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Role Model Masculinities in Contemporary YA Fiction: An
*Analysis of Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the
Universe and Not So Pure and Simple*

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Tutkielma tarkastelee, kuinka maskuliinisuus ja sen erilaiset muodot ovat esillä nykyhetken nuorten kirjoissa. Analyysin kohteina ovat Benjamin Alire Sáenzin *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* sekä Lamar Gilesin *Not So Pure and Simple*, joista molemmat seuraavat teini-ikäisten poikien elämää. Kiinnittämällä huomiota siihen, miten sukupuolinormit ja niistä poikkeaminen vaikuttavat näiden päähenkilöiden ja muiden romaaneissa esiintyvien hahmojen elämässä, tutkielma esittelee maskuliinisuuden kehittymistä ja nykyaikaisten maskuliinisuuden muotojen monimuotoisuutta sekä tämän merkittävyyttä nuortenkirjallisuuden genressä.

Johdanto esittelee tutkielman rakenteen, materiaalit ja tavoitteet. Tutkielman teoriapohja koostuu kolmesta osasta. Ensimmäinen osa antaa yleiskuvan maskuliinisuuden konseptista, kiinnittäen huomiota maskuliinisuuden tutkimuksen suuntauksiin ja R. W. Connellin määritelmään hegemonisesta maskuliinisuudesta. Seuraava osa selittää, miten maskuliinisuus on perinteisesti ollut esillä kaunokirjallisuudessa. Kolmas osa esittelee nuortenkirjallisuuden yleisimpiä piirteitä sekä maskuliinisuuden monipuolistumista ja näyttää, mikä merkitys näillä teemoilla on nyky-yhteiskunnassa ja lukijan vaikuttamisessa. Nuortenkirjallisuuden merkitystä käsitellään myös lyhyesti genreteorian näkökulmasta.

Analyysiosuus on jaettu kahteen osaan, joista kumpikin käsittelee yhtä romaania. Molemmissa osioissa analysoidaan romaanin päähenkilöä ja muita keskeisiä henkilöitä sen mukaan, miten maskuliinisuus esiintyy tai kehittyy esimerkiksi ympäristön hegemonisuuden, stereotyyppien ja henkilöiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen seurauksena. Tutkielman loppupäätelmänä on, että niin tarkastellut romaanit, kuin niissä esiintyvät nuortenkirjallisuuden trendit ja konventiot voivat edistää maskuliinisuuden monipuolisuuden kuvaamista. Lisäksi maskuliinisuuden kuvaaminen nuortenkirjallisuudessa voi positiivisesti vaikuttaa lukijoiden käsityksiin maskuliinisuudesta ja auttaa heitä ymmärtämään teeman ajankohtaisen merkityksen.

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This thesis studies the representation of masculinities in contemporary young adult fiction in the novels *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz and *Not So Pure and Simple* by Lamar Giles, both of which follow lives of teenage boys. By focusing on how gender norms and deviating from such norms influence the lives of these protagonists and other relevant characters, this thesis demonstrates the development and contemporary diversity of masculinities as well as the significance of this phenomenon in YA genre.

The introduction presents the structure, materials, and goals of the thesis. The theory section of this thesis comprises three sections. The first part provides an overview of the concept of masculinity, focusing on masculinity studies and R. W. Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity. The next part explains how masculinity has traditionally been integrated into literature and fiction. The third part introduces basic characteristics of YA fiction and diversification of masculinity and shows what significance these themes have on a contemporary society and in influencing readers. The relevance of YA fiction is also addressed briefly from the perspective of genre theory.

The analysis is divided into two sections, each considering one of the novels. Both sections analyze the protagonist and other relevant characters of the novel based on how masculinity presents

itself or develops, for example resulting from the hegemony, stereotypes, or interaction between characters in the environment. As a conclusion of the thesis, it is suggested that the novels examined and the YA trends and conventions present in them can promote a more diverse representation of masculinities. Additionally, portraying masculinities in YA fiction can positively influence their readers' perception of masculinity and help them understand the relevance of the theme today.

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1. Introduction

Today, the concept of masculinity is not self-explanatory, but a fluent and malleable structure. This has resulted in a diversification of the term. The traditional forms of masculinities have become challenged and widely disputed, spawning discourse that transcends cultural and societal boundaries. To approach this issue, two contemporary YA novels written by two different US authors will be analyzed, including *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by the author Benjamin Alire Sáenz and *Not So Pure and Simple* by Lamar Giles. As the two novels were first published in 2012 and 2020, respectively, they represent recent trends in the field of young adult or YA fiction, a coming-of-age genre targeted at adolescents. Today, these types of novels are widely used in schools and in the education of the youth (Alsup 1), which has implications on how the current generation of people view masculinities, themselves, and the world around them.

The novels by Sáenz and Giles both deal with similar themes of what it means to be a man today, focusing on issues such as gender, identity, and sexuality from the point of view of teenage boys. Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* has received a positive general reception in *Goodreads* ("Aristotle and Dante") and critical acclaim for its queer portrayal (Abate 1), exemplifying its position in the literary circles. While Giles's *Not So Pure and Simple* lacks comparable acknowledgment, it has nevertheless been praised for its take on contemporary issues in the lives of teenagers (Quealy-Gainer 208). The reputable literary publication *Publishers Weekly* has complimented the novel for its "true-to-life characters" and how "Giles's thoughtful, hilarious read offers a timely viewpoint on religion, toxic masculinity, and teen sexuality" ("Not So Pure"). A review in *SLJ (School Library Journal)* calls the novel "a compelling story of young people sorting through conflicting messages and social pressures around sexuality and relationships" that explores "expectations around gender roles and calls out toxic behaviors that even 'good guys' are guilty of." Additionally, Giles is a founding member of We Need Diverse Books, an organization advocating for changes in the publishing industry with the aim of promoting literature that is more inclusive and reflects the lives of today's young people more comprehensively.

As for the contents of the thesis, the thesis is divided into theory and analysis chapters. Before the said sections, a summary of the novels will first be presented. This includes explaining the main setting, characters, and relevant themes of both novels. In addition, references to the authors are included as a part of the discussion.

As a starting point for the theoretical framework of this thesis, the concept of masculinity is addressed. A historical overview of the traditional ideals of masculinity will be presented, with a focus on culture, hegemonic masculinity, and relevant shifts in the field of masculinity. The inclusion of these issues assists in understanding more contemporary views on the topic. While this section takes a more social-scientific than literary approach to masculinity, such research context is nevertheless fundamental for understanding the problematic nature of the shifting field of masculinity. Overall, this section provides basic knowledge concerning masculinity, thus providing prerequisites for analyzing representations of masculinity in literature.

Next, the focus is shifted onto the role of masculinity in literature. By explaining how masculinity has been addressed in novels historically, a connection between fiction and the representation of masculinity is established. The relevance of literature in conveying culturally and time-specific ideas is also introduced. Moreover, the relevance of literary studies to interdisciplinary masculinity research is explained.

Third, the recent developments and emerging ideas of masculinity are taken into consideration, with a specific interest in the plurality of masculinities. Contemporary representations of masculinities are viewed in the light of young adult fiction. By presenting a brief overview of YA literature, a relevant connection between it and masculinity is established. The relevance of YA genre is also considered from the perspective of genre theory. The section concludes with explaining how YA relates to representing contemporary masculinity, and the possible influence that this type of literature can have on the audience.

After the theoretical framework is introduced, the analysis itself is divided into two main sections. The first section considers masculinity in the life of Ari, the protagonist and narrator of Sáenz's novel. Ari's relationships with various characters, including Dante, are considered individually. With this, the section aims to explain the significance of different masculinities that Sáenz has incorporated in his novel. The following part addresses similar issues from the point of view of Giles's

novel, as they appear in Del Rainey's life. In addition to the protagonist, the story features Del's family and several of his peers, who provide varying contexts for the portrayal of masculinity. Finally, the paper includes a conclusion chapter, in which the main findings, including comparisons and contrasts between the depiction of masculinity in the novels, are summarized. The conclusion will finish with suggestions for further analysis.

1.1. Aims

This thesis focuses on the portrayal of masculinities in contemporary YA fiction through two different YA novels. More specifically, Lamar Giles's *Not So Pure and Simple* and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* will form the object of analysis. In both these works, masculinity is one of the fundamental components, featuring prominently in storytelling, characterization, as well as in the themes of the novels. Accordingly, masculinity presents itself, both explicitly and implicitly, in a remarkable role for their protagonists.

Furthermore, it is important to establish what constitutes the *masculinity* in question that will be analyzed. The definition that the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary uses for *masculinity* is "the quality or nature of the male sex: the quality, state, or degree of being masculine or manly", with the term *masculine*, for one, defined as "having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man." These descriptions will be used as a reference in the analysis. Since both novels are examples of realistic fiction, the analysis draws from situations in which being a male – or alternatively not being a male – has a notable effect on the situation or characters in that situation. The analysis will primarily consider the male point of view, as both protagonists are adolescent male characters. By disclosing the impact of masculinity in the stories, the analysis will also demonstrate how masculinity continues to affect different aspects of life, for example, the social context. Overall, by focusing on these issues, the thesis aims to discover how the portrayal of masculinity in these novels, as a factor shaping people's actions, expectations, and worldviews, reflects that of a contemporary Western society.

1.2. Materials

Starting with Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, the story takes place in 1987 in El Paso, Texas. The protagonist Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza, a fifteen-year-old Mexican American boy living with his parents, is a quiet, thinker-type person who prefers to keep to his own. At the start of the story, Ari wonders how he is going to spend his summer until he meets Dante, a new boy in town who is, in many ways, Ari's opposite. Dante is outgoing, honest, seemingly content with himself and copes with his homosexuality. From the beginning, the two are characterized by their differences. Dante's parents, especially his father, also strike Ari as intriguing due to their apparent differences from Ari's own father. As a result of differing masculine influences, the questions of alienation and assimilation surface prominently in the lives of the boys. As the novel progresses, so does the bond between Ari and Dante, which gradually shifts from a platonic relationship to romantic love. In this process, Ari struggles with finding himself, reshapes the relationship with his family, and goes through other challenges regarding youth, sexuality, and what it means to be a man. *Ari and Dante* has been of interest for many discussions and gained attention from academic texts to internet discussions and teaching contexts, to mention a few (Abate 1). Moreover, the LGBTQ-themes present in the novel have frequently been in the focus (Abate 1), but the novel provides also other interesting point of views for the inspection of masculinity.

Lamar Giles's *Not So Pure and Simple* is set in the modern day and follows Del Rainey, a sixteen-year-old American high-schooler. Del muses over his old crush Kiera Westing, and when he hears that she is finally single, Del spontaneously decides to partake in the local church's abstinence pledge, Purity Pledge, to impress her and spend time with her. Outside the Pledge, Del has a certain reputation with girls, being associated with his best friend Qwan, who frequently spends time with different girl companions and seems to treat them as conveniences. In order to make Kiera romantically interested in him, Del makes a pact with Jameer, another boy in the Pledge, who promises to help Del make an impression on Kiera. With these events as the main setting for the

story, Del becomes gradually faced with such issues of masculinity that make him reconsider what he has used to take for granted.

What comes to reviews, the reception of the novel has been positive, as I have already indicated above. The reputable American book review media *Kirkus* critics is among several to give the novel a starred review (an indicator of a particular excellence in its genre), and the review notes how “[t]he novel takes on teen attitudes toward sex and relationships and gender power dynamics in a way that is appealing and thought provoking.” In another commentary, *Kirkus Review’s* YA editor Laura Simeon provides the following acclaim: “This accessible, engaging book is a sheer pleasure to read, and the insights and revelations around toxic masculinity are all the more potent for being delivered with a light touch. It’s an ideal book club choice.” Various editorial reviews have praised the novel for its mixing of humor and entertainment with character depiction and contemporary realism and issues (*Barnesandnoble.com*). Therefore, the novel’s potential to have a meaningful impact on readers is more than obvious. For Lamar Giles himself, a source for his motivation to tackle negative and persisting sides of masculinity is his wish that “this book starts some conversations earlier, with younger people, before harmful mindsets cement,” and this view is in unison with the thesis of this thesis. Despite the positive response, the novel has largely been overlooked by scholars, and this fact introduces another reason for taking a critical look at the text.

2. Theoretical Framework

To better understand the major themes of this research, three theoretical sections are first provided. The first of these includes the concept of 'hegemony' and focuses on how 'masculinity' is commonly, and has historically been, defined and studied. The following section tackles the relationship between masculinity and its representation in literature, focusing on 'literary masculinities' and the significance they continue to have today. With the preliminaries complete, the third section explains how, in the contemporary setting, the concept of masculinities has broadened and how more forms of masculinities are accepted and represented. The section considers the significance of this and, with help from genre theory, presents the role of YA fiction in shaping images about contemporary masculinities. The theory part concludes with a short summary.

2.1. Defining Masculinity

The word 'masculinity' can imply a plethora of meanings and connotations depending on the context. For example, Chris Blazina states "[m]asculinity has changed its definition over time, and it will continue to do so" (96). According to Adams and Frauenheim's interpretation, "[d]efinitions of masculinity — that is to say, male gender roles — have differed across cultures and changed over the course of human existence" (25). R. W. Connell, who has researched masculinity extensively, states in *Masculinities* that masculinity is "not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced" (67) but requires "an account of the larger structure and how masculinities are located in it" (67). In Connell's terms, "'masculinity,' to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell, *Masculinities* 71). More importantly, as John Beynon emphasizes, "'masculinity' is composed of many masculinities [...] for there are numerous forms and expressions of gender, of 'being masculine' and 'being feminine'" (1). In short, both masculinity and femininity are fictional

constructions (Murphy 1). What can be distinguished from these perspectives is that in its simplest meaning, masculinity is a concept by which attributes associated with males or men have traditionally been viewed. However, the challenge to characterize masculinity in concrete terms rises from the fact that theories of masculinity have historically offered diverging perspectives on the issue.

