

Chapter Title: Expressive Individualism and the Myth of the Self-Made Man

Book Title: The Myths That Made America

Book Subtitle: An Introduction to American Studies

Book Author(s): Heike Paul

Published by: Transcript Verlag

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxsdq.11>

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Chapter VII

Expressive Individualism and the Myth of the Self-Made Man

1. WHY THE SELF-MADE MAN?

The legendary hero of America is the self-made man.

IRVIN G. WYLLIE, *THE SELF-MADE MAN IN AMERICA*

It is strange to see with what feverish ardour the Americans pursue their own welfare, and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*

Besides notions of religious predestination, political liberty, and social harmony, the imagined economic promises of the ‘new world’ constitute another important dimension of American exceptionalism and US foundational mythology. The popular phrase ‘rags to riches’ describes social mobility in analogy to geographical mobility in the discourse of westward expansion, the difference being that the latter refers to horizontal and the former to vertical mobility. Historically, the notion that upward mobility in US society is unlimited regardless of inherited social and financial status has 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; Myth and Symbol scholar David Potter, for example, described Americans within this framework of economic exceptionalism as a “people of plenty” and defined “economic abundance” as a decisive “force in US history” (*People* 75). In the 19th century, European visitors to the US, among them Alexis de Tocqueville (cf. *Democracy*), Joanna Trollope (cf. *Domestic Manners*), Harriet Martineau (cf. *Society*), and James Bryce (cf. *American Commonwealth*) have remarked on the hectic commercial activities of Americans and considered their peculiar pursuit of

material gain as an aspect of the American national character. In the 20th century, Theodor W. Adorno, who was more critical than many visitors before him, identified a culturally specific “barbarian success religion” in American society (“Tugendspiegel” 354). In its hegemonic version, the myth of the self-made man refers, first of all, to expressive individualism and individual success and describes a cultural type that is often seen as an “American invention” and a “unique national product” (Cawelti, *Apostles* 1). Second, based on the assumption of competitive equality, the self-made man has often been connected to utopian visions of a classless society, or at least to a society that allows considerable social mobility. Upon closer examination, the mirage of classlessness is often connected to the belief that most Americans belong to the middle class, into which most Americans will group themselves even in the face of contradictory empirical evidence: very few “will willingly say that they are in any other class” (Robertson, *American Myth* 259; cf. Mead, *And Keep* 54). The illusive conceptualization of the middle class as “homogenous and proximate” (Robertson, *American Myth* 260) entails not only notions of classlessness but also of democracy, freedom, and equality. This phenomenon has been dissected by Barbara Ehrenreich and others as a kind of ‘false consciousness’ which impedes social change (cf. Ehrenreich, *Fear*) and may also explain the relative absence of class as a concept and object of analysis throughout much of US social and intellectual history. Thirdly, the culturally specific figure and formula of the self-made man thrives according to all empirical evidence on the illusion that the exception is the rule (cf. Koch-Linde, *Amerikanische Tagträume* 9) and thus follows and time and again re-inscribes a social Darwinist logic based on the quasi-natural selection of those fit to compete and succeed in a modern “post-stratificatory society” (cf. Helmstetter, “Viel Erfolg” 709). According to this logic, there is little collective responsibility for the well-being of individual citizens. The illusion of equality – or rather of the equality of opportunity – is at the core of hegemonic discourses that describe social and political hierarchies in American society as temporary rather than as structural (cf. Fluck and Werner, “Einführung” 9). The national type of the self-made man and the creed of American mobility imply “parity in competition” (Potter, *People* 92), and, in fact, “an endless race open to all” (Thernstrom, *Poverty* 63) despite the fact that not all start out even or compete on an equal footing, and have been used to bolster the assumption that there are no permanent classes in US society. In “the doctrine of the open race” (ibid.), the providential success of the self-made man was identified with the success of the national project, and expressive individualism was thus regarded not only as the basis for individual but also for collective success.

In many ways, the notion that individuals can determine their own future and change their lives for the better is a modern idea and presupposes modern notions of culture, society, and the individual along the lines of Immanuel Kant's enlightenment dictum that man will be 'what he makes of himself' (*Anthropologie* 29), which later, in Sartre's reformulation, becomes "[m]an is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (*Existentialism* 10). This notion is the result of large-scale and complex processes of secularization that are quite at odds with Christian ethics, as it often flaunts competition, self-help, and ambition as its driving forces: "The competitive society out of which the success myth and the self-made man have grown may accept the Christian virtues in principle but can hardly observe them in practice" (Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln" 94). This connection – or rather disjunction – of ethics, ambition, and success plays out in culturally specific ways. In the present context, the idea of personal success is closely linked to processes of nation-building. The "pursuit of happiness" (as famously formulated in the Declaration of Independence) and the "promise of American life" (cf. Croly's book of the same title) in their early exceptionalist logic transfer notions of happiness from the afterlife to one's earthly existence, i.e. to the present moment or at least the near future. Coupled with the Calvinist work ethic, the pursuit of happiness constructs the modern individual's path to happiness as the pursuit of property and allows for self-realization in new ways. This notion has already been at the center of 18th-century 'new world' promotional literature, which touted America as an earthly paradise. The self-made man as a foundational mythical figure personifies this promotional discourse, and has been used to allegorize the 'new world' social order since the late 18th and throughout the 19th century. Of course, this perspective is highly biased: the eighteenth-century enlightenment subject was conceptualized as white and male, and thus the myth of the self-made man historically applies to white men only; however, in this chapter we will also look at the ways in which this perspective has been revised or amended by other individuals and groups who have appropriated this myth.

The coinage of the term "self-made man" is commonly credited to Henry Clay, who wrote in 1832: "In Kentucky, almost every manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor" ("Defence" 39). The term can thus be considered as yet another neologism of the early republic that speaks to specifically US-American cultural and economic patterns and is deeply intertwined with various aspects of American exceptionalism. 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. This contradiction is explored repeatedly in scholarly as well as literary texts and in popular culture as the basic conundrum of a myth that defines self-interest as the basis of the common good rather than as an immersion “in the *icy water of egotistical calculation*” (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*).

In this chapter, I will discuss, first, the history of the myth of the self-made man in the late 18th century and the foundational phase of the nation by reference to Benjamin Franklin’s writings and self-fashioning, and second, the popularization of success stories (such as those by Horatio Alger) in the 19th century; I will, third, analyze numerous rise-and-fall narratives and narratives of failure that mark the transition from romantic to realist and modernist representations and that fictionalize and criticize hegemonic ideological manoeuvres in the context of industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and consumer culture; I will analyze, fourth, immigrant fiction, which is often similarly ambivalent, fifth, African American constructions of the self-made man, and sixth, the feminization of this prototypically male formula with respect to the self-made woman; I will, seventh, conclude with some remarks on the myth of the self-made man in the age of globalization.

2. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, AMERICAN PARVENU

The root of the matter is a peculiar sense of the self, at once buoyant and practical, visionary and manipulative. To make a self – such is the audacious undertaking that brings one into a world of masks and roles and shape-shifters, that requires one to manipulate beliefs and impressions, that elevates technical facility and gives one the heady sense of playing a game. The central document of such self making is Franklin’s *Autobiography*.

GARY LINDBERG, *THE CONFIDENCE MAN IN AMERICAN LITERATURE*

Get what you can, and what you get, hold; ‘Tis the stone that will turn all your lead into gold.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) not only figures prominently in the myth of the Founding Fathers (cf. chapter 4) but has also typified the self-made man in American culture. As an autodidact who became one of the most respected Americans of his time (and beyond), he has often been considered the *homo*

americanus par excellence, and has been called “a model representative of the American Dream” (Huang and Mulford, “Benjamin Franklin” 147) and “a liberal capitalist hero” (Newman, “Benjamin Franklin” 173). His writings have been extraordinarily popular, especially his *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, of which 10,000 copies were printed each year from 1732 to 1758 and which by 1850 had been printed more than eighty times (cf. Huang and Mulford, “Benjamin Franklin” 150), and his *Autobiography*, which was published posthumously in English in 1793; both texts immediately turned into bestsellers, household names, and canonical material, and can be considered advice literature providing guidance on how to rise from “Obscurity” to “some Degree of Reputation in the World” (Franklin, *Autobiography* 1). Ever since the publication of Franklin’s memoirs, “autobiography has been the authoritative mode within which to imagine the self-made man” (Decker, *Made in* xxvii). Structured in four parts, they were composed by the author at different times in his life but never finished. Part one covers the first 21 years of his life in Boston and Philadelphia and narrates his childhood in poverty, his apprenticeship as a printer, his first journey to London, his marriage to Deborah Read, and his first professional success as a printer in Philadelphia. Part two is short and consists mostly of a self-improvement scheme that Franklin purportedly practiced on a daily basis; this “famous system of moral book keeping” (Cawelti, *Apostles* 20) has been quoted and emulated many times and reveals the didacticism of the text. In part three, Franklin says much about his achievements, among them the publication of his almanac, his study of foreign languages, and his initiatives in public affairs; this part ends with another journey to London on behalf of the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly. Part four is again brief and recounts his affairs in London; overall, Franklin’s text thus is a relatively disparate genre-mix. As a success story which recounts the life of a printer’s apprentice who becomes an internationally recognized statesman due to his “industry” and “frugality” (*Autobiography* 67), it displays the author’s modest origins as a dimension of his virtue rather than seeking to hide them, and thus also recodes ‘old-world’ resentments against social upstarts and ‘parvenus’ into evidence and manifestations of greater liberty, equality, and social justice in America (cf. Weber, *Protestant Ethic* 57).

