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## VARIA SECTION

# "The world doesn't give things, you take things": Deconstructing the Myth of the Self-Made Man in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017)

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**ABSTRACT:** Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, published in 2017, was an international success on social media, emerging in a time of political disarray in the Unites States of America with Donald Trump's election. The book tells the story of a successful woman, Evelyn Hugo, who perfectly represents the self-made individual at the heart of the American Dream. Even if she has achieved worldwide fame and success by herself, this article will argue that this myth of the self-made man does not lead necessarily to a happy ending, following Evelyn's own recounting of her story as one of profound grief and disenchantment. To deconstruct this myth, there will be an analysis of the different ways in which the character of Evelyn Hugo had to adapt to accomplish upward mobility, namely by agreeing to the objectification of her body, by erasing her ethnicity and sexual orientation, and by becoming someone immoral and self-serving, thus proving that this

**RESUMO:** O romance de Taylor Jenkins Reid *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, publicado em 2017, foi um sucesso internacional nas redes sociais, surgindo num período de desordem política nos Estados Unidos da América com a eleição de Donald Trump. O livro conta a história de uma mulher bem-sucedida, Evelyn Hugo, que encarna na perfeição o indivíduo *self-made* no cerne do sonho americano. Mesmo tendo alcançado fama internacional e sucesso por si mesma, este artigo defende que o mito do *self-made man* não resulta necessariamente num final feliz, em concordância com a história de profunda perda e desencantamento contada pela própria Evelyn. De modo a desconstruir este mito, procede-se a uma análise das diferentes maneiras em que a personagem Evelyn Hugo teve que se adaptar para concretizar a mobilidade social, nomeadamente ao ceder à objetificação do seu corpo, ao distanciar-se da sua etnia e orientação sexual, e

American myth does not pertain to everyone, nor does it imply and lead necessarily to happiness and personal fulfilment.

KEYWORDS: *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo,* Self-Made Man Myth, American Dream, Identity, Gender, Ethnicity, LGTBQIA+, Hollywood

ao tornar-se uma pessoa imoral e autocentrada, assim provando que este mito americano não é aplicável a todos, nem implica e leva necessariamente à felicidade ou concretização pessoal.

KEYWORDS: *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Mito do *Self-Made Man,* Sonho Americano, Identidade, Género, Etnia, LGTBQIA+, Hollywood

"When you're given an opportunity to change your life, be ready to do whatever it takes to make it happen. The world doesn't give things, you take things."

- Taylor Jenkins Reid
*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017)

## INTRODUCTION

Glamour. Fame. Success. All these are words that can be applied to a self-made man successful story, and the book *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, published in 2017, can be considered one such story. It tells the story of fictional Evelyn Hugo, a retired Hollywood actress who decides, at the age of seventy-nine, to disclose the story of her life and her rise to world-fame to unknown journalist Monique Grant. At first glance, her story is one of hard work and success, the epitome of the American Dream. However, the story that Evelyn discloses is not one of glamourous success and personal accomplishment, but rather of hardships and loss, representing the disillusionment of what it means to be successful in the United States of America, of what it means to be a true self-made individual.

In the nineteenth century, self-made narratives were at the forefront of the American cultural production (Paul 2014, 373), as the idea of social mobility (or going from "rags-to-riches") was extremely present in the American mindset due to existing discourse that had "been used to contrast the US to European societies with rigidly stratified social hierarchies, and to support the claim that the American economic system leads to a higher standard of living in general as well as to a higher degree of individual agency and economic opportunity" (*idem*, 367). The idea that the American individual could easily climb through the ranks of society to become a "self-made man" was promoted in popular fiction of the time, particularly in the stories of Horatio Alger (1832-1899), an American writer, teacher and pastor (373). Alger's tales often depicted stories of young, impoverished boys who, through hard work and good morals, were able to reach a wealthier and more respectable position in society, as was the case of *Ragged Dick* (1868), or Harry Raymond in *Sink or Swim* (1870). Even though Alger's stories gained recognition during the nineteenth century, the ideas of "Algerism" reached a new height during the twentieth century, when there was a need to assert the "'American way of life' in contrast to the 'un-American' notions of socialism and communism" (Paul 2014, 374). Many of the themes present in Alger's stories prevail to this day, as self-made narratives still constitute an integral part of the American mindset.