To grasp better what is meant by masculinity both within and outside scholarly discussions, a brief look at the history of masculinity and its preliminaries is required. For instance, Joseph H. Pleck's *The Myth of Masculinity* and Chris Blazina's *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity*, as their names suggest, demonstrate the instability of masculinity by taking a deep dive into its history. By doing so, distinct perceptions of masculinities at different points in time are presented in a manner that justifies change and interconnectedness as essential parts of masculinity. In other words, people of a particular historical period are predisposed toward assimilating a particular stance on masculinity, "a socially constructed paradigm" (Blazina 94) of a cultural 'myth.' Rosen notes that historically, each epoch has both inherited and adopted their own ideals of masculinity, which emanate from the mix of social and cultural changes, stereotypes of sex-roles, and the stress experienced by individuals conforming to these norms (xii-xiii). Similarly, Blazina remarks how in order to understand these ideals and their construction, we must recognize the impact of cultural dynamics and sociocultural forces (85). Therefore, when discussing masculinity, the role of culture is always present (Beynon 2). Consequently, Beynon differentiates between 'maleness' and 'masculinity' by linking the former to biological factors and the latter to culture (2). Beynon describes this as "a 'culturalist' approach to masculinity" (2), which is different from perspectives such as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology, "which tend to 'naturalize' male behaviour" (2). Moreover, Beynon lists various factors shaping an individual's sense of masculinity: age and physique, sexual orientation, education, status and lifestyle, geographical, ethnicity, religion and beliefs, class and occupation, culture and subculture and, finally, historical location (10). As will become clear, such a culturalist approach to masculinity is especially relevant when discussing representations of the masculine in literature.

Related to the cultural significance of masculinity, Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* has received a lot of attention in the field of masculinity studies. Hegemonic masculinity is "[o]ften considered the most influential theoretical concept in the history of the study of men and masculinity" (Reeser 20), making it critical to this study as well. As Connell explains: "in any given social setting

there is rarely just one masculinity. What used to be called '*the male role*' is best understood as the culturally authoritative or hegemonic pattern of masculinity" (*The Boys and the Men* 30; emphasis original). As Blazina rephrases, Connell "argues there will always be one exalted definition, or form, of masculinity within a culture and that members of that culture will be influenced by it, if not compelled to emulate it" (xiii). To put it briefly, hegemony has been historically influential in shaping the dominant masculinity ideals and paradigms of the past (Blazina xiii-xiv), and "current conceptions of masculinity are built upon earlier notions that once enjoyed hegemonic influence" (Blazina 86). In practice, this means for example that "In the United States, the normative form of hegemonic masculinity is defined by race (White), sexual orientation (heterosexual), socioeconomic status (middle class) and the possession of certain traits: assertiveness, dominance, control, physical strength, and emotional restraint" (Griffith et al. 187). However, as there is hegemonic masculinity, there are also other masculinities, including subordinated masculinities such as gay masculinity, or "marginalized masculinities, gender forms produced in exploited or oppressed groups such as ethnic minorities" (Connell, *The Boys and the Men* 30). These masculinities can be compared with the dominant model(s). As will be explained, the changing ideals of hegemony present themselves as integral to contemporary expression of masculinities.

To understand the contemporary position of masculinity, some of the most relevant masculine paradigms of the past will be summarized next. Historically, academics have directed their attention to various research areas in search of the ultimate nature of masculinity. From the late 19th century until most of the 20th century, various theories of psychology, sexology, and psychoanalysis dominated masculinity and the development of masculine identity, and certain beliefs of the period even remain in contemporary conceptions of masculinity (Blazina 55). The next major revision emerged around the 1950s when the idea of linking gender to social roles gained traction, creating 'sex roles,' specific social norms for men and women (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 5). As men were anticipated to conform to certain behavior, partly due to their gender as well as hegemonic masculinity, this concept of masculinity affected male's perception of themselves. In the 1980s, the problematic nature of male role norms was highlighted by scholars such as Joseph H. Pleck, who proposed the criticized *Male Sex Role Identity (MSRI)* paradigm that had dominated common beliefs and the study of masculinity for most of the 20th century until that point (1, 134-35). The MSRI

paradigm viewed obtaining traditional sex roles as enforced or normal practice, and the problem lied within individuals' failure to fit in them, rather than in "the nature of the roles themselves" (Pleck 4). For this reason, for instance male homosexuality and "delinquency, violence, and hostility towards women" were linked to unsuccessfully achieving a masculine sex role identity, a notable problem by itself (Pleck 4). Furthermore, according to the MSRI paradigm men modeling themselves to the sex role norms equaled to psychological well-being, but it ignored how individuals' personality traits may hinder this process of assimilation (Connell, *Masculinities* 25). In short, Pleck demonstrates how societal expectations pressuring men to conform to specific standards have set a serious precedent for men. Namely, a shift away from thinking masculinity as "natural or essential", or the male role as "a uniform, stable, and normative configuration" was a central development during the period (Reeser 13), and this change has persisted to this day.

Consequently, the following development of the study of masculinities, also around the 1980s, took a leap toward approaches from sociology, including "branches in anthropology, history and media studies" (Connell, *The Boys and the Men* 8). As Connell explains the features of this social-scientific approach:

Key intellectual underpinnings are the feminist analysis of gender as a structure of social relations, [...] sociological concerns with subcultures and issues of marginalization and resistance; and the post-structuralist analyses of the making of identities in discourse, and the interplay of gender with race, sexuality, class and nationality. (*The Boys and the Men* 8)

As implied, feminism emerged as another significant contributor to the developments of masculinity in the late twentieth century (Reeser 16-17). Additionally, the cultural and social changes of the 20th century, such as the women's suffrage movement and the gay movement, as well as changes in economic stability and work life were especially significant for men and impacted directly and indirectly how masculinity was experienced (Beynon 13-15). On the basis of this, the concept of masculinity was configured as suitable for the contemporary context.

Today, as an umbrella term the study of masculinity comprises "disparate subjects like cultural and media studies, sociology, psychology and social psychology, criminology, anthropology, literary studies, film studies, women's studies, and, of course, men's studies," with theoretical stances ranging from "feminist, gay scholarship, and more latterly, queer theory through to psychoanalytical, Marxist,

structuralist, semiotic and symbolic interactionist" (Beynon 55). This alone speaks of the relevance of masculinity. With expanding academic interest, the importance of understanding why and how masculine has developed and affects the world has reached a wider public. The implications that masculinity has on different areas of society, for instance education, health care and violence prevention, are also better known (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 4). Studies on masculinities can be organized under different themes, with focuses on "socialization into masculinity, masculinity in other times, masculinity in other places and the mediation of masculinity" (Beynon 55). Of these, the impact of social factors on masculinity, along with the construction and representation of masculinity in literature, as a type of 'mediated masculinity' (Beynon 64), represents the main interests of masculinity in this thesis, and present the tools for analyzing masculinity in fiction.

Finally, the role of gender needs to be highlighted. There have been references to gender throughout this thesis, and, again, the social dimension brings studies of gender and masculinity together in a cohesive way. Connell states that "[t]o understand 'men' or 'masculinity' we must first have some idea of how to understand gender" (*The Men and the Boys* 17) and that "[w]ith gender, we are dealing with a complex, and powerfully effective, domain of social practice" (*The Men and the Boys* 18). Moreover, past paradigms of masculinity have frequently failed to comprehend the complexity of gender, which echoes their outdatedness (*The Men and the Boys* 18). Due to these features, Connell conceptualizes masculinities in the following manner:

Masculinities are configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality. Masculinity is institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character or personality. (*The Men and the Boys* 29)

Moreover, the structure of gender relations between men and women as well as the organization of different masculinities gain their meaning in relation to the idea of hegemony (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 31). Instead of a direct femininity/masculinity juxtaposition, femininity has more commonly been contrasted with hegemonic masculinity, resulting in the fact that "[s]ubordinated masculinities are symbolically assimilated to femininity" (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 31). Much like the established notion of genders as hierarchical opposites, gender issues and sexual identity have been conceptualized to bias behavior that conforms to gendered norms (Bean and Harper 12). To

restructure the traditional dominance of (hegemonic) masculinity, alternative contemporary masculinities and their portrayals prove of great importance.

Overall, masculinity is a concept that is best studied with a clear focus area in order to avoid overgeneralization. However, that does not exclude utilizing different research areas altogether, as this can instead stimulate different points of view. Thus, the more research on masculinity is conducted, the more comprehensive perspective on masculinity people may be able to adopt. The same idea applies to literary works, as more knowledge equals to multifaceted and more accurate representations of masculinities, which simultaneously diminish detrimental effects of hegemony.

2.2. Masculinity and Literature

Literature and fiction offer a potential ground for representations of masculinity. As already explained, masculinity is a cultural construction, which also means it is mirrored in various productions. Masculine ideals of a society are reflected in cultural icons and stories (Blazina 85), and today's new masculine paradigms are present "in plays, television shows, movies, literature, and art – in short, in the very fabric of our culture" (Blazina 93). Horlacher proposes that gender identity, literature, and masculinity cross in their variability and constant change (5), thus aptly connecting the two objects of study: masculinity and literature.

Today, various research areas such as literary studies have placed a new emphasis on analyzing and teaching about masculinities, and the term 'literary masculinities' is employed when studying representation of masculinities in literature (Beynon 3). These representations may also be called "the fiction of manhood" (2), as per Murphy. Furthermore, Beynon names the literary mode as one of the six modes for researching masculinity, depicting it as "a valuable resource, providing insights into masculinity in different sociohistorical periods" (147). Reeser, for one, states that "literary form necessarily produces its own unique representation of masculinity, and for this reason, literary analysis in the twenty-first century constitutes a crucial and vibrant wing of masculinity studies" (12). Concurring with the statements above, Horlacher remarks how the role of literature, in the form of narration, stories, and genres, as a model for conveying historical as well as contemporary

representations of masculinities is increasingly relevant in various research areas, expanding outside the circles of literary and cultural studies (4-5).

With changes in masculinities, there has also been a surge in analyzing older texts from the point of view of masculinity (Beynon 144-45), which gives us a historical account of sorts. Studies have revealed, for instance, that in the 1950s the tensions of gender relations and masculinity were integrated in literature by male British writers of the period (Beynon 71). In *Changing Fictions of Masculinity* from 1993, one of Rosen's focal points is "the expectations that are formulated for males – 'masculinity'" (xv), which he analyzes through a collection of literary works ranging historically from *Beowulf* to D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, works considered "exemplary 'male' texts, texts by and about men" (xvi). Rosen's findings echo contemporary interpretations, as he acknowledges the change of masculinity, from "a modern concept of primal masculinity" (216) that has continued to evolve by mirroring social and cultural changes and by challenging the traditional male ideals of the time (217-19). Interestingly, for the male literary characters of Rosen's analysis, the idea of masculinity appears as an ideal that is at the same time too challenging to achieve but too essential to renounce in favor of opposite or personal views, which in turn bears men stress and negative feelings such as "longing, frustration, rage" (Rosen 219). As seen from this, older representations of masculinities reveal a lot about how hegemonic masculinity, especially, has been experienced by and has affected males. Additionally, Peter F. Murphy's anthology *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities* examines how fiction has affected images and norms of masculinity in different eras, and with reference to the contemporary context Murphy draws the conclusion that men today need to critically review their sexuality due to the changing environment of masculinities (1). For these reasons, contemporary representations that set themselves apart from those of past depictions can be especially fruitful as a target of analysis.

New fictional literary works stand at the front of representation, playing an important role in informing readers about the current state and issues regarding masculinities and their change. Accordingly, Murphy states how "[l]iterary representations of manhood have both relied on dominant cultural assumptions about masculinity and exposed the untenability of those assumptions" (6). Thus, unsurprisingly, contemporary novelists "depict a wide range of 'literary masculinities' and, in doing so, often subvert previously taken for granted male qualities and the notion of a 'fixed' masculinity

(Beynon 147). Bean and Harper claim that “what is most important in current research in literacy is the promise and possibility of challenging simplistic, rigid, and essentialized views of masculinity” (14). Consequently, when masculinity is brought into the world of fictional works as a central theme, readers can familiarize themselves with contemporary depictions of masculinity and the male experience. Furthermore, those narratives double as educational and representational works.

Lastly, literary masculinities in education must be acknowledged. Schools contribute remarkably to the formation of masculinity, often due to harmful influx of established gender relations (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 145-47). Certain academic subjects are typically categorized as either feminine or masculine, and, for instance, English as a feminized subject involves expressing one’s emotions, frequently alienating boys due to “contrast with activities defined as properly masculine” (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 158). One way for schools and teachers to effectively support students in assimilating positive masculine interpretations is to include more varied literary representations. As Connell reminds, “[g]ender for men . . . is actively made, both individually and collectively, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting” (*The Boys and the Men* 178). With school as a setting where competences required in an inclusive and democratic society are taught, contemporary representations of literary masculinities can undeniably reinforce people acquiring “a level of political literacy where reading opens up new ideas, poses alternatives to existing reality, [and] explains what forces are at work in the wider society” (Connell, *The Men and the Boys* 144).

In short, literary and fictional works offer a medium for inspecting different representations of masculinity. These representations exemplify the worldviews of their settings, thus providing valuable resources for inspecting the ever-changing notions of masculinity. Literature itself is closely tied to education, both in research and in a typical school setting. With its wide usage and cultural significance, the representation of literary masculinities continues to both adhere to and challenge prevailing conceptions.

2.3. YA Texts and Contemporary Masculinities

As has been explained, masculinity remains a concept that continues to develop. At the beginning of the 21st century, Blazina speculates that “the evolution of masculinity has entered a fluid stage of expansion wherein more masculinities are perhaps both available and acceptable” (75). Beynon calls a similar phenomenon ‘hybridized masculinity’ or ‘bricolage masculinity,’ meaning that many men today embrace and employ various masculinities depending on the situations they experience (6). Generally, this view has remained as the cornerstone of contemporary masculinity studies as demonstrated by the abundance of research as discussed above.

However, the past continues to affect modern impressions. In their book *Reinventing Masculinity: The Liberating Power of Compassion and Connection*, Adams and Frauenheim analyze the problematic nature of the traditional masculinity model that has persisted throughout history. The legacy of this today, in everyday lives of men experience, is detrimental *confined masculinity* whereas *liberating masculinity*, in turn, is their proposed type at the opposite end of the masculinity spectrum (Adams and Frauenheim 7). Men who incline toward confined masculinity come across as defensive or self-absorbed and tend to suppress their emotions, in other words, retain “traditional notions of what a ‘real’ man is supposed to be” (Adams and Frauenheim 3). Liberating masculinity, in turn, is a model that allows men to take new roles without being constrained and without constraining others, and helps men navigate away from egocentric toward altruistic worldview (Adams and Frauenheim 7-8). Liberating masculinity incorporates some aspects of traditional masculinity such as “valor, strength, and achievement” (Adams and Frauenheim 8), but does it in a new light, by taking other people into account (8). This is perhaps the strongest implication that change is taking place. On a bigger scale, embracing liberating masculinity contributes to men taking a more critical view on their emotional side and surroundings, and develops competences in working in a society that is more inclusive (Adams and Frauenheim 12-13). From this perspective, emerging models of masculinity appear as beneficial to all people, regardless of gender.

