



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane

Tesi di Laurea

***Performing, Surviving, Loving: Dispersed
Masculine Identities in the Mirror of
Contemporary Autofiction***

Relatore
Prof. Marco Malvestio

Laureando
Marco Cassan
Matricola n° 2123655

Anno Accademico 2025/2026

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1. The Study of Masculinities: Hegemonic, Intersectional, Crisis Perspective	10
1.1. Chapter Overview. The Masculine: From Invisible Norm to Critical Object	10
1.2. From Hegemony to Multiplicity: Theories of Masculinity	12
1.2.1. The Notion of Gender and Its Contribution to the Debate on Masculinity	12
1.2.2. Connell’s Hegemonic Masculinity	14
1.2.3. Critiques and Developments of the Hegemonic Model: Hybrid, Inclusive, and Affective Masculinities	17
1.3. The Intersectional Turn: Implications for the Study of Masculinities.....	22
1.3.1. Queer and Postcolonial Studies and Masculinity	23
1.3.2. The Case of Black Masculinity	25
1.4. The Crisis Narrative: Continuities from Robert Bly to Andrew Tate.....	29
1.4.1. The mythopoetic movement.....	30
1.4.2. Contemporary narratives of crisis	31
1.5. The Value of Literary Analysis for Masculinity Studies	34
Chapter 2. The Becoming Self: Models of Writing from the Bildungsroman to Autofiction	36
2.1 Chapter Overview: Masculinity and Its Narrative Realisations	36
2.2. The Bildungsroman as the Archetypal Masculine Self-Narration Form	37
2.2.1. Origins and Cornerstones of the Genre	37
2.2.2. The Exclusiveness of <i>Bildung</i> : Challenges, Confirmations, and Developments.	39
2.3. Autofiction, or the Site for Contemporary Realisations of the Self	42
2.3.1. Doubrovsky and the Origin of Autofiction.....	42
2.3.2. The Foundations of Autofiction: Autobiography and Fiction	42
2.3.3. Framing the Concept of Autofiction.....	45
2.3.4. The Holistic Approach to Autofiction and the Roles of Readers and Authors	50
2.3.5. On the Autofictional <i>Truth</i>	52
2.4. Autofiction and Its Potential for the Narration of Masculinities	53
Chapter 3. Fragile Coming of Age: Vulnerable Masculinity in Ocean Vuong’s <i>On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous</i>	57
3.1. On the Author: Ocean Vuong and the Aesthetics of Marginal Experiences.....	57
3.2. Situating <i>On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous</i> within Contemporary Autofiction	59
3.3. American Society as a Site of Normalised Violence	63
3.3.1. Migrant Labour Intersecting the American Landscape	64
3.3.2. “Damaged American Fathers” and Learned Behaviours of Hegemonic Masculinity	65

3.4. The Mother-Son Bond and Family as a Site of Learned and Embodied Care	69
3.4.1. The Family Setting: Trauma-Driven Violence and Care-Oriented Love.....	69
3.4.2. Surviving Each Other’s Truths	71
3.4.3. Interdependency and Mutual Care as an <i>Alternative</i> Family Model	73
3.5. Queer Desire and the Reconfiguration of Masculine Norms	74
3.5.1. Framing the Character of Trevor	74
3.5.2. The Erotic as a Site of <i>Alternative</i> : Power Reversal and Masculine Innovation.....	76
3.6. Conclusion: <i>On Earth</i> Narrating Vulnerable Masculinity	80
Chapter 4. Archiving a Rebel Lifestyle: Hypermasculinity in Gabriel Krauze’s <i>Who They Was</i>	81
4.1 On the Author: Gabriel Krauze and the Ethics of Self-Exposure.....	81
4.2 Situating <i>Who They Was</i> within Contemporary Autofiction	82
4.3. Shaping the self between symbolism, beliefs and hypermasculine coping mechanisms .	86
4.3.1. Symbolic Duality Without Dissolution	86
4.3.2. Agency, Vitality, and the Rejection of Submission: Snoopz’s Unconventional Worldview	89
4.3.3. Drugs and Violence as Emotional Technologies	91
4.3.4. Control, Defiance, Hyper-Awareness.....	92
4.4. Masculinity in Relation to Women: Desire, Validation, and the Refusal of Containment	92
4.4.1. Women in the Arena of the Road: Audience and Script	93
4.4.2. Sexual Encounters and the Consolidation of Masculinity.....	94
4.4.3. Love, Intimacy, and the Burden of Containment	95
4.5. Masculinity in Relation to Family: Inheritance, Conflict, and the Cracks in Hardness ...	96
4.5.1. Original and Alternative Family Settings	96
4.5.2. The Mother: Conflict, Control, and Recognition Denied.....	97
4.5.3. The Father: Model of Responsibility and Mediated Love.....	98
4.5.4. The Cracks in the Performed Stoicism.....	99
4.6. The Masculine Infrastructure of the Road and Its Dynamics	101
4.6.1. South Kilburn: Spatial Surveillance and Social Regulation.....	101
4.6.2. Unquestioned Closeness: Male Bonding and Brotherhood.....	102
4.6.3. Reputation: inheritance, Performance, and Symbols	103
4.6.4. The System’s Decline: Inevitability Without Victory.....	104
4.7. Conclusion: <i>Who They Was</i> Engaging the Hypermasculine Reality of the Street.....	106
Chapter 5. Between Systemic Constraint and Emotional Relationality: Black Masculinity in Caleb Azumah Nelson’s <i>Open Water</i>	107
5.1. On the Author: Caleb Azumah Nelson and the Aesthetic Legitimation of Black Masculinity.....	107
5.2. Situating <i>Open Water</i> within Contemporary Autofiction	108

5.2.1. The <i>You</i> -Narration Between Introspection and Address.....	111
5.3. Identity, Emotional Awareness, and the Conditions of Black Masculinity	113
5.3.1. Emotional Awareness and the Limits of Articulation.....	113
5.3.2. Art, Sport and Music as Emotional Languages of the Black Self.....	117
5.3.3. Hypervisibility and Misrecognition in Black Masculinity	119
5.3.4. Living Under Threat: Violence and Precarious Existence.....	120
5.3.5. Freedom as an Open Question.....	122
5.4. Love, Intimacy and Relational Masculinity	123
5.4.1. Recognition and Desire: The Emergence of Relational Identity.....	124
5.4.2. Embracing <i>Seeness</i> : Intimacy Beyond Language	125
5.4.3. Love as a Space of Safety and Freedom.....	126
5.4.4. Exposure and the Fear of Being Seen	128
5.4.5. Masculine Silence and the Collapse of the Relationship.....	129
5.4.6. Shame, Self-Recognition, and Emotional Reckoning	131
5.4.7. Writing, Confession, and the Possibility of Renewal	132
5.4.8. The Closing of the Circle: Seeing and Being Seen	133
5.5. Conclusion: <i>Open Water</i> Moving from Awareness to Articulation	133
Conclusion.....	135
Sommario in italiano	139
Works cited.....	150

Introduction

In recent years, questions surrounding masculinity have become increasingly central to public and cultural debate. Discussions of gender have often focused—rightly—on the structures of power that historically privileged male experience, yet contemporary conversations have also begun to address the complexities and contradictions that shape the condition of masculinity today. Young men in particular frequently find themselves navigating conflicting expectations: the persistence of traditional models of masculinity centred on professional success and social dominance on the one hand, and the growing awareness of their limitations fostered by an increasing exposure to alternative discourses on the other. Within this context, literature offers a space in which masculine identity can be examined, questioned, and reimagined. At the same time, both scientific studies and *feuilleton* have pointed out that younger male readers often engage with literary reading less frequently than their female counterparts, raising questions about the kinds of narratives through which young men might recognise themselves and reflect on their own experiences. This dissertation emerges from an interest in the potential of contemporary literature to address this gap. By focusing on autofictional works written by young male authors, it explores how literary self-narration can become a site in which masculinity is not simply reproduced but critically observed, revealing both its pressures and its possibilities for transformation.

Over the past decades, masculinity has increasingly emerged as a central concern in literary and cultural studies. Once treated as an unmarked and seemingly stable category that considered men as the universal norm for humanity as a whole, masculinity is now widely understood as historically contingent, socially constructed, and context dependant. The development of studies on masculinity, particularly since the late twentieth century, has challenged traditional assumptions about male identity epitomised by the influential model of “hegemonic masculinity” proposed by Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995), emphasising the plurality of masculinities and the ways in which gender is shaped by cultural expectations, social structures, and personal experience.

At the same time, recent decades have witnessed the growing prominence of autofiction, a hybrid narrative mode that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. Since the term was first introduced by Serge Doubrovsky in the late 1970s, autofiction has come to describe a wide range of literary works in which authors draw explicitly on their own lives while simultaneously deploying fictional strategies. Rather than presenting a stable autobiographical persona, autofiction frequently foregrounds the re-elaboration of lived experiences through fragmentation, self-questioning, and narrative experimentation to obtain a fictional realisation of the self. As a result, the autofictional mode offers a particularly fertile terrain for exploring the construction of identity. If the traditional autobiographical narrative often aimed to present a coherent life story culminating in a sense of retrospective unity based on referential *truth*, autofiction tends instead to emphasise instability, contradiction, and the ongoing process of becoming.

This shift has important implications for the representation of masculinity. Classical literary models of male development—most notably the Bildungsroman—have historically relied on narratives of linear progress and integration within dominant models in society. In such texts, the male protagonist typically moves through a series of formative experiences that ultimately leads to maturity, social recognition, and the consolidation of a stable identity. However, autofictional narratives increasingly challenge this paradigm of linear development. In a cultural context marked by shifting gender norms, heightened awareness of racial and sexual difference, as well as higher visibility for nondominant perspectives, masculine identity often appears less as a coherent and resolution-oriented endpoint than as a site of tension and negotiation. Autofiction, with its emphasis on subjectivity and self-examination, provides a particularly effective medium for articulating these transformations.

Given these premises, this thesis investigates how contemporary autofictional narratives reconfigure masculinity by examining three works published in the last decade: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by Ocean Vuong, *Who They Was* (2020) by Gabriel Krauze, and *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson. Although these texts differ significantly in style and thematic focus, they share a preoccupation with the construction of masculine identity in contexts shaped by vulnerability, violence, intimacy, and racialised experiences. Taken together, they reveal how contemporary male-authored

autofiction moves away from traditional models of masculine development to foreground the instability, independency, and multiplicity of masculine subjectivity.

The selection of these three texts also allows the thesis to trace a chronological narrative arc across different stages of life, from adolescence to early adulthood. Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* centres largely on childhood and adolescence, depicting the protagonist's coming-of-age through experiences of migration, family trauma, and queer desire. Krauze's *Who They Was* shifts the focus to late adolescence and early adulthood, portraying the protagonist's immersion in a world of street violence and criminality during his late teenage years and university life in London. Finally, Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* explores the emotional landscape of early adulthood, focusing on intimacy, articulation of vulnerability, and the search for relational belonging within the context of a romantic relationship, with the fundamental underlying influence of Blackness as a lens through which reality is experienced and recounted. By moving across these stages, the dissertation assesses how different moments of life generate distinct configurations of masculinity while also revealing recurring patterns of fragmentation and self-reflection.

The central argument of this study is that contemporary autofiction provides a space in which alternative narrations of masculinity can be staged, destabilising traditional narratives of masculine identity (and its formation) by presenting it not as a linear developmental achievement but as a *dispersed* and relational process. Rather than culminating in the consolidation of a stable male identity, the narratives presented here emphasise uncertainty, emotional exposure opposed to containment, and the ongoing negotiation of selfhood. Crucially, none of the texts offer simple and unilateral solutions to the problem of the depiction of masculinity, and this thesis aims not to discern between *good* and *bad* models but to present and analyse the different ways of dealing with such issues.

Methodologically, this dissertation combines approaches from masculinity studies, narrative theory, and contemporary literary criticism. The analysis draws on theoretical perspectives that conceptualise masculinity as performative and plural rather than singular or fixed. At the same time, the study engages with scholarship on autofiction in order to examine how features typically associated with this mode of writing—such as the blurring of autobiographical and fictional elements, the emphasis on subjective voice,

and the fragmentation of narrative structure—shape the representation of masculine experience. By placing these frameworks in dialogue, the dissertation explores how narrative form and gender identity intersect within contemporary literary production.

The structure of the dissertation reflects this analytical trajectory. Chapter One introduces the theoretical framework of masculinity studies from their origin to current debates, outlining key concepts related to hegemonic masculinity, gender performance, and the plurality of masculine identities, with specific attention to the case of Black masculinity and to the rhetoric of *crisis* developed around the concept throughout the last three decades. Chapter Two briefly presents the Bildungsroman as the genre of prototypical masculine formation to then show how autofiction detaches itself from the logics of the former in portraying the masculine identity's evolution. The chapter then thoroughly examines the emergence of autofiction as a contemporary literary mode, discussing its relationship to autobiographical writing and presenting the peculiarities and main theories developed around this mode of writing. The following analytical chapters represent the core of this thesis and offer close readings of the three primary texts. Chapter Three analyses Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, in which masculinity is shaped through experiences of queerness, vulnerability, familial memory, and intergenerational trauma. Chapter Four turns to Gabriel Krauze's *Who They Was*, exploring the performative and often destructive dynamics of violent masculinity within a hypermasculine social environment. Chapter Five examines Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water*, where intimacy and emotional openness become central to the possibility of relational masculinity, in a context shaped by cultural biases and social pressures. The conclusion then synthesises and compares the findings of these analyses to reflect on the broader implications these contemporary autofictions can have for the study of masculinity in literature.

By bringing together these three distinct yet interconnected narratives, this thesis ultimately seeks to demonstrate how contemporary literature provides a powerful lens through which to examine the evolving configurations of masculine identity. Rather than reaffirming traditional ideals of male development and autonomy, the texts analysed here reveal masculinity as a fragile, contested, and relational process—one that unfolds through vulnerability, conflict, and the search for connection in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Chapter 1. The Study of Masculinities: Hegemonic, Intersectional, Crisis Perspective

1.1. Chapter Overview. The Masculine: From Invisible Norm to Critical Object

For centuries, masculinity remained largely unexamined in Western intellectual thought, perceived as the invisible norm against which other genders were defined. As feminist scholars have long pointed out, the “unmarked” male subject functioned as a universal measure of humanity, culture, and reason, a sort of what Di Grigoli (2020) defines “absent presence” (p. 121, my translation). Only with the emergence of feminist, queer, and postcolonial critiques in the late twentieth century did masculinity itself become visible as a *gendered* and *constructed* category.

The first Men’s Studies developed as a response to a perceived crisis of masculinity (which will be presented in more detail in the 4th section of the chapter) as well as to the emergence of feminist, queer and postcolonial critiques parallel to the second wave of feminism. The common aim to highlight the position of men in relation to their masculinity was, starting from the 1980s, elaborated in two opposite schools of thought: one can be traced back to the mythopoetic men’s movement inaugurated by Robert Bly (and then followed by the more extremist Men’s Rights Movement), the other takes up the deconstructive approach adopted by feminism. While the former can be seen as a reactionary answer to societal changes of the time, the latter problematises masculinity in a way that has allowed a generation of scholars to understand, as it has been done with femininity, the dimensions of masculinity that are linked to specific cultural and historical systems and translate them into specific behavioural patterns.

By turning masculinity into an object of critical reflection, scholars challenge its historical invisibility and reveal how deeply it structures language, identity, and narrative. In this sense, studying masculinity does not simply mean studying men. Rather, it involves examining how societies have defined and enforced ideals of manhood, how those ideals have shaped power relations, and how individuals negotiate, resist, or reimagine them. To this extent, a brief terminological remark deserves attention. As prominent scholars M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn e R. W. Connell point out in their *Handbook*

of *studies on men and masculinities* (2005), naming the branch of research “Men’s Studies” may be misleading in its analogy with Women’s Studies by disregarding the asymmetry of gender relations that led necessary the development of Women Studies. A denomination like “Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities” (CSMM), therefore, better encompasses the current state of the art, which “inspired by, but not simply parallel to, feminist research on women” (Connell, Hearn, Kimmel, 2005, p.3).

By using the term Critical Studies on Masculinity (CSMM), the purpose is to imply a critical reflection that opposes the fixed realisation of gender roles that may lead to fracturing tendencies. In addition, the focus on masculinities and not (exclusively) on men opens up research to different ways of being and experiencing masculinity, moving away from rigid deterministic approaches. In this regard, Jeff Hearn (2015) further refines the area in which CSMM operate:

First, these studies, by recognizing men and masculinities as *explicitly gendered* rather than non-gendered, emphasize men’s relations, albeit differently to *gendered power*. They have entailed a *specific* rather than an implicit or incidental, *focus* on the topic of men and masculinities, informed by *feminist, gay, queer and other critical gender scholarship*. Men and masculinities are understood as *socially constructed, produced, and reproduced* rather than as somehow just “naturally” one way or another; as *variable and changing* across time (history) and space (culture), within societies, and through life courses and biographies, spanning both the *material and the discursive* in analysis; and also in terms of the *intersections of gender and gendering with other social divisions*. (Hearn, 2015, p. 8, emphasis in original)

As this comprehensive definition anticipates, this chapter aims to lay the theoretical foundation for the analysis that follows, by tracing the major developments in Men and Masculinity Studies, from R.W. Connell’s (1995) theory of *hegemonic masculinity* to its critiques and different intersectional, queer, and affective approaches. The goal is twofold. To outline how masculinities have been conceptualised as multiple, relational, and historically contingent; and to situate the forms of masculinity represented in contemporary autofiction within these broader theoretical frameworks. Attention will be given then to the productive notion of crisis of masculinity and its outcomes in theory

and, more recently, popular culture. Finally, the chapter presents the value of literature as a means of investigating culturally structured constructions of masculine identity.

