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"See the USA in your Chevrolet": Understanding North American Automobile Consciousness in 1950s to 70s

Saloni Srivastava

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Shiv Nadar University
India
saloni.srivastava93@gmail.com

Abstract

The gendered marketing strategy of automobile industries in post Second World War America has been studied by Margaret Walsh in her 2011 essay, "Gender and Automobility: Selling Cars to American women after the Second World War." Taking Walsh's essay as a point of entry, this paper will look at the 1950s and 60s print advertisements of the automobile manufacturing company, Chevrolet, and investigate how print advertisements with captivating tag-lines ("See the USA in your Chevrolet") entered the American consciousness by reiterating (albeit subliminally) the necessity of owning a Chevrolet to travel across the USA. This paper illustrates the automobile consciousness of America in the 1950s and 60s through an analysis of Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) alongside the conscious curation of a *car-culture* through the then-popular print advertisements of Chevrolet.

Keywords: North America; automobiles; car culture; American literature; suburbanisation; American roads,; advertisements; women drivers; Automobile consciousness.

"In the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro"

(Didion 162)

In the above quoted lines, the shift in the perception of reality for Maria Wyeth, the protagonist of Joan Didion's novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970), takes place through identifying herself as a woman "parking a Corvette" (Didion 162) and discussing her options of purchasing an automobile with a man in *white* pants. The man's inquiry leads Maria to identify herself as someone beyond her social and biological disposition. This momentary alteration is significant because for once she does not recognise herself as her husband's wife or the mother of his child, or even his actress, but as a woman driver—one who is in charge of her life, an individual

participant in her day to day existence. The unnamed man in white pants discusses his willingness to purchase a Camaro with her and enquires about the mileage of her Corvette. This exchange gives Maria a moment of inclusivity in a man's world. From going to get an abortion, Mariah in that moment feels like a woman of the world. Coinciding with the changing gendered spectrum of the North American car culture, this instance holds value as the moment that captures this transformation. Through this episode, Didion not only encapsulates the transition in the automobile consciousness of the United States of America in the 1950s and 60s with its sudden awareness of women as potential consumers of automobiles, but also addresses what Betty Friedan calls "the problem that has no name".[1]

Friedan in her magnum opus *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), unravels the manipulative strategies of advertising companies for their clients while quoting from a report on advertising, "In an absent minded moment, the report concludes that 'love of life, as of the other sex, should remain unsoiled by exterior motives…let the wife be more than a housewife…a woman…" (Freidan 1963). The report seemingly ends on a positive note advocating the emancipation of women from being dependent housewives to being self-reliant individuals but, Friedan, while asserting the "absent-mindedness" of the claim, explains how it was a calculated strategy employed by manipulative advertisers and their clients in American businesses. She emphasises on the predatory tactics of the advertisers who claimed to solve the *unnamed problem*[2] to make women avid consumers because according to them, "the buying of things drains away those needs which cannot be satisfied by home and family—the housewives' need for "something beyond themselves with which to identify." In the 1950s and 60s with the mass production of economical cars, automobile manufacturing companies urged advertisers to utilise this lack in the lives of American housewives and to shift their focus on women as

[1] Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), describes the limited existence of a housewife or women/girls preparing to be wives in North America in the early twentieth century in a chapter called, "The problem that has no name". Friedan, while quoting various testimonials of housewives of North America, elaborates on how the monotony of every day existence was jarring the lives and health of women. They lacked purpose beyond taking care of the family and maintaining the household. While the prospect of marriage was certainly desirable for women, the life after was not as rewarding as they had hoped. Pertaining to this lack, psychologists began to refer to this state of dissatisfaction in American housewives as the problem that has no name.

[2] Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), states the commonly persisting problem that all suburban housewives complained about. They stated a lurking incompleteness, a void in their lives despite having a full and wholesome family life. This unnamed problem became the dominant disease amongst most suburban housewives of North America in the 50s to 70s.

potential consumers. Automobile manufacturers pounced on this opportunity and as a result unlocked a new customer base in women. "Advertising and salesmanship had to be given much more emphasis, and the consumer had to be made more style conscious" (Flink 1972). With automobile manufacturers identifying this changing gendered landscape of car consumption tag-lines such as, "We are a two car family, now!",[3] started making the rounds and women graduated from the passenger's seat to the driver's. The postwar homemaker's desire for access to a car could only be fulfilled either through car sharing or by a second family car.