Emergent forms of masculinities also aim to empower particular minorities. Expanding circles that are rejecting the male hegemony and instead advocate for alternative paradigms include for

example *the gay male perspective* and *the African American perspective*, both of which place an emphasis on minorities of men and reconsider masculine and feminine notions (Blazina 75, 78-79). Multiple reasons for this shift exist today. The push for diversification of society and recognition of minorities, to name a few themes, have remained topical and have been set under a critical lens. In general, questions regarding equal representation, and the subsequent need to diversify representation, have received coverage in various sectors. In book industry, for instance, the lack of equal racial representation in books targeted for young readers have been addressed. As shown by one study, only 23% of children's books published in 2018 had people of color as their protagonists (Lo 612). To name some of its various accolades, Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante* has won the Stonewall Book, Lambda Literary and Pura Belpré awards (*Time.com*), which speak for the novel's acclaimed portrayal of LGBTQ and Latinx experiences, respectively. Similarly, *Not So Pure and Simple* distances itself from white heterogeneity by featuring black characters. Thus, the representation of race and sexuality are factors that help the characters to stand out from hegemonic ideals. Analyzing individual characters and how their traits interact with dominant ideals will also give insight into masculinity dynamics. With these strategies, the character focus in both Sáenz's and Giles's works is also indicative of various ongoing shifts in society. The way in which the novel's representation of minorities intersects with that of masculinities provides another perspective onto how masculinities are present.

With different masculinities come new possibilities for representing the male experience. The advent of young adult fiction or Young Adult Literature (YAL) has represented itself as a valuable asset to representations of masculinity. As explained by Thompson, the term 'young adult' refers to a specific demographic of readers aged around ten to twenty-five, with no exact boundaries that would define the expanding target group (261). The YA novel is "caught in the continuum between childhood and adulthood" and operates "as a genre named for an implied audience" (Cadden 310). The protagonist is typically a contemplative teenager, since "YAL strives to be relevant to YAs by mirroring their attitudes, issues, and concerns" (Owen 12). As their major themes and features, YA fiction tends to include character change or growth as well as personal struggle and reflection, and the goals of YA novels frequently include either "the triumph of the unified self able to grow, the integration of a self partly determined by society, or the discovery of a self (self-consciousness) that is almost purely socially determined" (Cadden 310). Therefore, YA fiction draws parallels with masculinity, which is

seen as a social construction and a cultural product negotiated in and shaped by the interaction between an individual and their surroundings.

Much like debates on masculinities, the influence of YA fiction has increased in many ways. In academic studies, the 'genre' started receiving attention after the 1970s, with studies typically focusing on literary analyses or the educational value the books provide to the audience (Doughty 1-2). Today, the popularity of YA literature has greatly expanded to include adult readers as well, which can for the most part be credited to the success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series (Thompson 267). In addition, Owen notes that "YAL has evolved and developed along with its audience", which can be considered "a strong and positive force" (15). As already suggested, improving diversity has also become one major component in today's YA market, one example being the nonprofit organization We Need Diverse Books that was established in 2014 (Lo 612-13). As Lamar Giles is working with this organization, his novel *Not So Pure and Simple* can illustrate trends in this movement. Thompson stresses the potential of this literature by noting "[w]ritten for teenagers—who are in the midst of establishing their identities and figuring out their place in the world—YA literature speaks to the entire human condition" (270). In a world where hegemony often maintains a tight grip, nontraditional or marginalized masculinities echo similar feelings of not belonging. Hence, YA fiction provides a promising medium for representing masculinities by also including other issues of belonging and identity formation in the mix.

Today's YA publications incorporate and "reflect the zeitgeist, including the social, cultural, and technological progresses in popular culture that dominates our cultural dialogue" (Lo 611). In fact, the significance of pop culture can be considered one of the biggest reasons why YA novels have become an international phenomenon. Internet and social media platforms have become the go-to space for readers to network and share their thoughts on new books, creating communities such as *BookTube* and *Bookstagram* in *Youtube* and *Instagram*, respectively (Lo 613-614). As will be shown in the analysis section, Giles has drawn from this dimension of rapid communication and use of social media in his novel as well. At the same time, popular TV shows and films, as well as such adaptations of YA novels, all accompanied by easier access thanks to streaming services, set trends and have helped expanding the YA audience (Lo 615). All this has contributed to the proliferation of different YA texts to the public.

To better illustrate the significance of YA genre to readers, current genre theory provides useful context. Today's genre theorists point to genre as "a dynamic response to and construction of recurring situation, one that changes historically and in different social groups, that adapts and grows as the social context changes" (DeWitt, "Generalizing about Genre" 580). As such, texts and genres are shaped by cultural and historical factors, much like masculinity. To add, genre is "created through the interaction of writers, readers, past texts, and contexts" (DeWitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre" 699). Since a genre is created as a reaction to a specific and recurring social situation (DeWitt, "Generalizing" 576), constructing a genre with a text's reflection of it corresponds to mirroring that situation (578). These views help to establish relations between the YA novels to be considered, the context they are set in, and the social circumstances behind their creation.

Within this perspective, genres and contexts influence each other, and understanding a genre and its features equal to recognizing conventions of certain social circumstances. If we are to consider YA as a genre at all, then we must believe that the struggles of the youth that YA novels portray mirror those in contemporary society since "Genre and situation are so linked as to be inseparable, but it is genre that determines situation as well as situation that determines genre" (DeWitt, "Generalizing" 578). The extent to which people identify genres, and YA fiction for that matter, undoubtedly varies by individual according to their experiences. However, as DeWitt states, those identifications determine how people "make assumptions not only about the form but also about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader" ("Generalizing" 575). In view of this, the YA genre, which has successfully expanded its popularity and target audience in recent years as mentioned, has simultaneously raised awareness of how YA novels can provide young adults guidance and representation of contemporary issues and images. The emergence of the YA genre in general, and the themes portrayed in YA novels such as those considered in this thesis, are mirroring recurring social situations of today. As the YA genre originally came to signify its intended audience, focus on younger population seems to be on the increase. By acknowledging YA as a genre, we are acknowledging the demographic and the importance of common YA themes such as identity formation. Thus, contemporary changes in society help explain why the YA genre has become such a phenomenon recently.

Furthermore, genre can work as a guideline for readers. As has been noted about the impact of popular genres, they can be seen both reflecting and shaping social conditions as well as dominant values and ideologies of their time (Chandler 4). With genres as ideological instruments, Carolyn Miller has directed focus to disclosing the purposes of a particular genre. To quote Chandler, "Miller argues that both in writing and reading within genres we learn purposes appropriate to the genre; in relation to the mass media it could be argued that particular genres develop, frame and legitimate particular concerns, questions and pleasures" (5). In YA, the didactic nature of YA novels can amplify these. Comparably, Dewitt notes how "Studies of particular genres and of particular genre sets can reveal a great deal about the communities which construct and use those genres, and studies of particular texts within those genres can reveal a great deal about the choices writers make" ("Generalizing" 581). Based on this, the choice of which themes to portray within a YA story, for example, serves a purpose and is driven by both the author and current movements within YA genre. Also, works sharing the same genre thus frequently employ similar meaning-making strategies, and readers experienced in a particular genre make connections between those strategies easier. Chandler shares similar thoughts by noting that "Certainly the assignment of a text to a genre influences how the text is read. Genre constrains the possible ways in which a text is interpreted, guiding readers of a text towards a preferred reading (which is normally in accordance with the dominant ideology)" (8). These points help see why common themes in YA texts, such as masculinity in the novels chosen for analysis, have the potential to influence their readers. By understanding the significance of a genre, we can better decipher specific analytical points in the novels in the analysis section.

The potential of YA literature has been acknowledged especially in the educational context, where it operates as a means of engaging students to critically consider contemporary issues and power relations, while simultaneously providing the youth a mirror for realistic and diverse character and theme portrayals (Coats 316-17). April Dawn Wells' study "Themes Found in Young Adult Literature: A Comparative Study Between 1980 and 2000" shows that various YA themes have shifted over time, in many cases in accordance with changes in society and how they have affected adolescents (66). Additionally, YA literature "exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation" (Coats 315), especially if it is utilized in the curriculum. Several YA authors and teachers see the genre as a way to promote teenagers' literary

identification and better self-knowledge (Alsup 9). Similarly, Rosen highlights the importance for men to understand how expectations and experiences of masculinity affect their lives, as it can aid in navigating through “some of the unnecessary pains of manhood” (227). As YA fiction is widely used in schools but it is not limited to readers in those circles, it can promote changing the outdated views toward masculinities and gender relations in general.

On that note, Bean and Harper’s study from 2007 draws on three acclaimed young adult novels used in education (18) and exemplifies the growing contemporary interest in the intersection of masculinity and YA literature. They have analyzed the importance of alternative masculinities in YA fiction, which they recognize as “a potentially rich and critical site to engage adolescents in thinking through the ways in which masculinity (and indeed femininity) is, and might yet be, ‘storied’ and ‘performed’ in and out of school” (Bean and Harper 12). In context of young males who might not actively enjoy reading, YA fiction “that challenges narrow images of males” can guide them to “see other ways of being in the world as men” (Bean and Harper 16). According to them, not only incorporating more varied images of masculinities in contemporary YA literature available for the youth, but also discussing them together in a classroom setting, is pivotal in order to change noxious conceptions about gender (16). Another similar study conducted by Harper considers alternate portrayals of masculinities from the point of view of YA novels about adolescent girls, in which alternate masculinities are similarly deemed as beneficial, favoring them over traditional masculinity (526). The school context in *Not So Pure and Simple* is linked to these factors as well. More importantly, both studies address the need for future research of masculinity in YA literature. In general, YA fiction as a platform for literary masculinities makes it possible to effectively present the contemporary spectrum of masculinities to younger people and the wider public.

2.4. Conclusion

Theoretical preliminaries for analyzing masculinity from a specific perspective have been established above. To examine masculinity, the ambiguity of the term must be taken into account. A look at the

history of masculinity and its research reveals important factors about this, as well as about its contemporary position. The concept has been employed to address the male experience, typically as the dominant opposite to female experience, which has formed the issue of gender relations. Masculinity is relational, and culture, social space, historical time, and society continuously construct and shape these gender relations, resulting in how masculinity is both produced and experienced by individuals. In summary, the most important changes in thinking go from the fixed to the dynamic, the restricted to the pluralistic, and from masculinity to *masculinities*, which leaves potential to discover new, emergent masculinities while inspecting the influence of past paradigms in contemporary settings.

To inspect the effects of different masculinities, we can focus on representations of the male experience. Literature provides a useful platform for this purpose, as it allows us to examine both new and contemporary depictions of masculinities. As masculinity has traditionally exerted, and remains largely today to exert, authority over shaping people's mindset about power relations and equity, among others, authors continue disclosing the role of masculinity through literature. Today especially, literary masculinities also hold renewed prestige in education and academic world.

The contemporary models of masculinities demonstrate, for the most part, a positive change. To specify, the change is positive in a sense of progress, as it suggests a move away from constricted thinking and mirrors the plurality of the male experience better. The developments, however, remain active and retain a certain obscurity, which makes observing them important. YA literature has illustrated trends for embracing masculinities as they have become more relevant, thus providing an asset for analysis. Furthermore, YA fiction reaches a wide range of readers, increasing the likelihood of different portrayals of masculinities to make a difference to people or collective thinking. These views are also supported by genre theory, which sees genre not only as dynamic and fluid, but also as something that "must respond dynamically to human behavior and social changes" (DeWitt, "Generalizing 579). Together, these three intersecting theory sections form a coherent whole that enables an analysis of emerging depictions of masculinities in the two novels under study.

3. Masculinity in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

What comes to representation of masculinity in Sáenz' novel, the reader experiences this through the narrator-protagonist Ari. In addition to Ari himself, this section focuses on several male characters in Ari's life in order to present a comprehensive analysis on the depiction of masculinity in the novel. These characters include Dante, Ari's father, Dante's father, and Ari's brother. Furthermore, more general references to masculinity may include other characters in the novel. By utilizing this approach, it will be shown that the novel's depiction of masculinity underlines, in line with contemporary views, the richness of masculinity and its many forms while not failing to ignore the prevailing and often hegemonic-related challenges that old-fashioned practices continue to entail, especially in the lives of adolescent males.

Before considering masculinity from the point of view of characters, the context of the story is taken into closer consideration. The time and location of the story have direct ties to Sáenz himself, who was born in 1954, grew up in New Mexico and resided in El Paso during the setting of the novel ("About Ben," benjaminsaenz.com). Thus, the intertwinement of the environment Ari encounters and the writer's own experiences of the traditional masculinity ideals of the time presents one layer of significance. Sáenz has revealed that both his titular characters, Ari and Dante, are representations of the type of men the author himself wished he had been as a young man, including being more virtuous (Echeverría, "On Writing"), which is linked to YA fiction's practice of mirroring or promoting constructive images for the readers. Although the timeframe of the story concerns a fixed period in the past, Ralph J. Poole notes how "[y]et the story is set very much in the here and now and is undoubtedly meant to serve as a guide for other youngsters facing problems similar to Ari's" (126). Similarly, the multiple awards the book has received speaks for the universality of the novel and its status among both critics and readers.

Due to rising public awareness of limiting traditional masculinity, the emerging masculinities are increasingly paying attention to minorities, and Sáenz can also be considered to incorporate elements of this in his novel. The most discernible example of this is homosexuality, which is demonstrated by the number of LGBTQ-themed readings of the novel. In addition to raising questions

of the relationship between ethnicity and masculinity, the historic setting exemplifies a traditional Latinx view to homosexuality (Poole 126) and thus also to being a man. In the US context, Latinx communities have been found having stigmatizing attitudes toward same sex sexual orientation more frequently than other communities (Ramirez-Valles 303). Closely related to the depiction of masculinity is Frank Ur's article on queer identity construction in Sáenz's novel, in which Ur provides a thorough analysis of *machismo*, which, simply put, is the traditional and socially approved way of acting manly in Latino cultures (4), similar to hegemonic masculinity. As these readings imply, Sáenz's novel can be considered especially influential in providing insight on both ethnocultural and contemporary representations of masculinities as well.