In doing so, this chapter aims to show the shift from studying men as a default category to analysing masculinity as a social construct. Therefore, it argues that masculinity should no longer be understood as a fixed identity, but as a *practice of negotiation*, an ongoing process through which men articulate vulnerability, desire, and belonging in relation to their selves and to others.

1.2. From Hegemony to Multiplicity: Theories of Masculinity

As briefly aforementioned, masculinity studies emerged in the late 20th century as a reaction to the feminist insight that gender is constructed and relational. Although there are several possible approaches to the study of men and masculinity, the one engaging with the feminist perspective, a gender perspective, is particularly appropriate for analysing the social construction of being a man. Firstly, because it looks at how people, in their interactions, construct knowledge and meanings that shape their behaviour; secondly, because it emphasises the importance of gender belonging in all aspects of social life and in intimate relationships in particular, looking at gender dynamics as power and representation dynamics. Early scholarship on the issue (Connell 1995/2005, Kimmel 1994/2006) emphasised that masculinities are multiple, hierarchical, and historically contingent.

1.2.1. The Notion of Gender and Its Contribution to the Debate on Masculinity

During the 1980s, increasing attention started to be given to men and the way they sustain gendered power relations. This assumption resonates with the lively debate about the notion of gender. Defining gender as a “socially imposed division of the sexes” (p. 179), the feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975) coined the term “sex/gender system” aiming to describe the “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (p. 159). Rubin was part of a scholar environment whose goal was to dismantle the idea of biological determinism. In their important contribution *Doing Gender* (1987), Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman delineated gender as something done and socially constructed rather than inherently part of individuals. People, they argued, carry out their performance of

gender in an arena influenced by the (virtual or real) presence of others. Gender may therefore be seen as “an emergent feature of social situations”, as “both an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (p. 126).

Having introduced the concept of performance in relation to gender, it is impossible not to mention Judith Butler, whose groundbreaking *Gender Troubles* (1990) provided the discourse around gender with important and new impulses. In their work, the scholar deconstructs the notions of *sex* and *gender* focusing on the importance of performativity. They argue how “gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (Butler, 1999, p. 11), de facto dismantling the essentialist causal link between ‘natural’ sexes and gender as their cultural realisation. In their view, we define sex in our gendered understanding of the world as well as we construct our gender identity by the continuous performance of the “very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (p. 10). These expressions, later referred to as “attributes” (p. 180), are not ‘just there’ as signs, they are instead performative, denying therefore the existence of “preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (Ibid.). Assuming that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (Ibid.) clarifies how “the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity” (Ibid.) are part of the same narrative to which “restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (Ibid.) belong. The notion of gender as a “free-floating artifice” (p. 10) allows therefore to escape binary narrations of gender dynamics, calling at the same time for deeper reflections on the concept and idea of masculinity.

Butler’s deconstructivism resounds in Raewyn Connell’s approach to the study of masculinity. The Australian sociologist agrees in seeing gender as “inherently relational” (2015, p. 39), constantly being constructed and reinforced in the actions that people perform on a daily basis and clearly posits masculinity not as “a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836), but rather as “configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Ibid.). In her many studies devoted to masculinity, she firmly opposes the notion of a masculine essence attributable to men’s bodies, just as she refuses the idea of a single

type of masculinity: what it means to be a man is a social and historical construct, and a process of personal development. Most importantly, according to her, masculinity is “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.” (Connell, 2005, p. 71).

1.2.2. Connell’s Hegemonic Masculinity

Importantly, Connell titled her seminal work *Masculinities* to emphasise the multiplicity within the concept. She introduces the term “multiple masculinities” (p. 76), implying the presence of multiple ways of being men that finds different (and complex) definitions within societies and historical periods. According to the sociologist, masculinities are not fixed and unchangeable, and they form themselves in relation to other masculinities. She infers, therefore, to the existence of a hierarchy of masculinities, at the top of which we find *hegemonic masculinity*, the dominant construction of masculinity in a given society and historical period.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has its roots in Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, a system in which “a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” (p. 77) or, in Hearn’s (2004) words, where “dominant (economic) class controls society, pressing its definition of the situation” (p. 54). This model both structures and legitimises gendered power, in the way it represents “the configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Far from being an innate property of individuals, hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a cultural product – a performative act in the vein of Butler – resulting from and, at the same time, fostering patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is supposed to provide a solution to the tension which are inherently present in gender relations, in the way in which it tends to “stabilise patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 853).

Hegemonic masculinity defines *the* way of being a man: while not representing “a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same” (Connell, 2005, p. 76), it presents itself as a model of success, as the most socially desirable way to be a man. In Western

capitalist society, according to Connell, the dominant ideal is exemplified by competitive, career-oriented, aggressive, cynical, unemotional, heterosexual men. The model is thus situated on a framework of masculine supremacy, not only at the micro-level in family dynamics, but also at the macro one of the public spheres. While the scholar admits that the number of ‘performers’ of hegemonic masculinity *stricto sensu* may not as high as expected, she introduces the concept of “patriarchal dividend” (p. 79) to identify the benefits in terms of “honour, prestige and right to command” (p. 82) men gain from the “overall subordination of women” (p. 79) fostered by hegemonic masculinity. The concept of dividend is subtle, as it represents the ‘passive profit’ men earn from the underlying, obscure discrepancy in gender relations. At the same time, it is worth noticing how the female sphere is both victim and, in a sense, involuntary promoter of these dynamics.

Connell outlines the necessity of an “overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men)” and of a “general symbolism of difference” (p. 223). The relational nature of masculinity represents, indeed, a leitmotiv of Connell’s thinking. From presenting hegemonic masculinity as “always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” (Connell, 1987, p, 183), she then defines a broader concept of masculinity as non-existing “except in contrast with femininity” (Connell, 2005, p. 68), while “patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). In a similar way, Michael Kimmel presents the opposition feminine/masculine as crucial in shaping the masculine identity, which is, according to the scholar, “born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine” (Kimmel, 2016 p. 64). In his previous work *Manhood in America*, in which he provides a detailed two-century history of the conceptions around being a man in the US, he further frames masculinity as a construct built on the “fear of others dominating [men], having power or control over [them]” (Kimmel, 2006, p. 4), centralising the role of women (together with femininity and effeminacy) and “marginalized ‘others’” (Ibid.) as models against which men can construct their ideal masculine self. This tendency shows how precarious – like everything that constructs itself on the basis of opposition from a certain ‘Other’ – the construction of the masculine gender identity is.

Returning to Connell, with the notions of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal dividend the scholar points out that masculinity is not a biological given, but rather a social and cultural construct in which a hegemonic model is established that dominates other forms of masculinity, based on social class, ethnicity and the privileges granted by the dividend to which other forms of masculinity are subordinate. Considering that many men do not correspond to the definition of hegemony, Connell (2005) recognises “relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination” (p. 37) between different kinds of masculinity, that are constructed by “practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on” (Ibid.).

Interestingly, she then provides us with a taxonomy of relationships *within* the masculine realm, in the way diverse types of masculinity relate to the dominant – hegemonic – one. *Subordination* can be found above all (but not only) in the relationship between the heterosexual and the homosexual man, with the former in a position of dominance and the latter in a condition of oppression. This subordination is expressed not only in the most striking manifestations of homophobia or discrimination and violence, but also in everyday practices and relationships. Men that ‘silently’ profit from the patriarchal dividend, even if they do not meet the criteria of the hegemonic framework, place themselves in a relationship of *complicity* with it, exercising their dominance over women “without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (Connell, 2005, p. 79). The last type of relationship concerns *marginalisation*, i.e. the relationship between the masculinity of members of the dominant classes and those of the dominated classes, or between different ethnic groups. As Connell writes, marginalised masculinities are subject to “authorization” (p. 81) by hegemonic masculinity. Her examples for this category, notes Reeser (2015), fall in the realm of race, as she observes how black athletes in the US embodying hegemonic masculinity has no “trickle-down effect” (Connell, 2005, p. 81) in the way that the fame and wealth acquired by members of a marginalised category does not result in changes in the status quo for the category as a whole.

It is now clear how hegemonic masculinity operates relationally and how it legitimises a hierarchy of masculinities. Rather than being embodied, it operates as a cultural construct that underlies relationships *within* the gender and *between* the genders. Together, as Howson and Hearn (2020) note, this conception

helps unmask the underlying “invisibility and taken-for-grantedness” (p. 43) that allowed the masculine view to be the unspoken norm. Connell’s model has provided an essential foundation for masculinity studies. Still, since its publication masculinities studies have undergone a profound conceptual broadening. Critics and reformulators have expanded the field by questioning the stability, coherence, and universality of the hegemonic model, leading to a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of how masculinities are produced, embodied, and contested. This theoretical evolution has opened new avenues for analysing gender not as a fixed hierarchy but as a constellation of practices shaped by power, affect, context, and intersectional identities.

1.2.3. Critiques and Developments of the Hegemonic Model: Hybrid, Inclusive, and Affective Masculinities

Demetrakis Z. Demetriou’s (2001) authors a pivotal early critique, arguing that Connell’s hierarchy of masculinities (hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, marginalised) risks depicting the hegemonic form as too homogeneous and impermeable, in the way hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities are “constructed as a *dualism*, as two distinct and clearly differentiated configurations of practice” (Demetriou, 2001, p. 347, emphasis in original). Instead, borrowing from Homi Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and negotiation, he suggests that hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominance by incorporating selected elements from subordinated masculinities. According to him, therefore, hegemonic masculinity is not simply the most powerful configuration; it is a “hybrid bloc” (p. 348) that selectively absorbs and neutralises alternative gender practices in order to preserve patriarchal power. Showing how elements of gay culture are made more visible and incorporated into the mainstream in an “attempt to articulate, appropriate, and incorporate rather than negate, marginalize, and eliminate” (Ibid.), the masculine bloc differs from hegemonic masculinity as it implies a “non-reified and non-dualistic understanding of masculine power and practice” (Ibid.). This insight, the idea that the hegemonic masculine appropriates “what appears pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment” (p. 345) lays the conceptual groundwork for later theories of hybrid masculinity and helps complicate the idea of a single, monolithic hegemonic ideal. Demetriou’s emphasis on “negotiation,

translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration” (p. 355) moves masculinity studies toward frameworks that better account for cultural diversity and change.

Howson and Hearn (2020) also recognise the problems in applying hegemonic masculinity as mere domination, as hegemony’s basis is itself “marked by leadership and persuasion in the creation of complicity”, and in accepting it as a “stable masculinity type” (p. 48). This focus on individual and individuation would implicate risking to lose focus on the greater social dynamic reality. Connell and Messerschmidt’s important reformulation of hegemonic masculinity (2005) puts a great deal of emphasis on the relational nature of the concept too. This relationship between hegemonic masculinity, emphasised femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities is itself presented as a pattern of hegemony, rather than domination. In this way, a “more holistic understanding of gender inequalities” is implied to recognise “the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 348) in shaping social and gender dynamics. Importantly, the scholars also highlight the role of embodiment and bodies as “both objects of social practice and agents in social practice” (p. 351). Together, they provide a reframing of the concept that moves the unique society-wide model of hegemonic masculinity to a multi-faceted one consisting of local, regional and global levels, proving the existence of multiple hegemonic masculinities.

Following this rethinking of the concept, James W. Messerschmidt produced another interesting reformulation of hegemonic masculinity (2018) that reasserts the value of the concept while clarifying its scope and flexibility. Building on the concerns expressed by years of scholarly reviews and applications of the notion, the scholar emphasises contextuality, implying how masculinities are not universal, but they emerge within specific institutional, cultural, and relational contexts. Together, the practices situated behind masculinity are presented under intersectional influences. Messerschmidt thus recognises how class, race, sexuality and age all play a role in determining the hegemonic version of masculinity. Further, hierarchies among masculinities must be understood through dynamic interactions, not static categories, and are secured by what he calls “structured action theory” (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 127), a set of relational and discursive social structures that allow “fleeting hegemonic masculinity” (p. xii) to be embodied in everyday actions and thus retain both “unequal gender relations” (p. 132) and power over other models.

Jeff Hearn's (2004) own reception of the concept of hegemonic masculinity reframes the discussion around the *hegemony of men*, suggesting that the focus on masculinities risks obscuring the structural power men continue to hold collectively. Such an approach seeks to "address the double complexity that men are both a *social category formed by the gender system* and *dominant collective and individual agents of social practices*" (Hearn, 2004, p. 59, emphasis in original). Hearn locates gendered domination not primarily in symbolic configurations but in the institutional, organisational, and political systems that reproduce male advantage. This perspective opens up the analysis to broader questions of governance, labour, and state power, highlighting how masculinity cannot be detached from the social structures that mediate inequality. According to Hearn, men's power is neither monolithic nor uniformly distributed; it operates through contradictory, dynamic social processes with women other genders and "within and among men" (p. 64).

The dialogue between different forms of masculinity is central in Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe's development of Demetriou's thesis on hybrid masculinities too. The scholars (2014) refer to hybrid masculinity as "the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities" (p. 246). They review a large body of research that shows how the most powerful version of masculinity (oftentimes corresponding to the cis-white heterosexual model) incorporates elements of "various "Others" into their identity projects" (Ibid.) to provide three patterns shared by hybrid masculine forms: *discursive distancing*, *strategic borrowing*, and *fortifying boundaries*. According to Bridges and Pascoe, men tend to discursively distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, performatively borrow traits typically associated with minorities like "young, gay, Black or urban men" (p. 253) perceived as more meaningful than theirs, and, in this way "fortify existing social and symbolic boundaries" (p. 246) that are made more obscure and subtle. In other words, men rebrand themselves as progressive through performances of, for example, queer stylistics, working-class toughness or feminist rhetoric, whereas hierarchies and systems of inequality are in this way "further entrenched and concealed in historically new ways, often along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (p. 254). This suggests that new forms of masculinity may be less emancipatory than they appear, functioning instead as updated strategies for maintaining privilege.

In observing changes in men's attitudes and behaviours, Eric Anderson does not share Bridges and Pascoe's view. With his *Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT)*, the author proposes a new framework with the aim to describe those masculinities that oppose the "orthodox" (Anderson, 2009, p. 8) model, emerging in contexts (British and American mostly sport-related areas involving young white men) where *homophobia*, the "fear of being socially perceived as gay" (Anderson and McCormack, 2018, p. 458), has decreased. This decline is displayed by findings like rejection of homophobia, inclusion of gay peers in friendship circles, tactile interactions with other men, engaging in activities once encoded as feminine, and refusal of violent and mobbing practices (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). In such settings, hierarchical stratification among masculinities weakens, emotional expressiveness, softness, and intimacy become acceptable and horizontal plurality replaces rigid vertical hierarchy. What Bridges and Pascoe (2014) simply regard as another conjugation of hybrid masculinity, is for Anderson and McCormack (2018) a comprehensive understanding of the changing arenas where masculine identities are in play. IMT thus captures the emergence of less defensive, less homophobic, and more emotionally open masculinities, often observed among younger generations in liberalised environments. This theory expands the masculinities framework beyond dominance and hierarchy, highlighting new spaces of emotional and social possibility.

Emotion, together with embodiment, has indeed become central to contemporary masculinity scholarship. Victor Jeleniewski Seidler is one of the scholars whose works (1989, 2007) foreground the emotional dimensions of masculine identity, emphasising the internal contradictions, vulnerabilities, and relational pressures that shape men's lives. His focus on how bodies and emotions structure masculine subjectivities examines the Cartesian dichotomy between rationality and affect that has historically underpinned patriarchal gender norms. Reiser's attention to affect, emotion and their interplay in men's bodies extends this line of inquiry, assuming that affect might "transform normative or hegemonic masculinity and [...] reify or reaffirm normativity of hegemony" (2020, p. 103). Importantly, the author differentiates affect ("pre-personal") from emotion ("primarily culturally coded") borrowing Massumi's definition of the latter as "the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience, [...] the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions"

(Massumi, 2002, quoted in Reeser, 2020, p. 104). In its being pre-linguistic and often failing to find discursive realisation, affect challenges a man's "sense of corporeal wholeness or his feeling of masculine self-control" (Reeser, 2023, p. 110) and has the capacity to "take over a male body and cause a masculinity breakdown" (p. 109) potentially leading to reframing of normative models of masculinity. Affect is an unfirm ground in which to observe and study masculinity, given its struggle to be realised in legible genuine emotions: much of the understanding of the affect underlying some human action relies on their readers' subjectivity. Yet, the idea that "with and through affect we do not know what a body can do" (Reeser, 2020, p. 109), opens up many possibilities, guarantees an "hermeneutic open-endedness" (p. 110) that allow masculinity to find multiple narratives around itself. Reeser and Gottzén (2018) take it further, suggesting how "[h]egemony works in part by playing on affective intensities, by coopting them" (p. 151). Thus, affect may not only reaffirm traditional gender constructs but also "queer normative masculinity by opening up to new non-heteronormative ways of being of representing" (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018, p. 152) and "help produce some new kind of feeling male subject not yet culturally defined" (p.153). Central is therefore once again the lack of fixity in the depiction of masculinities. An affective approach shows how masculinity is not only a social position or cultural script but also an emotional atmosphere, a way of feeling in and through the world. Together, it broadens masculinity studies to include emotional textures and embodied experiences, providing tools to analyse cultural production, literature, and personal narratives.