By the late 1960s with the advent of suburbanisation—which considerably increased the distance between the family home and the city centre—the need for women to add driving to their skillset became mandatory. With suburbanisation, the spatial organisation of the country necessitated the use of a car to perform the work and leisure activities, making it impossible for housewives to escape driving. Capturing this shift in the necessity of a woman driver in the average American family home, Margaret Walsh writes about the shift of focus from selling and designing cars for men to women in the post Second World War era. Walsh lists suburbanisation and women's initiation into the work force as reasons to explain this necessity for women to learn driving in post Second World War America. Walsh writes, "Women needed a car to take them to the shops and to hold all their purchases… chauffeur their children to out of school activities and to routine appointments with the doctor or the dentist. The postwar homemaker's desire for access to a car could only be fulfilled either through car sharing or by a second family car." (Walsh 2011) The advertisement given below depicts the picture of a woman driving a Chevrolet Corvair probably after running errands and taking her acquisitions home. She seems pleased with her mobility but that came about through sharing her husband's car—taking turns while using the vehicle—making driving a choice between the couple. With the message in the Corvair advertisement, advertisers made visible the necessity of having two cars between a couple, thus, promoting the notion of having two cars in a family. This desire of housewives became fertile ground for auto manufacturers to market their cars to women.

[3] Advertisement- 1936, Greyhound Bus

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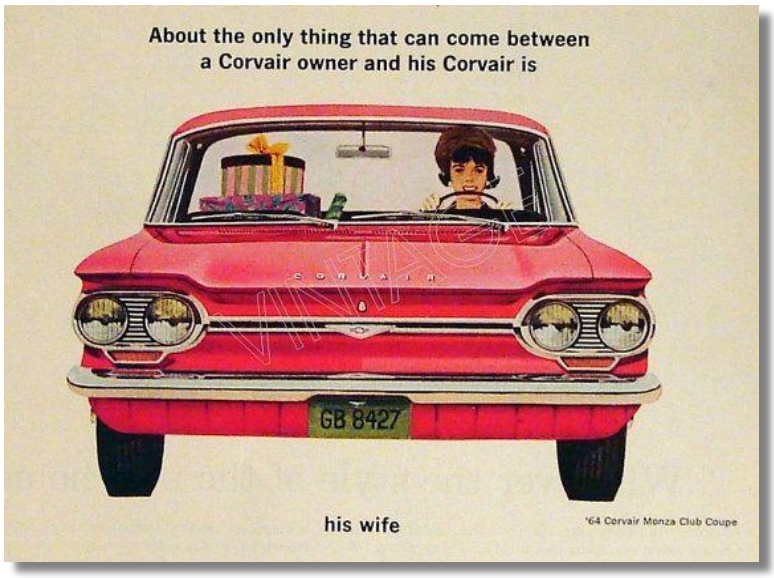

Figure 1: *Advertisement for Chevrolet Corvair, 1964.*

Walsh's analysis based on data that examines the change in the role women played earlier—in choosing the "colour" of the family car to expressing certain needs and becoming active participants in choosing one for themselves—traces the movement of agency to them based on an emerging desire cum necessity.

Building on Walsh's findings and analysis of this changing demographic of automobile consumerism, this paper will look at the 1950s and 60s print advertisements of the automobile manufacturing companies and investigate how print advertisements with captivating tag-lines entered the American consciousness by reiterating (albeit subliminally) the necessity of owning two cars, one for the man and the other for the woman (the family car). Further, it will examine the automobile consciousness of America in the 1950s and 60s through a close reading of Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970)—to look for evidences of the reflections of the automobile culture on to the literature of the time—alongside the conscious curation of a *car-culture* through the then-popular print advertisements of automobile manufacturing companies. Walsh writes, "Qualitative evidence in women's popular literature and in some automotive sources certainly suggests that more women were driving by the mid-1950s" (Walsh 14). Thus, the presence of women driving in movies in the mid-1950s is taken by Walsh as a suggestion of the same happening in North America of the time.