Even if some of the advice doled out by Franklin is tongue-in-cheek, he certainly represents an optimistic version of the American Dream of upward social mobility. His *Autobiography* has been received much in the vein of a success manual; the American frontiersman Davy Crockett apparently consulted it during the Battle of the Alamo (cf. Parini, *Promised Land* 79), and banker Thomas Mellon also speaks of having read the autobiography at a young and impressionable age and declares this experience “the turning point of my life”

(qtd. in Wyllie, *Self-Made Man* 15). In the 20th century, it has been referenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as well as by Dale Carnegie in his 1936 bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In addition, “Franklin was a self-made man in far more than a literal sense: how he constructed and presented himself, and the ways in which such performances succeeded and failed, reveal a great deal about life and society in eighteenth-century British North America” (Newman, “Benjamin Franklin” 162). Franklin’s self-fashioning celebrates individualism and free will against a deterministic social order, but it also affirms that everyone is responsible for their own fate and success in life: self-improvement and self-perfectability loom large in his texts, which were and still are part of US school curricula.

Franklin’s audiences past and present read his ideas about the synergetic fusion of a paling Protestant religiosity (Franklin was a deist) and a Calvinist work ethic as enabling and fuelling a capitalist economy that promises individual and collective gain and well-being – the defense of capitalism is, time and again, the tacit subtext of the narratives of self-made men. It is this blend of religious ideas and economic aspects that the German sociologist Max Weber discusses prominently in his description of what he calls the Protestant Ethic in his book of the same title. According to Weber, Franklin embodies the new type of the *homo americanus* that has been molded in and advances the “spirit of capitalism” (cf. *ibid.*). This spirit – which Weber identifies in the North American colonies as early as 1632 (cf. *ibid.* 46) – is brought forth by Puritanism as well as by the economic development of the colonies, which together turned people into economic subjects (“Wirtschaftssubjekte”) on the basis of an increasingly secularized logic of work-discipline, which, however, still took material wealth as a sign of God’s blessing. Over time, though, success was less and less defined in religious terms, and instead became a kind of ‘sublime’ of the social world, a way of distinguishing one’s self (cf. Helmstetter, “Viel Erfolg” 706). Self-improvement, in Franklin’s and in Weber’s argument, involves competition as well as processes of selection, but whereas Franklin sees “the necessity of a self-selecting and self-disciplining elite” (Cawelti, *Apostles* 14) and trusts the cultural and economic elite to work for the greater public good, Weber’s retrospective reconstruction of the capitalist ‘type’ is much more skeptical.

Even as Franklin’s writings are often seen as embodying the era and *zeitgeist* of the early republic, it becomes clear upon closer inspection that they also gloss over serious developments which ensued during Franklin’s lifetime:

During his [Franklin’s] lifetime wealth inequality rose in American towns and cities, and the economic security of craftsmen and unskilled labourers diminished. By the late eigh-

teenth century the traditional route to competency and independence that many working men had dreamed of, and which Franklin and some others had travelled, had become increasingly difficult. (Newman, "Benjamin Franklin" 167)

Thus, Franklin's success can in and of itself be considered an exception to the rule; whereas he personified the self-made man in no uncertain terms, his reception is often strongly decontextualized and smoothes out many contradictions that mark his historical persona, his time, and his idealism. Defining individual gain in terms of the greater common good clearly ignores the tension between two very different kinds of interest.

3. HORATIO ALGER AND THE POPULARIZATION OF THE SUCCESS NARRATIVE

Only fools laugh at Horatio Alger, and his poor boys who make good. The wiser man who thinks twice about that sterling author will realize that Alger is to America what Homer was to the Greeks.

NATHANAEL WEST/BORIS INGSTER, "A COOL MILLION"

I felt that my foot was upon the ladder and that I was bound to climb.

ANDREW CARNEGIE

By the mid-19th century, the "ideology of mobility" was firmly entrenched in American society; it was the theme of "[e]ditorials, news stories, political speeches, commencement addresses, sermons, [and] popular fiction" (Thernstrom, *Poverty* 57-58). Representations of the self-made man in popular fiction are particularly prominent in this period in the oeuvre of Horatio Alger (1832-1899), who was not only a prolific writer but also worked as an editor, teacher, and pastor. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines Horatio Alger as the author of popular fiction about "impoverished boys who through hard work and virtue achieve great wealth and respect" (43); often living with a single mother who depends on him for support, Alger's typical protagonist usually has a chance encounter with a gentleman, who becomes his mentor as the young protagonist shows his moral integrity, works hard, and thus appears to be deserving of help. At the end of the story, he ends up comfortably ensconced in middle-class America and "is established in a secure white-collar position, either as a clerk with the promise of a junior partnership or as a junior member of a successful mercantile establishment" (Cawelti, *Apostles* 109). Alger's novels

pursue a thinly veiled didactic aim while they also cater to sensationalism, sentimentalism, and voyeurism. In the 19th century, the virtual “cult of the self-made man” (Wyllie, *Self-Made Man* 13) was certainly propelled and reinforced by “Algerism,” as the popularity of the Horatio Alger stories came to be described, and even if his texts are hardly read anymore, Alger is still a household name today. Addressing a young, male audience, Alger’s 135 books, among them the well-known Ragged Dick series which comprises six novels (1868-1870), have sold more than 300.000.000 copies.

They “have structured national discourse as a narrative of personal initiative, enterprise, financial responsibility, thrift, equal opportunity, hard-work ethic, education and self-education, and other similar values of Puritan-Calvinist and liberal extraction” (Moraru, *Rewriting* 57) in seeming opposition to – yet ultimately in conjunction with – the so-called “bad boy-books” by Mark Twain and others that focused on a nostalgic “figurative escape into the pastoral, imaginative life of a premodern, anticapitalist world, while also embodying the enterprising and unsentimental agency of the capitalist himself” (Salazar, *Bodies* 75). In the 19th century, Alger’s books functioned as national allegories, since their adolescent protagonists’ rites of passage could be paralleled with the young republic’s struggle for independence (cf. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic* 34, 38). Alger’s success as a writer diminished towards the end of his life, when his books became the object of criticism by an ‘anti-Alger movement’ which rallied to have his books removed from public libraries because they were deemed too trivial, “harmful,” and “bad,” and to cause a “softening [of] the brain” (ibid. 256; cf. Hendler, *Public Sentiments* 87-91). Alger’s stories became truly iconic in the first half of the 20th century, when the sales of his books, which were then used to identify the ‘American way of life’ in contrast to the ‘un-American’ notions of socialism and communism, rose sharply; ‘Cold War’ ideology thus enlisted Alger as “a patriotic defender of the social and political status quo and erstwhile advocate of laissez-faire capitalism” (Scharnhorst and Bales, *Lost Life* 152). It is during these decades that Algerism had its heyday. As Algerism came to signify “Americanism,” in many crucial ways “[t]he word of Alger excluded the word of Marx” (Hartz, *Liberal Tradition* 248).

Illustration 1: Rags to Riches

Cover of *Sink or Swim* by H. Alger (Boston: Loring, 1870).

Referring to the Horatio Alger stories as rags-to-riches narratives, however, may be an oversimplification, as John Cawelti has pointed out: First, because their protagonists never achieve success on their own but crucially rely on helper figures, a circumstance which somewhat mitigates the self-help impetus of Alger's writings – Alger's typical protagonist has “an astounding propensity for chance encounters with benevolent and useful friends, and his success is largely due to their patronage and assistance” (Cawelti, *Apostles* 109); this reliance on “magical outside assistance” (Trachtenberg, *Incorporation* 81) has led scholars to describe Alger's famous hero Ragged Dick as a “male Cinderella-character in a postbellum America” (Moraru, *Rewriting* 56; cf. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic* 275). Second, the protagonists of Alger's tales never become spectacularly rich or successful – they rise from poverty to a comfortable middle-class status but never beyond that, and thus do not follow the get-rich-quick formula; in fact, we

may consider the rather nostalgic hankering after a “return to the age of innocence” (Salmi, “Success” 601) that can be discerned in Alger’s texts as indicative of his critical attitude toward “the greed of the Gilded Age” (Cawelti, *Apostles* 120), the large-scale “incorporation of America” (cf. Trachtenberg’s book of the same title), and the new mythology of “corporate individualism” (Robertson, *American Myth* 176). Yet, there are a number of issues that Horatio Alger stories evade, and these evasions carry ideological weight: Alger’s virtuous and deserving heroes never experience bad luck and are never threatened by downward mobility – they never become homeless tramps or drifters, or inhabit any other seriously stigmatized and disadvantaged social space (cf. Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic* 76); as they also typically strive for white-collar employment, the factory and the “factory system” as a locus of labor is effaced altogether (ibid. 88), and their success in the corporate world seems to be based solely on personal virtue and ambition: “Serve your employer well, learn business as rapidly as possible, don’t fall into bad habits, and you’ll get on” (Alger qtd. in ibid. 91); yet, this corporate world is at times also cast in a negative light: “The popular image of the business world held unresolved tensions; on the one hand, it seemed the field of just rewards, on the other, a realm of questionable motives and unbridled appetites” (Trachtenberg, *Incorporation* 80-81); thus Alger’s stories point to a fundamental conflict in the American experience which is vicariously solved in these narratives even if they hardly ever address it directly. Alger’s stories moreover pay no attention to how class distinctions can be maintained more subtly through manners and habitus (cf. Veblen, *Theory*) and how the lack of a particular habitus can prevent upward mobility; instead, they offer “a potentially seductive message” produced by an “amalgamation of moral and cultural elitism with egalitarianism” (Nackenoff, *Fictional Republic* 179) that optimistically suggests the complete permeability of social boundaries and thus mostly negate class differences proper. Satirical reworkings of the Horatio Alger story, whose theme of social mobility is heavily imbued with social Darwinist thinking, can be found, for instance, in Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (1934) and Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), whose protagonist, a fictionalized version of Richard Nixon, is reminiscent of Alger’s Ragged Dick. Alger’s long-term influence can also be detected in many other texts, genres, and stock characters in popular fiction, but he did not invent the success story formula and self-help-ethic that he helped popularize; a few success stories of the Alger kind had been published prior to the Civil War, among them Paddy O’Flarrity’s *A Spur to Youth; or, Davy Crockett Beaten* (1834), Charles F. Barnard’s *The Life of Collin Reynolds, the Orphan Boy and Young Merchant* (1835), and J.H. Ingraham’s *Jemmy Daily, or, The Little News*

Vender (1843), and it is in the 1850s that newsboys and bootblacks become common figures in popular literature (cf. Cawelti, *Apostles* 107). Yet, it is Alger among all self-help propagandists who lastingly shaped the cultural imaginary of Americans by adding to Franklin's advice register a new success formula with sentimental, affective appeal which celebrated "the pleasures of property" (Hendler, *Public Sentiments* 101) even more thoroughly.