The premise of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* may appear to fit into this formula. However, similarly to what already happened in Horatio Alger's stories, where

the young protagonists benefitted more from luck rather than intrinsic personal value, several problems inherent to the self-made narrative resurface in this novel, thus questioning the viability of this "American way of life" (Paul 2014, 374). This article aims to explore the different ways in which Evelyn's story undermines the self-made man myth by presenting a successful individual that simultaneously does not fit the linear conception of the self-made individual, considering that Evelyn is a Cuban American, bisexual woman and "a son of a bitch" (Reid 332). Additionally, it intends to prove that the self-made man discourse does not necessarily lead to happiness, in contrast to the ideas at the core of American culture and mindset.

Therefore, this paper will delve further into these themes by analyzing them in three different branches. The first will focus on the theory behind the self-made man myth and explore how it has to be adapted when considering the story of a female sex-symbol in Hollywood; the second will deal with Evelyn's erasure of her immigrant roots and bisexuality as a way to achieve the dream of upward mobility; and the third will focus on Evelyn's morally ambiguous actions to achieve material success and fame, and the real price of the myth of the self-made individual.

## 1. SELF-MADE WOMAN: ON BEING OBJECTIFIED IN HOLLYWOOD

American exceptionalism as a concept was propounded in the first half of the nineteenth century by Alexis de Tocqueville in reference to the American political system, which was "quite exceptional" in contrast to France's unstable politics of the time (Paul 2014, 14). Despite its initial connotation, the term quickly spread to describe the American nation's ideology, a nation that was "created differently, developed differently" (Shafer 1991, v), and the American society as special, and therefore, superior, as opposed to all that was un-American. This ideological paradigm, then, poses the very foundation for all the American myths, including that of the self-made man.

The concept of the self-made man, originally created by Henry Clay in 1832 is based on the belief that anyone, through sheer hard work, can achieve success, mainly the material and economic one, and climb the social ladder. In a way, it is intrinsically linked to Max Weber's (1864-1920) idea of Protestant Work Ethic as a major contributor

to the "spirit of capitalism", since it derives from "an increasingly secularized logic of work-discipline, which . . . took material wealth as a sign of God's blessing" (Paul 2014, 372). This myth falls under the broader spectrum of the American exceptionalism, and it is connected to the perception of the United States' exceptionality as a classless society which allows social mobility, so long as the individual works for it. It is also connected to the overall idea of the American dream, for the American nation presents itself as an ideal land, with opportunities for everyone to live a better and fuller life.

The American dream and the myth of the self-made man are clearly represented in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn* Hugo. Evelyn Hugo achieved material success in the terms already alluded to: she rose from poverty all the way to the Hollywood elite by herself, thus apparently proving that the myth is indeed attainable.

However, as previously mentioned, Evelyn is not just "self-made": she is a "self-made woman", a word that makes all the difference, as it places her immediately outside of the traditional conception of the foundational myth of self-making (Paul 2014, 398). Historically, this myth pertains to men, as, in fact, its name suggests: "the self-made man". This immediately places women in a position of inferiority and fragility, thus making their journey towards success both different and more arduous. In more recent examples of 'self-made' women success stories, their self-making is usually closely tied to men's desires and to the improvement of physical appearance. As Heike Paul puts it, "Women's upward mobility thus depended on their relations to men" (2014, 399).