Figure 2: *Advertisement, 1958 Chevrolet* Figure 3: *Advertisement, 1961 Chevy Corvair*

Similarly, the prevalence of this culture is seen in the art, literature, cinema and music of the age. Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) is a fictional account of a woman articulating her preoccupation with driving Chevrolet's Corvette (a sports car, designed and marketed to men) across the freeways of America and familiarising the reader with the vulnerability that accompanies a woman driver on the road. Born out of the brewing American automobile consciousness and the life of excessive consumption of the 60s, Didion's novel is monumental as an evidence of the osmosis of this culture in the literature of the time. It vocalises the first hand experience of a woman driver on American freeways as a means to exercise her agency and give purpose to her otherwise disjunct and unfulfilling life.

The design and the idea of a car is much more than its utilitarian value. Henri Lefebvre wrote, the car, "is consumed as a sign in addition to its practical use, it is something magical, a denizen from the land of make believe." (Lefebvre, 14) Laying emphasis on this mythic and magical quality of the car Andrew Warwick wrote, cars have been "vehicles for myths…intrinsically bound up with promotional imagery and signs of modernity." (Warwick 45) This myth around the car, a vehicle for transportation, is carefully curated by the manufacturers with the help of advertising agencies who feed into this desire of owning a car

by selling not just the car but also the carefully crafted idea of a particular vehicle as a personality that gets projected upon the owner if they buy it. The distinguishable quality of a vehicle from another—hence, of one owner from another—is also an important parameter which the advertisers primarily put into use. Along with the element of a mythic quality there is also a notion of modernity while buying a technologically advance automobile as against an old existing model. This stems from a need to stay updated with the latest technological and vehicular advancements. Just like fashion in clothing and accessories, automobile consumerism also establishes trends to be considered and followed while investing in a vehicle.

This distinguishing quality of the car culture is captured by Judith Williamson as she writes, "At the same time as advertisements differentiate a vehicle from other vehicles, they promise to distinguish the prospective owner from owners of other vehicles, attributing qualities of each to the other, and totemistically identifying the buyer with the product." (Williamson 1978). The 1958 Chevrolet Ad, "Your pride will perk up…" suitably explains Williamson's claims by reaffirming that owning the '58 Chevrolet will perk up the pride of the owner of the car. The Advertisement makes a claim, "…you're bound to be noticed"; driving this vehicle will bring the owner at the centre of attention. The advertisers of the 1950s and 60s thrived on not only selling a distinguished car but also feeding into people's insecurities by selling the personality associated with the car to the buyer.

The advertisement for the '61 Chevy Corvair, reiterates this by claiming that the owner would either be smart to buy this car or at least "look" smart for making the choice. While one of, the other sells the opportunity of appearing judicious by making the choice of buying it. In this context, American housewives and the persisting and undefinable lack in their lives became easy targets. Print advertisements of automobile manufacturers featuring women as drivers depicted confident women in pants and shirts with hats on their heads and scarves around advertisement sells the car with the idea of giving the owner something to be proud their necks whereas those targeting male buyers portrayed women donned in pearls and delicate dresses smiling in the passenger's seat with an air of domestic bliss. The 1960 Cadillac advertisement portrays a woman dressed in a delicate, white satin dress, jewellery, blow dried hair and sitting on the passenger's seat while a man opens the door for her.