In combination, all these theoretical developments produce a field in which masculinity is understood as dynamic rather than static, contextual rather than universal, and embodied and affective rather than purely ideological. The cumulative effect is a shift from monolithic accounts of essential masculinity or a singular hegemonic model to a more nuanced understanding of masculinities as relational and historically situated. This theoretical trajectory naturally leads to the next key development in masculinity studies: the recognition that gender cannot be analysed in isolation from race, sexuality, class, migration, and other axes of social identity. The move from structural to situational and affective models has already pointed toward intersectionality as an indispensable framework. The next section therefore examines the critical contributions of Black studies, queer studies, and intersectional feminism, which further complicate and enrich

our understanding of masculinities in contemporary cultural contexts.

1.3. The Intersectional Turn: Implications for the Study of Masculinities

The theoretical developments outlined in the previous section highlight the need for an approach to masculinity that is relational, contextual, and attentive to difference. In this regard, one of the most significant shifts in masculinity studies over the past three decades has been the recognition that gender cannot be analysed independently of race, sexuality, class, migration, coloniality, and other axes of identity. Masculinity is not a singular identity category, but a constellation of positions produced at the intersection of multiple forms of power. This section maps out the intersectional turn in masculinity studies, with particular attention to queer studies and Black masculinity scholarship.

Intersectionality, first theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), emerged as a critique of feminist frameworks that centred white women's experiences while marginalising women of colour (Christensen and Qvotrup Jensen, 2020). Intersectionality demonstrates that social identities such as race, gender, and class are not additive categories but mutually constitutive. Within masculinity studies, intersectionality seems to provide two key insights. First, there is no generic or universal *man*. Masculinity is shaped by embodied histories, racial formations, national belonging, and socio-economic positioning. In other words, it cannot be abstracted from the racialised or sexualised body that enacts it. Second, some masculinities are systematically devalued, while others are normalised or idealised. Masculinity is thus inseparable from the social hierarchies of capitalism, colonialism, and heteronormativity.

Intersectionality applied to CSMM is no less than a way to complicate the framing of the object of study. However, considering how nuanced the understanding of men and masculinities has nowadays become, it appears difficult not to agree with Christensen and Qvotrup Jensen (2019) when they affirm that “complexity is a condition, not something to be avoided” (p. 89). Hosting different epistemologies, intersectionality can represent a way to “expand our knowledge about masculinity, power, and social differentiation” (p. 85) offering “analytical tools well suited to grasping differences among and between men and [...] how other social differences play a role in the social processes that shape and condition masculinities” (p. 89). When it comes to embracing the complexity rather than

refusing it, the mind rapidly goes to Queer and Postcolonial Studies. Such frameworks of thinking can both provide useful stimuli to the CSMM agenda.

1.3.1. Queer and Postcolonial Studies and Masculinity

The central object of interest of Queer Theory lies in the “so-called “non-normative”” (Allan, 2020, p. 73). Such an approach “plays and embraces the messiness of complexity” (Ibid.) in the realms of identity, sex, gender and desire. According to Jonathan A. Allan, therefore, the interaction with Queer Theory might “allow for critical studies of men and masculinities to focus on the unsaid, the non-normative, and the complexity and messiness of desire” (p. 74), to move from the *dominant* to approach the *diverse*, to examine “alternative practices, identities, and desires inherent to men and masculinities” (p. 80). Within this broad framework, it is important to introduce two early and fundamental contributors, namely Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jack Halberstam. While we own the former the fundamental terminology *homosocial*, used to describe (male) same-sex ‘masculinity-defining’ relationships, the latter’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) first conceptualised masculinity as not inherently tied to men.

In her *Between Men*, Sedgwick (1985) coined the term *homosocial desire* in a social context “characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 1) to place “male bonding” activities within an unbroken “continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (Ibid.). In a world in which masculinity is produced through homosocial relations structured by homophobia, the heterosexual male identity depends on the disavowal of same-sex desire. Sedgwick both questions and explains such tendency by rereading canonical pieces of English literature from Shakespeare to Dickens. She places relations between supposedly heterosexual men and desire between men and women as not completely separated. Analyses of triangular models of desire emphasise the impossibility to locate or stabilise “male-male relations as strictly “heterosexual”” (Reeser, 2015, p. 29). Scholarly interpretations of Sedgwick’s reflect on two essential points. First, *homosociality* can be used to understand how men develop relationships with other men to “construct power blocs and protect male territory and privilege” (Hammarén and Johansson, 2020, p. 214), in the way heterosexuality is emphasised, homosexuals are feared or hatred and misogynist language is used. Second, the complexity in gender relations observed by Sedgwick may also set “the stage to

consider movement-centered approaches to masculinity, including the queerness within heterosexual masculinity” (Reeser, 2015, p. 30). Queer lenses on masculinity can therefore really help focus on the performative and unstable nature of masculinity, on movement and the non-fixity of social constructs of manhood.

What is perhaps the greatest merit recognised to Jack Halberstam is indeed his recognition of masculinity as something not exclusively owned by men. With *Female Masculinity*, he demonstrates how masculinity “becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (Halberstam, 2014, p. 2), targeting for the first time non-male subjects such as tomboys and butches as bodies that really inform “about gender relations and [are] most generative of social change” (p. 3). In order to do so, he employs a queer methodology, that he importantly defines as “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (p. 13). This is an important impulse for CSMM to look for answers outside the norm, to consider minorities and liminalities as informative as the dominant models.

Such an approach is key to Postcolonial Studies too. As Farahani and Thapar-Bjokert (2020) nicely summarise,

Postcolonial historiography re-enacts the dialogical relations between the North (with all its heterogeneities) and the ‘Rest’ (with all its entities and complexities), a relationship that was essential to the formation of the ethos of modernity as well as construction of modern/non modern, progressive/primitive female or male (gendered) subject positions (p. 95).

Central to Postcolonial critique is the investigation on the aftermath of colonialism, the lasting legacy that colonial domination has had in culture and society. Within CSMM, this has to do with the exploration of the varied and overlapping (post)colonial masculine identities that emerge after or beyond colonialism. These are shaped in relation to, in reaction to, or in continuity or discontinuity with the different forms of masculinity constructed during colonial rule (Farahani and Thapar-Bjokert, 2020). That considered, it appears clear how the focus of Postcolonial attention in CSMM has to be on racialised, marginalised masculinities. Among many possible examples, I will focus on Black masculinity to provide theoretical insights that may be useful in the following analysis.

1.3.2. The Case of Black Masculinity

In his article on African and black men and masculinities, Kopano Ratele (2020) calls for an adequate consideration of the heritage of coloniality which is, in his view, oftentimes minimised or even disregarded in CSMM. Understanding it as the most important driver influencing the discourse around black men and masculinities allows three observations. First and most obviously, it is fundamental to always take into account the “historical trauma of colonialism, slavery, apartheid and global racism” (Ratele, 2020, p. 127) that led the colonising world to reshape its notion of ‘human’. There is therefore the necessity to decolonise work and approaches “to the very category of men, the very language and concepts we use to think of masculinity” (Ibid.). Second, studies that aim to centralise Blackness and Africanness have to aspire to make *blackgender* visible too. *Blackgender* is Ratele’s important coinage that signals how “black men and women are always already raced and gendered at once, [...] always black, particular, localised and never representative of humanity” (Ibid.). With this term, he implies the connection between the colonial past and contemporary reasonings on gender and race, assuming at the same time how patterns of domination have not extinguished with the end of colonialism but may have taken other forms. Third, the legacy of *dehumanisation*. The colonial reification that made “some men and women as non-men and non-women” (p. 128) might not be over, warns Ratele, as he questions which place the non-men’s heirs occupy in gender relations.

This framing of nonbeing clearly resonates with Frantz Fanon’s thought. Indeed, the theoretical foundations of Black masculinity studies are often traced to Fanon’s groundbreaking *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). A lot has been and could be said about this work, in which the West Indian psychiatrist analyses how colonialism produces psychic alienation in the Black man. Fanon’s depiction of the Black subject “overdetermined from without” (1986, p. 116) remains central to understanding how masculinity is experienced under the gaze of racial hierarchy. Central in Fanon’s view is the lack of agency that does not allow independent meaning making processes for him (and for the Black man) to take place, as “the meaning was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me” (p. 134). In his world, “a man was expected to behave like a man. I was

expected to behave like a black man—or at least a nigger¹” (p. 114). The black male body becomes the realisation of the inferior *Other* shaped by binary narratives of white virtue, civilisation, and cleanness and black sin, barbarism, and dirtiness. As a result, the black subject in colonial settings abandons actional behaviours to become “The Other” (p. 154), to adhere to the standards that white colonisers have set for him with their “cultural imposition” (p. 192). His masculinity is therefore never his own, but a distorted reflection of white fantasies of power and domination.

The role ‘white standards’ within gender relations is central in bell hooks’s critique of patriarchal masculinity too. As she observes in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. xi) shapes both the oppression and self-construction of Black men, producing forms of masculinity that are always already mediated by racism and exclusion. Fanon’s premonition – “[f]or the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (1986, p. 12), resonates in hooks’s thesis that patriarchal domination in black communities was learnt within the “gender politics of slavery and white-supremacist domination” (hooks, 2004, p. 3). In her view, African American men “had to be taught that it was acceptable to use violence to establish patriarchal power” (Ibid.). After having internalised white patriarchal standards, Black men see aggression in words and action, dominance, and stoicism as tools to affirm their male identity. The author advocates for *cool* Black men to unlearn these poor principles driven by patriarchy and reclaim tenderness and self-love.

Touching upon the notion of coolness, a key contribution from sociology and cultural studies is Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson’s concept of the *cool pose*, first articulated in *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992). Cool pose represents a way of conceiving Black male identity, a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors and Mancini Billson, 1992, p. 4). Coolness then functions as a performative strategy, a repertoire of gestures, language and style through which Black men make themselves visible to the dominant culture. Considered as the “bittersweet symbol of a socially disesteemed group that shouts, “we are,” in the face of a hostile and indifferent world that everywhere screams, “you are not”” (p. 116), being cool exemplifies the

¹ The term is retained in the quotation as it appears in the original 1986 translation.

“coping mechanism par excellence” (Ibid.), in the way becomes the only way in which the Black male can navigate and survive in a reality of social inequality. Yet it is also double-edged: while it offers agency, it can reproduce emotional repression and gendered domination, valorising toughness over vulnerability.

The cool pose can find its realisation also in what Mark Anthony Neal (2015) defines “Strong Black Man”, a sort of “functional myth on which the black nation could be built” (p. 21), a figure able to embody the resilience to all the afflictions Black men had to go through in “400 years of lived experiences by Black Men in North America” (Ibid.). In the second edition of his *New Black Man* (2015), however, Neal calls for a new politics of Black manhood grounded in feminist thought and self-reflexivity. Considering how the Strong Black Man behaves as a provider of financial security, stability and discipline for his family but also bearer of homophobic and misogynist views, Neal proposes the *NewBlackMan* model. Based in his own situation, his proposal refuses to be labelled as a “more positive version of black masculinity”, but rather aims to acknowledge “the many complex aspects, often contradictory, that make up a progressive and meaningful black masculinity” (p. 29). A great deal of emphasis is put on what influences black men. Neal attempts to reframe black feminism not as an enemy of black men, but as a useful tool to approach a deeper understanding of the condition of women within the black community. He also recognises hip-hop music’s role in shaping black youth identity as not entirely problematic, while still acknowledging how a degree of new language has to be made available to young men to help them “rethink their gender politics” (p. 158). Fundamental is also the role of fatherhood: children must be able to rely on their fathers not only financially but also emotionally. Neal envisions therefore a masculinity that embraces vulnerability, nurturance, and dialogue across gender lines: the male strength finds new conjugations in the *NewBlackMan*, in the way, accepting to struggle in the process, he commits to diversity within communities, supports women and feminism, and believes in love and the value of listening (p. 159).

In *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013), Neal extends his project by interrogating how popular culture renders certain Black male identities ‘unreadable’. Figures who do not conform to dominant scripts (from the “most legible black male body [as] criminal body and/or a body in need of containment” (Neal, 2013, p. 5) to the hypermasculine model spread by hip-hop culture) – whether queer, artistic, or

emotionally expressive – become illegible within both white and Black communities. Neal’s concept of *illegibility* is particularly relevant for contemporary literature, where young Black male narrators often articulate selves that resist cultural legibility through fragmentation, introspection, and ambivalence.

Neal’s observation intersects well Todd W. Reeser’s (2023) reflections on racialised masculinity as informed by “its oscillation between stable and unstable, between essential and fluid” (p. 177). According to the American scholar, binary oppositions (effeminacy/hypervirility, white/black) still work as fundamental tenets around which (black) masculinity can be construed to embrace – in a way the recalls Fanon’s discourse – a version of alterity intended “as an analogical link, a racial and gendered other all in one” (p. 170). That is why, argues Reeser, Black masculinity (in the American context) can be regarded as the result of the contradiction “between being seen and not being seen” (p. 181), between its steady presence in stereotyping images of “rapist[s], criminal[s], drug dealer[s], etc.” and its invisibility “as object of desire, in positions of power, etc.” (p. 182). This notion of *unseenness* will be central to the analysis of a young Black male’s identity depicted in Azumah Nelson’s *Open Water*. I will therefore touch on the issue again later.

This brief overview on Black men and masculinities aimed to show how Black masculinity has historically been constructed through racist and colonial discourses that oscillate between hypervisibility (the hypersexualised, violent Black man) and invisibility (erasure, marginalisation). Great emphasis is also put on the performance of masculinity as both constraint and creativity. Thus, the Black male subject emerges not as a fixed identity but as a *relation* – to history, to community, to the gaze of others, and to the self. It is essential therefore for Black male subject to gain representation that foreground the tensions between performative toughness and emotional transparency, between visibility and legibility, and between belonging and displacement. In this sense, the literature of young male authors today both inherits and reimagines the long struggle of Black (and non-Black) masculinity: the effort to narrate oneself fully in a world that has already scripted what that self should be.

Taken together, intersectionality, queer theory, and postcolonial studies assemble a multidimensional picture of masculinity as a field of power shaped by race, class, sexuality, migration, and their historical sedimentations. These frameworks contribute to

challenge the notion of masculinity as fixed and essential and emphasise instead the heterogeneity and *contestedness* of masculine identities across different contexts.

At the same time, they provide tools for understanding contemporary cultural tensions surrounding masculinity. Intersectional and queer analyses help explain why certain groups of men feel alienated from dominant gender norms, while postcolonial critiques illuminate how anxieties around race, migration, and social hierarchies have an impact on debates about masculinity. These tensions, when combined with shifting economic conditions and transformations in gender politics, have fuelled what is famously known as *crisis of masculinity*.

Accordingly, the next section will trace contemporary discourses of crisis and backlash. From nostalgia for archetypal conceptions of manhood to the culture of self-help and the impact of online influencers, the evolutions around the narrative of masculinity in crisis demonstrates how these phenomena respond to, resist, or distort the very theoretical insights outlined above.

1.4. The Crisis Narrative: Continuities from Robert Bly to Andrew Tate

As postcolonial perspectives try to show, the concept of masculinity might still be very attached to that of the white heterosexual male. It is also well known how feminist, postcolonial, and queer critiques try to unmask the privileges that white men, as subjects embedding the edges of both maleness and whiteness, benefit from.

It is in response to such impulses that the notion of a “crisis of masculinity” has gained prominence in the discussion of the (white) men’s position within the changing society of the late twentieth century. The keyword here is change. Changes in the perceived status of women or homosexuality (that have already been shown as fundamental counterparts against which the masculine identity defines itself) as well as “cultural shifts in labor, capital, or the nation” (Reeser, 2015, p. 20) are taken as the causes of the crisis of masculinity. Importantly, we should not consider crisis as an isolated case, but rather as recurring processes over time, which manifest themselves in different cultural contexts and take various forms (Ravn and Roberts, 2020), triggering opposing mechanisms of deconstruction and reconstruction of identity models. Particularly significant circumstances generating these crises, however, have been the “growing feminist discourse and [the] growing gay discourse” (Reeser, 2023, p. 27) since the 1970s and the

“massive societal shifts in economic and gender relations” (Ward, 2020, p. 201), linked to “processes of de-industrialization and neoliberal governance” (Ibid.) of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In his poignant observations of the American frameworks of manhood, Michael Kimmel (2006, 2013) also sees crisis as a typical discourse practice around the discussion of masculinity. In his investigations, he widely discusses the changes in the “playing field” (Kimmel, 2006, p. 197) in which American men move between the millennia. The erosion of features of the so-called traditional manhood like “economic independence, geographic mobility [and] domestic dominance” (Ibid.) has led men to feel anxious for the perceived loss of authority, status and power. This translates into what he defines as “aggrieved entitlement”, presented as “the sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 18). As the title of his monograph *Angry White Men* suggests, the author aims to bring to light how the category of white males perceives a loss of both power (to women and other minorities) and their sense of self-determinacy.

1.4.1. The mythopoetic movement

Central to the idea that masculinity is in crisis appears therefore the destabilisation of long-unchallenged patriarchal structures, critiqued in the first place by second-wave feminism and gay liberation movements starting from the 1970s. While this agitation led to the development of the Connell’s front I previously examined, it also produced responses on the very other side of the gender debate continuum: the mythopoetic movement. As a loosely organised network of writers and workshops, the movement sought to reclaim an allegedly lost essence of manhood through myth, ritual, and emotional introspection (Kimmel, 2006, p. 208).