Both Franklin's and Alger's formulas echo in many later representations of success in American culture, and have time and again been used as models for narrating success in the biographical and autobiographical vein. The self-made man as cultural script has been employed in order to describe individuals as different as Andrew Jackson (often referred to as the first self-made man in the White House), Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie, who also used the formula in their own self-fashioning. Thus, for instance, Abraham Lincoln, who has often been viewed as the quintessential self-made man, "himself nurtured this tradition of humble origins to accentuate his own rise from obscurity to distinction" and fashioned himself as a 'common man' for political purposes, and many of his biographers have followed this lead (Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln"). Richard Hofstadter in this vein sees Lincoln as a "pre-eminent example of that self-help which Americans have always so admired" ("Abraham Lincoln" 92), and quotes from Lincoln's Address to the 166th Ohio Regiment: "I happen, temporarily, to occupy this White House. I am living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child had" (ibid.). Lincoln's rhetoric to some extent shares in the "glorification of poverty in the success cult's ideology" (Wyllie, *Self-Made Man* 24), yet "the most publicized actors during the late nineteenth century were not politicians but a dynamic breed of entrepreneurs, such as Astor, Gould, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and Rockefeller" (Decker, *Made in* xxvii).

One of those entrepreneurs, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, published an article in 1889 titled "Wealth" (commonly referred to as "The Gospel of Wealth"), in which he programmatically (and somewhat hypocritically) reconnects wealth to social responsibility in a Franklinesque manner. In addition, Carnegie feels justified in advising the readers of his autobiography (published in 1920) about self-reliance and morality by repeatedly interspersing his account of how he spectacularly rose from poverty to become one of the world's richest entrepreneurs with truisms such as "It is a great mistake not to seize the opportunity" (*Autobiography* 38) or "No kind action is ever lost" (ibid. 78), while failing to elaborate on certain less illustrious events in his life like his dubious role in the suppression of the 1892 Homestead Strike, which occurred at a steel works belonging to the Carnegie Steel Company. In order to evade and

counteract the question of how extremely wealthy people like him, despite “having everything they wanted, [...] manage[d] to keep on wanting” (Michaels, “Corporate Fiction” 193), Carnegie turned to charity and welfare. His text is prefaced by his editor as follows:

Nothing stranger ever came out of the Arabian Nights than the story of this poor Scotch boy who came to America and step by step, through many trials and triumphs, became the great steel master, built up a colossal industry, amassed an enormous fortune, and then deliberately and systematically gave away the whole of it for the enlightenment and betterment of mankind. (Van Dyke, Editor’s Note 5)

‘Giving away’ one’s wealth, of course, retrospectively affirms once more that one had earned and owned it legitimately. Charity thus seeks to close the gap between self-interest and the common good by ‘returning’ to the general public what had previously been extracted from it through often exploitative practices. In similar fashion to Carnegie, the Rockefeller family is linked to both ruthless business practices *and* philanthropy (e.g. through the Rockefeller Foundation). Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller Sr.’s corrupt business practices (such as the large-scale blackmailing of competitors) have been minutely chronicled in the voluminous *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1905), whose author, journalist and historian Ida Tarbell, regretted that despite the exposure of his unlawful monopolization of the oil industry public opinion did not turn against him. Although the court proceedings against him did lead to Progressivist anti-trust legislation, as by that time “tensions between the business community and the rest of American society seemed to preoccupy the minds of many” (Kammen, *People* 266), Americans seem to admire Rockefeller as an impressive specimen of the self-made man even today.

Illustration 2: Self-Made MonopolistC.J. Taylor, *King of the World* (n.d).

The myth of the self-made man – with a story based on trust in the incentives of the capitalist market, adherence to the Protestant work ethic, and luck – may be *the* prototypical modern American fairy tale. Decker points out how “stories of entrepreneurial success confer ‘moral luck’ – a secular version of divine grace – on their upwardly mobile protagonists” (*Made in* xxviii). Success stories thus can easily be considered American fairy tales with a providential twist, and as such they echo in and are invoked by many cultural productions from 19th-century popular fiction to 20th- and 21st-century Hollywood films. Their protagonist, the self-made man, personifies the American dream as wishful thinking and wish-fulfillment at the same time: “[T]he assumption that men were created equal, with an equal ability to make an effort and win an earthly reward, although denied every day by experience, is maintained every day by our folklore and dreams” (Mead, *And Keep* 68). As part dream, part fantasy, and part prophecy, the foundational myth of the self-made man seems to be powerful enough to defy the overwhelming evidence of its own baselessness.

4. CRISES OF SELF-MADE MANHOOD IN AMERICAN LITERATURE SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY

The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That – with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word “success” – is our national disease.

WILLIAM JAMES

I didn't want you to think I was just some nobody.

JAY GATSBY IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

Success narratives and the ‘new world’ social order they project of course have not gone unchallenged. In this section, I will exemplarily discuss literary texts – short stories, novels, essays, and poetry – which from the beginning have provided critical perspectives on the success myth. My first example will be Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1832); written and published more than 40 years after Franklin’s death, it offers a quite skeptical view on the transitional process at the end of which the self-made man emerged as a new cultural type in North America. An initiation story set in the pre-revolutionary period, the text revolves around Robin, a young man who goes to Boston, where his uncle, a high-ranking official in the colonial government – titular character Major Molineux – is supposed to act on his behalf and help him to settle in. Throughout the story, Robin is in search of his uncle and invokes him as a paternal authority figure and benefactor, but when he finally meets him at the story’s traumatic climax, the Major has been tarred and feathered and is paraded through the town by an angry revolutionary mob. Seeing that his uncle has lost his position of authority, Robin does not even consider attempting to establish himself in the city without the Major’s support and wishes to return to his home, yet a fatherly friend advises him to stay and try to “rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux” (19). The short story plays off the notions of European social hierarchy and ‘new world’ equality against each other and “takes part in the cultural process that constructs self-made manhood” (Walter, “Doing” 21) as it narrates the shift from “the social habits of deferential hierarchy” (ibid. 23) to self-made manhood and democracy by having Robin display the former throughout much of the story until in the end, he is rudely confronted with the advent of the latter. Hawthorne’s ambivalence regarding revolutionary upheaval has often been noted and is evident in the unflattering depiction of the mob (cf. Bercovitch, *Office*); “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” can thus also be read as a critique of the self-made man (cf. Leverenz, *Manhood*

235), as the story points to the violence that accompanies his emergence. While Franklin's projection of upward mobility seems rather enthusiastic and embraces the full spectrum of economic success, social respectability, and participation in public life for the greater common good, other writers of the early republic, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, and Washington Irving, were more ambivalent toward the abolition of established social hierarchies and less eager to celebrate the new national ideal of 'equality.'

Self-made manhood is accentuated in yet another way by Transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who connect it to an inner-directed way of life rather than to notions of material success and social permeability. Both writers thus critically comment on Franklin's success credo by providing a decidedly anti-materialistic and spiritual perspective on self-culture and "self-reliance" (cf. Emerson's famous essay of the same title). In his late poem "Success," Emerson contrasts success based on "the exact laws of reciprocity" and the "sentiment of love and heroism" with success that rests on "a system of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving, but of taking advantage" (232); for Emerson, the focus on outward success in hegemonic conceptualizations of the self-made man produce and conceal self-estrangement and alienation. Henry David Thoreau picks up on this theme in *Walden* (1854) when he states that "[t]he mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8). In *Walden*, which recounts how Thoreau lived for two years in solitude in a hut at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, the author seems to mock Franklin when he elaborates in the first lengthy chapter titled "Economy" on how he has to live frugally due to his limited financial means, and even offers the statistics he used to calculate his living expenses. Thoreau's concept of self-making can be considered anti-Franklinesque in that it rejects the rags-to-riches scheme by following a reverse trajectory that seemingly moves from 'riches' to 'rags' (cf. Parini, *Promised Land* 115-17). The 19th-century Transcendentalist tradition, of which Emerson and Thoreau are two of the most famous representatives, will in the following continue to critically flank more positive (and popular) representations of the self-made man in the American history of ideas and culture.

