Exploitation for Empowerment: Resisting Heteronormativity and Sexism in Hollywood

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Preceding both the progressive milestones of the gay rights and women's liberation movements of the '60s and '70s, American film's golden age of Hollywood operated under a heteronormative and patriarchal social regime. Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) explores the titular character's life as a rising Hollywood starlet in the 1950s and early '60s as she navigates being a Queer woman in an industry controlled by male-dominated studios. The status quo allowed only a subordinate, domestic position for women and supplied dangers to health and well-being for Queer folk; however, Reid's Evelyn Hugo successfully maintains control of both her career as well as her public image while protecting her authentic self through the utilization of both her body and domestic image, the commodification of her celebrity, and her lavender marriage to a gay film producer.

Women and Queer members of the film industry were forced to conform, in both their personal and professional lives, to socially defined boundaries of sexuality and gender founded on heteronormative patriarchal values. Facing legal barriers to equality, cultural hostility, and political apathy, Queer people across the country were vilified by news outlets, the police, sodomy laws, and popular culture (Rosenfeld 27–29). Queer Americans who were outed as gay or lesbian were subject to arrest or dismissal from their job, often losing the favor of their local community as well. These consequences were acknowledged across the country, but within Hollywood they were written into employees' contracts, known as the Hays Code, or the Motion Picture Production Code (Brown; Rosenfeld 28). Worries that inappropriate depictions of murder, drug use, and sexual assault began to cloud the glamour of the film industry, so the Hays code limited and controlled exactly what was allowed to be shown on screen and what narratives were allowed to be presented to audiences in films from 1934–1968 (Lewis). Further, in an effort to preserve social etiquette and public comfort, the Hays code dictated that Queer characters could only have sinister intent and an unhappy ending, and female portrayals were largely limited to either the contented housewife or the alluring seductress. Because the censorship of positive Queer

representation and female independence went along with the censorship of violence and substance abuse, the Hays Code deemed them transgressions of equal harm to viewers – reinforcing the immorality of Queer folks and women's rights as similar to that of murder. The Hays Code was weaponized to support the patriarchal, heterosexual, white supremacist hierarchy within the cinematic machine to disappear the concept of female liberation from cultural norms or of homosexuality as comparable to heterosexuality.

Actresses in Hollywood were owned by the studio they worked for, or likewise controlled by male colleagues who held immense social and/or financial capital. Ever present for women in the industry was overt sexualization, assault, objectification, and the offer of trading sex for a promotion. The reality of the 1950s and '60s held the absence of protection for victims of such industrial norms, as well as lack of repercussions for perpetrators. In the face of this widely normalized misogyny, Reid's Evelyn Hugo engages sex as a tool and her beauty as an asset to manipulate those around her, understanding that these aspects will be asked of her anyway. Speaking to utilizing her beauty to land film roles, Evelyn says, "it was my chest that kept men's interest. And women admired my face" (51). She sexualizes her own body and, in that, takes back the power in how she is perceived and treated. Evelyn remains in control throughout the novel, despite navigating female oppression and sexualization based upon patriarchal ideologies. Growing up in Hell's Kitchen, she finds[27] social power as a girl who developed early for her age, inciting looks and innuendos from the men around her. Understanding that she was not in a position to refuse a man's advances, she used her body as a valuable commodity to trade and found comfort in using sex for profit if it was on her own terms. Looking back on her teenage years, Evelyn speaks to a relationship she had with a man who owned a local corner store:

> I knew he was going to get what he wanted from me whether I let him or not […]. I took anything I wanted […] in exchange, I saw him every Saturday night and let him take my shirt off. […] He'd convinced himself that his wanting me was my fault. And I believed him. *Look what I make these poor boys do,* I thought. And yet also, *Here is my value, my power.* (43, italics in original)

In the beginning of her career, Evelyn uses sex appeal as a steppingstone to introduce herself to Hollywood, while advertising her ability to keep an audience

[27] Although the novel is mostly set in its fictional past, I will largely use present tense to describe the memories she shares, in order to distinguish Evelyn's fictional experiences from their historical real-world contexts.

entertained. Her character is a gifted actress, but her beauty and free use of her sexuality opens doors in the industry that otherwise wouldn't have been by talent alone. In parallel, Marilyn Monroe, real-life sex-symbol and iconic actress from the late golden age of Hollywood, spoke in an interview about trading sex for acting jobs throughout the beginning of her career, stating "'When I started modeling, it was like part of the job,' she explained. 'All the girls did […] and if you didn't go along, there were twenty-five girls who would. […] I've slept with producers. I'd be a liar if I said I didn't'" (McElroy, "The Studio"). Evelyn, like Marilyn, understands the necessity of conforming to the actions expected of her within a male-led industry founded on misogynistic and patriarchal values to achieve her desired career.