Figures such as Robert Bly (*Iron John*, 1990), Sam Keen (*Fire in the Belly*, 1991), and Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette (*King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*, 1990) argued that industrial modernity and feminism had estranged men from their ‘deep masculine’. Their proposed solution was not political but spiritual: a journey inward toward archetypal male energies drawn from Jungian psychology and mythic tradition. In his 1990’s *Iron John: A Book About Men*, for example, Bly recounts the journey of a young boy attempting to escape the ‘feminising’ influence of his mother. Bly denounces the system that was

denying the ‘true’ men’s self, that of the “inner warrior” or “wild man”, as Kimmel (2006, p. 208) puts it, calling for a return to the profound, biological and essential masculinity that is part of their “genetic inheritance” (Gardinier, 2002, p. 100).

While the movement rhetorically promoted emotional work and initiation, its premises were often conservative: by locating crisis in the loss of an essential ‘male soul’ rather than in social hierarchy, it tended to individualise structural problems and reinscribe nostalgic models of gender. Scholarship on the movement (Kimmel, 2006; Reeser, 2015) emphasises both its appeal – especially to men seeking affective resources in a changing social world – and its reactionary, misogynist nature. However, its mythic narrative of reclamation continues to resonate today, though it has taken new, digital forms.

1.4.2. Contemporary narratives of crisis

Contemporary culture has absorbed the mythopoetic vocabulary into a vast self-help industry offering what Kimmel (2006) defines “quick-fix solutions” and “antidotes for gender troubles” (p. 196). From bestsellers such as Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life* (2018) to countless podcasts, YouTube channels, and TikTok accounts, men are urged to ‘take responsibility’, ‘find purpose’, and ‘reclaim discipline’. These imperatives echo the older quest for a lost manhood, but they are now articulated through the idioms of neoliberal individualism and self-improvement in a digital scale. Peterson’s appeal, for example, lies precisely in this fusion: he combines a Jungian belief in archetypal order with the rhetoric of self-optimisation. His message reframes structural anxieties, economic precarity, gender equality, cultural diversity, as personal failings to be overcome through moral effort. Peterson’s discourse, argue Inge van de Ven and Ties van Gemert (2020), functions as a kind of public intellectualism tailored to online audiences: it offers a rhetorically powerful synthesis of psychological narrative, cultural critique, and self-help injunctions that speak to men feeling dislocated in late modernity. The result is a privatised notion of crisis: the problem of masculinity is to be solved not through collective redefinition but through self-discipline and hierarchy. The crisis of masculinity thus becomes endlessly renewable, an anxiety that generates content, products, and gurus. In contrast to the mythopoetic retreats and seminars of the 1990s, today’s gatherings occur online, through algorithmic communities that reinforce particular norms of strength, productivity, and stoicism.

Coming to online communities, it is impossible not to cite the *manosphere*, an online ecosystem which is “home to several different groups, including pickup artists, the more radical ‘Incels’, father’s groups, Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)” (Jones, Trott, and Wright, 2019). As a network of forums, channels, and influencers that range from self-improvement communities to explicitly antifeminist or misogynistic groups, these groups reinterpret men’s social disorientation not as an opportunity for change but as proof of victimisation by feminism and progressive politics. Influencers like Andrew Tate illustrate how these dynamics play out visually and rhetorically on social media. Research into Tate’s content and reach (Love, Prskalo, Moloney, 2025) characterises his brand as promoting a hyper-masculine ideal of wealth, sexual conquest, and dominance which is spread through performances of “virtual manhood acts”, i.e., “technologically facilitated misogyny in online spaces” (Love, Prskalo, Moloney, 2025, p. 1) that normalise aggression and contempt for egalitarian norms. Harriet Over et al. (2025) have linked the visibility of figures like Tate to worrying patterns of misogynistic normalization among young followers. At the same time, recent research by the King’s College London’s Policy Institute and the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership (2024) on contemporary cohorts of young men in the UK indicate that non-trivial minorities regard influencers like Andrew Tate (one fifth of the cohort) and Jordan Peterson (one third) positively. Alongside, Over et al. warn how the complex constellation of manosphere can provide pathways to radicalisation for vulnerable young men, leveraging social isolation, algorithmic recommendation, and peer contagion, implying “downstream consequences for women and girls’ mental health” (Over et al., 2025, p. 274).

Social media itself reshapes masculinities by compressing identity into imageable, consumable formats. Platforms reward exhibitions consumerism-driven beauty, clarity of stance, and repeatable gestures; they also encourage comparison, performativity, and rapid formation of homogenous communities via algorithms. This digitalisation of masculinity has deep consequences for the idea of crisis. On the one hand, it democratizes visibility, allowing for diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. On the other, it amplifies anxiety through constant comparison and exposure. This double logic means that while new, plural masculinities can find visibility online, the same infrastructure facilitates the spread and entrenchment of regressive models.

Against these regressions, the concept of *toxic masculinity* has entered mainstream discourse as both critique and caution. Originating in men's therapy groups of the 1980s but popularised by feminist and psychological research in the 2010s (Harrington, 2020), the term is supposed to designate what the American Psychological Association defines *traditional masculinity* as “marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression [which] is, on the whole, harmful” (Pappas, 2019). The concept refers to patterns of dominance, aggression, and emotional repression that harm both men and others, and campaigns such as *#MeToo* have amplified this critique, challenging men to confront complicity in systemic violence. However, as deBoise (2019) cautions, labelling masculinity as toxic risks pathologizing individuals rather than addressing social structures, in the way it tends to “individualise social problems and [...] ignore the contextual nature of various performances, presuming a certain essence to these constructs” (deBoise, 2019, p. 149). Creating a framework of toxic masculinity leads to its stereotyping, in what Reeser (2023) defines as “attempt to stabilize a subjectivity that can never ultimately be stabilized” (p. 15). While rightfully opposing oppressive models of masculinity, it can, like the mythopoetic discourse, reproduce the binary of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ men in lieu of analysing how all masculinities are historically produced and socially contingent.

This criticism echoes the problematic around the notion of crisis itself applied to masculinity. Presenting masculinity in crisis assumes for it the presence of a state of non-crisis, or, as Judith Kegan Gardiner (2002) puts it, of a golden age of untroubled gender when men were men and women were women and everyone was content with their social roles. Connell too maintains how the term crisis “presupposes a coherent system of some kind, [...] destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis” (1995, p. 84). Seeing, as the scholar does, masculinity as a “configuration of practice within a system of gender relations” (Ibid.) automatically excludes crisis from the scenario, redefining it as “disruption” or “transformation” (Ibid.). What is often framed as a crisis may instead be a necessary process of adaptation, in which masculinity becomes plural, self-reflective, and contingent. As Buchbinder (2013) puts it,

[i]f there *is* a crisis in masculinity, if men *are* confused about their roles and what is expected of them, then we must look for a solution, not in the reversion to an earlier set of attitudes and practices that evolved under different conditions and out of a different

history, but rather in the adaptation of men and boys to current conditions and a presently developing history” (pp. 178-179, emphasis in the original).

He underlines the productive function of crisis, that of changing, of finding relief rather than panic in the call for movement. If the crisis narrative persists nowadays, it is because some men perceive themselves and their identities as endangered and see the dynamic nature of their masculinity as a threat rather than an opportunity.

As I tried to show, the contemporary landscape of masculinity has inherited the contradictions of the mythopoetic legacy while reshaping them through neoliberal and digital logics. Where Bly’s wild man sought meaning in the forest, today’s influencers seek it in the algorithm; where the 1990s promised emotional repair through archetypal narratives, the manosphere and its celebrity avatars often close off introspection in favour of self-branding and performative toughness. Yet beneath these transformations lies the same desire: to make sense of manhood in a world where patriarchal scripts no longer provide stability. It is here that literature comes into play: in literary works, indeed, instability and anxiety are harbingers of new ways in which young men can imagine and narrate themselves and their own becoming. Contemporary autofictions offer therefore sources of new aesthetics and emotional depths. Hence, the challenge that awaits my literary (and cultural) analysis is to embrace new representations, to explore how texts imagine transformation, vulnerability, and rebellion to pre-given schemes as alternative ways of being male.

1.5. The Value of Literary Analysis for Masculinity Studies

To conclude this first chapter, I would like to briefly emphasise the value of literature in studying patterns and realisations of masculinity. Although masculinity studies have drawn extensively on sociology, psychology, and anthropology, there is nowadays wide agreement in considering the literary text as a proper “epistemological medium” (Horlacher, 2015, p. 5; 2025, 81) and literary analysis as a “crucial and vibrant wing of masculinity studies” (Reeser, 2015, p. 12). Literary texts do not simply mirror or reproduce cultural constructions of masculinity, they offer the place where its different and divergent aspects become “readable, knowable, and thereby also rewriteable” (Horlacher, 2015, p. 6). Importantly, as Reeser (2015) notes, the boundaries between the

study of “flesh-and-blood human beings” (p. 13) and their literary representations are porous: sociological concepts inform literary readings, yet within the narrative literariness has the potential to reshape and expand social theories of gender.

This reciprocal relationship is precisely what Josep M. Armengol (2020) identifies as central to the synergy between literary masculinities and masculinity studies more broadly: while “cultural and literary constructions of masculinity feed off one another” (p. 428), these literary realisations “go hand in hand” (p.431) with broader social patterns too. Indeed, according to Stefan Horlacher (2025), they generate forms of knowledge unavailable to empirical disciplines and actively participate in the ongoing negotiation, reimagination, and critique of gendered identities. As producers of “often anticipatory knowledge”, literary texts are considered “a transitional space that manifests the liminal and gives voice to precarious and insurgent knowledges that evade conscious perception” (Horlacher, 2025, p. 81). Because readers encounter masculinity through the multi-faceted dynamics of narrative, literature has a “co-constructive potential” (p. 85): it enables them to critically reconstruct their own masculine identities. The interaction between a specific text and a specific reader, continues Horlacher, can be reassuring or alienating, liberating or disorienting; it can confirm existing identifications or open up the possibility of new, insurgent, and previously unimagined masculinities.

From the literary perspective, masculinity emerges as a plural, mutable, and fundamentally unstable phenomenon. For this reason, literary analysis is not peripheral but central in its study. Literature works simultaneously as an archive of cultural gender norms, a place that fosters readers’ self-reflection, and a laboratory for imagining alternative masculinities. Importantly, it offers different scenarios. It shows masculinity not only as it is lived but as it could be lived otherwise. As the following chapters will attempt to demonstrate, contemporary autofictions by young male writers offer new narratives through which masculinities can be interrogated, reshaped, and reimagined.

Chapter 2. The Becoming Self: Models of Writing from the Bildungsroman to Autofiction

2.1 Chapter Overview: Masculinity and Its Narrative Realisations

While the first chapter of this study has outlined the main sociological and cultural theories of masculinity, it has also implicitly pointed to their limits. Masculinity does not exist solely as a social structure or ideological formation; in the first place, it constitutes itself via being lived, performed, and narrated. Literary texts, and particularly narratives of the self, offer a privileged site for examining how masculinities are experienced and articulated from within. Rather than describing masculinity as an abstract system, literature allows access to its affective textures, contradictions, and failures, revealing how masculine subjectivities are continuously shaped through language and narrative form.

Each narrative form, manifested in genres or wider literary modes, functions as a historically and culturally situated framework that organises experience, structures expectation, and shapes the ways in which subjects can tell their stories. Genres of self-narration, in particular, provide models through which individuals make sense of their lives and position themselves within broader social narratives. The representation of masculinity is therefore inseparable from the tools through which it is narrated: to write the self is always to write within, against, or beyond inherited narrative forms.

In this context, writings of the self occupy a crucial position in contemporary literature. The increasing prominence of autobiographical and autofictional narratives reflects a broader cultural shift toward the exploration of intimacy and lived experience. For male authors, such modes of writing have often entailed either a confirmation or a reconfiguration of masculine norms traditionally associated with emotional restraint, self-assurance, and distance. Narrating the self thus becomes not only a literary phenomenon but also a gendered and performed act, one that exposes the tensions between masculine self-presentation and narrative self-exposure possibilities, after centuries in which this possibility of narrating oneself was a privilege enjoyed by very few.

This chapter examines the literary frameworks that enable narratives of masculinity to be displayed, focusing on the transition from classical genres of formation to

contemporary forms of autofiction. It begins by revisiting the Bildungsroman as the paradigmatic genre of masculine development, in order to highlight its normative assumptions and historical limitations. It then turns to autofiction as a relevant mode of contemporary self-writing, tracing its origins and theoretical debates, concentrating on important discussions on its features, on readers, writers and their roles, and reflecting on the notion of truth in autofictional settings. The chapter then concludes by outlining the significance of the perspectives previously presented for the narration of masculine identities within the literary works, aiming to inform the close readings in the analytical chapters that will follow.

2.2. The Bildungsroman as the Archetypal Masculine Self-Narration Form

The Bildungsroman has long been one of the central narrative forms through which masculinity has been imagined, legitimised, and naturalised within Western literary tradition. Emerging in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the genre narrates the gradual formation (*Bildung*) of a young subject—typically male—who, through education, experience, and self-reflection, progresses toward a socially recognised form of maturity (Boes, 2006; Esty, 2012; Frow et al., 2020).

2.2.1. Origins and Cornerstones of the Genre

The term itself was coined in the early 19th century by Karl Morgenstern and elaborated by Wilhelm Dilthey, who, considering Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the genre's master example, described it as the narrative of a "regular development" of the self, in which "[t]he dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary points of passage [*Durchgangspunkte*] through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony" (Dilthey, 1906, quoted in Redfield, 1996, p. 40). From this early definition alone, the centrality of two features can be noted: on the one hand, the importance of experiences shaping one's journey and, on the other hand, adulthood as the goal of the journey itself, symbolising security and adherence to the essential values of middle-class bourgeoisie.

Another fundamental trait that enjoys academic recognition is the tendency towards compromise, considered intrinsic to the Bildungsroman. The genre, according to Jed Esty

(2012), “both reflects and produces social consent, for it negotiates a flexible and wily compromise between inner and outer directives in subject formation” (p. 4). Having articulated a model of personal development that aligns individual growth with social integration, the Bildungsroman foreshadows adulthood as the successful reconciliation of inner desire with external norms. It therefore stages a compromise between individual desire and social norms, presenting maturity as the successful internalisation of dominant values and the attainment of social integration. In Marc Redfield’s words, the Bildungsroman showcases the “integration of a particular “I” into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity” (1996, p. 38). In his view, works labelled as Bildungsroman are able to connect the general to the specific, in the way they display three features belonging to a “pragmatized *absolu littéraire*: self-reflexivity, self-productivity, and exemplarity” (p. 54). In other words, Bildungsromane are given credit to produce reflections on self-related issues that might serve as example for the readers.

Another influential voice in the debate on Bildungsroman is without doubt Franco Moretti. Similar to Redfield, in his *The Way of The World* (2000) he also recognises the importance of the literary genre, labelling it as a “symbolic form of modernity” (p. 5), as the European answer to the changes brought by the modernisation taking place in the nineteenth century. According to the scholar’s opinion, this search for answers made youth “the most meaningful part of life” (p. 3), the moment of life during which a greater deal of transformation and experimentation is possible. In Esty’s reading of Moretti, he effectively summarises the two classic functions of Bildungsroman: first, to “make modernity's endless revolution narratable” and, second, to “secure middle-class consent through a realist narrative of vocational-spiritual compromise” (Esty, 2012, p. 24). Within this model, masculine development is implicitly normative. *Bildung* presupposes access to education, mobility, and recognition, and it imagines adulthood as a stable horizon marked by autonomy, productivity, and belonging. In addition, focussing on “European, masculine, and class-privileged experience in its formation” (Frow et al., 2020, p. 1906), the classical Bildungsroman has historically functioned as a narrative of privilege, reflecting the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual men whose trajectories of self-realisation were aligned with the institutions of the nation-state.

This alignment context-character is central in Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the genre too. Importantly, the Russian scholar signals how the (mostly male) protagonist of a Bildungsroman "emerges along with the world and *he* reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (1986, p. 23, emphasis added). The author inserts the Bildungsroman within his taxonomy of *novels of emergence*. The emergence he observes in the case of the Bildungsroman takes place concurrently in both the protagonists and the contexts where they act. This reading has allowed for an "expanded, globalised and historicised" understanding of the "framework for *Bildung*" (Frow et al., 2020, p. 1906). For Bakhtin, the Bildungsroman essentially depicts "the image of man in the process of becoming" (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 19), anchored to a "real historical time" (23) which both influences the character's development and is influenced by him. This, according to the author, is a sign of the Bildungsroman's "chronotopic nature" (Ibid.), the condensation of time and space within narrative structures. His understanding of the genre could therefore be summarised as a 'chronotope of becoming', the literary space where the protagonist—following a series of steps—comes of age. This is, however, a pattern which further emphasises the genre's investment in linear temporality, in which time is developmental and transformative, leading the protagonist towards a coherent identity. As Esty (2012) notes, the Bildungsroman plunges its roots in a "burgeoning nationalism based on an ideal of organic culture whose temporality and harmony could be reflected in the developing personality at the core of the bildungsroman [sic]" (p. 5). Masculine identity, within this framework, is inseparable from temporal progression: to grow up is to move forward, to leave behind immaturity, and to approach a coherent and unified sense of self.