Another prominent and highly complex (if not enigmatic) 19th-century text that provides a critique of the widely celebrated culture of self-help, optimism, success, and the self-made man certainly is Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story from Wall Street" (1853), which revolves around a young man who is hired by a successful elderly Wall Street lawyer (the story's narrator) as a copyist. This young man – the story's title character – refuses to function in a rationalized capitalist economy; when asked to perform certain tasks by his

employer, he answers “I would prefer not to” (10). Bartleby’s repetition of this speech act appears, as critics have pointed out, to bear some self-referential quality (cf. Deleuze, *Bartleby* 19); his regressive development, which is an un-making rather than self-making, contrasts with the career path of his employer, who qualifies as a self-made man and whose worldview thus prevents him from making sense of Bartleby and his actions. Upon first meeting him, he comments: “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (10). The themes of isolation and alienation have repeatedly been pointed out by critics such as Leo Marx, who has read the story as a critique of capitalism (cf. “Melville’s Parable” 605), and Louise Barnett, who has called Bartleby an “alienated worker” in the “numbing world of capitalist profit and alienated labor” (“Bartleby” 385); and yet, Bartleby’s self-assertion is neither compliance nor refusal in that it preserves a balance between affirmation and negation, as Giorgio Agamben has pointed out (cf. *Bartleby* 38). Michael Rogin calls attention to Bartleby’s “passive resistance” (*Subversive Genealogies* 195), which is explicitly acknowledged in the story by his employer: “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (13); Rogin thus considers the story in terms of its political message:

Bartleby protests, with “passive resistance,” against his condition. In refusing to copy, he is copying Thoreau. “I simply wish to refuse allegiance,” announced Thoreau, “to withdraw.” Bartleby’s “I prefer not to” is an echo of “Civil Disobedience.” (*Subversive Genealogies* 195)

The connection between Melville’s character Bartleby and Thoreau’s writings has also been established by other critics: “Bartleby represents the only real, if ultimately ineffective, threat to society; his experience gives some support to Henry Thoreau’s view that one lone intransigent man can shake the foundations of our institutions” (Marx, “Melville’s Parable” 621). Whereas Dan McCall considers an exclusively economic interpretation of Melville’s “Bartleby” as perhaps too narrow in view of the existential *angst* that this story confronts us with (cf. *Silence*), such an interpretation is certainly correct in pointing out that the story has the hegemonic discourse of the self-made man appear as profoundly lacking in the “humanity” that its narrator in the end proclaims upon the death of his former employee.

In the last decades of the 19th century – a period that in reference to Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel of the same title has been called the Gilded Age – and in the early 20th century, class and class difference were explored by realist/naturalist writers such as William Dean Howells, Henry James,

Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser, in whose works the US does not at all appear as an egalitarian but instead as a highly stratified society with finely-tuned mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. These mechanisms are often examined by these authors with the aid of characters representing the businessman as the prototype of the self-made man in the emerging corporate America; one example of such a businessman is Silas Lapham, the title character of William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), a so-called *nouveau riche* who, having made a fortune in the mineral paint business, seeks to increase his social status by building a mansion in a fashionable Boston neighborhood and by having one of his daughters marry Tom Corey, the son of a genteel family that has less economic but far more social and cultural capital than the Laphams; for the Coreys however, the fact that Lapham is a self-made millionaire does not compensate for his lack of etiquette and his proud and boastful manner. When Lapham finally makes a decision that is ethically right but costs him much of his fortune, the Laphams move back to their family home in the countryside and accept their financial decline that returns them to middle-class status, which in the logic of the novel is a return to moral integrity (cf. Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* 226). By construing capitalism and the "superabundance" connected to the self-made man as "a violation of the old ways and of the family itself" (Michaels, *Gold Standard* 39) and Lapham's bankruptcy as leading to his redemption (cf. *ibid.* 40), the novel reflects on the psychological costs of self-made manhood and suggests a chiasmic relation between material success and moral self-realization, as upward mobility in economic terms comes at the cost of alienation and moral decline, whereas financial ruin leads to true self-discovery. Thus, the ending may be considered positive, if not happy (cf. Boesenberg, *Money* 137). Howell's novel can be described as an "inverted success story" (Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* 281) that reflects on changes in American culture; according to Donald Pease, the novel

provided a representative account of the conflict, following the transition from a predominantly agrarian to an industrialized nation, between the restraint of self-made men and the unrestrained self-interest of laissez-faire individualists. [...] In this transition, the self-made man was replaced by the competitive personality, who depended less on his faith in character and more on the power of his drives to get whatever he wanted. ("Introduction" 15-16)

The figure of the self-made man is used in Howells's novel to critique a historical turning point after which economic success was increasingly achieved through speculation rather than work; that Silas Lapham remains bound to a tra-

ditional work ethic eventually makes him lose his self-made status under the conditions of a changing economic system.

Stephen Crane's late short story "A Self-Made Man" (1899) is lighter in tone and offers an ironic perspective on the subject of upward mobility; in this "little parody" (Solomon, *Stephen Crane* 60), Tom, a young man without means, becomes successful after helping an illiterate old man he happens to meet on the street regain his property by posing as his lawyer; even if Tom realizes that "he had not succeeded sooner because he did not know a man who knew another man" (129) – adding connections, or social capital, to chance and deceit as reasons for his success – the narrator ironically remarks near the end of the story that Tom's "fame has spread through the land as a man who carved his way to fortune with no help but his undaunted pluck, his tireless energy, and his sterling integrity" (ibid.). That Crane satirizes the Horatio Alger formula as well as the genre of self-help and advice literature becomes even more obvious from the subtitle of the story – "An Example of Success That Any One Can Follow" – and from its ending, where its protagonist, who developed from "Tom" into "Thomas G. Somebody" (ibid.), "gives the best possible advice as to how to become wealthy" to "struggling young men" in newspaper articles (ibid.).

The (preliminary) endpoint of the self-made man's development from a rural to an industrial and finally to a market-oriented and corporate figure seems to have been reached with *The Great Gatsby* (1925), whose titular character in Lionel Trilling's view is an allegorical figure that "comes inevitably to stand for America itself" (*Liberal Imagination* 251). Much of the scholarship on Fitzgerald's novel has focused on the American dream, or rather "the withering of the American dream" (Tyson, *Critical Theory* 69). However, it is noteworthy to point out that 'American dream' as a catchword became popular only with the publication of James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931); thus, Fitzgerald's novel, by using interconnected characters of different backgrounds – Gatsby, a self-made man who has acquired his status and wealth by using dubious means, narrator Nick Carraway, an ambitious young man, the upper-class Buchanans, and the working-class Wilsons – deconstructs an implicit exceptionalist understanding of success in US society years before it was explicated in Adams's book.

Self-made manhood in the context of corporate and consumer culture has also been paradigmatically embodied by the figure of the salesman. Whereas salesmen "were heralded as the self-made men of the new century" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 71), they were also used as allegorical figures in texts that critiqued success ideology; a prominent example of the latter is Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949), which revolves around protagonist Willy Loman's

futile attempts at self-making in a culture characterized by affluence, mass-production, and an economic rationale that ultimately considers human beings just as expendable as the (mass) goods they produce and sell. Loman's materialistic worldview renders him a paradigmatic specimen of what David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney refer to as "outer-directed" individuals in their sociological study of character in corporate America, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Beside Miller's play, there have been numerous literary texts (as well as other cultural productions) that have more or less critically dealt with corporate culture in the 20th and 21st centuries, among them for example Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), and, more recently, the television series *Mad Men* (2007-).

The works I discussed in this section exemplarily show that the self-made man has not only been a figure of consensus but also one of controversy and criticism. By expressing anxieties about the overthrow of established social hierarchies, offering spiritual conceptualizations of self-making, critiquing capitalism and corporatism, or warning of the fleeting nature of material wealth, all of these texts point to the precariousness of dominant white, masculinist, and individualist notions of self-made manhood in the US.

5. "LAND OF OPPORTUNITY"? IMMIGRANT STORIES OF SELF-MAKING

The American dream, as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the impact of mass immigration came to understand it, was neither the dream of the American Revolution – the foundation of freedom – nor the dream of the French Revolution – the liberation of man; it was, unhappily, the dream of a "promised land" where milk and honey flow. And the fact that the development of modern technology was so soon able to realize this dream beyond anyone's wildest expectation quite naturally had the effect of confirming for the dreamers that they really had come to live in the best of all possible worlds.

HANNAH ARENDT, *ON REVOLUTION*

The notions of upward social mobility and the pursuit of the American dream have often been connected to the immigrant experience. Despite the fact that stories in the Horatio Alger vein at times displayed a nativist streak, immigrant authors too used the narrative formula popularized by Alger to frame the topics of immigration and Americanization in the context of individual success and

self-making. Beginning a new life in the US in these texts is represented as a process of (predominantly cultural) change and transformation, and is rendered in the same civil religious diction that also shapes many discussions of the melting pot (cf. chapter 5). However, even if immigrants often comment on the fact that the standard of living in the US is higher than in their countries of origin, they have no illusions as to the hierarchies that structure US society, even if these hierarchies may be relatively permeable.

For the sake of a systematic approach, I would like to identify four different patterns that underlie representations of the immigrant experience in American literature and popular culture from the mid-19th century to the present and that articulate different degrees of affirmation and critique of the myth of the self-made man.