3.1. Aristotle Mendoza: Developing Masculinity

First, this section will focus on the protagonist. Early in the novel, Ari is depicted as someone facing a hegemonic environment. More specifically, he expresses a certain sense of discomfort for feeling out of place as a male. He compares himself to the other boys, making observations of how he differs from them. Hearing two guys distastefully joking how "A girl is like a tree covered with leaves. You just want to climb up and tear all those leaves off" (Sáenz 16) makes Ari to the following thoughts:

See, the thing about guys is that I didn't really care to be around them. I mean, guys really made me uncomfortable. I don't know why, not exactly. I just, I don't know, I just didn't belong. I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy. And it really depressed me that there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes. (Sáenz 16)

In this passage, Ari's insecurity is quite explicit. Even from a teenager's point of view, certain actions are easily linked to a particular gender, and this can cause confusion about how one is expected to behave. In this case, the effect is a negative connotation of assimilating undesirable behavior in the future. Readers paying attention to historical and cultural contexts can discern in the "guys" behavior features of the traditional, heterosexual-oriented and derisive masculine behavior. Masculine embodiment is one way to study hegemonic masculinity and identity, and in Western culture it has

been common to see “prestige conferred on boys with heterosexual partners and sexual learning imagined as exploration and conquest” (Connell and Messerschmidt 851). Alternatively, for contemporary readers the incidence may mirror the *toxic masculinity* of today. This term has entered the public usage in the past decade, largely emerging from gender-political movements such as MeToo, which launched new awareness and explicit critique on detrimental male behavior (Whitehead 1). To briefly sum up its severity, toxic masculinity is seen as “a form of masculinity which is misogynistic, self-destructive, deadly and damaging to all of us, even to the planet itself” (Whitehead 17). Relating back to traditional masculinity, Whitehead explains these two views are actually one and the same, noting that today “toxic masculinity may be thriving but then it always has done; before 2013 it was known simply as ‘traditional masculinity’” (12). Another synonym is *confined masculinity* (Adams and Frauenheim 25), which is used interchangeably with the abovementioned two terms in this analysis. At the same time, Whitehead points out that today’s masculinities are diverse but also include healthy and cherished models of masculinities (12), and precisely this becomes apparent in *Aristotle and Dante*.

As a further example, Ari tends to find it challenging to spend time with other boys:

I always kept my distance from the other boys. I never ever felt like I was a part of their world. Boys, I watched them. Studied them. [...] I just didn’t understand how to talk to them, how to be myself around them. Being around other guys didn’t make me feel smarter. Being around guys made me feel stupid and inadequate. It was like they were all part of this club and I wasn’t a member. (Sáenz 22)

Here, belonging to a group is depicted as a twofold issue. Although Ari expresses certain discontent for feeling solitary, the prospect of integrating is also received with limited confidence. It is the prospect of embracing hegemonic masculinity and its expectations, which stands at the core of issues in the life of a teenager here.

There are also hints concerning the ambiguity of masculinity. Ari mentions: “I don’t think my mom got the whole guy thing. I didn’t get the guy thing either. And I was a guy” (Sáenz 16). As discussed in the theory section, masculinity is a cultural concept that changes over time, making it a challenging topic to deal objectively with. For a teenager of Ari’s age, especially, the endeavor of knowing how to “be a guy,” in other words masculine, can thus prove a heavy task. As Whitehead explains, it has been

realized that “most men desire to be seen as masculine, even if they are not quite sure what masculinity actually is” (21-22), because “[m]asculinity contains the codes of behaviour which they have internalised as essential for their validation as men” (22). Noting this, Ari’s behavior and the development of his masculinity can be considered to have been influenced by masculinity prevalent in Ari’s environment. Furthermore, since the novel belongs to YA genre, the parallels of discovering what it means to be both a man and an adult are effectively brought together through the mindset of a contemplative teenager. This echoes Ur’s view that “Aristotle is split in two ways, he has to navigate going from childhood to adulthood and then within this he must navigate what this means for his masculine identity” (5-6).

Later in the story, Ari’s fascination to understand himself through the lens of boyness/manliness/masculinity takes him to consider the corresponding position of women. Spending casual time with his two female school friends, Del again considers whether certain type of behavior and characteristics are more appropriate for females than males:

I listened to Gina and Susie talk and I thought it was nice that they knew how to talk and how to laugh and how to be in the world. But maybe it was easier for girls. [...] I wondered what it would be like, to love a girl, to know how a girl thinks, to see the world through a girl’s eyes. Maybe they knew more than boys. Maybe they understood things that boys could never understand. (Sáenz 232)

While what the girls in question are involved in is merely having a casual talk, Ari affiliates this with the fact that they are girls. To put it another way, Ari links this particular competence with the opposite sex and thus to a simplified binary-opposition thinking, rather than considering it to be a personal skill, for example. By doing so, Ari’s attitudes echo the view that gender roles are rigid, rather than fluid, as is the consensus today. What this implies is ambiguous. On one hand, it might implicate cultural beliefs, in which such features are regarded as being traditionally feminine, rather than relating them to masculinity, which would presumably be easier to embrace for Ari based on his earlier thoughts and endeavors. The thoughts can also be attributed to Ari’s youthful naivety, since he has not yet found himself, as explained, but continues to (re)evaluate various qualities about both himself and the people around him, as is typical to the YA genre. On the other hand, the excerpt can illustrate Ari’s ability to act open-minded and understanding toward different people, and perhaps

illustrate his efforts to achieve a better sense of himself in the process as well. In the case of the latter stance, the passage demonstrates a trait that is considered a positive one for masculinity. The type of curiosity Ari demonstrates can be viewed from Adams and Frauenheim's perspective. As they explain, men aiming to employ a liberating masculinity are encouraged to embrace curiosity by "asking important, challenging, and probing questions, including ones that may make us uncomfortable" (70), as well as "to ask existential as well as practical questions, looking in places they don't normally explore" (71). What comes to Ari's masculine identity development, Nelson places positive emphasis on the fact that Ari is a type of protagonist "embodying a gender expression that balances stereotypically feminine and masculine traits" (55). As seen by these examples, self-reflection and gender dynamics are also linked to the representation and development of Ari's masculinity.

Thanks to Ari's narration, various comments on everyday life reveal nuances of what is associated with masculinity in their environment. Neither Ari nor Dante is allowed to watch television since their "parents didn't like what television did to a boy's mind" (Sáenz 20). Rather, Ari is encouraged to different activities: "*You're a boy! Get out there and do something! There's a whole world out there just waiting for you*" (Sáenz 20; emphasis original), as Ari's parents tell him. Even today, traditional gender roles are prominent in Latinx communities and contribute to stigmatizing attitudes (Ramirez-Valles 303), and the way this appears in the novel can lead to further findings, for example regarding mental health of the male characters. One of Ari's classmates calls him gay for Ari not wanting to do drugs with him, baffling Ari due to the apparent arbitrariness of the cause for the slur. As already mentioned, the heteronormative standard has been considered one of the main parts of hegemonic masculinity, both in a general US normative form and, as Ur tells, in machismo (5). Because of this, it is also commonly associated with Latinx culture. As can be deduced from the classmate's reaction here, other people also remark how Ari's masculinity sets him apart from his environment. Additionally, studies have also indicated that men frequently associate alcohol or substance use with stereotypical conceptions of masculinity (Griffith et al. 190), an issue that seems to apply to Ari's classmate here. As a result, the classmate's comment is also rooted in what has historically been defined suitable for or expected from hegemonic masculinity. Ur's article links the slurs to the act of excluding Ari from the sphere of hegemonic masculinity and sees it as an "attempt to torment and degrade Aristotle of

his masculinity" (16). Therefore, deviating from such behavior results in Ari being called gay, in other words, someone pushed outside the hegemony and heterosexuality. The reactions of both individuals here, in turn, echo how employing and recognizing such behavior is culturally learned but still varies from individual to individual.

Along similar lines, Ari also, quite self-assuredly, rationalizes some of his actions based on the fact he is a male. When her mother tells Ari he is driving a car too fast, Ari's answer is: "I'm sixteen [...] And I'm a boy" (Sáenz 201), as if this was a totally convenient excuse. It insinuates, though implicitly, that in this social and cultural context driving recklessly is associated with masculinity. This complies with Connell and Messerschmidt, who draw a connection between masculine identity and risk-taking behavior in driving (851). In the case of young drivers especially, studies have shown that risk-taking behavior in driving has been found to correlate with embracing some forms of masculinity while pushing femininity away (Özkan and Lajunen 270-71). Conversely, later in the novel Ari witnesses Dante's father admitting his own lack of competence when it comes to driving, stating he is "[t]he worst driver in El Paso" (Sáenz 243). This surprises Ari since Dante's father "was the only man I'd ever met who actually admitted he was a bad driver" (Sáenz 243), showing again that there exists a tendency for males to regard driving as something special to their gender and masculinity. For instance, there exists some data backing how "[b]eing a skilful driver' is seen as a masculine characteristic", which plays a role in identity construction for masculine drivers (Özkan and Lajunen 271). With these observations, Ari holds certain features that are frequently attributed to traditional masculinity. Other examples include the fact he is known for showing his fighting capabilities when necessary, and he occasionally displays a somewhat taunting attitude toward others by swearing or invoking mild verbal insults. These can indicate Ari's tendency to agitation and lack of compassion, which can be associated with negative masculine attributes such as anger. Anger is considered a "manly" feat by many but also easily poses harm as it "is used as justification for violence and aggression" and "is frequently 'me' oriented and judgmental" (Adams and Frauenheim 102). For these reasons, anger, or the attributes it makes one prone to, come across as a part of the negative masculine stereotype. Similarly, masculine stereotyping includes traits such as physical strength, assertiveness, and control (Griffith et al. 187), which appear in Ari's life as well. Thus, the mixing of different features make Ari's apparent masculinity a more complex issue.

As has been suggested, the depiction of Ari's masculinity is miscellaneous. Some of his characteristics give the impression of a traditional masculinity, while others incline him toward more contemporary representation of masculinities, in terms of versatility. The following two sections will illustrate better how Ari's masculinity develops as he observes different male behavior from other characters. Only after considering the said factors are we able to determine the full extent and significance of Ari's masculinity.

3.2. Dante Quintana: Healthy Masculinity

Since we are now aware of Ari's initial position regarding masculinity, we can analyze it in relation to the other named characters. Dante, who appears as a companion to Ari, and his masculinity can be considered to provide a contrast to Ari, and he can also be seen the driving force behind Ari's development. Dante acts spontaneously and is outgoing, not hesitant to voice his opinion, and has had come to terms with his queerness and family. While the two boys act differently, another point of significance regarding the depiction of masculinity is that they both share a connection through their rejection of norms of hegemonic masculinity. They are both outsiders, so to speak, in their own ways. Whereas Ari frequently ponders what is socially acceptable for guys, Dante embraces his own mannerisms, seemingly overlooking both the surrounding hegemonic masculinity and typical ethnocultural associations. Dante's masculinity becomes evident through his attitudes and actions, as they are filtered by Ari's narration and observations. Therefore, the novel can be read as a particular individual's consideration of other masculinities, much like the way in which the readers themselves perceive the characters through their own backgrounds. As such, the connections and findings established in this study provide a new layer in representation of masculinities to consider.

The way Dante's masculinity positions itself within the sphere of hegemony is also complex. As Ari begins one of the first chapters to deal with Dante in the novel, "ONE IMPORTANT FACT ABOUT DANTE: HE DIDN'T LIKE wearing shoes" (Sáenz 44; capitals original). This is one example of how Dante stands out with his views. As to Dante, his mother does not approve this since "people will think I'm just another poor Mexican" (Sáenz 45), implying a possible negative association regarding Dante's Mexican heritage and how one should not act to avoid the image. However, Dante's own argument

for not wearing shoes is simply that “I don’t like them. That’s it. That’s all. There’s no big secret here. I was born not liking them. There’s nothing complicated about the whole thing” (Sáenz 45). While there seems to be certain defiance in how Dante behaves, partially due to him being a teenager, he equally shows determination to remain true to himself. What comes to men’s health, Griffith et al. note that “[e]ngaging in positive health behaviors and being rational, decisive, and making autonomous decisions also may draw on hegemonic ideals of masculinity” (187). For that reason, it is important to critically consider positive effects of hegemonic masculinity as well. Alternatively, the lack of self-kindness and verbalizing one’s sentiments are signs of confined masculinity (Adams and Frauenheim 100), an unhealthy and persisting remnant of traditional masculinity, and Dante seems to be own traits that are opposites to these. When compared to Ari in this regard, Dante is shown to be more progressive of the two. Since Ari also considers the comment significant, we can assume it relates to how Ari comes to identify Dante and value his individualism, as a potential depiction of masculinity that also affects the development of Ari’s masculinity.

Another factor dividing Dante from hegemonic masculinity is his homosexuality. The term gay masculinities, by itself, can be a conundrum since heterosexuality has traditionally been so closely linked to the idea of being masculine (Edwards 51). As has been explained in this thesis, however, minority masculinities such as that form a major section of research on masculinity. On that note, YA genre seems to offer a prominent platform for queer representation. As noted by Ruth Nelson in her 2015 study, YA novels have seen a notable increase in portraying LGBTQ themes in recent years (49). As Nelson describes the relevance of this context, “When it comes to LGBTQ YA literature, then, the gender representations put in place for gay men are significant, as they have the potential to reinforce and perpetuate negativity toward effeminacy and privilege unrealistic and harmful ideals of masculinity” (55). As an openly gay character, Dante challenges both heteronormative hegemonic masculinity and images of machismo, which is important. As exemplified by other sections, however, Dante’s inclusion serves an important part of the novel, rather than it being merely a proxy for a minority masculinity.