2.2.2. The Exclusiveness of *Bildung*: Challenges, Confirmations, and Developments.

However, the alleged universality of this model has not remained unchallenged. The feminist perspective brought by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland's *The Voyage In* (1983) has questioned the exclusive masculine paternity on the genre, first signalling the existence of a "female novel of development" (vii) within the genre's tradition. Nevertheless, the traditional Bildungsroman implicitly positioned masculinity as the normative subject of formation while rendering female development either marginal or incompatible with the genre's logic. Mobility, in social, geographical, or symbolic terms, was a key narrative element, an element that has historically been

unavailable to many people, particularly those marked by racialisation, economic precarity, sexual non-normativity, or gender-based exclusion. In this sense, the traditional notion of the genre does not merely describe a process of individual maturation; it encodes a normative vision of social order. Formation becomes intelligible only insofar as the subject can be integrated into existing structures of power and recognition. Masculinity, within this framework, is less an open-ended process than a regulated pathway, oriented towards productivity, respectability, and belonging.

The limitations of this model have become increasingly visible in contemporary literature. Under conditions of late capitalism, instability, and social fragmentation, the promises of traditional *Bildung* appear old-fashioned and are therefore frequently deferred or withdrawn altogether. If we allow then, as Boes (2006) suggests, for a British-tradition-driven “free-floating use” (p. 232) of the term *Bildungsroman* for defining coming-of-age narratives, the understanding of the genre can be expanded also to feminist, postcolonial and minority views. Such recognition opens the door of the ‘*Bildungsroman*-label’ to works of literature that may “bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models” (p. 231). Indeed, Moretti himself identifies the First World War as a temporal boundary after which the *Bildungsroman* loses its original and ‘authentic’ meaning, leaving therefore room for its loosened usage as a synonym for coming-of-age narratives that focus on the development of their protagonists from a young, unaware age (or worldview) to a more mature one.

Nowadays, development appears often stalled or fragmented and adulthood seems more as a contested and unstable position than a fixed endpoint. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century experiences of modernity—marked by social fragmentation, economic precarity, migration, racialisation, and shifting gender norms—have rendered the linear logic of formation less plausible. As a result, it appears clear that the classical *Bildungsroman* no longer offers an adequate narrative framework for articulating masculine experience, which starts, like many other identity patterns, to be seen as an ongoing narrative labour rather than an achieved status, a process of self-interpretation shaped by age, class, race, sexuality, and affective relations. The assumption that masculinity unfolds through a coherent trajectory towards adulthood seems to no longer adequately account for experiences characterised by diversity and instability.

This transformation is also reflected at the level of narrative form. Rather than presenting life as a unified arc, many contemporary texts (the three chosen for this study being just an example) privilege episodic structures and temporal disjunctions. The self is no longer narrated as a stable entity progressing towards fulfilment, but as a fragmented and relational subject. Narrating the self becomes less a retrospective ordering of experiences than an ongoing negotiation of meaning whose outcomes remain uncertain. For these reasons, the Bildungsroman is here best understood not as a dominant model to be replicated, but as a historical point of departure against which contemporary narratives of the self define themselves. Its emphasis on linear development, social integration, and narrative closure provides a crucial contrast to the modes of self-narration that emerge in contemporary autofiction, where masculinity is no longer secured through formation but can instead be continuously negotiated, exposed, and rewritten.

As the next section will try to outline, autofiction emerges within this literary and cultural landscape as a deviation of canonical autobiography and a mode that reconfigures, rather than abandons, the concerns of the Bildungsroman. While it retains a focus on lived experience and personal formation, autofiction rejects the classical genre's teleological assumptions and destabilises the boundary between fact and fiction. Traces of formation persist: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood remain key narrative sites, but they are no longer necessarily oriented towards synthesis or reconciliation. What emerges is a narrative logic of reconfiguration rather than development, in which masculinity is continually re-written in response to changing social and emotional conditions.

In the following section, I will attempt to show how autofiction refuses closure and embraces formal instability to offer a framework allowing for the representation of vulnerability, ambivalence, and contradiction, features traditionally marginalised within normative masculine narratives. This perspective will be central to the analyses that follow, where masculinity is examined across different moments of the life course, not as linear progression but as an ongoing narrative negotiation.

2.3. Autofiction, or the Site for Contemporary Realisations of the Self

2.3.1. Doubrovsky and the Origin of Autofiction

“Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like”²
(Doubrovsky, 1977, n. p., my translation, emphasis in the original).

Since Serge Doubrovsky with this formulation coined the term, first to be read on the back cover of his novel *Fils* (1977), ‘autofiction’ has emerged as one of the most contested and productive modes of contemporary self-writing, occupying a liminal space between autobiography and fiction. Following its creation, the concept has generated sustained debate concerning questions of referentiality, narrative truth, and genre classification. Doubrovsky introduced the term ‘autofiction’ to describe a form of writing of the self that rejects the conventions of traditional autobiography while remaining anchored in lived experience. The scholar’s view has allowed, for the first time, a narrative in which the author and the protagonist can share a name while being involved in fictional (or not strictly referential) situations. His formulation deliberately unsettles the expectation that self-writing must offer a coherent, retrospective account of a life. By insisting on the fictionalisation of real events, on the psychoanalytical outcome deriving from such an effort and by foregrounding linguistic experimentation, Doubrovsky challenged the assumption that personal identity could be transparently represented through narrative. Autofiction thus emerges from the outset as a response to the limits of autobiographical representation rather than as a mere hybrid genre. As Arnaud Schmitt (2019) points out, Doubrovsky deserves credit for naming “a literary space, [...] middle ground between ‘fiction’ and ‘autobiography’” (p. 659) that had not been discussed and defined effectively enough until then. In order to better understand the framework in which the concept of autofiction has developed, I will now briefly delve into the two tropes that form autofiction’s hybrid character: autobiography and fiction.

2.3.2. The Foundations of Autofiction: Autobiography and Fiction

Doubrovsky’s intervention must be understood in dialogue with Philippe Lejeune’s influential work on autobiography (1975), which led to formulation of his

² “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels; si l’on veut autofiction”.

autobiographical pact. According to Lejeune, autobiography is defined by a metaphorical contractual agreement between author and reader, grounded in the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist who all share the same name, and sustained by an implicit commitment to truthfulness. As Lut Missinne (2019) notes, his last aspect also involves a “referential pact” (p. 223): providing information about “extratextual reality”, a “truth claim comes into play” (Ibid.) that the writer implicitly agrees to respect. The author’s work is, in turn, taken for truthful and authentic by the reader. Lejeune also highlighted the role played by paratexts in orienting towards a stable identification of a text as autobiography. Title, subtitle, preface, introduction, epilogue are among the tools that can inform the readership about a text’s belonging to a specific genre. At the same time, these features, together with “a clear indication of non-identity between author and protagonist (e. g. by giving them different names)” (p. 223) are signals for the parallel form of reading contract, the “romanesque (or fictional) pact” (Lejeune, 1975, quoted in Missinne, 2019, p.223). The dichotomy, in Lejeune’s terms, is clear, as clear as the border between truth and fiction. However, while this model provides a powerful framework for distinguishing autobiography from fiction, it also relies on a notion of the self as stable, knowable, and retrospectively intelligible. Autofiction, positioning at the intersection between autobiography and novel, between referentiality and nonreferentiality, disrupts this pact by retaining the authorial name while suspending the obligation to factual accuracy, thereby introducing ambiguity at the very heart of self-narration.

Having considered the foundations upon which autobiography has developed, we can now turn attention to the notion of fiction. It appears useful in the first place to draw from Lorenzo Marchese’s (2014) analysis of the term’s etymology. Borrowed from the Early Modern French, fiction derives from the Latin substantive *finigo* and verb *finġere*, indicating to fashion or to form (Oxford English Dictionary, n. d.). In its current use, Marchese (2014) observes, the term maintains the “dual meaning” of, on the one hand, “shaping, creating, imagining” and “feigning, faking”³ (p. 115, my translation) on the other. This is why the word entered the literary vocabulary to describe “[t]he species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters; fictitious composition” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). To this extent, Dorrit Cohn’s (2000) classification of fiction as “literary nonreferential narrative”

³ “significato duplice”; “plasmare, creare, immaginare”; “finġere, falsificare”.

(p. 12) comes into play. In Cohn’s perspective, the nonreferentiality of fiction implies that “references to the world outside the text are not bound to accuracy” and that fictional texts do not “refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text” (p. 15), opening up for a twofold classification of narrative works: referential and nonreferential narratives. The former (which include autobiography) are “verifiable and incomplete” (p. 16) and “subject to judgements of truth and falsity” (p. 15), while latter are “unverifiable and incomplete” (p. 16) and “immune to such judgements” (p. 15). For Cohn, therefore, the possibility to verify what is been narrated represents the key to distinguish non-fiction from fiction.

These considerations notwithstanding, it is important to note that, for fiction to thrive, an “author-reader cooperation”⁴ (Marchese, 2014, p. 117, my translation) is necessary. In the wake of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous “willing suspension of disbelief” (1817, chapter 14), Marchese (2014) underlines how the “truth [...] proposed by the author”, the “creative hypothesis, [the] narrative elaboration of reality models”⁵ (p. 117) needs to be accepted by the reader in order to work. The relationship between reader and the autofictional text, together with the author’s role, will be dealt with later in the chapter, allowing now to step back to the discussion of the fictional trope within autofiction.

If we agree with Karen Ferreira Meyers’s (2018) assumption that the “fact-fiction blurring is one of [its] main characteristics” (p. 35), then we can understand how autofiction lies by definition on the juncture between the two: authors, presenting themselves both referentially and imaginatively, unsettle the conventional referentiality-nonreferentiality divide. This is key to identify the epistemological value of autofiction: in the way writers reshape their own lived experiences adding fictional elements, they can retrieve new impulses to advance in the process of personal meditation and identity formation. This is why it is important to embrace the creative side of the concept of fiction: reading it as a site of construction and self-development rather than of untruth, fiction becomes—in Marchese’s words—“a tool to expand one’s epistemological skills”⁶ (2014, p. 270, my translation). If then, as Ferreira-Meyers (2015) suggests, “[t]o fictionalize one’s self is essentially an autofictional enterprise” (p. 214), autofiction may be really seen as the literary space where one constructs their self.

⁴ “cooperazione autore-lettore”.

⁵ “la verità [...] proposta dall’autore”; “una ipotesi creativa, una elaborazione narrativa di modelli di realtà”.

⁶ “uno strumento per allargare le capacità epistemologiche del soggetto”.

After this introduction on the constituting terms of autofiction, an attempt will be made to define it, considering more than 40 years of debate on the concept.

2.3.3. Framing the Concept of Autofiction

First and foremost, it appears now clear autofictional writing develops a narrative operating within the same framework as autobiography (author corresponds to narrator which corresponds to protagonist), renouncing at the same time to claims of referentiality which are typically associated to common autobiographies. Given autofiction's non-conformity to Lejeune's autobiographical pact, Ferreira-Meyers (2018) accordingly develops the notion of an "autofictional pact" which posits how the "author is not honest, but sincere" in the way "s/he will lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice" (p. 28). Via this pact, adds Bran Nicol (2018) in another article of the same volume, the author "commits to a sincere exploration, through fiction, of a personal, i.e. autobiographical, truth" (p. 257). To this extent, Arnaud Schmitt's (2022) argument on sincerity serves as a corollary to understand the intent behind autofiction. For the scholar, autofiction's inclination towards sincerity—though not accurate one—aims to "produce an autobiographical *intent* without clearly identifying the autobiographical *content*" (p. 97, emphasis in the original). The idea that a personal truth is *sincerely* chased in the process of fictionalising the self within the narrative is therefore key to understand the intent behind the autofictional enterprise. A text originating from such premises presents its audience, in Alison James's (2022) terms, with "a wide range of configurations of the fact/fiction relationship" (p. 58), allowing for the development of multiple forms of literary hybridity. The widely exploited concept of hybridity will soon return as the key pattern around which one of the major approaches to the study of autofiction develop.

Drawing back to the attempt to define autofiction, then, critical studies by Karen Ferreira-Meyers (2018) and Marjorie Worthington (2018) have identified three main orientations towards this form of writing. The first traces back to Doubrovsky, who—in his early formulations—put a great emphasis on the autobiographical experience as the main focus of the narration, the nominal identity between author, narrator and protagonist serving as a certification of this pattern. For Doubrovsky, this focus on the 'auto' part of the term is accompanied by stylistic innovations and the attention to psychoanalytic processes accomplished within the narrative as equally important tropes defining

autofictional works. The second approach is drawn by the influential work of Philippe Gasparini (2008) and is summarised as *hybrid*. It takes into consideration the incessant shifting between referential and nonreferential narration and embraces the deriving impossibility of and a fixed and clear classification, accepting therefore that authors construct themselves in their works with the employment of fictional elements. Coming to the third and last approach to autofiction, Ferreira-Meyers and Worthington disagree by placing it at the opposite poles of referentiality. While the former argues that this third “self-narration approach” (Ferreira-Meyers, 2018, p. 30)—the most widely diffused in world autofictional literature in her view—is primarily “autobiographical and contains an openly referential reading component” (Ibid.), the latter completes the taxonomy leaning towards the fictional half of the term autofiction. According to Worthington, indeed, this last view on autofiction aligns with Gérard Genette’s, who famously condensed it with the sentence: “I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but [sic] which never happened to me” (Genette, 1993, quoted in Worthington, 2018, p. 11). Within this logic, the autofictional self is depicted as a non-unitary construct and, most importantly, autofictions can easily be labelled as novels, completely fictionalised accounts that “play with the expectations evoked when the protagonist and the author share a name and some biographical information” (p. 12). This last observation emphasises the role of paratexts as helpful tools in determining how we interpret and therefore approach works of literature. Still, academic voices like James (2022) and Schmitt (2022) signal how paratextual hints such as ‘novel’ on the book’s cover have become “an extremely fragile signpost of fictionality” (James, 2022, p. 53), showing once again how the discourse around autofiction is far from clear and unambiguous.

A brief reflection on the concept’s taxonomy can confirm this assumption. As Ferreira-Meyers (2018) notes, it is possible to detect a difference between the Francophone and the Anglophone receptions of autofiction. According to the scholar, French-speaking critics tend to classify autofiction as a genre, while English-speaking ones “conceive it as a ‘modus’ of writing” (p. 41). At the same time, Francophone literatures seem to remain focused on “the endless discussion regarding truth, fact and fiction, the real and the ‘made up’” (p. 33), while other players in world literature distance themselves from this debate and instead seek an “answer on how to live and how to create, not on how to truthfully write how one lives” (Ibid.). This last hint might be very useful, as it goes close to capture

the essence of autofiction, seen by Hywel Dix (2018) too as a “project of self-exploration” (p. 4). In order to provide another solution to the issue of classification, I draw again on Marchese’s (2014) accurate analysis of the concept. According to the academic, autofiction fails to be labelled as a genre (a parameter which is not cogent enough), in the same way as it is not helpful to classify it in light of formal, thematic and stylistic recursive elements. Then, he reflects on a possible characterisation of autofiction as a mode, seen as a series of constants (thematic and formal) that can be reflected in literature within works belonging to different genres. This option is also turned down when he notices as the diachronic and formal elasticity inherent to the concept of mode do not fit the contemporary feel and adherence to the prosaic form that autofiction brings with it. These difficulties bring Marchese to reject vast and fixed categorical labels and to accept “form of writing”⁷ (p. 132, my translation) as the most appropriate attribute to define autofiction.

While, in my view (that slightly distances itself from Marchese’s), considering autofiction as a mode of writing might prove to be productive, I venture to say that the struggles in finding a place for autofiction within literary classification may be read as intrinsic of a trend which thrives in ambiguity and whose strength and appeal (and possibly success) lie on providing as few certainties as possible. In order to shed light on the characteristics of autofiction as a literary phenomenon, I now draw attention to two scholars whose proposed structures might be helpful in making order in the discussion of this *literary place*.

The first noteworthy insights come from Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf’s (2022) articulation of five interrelated theses that reconceptualise “the autofictional” as “a conceptual matrix with scalable and interactive dimensions” (p.23). Against claims that the term autofiction is redundant in light of established categories such as “life writing” or “autobiographical writing”, Wagner-Egelhaaf argues that “there is a need for the term ‘autofiction’”, since its sustained use in scholarship signals an “obvious epistemological need” to grasp “the vibrant interrelation between life and text, fiction and real” (Ibid.) for which no adequate alternative concept exists. Her second proposition develops her refusal of rigid categorisations by positing the autofictional as an “intrinsic mode” within autobiographical narratives that can be “performed in various ways and with changing

⁷ “forma di scrittura”.

intensity” (p. 24), while also insisting that fictional elements in autobiography should be seen not as inevitable by-products of construction but as “deliberately introduced and artistically handled” (p. 27). The third thesis foregrounds imagination as a constitutive, rather than antagonistic, element of autobiographical reference: the inclusion of invention, and even of fantastical or supernatural elements, does not undermine but may instead “highlight the claim of truth in life writing by giving emphasis to what is related” (p. 30) and by intensifying reader engagement. The fourth thesis furthers this position by shifting attention to the performative dimension of autofiction: autobiographical writing is not external to life but part of it, producing “real-life effect[s]” (p. 31) insofar as life and writing merge through the act of writing on the self. To conceptualise this dynamic, Wagner-Egelhaaf introduces the figure of the Möbius strip, which models the continuous, reversible, and processual intertwining of life and text, of subject and object, thereby deconstructing their opposition while insisting on constant motion. Finally, her fifth thesis addresses the readerly dimension of autofiction, defining it as a mode that “oscillates between fictionality and factuality” (p. 32), drawing on Doubrovsky’s notion of texts caught “in the in-between of the genres” (Ibid.) and on Frank Zipfel’s idea of an oscillation between the autobiographical and the novelistic pacts. This oscillatory logic, Wagner-Egelhaaf argues, is structurally homologous to the strange loop of the Möbius strip: autofiction “alternately brings one or the other dimension into the foreground while still allowing the other to permanently resonate” (p. 33), thus foregrounding both “the fictionality of the factual and the factuality of fiction” (p. 35). Taken together, the five theses form a coherent theoretical model that conceptualises autofiction as a dynamic, performative, and epistemologically productive mode of self-writing rather than—once again—as a fixed genre.