In the novel's dedication, Taylor Jenkins Reid writes "Smash the patriarchy, sweetheart". This is a curious way to start a book whose narrative is marked by the burdens of patriarchy, in which the protagonist loses her sense of self. According to Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, the United States was founded on white patriarchal capitalism (2021, 8), which inevitably constructed colonial relations of power between men, perceived as superior, and women, as secondary. The Hollywood industry reflects this patriarchal system, where men had the power and authority both in front of and behind the camera (*idem*, 223). This male dominance over the image of women represents a form of control that finds its strength in the objectification of women, which entails a reduction from a full-on being with prospects and importance to mere body parts to be abused and consumed through the practice of fetishization (Hall *et. al* 2013, 256). As Laura Mulvey explains,

> women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative. (1985, 809)

Hence, in the movie industry, mostly led by and catered to men, body and appearance stand at the center of women's journey to success, and Evelyn Hugo is not an exception.

From the age of thirteen, when her body starts to hold "a sexuality . . . that my mind wasn't ready for" (Reid 43), Evelyn begins to associate her personal value to her body, something that she uses as a "currency, . . . like money" to trade her way through the social ranks of the Hollywood elite and, in general, to the American society (239). Evelyn's entire image, when she is already a well-known movie star in Hollywood, is that of a bombshell, the sex-symbol of her time, in a Marilyn Monroe fashion, that bedazzles readers of every magazine. She is at the top of the American Dream to the point in which a single glimpse of her body is worth millions: "In the editing room, Max . . . cut the footage a millisecond before you can see my full breasts. . . . There was so much anticipation. . . . Six months after we finished shooting *Boute-en-Train*, I was an international sensation" (*idem*, 160).

Evelyn achieves success using her body, thus understanding how to get what she wants. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, she tries to make a start and find connections in Hollywood by applying to a job at a popular café near a production studio. It is through luck and because of her body that Harry Cameron, a young producer at a movie studio, notices her: "Harry looked up at me and said, 'Jesus.' Two weeks later, I had a job at Sunset Studios" (*idem*, 46).

Despite her efforts to make this happen, her start in Hollywood is not necessarily a consequence of her hard work and talent in acting, but rather a consequence of luck and cunning. In fact, throughout the rest of the novel, several are the instances where Evelyn mentions her own lack of talent for acting: "I wasn't well educated when I got to Hollywood, I wasn't book-smart, I wasn't powerful, I wasn't a trained actress. What did I have to be good at other than being beautiful?" (*idem*, 239). What she had

accomplished, then, could not necessarily be attributed to meritocracy, but rather to her luck in genetics. In a way, this already placed her in a position of privilege, seeing as most likely any other Cuban American girl[1] like her, whose body was not perceived by society with the same awe and fetishization as Evelyn's, would not have had access to the same opportunities as her.

This entire process of objectification and fetishization is a manifestation of the patriarchal power that aims at restraining women to a subordinate position, reducing them to an "object" that can be owned and controlled. Even though Evelyn appears to find her freedom and power in her body, which allows her emancipation from her impoverished background, one may argue that it is precisely her body that imprisons her to an oppressive male structure. Furthermore, it makes her a subordinate in the industry and of the public in general. Her perception as a strong, powerful woman is nothing more than an illusion, as her condition and path to success is always limited to what patriarchy allows her to be, considering "[women stand] in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions" (Mulvey 1985, 804). This conscious reduction of her image from a whole individual to a body to be consumed reflects the same necessities felt by Hollywood actresses of the past century, who understood what the path to their success meant: "To survive, Monroe, Crawford, and others became 'signs' or caricatures of themselves, yielded to the pressure of mediocrity that emanated from the American public as much as from the pulses of Harry Cohn and Darryl Zanuck. Audiences didn't want to see Monroe as a sensitive comedienne, but as a sexual monster . . ." (Haskell 2016, 38).

The myth of the self-made woman is indeed achieved by Evelyn, but within these constraints that, in the end, do not allow her to be happy and satisfied with the decision that she made throughout her life, because this bombshell persona that she was forced to embody was not one she could be fully separated from.