As Ari spends more time with Dante, he starts to pay more attention to their differences. After the boys find a dead bird shot by younger boys with a BB gun, Dante’s and Ari’s reactions are quite the opposite. Ari is fumed and threatens the culprits with violence, being the type of person who

“never felt bad for punching out a guy who needed punching out” (Sáenz 52), whereas Dante, also demonstrating anger, becomes later overwhelmed by sadness and starts to cry. With this and admitting to Ari that he has been scared, Dante is, again, not afraid to show his softer side. Portraying characters with both stereotypically feminine and masculine traits can help presenting alternative, balanced masculinities as well as “challenge contemporary gender binaries and offer young readers alternative masculinities that are generally depicted as positive” (Nelson 62). Ari shows comparable sympathy for Dante by thinking:

I wanted to tell him not to cry anymore, tell him that what those boys did to that bird didn't matter. But I knew it *did* matter. It mattered to Dante. And anyway, it didn't do any good to tell him not to cry because he needed to cry. That's the way he was. (Sáenz 54; emphasis original)

As a poignant example of how men should be allowed to express themselves without judgment, Ari's consideration demonstrates admirable qualities when it comes to healthy masculinity. A bit later Ari speculates “what it was like, to be the kind of guy that cried over the death of a bird” and “why was it that some guys had tears in them and some had no tears at all? Different boys lived by different rules” (Sáenz 55), thus providing quite straightforward commentary on the diversity of masculinity. Increased emotionality is a traditionally feminine trait (Nelson 58), whereas emotional restraint is associated with hegemonic masculinity (Griffith et al. 187). In addition, Ur links Ari's habit of internalizing his emotions to the negative effects of machismo (8). Along similar lines, Adams and Frauenheim have stated that “[o]ne of the most destructive elements within confined masculinity is the notion that men should not express feelings, needs, emotions, or personal matters to anyone, even to oneself” (100). Drawing from this difference of rationality versus emotions, Ari and Dante can be seen on the opposite binaries of masculine stereotyping, with Ari demonstrating more traditional or hegemonic traits than Dante. While Ari acknowledges acting differently when compared to Dante in the situation, neither reaction is accentuated over the other. Rather, they are both acceptable representations of masculinity in their respectable characters.

Not too long after witnessing Dante cry for the first time in the story, Ari himself experiences a similar kind of emotional turmoil. In his fever delirium, Ari awakes from a distressing dream and realizes he is crying, finding the situation overall confusing and thinking that “I knew I was crying, but I didn't know why because I wasn't the kind of guy who cried, and I thought that maybe it was someone

else who was crying” (Sáenz 61). In this situation, Ari is depicted both intrigued and influenced by such factors of Dante’s behavior that are distinct from his own. Nonetheless, it can be argued that Ari’s masculinity continues to develop as a result of spending time with Dante, who is for example more emotionally expressive. The change from a more traditional, quiet, and prone-to-aggression boy toward one who is less constrained by his earlier way of thinking is a part of Ari’s growth and demonstrates how masculinity is adaptable.

To sum the findings of this subchapter, Dante’s masculinity represents an alternate way to act as a man that contrasts with Ari’s initial position. More specifically, this illustrates a healthy masculinity as a move away from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. While the two boys differ in some traditionally masculine traits, like emotional reflexivity, that does not prevent them from developing their relationship. Dante’s masculinity also doubles as a depiction of gay masculinity, one common form of a minority or subordinated masculinity. Because of this, it contributes to subverting traditional images and provides readers with more acceptable models. As Ari is depicted being both intrigued and influenced by Dante, Dante’s masculinity also plays an important role in showing the readers how the environment can positively affect one’s conception of acceptable gender roles.

3.3. Fathers and Adults: Transgenerational Representation of Masculinities

Sáenz’s novel pays attention to the relationship between fathers and sons, which brings attention to how masculinity is portrayed in the case of adult characters. In today’s academic circles, the view that fathers are essential to their sons’ development of masculinity, in the sense that “fathers are expected to model, encourage, and even demand masculinity in their sons,” has largely been disproven (Levant et al. 325). Despite this, said views and “implicit and explicit messages from fathers regarding what is ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ gendered behavior for boys” remain prevalent in the ordinary lives of people (Levant et al 325). In view of recent findings, Levant et al. have consequently determined “that fathers are an important source of boys’ masculine gender role socialization” (325) and impact whether their sons adopt traditional or more flexible and varied masculine norms (325-26). Due to

this, the novel's father-son relationships can reveal both constructive and possibly destructive gender role models. Ari's father, Mr. Mendoza, is a quiet man whom Ari finds difficult to connect with. "He didn't give lectures. Not real ones. Which pissed me off. He wasn't a mean guy. And he didn't have a bad temper. He spoke in short sentences [...] How was I supposed to know him when he didn't let me? I hated that" (Sáenz 23), Ari contemplates. As the reader learns, Mr. Mendoza is haunted by the traumas of the Vietnam War, which makes his demeanor somewhat expected. Despite this reasoning, the way Mr. Mendoza secludes himself and his inner life from others is simultaneously both traditionally masculine and not fully masculine behavior. He tries to survive on his own, not sharing emotions or allowing others to help him. At the same time, however, he cannot cope like this as stereotypical individualist men do. What comes to men's health and masculinity, Griffith et al. have pointed out the need for studying "how men who are middle-aged and older adults conceptualize, perform, and embody masculinity" (Griffith et al. 192). On the surface, Mr. Mendoza holds traditional male attributes such as not showing excess emotion and being quiet and firm. As a father, he is an important figure to his teenage son, and for this reason his seeming aloofness in Ari's eyes is challenging. Nonetheless, the two become closer and more understanding of each other as the story progresses and reveals more about Mr. Mendoza and the development of his masculinity.

To Ari, his father is something that he must discover in order to know himself. This is not so surprising considering the prevalence of the transgenerational teaching of masculinity. With this, the story also provides an interesting point of view of how upbringing affects the behavior of male characters. On several instances, Ari ponders on how little he knows about his father. Rather than talking to each other, Ari opts to observe his father until "Some day all the clues would come together. And I would solve the mystery of my father" (Sáenz 37). Though Ari tends to criticize his father's behavior in his mind, the similarities between Ari and his father form another subject. Questions of the significance of upbringing surface at times, with Ari feeling that he is more like his father and different from Dante. On that note, Ur has pointed out that Ari "is constantly tied to his father who represents the 'old' Mexican culture and ideas regarding 'proper' masculinity" (7), that referring to hegemonic masculinity and parts of machismo. Comparably, Nelson states that Ari's relationship with his father, though "crucial to the development of Ari's masculine identity" (68), is linked to their challenges at establishing emotional connections rather than to Ari's sexuality. A nightmare resulting

from Ari's fewer delirium acts as a point that marks a bridge between Ari and his father, who is worrying about his son's state. After Ari's father asks Ari about his bad dreams, the two share a brief but heartfelt talk:

"Are you always lost?"

"In most of them, yeah."

"And are you always trying to find me?"

"Mostly I think I'm trying to find me, Dad."

[...]

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry I'm so far away."

"It's okay," I said.

"No," he said. "No, it's not."

[...]

"I have bad dreams too, Ari."

I wanted to ask him if his dreams were about the war or about my brother. I wanted to ask him if he woke up as scared as me.

All I did was smile at him. He'd told me something about himself.

I was happy. (Sáenz 65-66)

After this talk, both Ari and his father gradually find what can be called "the liberating power of connection," as one of the main chapters in Adams and Frauenheim's book for reinventing masculinity is titled (113). With this talk, Ari and his father demonstrate emotional vulnerability and courage to engage in a form of healthy intimacy, in which "men share inner conflicts or confusions with other men" and move toward "[i]ntimate bonds [that] create deep and satisfying connections that fill the painful voids within our hearts" (Adams and Frauenheim 119). On the whole, their bonding is another sign of how the novel promotes healthy forms of masculinity.

Additionally, much of Mr. Mendoza's characterization is provided by how Ari perceives him and compares him to Dante and Dante's father, Mr. Quintana. Similar to their boys, the two fathers come across as quite different, which catches Ari's attention: "He seemed like a man who was in love with being alive. So different from my father, who had always kept his distance from the world. There was a darkness in my father that I didn't understand. Dante's father didn't have any darkness in him"

(Sáenz 24). This way, much like hegemonic masculinity and subordinated masculinities, the masculinities of fathers are also represented using various binaries. Ranging from showing physical affection and using different vocabulary to bantering with each other, the relationship between Dante and his father contrasts with that of Ari and his father remarkably, catching Ari's attention on several occasions. The differences in masculine behavior, in other words, are again foregrounded. More importantly, the Quintanas' distinct behavior is depicted as something positive: "It made me smile, the way they got along, the easy and affectionate way they talked to each other as if love between a father and a son was simple and uncomplicated. [...] I wondered what that would be like, to walk into a room and kiss my father" (Sáenz 26). Thus, Ari contemplates, quite explicitly, how male characters act differently in the novel and whether all forms of it are acceptable. Interestingly, some studies have indicated that teenagers might find it easier to recognize stereotypical images of masculinities, those that mirror hegemonic masculinity in one's environment, than positive or alternative male performances (Bean and Harper 16). By redirecting Ari's focus from familiar to something different and intriguing, the story highlights the need to consider and view the scope of masculinities more.

In addition to portraying different ways to act as a man, the fathers depict a positive stance toward diversity of masculinities. Overall, Mr. Mendoza and Mr. Quintana belong to a different generation of men than their sons, which has its own implications regarding the historical construction of masculinity. More importantly, as mentioned already, the personalities of the fathers are quite different. There is notable contrast in their relations with their sons and family. Both fathers provide an example of masculinity to their sons. While this alone could imply that the men promote their own, one distinct version of masculinity over that of others, both men's conduct in the novel demonstrates instead the opposite. Both boys' parents, fathers included, while acknowledging stark differences in Ari and Dante, are consistently shown to be supportive over Ari and Dante's developing relationship, for instance. This fact in itself is a positive sign of masculinity when remembering the prevalence of homophobic views in traditional machismo (Ur 5). According to Nelson's study, YA novels with gay protagonists tend to depict contrasting masculine expectations of fathers and sons as something that leads to conflict in their relationships (68-69). *Ari and Dante* differs from the norm in this aspect as such views are nonexistent in both boys' families. Similarly, Nelson claims that fathers having such a positive stance on their sons' homosexuality is a sign of challenging gender stereotypes

(76-77). Over the course of the novel, Mr. Mendoza and Mr. Quintana even start spending time together, fully enjoying each other's company, which in Ari's words "*did* surprise me how well Mr. Quintana and my dad got along" (Sáenz 152; emphasis original). As known by this point, the way one conceptualizes masculinity can change and vary by individuals. Regarding masculinities and one's age, Griffith et al. provide the following:

Some of the masculinities men try to perform when they are younger tend to demonstrate their physical strength, sexual prowess, and risk tolerance, but as men age they tend to also want to demonstrate more positive aspects of masculinity: being a responsible father, provider, husband, etc. [...] it is critical to identify positive aspects of masculinity that can be the foundation for interventions to promote healthy behaviors, lifestyles, and outcomes. (192)

The quote above indeed echoes the nature of the characters in the novel. In essence, the two fathers embrace their own masculinity while not downplaying other forms of masculinity around them. Together, all of this appears as the fathers take a positive and understanding view of the diversity of masculinities. In this way, Sáenz's portrayal of adult masculinity in the novel can be regarded as healthy and exemplary to both young and adult readers.

Finally, there is Ari's older brother, who has comparable significance to Ari's father when it comes to masculinity. The brother, who is in prison and remains unnamed to the reader, is only mentioned by others instead of appearing directly in the story. Similar to the relationship with Ari's dad, Ari's brother epitomizes Ari's need for another masculine figure in his life. Ari's brother has been deemed to fill a stereotypical Latinx role of a gang member or criminal, and his character effectively functions to Ari "a cautionary tale, a 'type' of man not to be" (Gomez 20). This also ties to how Ari's father conceptualizes this form of masculinity, as he makes efforts to make sure Ari behaves well and does not end up like his brother. Drawing attention to how upbringing and male role models may influence the development of masculine identity, Ari wonders whether his life would have been different with his brother: "Maybe he could have taught me stuff about being a guy and what guys should feel and what they should do and how they should act" (Sáenz 299). Hence, Ari is seen as paying a great deal of attention to the other male characters around him, and he tends to construct himself based on how masculinity is depicted with these characters.

As revealed later in the novel, Ari's brother has been jailed for violently killing a prostitute when the person turned out to be a man and, ergo, a deviation from the sexuality associated with traditional hegemonic masculinity. While the brother's confined or primal masculinity is unleashed in the incident, there is also the question of discrimination of masculine minorities. Ironically coinciding with the nature of the relationship Ari and Dante develop with each other, Ari's brother serves as a realistic depiction of how non-traditional forms of masculinity have historically been met with opposition. In this case, the incident with the brother can even be viewed as a metaphor of traditional masculinity firmly defending its place from a subordinate one. As mentioned earlier, the brother's behavior is also related to how Latinx cultures have typically resisted alternate forms of masculinity in view of preserving heteronormative culture.

To conclude the reading of this novel, the masculinity in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is manifold. Masculinity reveals itself as a versatile tool for the story, its characters, and the relationships between these characters and the protagonist. By including Aristotle as a protagonist who is unsure of his masculinity and actively pays attention to it, not only in himself but also in other characters, Sáenz emphasizes a meaningful consideration of masculinities. Some masculinity forms, such as Dante's and his father's, can be tied to contemporary movements that advocate for diversity and healthy models. Others such as Ari's father and brother show how traditional images, including those typical to Latinx portrayal, continue to persist. In a malleable time in his life, Ari is caught navigating between these environments, which serves a didactic YA function to readers. Together, the two titular characters and their respective fathers exemplify the potential for masculinity to take several forms without downplaying other ways of being a man. As has been shown, non-traditional or alternative masculine roles are depicted as positive, complying with the aim to provide the reader base with insightful discoveries about the more widely accepted plurality of masculinities today. Lastly, the context sheds light on historical, partly old-fashioned but nonetheless persisting views on hegemonic masculinity, and signifies a move away from it in accordance with contemporary societal and cultural changes of the recent decades. With these facts in mind, Sáenz's novel is exemplary in its execution of representing masculinities.

4. Masculinity in *Not So Pure and Simple*

Lamar Giles's *Not So Pure and Simple* demonstrates a comparable view to masculinity, similarly from the point of view of the youth. Whereas in Sáenz's novel various forms of masculinities are in a sense individualized through the characters, Giles tackles with masculinity issues in a more general, hegemonic-oriented way that aims to reveal the problems of patriarchy and toxic masculinity, addressing not only a strictly male point of view. The flip side to this issue is learning from one's errors and form a progressive masculinity.