The first consists of success narratives that mostly conclude with a happy ending and feature successful and well-adjusted (i.e. assimilated) protagonists that take pride in their own achievements in a society which is usually described as rewarding hard work, discipline, and stamina. Success may come in different forms and need not be limited to financial success – often, it is connected to gaining an education, overcoming particular obstacles in life, or to achieving public recognition (sometimes even fame). Among this first type of self-made narratives, I group Scottish American Andrew Carnegie's autobiography; early immigrant tales such as Jewish American Mary Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) and Arab American Abraham Mitrie Rihbany's memoir *A Far Journey* (1914); and more contemporary texts such as Richard Rodriguez's assimilationist autobiography *Hunger for Memory* (1982) and Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989), which features a female immigrant protagonist. Self-made success can also be achieved through physical self-discipline, as Italian American Rocky Balboa's boxing pursuits in *Rocky* (1976) show. The career of Austrian American Arnold Schwarzenegger, who quite recently published his celebrity memoir *Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story* (2012), points to yet other arenas of self-making; his remark that "[i]f there is one thing in this world that I despise, it's losers!" (Schwarzenegger qtd. in Halberstam, *Queer Art* 5) is symptomatic of a cult(ure) of self-made manhood that glorifies the success of individuals and denigrates those who are unsuccessful. Historically, immigrants used a number of metaphors to frame their experience of the 'new world;' Chinese Americans for example referred to Western North America as the 'Gold Mountain,' whereas arrivals from the East referred to Ellis Island as the "golden door" (cf. Emma Lazarus's 1883 poem "The New Colossus," which is engraved on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty), even if there was little to idealize about the experience of internment, inspection, and admission immigrants had to en-

dure there. Today, the Immigration Museum on Ellis Island hosts the Bob Hope Memorial Library in honor of the English-born entertainer who after arriving at Ellis Island in 1908 went on to become one of America's most famous and successful self-made celebrities – and one of the most patriotic ones too (cf. Zoglin, “Bob Hope”). To summarize, immigrant voices and stories of the type outlined above articulate the hegemonic version of the myth of the self-made man and affirm exceptionalist notions of the US as a society in which anyone can achieve success through individual talent, hard work, and discipline.

The second type of immigrant tales in contrast is less unequivocally committed to the American success mythology, and consists of narratives of upward mobility that end on not quite so happy a note or consider the downside of success – in fact, outward success may even be paired with a sense of failure, loss, and alienation. This discrepancy becomes evident, for instance, in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), in which the titular character and first-person narrator has to realize that money and success do not provide happiness (525-26); echoing the work of Cahan's mentor Howells, the novel constructs a chiasmic relation between feelings of loss and economic gain, and offers an ironic commentary on the mythology of success and self-making. Similarly, Paule Marshall's novels about the Caribbean-American immigrant experience reveal the discrepancy between material aspirations and non-material longings, for instance in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1957), where we encounter a profound generation gap between the first-generation immigrant Silla, who pursues material success at any cost, and her daughter Selina, who dreams of less tangible things like falling in love and becoming a dancer. Self-making is addressed in a somewhat ironic as well as magical realist fashion in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), where the house referenced in the title, while superficially representing material gain and upward mobility, at closer inspection turns out to be a metaphor for belonging and shelter against male abuse. All of these texts thus represent immigrant perspectives from which notions of self-making and upward mobility appear problematic.

In contrast to those who can be (with all due modifications) considered as self-made personae, there is a third variant: stories that address the ‘other’ side of winning and self-making, a perspective that even more strongly articulates counter-hegemonic aspects. Scholars have pointed out that many of those immigrant narratives critical of the success myth were written in languages other than English even as they were printed in the US. Werner Sollors (cf. *Multilingual America*), Orm Øverland (cf. *Immigrant Minds*), and others have pointed to the connection between multilingualism and non-conformity in American literature, and Karen Majewski's reading of Polish-language immigrant writings

by Alfons Chrostowski (e.g. “The Polish Slave”), Bronislaw Wrotnowski, and Helena Stas (e.g. “In the Human Market: A Polish-American Sketch”) also points to this connection (cf. Majewski, “Crossings”). Often written in a naturalist mode, these narratives, of which some were recorded and fictionalized by Progressivist reformers, naturalist writers, and so-called muckraking journalists, are part of a discourse of failure that is situated at a distance from notions of American civil religion, patriotism, and exceptionalism. The slums of New York City, where much of the immigrant population lived at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, have been famously captured by Danish American journalist and photographer Jacob Riis in his book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Similarly, Stephan Thernstrom chronicles the lives of those who are at the bottom of society in his *The Other Bostonians* (1973). Many American critics of the self-made myth in and around what Daniel Bell has described as “the ‘golden age’ of American socialism” (*Marxian Socialism* 55) – the years from 1902 to 1912 – had other ideas than laissez-faire capitalism for realizing a truly egalitarian society; “Chicago Will Be Ours!” is the socialist prophecy at the end of Upton Sinclair’s naturalist novel *The Jungle* (1906), which provides another bleak vision of the immigrant experience in American society by describing the merciless exploitation and destruction of a Lithuanian family who works in the Chicago meat packing industry. The family, once full of enthusiasm for America, realizes that immigrant life is “no fairy tale” (143), as their attempts at improving their lot – and even at survival – are defeated: “They were beaten; they had lost the game, they were swept aside” (144). Narratives of immigrant failure thus are obviously at odds with the hegemonic version of the self-made man and expose the underside of the myth. They also reveal the myth’s often unacknowledged social Darwinist underpinnings, as the myth’s hegemonic version shrugs off the fact that it is not success and self-making but sheer survival that is at stake for many immigrants in a society that is characterized by gross class inequities.

Illustration 3: Muckraking Photography

Photograph from *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis (1890).

Lastly, a fourth kind of formula explores alternative modes of self-making and success that often transgress the bounds of legality, and thus also do not follow the dominant version of the success myth. These narratives acknowledge the difficulties of immigrant life in the US that arise from nativist resentments and other forms of discrimination against immigrants that often make assimilation impossible or undesirable, and thus locate success not within the American mainstream but in family- or ethnically-based criminal organizations and in plots revolving around a central gangster figure (cf. Dickstein, *Dancing* 313). A prominent example of this kind of tale is the *Godfather* saga (cf. Mario Puzo's novel and Francis Ford Coppola's film of the same title, as well as the sequels they spawned), which exemplifies an immigrant success formula based on maneuvering at the limits of (and beyond) legality and in socio-economic niches. In fact, as John Cawelti already argued in the 1970s, we find "a new mythology of crime" that reveals a fascination with power and corruption ("New Mythology" 335); this fascination, however, may be explained not only by the allure of glamorized depictions of organized crime but also by the fact that organized crime in many ways reflects rather than contrasts with what often hardly deserves to be

called ‘honest’ business in the US: Daniel Bell argues that “organized crime resembles the kind of ruthless business enterprise which successful Americans have always carried on” (qtd. in *ibid.* 347); thus, “[t]he drama of the criminal gang has become a kind of allegory of the corporation and the corporate society” which conveys “the dark message that America is a society of criminals” (*ibid.* 353, 355). Seen in this light, immigrant gangs and robber barons may be more closely connected than is immediately evident. More recently, the Godfather formula was taken up in the television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) as well as by a host of other series who focus on the self-making of characters conventionally thought of as ‘criminals.’ Beside Italian American mafia dynasties, Irish Americans also figure prominently in this alternative success myth, for example in Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York* (2002), which dramatizes nativist and Irish gang life against the backdrop of the New York Draft Riots of 1863 and other contemporaneous historical events.

The four different ‘success’ patterns that we can detect in representations of the immigrant experience thus cover a broad spectrum of responses to the myth of the self-made man: affirmative ones that tend to mimic older rags-to-riches narratives; mildly affirmative ones that often substitute material gain with non-material notions of success; highly critical ones that mostly focus on failure (caused by adverse circumstances and discrimination) rather than success; and mildly critical ones that sidestep the legal framework of the success myth but champion material success nonetheless. In all of these versions, the self-made man (or woman) appears as a more or less contested prototype of American entrepreneurship, whereas social stratification and systemic inequality are more systematically addressed only selectively by writers and critics who are invested in a socialist agenda that often does not stop at national borders and thus more fundamentally critiques the myth of the self-made man along with notions of American exceptionalism.

6. THE MYTH OF SELF-MADE MEN (AND WOMEN) AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINATION

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.

W.E.B. DUBOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK*

Conventional versions of the figure of the self-made man as white (and male) have excluded many groups and minorities, among them African Americans.

Yet, as the self-made man has been such a prominent figure of empowerment, emancipation, self-reliance, and autonomy in the American cultural imagination, it is perhaps not surprising that African American writers and intellectuals took up the image as well as its cultural scripts of success and appropriated them for their own ends. In this section, I will thus trace the critical as well as affirmative responses to the powerful cultural prototype of the self-made man that can be found in African American cultural criticism, literature, and popular culture from Frederick Douglass to Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama.

Scholars of slavery have argued for viewing the early African American literary form of the slave narrative as a modification of the success myth: When using a broad definition of the self-made man, we may consider the author/narrator of the slave narrative as a subject that has refigured himself (or herself) as a free person. This kind of interpretation prioritizes notions of freedom and emancipation over ideas of upward mobility and economic abundance, and turns the African American freedman or runaway slave into a paradigmatic exemplum of the self-made man who triumphs over adversity due to his own strength and perseverance and infuses a strong moral sense into the discourse of the self-made man. Frederick Douglass (1817/18-1895) for instance documents in his autobiography his own process of emancipation in a way that strongly resonates with the myth of the self-made man. Douglass, who certainly had read Franklin (he quotes Franklin's aphorisms every once in a while in his own writings), and admired him, among other things, for being the President of the first Abolition Society in America, has often been called "a sort of Negro edition of Ben Franklin" (Alain Locke qtd. in Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass" 99). In his writings, Douglass himself reacted ambivalently to being called a self-made man:

I have sometimes been credited with having been the architect of my own fortune, and have pretty generally received the title of a "self-made man;" and while I cannot altogether disclaim this title, when I look back over the facts of my life, and consider the helpful influences exerted upon me, by friends more fortunately born and educated than myself, I am compelled to give them at least an equal measure of credit, with myself, for the success which has attended my labours in life. (*Life* 900)

Rather than identifying with notions of the self-made man, Douglass reacts to this appellation with modesty, and seeks to give credit for his success to a collective agency of helpers and supporters of the abolitionist cause. Focusing on the assistance and support needed to become a self-made man, Douglass thus modifies the myth of the self-made man to suggest that there is a collective of helpers

surrounding self-made men that should not be ignored for the purpose of elevating the individual in an undue manner.