In addition to this valuable conceptual framework, Arnaud Schmitt (2022) identifies two kinds of features that help us marking a text as autofictional: primary (essential) and secondary (referred to as ‘enhancers’) ones. Primary features represent the *conditio sine qua non* of autofictional writing: “onomastic correspondence and similarities in biographical background between author and narrator” (p. 90). According to Schmitt, without one of these “necessary signal[s]” (Ibid.), a text fails to be recognised as autofiction. These “identification operators” (p. 88) include information, among other things, on the protagonist's age, gender, socio-cultural background, occupation and

dreams and echo those of the author. Such details reminding of the referential life are normally disseminated within the fictional narrative and contribute to the create the aforementioned tension between fact and fiction which is peculiar to autofiction. At the same time, they constitute what Alison James (2022) refers to as “referential ground of the *I*” (p. 56, emphasis in the original) which is maintained—“to a greater or lesser extent”—within the “sites of fictionalization” (Ibid.) of autofictional writing, operating as counterweight to the fictional component. Thus, fictional and referential elements are jointly responsible for the ambiguity that reading autofiction inevitably generates. In this regard, Schmitt considers enhancers as elements that “contribute to the reader’s awareness of the necessary ambiguousness of the generic status of the text” (p. 90), without unequivocally creating it. In the academic’s view, three features belong to this category: *metafiction*, *time*, *tenses* and the *fallibility of memory* (considered by the scholar as one entity), and *apostrophe*. While recognising the differences between autofictional and metafictional texts, the author acknowledges how both forms “thrive on the same narrative environment: unstable narrative centers and authorial intrusions” (p. 90), signalling how techniques typically associated to the metafictional self-consciousness at the language and narration levels can fit to and enhance the construction of the autofictional. On the second element, Schmitt insists on the imitative nature of autofiction: as in autobiographies, the narrative is in most instances retrospective, with the difference that in autofictions “an older self project[s] himself or herself into an imaginary past” (p. 92). Within this settings, tense shifts can be used to emphasise “the chronological and ontological separation of events and narration” (p. 93), of narrated and narrating self, thus increasing the distance between the two, undermining their credibility and favouring—again—the emergence of ambiguity. For what concerns memory then, the author simply mentions “the complexities of the process of remembering and its flawed results” as an established “*raison d’être* of autofiction” (p. 94). To conclude his analysis, Schmitt identifies a “modern version of the apostrophe” (p. 95) as the instances in which “the narrator of a work of fiction directly addresses readers” (Ibid.). Such interventions serve as ways to guide the reader’s attention towards the themes and ambiguous intents of the narration but highlight at the same time how “meaning is built jointly by both narrator and addressee” (p. 96). Importantly, in this perspective the meaning-making process is accomplished by both sides of the author-reader continuum,

even if “it is part of the autofictional game to muddy the waters as early as possible in the reader’s experience of the text” (p. 85). In view of this, as I am about to present, the readers are themselves protagonists of a stimulating adventure when approaching to an autofictional text.

2.3.4. The Holistic Approach to Autofiction and the Roles of Readers and Authors

Concluding the cursory overview of autofiction studies, I introduce Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons’s (2022) significant proposal of a “holistic approach” that conceptualises autofiction not merely as a textual phenomenon but as a complex literary event involving equally writers and readers. Building on long-standing critical intuitions that autofictional reading involves an oscillation between the autobiographical and the fictional pacts, they develop a cognitive and empirically grounded framework that reconfigures the degree of attention normally given to the autofictional text, its writing and reading processes, exploring not only “the textual and narrative dynamics that signpost autofiction as at the same time autobiographical and fictional”, but also—and most importantly—“considers both production and reception” (p. 63). Their argument draws on Gibbons’s (2019) consideration of autofiction as a “a reading strategy” (p. 411) that activates distinct but co-present cognitive schemata for fiction and non-fiction. Readers, they argue, approach autofictional texts with “two overarching schemata, either in combination or in quick oscillation” (p. 65), frequently experiencing moments of tension or uncertainty regarding both the communicative intention (fictional or factual) and the ontological status of narrated elements. Complementing this reader-centred perspective, Effe and Gibbons define autofictional writing as the intentional act of “producing a text both as autobiographical and as fictional”, an act of “autofictionalization” (p. 66) in which authors simultaneously pursue aesthetic goals (typically related to the production of fiction) and engage in—more peculiar to the autofictional mode—processes of self-exploration, self-performance, and readerly positioning. Autofictional texts, in turn, are often self-reflexive artifacts that disclose how authors conceptualise autobiography, fiction, and their deliberate intertwining (p. 69). Taken together, these dimensions support Effe and Gibbons’s concluding claim that autofiction should be understood as a holistic literary experience whose “rootedness in reality” (p. 77) fosters personal relevance and

emotional involvement, while whose fictional dimension encourages critical, imaginative, and potentially transformative reader engagement.

As the preceding paragraph aimed to demonstrate, autofictions demand the reader the effort of a “constant narrative code-switching” (Worthington, 2018, p. 15) and at the same time manage to achieve “moments of true intimacy between reader and subject matter” (Jensen, 2018, p. 79). In Ferreira-Meyers’s (2018) terms, the autofictional text is seen as a “literary puzzle” (p. 40) the reader accepts to solve. From their side, the writer composes this puzzle as a “fictional and metaphorical self-translation” (Ibid.) consisting of ‘coloured’ life experiences and memories that are rendered into a text. Writers of autofiction are seen as their own “avatar[s]” (Marchese, 2014, p. 35; Schmitt, 2022, p. 84) within the narrative. Their realisation is a “possible I”⁸ (Marchese, 2014, p. 35) charged of self-explorative and epistemological value.

Coming to the discussion of the authorship within autofictional settings, Worthington (2018) offers a compelling intervention into the debate by arguing that autofiction should be read not as a confirmation of poststructuralist claims about the author’s disappearance, but as a sustained and often confrontational response to them. Revisiting the foundational arguments of Barthes and Foucault, Worthington acknowledges how poststructuralism dismantled the notion of the author as a unified, sovereign source of meaning, replacing it with the figures of the “scriptor” (Barthes) and the “author-function” (Foucault), both conceived as reader-centred and culturally contingent constructs rather than flesh-and-blood individuals. Yet she contends that these theoretical proclamations were “hyperbolic and somewhat premature” (p. 63), particularly in light of contemporary literary practices (like metafiction and, of course, autofiction) that insist on reintroducing the author into the textual field. Autofiction, in this sense, emerges as a “corrective” (Ibid.) to the death of the author acclaimed by Barthes, staging what Worthington describes as a revolt against authorial effacement through the intrusive presence of (mainly eponymous) author-characters who simultaneously invoke the extratextual writer and destabilise—via their autofictional realisation—any straightforward identification with them. Crucially, Worthington argues that autofiction is able to restore authorial relevance thanks to the author’s paradoxical “absent presence” (p. 75) in which their visibility is reasserted precisely by playing with themselves, their lives (and therefore with the readers) within

⁸ “io possibile”.

the narrative. This strategy invites the previously discussed heightened readerly engagement and inspires what Worthington calls a “readerly effort to find [the author]” (p. 67), even while knowing that such an effort is ultimately compromised. As the scholar masterly shows, the pleasure and tension of autofiction thus arise from its capacity to make the author both unavoidable and undefinable, transforming authorship into a site of struggle rather than a stable source of meaning. In this way, autofiction reflects broader cultural anxieties about the survival of authorship in an age of media proliferation and their uncertain truths, demonstrating not the author’s disappearance but the persistence (and mutation) of authorial relevance within contemporary literary practice.

2.3.5. On the Autofictional *Truth*

This aspect leads us to the discussion of the very last important theme of autofiction: truth. The core of autofiction is, as I tried to show, the perpetual oscillation between reality and fiction: it is therefore reasonable to question whether this contrast inherently brings with it the opposition between truth and its contrary. While reading autofictions, indeed, a natural way to interact with the content is asking how much of it is *true*. But if we accept to delineate autofiction as a hybrid concept, a place where the referential meets the nonreferential to shape a construct of the self, then—also in light of the ““post-truth” age” (Worthington, 2018, p. 156) we live in—we can start to embrace hybrid constructions of truth. In my understanding, autofiction does not abandon truth claims altogether, but relocates them: what is at stake is not the empirical correspondence between narration and life, but the plausibility, intensity, and resonance of the narrated experience. Whereas classical autobiography and the archetypal Bildungsroman rely on a logic of, respectively, correspondence between lived and narrated reality and exemplary journeys and definitive solutions, autofiction operates according to a logic of ongoing negotiation. Meaning is not secured through verification or catharsis but through affective and cognitive engagement to the text that is produced and read. In this sense, autofiction shifts the focus from *what happened* to *how experience is made sense of*, thereby redefining the terms on which referentiality operates. In this way, the striving demand for truth is erased by a *sense of the possible*. The tension the reader lives at the edge of autofictional representations of the self makes their reading experience more complete and the potential for reflections on *their* self is unleashed.

Approaching to autofiction as a mode of self-discovering that provides us with a starting point for our reflections rather than a destination of a journey allows us to transcend the concept of factual truth to embrace an idea of more *subjective* truths. By refusing to stabilise the relationship between life and text, referentiality and fiction, autofiction foregrounds the contingency of self-knowledge and therefore proves adequate to examine identities at the margins, in social, economic and cultural terms whose stable self-representation may be otherwise unattainable. In this sense, autofiction does not abandon the concerns of earlier genres of development and self-writing but reworks them under new historical and cultural conditions, where factual truth becomes every day more contestable and in which the self and its narration are inextricably intertwined. While patterns of formation, memory, and self-exploration persist, they are no longer oriented towards synthesis or closure but to moral and epistemological openness. Autofiction thus provides a framework for narrating the self in a world where traditional scripts of development and identity have lost their explanatory power. It is in this framework that my analyses in the following chapters will attempt to unmask new and alternative ways to conceive the *masculine* within the literary works by Ocean Vuong, Gabriel Krauze and Caleb Azumah Nelson.

2.4. Autofiction and Its Potential for the Narration of Masculinities

To conclude this second theoretical chapter, I would like to combine the threads of masculinity and autofiction, to demonstrate how the latter can serve as a platform in which changes in representations of the former can be staged. To do so, I first draw attention to Hanna Meretoja's (2022) exploration of the metanarrative dimension of autofiction. Drawing on narrative theory and cultural studies, the scholar introduces the concept of *metanarrative autofiction* to describe texts that not only narrate lives but critically reflect on the role of narratives themselves in shaping individual and collective sense-making. While, as previously mentioned, metafictional autofiction primarily presents and interrogates the boundary between fiction and fact, metanarrative autofiction thematises the cultural narrative models through which subjects come to understand their lives, foregrounding the functions, limits, and ethical implications of narrativity. Central to this framework is the notion of *narrative agency*, defined as the culturally mediated capacity to engage with, challenge, and reconfigure available narrative repertoires. In Meretoja's

formulation, narrative agency comprises three interrelated dimensions: *narrative awareness*, or the ability to recognise narrative templates that surround us; *narrative imagination*, understood as the capacity to envision alternative life trajectories beyond what appears self-evident; and *narrative dialogicality*, which implies one's participation to and active role within relational and intersubjective "narrative in-betweens" (p. 133). Importantly, metanarrative autofiction exposes the tension between agency and the constraint of dominant social schemata, emphasising that lives are shaped as much by what happens to subjects as by their capacity to act and narrate. By staging this tension, Meretoja argues, metanarrative autofiction allows its authors to verbalise (and therefore us to realise and visualise) their anxieties, uncertainties, making thus readers acquainted with "different life trajectories" (p. 137) that lie beyond normative scripts.

Meretoja's perspective helps understand how autofiction can serve as a tool to engage with greater social phenomena, like masculinity. What the next chapter will try to do is building a narrative arc made of experiences and narrations of boys and men that—even though inevitably different from each other—frame the concept of *being a man* as relational and contextual rather than pre-given. I situate the rationale behind this goal in my experience of reading autofictions as a container where lived experiences are re-enacted and reshaped to elaborate a more comprehensive sense of the self. Indeed, rather than reconstructing a coherent life trajectory, autofictional texts frequently dramatise the instability and fallibility of memory. In my view, memory is inevitably present-oriented, as are the protagonists of autofiction, whose act of reliving their past is bound to be partial and fragmented. The *autofictional I* thus emerges not as a stable subject unfolding across time, but as a temporal knot in which experienced past, narrated present, and imagined futures intersect. This knot is especially visible in narratives that return to childhood and adolescence from a later vantage point, where memory is shaped not only by recollection but by delayed understanding, as we will see in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Temporal complexity often manifests formally through non-linear structures, repetitions, and an oscillation between immediacy and retrospection. Childhood and adolescence may be narrated from a temporally distant vantage point, while moments of crisis or affective intensity collapse temporal distance, producing a sense of narrative simultaneity. Thus, conceiving temporality as a non strictly linear phenomenon (as the

classical autobiography and Bildungsroman tend to do) is particularly significant for the study of masculinity. Narratives of masculine identity are—still today—often structured around ideals of linear progression made of growth, mastery, self-control, and achievement. However, autofiction can expose the fragility of these temporal scripts. By staging memory as unstable, unreliable and time as recursive, autofiction unveils the ways in which masculinity is continuously reworked in relation to past vulnerabilities, unresolved conflicts, and belated recognitions.

Moving on from the time dimension, another important trope of autofiction that will be examined in the following chapters is affect. Rather than subordinating feeling to plot or psychological explanation, autofiction often lingers on real sensations like shame, desire, grief, anger, and confusion. This affective orientation resonates with recent turns in literary and masculinity studies that challenge the association of masculinity with emotional restraint and rationality. Autofiction, with its formal and thematic openness, allows for the articulation of vulnerability without requiring narrative resolution or moral redemption: characters embrace their emotional states, even those that are presented as excessive, contradictory, or unresolved. Nevertheless, as I tried to show in my review of studies on autofiction, affect in autofictional settings is not reducible to confessional authenticity.

The complex relationship between writing and experience is conveyed through “numerous traits of orality, formal innovation, narrative complexity, fragmentation, otherness, disparateness and self-commentary”⁹ (Gasparini, 2008, p. 311, my translation). These typical patterns concerning autonarration identified by Gasparini signal how emotional exposure in autofiction is mediated by literary strategies that may simultaneously invite empathy and provoke scepticism. This ambivalence is productive in the way it prevents affect dynamics from being universalised and instead situates them within specific social and cultural contexts. The same ambivalence will be presented particularly pronounced in narratives that foreground risk and transgression like Gabriel Krauze’s *Who They Was*, where affective exposure is inseparable from questions of credibility and self-legitimation.

⁹ “nombreux traits d’oralité, d’innovation formelle, de complexité narrative, de fragmentation, d’altérité, de disparate et d’autocommentaire”.

Taken together, autofiction's treatment of temporality and affect strongly challenges developmental models that conceptualise identity formation as a linear process culminating in stability or resolution. Rather than narrating masculinity as something once and for all achievable, autofiction tends to frame it as a series of ongoing negotiations across different moments of the life course. Early adulthood, in particular, will be depicted in Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* not as a moment of consolidation but as one of suspension, marked by repeated attempts at intimacy, belonging, and self-definition that do not culminate in a fixed resolution.

Childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and maturity do not function as discrete stages but like interconnected narrative nodes that continually refract one another, as the narrative-temporal arc I am about to design will attempt to exemplify. My choice to elaborate it as composed by three different authors and their distinct works draws on the autofictional mode's understanding of life-course narration as discontinuous and in constant development. Masculinity, within this framework, is not something one grows into but something that is repeatedly questioned, undone, and reformulated in response to changing relational, social, and affective contexts. Relational dynamics—friendship, romantic intimacy, rivalry, and grief—will emerge in the works that will be analysed as key sites where masculine identity is both sustained and destabilised over time.

The following analytical chapters build on these theoretical premises and examine how specific texts mobilise autofictional strategies to narrate the masculine experience across different ages, social contexts, and affective landscapes, revealing both the constraints and the possibilities embedded in contemporary narratives of the self.

Chapter 3. Fragile Coming of Age: Vulnerable Masculinity in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

3.1. On the Author: Ocean Vuong and the Aesthetics of Marginal Experiences

Ocean Vuong¹⁰ (born 1988) is a Vietnamese American poet, writer and lecturer. Born Vương Quốc Vinh in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon), Vietnam, Vuong and his family were forced to flee from the country; his mother, being the daughter of an American GI, was not allowed to work in her native land. After more than a year spent in a refugee camp in the Philippines, the family emigrated to the United States, when Vuong was two years old. They settled in Hartford, Connecticut in conditions of economic precarity and cultural displacement. His father was soon made to leave the household due to his violent behaviour towards his wife. Vuong grew up surrounded by women: his mother, grandmother, and aunts raised him, with his mother with her job in a nail salon being the only source of income for the family's sustenance. Interestingly, his renaming by his mother, from 'Vinh Quoc' to 'Ocean', was inspired by a customer who explained to her how *ocean* is the word employed to describe the widest surface of water in the world, a surface—in the case of the Pacific Ocean—that connects the US with their native land, Vietnam.

