many of these businesses, along with white businesses known to be friendly to black clients.[92] The guide was arranged by state, city, and street and listed housing and food options—many of which were black-owned or allowed blacks to safely and comfortably visit.[93] Green developed his guide through information he gathered from the Postal Workers Union, his own travels, travel agents, and black Americans who sent Green letters about their own travel experiences.[94]

The Green Book followed the ideology of racial uplift, promoting the pursuit of black economic advancement as the route to black improvement and, eventually, equality.[95] Green himself believed in the power of the growing wealth of black Americans to bridge racial divides: he contacted white businesses that he hoped to include in his guide, arguing that they should take advantage of the untapped economic value of the black desire to travel.[96]

That desire to travel was widespread among black Americans, and despite the extreme hardships and racial injustices that black Americans faced, leisure travel became more and more popular.[97] Even in the face of Jim Crow segregation, black Americans enjoyed traveling for leisure across the country, and resources that catered to black Americans grew. Indeed, an entire parallel world of businesses that served black Americans developed, including black hotels, guesthouses, nightclubs, and restaurants.[98]

As that alternate economy grew, so did black wealth and the Green Book itself. The Green Book thus represented the ways black Americans modified, adapted, and navigated the Jim Crow landscape to accommodate their own needs.[99] Moreover, the "Green Book" showcased travel and mobility as a resource that revealed white America's power dynamics and highlighted the politics of mobility in the United States.[100]

Black Cadillacs

More black travel meant more black Americans purchasing automobiles. Two major factors influenced black Americans to purchase Cadillacs in particular: the desire of black Americans for social status that could be attained by mirroring white consumption patterns and the belief that the practice of marketplace activism was a route to racial advancement and an effective protest against racism.

Throughout American history, elite social status was consistently associated with whiteness, including white skin color, white forms of leisure, and white patterns of consumption that contributed to a white ideal of humanity.[101] For the black elite that developed before the Civil War, this meant that even elite black communities used colorism as a gatekeeping mechanism. After the Civil War, as the black elite class expanded throughout Reconstruction, black elite circles increasingly focused on economic success and consumption as criteria for access to elite society.[102] Nevertheless, even once skin color ceased to be a requirement for entry into the upper echelons of black society, the consumption

habits that carried the most prestige were often based on habits demonstrated by white Americans.[103]

Automobiles were a key element of white consumption in America. Lewis Mumford, an American sociologist, noted that Americans came to see cars as representative of the "American Dream" and all the freedom that concept implies.[104] For black Americans, automobiles spoke to more than affluence and luxury. Because automobiles were one of the few major luxury items that black Americans could purchase, the relationship between class, race, and automobile ownership heightened the symbolic power of the car for black Americans who sought upward mobility.

Automobiles held this power because, in Jim Crow America, many people believed that "Status [was] something you buy. No title to defer or impenetrable class hierarchies to hold you down, you can start as a Ragged Dick and end up a John D. Rockefeller."[105] Where Jim Crow laws dictated where blacks could and could not go, owning a Cadillac represented not only the freedom of driving an automobile anywhere one wanted, but also spoke to a visible attempt to reimagine American class hierarchies through consumption. As many people saw it, "Cadillac is a company built on dreams."[106] The dream Cadillac presented was a universally recognizable standard of 'making it' in spite of the economic segregation restricting black consumers.[107]

And yet, until the Dreystadt Plan, that dream was largely inaccessible to black Americans. Because of the company's policy against selling to black customers, black people who wanted to buy a Cadillac could only do so through 'fronts'—white people who would buy luxury goods on behalf of black consumers. As black Americans' continued practice of buying Cadillacs showed, however, the desire for social status through purchases outweighed the apparent indignity of purchasing through 'fronts'.

For black Americans, this standard was not merely about social climbing. On the contrary, in the Jim Crow era, cars promised an escape from the pressures of racial hierarchy, "a way to flee the farm, the city, adolescence, middle age, frustration, poverty, class [and] other people." [108] In this sense, cars and public roads

were a means of equalizing America's varying races and classes, and Cadillacs were a means of doing that in style.[109] In a society largely defined by consumption, engaging in upward mobility through spending was also seen by many as a form of resistance against racial hierarchies.[110] Under this point of view, owning a luxury automobile provided black Americans with a less confrontational method for opposing the racial landscape of the time.[111]

Long after the Great Depression passed, black consumer activism would grow through a series of strategies, including consumer boycotts against companies that instituted racist hiring practices, refused to sell goods to black Americans, or discriminated against black customers in their stores.[112] As America entered the Great Depression, however, those methods were still in the distant future, and early forms of marketplace activism became a norm in black communities.