## 2. SELF-MADE SHADOW: ON BEING A MINORITY OUT OF THE PUBLIC EYE

*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* was published in 2017, a time marked by political tensions with the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, whose

Administration policies and discourses greatly targeted immigrants (Clapton 2022, 105) and minorities such as the LGBTQIA+ community. Irrespective of the Immigration Act of 1965, a policy that attempted to progressively facilitate and encourage the immigration of non-Europeans to the United States (Anderson 2021, 89), or the progress made in LGBTQIA+ history since the Stonewall riots[2] and boosted by contemporary media, Trump's discourse constituted a serious setback to these communities. In this sense, this book represents an important representation for those whose voices are being silenced, by exploring the story of a Cuban American who is also a bisexual woman.

Born the daughter of impoverished Cuban immigrants, Evelyn Hugo achieved a glamorous life due to her career as a world-renowned Hollywood actress. When she dies, she dies in an Upper East Side luxurious apartment, surrounded by money, international success and a lifetime of achievements. Nonetheless, behind this self-made woman there is not solely a story of hard work, but mostly one of self-erasure, and it is that story that Evelyn decides to tell Monique, thereby casting light on a shadow that she herself created. In order to follow her dream of making it in Hollywood, Evelyn was forced to negate one half of herself, the half that was Cuban. When she describes herself physically, at the age of thirteen, she mentions how she had "dark, shiny brown hair" and "light bronze skin", both physical characteristics belonging to her Cuban descendance (Reid 42). However, during her interview with Monique, she explains how, to enter Hollywood, her Cuban heritage would have only restricted her to specific roles and that she would have to appear "white"[3] to play roles attributed to "white" people. Immigrants presenting themselves as "white" in order to assimilate themselves into the American society is an old pattern that can be considered a question of "sheer survival" (Paul 2014, 388), the only way to guarantee a minimal degree of prosperity. This is due to the fact that the term of comparison forced upon these people is the standardized and foundational conception of Americanism as "white", a term which in recent times came to include more than just the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP). Evelyn was aware of this when she agreed to have her physical appearance changed, namely her hair which was bleached, as Evelyn herself acknowledges: "I knew what it would mean, playing Jo. I knew Jo was a white woman. And still, I wanted it. I hadn't gotten on my back just to take a baby step" (Reid 50).

Even though her physical changes already allowed her to create a persona detached from her ethnic heritage, her success was also dictated by the calculated crafting of an identity that would satisfy the audience, giving the illusion of permeating the American society of the time. As Stuart Hall states, identities are forever shifting, constructed not only through nature and heritage, but also through history, language, and culture (2013, 4). This is a process of transformation made possible through the contact with others, and it is in this middle ground between being something and reaching something else that identity is found (*ibidem*). Evelyn builds her identity basing it on the perception that she has of the world's expectations and the prejudice she might face. The change in her name, that goes from Evelyn Diaz[4] to Evelyn Hugo, is an example of how she tries to mirror the expectations of her surrounding society. During the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of name change was common amongst Hollywood stars belonging to ethnic groups (Benshoff and Griffin 2021, 61-62). Considering that the Hollywood industry can represent a microcosm of the Western society and of the United States in particular, this issue can be connected to the forceful obligation of immigrants to change their names, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, in order to sound more American upon arrival in the country (Portes and MacLeod 1996, 543). This was a symbolic and violent practice they endured to facilitate their integration in the American society, and to enter a system from which they would otherwise be certainly excluded.

Evelyn herself acknowledges that these alterations constituted the necessary requirements to be able to succeed in a predominantly "white" industry. She did not even protest when an elocutionist was assigned to her and "banished Spanish entirely" (Reid 50). After that, Evelyn stopped speaking Spanish completely and abandoned this part of her heritage, as exemplified by certain interactions with other characters that did not recognize her as Latinx,[5] or even assume she spoke Spanish: "Luisa's eyes went wide, and she hung up the phone on her mother and said to me, '*No sabía que ústed hablaba Español*'" (*idem*, 198). According to Alejandro Portes and Dag MacLeod, immigrants tend to adopt what they call "symbolic categories" (1996, 528) favored by mainstream society, in which language can be included. This assimilation of the non-parental language, or, in the case of Evelyn, the complete abandonment of Spanish in favor of English was fundamental for the integration of these immigrants in American groups and

for their upward mobility, and as such it did not constitute merely a question of choice, but of necessity provoked by a biased society. In the end, Evelyn's path towards success and her integration into the American elite were greatly dependent on the erasure of her Cuban and parental roots.