Vuong's early life was shaped by economic and linguistic insecurity, as well as the legacies of war and migration. Both his mother and grandmother suffered from psychic disorders deriving from their traumatic experiences during the Vietnam War, which translated into a partially turbulent upbringing environment for the author. Together, Vuong was responsible for much of the communication in English regarding his family and its management even though, growing up in a working-class immigrant community, he did not speak English until he began kindergarten and only became proficient in reading and writing in his early adolescence. These formative experiences—including communal living, parental absence, and the struggle to acquire literacy in a foreign

¹⁰ In order to provide an overview of the authors' lives that serves to contextualise the events discussed in their writings, I am introducing this section in this and the following chapters. This is intended as a summary of biographical information gathered from interviews and dedicated articles on the web, as well as from the back cover of the books.

language—have remained central to his artistic sensibility and are recurrent themes in his works.

After high school, he briefly enrolled at Manchester Community College and Pace University to study International Marketing, before dropping out and transferring to Brooklyn College, where he completed a BA in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, and later earned an MFA in Poetry at New York University (NYU). His first publications were in poetry: from the chapbooks *Burnings* (2010) and *No* (2013) to the first full collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), that paved his way in the American and international poetry scene, winning the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award among other awards. After reaching worldwide recognition and critical acclaim with his first novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which soon became a New York Times bestseller and has now been translated in 41 languages and sold more than one million copies, Vuong returned to poetry with his second collection of poems *Time is a Mother* (2022), understood as a way to process grief following his mother's death in 2019. In 2025 then, he published his second novel, *The Emperor of Gladness*, which also maintains an autobiographical character and was well received by critics and audience. Beyond his writing, Vuong's career includes teaching positions in MFA programs in Creative Writing, Poetry, and Poetics at University of Massachusetts and New York University.

As both poet and novelist, Vuong embodies a literary identity in which form, voice, and own experience—especially the intersectional experiences of migration and queerness—are inseparable from the very act of narrating the self. This chapter will attempt to show how biographical and artistic dimensions collide in Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to situate the act of narrating as a site of self-discovery where experiences and vulnerabilities can be conveyed and accepted. This intersection of life and art makes Vuong an exemplary figure for examining the narrative constructions of masculinity in contemporary autofiction, where the personal and the literary co-constitute one another.

3.2. Situating *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* within Contemporary Autofiction

After its publication in 2019, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*¹¹ was immediately successful with critics and audiences alike. Alongside, the work has in the years attracted academic attention for its peculiar style and form. Although it presents the paratextual indication ‘novel’¹² in its cover, scholars (Neumann, 2020; Zhu, 2026) have underlined how Vuong’s first work in prose resists straightforward generic classification, bringing together elements “from the epistolary novel, the coming of age story, [...] migrant literature, and [...] transcultural autofiction spanning different times, places and creative traditions” (Neumann, 2020, p. 279). To this extent, it has been pointed out (August, 2024; Soler i Arjona, 2025; Quong, 2019) that Vuong’s work differentiates from “the conventional Western three-act plot structure” (Soler i Arjona, 2025, p. 472) to embrace the Japanese traditional framework of *kishōtenketsu*, a four-stages narrative structure that “does not rely on conflict to advance the story” (Quong, 2019, para. 2). This includes an introduction to the characters (*ki-*), their deepening (*-shō-*), a turn, a new element, an evolution (*-ten-*), and a final accumulation (that differs from a conclusion) of all agents and factors that played a role within the narration (*-ketsu*). In this way, tension in the narrative is achieved through proximity to the characters rather than on conflict-driven plot. Such an approach finds its realisation in the novel’s “unconventional temporality”, narration being “highly unstable, mobile, and fragmentary” and in constant movement “backwards and forwards, blurring past and present” (Soler i Arjona, 2025, p. 471). Structured as a letter written by a son to his illiterate mother—who is thus not (and will never be) able to read it—the text establishes from its outset the paradoxes that underlie its narrative project: Vuong’s prose is less an ordered recollection (and fictionalisation) of past events than a set of “juxtapose[ed] fragments of family life and romantic life” that prioritises “the transient yet complex sensory perceptions, cultivating a continuum of images rather than plots” (Zhu, 2026, p. 15). These tensions position Vuong’s work squarely within contemporary autofiction, understood as a mode of writing that develops “the drives, emotions, and beauty of [the] characters” via instability of reference, identity,

¹¹ Vuong’s work is hereafter referred to as *On Earth*.

¹² For this reason, the label ‘novel’ may be used throughout the chapter to refer to Vuong’s work.

and narration, importantly providing “insight rather than evidence” (August, 2024, p. 694).

The novel follows the narrator, nicknamed Little Dog, as he recounts episodes from his childhood and adolescence as a Vietnamese American growing up with his mother Rose and his grandmother Lan in the working-class environment of Hartford, Connecticut. In a way that clearly draws from the author’s biography, these recollections unfold non-linearly, moving between scenes of domestic violence, intergenerational trauma linked to the Vietnam War and its aftermath experienced by his mother and grandmother, linguistic and cultural dislocation, and the narrator’s coming of age as a queer subject. Central to the narrative is Little Dog’s relationship with his mother, constantly (and almost entirely) addressed with the personal pronoun ‘you’ and whose life is marked by physical labour, emotional instability, and the lingering effects of historical violence. Alongside this maternal axis, the novel devotes sustained attention to the narrator’s first romantic and sexual relationship with Trevor, a white American boy whose body becomes a symbolic site where intimacy and vulnerability as well as masculinity and structural violence intersect.

Rather than presenting these experiences as a coherent developmental arc, *On Earth* adopts a fragmentary and recursive narrative structure. To this extent, a fundamental role is played by memory, beautifully equated in the novel to “a choice” (Vuong, 2019, p. 78), then to “a flood” (p. 78) and to “a second chance” (p. 159) to underline its capacity (and with it, its intrinsic limitations) to elaborate the past into something that has an impact on the present. Being fallible, memory recreates scenarios influenced by subjectivity. Drawing from his grandmother Lan’s art of storytelling in which “the past is never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen” (p. 28), Little Dog’s memories are revisited, reworked, and reframed, emphasising not linear growth but the ongoing labour of meaning-making. The narrator’s memories and thoughts are scattered throughout the book like brushstrokes on canvas acquiring significance only once the picture is completed. For this reason, temporal continuity is sacrificed to make space for meanings and feelings that transcend normal paradigms. To do so, the author welcomes a consideration of history as “mov[ing] in spiral, not in the line we have come to expect” (p. 27), allowing himself therefore to ‘jump’ from topic to topic, from a narration (and its temporal level) to another, at the same time inserting unusual spaces between the

(sometimes relatively short) paragraphs and making use of lyrical techniques (imagery, metaphors and elliptic syntax among other devices) to proceed in the narration. These formal choices align the novel not only with the autofictional inclination to stylistic innovation, but also with what has been described as a life-course approach to autofiction, in which identity emerges not through teleological *Bildung* but through repeated narrative reconfiguration. Even as it engages themes—youth, self-discovery, sexual awakening—historically associated with the traditional Bildungsroman, the text resists the genre’s classical orientation to stability, refusing to present events as “a straightforward progression” towards “a clear lesson, resolution, or, even, ending” (August, 2024, p. 685). As this chapter will attempt to show, the self whose coming of age is narrated does not develop in a vacuum but engages in relationships that shape the protagonist and his being. The ‘hero’ is not self-arising; he is tied to the events and people that inform him and his path. His development is contextualised and relies heavily on relationships; it is shaped through the history of his family and the sociocultural dimension he inhabits as much as through his own and his lover’s paths.

From the perspective of autofiction theory, Vuong’s novel exemplifies a mode of writing that deliberately exploits the tension between autobiographical evocation and fictional mediation. The narrator shares significant biographical coordinates with the author—migration history, linguistic trajectory, sexual identity—yet the text often favours broader reflections on identity and society to simplistic referential reading. The framing of the narrative as a letter to an illiterate mother functions as a powerful metanarrative device: in this at the same time hypothetical and impossible confrontation with his mother, the author/narrator/character allows himself to interrogate multiple themes regarding his identity and life, not last that of his role as a writer and the function of writing as a political action itself. When reflecting on what it means to be a writer, Little Dog/Ocean Vuong comes to a quite extreme conclusion: “it’s a mess” (Vuong, 2019, p. 189). Indeed, he is “telling [his mother] a story so much as a shipwreck—the pieces [i.e., the textual fragments] floating, finally legible” (p. 190). This finds a reason in his intention, as a writer, an artist, not “to build a ‘body of work’, but to preserve [their] bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work” (p. 175).

In this attempt to present and protect bodies and experiences normally marginalised like those of diasporic first and 1.5-generation immigrants, the intrinsic political value of

art is to be found. Confronted with the idea that “great writing ‘breaks free’ from the political, thereby ‘transcending’ the barriers of difference, uniting people toward universal truths” (p. 186), Vuong underlines the impossibility to separate art from the context in which it is made, “as if something is assembled is alien to the impulse that created it. As if the first chair was hammered into existence without considering the human form” (p. 190). Then, especially from a queer perspective like Vuong’s, embracing the political becomes a must as for, being the *alternative*, the queer perspective always unfolds in relation to the dominant narrative. Vuong therefore foregrounds writing as an act that is ethically charged, asymmetrical, and potentially violent, rather than as a transparent vehicle for truth. In this sense, the novel enacts what contemporary theorists have described as *autofictionalization*: an intentional process of self-representation that combines personal material with aesthetic transformation and reflexive distance.

Moreover, *On Earth* actively engages the reader in an autofictional mode of reception. The sharing of a name between author and narrator is avoided, yet the accumulation of biographical echoes invites readers to oscillate between factual and fictional reception schemata. At the same time, the novel introduces moments of irresolvable ambiguity—particularly in its handling of memory, desire, and violence—that suspends the possibility of definitive ontological classification. While reading, one soon renounces to a linear explanations of facts, engaging in Little Dog’s analepsis and prolepsis, in his ‘jumps’ inward and outward himself. As Timothy K. August (2024) notes, the “book’s lurid imagery and beautiful moments draw the reader toward the narrator’s voice” (p. 686), whereas “temporal ellipses, a non-developmental narrative, and the inclusion of fragmented observations” (p. 685) contribute to foster closeness alternated to estrangement. These oscillations align Vuong’s work with holistic models of autofiction that conceptualise autofictional works not merely as a textual phenomena but as literary events involving writing, reading, and interpretation.

Finally, Vuong’s novel can be read as a form of metanarrative autofiction in Meretoja’s (2018) sense, insofar as it reflects critically on the cultural narratives available for making sense of migration, masculinity, and queerness. The narrator repeatedly interrogates inherited narrative models—of the immigrant success (or failure) story, of masculine toughness, of romantic fulfilment—and exposes their insufficiency for articulating lived experience. This is why the next section turns to depict the wider social environment that

serves as a background for Little Dog's journey, in order to ground the analyses that will follow. As I will attempt to show, Vuong's writing becomes a space for negotiating narrative agency: a way of acknowledging social conditioning while simultaneously imagining alternative forms of self-understanding. The goal of this chapter is precisely that of outlining these representations of *alternative* that are disseminated throughout *On Earth*. To do so, after the next section on the American sociocultural background depicted in the book, special attention will be given the protagonist's relationship to, respectively, his mother and Trevor, considered—as previously mentioned—a fundamental trope of becoming of the self.

3.3. American Society as a Site of Normalised Violence

On Earth situates Little Dog's coming-of-age within a distinctly American social landscape marked by precarity, violence, and normative pressures surrounding gender, race, and class. Rather than functioning as a neutral backdrop, American society, first consumed by Vuong in his life and then recreated by Little Dog in the pages, operates in the novel as an active force in the production of subjectivity, shaping the conditions under which—in this case—masculinity is learned, internalised, and contested. Two sequences in the novel, to this extent, are worth noticing. First, towards the end of the narration, Vuong dwells on the use of the phrase “what's good?” as an alternative way of greeting in his Hartford at the beginning of the millennium. In this part of America, among “hollowed-out, boarded buildings, [...] mobile parks and HUD housing” (p. 213), one arranges “a kind of life digging in and out one brutal winter after another”, hearing “[t]he two a.m. gunshots, the two p.m. gunshots” and seeing “the wives and girlfriends at the C-Town¹³ check-out with black eyes and cut lips” (p. 214). Here, facing the hardships of life is the norm, being defeated is “already understood, already a *given* [like] the skin you [wear]” (Ibid., emphasis in the original). In such difficult living conditions marked by economic restraint and, as we will see, addiction, asking “what's good” is a way to—the difficulties already taken for granted—“push aside the inevitable to reach the exceptional” (Ibid.), reshaping the notion of good to make it assume a character of exceptionality.

Another scene that illustrates the socioeconomic circumstances within the book is that recalling of a night bike ride along the river Connecticut. Describing what Little Dog and

¹³ An American chain of supermarkets operating mainly in the northeastern United States

Trevor see while riding their bikes, a picture of America is made. They ride “past Church St. where Big Joe’s sister OD’d¹⁴, then the parking lot behind the MEGA XXXLOVE DEPOT where Sasha OD’d, the park where Jake and B-Rab OD’d” (p. 147). This is the non-white side of the river, where Little Dog’s tenement used to stand before it was demolished. Towards the suburbs, however, the scenario changes: houses grow “further and further apart from one another” (149), so large “you could look in all the windows and never see a single person”, but only the “sparkling chandeliers, dining tables, multicolored Tiffany lamps shaded with decorative glass” (p. 148). From the poor housing estates to the villas on the hills: within a few miles they experience the multiple faces of America, a heterogeneous place where everything is close together and sliced unequally through socioeconomical diversities.

3.3.1. Migrant Labour Intersecting the American Landscape

As a matter of fact, a central aspect of this context is economic and social marginalisation. Little Dog grows up in a working-class environment defined by instability and limited prospects, where survival often takes precedence over self-expression. It is here the case of immigrant labour, effectively described in the dimensions of the tobacco farm, where adolescent Little Dog works during summers, and his mother’s nail salon, a “place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in America—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid” (pp. 80–81). The nail salon is, for newly arrived migrants as in the case of Rose, the place to start, and often to stay. It has a community-making connotation: “a place where *our* children are raised” (p. 79, emphasis added) recounts Little Dog, “where folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told, [...] a makeshift classroom when *we* arrive” (p. 80, emphasis added). However, it is also an environment where dignity is denied, in the way “there are no salaries, health care, or contracts, the body the only material to work with and work from” (Ibid.).

Having the body as only warrant, as the only safety one can rely upon is a pattern which is shared also by the “undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America” who are responsible for harvesting tobacco in the estate run by the white landowner Buford, where Little Dog spends his summers working side by side with Trevor. These

¹⁴ American slang for ‘overdosed’

men, far from their loved ones, keep travelling across the country like shadows, from field to field, from harvest to harvest, season after season. Waiting to go back where they belong, *if* they make it back, each of them has some kind of goal: a house for a mother “outside Guadalajara” to buy, a daughter to send to “university in Mexico City” (p. 92), a tumour-removing operation to pay. Their bodies, “even after morning showers, exude the salt and sunbaked underscent from the previous day’s work” (p. 88) and their mouths, just like those of the nail salon’s workers, are only able to pronounce “[I]o siento” (p. 92) or “*sorry*” (p. 91, emphasis in the original), to Mr. Buford as to the white customer receiving a manicure. Apologising, in these work environments, is a way of self-positioning in a lower stage of the social hierarchy. The migrant—the subaltern—addresses the white interlocutor to remind them that he or she is inferior. In the nail salon, *sorry* is a passepartout, “a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency” (Ibid.) in the form of a tip, a word which is “charged and reused as both power and defacement at one” (pp. 91–92). For the field workers, having no agency but that of their bodies and this only utterance, it is “a passport to remain” (p. 93).

3.3.2. “Damaged American Fathers” and Learned Behaviours of Hegemonic Masculinity

With this discussion of the role of apologising in the sphere of migrant work, the fundamental issue of language and its agential function has been addressed. As a child, Little Dog is confronted twice with incidents of bullying that relate to this issue. In the school bus, he is violently invited to speak English but, unable to, remains silent. Slapped multiple times then, the boy ‘asks’ Little Dog to say his name, “like [Little Dog’s] mum did last night” (p. 25). Helpless, with his eyes shut, he obeys, triggering the boy’s satisfaction: “[t]hat’s good little bitch” (Ibid.). At only nine years of age, the bully “already master[s] the dialect of damaged American fathers” (p. 24), already knows how to perform the masculinity of American fathers and how to police it through peer violence. It is equally noteworthy how this violent episode is received at home by Little Dog’s mother. Startled, she reacts twisting responsibilities: “[w]hy’d you let them do that, [...] what kind of *boy* would let them do that?” (pp. 25–26, emphasis added). In her view, Little Dog has “to find a way” himself, to “be a *real boy* and be strong” (Ibid., emphasis added). Owning “a bellyful of English” she does not possess, he should have the means

to fight for himself, to show the strength typically associated with male figures. This hint, together with a big glass of “American milk” the following morning, symbolically poured “hoping the whiteness vanishing into [Little Dog] would make more of a yellow boy” (p. 27), are the only solutions that she, as a mother, manages to offer to his troubled son. In this case, Rose as a parent does not differ from the “damaged fathers” advocating masculine legitimacy as conferred through the capacity for violence—whether enacted or endured.