Apart from referring to the self-made myth in his autobiographical writings, Douglass also wrote a talk titled “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,” which he delivered in slightly different versions on more than 50 occasions in the US, Canada, and Great Britain between 1859 and 1893, and which has been referred to as his “most familiar lecture” (McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* 298). Even if “Douglass’ standard speech on ‘Self-Made Men’ accentuated the morality of success rather than its economics” (Martin, “Images” 275), it has a slightly chauvinistic ring to it that stands in contrast to many other descriptions he offers about antebellum and postbellum American society. In fact, it is astounding that he writes the following lines in the pre-Civil War version of the talk:

I seldom find anything either in the ideas or institutions of that country, whereof to glory. [...] But pushing aside this black and clotted covering which mantles all our land, as with the shadow of death, I recognize one feature at least of special and peculiar excellence, and that is the relation of America to self-made men. America is, most unquestionably and pre-eminently, the home and special patron of self-made men. In no country in the world are the conditions more favourable to the production and sustenance of such men than in America. (“Trials” 297)

In the version of this lecture that is included in John Blassingame’s edition of Frederick Douglass’s collected writings, we find the self-made man positioned at the heart of a work ethic that Douglass formulates in often proverbial and metaphorical language which frequently refers to labor, exertion, necessity, self-reliance, good work habits, industry, and uplift (ibid. 294, 298). That Douglass shares in the exceptionalist discourse of the self-made man to such an extent is perhaps somewhat surprising, and it seems awkward, if not outright cynical, that he would sweep aside his criticism of slavery that can be found elsewhere in his writings in the process; as to how it was possible for an ex-slave and abolitionist intellectual to embrace the hegemonic version of the success myth remains open to speculation.

After Douglass’s awkward affirmation of the self-made man despite the institution of slavery and rampant racism in US society, other African American intellectuals also referred to and appropriated the white success mythology. The title of Booker T. Washington’s (1856-1915) *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1901) for example clearly borrows from the notion of upward mobility, which in the book is connected to educational achievement and economic success. Like Franklin, Washington conceives of the public good and of republican

virtue as compatible with economic self-interest and material gain, and many contemporaneous reviewers of his book – e.g. in the *Nation* (April 4, 1901), the *New York Times* (June 15, 1901), and *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1901) – pointed out exactly this parallel (cf. Kafka, *Great White* 9). Phillipa Kafka similarly holds that “Booker T. Washington was the mediator for African Americans of the European American success mythology as personified by Benjamin Franklin” (ibid. 3). She considers *Up from Slavery* as the narrative of a self-made man seeking to expand white success mythologies, as the text begins with the statement that “[m]y life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings” (*Up from* 15) and ends with Washington’s account of being awarded an honorary degree from Harvard University in 1896 (he is also invited to dine at the White House by US president Theodore Roosevelt in 1901). In statements such as “I believe that any man’s life will be filled with constant, unexpected encouragements of this kind if he makes up his mind to do his level best each day of his life” (*Up from* 133), Washington’s wording echoes Franklin’s aphorisms. In contrast to more critical assessments of Washington’s accommodationist views, Houston Baker sees him as providing a “*how-to* manual, setting forth strategies of address (ways of talking black and back) designed for Afro-American empowerment” (*Modernism* 32) based on a realistic assessment of the options of African Americans in the Southern US at the time.

Even if Douglass and Washington, two of the most prominent figures who contributed to the discourse of black self-making, exemplify the tendency in the African American history of ideas to conceive of self-made success figures as male (just as in its hegemonic white counterpart), we find female embodiments as well, for example in Ann Petry’s naturalistic novel *The Street* (1946), whose protagonist, Lutie Johnson, a self-supporting, single mother, tries to emulate the ideal of self-making. At one point, having just found new employment, she imagines herself in Benjamin Franklin’s footsteps – almost:

She walked slowly, avoiding the moment when she must enter the apartment and start fixing dinner. She shifted the packages into a more comfortable position and feeling the hard roundness of the rolls through the paper bag, she thought immediately of Ben Franklin and his loaf of bread. And grinned thinking, You and Ben Franklin. You ought to take one out and start eating it as you walk along 116th Street. Only you ought to remember while you eat that you’re in Harlem and he was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago. Yet she couldn’t get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she. [...]

You better get your dinner started, Ben Franklin, she said to herself and walked past the children who were jumping rope. (64)

As a Black woman, the novel suggests, the odds are against her, however hard she may try to make a living for herself and her son, and she begins to completely lose her sense of agency as she realizes that despite all her efforts at self-improvement she will forever be kept down by the structural forces of racism and classism:

All those years, going to grammar school, going to high school, getting married, having a baby, going to work for the Chandlers, leaving Jim because he got himself another woman – all those years she'd been heading straight as an arrow for that street or some other street just like it. (426)

Petry, who was associated with the Communist Party, as Alan Wald points out (cf. *American Night* 88), addresses “the postwar crisis of the vision of the 1930s in relation to Black America” (ibid. 155). Failure, rather than success, is explored in her oeuvre, and this is also true for many other texts by African American women writers such as Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayle Jones. Somewhat in contrast to Petry's account of a failed self-made woman stands Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which narrates the story of two sisters, Celie and Nettie; even if their lives are characterized by acts of the most brutal patriarchal violence, abuse, and oppression, the novel ends fairly happy, with Celie becoming a self-made woman who supports herself as a tailor and owns her own house. The novel has been criticized for both its explicit depiction of violence and sexual abuse (according to the American Library Association, it is one of the most frequently challenged books) and for its somewhat implausible, (pseudo-)emancipatory happy ending.

Hollywood films constitute another arena in which we find many representations of black social mobility and immobility. It is noteworthy that even quite recent productions often depict African American characters as being content with holding subordinate social positions, even if they are the protagonists of the films in question. In *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) for example, the African American Hoke (Morgan Freeman) is happy to be employed as a chauffeur by the elderly Miss Daisy (Jessica Tandy), and even though the film acknowledges racism and anti-Semitism, it also affirms a racially stratified social order. The controversially discussed adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's 2009 bestseller *The Help* (2011), which again portrays African American characters in a position of servitude, arguably similarly downplays past and present racial discrimination

and black subordination by way of a sentimental politics of representation. Another puzzling example that calls for a thorough critique of black representation is *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) starring Will Smith as Chris Gardner, a homeless African American salesman and single parent who against all odds lands an unpaid internship at a brokerage firm, is then taken on as a paid employee, and finally goes on to become a millionaire. Instead of using its premise – unemployment, social insecurity, and poverty in an increasingly finance-driven economy – to formulate a critique of the financial sector in particular and of US society at large, the film thus turns out to be yet another celebration of individualism and self-reliance. Gardner tells his son: “Don’t ever let somebody tell you, you can’t do something. [...] You got a dream, you gotta protect it. [...] If you want something, go get it. Period.” This American Dream narrative may well be described as postracial, if only for the very fact that it does not acknowledge the blackness of its protagonist: as Gardner is never interpellated as black and racism is never explicitly addressed in the film (cf. Gerund and Koetzing, “This Part” 203), *The Pursuit of Happyness* seems to deny race as a factor that co-determines social (im)mobility by once more celebrating the exception as the rule.

Self-making as a cultural script has been used to fashion African Americans as heroes and heroines not only in the realm of business and enterprise but also in many other areas such as the entertainment industry, sports, and – less often – politics. Media personality Oprah Winfrey for instance, who grew up in rural poverty, went on to become one of the richest self-made women in the US, and can easily be considered to be the most prominent icon of black female success. In her talks, she affirms notions of expressive individualism and the myth of self-making by once more reiterating the claims that hard work, moral integrity, and discipline lead to material success and that experiences of crisis and failure – rather than being indicative of larger social, political, and economic problems – constitute chances for self-improvement. In this sense, her philanthropy and the laudatory discourse within and by which her philanthropic and charitable activities are framed and promoted (not least by herself) function as complementing and enhancing her own success myth: philanthropy and charity become part of an entrepreneurial scheme that – not unlike Rockefeller’s and Carnegie’s approach – attempts to forestall and defuse any critique of structural injustice and inequality. Again, because Oprah Winfrey has her own autobiographical narrative of success and conversion to offer and to share, she can speak with the authority of experience about the business of self-making, adding positive thinking and pop psychology in “a trademark combination of pathos and uplift”

(Watts, *Self-Help Messiah* 495) as enabling forces to the myth while figuring as a living exemplum herself.