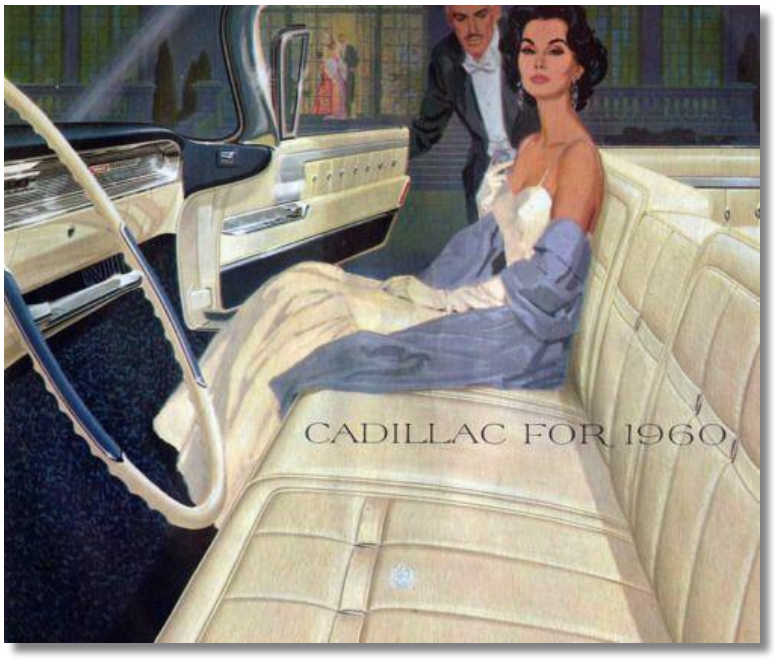

Figure 4: 1960, Advertisement for Cadillac

The finesse of the woman's attire is similar to that of the interiors of the car—both seem carefully designed and opulent. The careful curation of splendour represented in the advertisement is a conscious attempt of selling the car but also the life that the couple in the picture seem to have. The picture depicts the fortitude that comes with upward mobility, making the car an acquisition that comes with the essence of being or feeling rich.[4] While the other advertisement for a vintage chevy depicts a woman in pants, possibly the mother of the child, mending the family car while also looking after the child. The stark difference between the two advertisements is definitely that of class. The two women belong to different socio-economic classes—the viewer is informed of this disparity not only because of the difference in their dresses but also the difference in the quality of their respective cars. The vintage chevy advertisement reflects, what seems like a redressal from the monotony of the unnamed problem of the housewives—having access to independent mobility, while also looking after the child and keeping up with the role of the housewife. What remains common to both the advertisements is the aspirational life of a married woman.

[4] Margaret Walsh, while discussing Cadillac advertisements writes, "Advertisements for Cadillac, at the top end of General Motors' automobiles, pictured glamorous women, often in evening wear, escorted by their handsome partners, stepping into or out of their luxurious limousines. Life was not only elegant and exclusive, but it was also romantic and exciting for those who could buy expensive vehicles. If women aimed high for beauty, style, and craftsmanship, they should opt for the luxury of a Cadillac (Cadillac Advertisements 1950s)." (Walsh 14)

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Figure 5: *1954, Vintage Chevy*

The advertisements strictly targeted housewives with tag-lines almost compulsively using the term, "wife"[5] and the suggested idea of a family car for the woman—assuming she will require a bigger car to drive her children around.[6] Whereas, the vehicles made for men were generally two to four seater sports cars. The advertisements of these cars often personify the vehicle as a woman—"It has a twinkle in its eye" and "It flirts with you".[7] Cars for men are imagined either as a beautiful woman—possessing whom would be aspirational for most of them—or as a mighty weapon or animal—with the subliminal message that the personality of the vehicle will be projected on that of the car owner. Therefore, the notions of masculinity are necessary and common elements of car advertisements designed for men. Although, the latter half of the sixties saw an emerging trend of advertisers targeting the college going girl—the demographic shifted from the housewife to the college going, counterculture loving girls, who joined protests but were still committed to consumerism. Addressing this shift, Walsh writes, "In the 1960s, car producers and their advertisers learned to address a new female consumerism that reflected sociopolitical trends toward gender equality and recognised the teenage market" (Walsh 11).

[5] Refer to Figure 1.
[6] Refer to Figure 5.
[7] Refer to Figure 6.

Figure 6: 1960, Advertisement for Corvair Monza

In lieu of this changing demographic of the automobile dependence and the curation of the *car culture* in North America, reflections of the same began to be seen in the music, literature and art of the time. Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970)—an account of the life of Maria Wyeth—pits driving the freeways of North America as the only form of recluse in her otherwise disjunct life. The prominence of the culture engulfed the consciousness of Americans in such a way that the creative output of the time was also influenced by the automobile consciousness. Since the publication of Jack Kerouac's magnum opus *On the Road* (1957), the road narrative genre[8] gained popularity. With songs such as "Hit the road, Jack" (1961), "King of the road" (1969), etc. dominating the music scene of the country and road movies such as, *Easy Rider* (1969), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971), etc. taking over the big screen and multiple literary road narratives written during the time—the automobile, the road journey and driving dominated the artistic outputs of the time. The society and culture of North America in the 50s and 60s was largely dominated by the automobile—the "machine in the

[8] In *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1990), Ronald Primeau defines a road narrative as, "fiction and non-fiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away".

garden".[9] A car parked in front of a house became the accepted aesthetic visualisation of a home in America. The literature of the age represents a reflection of the same culture that dominated the sociocultural purview of the time. Analysing Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) becomes instrumental to study this shift new transition in the automobile customer base.