Roles and jobs available for women in Hollywood sharply dropped in the 1920s. Options slowly rose again in the '50s, but decades of limited female-held positions fostered a landscape that encouraged women to compete while discouraging female bonds to form within the industry (Morris). Actresses of the post-war era were exploited and oppressed but were simultaneously taught to conduct themselves as if they weren't, thus perpetrating an outward image of complicity (McElroy, "There Were No Laws"). This image of complicity works to alienate rebellions versus the patriarchal ideal and eliminates a platform to make a change by removing community connections between women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* unpacks the sociocultural phenomenon of the time that encouraged women to "desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity," to live for nothing other than domestic and motherly duties, and to revel in it (Freidan 15). Oppression within the domestic sphere, Hollywood arena, and local political structures worked in tandem to discourage women from seeking independence, while convincing them it was in their own self-interest. Despite her seven marriages, Evelyn refuses to adhere to the "feminine normality [and] fulfillment" that is a woman's natural journey to wife and mother expected at the time (Freidan 31). Managing to control the narrative around her body and actions, Evelyn enters the domestic realm on her own terms, while refusing to give up her career and independence. Like her sexuality, Evelyn employs the ideal of domestic female subordination in her first marriage to Ernie. As Ernie offers her a new start in L.A., playing the role of housewife allows her financial stability and access to Hollywood that she wouldn't have had otherwise. When approaching him about taking acting lessons, Evelyn makes him dinner, noting, "I specifically didn't take my apron off when I brought it up. I wanted him to see me as harmless and domestic" (47). This ultimately brings her success and sets her on course to become a big Hollywood name.

In order to conform to something the public would respond to positively, Evelyn knows she has to disconnect her public persona from her Cuban heritage and past life. She bleaches her dark hair, loses the ideal amount of weight, perfects a trans-Atlantic accent, and formulates a false backstory and suburban parents. Evelyn notes, "it was an easy act to put on … a star feels comfortable being the very thing the world wants her to be" (51). The 1950s was the start of a sociocultural shift from buying patterns and personal interests being entirely reliant on tradition and institution, to an exploration of self and impulse within consumer trends (Davis). Being an actress right in the middle of this shift allows Evelyn's personal branding and film marketing strategies to integrate both a portrayal of an ideal 1950s woman – alluring but innocent – and the glamour of scandal to attract attention. Actively producing an image for the consumer, Evelyn and her team contrive her celebrity identity to appeal to as large an audience as possible. This is engaging in a "new language of self-empowerment," because Evelyn is in charge of her own commodification and objectification, "turning the power of branding around to personal advantage" (Davis). Sitting for publicity photos curated by her agent Harry Cameron, decorated by a team of makeup and fashion professionals, Evelyn notes: "I was being designed to be two opposing things, a complicated image that was hard to dissect but easy to grab on to. I was supposed to be both naïve *and* erotic" (51). Evelyn is well aware and an active participant in this formulation of narrative of how she is conceived by the public and understands that she can capitalize on it.

A highly mediatized celebrity identity possesses power, generating both monetary and attention-based capital (Marshall 164–166). Evelyn finds her fanbase and role opportunities growing simultaneously as she builds a relationship and engagement with the public. As she is idolized by her audience for both her scandals and her talent, Evelyn gains social capital and affective power, which she commodifies as monetary value. Engaging in the objectification of herself once again, Evelyn elevates a one-dimensional, sexualized icon as her public persona, retaining control of her self-presentation to a public audience. Comparing Evelyn to real-life Hollywood actress Elizabeth Taylor, Evelyn's popularity is in part due to her beauty and on-screen talent, but just as exciting to her audience are her many marital scandals and mentions in the press. Similarly, Elizabeth Taylor's infamy included divorces, affairs, and husband-stealing scandals throughout her career – a prospect that she and her studios commodified, because they understood her notable reputation would transfer to ticket sales (McElroy, "There Were No Laws").

Like Taylor, Rita Hayworth is another real-life inspiration for Evelyn's character (Reid, Author comment). Hayworth adopted Jean Harlow's "Blonde Bombshell" nickname and gave it new meaning as an erotically charged femme fatale in the 1940s, which catapulted her to fame in Hollywood (Gilda). In Reid's novel, Evelyn Hugo similarly has a "Blonde Bombshell" persona through public marketing and self-promotion, with a reliance on the concept of spectacle, through fabrication or exaggeration of stories and personal anecdotes. Evelyn's third marriage to Mick Riva is a performance for the press, to cover the rumors of her lesbian relationship with her true love, Celia St. James. Evelyn understands the damage being outed as Queer would do to her career, not to mention the threat to her and Celia's safety, and manipulates Mick into a quick wedding and annulment, both of which she convinces him are his idea. Her fourth marriage to Rex North is "a relationship built entirely on box office" to promote the movie they costar in and advance both their careers (Reid 196). Her staged affair and subsequent marriage to her fifth husband, Harry Cameron, is a mutually agreed upon lavender marriage, fabricated from their deep friendship and for the conservation of their heterosexual reputations. Harry and Evelyn decide together to concoct a narrative of convenience: as Harry says to Evelyn, "We could get married… after all I love you. Maybe not the way a husband is supposed to love a wife but enough" (220). Evelyn's marriages and tawdry set-up affairs work to promote her sexual allure and allow her to engage with the public gossip to maintain relevance and popularity. The marriages also work as steppingstones for her career or the preservation of her secret Queer relationship from the spotlight; each relationship leaves Evelyn with something learned, or something earned, reiterating the idea that these seven men exist to promote *her* as opposed to the social norm at the time which dictates the wife exists to serve her husband. Years later, when asked by a reporter if she is embarrassed about having been married so many times, Evelyn replies: "No … Because they are just husbands. *I* am Evelyn Hugo" (385). She refuses to participate in the devaluation of women, of herself, and discards the societal ideal that a husband dictates his wife's worth in any way.