Barack Obama – whose rise to the highest political office in the US has often been rendered according to the standard narrative formula of the success myth – has also himself appropriated the myth of the self-made man in many instances, for example in the following passage from the speech he gave in Berlin on July 24, 2008:

I know that I don't look like the Americans who've previously spoken in this great city. The journey that led me here is improbable. My mother was born in the heartland of America, but my father grew up herding goats in Kenya. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. (“World”)

Whereas Obama here appropriates the cultural script of the white success mythology to frame his own family's story (from domestic servant to US president in the course of two generations) and more generally contributes to the mythic discourse of the land of opportunity in his book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006), he has also somewhat inconsistently and provocatively issued criticism of the myth of the self-made man, for instance in a speech he held in the course of his re-election campaign on July 13, 2012 in Roanoke, Virginia:

[L]ook, if you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own. You didn't get there on your own. I'm always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something — there are a whole bunch of hard-working people out there. If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business — you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet. You [wealthy people] moved your goods on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces the rest of us paid for. (“Remarks”)

Even if phrases such as “this unbelievable American system” reinforce long-standing assumptions about America's exceptionalism, they at the same time also emphasize the public sector and communal efforts as prerequisites for individual

success, and thus counter the hegemonic version of the myth of the self-made man. Obama's speech has been denounced as a call for "massive redistribution" (Goodman, "Obama") and as "contradict[ing] the belief in American exceptionalism, that is: Laissez faire economics, equality of opportunity, individualism, and popular but limited self-government" (Stepman, "Obama's Philosophy"); these responses reveal that remarks that challenge the ideology of individual success, whose function it is after all to provide a justification for the social order, will be immediately perceived as a threat to the economic status quo by conservatives like the above-quoted critics, who thus attempt to bolster the myth of self-making by evading and intentionally blurring the question as to whether wealth is actually distributed fairly in a capitalist system.

In sum, we can thus identify different aims for which the myth of the self-made man has been used in African American intellectual history, culture, and individual (self)-representations, for example, to construct a positive image of black masculinity and to claim recognition for African American individual and collective achievement, but also to point to the limits of the model of expressive individualism in US society.

7. AMERICAN CINDERELLAS? THE CASE OF THE SELF-MADE WOMAN

Workin' 9 to 5
What a way to make a livin'
Barely gettin' by
It's all takin'
And no givin'
They just use your mind
And they never give you credit
It's enough to drive you
Crazy if you let it.
[...]
It's a rich man's game
No matter what they call it
And you spend your life
Puttin' money in his wallet.
DOLLY PARTON, "9 TO 5"

They can beg and they can plead, but they can't see the light,
cuz the boy with the cold, hard cash is always Mr. Right!
Cuz we are living in a material world, and I am a material girl.
MADONNA, "MATERIAL GIRL"

The myth of the self-made man can also be related to women, as has already become clear by the (more or less successful) self-made women we have already encountered in this chapter. Still, there seem to be crucial points in which the female success myth departs from the hegemonic male one, to which it appears to be connected asymmetrically and in complementary fashion. For one thing, self-made women are not part of the foundational narrative of self-making, and even more recent female exemplars often follow a skewed logic that tends to define female success not in terms of work as productivity, but more often in terms of the kind of work that goes into maintaining and improving one's physical attractiveness. Thus, we may well speak of the prototype of the self-made woman as being shaped somewhat paradoxically by a process of 'othering.' Ann Douglas has diagnosed a "feminization of American Culture" as having accompanied the shift to an increasingly consumption-oriented economy in the 19th century that lastingly gendered the relations of production and consumption: The "sentimentalization" of culture "was an inevitable part of the self-evasion of a society both committed to laissez-faire industrial expansion and disturbed by its

consequences. [...] [S]entimentalism provided the inevitable rationalization of the economic order” (*Feminization* 12). In that sense, women were both

the stewards and prisoners of sentimental culture; theoretically reduced to affect and relegated to domestic space, women oversaw the cultural role of their own social and ontological captivity, which provided the moral rationale for an increasingly economically competitive society. (Gould, “Revisiting” ii)

Being interpellated not as producers/workers but as “consuming angels” (cf. Lori Anne Loeb’s book of the same title) by the discourse of economic wealth and social mobility which propped up the newly emergent consumer economy, women entered it as customers and as male status symbols – i.e. as passive subjects or rather objectified non-subjects – or not at all. Women’s upward mobility thus depended on their relations to men: The boy in the Alger story who becomes the protégé of an older benefactor is replaced by a young, attractive girl/woman who is similarly elevated through male assistance according to a patriarchal logic in which women’s function is precisely not to become independently successful but to further highlight male success by yielding to men’s efforts at changing women according to their ideals. American cultural productions also often use an Americanized version of the Cinderella tale to circumscribe female success, for example Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1901), in which the titular character, a country girl who goes on to become a successful actress, however ultimately leaves both male mentor figures with whom she has relations in the course of the novel; Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), which ends with protagonist Lorelei Lee, another provincial girl, marrying into high society; or Garry Marshall’s Hollywood romance *Pretty Woman* (1990), which tells the love story between Vivian Ward, a prostitute, and a rich businessman. Whether Carrie Meeber, Lorelei Lee, and Vivian Ward would more aptly be called self-made women, businesswomen, or “sexual entrepreneurs” (Harvey and Gill, “Spicing” 52) is a question that cannot easily be answered. As female success often seems circumscribed by and limited to marriage as an arena in which the exchange/circulation of social capital, economic capital, and libidinal energies is only thinly veiled by the ideology of romantic love, it is no wonder that we also encounter more critical treatments of marriage in American literature and culture, for example in Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* (1905), which ends with the tragic death of protagonist Lily Bart, a young woman who refuses marriage and fails to live up to the (double) moral standards of New York high society. With regard to Wharton’s novel, Lauren Berlant notes that “the linkage between conventional gendering and failure feels both melodramatic and mundane,” and wonders,

“what are the consequences if you try to ‘quote’ the normal practices identified with your gender and you fail [...]?” (*Desire/Love* 61). In the context of a newly emerging women’s movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women themselves critiqued white middle-class women for partaking in relationships based on what Olive Schreiner for instance has called “sex parasitism” (*Woman* 78); after all, these women could be considered to be complicit in maintaining their own socio-economic dependency, which Charlotte Perkins Gilman described as follows:

We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation. The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation. (*Women* 5)

From a gender-specific perspective, the Cinderella story as the (inverted) correlate of the male success myth thus defines the capital and opportunities of women differently from the capital and opportunities of men. Whereas we do find straightforward narratives of upward mobility, more often we encounter narratives of self-making that are concerned with women’s outward appearance and with the work that needs to be invested in order to conform to socially defined beauty standards. Beauty contests constitute a notorious example of socially accepted cultural practices and forms of female self-making aiming at recognition, fame, and economic gain, of which the Miss America pageant is especially prominent. Invented as a marketing strategy by Atlantic City hotel owners to extend the holiday season beyond the Labor Day weekend, it took place for the first time in 1921 and, in spite of several interruptions, is still an extremely profitable venture. Ironically, 1921 was also the year women were allowed to vote in national elections for the first time, as Susan Faludi notes (cf. *Backlash* 50), which shows that emancipatory efforts conflicted and overlapped with discourses and practices that objectified and commodified women and their bodies. More broadly, Lois Banner suggests that

[t]he history of beauty contests tells us much about American attitudes toward physical appearance and women’s expected roles. Rituals following set procedures, beauty contests have long existed to legitimize the Cinderella mythology for women, to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women. (*American Beauty* 249)

Banner goes on to say that “the Miss America pageant is a striking example both of the breakdown of Victorian prudery in the early twentieth century and the strength of Victorianism in a specific setting” (ibid.). In order to ameliorate the overtly sexist, objectifying implications of the beauty contest, which to this day is considered the most important part of the competition, the winner of the pageant is now awarded a college scholarship.

Overall, female self-making runs counter to the conventional American work ethic. Rita Freedman comments on the Disney television film *Cinderella* (1997): “Hard at work in her clogs, Cinderella was ignored. Transformed by her satins and slippers, she conquered the world” (*Beauty Bound* 68). Thus, we may even speak of a somewhat perverted work ethic that encourages women to spend all their material resources and time on the exhaustive and narcissistic task of self-managing and self-disciplining their bodies (cf. Gill and Scharff, “Introduction” 7). The fact that more and more women undergo surgical treatment before entering the Miss America contest (cf. Wolf, *Beauty Myth* 266-67) has given rise to renewed criticism of the competition.

Illustration 4: Margaret Gorman, the First Miss America



(1922) © Bettmann/CORBIS

In a more recent postfeminist discourse, female self-making more radically (and quite literally) refers to self-transformations achieved through cosmetic surgery.

Thus, Elizabeth Atwood Gailey discusses as “self-made” the women who undergo cosmetic surgery on reality television series such as *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*, and *Dr. 90210* for “the promise of status elevation and enhanced economic opportunity” (“Self-Made Women” 109). Here, as Gailey points out, “[w]omen are either portrayed as material objects – little more than a collection of (often almost cartoonishly) formulaic body parts – or, equally limiting and pathological – as self-exploitative, entrepreneurial agents who are more than willing to use their bodies to ‘get ahead’” (ibid. 110) or to have signs of aging or pregnancy and childbirth removed in a spirit of “responsible self-management and care” (ibid.). This sort of female self-making constitutes “a liberation requiring utter submission to social authority” and complete conformity to normative gender ideals:

Performing perhaps the ultimate act of the “self-made” subject, women who undergo cosmetic surgery on these shows not only personify the exercise of political power through women’s bodies, they reveal themselves as paragons of the neo-liberal doctrines of self-help and self-sufficiency. They are, in every way, then, “self-made women,” products of the hegemonic alliance of patriarchy and global capitalism. (ibid. 118)

Speaking to individualist, neo-liberal notions of empowerment, emancipation, and agency, this kind of self-making in the spirit of a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, “Postfeminist” 147) at the same time can also be considered as a practice which enforces conformity rather than individuality and deprives women not only of their agency, but possibly even of their lives, as made-over women, by being surgically remade again and again, ultimately may literally come undone.