Another symptom of the biased social constraints is Evelyn's concealment of her bisexuality. During a major part of the book, she recognizes that she had been in love with fellow actress Celia St. James. However, not once in her life, did she allow herself to live this relationship openly. For her, hiding was, first, a matter of survival, as Evelyn explains: "We'd tell the truth about our lives, and they'd bury us. We could end up in prison or in a mental hospital" (Reid 171). It was not until 1961 that homosexual sexual acts were decriminalized for the first time in the United States, albeit in Illinois only (Eaklor 2008, 186); and in the 1950s and turn of the 1960s, when Evelyn discovered her sexual orientation, there had been a general increase in the persecution of homosexuals, with episodes such as the Lavender Scare[6] (*idem*, 87) or the general increase in police raids of LGBTQIA+[7] spaces, such as the case of the famous raid of the Stonewall gay bar in 1969, which led to the Stonewall Uprising, one of the key turning points for the gay rights movement (Carter 2010, 307). Secondly, she also feared she would lose her fame and money, the fear of downward mobility: "Because I worked my ass off . . . . And I did that so I could be famous. So I could live the life we're living. And if you think I'm not going to protect that, you've lost your mind" (Reid 170).

Even as a Cuban American and a bisexual woman, Evelyn succeeded, although her success was not only due to hard work, but also to the erasure of parts of her identity: "I kept thinking, *How dare she try to take my own identity away from me?* . . . , I realized Luisa hadn't done that to me. I had done it to me. I'd made the choice to be different from my true self" (*idem*, 198).

## 3. SELF-MADE MISERY: ON CHOOSING SUCCESS OVER HAPPINESS

Although Evelyn's story as a self-made narrative has been demystified hitherto by reasons outside her control, the same cannot be said after considering her actions and choices throughout the book, which are profoundly individualistic. The concept of

individualism was developed in Britain, according to Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham's ideas (Pereira 2023, 145). However, it has direct ties to important concepts for the American framework of mind, such as personal freedom, self-reliance, Social-Darwinism or the 'survival of the fittest', and minimal governmental interference in economic affairs, or *laissez-faire* capitalism (*idem*, 140). In a sense, Evelyn's actions, even when she talks to Monique, reflect most of these ideas: she rarely relies on anyone but herself, something she tries to make Monique understand; she achieves emancipation by leaving Hell's Kitchen, her impoverished neighborhood, and fighting against the odds on her own: "I like the Evelyn Hugo who sees the world for what it is and then goes out there and wrestles what she wants out of it" (Reid 190). At the end of the book, she commits suicide, after accomplishing the goal she had set out for herself, that is, telling her real story to Monique. All of this points to a profoundly individualistic mentality that is praised in the American society to the extreme extent of controlling one's own death.

The myth of the self-made man relies on individualism to justify its own existence, as it forms under the assumption that people should seek and need self-realization. For Evelyn, it is the search for self-realization, through economic prosperity, and a wish for fame that drive her out of Hell's Kitchen. However, as Paul argues, "There are contradictory forces at work in this notion, as it includes both aspects of self-denial (education, hard work, and discipline) and self-realization based on an ethic of self-interest that aims at the sheer accumulation of property, recognition, prestige, and personal gain without any concern for others" (2014, 369-370). This can be considered the case of Evelyn, someone who chose, but who, to an extent, was also forced by society, to sacrifice ideals and even relationships over prospects of more fame and monetary gain, and even over fear of losing what she had earned. Evelyn's path to success and prosperity was marked by a behavioral shift, going from good moral values to lies, deceit, and manipulation. For example, to leave Hell's Kitchen, she had to lie to her first husband about her age and pretended to love him. Most of her seven husbands, in fact, were conduits to Evelyn's success or to her self-realization: she married Ernie Diaz to leave Hell's Kitchen for Hollywood, Don Adler to boost her fame at the beginning of her career, Mick Riva to hide her relationship with Celia St. James, and Rex North to promote their new movie, among other examples.