There are, however, some similarities between the two novels, which provides opportunities for a comparison. Much like Ari, Giles's protagonist Del Rainey provides insight into the story in his position as the narrator of the novel. One stark difference between the two novels concerns the setting. Del Rainey is a teenager who lives in a contemporary period, where typical teen slang, social media and pop-culture references are heavily featured in the language of the novel. The high school context is another site of action, which fuels meaningful exchanges around Del and his relationships with other people. Rather than contemplating masculinity in his life as thoroughly as Ari does, Del can be regarded as a more passive vehicle, through which readers are exposed to contrasts between masculinities and the potential dangers surrounding them. As is revealed by the ending of the novel, Del himself learns this thinking as well, and this serves as the ultimate thematic departure point for both the protagonist and the readers.

The next sections focus on analyzing the abovementioned issues more closely. The structure follows that of the previous section, by beginning with the protagonist and then moving on to other characters whose masculinities can be observed. While Giles's novel introduces more characters than Sáenz's, some of them feature less prominently in the story. For this reason, more than one character with a comparable contribution may be analyzed together. As means of portraying the masculinity in male characters, Del, and his friends Qwan and Jameer receive most of the focus placed on these individuals. Another important subject, although not an individual character, is the influence of masculinity that female characters become subject to. This topic draws attention to the concept of toxic masculinity, linking the representation of masculinity in the novel closely to views featuring

heavily in contemporary debates and discussions. Additionally, religion plays a minor role with its own proposals for how to appropriately acts as a male or female, and the analysis briefly considers this. The analysis finishes with explaining the development of Del's masculinity and its results. Finally, a short conclusion summarizes my reading of the novel.

4.1. Del Rainey: Hegemonic Masculinity

Starting with Del's masculinity, like Ari he is a complex person. What is meant by this is that Del demonstrates a certain awareness of the masculinity/femininity juxtaposition in his daily life. As soon as he introduces Kiera Westing, his crush, he notices she has changed her hair style, which is "girl stuff" (Giles 3). Echoing similar comments that Ari makes when he associates certain issues with a particular gender, Del's logic is generalizing and reinforces certain conventional behavior patterns for both males and females. Del also makes comments about Kiera's attractive looks to himself, but then refrains from looking at her too long since he "wasn't a creepy dude" (Giles 3), implying the social stigma that is attached to staring within this kind of gender-context. Another remark by Del relates to his work partner Mya Hanson. Assessing Mya's fast food work uniform, Del expresses mild discomfort which can be traced to his presumptions about gender: "Her shirt was a size too large, her pants too baggy and dusty with batter. I mean it was the same deal with my uniform, *but she's a girl!*" (Giles 24-25; emphasis added). As these examples early in the novel show, Del appears relatively perceptive and inclined toward judging people based on his conceptualization of their masculinity or femininity.

Being with Kiera is Del's main motivator in the story, and his commitment to the task continues to signify much of his later actions in the story. This gradually illustrates Del's apparent lack of consideration for Kiera's and other female characters' perspectives. Later in the novel, things escalate with another male character. When Del hears his classmate Mason bragging to his friends about having had sex with Kiera, a thing Del believes to be a lie, Del is quick to verbally challenge Mason's claims, for the sake of not letting him "throw dirt on Kiera's name like that" (Giles 315). In a fashion of defending what Del believes to be *his* woman's honor, Del resorts to violence by punching Mason.

Mason answers with violence, and after a quick defeat Del finds himself as the underdog in the situation. Here Del's role resembles that of a classic archetypal "protector" or "conqueror" (27) as they are described by Adams and Fraumenheim, who link these roles to confined or traditional masculinity. So, Del's way of acting is reduced to traditional male traits such as a "reliance on competition, aggressiveness, physical courage, and arrogant confidence" (Adams and Fraumenheim 28). Similarly, competitiveness manifests itself as Del perceives other males as threats. This episode reinforces the idea that Del's masculinity is predominantly hegemonic, and, for certain parts, outdated. It is a situation in which Del is overwhelmed by his instincts, rather than him handling the situation with respect, composure, and rationality, in other words, through traits more appealing to contemporary healthy masculinities.

After the incident mentioned above, Del shows further signs of questionable behavior with Kiera. Before explaining to her why he criticized Mason, Del "ran through likely scenarios – sadness, shame, rage – and wondered about the best way to comfort her, to remind her all dudes aren't trash like [Mason]" (Giles 317-18). Here Del makes an implication regarding Mason's negative masculine conduct and respectively considers himself superior to him as Keira's protector. Del's own behavior prior to this, however, has revealed the controversy between his thoughts and actions. Thinking of the central features that are commonly attributed to hegemonic masculinity, such as "toughness/strength, dominance/power/authority (especially over women), minimal emotional expression, risk-taking behavior, heterosexuality, antihomosexuality, sexual prowess/drive, competitiveness" (Talbot and Quayle 257), different situations that have been considered show that Del embodies several of these factors. To put it differently, Del is driven by hegemonic masculinity thinking. As the reader knows, Del convinces himself and much of his actions through his aims of achieving Kiera's favor. Rather than illustrating Del's benevolence, it frequently evokes the sense of Del being prejudiced with his own aims. He tries to dissociate himself from resembling other masculine figures he considers inferior, and therefore believes to undermine his efforts with Kiera. When Del learns from Kiera that what Mason said is in fact true, his appearance shifts from compassionate to judgmental. Del inverts the situation and blames Kiera by saying things such as "[y]ou should've known better!" (Giles 320) and refers to Kiera's hypocrisy as a member of the Purity Pledge, the abstinence program that will be focused on in the following section: "She was hurting; me

rubbing her broken vow in her face was salt in a wound. Good! 'Out here acting like a THOT.' I was all rage then, none of the other emotions. It felt good being real about all this bullshit. For once" (Giles 321). Again, the characteristics that Del demonstrates here are attributed to detrimental masculinity due to Del's lack of self-control and inability to properly comply with his mistaken beliefs.

At this point, Del's masculinity is undoubtedly flawed. Much like with Sáenz's protagonist Ari, Del's behavior brings forth aspects of masculinity that are generally unvalued due to their negative effects. From a narrative perspective, however, readers are exposed to a more authentic depiction of masculinities and will yet witness a crucial but ultimately constructive change in Del's character. Once again, this conforms to the YA genre's tendency to mirror contemporary social issues in teenagers' lives. To better grasp the significance of the plurality and change in masculinities, the portrayal of masculinities in Del's environment deserves further analysis.

4.2. Environment: Subordinated and Minority Masculinities

By considering some of the people Del frequently interacts with, we can try to determine how social factors influence Del's beliefs about masculinity, and how masculinity is otherwise presented in the novel. This section considers the said factors by focusing on Qwan, Jameer, and the role of the church that Del frequently attends to.

As Del's best friend, Qwan aims to provide Del with advice and support, especially with Kiera. Whereas Del is drawn to Kiera, Qwan's interests in women are more superficial. Qwan himself "was mad successful with girls" (Giles 32) and criticizes Del for his lack of sexual encounters and overvaluing romance. The following quotation shows how Qwan views girls and justifies his own methods with them:

Since he lost his virginity three years prior, he'd been obsessed with getting more, more, more. He treated Instagram like Amazon, always shopping, always sliding into some new girl's DMs looking for nothing longer than two-day delivery. He swore he smashed as much as he did because he didn't do emotion. Told me / shouldn't do emotion, that girls liked it when you

weren't all soft and fuzzy. His thinking wasn't much different than most of the dudes at school.
(Giles 32; emphasis original)

Based on this quote, Qwan's views about how males and females act come across as relatively hegemonic. Appearing as a tough guy or the player of women are some of the best-known masculine stereotypes for African American youth (Hewitt 12), and Qwan's behavior seems to draw from this. As teenagers, both Qwan and Del are prone to influences from their peers, and this includes sharing one's own world views as Qwan is depicted doing here when he links manliness to sexual interest in girls or the lack of feelings. The ending of the passage links Qwan with the hegemonic masculinity of their school community, as Del notes.

Although the novel does not provide detailed comparable narrative insight into how Qwan feels or thinks as it does with Del, Qwan's later actions demonstrate the development of his masculinity. As the novel progresses, Qwan demonstrates renewed respect for women by starting a serious relationship with a girl named Angie and stopping his earlier, boastful way of acting with girls. With this, Qwan's way of conceptualizing women develops from a biased view to one respecting people's diversity and individuality. Additionally, the change in Qwan's principles functions as an example of how the youth are still developing themselves and their views, resulting also in positive changes such as this. When the couple worries that Angie might be pregnant, Qwan shows responsibility by staying on her side, and the two continue their balanced relationship for the remainder of the novel. In terms of masculinity, this progress shows positive characteristics such as renewed tolerance, open-mindedness, and emotional reflexivity. The change from predominantly hegemonic masculinity, even toxic masculinity when it comes to Qwan's earlier relationships with women, to one resembling healthy or progressive masculinity is presented quite explicitly. Hence, rather than presenting merely a possible influence on Del's masculinity, Qwan's development strengthens the idea that masculinity can and should be encouraged to evolve into healthier and positive forms.

The third young male character to be analyzed is Jameer, with whom Del becomes acquainted as a member of the Purity Pledge. Jameer is depicted as observant, especially what comes to other male characters. During Del's and Jameer's first encounter, Jameer makes clear he is aware of Del's feelings toward Kiera. As it stands, Del learns from Jameer how now-single Kiera is in fact a

romantic target for many others: "You and half the school" (Giles 15) are making their moves to impress Kiera. Jameer's critical commentary sheds light on Del's whole situation with Kiera: "It's shocking how oblivious she is about how many of you are unhealthily obsessed with her [...] / know because you're just not very original [...] You're doing what everyone else is" (Giles 16; emphasis original). Hence, male characters are, again, depicted as functioning in a homogenous fashion, though some of them, such as Del, do so unknowingly to themselves. Strikingly, this shows the masculine ideology in work. People are accustomed to prevailing norms and examples in their surroundings, ignoring or downplaying the validity of alternative forms of masculine conduct. At the same time, Jameer shows an ability to evaluate masculine behavior and act according to his own interests, rather than following others. Jameer is a type of guy who is not afraid to mention faults relating to hegemonic masculinity, as in this case with implying to the unhealthy obsession of others. Accordingly, Jameer places himself outside the hegemony of which his male peers seem to be a part of.

Jameer's role as an agent of a minority masculinity is strengthened by other factors. Jameer is revealed to be gay, thus introducing a queer factor to the novel. Interestingly, Jameer's several characteristics are shared with Sáenz's Dante. Unlike in Sáenz's novel, here the representation of this kind of minority masculinity is portrayed through a not-so-prominent side character. With Del who is interested in girls, the context of acknowledging Jameer's queerness is different when compared to Ari and Dante. It presents the acceptance of someone deviating from heteronormative masculinity from a fellow teenager's point of view without drawing special attention to the content itself. Rather, Jameer's sexual orientation is portrayed as normalized without any extravagant bewilderment from Del, which has educational and inspirational value for conveying readers contemporary notions regarding different masculinities. Both Jameer's orientation and Del's reaction to it represent an environment that is inclusive toward the plurality of masculinities.

Finally, a further relevant social factor concerns the church that offers the Purity Pledge program. As Connell and Messerschmidt have noted, idealized models of masculinities are present in social processes at a society-wide level, with churches being one example of forces that exalt their preferred kind of masculinity (838). Religions such as Christianity have historically influenced people's views by offering their own perspectives on what is suitable for men or women, and through including the Purity Pledge in the plot, Giles's novel alludes how such practices are still employed today, for

instance in US congregations. The Purity Pledge is a type of sexual abstinence program. These are considered a phenomenon of US conservative Christians, and even though met with harsh criticism especially outside the US, the phenomenon has retained a tight grip in public debates and even made its way to US school context (Greslé-Favier ix-x). In order to justify abstinence education, its supporters portray teenage sexual activity with negative images “to reinforce heteronormativity and traditional gender roles and promote marriage as the best solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy” (Greslé-Favier xvii-xviii). As such, the topic has become rooted in a cultural sphere, thus intersecting with that of masculinities and gender in general. One of Pastor Newsome’s sermons includes preaching about “how God’s natural order meant men and women had different roles and responsibilities during our time on earth” (Giles 106), after which Newsome addresses the double-facedness of seductive women, in other words, ones not appearing sexually passive or overtly constrained by the surrounding society. Del’s reaction embodies the youthful guilelessness toward predisposed conceptualizations of maleness and femaleness: “all I could think was, wow, that sounded dark. And wrong. Somehow” (Giles 107). The authority behind programs such as the Purity Pledge can exert a powerful influence on its members. For example, pro-abstinence discourses allow ministers to appear as educators and further reinforce their authority by insinuating the moral superiority of their own religious environment, also helping to convince parents of the cause in the process (Greslé-Favier 113). Drawing from this, Del’s mother, another devout member of the church, compliments his son for joining the Purity Pledge: “I’m glad you’re taking such steps to being a good man” (Giles 109). As Greslé-Favier has noted, supporters of pro-abstinence often tend to exaggerate teenager boys’ sexuality and portray it in a negative light (229), and Del’s mother seems to echo a mindset similar to that. As goes without saying, an authority asserting such values to a public can set a hazardous provocation, posing the danger of propagating misinformation about patriarchy, masculinity, and femininity.

The church also plays a part with Jameer’s queerness. His family is revealed to be devout supporters of Newsome’s church, and together with the pastor the parents are “fixing” (Giles 215) Jameer, meaning that they attempt to make Jameer renounce his queerness. This episode puts further pressure on Jameer to embrace hegemonic and heteronormative masculinity. Christian upbringing and sexual identity frequently clash, which can result in rejection of either one,

compartmentalization, or integration of both identities (Levy and Edmiston 66). Pro-abstinence discourses also connect to conservative Christians promoting traditional, patriarchal family cell as the correct family type (Greslé-Favier 117), which in turn links to traditional values within hegemonic masculinity. In short, “The necessity for pro-abstinence discourses to promote traditional gender roles is grounded in the fact that for them gender equality and feminism are undermining the appeal of traditional heterosexual marriage” (Greslé-Favier 125). As shown here, the church’s agenda influences people, notwithstanding the fact that many of the gender-related views, including sexuality and gender norms, it proposes are less and less in line with the more critical developments in the study of masculinities and other gender-related issues, as considered in this thesis. Due to these reasons, the novel’s inclusion of religion has also some relevance in demonstrating how certain powers can limit the representation of masculinities. By highlighting this time more negative than positive images, the novel draws another line between a hazardous source of influence and representation of masculinities.