Another cultural script about female self-making addresses women conventionally as wives and assigns them a supporting role in their husbands’ self-making and rising in the world. In *How to Help Your Husband Get Ahead in His Social and Business Life* (1953), a book adhering to the prototypical “conformist sensibility of the 1950s” (Watts, *Self-Help Messiah* 485), Dorothy Carnegie, who tellingly refers to herself rather as Mrs. Dale Carnegie, counsels wives on how to increase their husbands’ success by making them comfortable at home, boosting their egos, and – most importantly – by not pursuing careers of their own, while she herself de facto took over her ailing husband’s business around the time of her book’s publication. Beside patriarchal conceptualizations of female/wifely success as coextensive with the success of their husbands, there are also other – quite ambivalent – images of the self-made woman for example in cinema, in which career women are often represented negatively as deficient single females.

In the 1950s, a watershed moment for gender conservatism, movie stars like Doris Day in many films played businesswomen who give up their careers for the sake of a man, and in the 1980s, successful female professionals are also often confined to narrow stereotypes, for example in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which Alex (Glenn Close), the successful editor of a publishing company, starts terrorizing Dan (Michael Douglas) and his family after he refuses to continue their affair; Susan Faludi compellingly reads Alex's deterioration as signifying the pathologization of the businesswoman in American culture (cf. *Backlash* 112-13, 122-23): Self-making and professional emancipation in the film's logic lead to the character's psycho-social disintegration because her career cannot compensate for her lack of a husband and family. The romantic comedy *Working Girl* (1988), in which we follow Tess McGill's (Melanie Griffith's) rise from secretary to successful businesswoman, represents female professional ambition and success rather positively; however, the character of Katharine Parker (Sigourney Weaver), Tess's boss, does reinforce the stereotype of the scheming and callous career woman, and as she is also Tess's major antagonist furthermore disavows any notion of female solidarity (cf. Faludi, *Backlash* 128-29). Whereas "Hollywood representation is characterised by an insistent equation between working women, women's work, and some form of sexual(ised) performance" (Tasker, *Working Girls* 3), in *Working Girl*, this performance is ultimately relegated to the sidelines, as the protagonist in the end earns her deserved recognition, which is symbolized by her moving into an office of her own in the final scene. It should be noted though that this largely positive representation of female professional success must be considered as more of an exception than the rule in Hollywood films as well as American popular culture in general.

Investigating self-made women in relation to self-made men obviously operates within a binary opposition; J. Halberstam has noted that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (*Queer Art* 2). Beyond the reproductive paradigm, Lauren Berlant is asking us in her book of the same title to consider the "cruel optimism" that underlies the American dream of success and prosperity, which is as alluring as it is out of reach for most people: "The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (3). In fact, focusing on the avenues of self-making heralded by hegemonic versions of the success myth may just accustom one to a sense of permanent anxiety, or what Berlant calls "crisis ordinary" (ibid. 9). Rather than to adjust and succumb to this sense of crisis, J. Halberstam suggests reading failure "as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and prof-

it, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (*Queer Art* 12). A feminist and/or queer studies perspective on self-making can contribute to such a critical reading by asking us not merely to include women into the dominant logic of self-making, but to question the premises of growth, reproduction, success, and gain that connect the success myth to capitalism and to normative conceptualizations of social structures and institutions such as the family.

8. CONCLUSION

But what I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich. That's the thing that we have and that must be preserved.

RONALD REAGAN

Of course we need the rich. We always have: to ogle and envy and imitate. They are our spectacle and our joy because in the head of every American lies the thought *That could be me*. The rich constitute our mythos, after all, our fairy tale, our hymn to success.

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *THE BLAZING WORLD*

Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens?

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

Throughout this chapter it has become evident that the myth of the self-made man strongly affirms an ideology of expressive individualism as well as individual achievement and success that conceptualizes the “pursuit of happiness” (cf. the Declaration of Independence) as the pursuit of property. By claiming that self-making also contributes to the greater common good, hegemonic versions of this powerful myth – or fairy tale – of social mobility still very successfully obscure its role in legitimizing and perpetuating immense structural social inequalities.

In the age of global capitalism and the new social media, corporate success on a grand scale has once more become concretized and personalized in ‘self-made’ individuals such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, or Mark Zuckerberg (again, self-made *men*), who are turned into celebrities and high priests of the American civil religion of success, albeit with a new global dimension. In *The Road Ahead* (1995), Bill Gates fashions himself as such a high priest of the new age by using the semantics of a “peaceful revolution” to describe the effects of the computer and the internet on US society (and the world at large) and by affirming his company’s supposedly democratic commitment to making it affordable for people to have “a computer on every desk and in every home” (4) – which, of course, is only in the corporate interest and need not necessarily be a blessing for humanity. Based on the success formula of the self-made man, Gates’ develops a notion of “friction-free capitalism” (ibid. 180):

Capitalism, demonstrably the greatest of the constructed economic systems, has in the past decade clearly proved its advantages over the alternative systems. As the internet evolves into a broadband, global, interactive network, those advantages will be magnified. [...] I think Adam Smith would be pleased. (207)

It is telling that Gates invokes Adam Smith, whose *The Wealth of Nations* is a key text of laissez-faire capitalism, rather than Thomas Jefferson and The Declaration of Independence, which constitutes a key text of a very different kind even if both were published only a few months apart, in March and July of 1776, respectively. Gates's reference to Smith attests to his own global neoliberal capitalist vision (exceeding the nation state and the national market) in which there are supposedly only winners, as everybody profits from the new 'democratizing' technologies and the workings of Smith's proverbial invisible hand. Gates thus romanticizes the conditions of consumption and the role of consumers and entrepreneurs while obscuring the conditions of production and the economic vulnerability of those involved in it. In *Steve Jobs: Life Changing Lessons! Steve Jobs on How to Achieve Massive Success, Develop Powerful Leadership Skills and Unleash Your Wildest Creativity* (2014), William Wyatt similarly taps into the tradition of idolizing self-made men in a quite narrow ideological framework and regardless of Apple's numerous manufacturing and tax scandals and its dubious labor policies abroad (condoning for example deplorable working conditions at its suppliers in China). In spite of somewhat critical representations of his personality and entrepreneurial strategies for example in *The Social Network* (2010), Mark Zuckerberg's achievement also has been much applauded in biographies and advice literature such as George Beahm's *Billionaire Boy: Mark Zuckerberg in His Own Words* (2013) and Lev Grossman's *The Connector: How Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg Rewired Our World and Changed the Way We Live* (2010).

These more recent embodiments of the self-made man indicate that the myth has weathered the storms of capitalism's periodic crises and may have in fact even been instrumental in providing the ideological glue which maintains the quasi civil religious belief that upward mobility can be achieved by all. In turn, in the logic of this myth, financial and economic crises are not considered as part and parcel of a dynamic that is built into the increasingly globalized capitalist US economic system, but as somehow random and contingent or caused by outside economic influences. Nancy Fraser has called this false attribution of responsibility for structural inequalities "misframing" ("Post-Polanyische Reflektionen" 103); according to her argument, the intrinsic problems of a market economy are often credited to adverse outside factors allegedly skewed against

the self-made man as object and agent of American exceptionalism. In view of a transnational perspective, scholars have also pointed out that many other societies are much more permissive and less socially deterministic than the US, which however has not lastingly affected specifically American notions of the self-made man and competitive equality. Even more fundamentally, sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin has asserted that an “unstratified society with real equality of its members is a myth which has never been realized in the history of mankind. [...] The forms and proportions of stratification may vary, but its essence is permanent” (qtd. in Potter, *People* 99). Like so many aspects of American exceptionalism, the myth of the self-made man is as unrealistic as it is powerful. As we have seen in this as well as the preceding chapters, the foundational mythology of the US – Margaret Mead describes it as “our compensatory mythology” (*And Keep* 50) – creates a usable past and a hopeful future by bypassing the manifold discrepancies between mythic text and lived reality. Closing this gap is the ideological function of myth and the ongoing cultural work it performs.

9. STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Define the cultural type of the self-made man, and explain its ideological function.
2. Give a definition of Algerism, and discuss and contextualize the statement “Horatio Alger must die” from Michael Moore’s *Dude, Where’s My Country?* (2003).
3. Discuss how F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and its 1974 and 2013 film adaptations represent class in American society.
4. How does the meaning of the phrase “pursuit of happiness” change when we focus on the notion of “pursuit” instead of “happiness”?
5. In the context of the Great Depression many texts about the experience of migrants offer a profound counter-narrative to that of expressive individualism and success. Studs Terkel writes: “Failure was as unforgivable then as it is now. Perhaps that’s why so many of the young were never told about the depression; were, as one indignant girl put it, ‘denied our history’” (*American Dreams* xxiv). Discuss the 1930s and the Great Depression in light of the myth of the self-made man.
6. Analyze the particular ways in which Bobbie Carlyle’s sculpture *Self-Made Man* visualizes the myth. You may also refer to the artist’s website: <http://selfmademan.bobbiecarlylesculpture.com/>.

Illustration 5: Self-Creation



Bobbie Carlyle, *Self-Made Man* (1988).

7. What distinguishes self-made women (in the dominant cultural logic) from self-made men? Give examples and discuss *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) as a film about and a comment on beauty pageants.
8. How do self-help books connect to the ideology of self-making and to the myth of the self-made man? Discuss the self-help genre with regard to social, cultural, and economic aspects, and analyze *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) by Dale Carnegie, who has been considered as having created a new and attractive blend of “success ideology, charismatic personality and self-fulfillment, positive thought, human relations, and therapeutic well-being” (Watts, *Self-Help Messiah* 7).
9. How are success and failure represented in advertising? Compare, for instance, Nike’s “Failure” commercial with Michael Jordan and Citibank-City “Moments of Success” commercial (both to be found on the web).
10. Discuss how the rules, options, and gratifications of the board game Monopoly connect to American ideas of self-making, classlessness, and success.

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