Even though her own individual interests led her to become "cynical and . . . bossy, and . . . vaguely immoral" (Reid 220), it is important to note that Evelyn's decisions, as cold-blooded or cruel they may appear, should not be the true indicators of her character. Indeed, they are a consequence of the American society, as a system which rarely favors those belonging to gender, sexual and ethnic minorities, and which instead conveys to them the message that they need to willingly sacrifice all that they care about in order to succeed. In fact, throughout the novel, Evelyn never takes pride in hurting people she loves, and this can be seen in some instances of the book, where seemingly poor and hurtful actions that she takes are immediately met with guilt: "I'm not proud of what I did to him" (Reid 52), "And it wasn't until I was back in my apartment that I lost it. Sobbing as if she'd died. That's how final it felt. I had pushed her too far. And it was over" (Reid 268).

Evelyn's path through the depths of immorality should not be seen as a reflection of her true intents, but rather as a desperate reaction to stay afloat in a castrating and oppressive society. This process of fighting for survival, in a discriminating industry, would cost her everything she truly cared about – not money, but rather those she loved: "When you write the ending, Monique, tell everyone that it is the people I miss. Tell everyone that I got it wrong. That I chose the wrong things most of the time" (Reid 358). Thus, in Evelyn Hugo's case, the achievement of the myth of the self-made man occurs through immoral actions and it is based on false promises of prosperity, proving that outer success does not always equal inner fulfillment. Moreover, as Evelyn explains, the real path for success does not rely on hard work and talent, but on "luck *and* being a son of a bitch" (Reid 332).

Effectively, the pursuit of success at the cost of integrity and relationships is a recurring theme in American cultural expression, as it can be seen in novels such as *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fizgerald, or the play *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller. All these examples present a world where the American Dream is far from its idealization. In Miller's play, the story of the main protagonist, Willy, shares some key aspects of Evelyn's narrative. Willy believes that, in order to achieve the American Dream, what is truly necessary, above hard work, is "being liked" (Miller 62), similarly to Evelyn, who understands that her image and persona will lead her to success. However, Willy's

incessant search for success, mainly for his sons, will lead him to questionable acts, such as lying and cheating, like Evelyn, and to distancing himself emotionally from his family. At the end of the play, Willy commits suicide, as Evelyn. However, even if it could be argued that Willy does not reach the American Dream and Evelyn does, the truth is that both die unfulfilled and unaccomplished. Stories that revolve around this myth, and, at a first glance, apparently promote the self-made man dream, are in fact deconstructing it, since they show the contradictions and flaws of such belief.

As proved by Evelyn, the self-made man myth may lead to success, though one that is merely material and economic. Within this narrative, inner success is rarely a priority, since the search for prosperity comes at a high cost because, to rise through the ranks of a capitalist society, one is forced to instrumentalize others around them. In the end, and if we take Evelyn's case as paradigmatic, if someone makes it through this profoundly individualistic path to produce capital, what they encounter is a life of loneliness and misery, an understanding that they were the ones being instrumentalized, pawns to this myth that may lead to wealth, but not necessarily to happiness.

## CONCLUSION

This novel emerges under a tense political climate, with Trumpism reaching its height with his ideologies of hatred and exclusion towards minorities. Given Trump's new resurgence, it is important to turn to literature like *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, where quintessential American values are deconstructed to reflect upon them. The novel sheds a light on the sacrifices that need to be taken in a society where everyone relies on themselves, and where division and self-interest are promoted. Furthermore, it holds interesting discussions that can be related to the contemporary realities of minorities, as they are forced to confront a new wave of oppression, similar to Evelyn's self-imposed repression in a hostile society. By showcasing the hard truth behind an American self-made woman, Reid brings to light the inner voices of Evelyn, giving space to her untold story of marginalization.