Didion's protagonist Maria feels most attuned with herself while driving on the freeways. With women getting behind the wheel, their life moved outside of the confinement of a house into the confinement of the car, an extension of the home, mobile one—this home brought along a promise of mobility. The importance of *Play It as it Lays* (1970) is monumental in portraying women's acquisition of mobility through driving and escaping the humdrum of their otherwise consistently domestic life, albeit for a while. Didion's novel captures this transition—automobile industries targeting the female customer base through advertisements—becomes one of the first literary text where a woman writer describes the experience of a female driver, driving on the road in North America. Didion's protagonist, Maria, not only values driving the freeways but also takes pride in her ability to shell an entire boiled egg while driving at seventy mph. She compulsively needs to reach the freeways at ten o' clock every morning and follow her routine of driving the freeways to set the "rhythm of her day" (Didion 78). Maria, a former Hollywood actress, who is going through a bad marriage and a botched abortion, sees herself most in control while driving the freeways of Los Angeles and the neighbouring areas.

Maria Wyeth left home at an early age to become a model and actress. Her mother, from whom she inherited "her looks", thought she looked okay and must become an actress, "my mother thought becoming an actress was a nice idea, she used to cut my hair in bangs to look like Margaret Sullavan" (Didion 8)—so, she left her hometown to fulfil her mother's vision for her future. Her mother—who died in a car crash—left a strong influence on Maria, resulting in her choice of profession and her preoccupation with driving. Driving became Maria's recluse to the otherwise uneventful life and also became the place she felt most at home with. This feeling of being at home on the road could also be because that's where her mother last was and she failed to be around her when she passed. Maria's life was continuously defined by someone else' vision; first her mother defined her profession for her and later she became her

[9] Leo Marx's 1960 book called *The Machine in the Garden*, talks about the changing landscape of the United States since the "machine" (automobile) made its way into the idyllic landscape of North America (the garden).

husband's heroine but she could never relate to herself on the big screen. "She never thought of it as *Maria.* She thought of it always as that first picture…The girl on the screen in that first picture had no knack for anything" (Didion 21). Not only did Maria not identify with herself in the picture, she was also critical of *the girl's*[10] performance. Maria was thoroughly moulded by other's perception of herself therefore she felt entirely divorced from herself; the only time she experienced some level of control over herself was while she was driving on the road.

Conclusion

For Maria, the car was way more than a vehicle to take her places, just like the housewives of America in the 50s and 60s who had found a new hobby in the car. For Maria, the car was the only home she had. "The first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter, Maria drove the freeway" (Didion 12). Didion strategically pits the two things together: the breaking of her marriage and her metaphorical marriage to driving the freeways—a relationship she formed with the automobile and by surrogacy with herself. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) portrayed a similar shift—Sal Paradise divorced his wife and took to the road to drive across North America. Hence, this tendency of the road becoming the destination, and the car being assumed as an extension of the home, is common to road narratives and Didion's protagonist is negotiating the same within the limits of her circumstances. Maria's confession of her pregnancy to Carter took place in his car. But this episode is emblematic of the fact that there is also an element of automobile ownership which particularly made Maria's car her own and she felt like she has control over her circumstances. Owning her car was an important element which made the experience of driving her own Corvette where she had full control. Maria identifies the car as a room of her own where she could really exist and be herself without having to play a role for someone else. She often gets into her car when she needed to have a cry. The Corvette becomes the only space where she expressed her real desires, "I'm having a baby" (Didion 141)—Maria says this out loud as if she was talking to her Corvette and to herself while she is at home in the Corvette. The car becomes the space which is therapeutic for Maria, "She drove it as river man runs a river, everyday more attuned to its currents, its deceptions…" (Didion 12). The car became sort of a safety blanket for her. Each day she would get to the freeways by ten o'clock, "the freeway was her only destination" (Didion 46). Maria was not

[10] Refers to herself in the third person.

driving the freeway to get somewhere, she was driving the freeway to stay on it for as long as she could. The destination, the grand plan was to stay on the freeway.

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BIO- NOTE

Saloni Srivastava is a fourth year PhD Candidate of the Department of English at Shiv Nadar University, India. Saloni's research centres around the North American road as represented in North American fiction of the 1950s and 60s.