By considering different characters as both complementing and contrasting to Del, this section has expanded on how masculinities are present and affect each other in the novel. Plurality and improvement arise as notable factors, similar to Sáenz’s portrayal of masculinities in his novel. The next section shifts its focus onto how masculinities affect people on an even larger scale. With this, the analysis decisively concludes the portrayal, development, and impact of Del’s masculinity.

4.3. Progressive Masculinity

Until this point, we have considered the representation of masculinities mainly from a positive angle. Giles, however, approaches contemporary masculinities also more critically. The reverse side of masculinity, which was tackled also in Sáenz’s novel, becomes most evident in the case of the female characters, whose points of view challenge many of the hitherto expressed hegemonic ideas about masculinity. The effects of this unfold like dominoes: Through their own experiences, characters reveal to other characters what they attribute to proper and improper male behavior models. This

perspective is important. To illustrate, Talbot and Quayle have emphasized that women are active participators in construction of masculinities, and their input plays a role in shaping socially accepted forms of hegemonic masculinity (256). As a result, characters such as Del become compelled to reevaluate their awareness regarding masculinities. The third layer of influence, which turns out more challenging to prove, is how these themes and their mirroring of contemporary reality can result in comparable changes within readers and in how they consider the issues the novel raises. Nevertheless, the development in Del's masculinity proves the most integral part of the discussion. The changes in Del's character are attributed to progressive masculinity, which can be considered as one of the three dominant forms of masculinities today alongside toxic masculinity and collapsed masculinity (Whitehead 5). In this analysis, progressive masculinity shares its principles and aspirations with liberating masculinity mentioned at the start of the analysis, since both terms advocate a similar model as the most necessary and welcome form of masculinities. With this approach, this section considers how the possibility of adapting and conforming one's masculinity is represented in the novel.

To start with a more implicit example, which also happens to tie together some of the points discussed, we need to return to the educational context. MJ, the teacher of Del's sex-education class, utilizes a tactful approach with the adolescent male students, exemplifying a constructive scrutiny of masculinity. MJ tells his students a story about his own school days, how he tried to make an impression on a girl by complimenting her looks. When he explains the negative reaction he received, students are baffled, with one commenting: "Why were they mad, though? You were telling her she looked good in the skirt. It was a compliment" (Giles 135). Answering vaguely with "Was it?" (135), MJ proceeds to make the male students' conceptions visible by asking them to raise a hand as a sign of affirmative answer. Both Del and Qwan comply with the majority and raise their hands, again demonstrating their association with hegemony. MJ continues the topic with a remark about the girls in the next room probably answering the question quite differently from the boys, thus trying to prompt the boys to re-examine the impression they give as men. Finally, he tells them frankly: "Guys, it took me a long time to get it, too. You wanted to ask real questions, so I'm trying to give you real answers. Almost everything you think you know about girls and women is wrong. That incorrect information can be dangerous" (Giles 136). A noteworthy point is that MJ admits that he has himself

experienced what he is trying to convey to his students here, thus illustrating a model of masculinity that is both personal and educational in a teacherly fashion. Del at least starts to grasp the gravity of the case, noting “[a]s serious as I’ve ever seen him, MJ said, ‘I don’t mean dangerous for you. A lot of women have been hurt and will be hurt because we – men – are mostly still operating on a caveman’s script’” (Giles 136). The last part, especially, can be contrasted with Del’s violent outbreak against Mason later in the novel. While the class reacts with a perplexed silence, MJ points out the “topic bears much further discussion” (136), indicating his need to make the boys better aware of the issue at hand. Overall, MJ raises valid points regarding the biases that the established norms surrounding masculinity expose people to. Furthermore, MJ’s character embodies the educational aspect of reviewing masculinities with scrutiny. According to Winhar et al., educators have a major duty when it comes to breaking gender norms and tackling diverse questions about gender (118). Mirroring the way readers can internalize the content or context of the novel through its relevance in the real world, MJ performs, with regard to masculinity, a similar didactic activity for the benefit of the next generation within the story. In short, he is shown to be advocating for a healthy progressive masculinity that values being attentive and ready to change negative behavior.

Contact with Shianne, a same-aged female friend of Del’s, acts as a similar wake-up call to Del. He explains to her how things with Kiera went wrong. When Shianne answers with an opinion that rightfully stresses Kiera’s plight over Del’s, Del starts to lose his temper and, again, resorts to overgeneralizing people based on their gender: “I don’t get y’all. For real. All of you say you want a nice guy, but you can’t see one sitting right in front of you, then get mad at us when we tired of the bullshit” (Giles 327). Shianne explains Del how his apparent niceness has in fact been merely an egocentric act, a tool for the purpose of appealing to Kiera, and she then proffers a relevant counterargument: “Since you have your gripes about us girls and what we don’t see right in front of us, let me put you on to one of my pet peeves about boys. Warped perspective” (Giles 327). Today, media has dubbed a particular type of men’s behavior as ‘nice guy syndrome’. It refers to men who have unrealistic expectations regarding the reciprocal nature of their relationship with women. As a means of compensating for their own desired attraction, these men aim to appeal to women with their kindness, expecting that to help forming ‘covert contracts’ where women repay them by becoming their girlfriend, for example (Hosie). Psychologist Dr. Robert Glover, who has studied the

phenomenon and helped bringing the topic to the public eye with his book *No More Mr. Nice Guy* from 2003, has explained that such behavior operates at unconscious level, and that men are and need to overcome this behavior (“The Nice Guy Syndrome”). To illustrate ‘nice guy’ characteristics in Del’s life, Glover says that such men “seek the approval of others” and “try to hide their perceived flaws and mistakes” (“The Nice Guy Syndrome”). Such behavior becomes apparent through Del’s relationship with Kiera, and Shianne is the one assuring Del of his unhealthy coping mechanism. What is significant for Del as well as the readers of the novel, is the act of challenging and demonstrating alternative views regarding proper masculine behavior. With such involvement, males such as Del are drawn to inspect what kind of an example they give to others. Even though ‘nice guy’ masculinities are considered nonhegemonic (Talbot and Quayle 255), such forms can likewise have potentially detrimental features, similar to their hegemonic counterparts. In general, it also shows how approaching misconduct, in this case of unequal treatment of people based on their gender, is justifiable and can help to make a difference.

The third example finally convinces Del of the same point the last two examples have indicated, both literally and figuratively. It has been shown using various binaries, Del’s teacher and friend, an adult and a teenager, a male and a female, that acting constructively as a male requires a certain foresight today. The third instance that focuses on progressive masculinity does this by including the family aspect as well. Frustrated at what Shianne says, Del leaves for his home and explains the Kiera situation to his father. Seemingly alert about Del’s behavior, Del’s father calls for a family discussion that includes not only them, but Del’s mother and older sister as well. What follows is “Enlightenment” (Giles 332), as Del’s sister Cressie calls the following important discussion about male behavior. Del is requested to watch an episode of Cressie’s YouTube series in which female subscribers reveal their experiences of harassment or abuse by men. The stories highlight how being a woman, and getting exposed to persisting negative masculine behavior, exacerbates these situations. As explained in the video:

These are scary stories, but also entitlement stories. In every one of them a man felt entitled to a woman’s time, attention, body because . . . reasons. And to appease their entitlement, we get left with scars. The wariness of animals who only want to forage but who always have to watch for the shadow of a predatory hawk, or slithering viper. No space is safe where toxic

male energy is permitted, or simply invades. But, we all knew that, didn't we? It's the other gender that seems ignorant to their toxic colonization of a woman's right to breathe, and sunshine, and solace. Too bad they aren't reading these stories, too. (Giles 334)

From an educational perspective, the quotation reveals a few points. Janet Peterson has addressed the issue that, historically, YA fiction has promoted gender stereotypes by portraying simplified images of female characters (1). From the 1990s onwards, educators, authors, and publishers alike have showed a renewed alertness for tackling the issue and instead promoting gender equality (Peterson 2-3). Fiction's potential in producing gender sensitivity in education has been documented in studies such as one by Winhar et al. In their view, gender sensitivity can be defined as "as understanding society's expectations for men and women and how these presumptions guide us to make decisions in our own lives" (118). Gender-sensitive education also ties to combatting inequality associated with masculinity (Winhar et al 118). Giles's emphasis on how hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles affect female characters and how these characters confront detrimental societal forces can be considered the author's way to participate in this movement.

Since male readers are not in any way excluded from reading the novel nor being aware of the issues it thematizes, the excerpt from the novel above adds another layer of metacommentary on the topic. A metaphorical representation of men's harmful actions as animalistic and threatening further reinforces the opposite plight that Del, as the novel's pivotal depiction of masculinity, is unable to experience personally. Toxic masculinity has been dubbed "without doubt the most damaging and dangerous form of masculinity out there [...] damaging and dangerous not only for society but also for the men who have it" (Whitehead 39). The novel precisely illustrates this: Partly lurid, partly accusive, the tone of the statement keeps Del engaged in its message for the following part of the video. Within this context, the excerpt shows how Giles partakes in the ongoing societal discussion on gender-issues and masculinities.

The choice of vlogging as the medium for conveying the masculinity message, for one, illustrates the potential of powerful contemporary communication and influence. Similar to how the YA novel intersects with other forms of YA media today, masculinity is presented in this scene, via social media, on societal level and as part of popular culture. In 2009, Koss and Teale speculated that major societal-level changes, such as increasing prevalence of different digital communication

formats and different text forms, would manifest also in YA literature (570). The use of social media in the scene reflects that. Similarly, it is a way to combine different perspectives, making different voices heard, as well as a form of organization requiring both readers and Del to sew multiple pieces of information together to form an overview of the masculinity-issue in-question. Through the popularity of Cressie's video channel, (toxic) masculinity is depicted as a widespread and globalized topic affecting people everywhere. Whitehead notes that in the past decades, women taking action against the traditional, hegemonic gender order has, along with the rising interest in men and masculinities as subjects of criticism, increasingly paved the way for progress (2). Bringing forth these issues is a part of progress and a move toward promoting progressive masculinity. This way, the novel utilizes, once more, authentic and contemporary elements familiar to the majority of today's younger readers in order to explore the position of masculinity effectively both in and outside the text.

Considering the many messages ranging from promoting appropriate forms of masculinities to advocating important social changes, the novel's didactic function is noticeable. From one perspective, the novel resembles a contemporary version of *roman à these*, or a 'thesis novel.' Defined as "a didactic novel that puts forward an argument or proposes a solution to some problem of politics, morality, or philosophy" ("Roman à these"), one well-known example of such a novel is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from 1852, with its message to abolish slavery. Susan Suleiman has analyzed the concept of *roman à these* in literary theory in her book *Authoritarian Fictions* (1983). In her simplified terms, Suleiman's definition is the following:

roman à these is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine. (Suleiman 7)

Suleiman stresses the "primarily didactic and doctrinaire in intent" (8) part and specifies as their most important trait that *roman à these* offers a single, unmistakable way to interpret the thesis of the novel (9). Since the arrival of modernist writing shifted the focus from finding a single meaning to favoring the production of 'plural' texts with multiple meanings and ways to perceive their message (Suleiman 22), such readings of literary novels might be less common today. As seen, however, Giles has indeed

put forward an argument regarding the grip of masculinity in society, covering the topic from multiple angles. To quote the author's own thoughts about the meaning of his novel:

If there was one message I could have readers take away from this book, I hope they recognize Del's flaws, as well as the positives in his character. And look for ways to mirror the positives and maybe eliminate the flaws in themselves. [...] If there is a message, it's that we don't have to perpetuate toxic masculinity. (Giles, "Getting Real")

While the author does bring up a certain message that he hopes the novel to convey, the question whether that compares to features of *roman à these* still stands. Suleiman states that the *roman à these* is controversial due to its conflicting dual nature as both overtly ideological and fictional (Suleiman 2). To make its didactic thesis obvious, a *roman à these* needs to sacrifice mirroring intricacies of everyday life that is characteristic of realist novel (Suleiman 22-23). This issue makes defining Giles's novel as a *roman à these* challenging. Perhaps *Not So Pure and Simple*, and trends in YA fiction for that matter, exemplify a contemporary evolution of that genre, by paying focus on societal issues and offering both solutions and warning examples regarding said topics. If a traditional *roman à these* is overly ideological, then YA fiction offers a medium for balancing ideological messages and entertainment value. While this approach might be less ambitious, it means the novels can provide readers with more natural opportunities to think critically about relevant topics.

To return to the novel, next the video plays a comparable confession from his sister, finally provoking Del more strikingly. After hearing Cressie's account of having been assaulted in her college, Del is "[s]tunned" to the point of wondering why neither he nor his dad have been informed of the incidence until this moment (Giles 337). Remarking how "[i]t's hard to talk to you two about anything" (Giles 338), Del's mother refers to the prevailing juxtaposition between men and women: "Because I know what it's like for a woman. Doesn't matter age, looks, what we wear, where we go. There's always danger, because of, well, you" (338). The form of masculinity that should be eradicated includes "anger, violence, prejudice, misogyny, fear, oppression, and misunderstanding" (Adams and Frauenheim 171), and many of the said factors are highlighted by the video and the family discussion in a negative way, as is appropriate in the discourses of both progressive masculinity and didactic YA fiction. Del's mother's depiction of men as ominous here is stark, but it results in an effective reaction from the two males of the family. What follows is an epiphany of sorts for Del and his father. Del's

father is moved to tears by the revelations, and at this point Del also remembers and reconsiders MJ's lesson, linking the shared message of the two incidences together. The subsequent cracking of the experienced male-centered bubble can be discerned in both Del and his father as a result. Del's mother, afraid Del's actions may exacerbate in the future, tells Del how she has "seen you trying to force a situation with the Westing girl" (Giles 339), much to Del's dismay and confusion. The comment presented by a woman and a close family member reveals another perspective onto Del's masculinity, one that is vastly different from how Del himself has understood his actions. His sister softens the tone but raises another serious case:

I believe you, baby bro. I don't think you're anything like my attacker. But there are degrees to this. Maybe he wasn't always like that. Maybe he got denied too often. Angry too often [...] Maybe he built up to what he tried with me. But buildings have foundations. They start somewhere. Are you angry about anything's Kiera's done recently? (Giles 339)

As mentioned above, Del is faced with a serious question and a demand for self-reflection. While the commentary by Del's family may resemble an interrogation, it is the defining moment when Del is forced to confront the reality of not only his own situation, but those of women who have been and possibly remain damaged by the unjustly dominant traditional maleness.