For black Americans, then, Cadillac served as both an icon of luxury and resistance against the denial of their own purchasing power in a capitalist society. Indeed, to black Americans, the right to purchase goods freely was a signal of their citizenship and tied to their rights to fully participate in American democracy.[113] Through marketplace activism, black American consumers sought to remove white privilege from the center of American consumer culture.[114]

The Invisibility of the Black Consumer

Marketplace activism was an uphill battle in a setting characterized by business practices intended to prevent black Americans from publicly purchasing prestige goods. Even as Dreystadt was pushing GM to envision black Americans as a major market for Cadillacs, businesses in America strongly avoided being associated with black American customer bases. In fact, as one writer has noted, many "companies simply acted as though blacks did not exist as consumers for their products."[115] In fact, the preference against associating a company's products with black consumers was so strong that even the Fall 1956 edition of the

Green Book featured white Americans on its cover rather than black Americans.[116]

White opposition to black consumption had a long history. Before the Civil War, white slavery advocates sought to silence and punish the emerging black elite class, fearing that empowered blacks could provoke insurgency amongst slaves.[117] As a result, the consumption habits and purchasing power of black elites were often discreet and inconspicuous to avoid racist backlash. Even after emancipation, the black elite evoked resentment from whites.[118] Within the media, black Americans were portrayed through derogatory caricatures and the mainstream press satirized affluent blacks.[119] When images of black Americans did appear in advertisements, those images were often stereotyped white images of blackness that commoditized black experience, such as the infamous use of the black servant "Aunt Jemima" character to sell flour to an almost all-white client base.[120]

Nonetheless, between 1920 and 1940, during and after the Great Depression, businesses like the white-owned William B. Ziff Company started to acknowledge the potential of the black consumer market. The Ziff Company proceeded to promote black newspapers and publish advertisements and pamphlets that highlighted the viability and presence of a black consumer market.[121] Black purchasing power grew throughout this period as black communities formed in urban environments and created their own economies.[122] By the 1930s, the wealthy black elite presented a "marketplace opportunity" with the purchasing power to "save" luxury brands from the crippling effects of the Great Depression.[123]

Implementing the Dreystadt Plan

At Cadillac, Dreystadt was prepared to take advantage of the opportunity represented by black elites. The Dreystadt Plan's suggestion that the company pursue a strategy aimed at catering to black consumers was radical in the context of corporate aversion to marketing to black Americans. Dreystadt's insistence that GM sell directly to black Americans was based on the insights that he had developed as Cadillac's service manager. He had noticed black

customers frequently bringing in their own Cadillacs for service despite the company's policy of only selling to white people.[124]

Other managers at Cadillac were no doubt aware of this trend as well, but Dreystadt's inclusive approach to business, driven by his status as an immigrant and outsider himself, allowed him to take bold steps. When Detroit faced a shortage of skilled mechanics for a military engineering project, for example, Dreystadt hired approximately two thousand black former prostitutes and trained them to do the necessary work, a decision that shocked his colleagues but ultimately succeeded.[125]

At the same time, Dreystadt was a practical man focused on ensuring Cadillac's survival. To do so, he developed a plan that involved streamlining production, maintaining the aspirational image of the Cadillac brand, and increasing sales to black Americans.[126] Reorienting Cadillac to cater to black Americans required making Cadillacs more accessible in multiple ways. The most obvious change was to stop barring black people from buying Cadillacs at dealerships. Equally important, however, was making Cadillacs less expensive.

To that end, Dreystadt invested in production costs intended to cut down on the extravagant Cadillac production process that had involved extensive handcrafting and extremely high labor costs.[127] By implementing mass production techniques, Dreystadt decreased the cost to build a Cadillac, and within three years, the production cost of a Cadillac was comparable to the production cost of a Chevrolet.[128] He invested the savings he had created in quality control and service under the belief that those would be primary drivers of a sense of luxury among Cadillac's customers.[129] In developing and carrying out his plan, Dreystadt not only incorporated black Americans formally into Cadillac's plans but also greatly expanded the segment of black Americans who could aspire to elite-style luxury "status purchasing" by making Cadillacs more affordable.[130]

Despite Cadillac's new reliance on black purchasing power and its willingness to sell to them, advertisements during the 1930s did not reflect the company's black customers. Rather, most

advertisements upheld the brand's "aristocratic pretensions."[131] Cadillac framed its advertisements around imagery of old, white American aristocracy in the pre-Depression era, a move intended to strengthen the luxury branding of Cadillac.[132]

Nonetheless, Cadillac's advertisements throughout the 1920s and 1930s hinted at the possibility of class mobility, feeding into the aspirations of the black and white lower classes alike. One classic Cadillac ad, for example, shows a couple saying, "Maybe this will be the year"—the year they would finally purchase a Cadillac and fulfill their aspirations of joining America's upper class.[133] Cadillac's 'American dream' imagery reinforced the concept of class mobility through luxury goods consumption.[134] For black consumers with the financial ability to buy a Cadillac, the message of class mobility held an additional connotation of racial mobility, the freedom to break out from restrictive laws, norms, and practices of racism by displaying economic success.