Lavender marriages were marriages of convenience, involving a man and a woman, in which one or both of whom are Queer and wished to hide their sexuality for the sake of their careers or safety. Originally a term from the 1800s, "lavender marriages" arose during the golden age of Hollywood due to public scrutiny of those in the film industry, and the strict heteronormative guidelines enforced by the Hays Code (Brown). In the face of socially, legally, and religiously enforced heteronormativity, lavender marriage arrangements allowed high profile members of society or celebrity personalities to pursue their public ambitions

while concealing their true sexual orientations. Highly stigmatized and the subject of political fearmongering campaigns all over the world – e.g. homosexuality being conflated with communism during the Red Scare in America – being openly gay was to accept public hostility and to put your career and relationships in jeopardy (Brown). Lavender marriages offered Queer people, especially celebrities, the appearance of a traditional heterosexual marriage that was acceptable at the time, while allowing them to lead separate private lives without persecution. One of the most famous purported lavender marriages of the time was Rock Hudson's three-year marriage to Phyllis Gates, supposedly set up by Hudson's agent to invalidate a magazine exposé that would potentially out him as bisexual (Garber 18-19). Another is Judy Garland's marriage to Vincente Minelli, who was purported to be gay throughout gossip circles and salacious Hollywood press (Garber 19; Nesti). Lavender marriages were a necessity to any Queer person in Hollywood intending to further their career and protect their public image, and Evelyn is no stranger to this concept. After life drives them apart and Evelyn decides to get back in touch with her true love, Evelyn and Celia exchange letters that Evelyn signs as Edward to posture a heterosexual relationship, in case anyone should read them. However, in an act of devotion to Celia, and an act of defiance for herself, she signs her last letters as Evelyn, crossing out the Edward initially written. Here, she maintains her autonomy, embracing her authentic identity and sexuality in permanent ink, despite potential consequences.

Evelyn acknowledges the high price of fame as akin to that of simply existing as a bisexual woman in the social climate of 1950's America, in that it required hiding aspects of yourself and fabricating others. Meeting a young man with dreams of being an actor, she reflects inwardly on the price she paid, noting, "you have to be willing to deny your heritage, to commodify your body, to lie to good people, to sacrifice who you love in the name of what people will think, and to choose the false version of yourself time and time again" (326). Though at points in the novel Evelyn feels as if she has discarded the intersectionality of her identity, she claims power by employing her body, celebrity influence, and marriages of convenience to maintain her reputation and Hollywood career. Years later, within the secondary storyline, Evelyn is diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer and is working to have her life's story published in the modern day, complete with illicit relationships, business deals disguised as marriages, and an account of her healthy domestic life with Celia St. James, as her happiest and most legitimate marriage is ironically with another woman. In a last act of authority and self-empowerment, Evelyn takes her own life instead of succumbing to cancer. By publicly revealing the hidden details of her time in Hollywood, and subsequently

committing suicide, Evelyn ends her life just as she lived it at the beginning of her career, in full control and on her own terms.

Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is a work of crossover fiction, enjoyed by both adults and younger readers. It does not fall under the label of young adult (YA) fiction like the much of the rest of the focus texts of this anthology, although it is a Queer romance novel that is written in an accessible style with relatable content for a range of readers. The strong YA publishing sphere of today offers options to teen and youth readers who have outgrown juvenile-targeted works, and crossover fiction allows these audiences an even wider range of content. Novels like Reid's are valuable because they not only foster an emotional connection with young readers, but they introduce more complex concepts surrounding history, culture, social progression, and sexual exploration in language that doesn't completely alienate them. Novels like this one offer younger readers access to themes that are a little beyond their years or their scope of personal identification and introduce complex issues that they might encounter later in their lives. Further, the overt sexualization and subordination of women, as well as a lack of political and cultural acceptance for Queer people are concepts that persist today. Around the world, young people encounter sexualized commodification and construction of narrative within media, as well as homophobia and sexism. As such, this novel is not only a window into the past, but also a distinctive comment on the present. *Seven Husbands* is informed by real-life experiences so that Queer teen, youth, or adult readers can know that despite their story being rewritten, despite their struggle, Queer people have always been here and have fought very hard for their right to openly love who they want.

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