After learning about both his sister's and mother's experiences, the next voice to address Del is his father's. Cressie's video concludes with a guideline for men to keep a check on other men since "y'all don't listen to us, maybe you'll listen to each other" (Giles 337), which can be seen as an effort to guide men act more progressively. Further, this part ties back to not only transgenerational teaching of masculinity, but to gender sensitive education. Possibilities to improve gender sensitive education differ depending on culture and available resources, and "gender sensitivity has to be considered on a governmental level, in education from kindergarten to university and in grassroots curriculums and classrooms" (Winhar et al. 118). Therefore, while gender sensitive education can be considered progressive, it is also partly ideological. Considering how Suleiman characterized the *roman à these* as being an overtly ideological novel, this part of promoting gender sensitivity mirrors at least certain traits of the *roman à these*. Coincidentally or not, Cressie's suggestion is then illustrated in action by Del's father. By verbalizing the cause for his and his son's traditionally masculine behavior, Del's father

takes the important steps toward correcting the course he and his son have, unknowingly to themselves, traveled:

It's not all your fault, because I've been encouraging you in a way that my father and my uncles and a bunch of other guys I looked up to encouraged me. It felt good-natured, like a rite of passage. 'Go get that girl.' But all I can think about now is that animal who put his hands on Cressie was probably getting good-natured encouragement from his dad, and uncles, and all the guys around them. 'Go get that girl.' (Giles 339-40)

Del's father has clearly understood how the masculinity in his life has been bound to other fellow men, in other words, to the male hegemony. Similarly as shown in Sáenz's novel, the grip of hegemony has resisted through tradition and education, and this can prove problematic or negative. Following this moment, however, the awareness of this as demonstrated by Del's father is also a sign of progress. It signifies breaking out of the chains that bind and blind people, men predominantly, that is consequently depicted by Del's father affirmations. Due to the said reasons, the example be considered a portrayal of progressive masculinity and development for Del's father as well.

Overall, this "Enlightened Intervention" (Giles 342), as Del afterwards considers it, serves as his epiphany for progressive masculinity. Del's talk with his father marks the conclusion of the intervention, since after that Del rushes to his room alone and becomes overwhelmed by hours-long emotional turmoil and anger without a clear target. The meeting has clearly marked a point of transformation, as can be inferred from the following, final chapters of the novel. Del's demeanor has changed toward being more modest and composed. At first, he avoids many of his social contacts "given the very real work I apparently needed to do processing my feelings toward all the woman in my life" (Giles 349), giving thus himself time to consider what he has assimilated recently. On a positive note, Del does not have negative feelings for his family members, and he makes sure his relationships with Qwan and Jameer are still in order. With his newfound endeavor for personal development, Del is finally able to admit to himself and constructively discuss the fact that a romantic relationship between him and Kiera is more a fantasy than reality. He then makes amends with both Kiera and Shianne, rectifying his past behavior and mistakes and demonstrating an improved understanding of and acceptability toward alternative and more healthy masculine behavior.

As a final contribution to the development of Del's masculinity in the novel, Del decides to make his progress public and thus an inspiration to others. Partaking in his sister's vlog for a video in which he confesses all his plot-relevant secrets to the viewers, Del is not afraid anymore to publicly show his emotional side and act for the benefit of others. As he informs the viewers:

This is me baring my soul. Confessing my sins. It's okay if you're scared about anything in your life. It's not okay to lie and manipulate to hide those fears. I know that now. I'm better for it. I hope me telling my story helps you find ways to be better. (Giles 365)

Del's endeavor to being an example to others who may have been in a similar situation is clearly driven by an altruistic agenda. The notion of *self-help* discourse may help explain the situation. As American Psychological Association defines the term, self-help is:

a focus on self-guided, in contrast to professionally guided, efforts to cope with life problems. Self-help can involve self-reliance, in which one addresses such problems on one's own (e.g., by reading self-help books), or it can involve joining with others to address shared concerns together, as in self-help groups. (APA Dictionary of Psychology)

An earlier section of this thesis discussed the 'nice guy' phenomenon, which is one example of how self-help has shaped public discourse on different topics, masculinities included. US sociologist Eva Illouz explains that self-help discourse, an "alliance between the therapeutic discourse and the self-help ethos", resulted from developments and blending of frameworks in various areas, including major conceptions of self in American culture and the popularization of psychology (Illouz 155). As such, self-help interacts within both psychological and cultural discourse and has established its place in popular culture. On that note, Illouz characterizes the phenomenon as "self-help therapeutic culture" (156) that can provide people therapy for various challenges, ranging from social, mental, and economic troubles individuals face today (157).

To connect the topic to masculinity, self-help reading is one channel through which men encounter and may stop to think about hegemonic masculinity in their lives, and "Studying how men read self-help books provides important insight into the manner in which hegemonic ideals of masculinity influence the ways men think about themselves and present themselves to others" (McLean and Vermeylen 717). We have seen Del trying to cope with his challenges alone, but it is not until other people intervene that he starts embracing progressive masculinity. What comes to

hegemonic norms for men, seeking help stands in contrast with “culturally dominant masculine practices, such as being independent, suppressing one’s emotions, and displaying a lack of vulnerability” (McLean and Vermeylen 719). As implied in McLean and Vermeylen’s study, possible effects of self-help reading are diverse: some men who read such literature encounter a stigma, while others employ it as a resource, helping them to accomplish more financially secure positions or to improve their physical or mental well-being (730-31). Due to this, reading self-help books can serve as a substitute for men to cope with their health problems. Del partaking in self-help discourse in this scene is reminiscent of such a coping strategy. The question whether self-help discourse within the story doubles as self-help reading for the novel’s readers provides another layer worth mentioning, as it can be metacommentary about the relationship between masculinity and self-help. Regardless, similar to including social media, utilizing self-help helps to tie in parallels between the pages and the world readers experience today.

To return to Del’s confession, Adams and Frauenheim include this type of emotional courage in males as one of *The Five Cs* to reinvent one’s masculinity, the courage illustrating “the fortitude to enter the uncharted territory of deep self-reflection and the landscape of feelings—including empathy and compassion for others” (74). The significance of Del embracing this is a sign of progress, since as Adams and Frauenheim explain, even only one of the five Cs “can serve as the entry point for beginning the transformation to liberating masculinity” (88). Considering how Del announces his manifest through Cressie’s vlogging community, in which masculinity typically appears in a negative light, there is this time an attempt to provide a different, more optimistic portrayal of how men should act. The toxicity is fading, and the next steps taken are toward progress and equity.

With the considered factors in mind, the novel’s representation of masculinities depicts a guideline for improvement. Del evolves from oblivious and male-centered to someone with renewed respect for the heterogeneity of people and their opinions. On the same account, he becomes mindful of the rifts that certain forms of masculinities, such as toxic masculinity, expose people to. As Cressie informs at the start of Del’s video, Del has “recently turned the corner on some very Boy-ish Things . . . [which] refer to some of the sillier ideas boys get in their heads about what we like, and don’t like” (Giles 363). This turning away from boyish fantasies comes across as something favorable, and the connotation that accompanies it indicates of progress, rather than of deprivation. Simplifying the

matter, improving masculine behavior toward women is reduced to mere “boyish” and thus immature features, while growing out of it is something desired and worthwhile, that is, relating to real and respectable masculine characteristics. Aptly, this didactic message, once again, returns to some of the very integral features of YA fiction and the reader-oriented meaning-making strategies it prominently applies to texts, as was considered with genre theory within the theoretical framework.

Finally, Del’s journey of self-discovery has been developing side-by-side with the representation of masculinities in the story. The novel depicts these mainly in the case of Del, but also through various characters addressed above. Jill Ratzan acknowledges similar function in their starred review, stating how “[d]ialogue between Del and his father, older sister and other characters gives readers a view of gender politics from balanced perspectives without interfering with Del’s authentic narrative voice.” Likewise, the novel maintains a respectful configuration of masculinities in Del’s peers Qwan and Jameer, whose characterizations highlight alternative paths to experiencing maleness. The role of religion and Purity Pledge, in turn, functions as a reminder of how traditional gender roles are simplified and detrimental. In terms of promoting positive development of masculinity, the importance of male role models and setting a proper example are other issues the novel considers. Characters such as Del’s teacher MJ and Del’s family members signify inspirational instances that help Del disclose effects of progressive and toxic masculinities. As made evident, the scope when tackling with these issues of masculinities can be immense, ranging from the individual-centered plight to a larger context of societal critique.

As the title *Not So Pure and Simple* suggests, the male experience and its significance remain a complex issue in both Del’s personal life and the surrounding society. In essence, the title can be considered to symbolize not only the unfavorable sides of masculinity, but also the potential for it to take improved forms apart from hegemony, as shown by the analysis and today’s views mirrored in the story. Certain expressions of hegemonic masculinity prove problematic for also female characters, and uncovering this causation greatly affects Del’s consideration of what is and is not suitable masculine behavior. Achieving awareness of this functions as the guiding principle for both the characters and the readers of the novel, further strengthening the coaction of the novel’s thematics and employed YA strategies. With these concluding remarks, *Not So Pure and Simple* succeeds, with help from utilizing contemporary and thought-provoking issues apt for an YA novel, in

contextualizing and transmitting its representation of masculinities to both its targeted youth audience and the general population who, almost inevitably, encounter similar masculinity-related issues as explored in the novel.

5. Conclusion

Despite the fact that today's masculinities are diverse, traditional ideas of how to act as a man continue to persist. Hegemonic masculinity provides a frame for analyzing the hierarchy of different forms of masculinities and gender roles. Since masculinities are culturally and historically dependent, they are found in various representations in both literature and pop culture. The young adult genre, which reaches a wide audience today, has become a medium where these two intersect, making it an ideal source to study current representations of masculinities. This thesis has analyzed how masculinities are represented in two contemporary YA novels, Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and Lamar Giles's *Not So Pure and Simple*, and what effects these representations can have on readers.

The theory section contextualized key concepts of the study in three parts. The first part exemplified traditional roles of masculinity and introduced hegemonic masculinity, the representation of which is also included in the analysis. The following part further emphasized masculinity, showing how literature and fiction function as relevant platforms for representations of masculinity. The third part showed that the YA genre works well for analyzing representations of masculinities, since it is didactic, reaches the public, and frequently mirrors contemporary themes. The advantages of YA for influencing readers were further supported by ideas from genre theorists.

The analysis sections focused on one novel at a time. The first section started with analyzing the masculinity of Sáenz's protagonist, Ari. The way his masculinity was portrayed made Ari stand out from hegemonic masculinity, but also demonstrated the influence of it and other masculinities in his environment, including machismo. The analysis continued with the other titular character, Dante, whose masculinity was representative of both a healthy and a minority masculinity. It was apparent that Dante's and Ari's masculinities differ, and that the latter was influenced by the former. As a third major example of representation, the analysis examined the masculinities of father characters. While these representations illustrated both traditional and healthy masculinity, more emphasis was put on the latter. These also subverted traditional images and demonstrated transgenerational teaching of masculinity, which were deemed other significant factors for the development of Ari's masculinity.

On the whole, *Ari and Dante* portrayed masculinities diversely, addressing challenges of navigating between traditional and non-traditional masculine gender roles and offering positive role models in the process.

The second part of the analysis focused on the portrayal of masculinities in Giles's novel. The protagonist Del can be seen to embody hegemonic masculinity, giving insight into how the masculine ideology manifests. Some of Del's actions and behavior also related to toxic masculinity, the inclusion of which connected the novel's portrayal of masculinities to contemporary issues more closely. Similarly, Del's teacher and family members helped Del to understand negative effects of toxic and traditional masculinities. Despite Del's conformity to several masculine norms, his masculinity develops throughout the novel, ending with him ultimately finding and adapting a positive masculine model in progressive masculinity. To achieve this outcome, the novel highlights problems that detrimental masculinity forms entail on a societal level, providing more commentary on contemporary issues in the process. Additionally, Del's friends Qwan and Jameer provided further representations of masculinities in the novel, contributing to its depiction of diversity and subordinated or minority masculinities. Qwan's masculinity was seen developing positively, moving away from stereotypical images, whereas Jameer's masculinity and queerness were contrasted with how religion and the Purity Pledge can promote detrimental traditional masculinity and gender roles. While the masculinities in *Not So Pure and Simple* do not stray from showing contemporary problems with traditional masculinity, they are nonetheless portrayed as dynamic and capable of also developing into healthier forms.

As seen by the two different novels, representations of masculinities play a thematically and educationally significant role in both novels. Both novels also demonstrate how masculinity is progressively shaped by the reciprocal effects of the self and the environment. The direction the novels take embraces the plurality of masculinities as a resource, helping readers to strive toward equity and a better understanding of both the prevalent homogeneity and promoted heterogeneity. A realistic tone, inclusion of adolescent protagonist, acceptance of non-traditional or alternative masculine roles, and parallels with other contemporary issues or pop-culture, all come together with thematics that are relevant to and sufficiently universal for both adolescent and adult readers. In doing all this, the two novels analyzed in this thesis can be seen to aim to redesignate what is seen as

proper masculine behavior, and open doors for people to step outside dominantly hegemonic perceptions of masculinity.

Finally, we can consider the implications for further research. This thesis has focused on the depiction of masculinities by considering YA novels written by male writers and mainly concerning male characters. Female writers could provide another perspective onto the issue, as Giles's novel already alludes to the experiences of female characters. Including female protagonists can have a similar outcome and provide insight into how masculinity in female characters is perceived, for example. Another factor that has limited this thesis is the setting. Both novels were set in the United States and can be considered to reflect typical Western values and culture. These views on masculinities do not necessarily comply with those of different societies over the world, and looking into representations of masculinities in such contexts may provide alternate results. As it stands, the representation of masculinities can take various paths, and this testifies to its potential as a topic of current academic interest.

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