The Dreystadt Plan led to economic success for Cadillac. With Dreystadt's new market segmentation and production reforms, Cadillac went from producing only 3,179 units in 1933 to producing 9,566 in 1934 when it again started to once again turn a profit.[135] Due to its low production costs, effective marketing, and new consumer base, Cadillac sold more in the Great Depression than it had in the booming 1920s.[136] By opening its doors to black customers, Cadillac even outsold the first black automobile company, Patterson-Greenfield.[137]

Conclusion

The racially discriminatory policies that blocked black Americans from purchasing luxury goods and that led corporations to avoid marketing to black Americans had a secondary effect: companies did not keep organized records of sales to black customers. Even after the Dreystadt plan was put in place, Cadillac was no exception to this rule, and so no quantitative data exists demonstrating the precise number of Cadillacs sold to black Americans in the 1930s.[138] This lack of data does not undermine

the role that black Americans played in shaping Cadillac's success as an automobile company and as a culturally important brand.

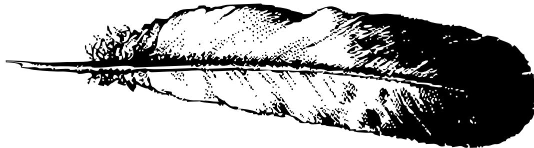
Indeed, the central role Cadillac played in black culture demonstrates that black consumers were instrumental to Cadillac's nearly miraculous turnaround during the Great Depression.[139] At a time when other divisions of GM were consolidating and Cadillac itself was at risk of being shut down, black customers became the foundation of the luxury brand's resurgence. To some extent, that resurgence was enabled by the Dreystadt plan's focus on cutting costs and streamlining production, but that plan could not have succeeded without Dreystadt's willingness to expand Cadillac's customer base. That willingness, built on the desire of black elites to purchase luxury goods, allowed a larger segment of black Americans to engage in marketplace activism. Over time, this dynamic made Cadillacs a staple of black American aspirational culture.

The black relationship with Cadillac seemed like a mixed blessing at times. For one thing, the sight of black Americans enjoying the fruits of American industry gave rise to resentment among many whites. In fact, Louisiana's Separate Car Law had been motivated by white anger at the sight of wealthy black Americans taking vacations along the Gulf Coast.[140] Cars were even more likely to incite white rage. The writer Chester Himes recounted how white farmers were outraged at the sight of his father driving his own car in their rural town in Mississippi and how those farmers drove his family out of the state.[141] The disconnect between the 'American dream' of purchasing a Cadillac and the reality of owning a luxury car as a black American spoke to the hostility surrounding black purchasing power in the early 20th century. In his short story, "Cadillac Flambé," Ralph Ellison told the story of LeeWilliee Minifees, a black man who attains his 'American dream' by purchasing a Cadillac, only to set fire to the car after a white senator calls it a "coon cage."[142]

Nevertheless, the Cadillac remained a symbol of freedom throughout the Jim Crow era, allowing black Americans to travel more freely, avoid segregated public transportation methods, and explore the country in relative safety through a network of

black-owned and black-friendly businesses.[143] In the context of black life during the Great Depression, quality luxury cars from Cadillac were both gateways to status and escapes from a hostile racial landscape. As bell hooks wrote, through a car's "leather seats, the real wood on the dashboard, the shiny metal so clear it's like glass….find the secret places within where there is no such thing as race."[144] Through the Great Depression and the years that followed, Cadillacs in particular became so closely associated with black success that by the 1970s, black singer William DeVaughan's hit song "Be Thankful For What You Got" had to reassure black Americans that there was no shame in not owning a Cadillac. Though "[y]ou may not drive a great big Cadillac," he sang, "brothers and sisters, you can still stand tall."[145]

Because of its alliance with the black economic elite—and later with black Americans more broadly—Cadillac stood tall, too. Cadillac's profitability long outlasted the Great Depression, and it remained at the forefront of the luxury car market into the 1970s, outselling its nearest rival, Lincoln, five-to-one at the peak of its popularity.[146] While this continued success was no doubt also due to the brand's innovative methods and technologies, it is nonetheless clear that black Americans played a major role in "saving" Cadillac. In the process, black Americans forged a pattern of consumption that both literally and figuratively enabled them to escape some of the realities of racial subordination.



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