To conclude, Evelyn Hugo can be seen as a self-made woman who accomplished the American dream. She achieved economic prosperity and world-wide fame, adapting to a life in Hollywood, all the necessary steps to attain the self-made man myth.

However, it also seems quite clear that she died unhappy too. If Evelyn always prided herself in being powerful, someone who had the world in the palm of her hand, at the end she realizes this had always been an illusion — she was always just a body in the Hollywood industry, a minority in disguise, a pawn in her own game. She dies alone and, in the end, she tells Monique: "That's how my story ends. With the loss of everyone I have ever loved. With me, in a big, beautiful Upper East Side apartment, missing everyone who ever meant anything to me" (Reid 358).

Evelyn's self-made journey turns her into a victim to patriarchal forces. Patriarchy as a power structure means that it employs several hierarchical and oppressive strategies interconnected with ideologies of capitalism. Considering that the United States is founded on the ideologies of a white patriarchal capitalism (Benshoff and Griffin 2021, 8), it centers its power structures on the hands of a selected male few. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* analyzes these issues, though sometimes hidden by the eventfulness of Hollywood life, and directly connects these oppressive structures to the American ideology of self-making. Therefore, at its core, the myth of the self-made individual is nothing more than a branch of these systems of control, thus losing its credibility as something that can bring happiness to someone's life. The self-made man myth, reinforced by stories such as Alger's, heavily relies on and reinforces the illusion that "the exception is the rule" (Paul 2014, 368). Effectively, Evelyn is an exception. However, even after reaching the American Dream, happiness is not a guarantee, because the material conception of success that is promoted in American self-made narratives does not equate to the true, immaterial happiness that most often individuals seek, as Evelyn grew to found out.

## END NOTES

[1] To be further discussed in the second topic of this article, "Self-Made Shadow: On Being a Minority out of the Public's Eye".

[2] The Stonewall Riots or Stonewall Uprising were a five-day rebellion between LGBT individuals and law enforcement that became one of the turning points in the history of the LGBTQIA+ community. According to Eaklor, these riots began in the early morning of June 28, 1969, at a popular gay bar called the Stonewall Inn in New York, after "police began one of their frequent raids on the place and expected the patrons either to slink off guiltily in the night or come along in the paddy wagons" (2008, 122). However, the contrary happened, with multiple patrons forming a resistance force against the police, thus leading to the riots that occupied the streets of New York for several days, and which directed mass media attention towards the LGBT community: "Local press, TV, and radio reported the fight and Saturday night the Stonewall was mobbed. Police arrive and the riot was again underway; acts of resistance now included not only throwing objects but also public displays of affection between same-sex people, and a chorus line of drag queens" (*idem*, 123). The importance of Stonewall relied on it being "the motivating force in the transformation of the gay political movement" (Carter 2010, 1).

[3] The term "white" is used between apostrophes in this article in accordance with Garner's explanation regarding "whiteness": ". . . whiteness has no stable consensual meaning, and has been conceptualized in a number of different yet not mutually exclusive forms. As much as anything, it is a lens through which particular aspects of social relationships can be apprehended" (2007, 1).

[4] While Evelyn's birthname is Evelyn Herrerra, at this point in the book she was married to Ernie Diaz, a Mexican man, hence the adoption of his last name.

[5] The term Latinx is used in accordance with its definition by Méndez – a "gender-neutral and inclusive" alternative to Latino, which "refers to everyone from Latin America".

[6] According to Eaklor, the Lavender Scare began in 1947 and constituted a period in time where there was an "elimination of suspected homosexuals from government service" since "In 1950 many politicians, journalists, and citizens thought that homosexuals posed more of a threat to national security than Communists" (David K. Johnson qtd. in Eaklor 2008, 87)

[7] Transgender (T), queer (Q), Intersex (I) and Asexual (A) are terms that only became part of this acronym from the 1990s onwards (Blakemore). For the sake of representativity, and considering the time this essay is being written, it only makes sense to utilize the term "LGBTQIA+" to refer to this community.

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