The second instance in which the child Little Dog is harassed has again to do with internalised rules of masculinity, this time symbolised by colour. Soon after receiving his first bike with training wheels, “hot-pink [...] because that was the cheapest bike in the shop” (p. 134), Little Dog must confront with the neighbourhood’s unwritten regulations on boyhood. In a scene that could come from anyone’s childhood, Little Dog is riding his bike in the parking lot of the tenement he lives in. Suddenly, a boy, “maybe ten”, interrupts his ride, knocks Little Dog to the ground, and seizes his bike. Then, helped by another kid and his key chain, he scrapes off the pink paint. In this way, Little Dog is “made to reckon his trespass” (p. 135) and, after having “learned how dangerous a color can be”, left with the desire to cry, unrealised as he “did not yet know how to in English” (p. 134). Again, the limited (or complete lack of) linguistic agency makes itself relevant also in the most human and natural phenomenon.

Whitin the narrative in *On Earth*, these violent events are not presented as aberrant or exceptional, they appear as almost routinised mechanisms through which social norms and hierarchies are maintained. Vuong renders this context not through abstract commentary but through embodied scenes in which social norms are inscribed onto the migrant workers’ above and the child’s bodies in this last paragraphs. As previously mentioned, fathers are central in the effect these norms have on generations of children. In this regard, the father figures depicted in *On Earth* are undoubtedly problematic. Leaving aside Little Dog’s own dad, who barely plays a role in the book (aside that of being forced to leave his family soon after their arrival in the US, following yet another assault to Rose), fathers fail throughout the book to provide positive examples. Trevor’s alcoholic “old man”, his only parental figure, is described in pathetic terms, looking “like Elvis in his last day alive”, smelling “strong with drink and cheap cigars” (p. 141) and

bearing no authority, let alone respect, on his son, who only wants to “[f]orget that guy” (p. 150).

The notion of fatherhood is devalued also when referring to Rose’s father, “just another American john—faceless, nameless, less” (p. 55). Back in Vietnam during the war, indeed, Lan, Rose’s mother, would prostitute herself in order to survive and feed her children, after fleeing from her first marriage and being rejected by her family, resulting in a lack of a father figure in her case too. Returning to the American soil, Hartford’s damaged fathers—the sons of the very soldiers who fought, died (and had children) in Vietnam—are depicted addressing a passing transgender woman with epithets like “*faggot*”, “*homomaphedite*” or threatening, while “holding their daughter’s or son’s hand, ‘I’m gonna kill you, bitch, I’m gonna cut you, AIDS gonna cut you’” (pp. 145–146, emphasis in the original). This is the school where children learn how to deal with diversity, as the scene in the school bus has shown. The same fathers are “phantoms, dipping in and out of their children’s life”, a life which these “sons and daughters” spend “at work or in jail or overdosed or just gone, hitching cross-country on Greyhounds with dreams of kicking the habit” (p. 213). Such absence—and negative presence—are factors that inevitably shape the identity of the children, of Hartford’s young generation, in turn repeatedly portrayed as victims of the last relevant ‘social trend’ that influences the context of narration: the opioid crisis and the related drug abuse among young people.

These phenomena constitute another crucial dimension of the American society depicted in the novel. Little Dog counts at least five people among his friends who died from overdoses at a very young age. Trevor’s storyline, in particular, shows how the social environment contributes to feed cycles of addiction and self-destruction, foregrounding economic dispossession and lack of effective supporting structures. Aged fifteen, Trevor is “put on OxyContin after breaking his ankle”¹⁵ (p. 174) and after a month, while his ankle heals, he becomes “a full-blown addict” (p. 175). Trevor’s drug use, which will end with his fatal “overdose from heroin laced with fentanyl” (p. 178) is not much framed as individual weakness but as a response to economic stagnation, inherited despair, and lack of perspectives in this America, described by Vuong as “one nation, under drugs, under

¹⁵ “OxyContin, first mass-produced by Purdue Pharma in 1996, is an opioid, essentially making it heroin in pill form” (p. 175). Within the novel, Vuong disseminates this and other passages that directly address this pharmaceutical company, considering it responsible—as has now been established—for the large-scale spread of opioids that contributed to the addiction of many Americans at the beginning of the millennium.

drones” (p. 183). This assumption entails an essential critique of the American system run by the “millionaire[s] of American sadness” (p. 181) and frames the crisis not as a moral failing but as a systemic outcome of social neglect, one that disproportionately affects working-class communities. Vuong/Little Dog firmly opposes this system that aims to benefit from controlling one’s emotions. His statement “I don’t want my sadness to be othered from me just as I don’t want my happiness to be othered. They’re both mine. I made them, dammit” (p. 181) can be read as a fundamental teaching, an invitation not to let the context flattens one’s uniqueness.

In a similar fashion, he deploys one of the many references to the animal world to tackle the issue of drug addiction as a social learned and repeated behaviour. In one scene, Little Dog and his grandmother Lan are watching a footage of buffalos blindly following one another over the edge to their deaths. She is confused about why the animals would do this, and Little Dog tries to find an explanation to it, telling his grandmother that they are not choosing death consciously—they are simply following the herd, their family. In a possible reading, Vuong uses this image to mirror how addiction spreads through communities. Just as the buffalo follow their ‘family members’ without questioning their actions, many people may fall into drug addiction after seeing friends or relatives do the same. The pattern becomes cyclical and self-perpetuating. When Little Dog says, “You don’t have to be like the buffaloes. You can stop” (p. 182), he suggests that addiction is not inevitable, that one possesses their own free will, crucially informed by their own sadness, intended here as the “most brutal teacher” (p. 181).

Importantly, Vuong counterposes these scenes of violence and erasure with the act of narration itself. The lyricism of the prose, with its recursive sentences and reflective pauses, formally resists the speed and brutality of the world it describes. Through the intertwined scenes of labour and childhood and the patterns around father figures and addiction, *On Earth* exposes American society as a system that produces masculinity through harm while denying the means to process that harm. This broader social context is essential for understanding the relational dynamics that follow. The novel’s most significant reconfigurations of masculinity do not occur in isolation but emerge within—and against—these structures, beginning with the complex and ambivalent relationship between Little Dog and his mother.

3.4. The Mother-Son Bond and Family as a Site of Learned and Embodied Care

If American society disciplines Little Dog into masculinity through fixed social norms and pre-determined economic structures, the domestic sphere complicates and deepens that formation. The complicated, multi-layered relationship with Rose is not a refuge from violence but another site in which gender, trauma, and power intersect. Yet it is also the space where alternative emotional vocabularies become possible. The mother-son bond thus becomes central to the novel's reconfiguration of masculinity.

3.4.1. The Family Setting: Trauma-Driven Violence and Care-Oriented Love

From the beginning, Little Dog builds up the relationship with his mum by recalling a series of *times*, “with the remote control” (p. 5), “the box of Legos” (p. 6), “with a gallon of milk” (p. 9), in which Rose used violence towards Little Dog. However, these first memories of physical abuse are often followed by scenes of care: apologies and a dinner at McDonald's (p. 6), small gestures of protection, such as pouring the glass of milk the morning after the bullying incident (p. 27) or riding together a roller coaster even while knowing that it would make her throw up afterwards (p. 9), fragmented expressions of pride, like the Saturdays spent at the mall, all dressed up and trying to ‘fit in’ the American worldview, buying nothing but a small pack of “fancy chocolates” (p. 7), all they could afford. Vuong deliberately refuses moral simplification: love does not cancel violence, nor does violence negate love. Instead, the novel insists on coexistence.

Rose's violence towards Little Dog must be read within a transgenerational framework: Vuong refrains from isolating her brutality as individual pathology, the PTSD she suffers from as an aftermath of the Vietnam War. Instead, the narrative consistently situates it within histories of migration, displacement, and, of course, war, described as something that, once inside of you, “never leaves—but merely echoes” (p. 4). Crucially, Little Dog does not narrate these scenes in a tone of accusation but of painful comprehension. Behind his impossible act of writing this letter to his mother, lies the paradoxical intent declared in the very first page of the book: “I'm writing to reach you” (p. 3). In other words, the necessity to *see* his mother and her perspective, as both a selfless, mature, and loving act towards her and an attempt to understand the reasons behind the violence, or, to a certain extent, to justify it by visually presenting it to the

audience. As if, when narrated, it could become easier to accept. The prose often slows down during episodes of violence abruptly placed between the narration of other stories (like his encounter with Trevor later in the book), introducing reflective pauses and associative imagery. This stylistic hesitation mirrors the narrator's attempt to digest his experiences. Violence becomes not only an act but a problem of narration: how can one write about a mother who hurts—and loves—you without reducing her to a monster?

The fragile family picture is completed by Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, who often serves as mediator between her daughter and grandson. Where Rose hurts, Lan finds a remedy, heals, protects. By "kne[eling] on all fours over [Little Dog], making a small and feeble house with her frame" against a "storm of mother" (p. 101) caused by the too many toy soldiers found lying on the floor as she came back from overtime at work. By teaching him how freshly boiled eggs—first rolled on the wound and then swallowed—heal "even the worst bruises", like the one just caused by an "empty ceramic teapot" (p. 105) thrown by Rose to Little Dog's cheek. By reaching the 10 year-old running away Little Dog to explain him that his mum "not normal okay? She pain. She hurt. But she want you, she need you" (p. 122). Lan, though herself suffering from schizophrenia, represents stability in this alternative family framework, where the mother embodies the only breadwinner and the child—like in many first-generation migrant families—the "official interpreter" (p. 32).

Coming to the linguistic issue in relation to Rose, language represents for her a source of inequality (within the American system) and asymmetry (with her son). "When it comes to words", Little Dog addresses her, "you posses fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips" (p. 29). Rose's illiteracy marks her exclusion from institutional power in the United States, as one can infer from her reaction after getting to know that Little Dog has been harassed in the school bus: "I don't have English to help you. I can't say nothing to stop them". (p. 26). Language is, as previously shown, tied to authority, citizenship, and agency. Contrasting Rose's situation, Little Dog's—first developing, then achieved—mastery of English grants him access to articulation and symbolic control. The act of writing, then, becomes an inversion of the power hierarchy within the family: the son narrates; the mother becomes the narrated. Little Dog repeatedly questions his own authority in this regard, acknowledging that by telling her story, he risks appropriating it. The novel thus stages an unresolved tension between giving voice and speaking over.

Following this logic of inversion, a similar dynamic takes place when young Little Dog tries to teach his mother how to read, the same way as he is taught in school. This attempt soon proves unsuccessful: the “stutters and false starts, the sentences warped or locked in [her] mouth”, but most importantly the inversion of their hierarchies, “and with it [their] identity” (p. 5) lead her to the conclusion that she does not *need* to read as long as she can *see*. This emphasises the role of sight as fundamental means to achieve knowledge, a pattern which is confirmed by Rose’s capacity to recognise beauty even when lacking the words to describe it, in the way she cries out “Đẹp quá!”, it’s beautiful, whenever she notices something pleasing to the eye, being it “a bird, a flower, or a pair of lace curtains from Walmart” (p. 29). Perhaps then the extensive use of imagery is also a way of honouring Little Dog’s mother. While the author’s lyrical prose contrasts with Rose’s fragmented speech patterns (a trait emphasised by the intrinsic impossibility to communicate using the literary medium), the novel may itself—rather than reinforce superiority—frame Little Dog’s literacy as indebtedness: he writes because she could not.

The act of writing this letter can therefore be interpreted not as an act of conquest but as one of preservation. Little Dog does not attempt to overcome his mother’s violence; he tries to—once again—understand, elaborate, and situate it. He does not silence her; he reconstructs her history. This shift from power to interpretation is crucial. In narratological terms, the use of a first-person voice continually addressing a ‘you’ embodied by Little Dog’s mother’s persona creates intimacy and uncertainty in the way it foregrounds vulnerability. The ‘I’ is not triumphant but searching, as the central “[W]here have you been? Where have we been, Ma?” (p. 137) indicates. This searching quality aligns with autofiction’s investment in unstable selfhood: identity is not presented as achieved but as continually renegotiated through memory and relation.

3.4.2. Surviving Each Other’s Truths

To this extent, the mother-son relationship becomes also a site where the definition of normative masculinity as based—among other things—on emotional restraint is unsettled. Such a pattern finds its thorough realisation in the scene where Little Dog comes out to his mum. Anticipated by the graphic device implying separation of a blank page, the scene begins with a sudden “Then I told you the truth” (p. 129). This signals a change in the voice: in the second part of the novel, indeed, the passages concerning

family dynamics preceding this one saw a use of ‘he’ and ‘she’ when referring to Little Dog and Rose. Now, there is a return to the usage of homodiegetic narrator that characterises the entire prose, suggesting a restoration of closeness and intimacy between son and mother, necessary to address crucial issues like the Little Dog’s coming out.

Searching for definitions of his queerness that do justice to his identity and at the same time may help his mother understand, Little Dog finds no better solution than saying “I don’t like girls” (p. 130), as he refuses to use the Vietnamese *pê-đê*, associated with paedophilia. However, delineating the queer as a negation of an attribute (to like girls) which is considered the normative standard, he is himself framing his identity as a deviation. Aware of the pain this revelation may cause to his mother, Little Dog promptly offers a way out: “[i]f you don’t want me I can go. I won’t be a *problem* and nobody has to know” (Ibid., emphasis added). This is the moment in which the character of Rose elevates, pushing aside all the doubts and practical preoccupations to focus on the essential: “[y]ou don’t have to go anywhere. It’s just you and me, Little Dog. I don’t have anyone else” (p. 131), her eyes turning red. Then, what was thought to be a one-way confession turns into an “exchang[e of] truths” (p. 133). She recounts how, back in Vietnam in 1986, four months pregnant, she was forced to abort Little Dog’s “older brother”, as “[t]her was nothing to eat” (Ibid.). What is striking here is the usage of an “image, [whose] practical mundanity” makes it “unbearable” (p. 135) for Little Dog, and vicariously for those who read: when Rose notices the pharmacological abortion had not worked out, she went to the hospital where, lightly anaesthetised, a nurse “scraped [her] baby out of [her], like seeds from a papaya” (Ibid.). The cost of these revelations translates into Rose’s bodily reaction of throwing up, the physical realisation of the act that just took place. Mother and son then “leave the Dunkin’ Donuts”, the American screenplay for this intense exchange of truths, “heavier with what [they] know of each other” (p. 139). In this scene lies the first *alternative* provided by *On Earth*, that of two people whose closeness and importance for each other is stronger than the secrets that may tear them apart. These secrets, in this problematic but loving family setting, can be shared without letting what is revealed destroy the familial bond or its members themselves, who choose to go beyond facts to embrace the real significance one has for the other.

3.4.3. Interdependency and Mutual Care as an *Alternative* Family Model

This leads to the last crucial aspect that displays the *alternative* within family dynamics: the notion of *care*. In this regard, there are two episodes within the narrative that are worth presenting. First, on a Sunday in Little Dog's childhood he and his mum spend in the nail salon (Rose always run the business on Sundays), an old lady comes in, asking for a pedicure, a usual scene. Until the woman removes a prosthesis, unveiling her amputated right leg. Done with the regular pedicure, the lady asks Rose if she could to the same with the prosthesis first, and with the 'invisible leg' then, arguing "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can. I can" (p. 83). Rose, without hesitation, "wrap[s] [her] fingers around the air, [...] the muscle memory in [her] arms firing the familiar efficient motions, revealing what's not there" (Ibid.). Saying no words, she delivers an act of quintessentially symbolic care to a stranger, Little Dog witnessing the whole process and learning how to give attention even when there appears to be no reason for doing so.

This care is consequently transposed from the workplace to the household. If, as Little Dog remembers, "[c]are and love, for us, are pronounced clearest through service" (p. 33), then the way Rose and Mai (Rose's sister and Little Dog's aunt) assist their seriously ill mother is another majestic example of what Little Dog learns from his family: how to care for the others through actions rather than words. As the "most fundamental act of our species: to sustain the body until time leaves it behind" (p. 198), Little Dog witnesses how "two daughters care for their own with an inertia equal to gravity" (p. 210). Finding no shelter in "Shakespeare and Milton, Barthes, Du and Homer, masters of death who can't, at least, teach [him] how to touch [his] dead" (Ibid.), he can only gain this kind of knowledge from the experience, observing the way the two sisters bathe their mother, medicate her body, sing to her, feed her with her last plate of rice, pretending "it's Go Cong rice, just harvested last week" (p. 209). The epistemological value of such scene cannot be equalled to those in the pages of 'his masters' and Little Dog's experience retroactively remembered makes him aware of it. So, when he recalls how, lying on the ground with Lan, massaging Rose after a long day at the salon, "three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch, made something like the word *family*" (p. 33, emphasis in the original), he is recognising that their mutual dependency and the acts of care for each other are the things that make them a family. This is the second visualisation of *alternative*: a house which, without a man, is not a broken home, to the same extent as a

child without a father is not a broken child. Refraining from romanticising the female characters but showing each part of them, the qualities as well as the flaws, Vuong provides an alternative family scenario, one that importantly situates masculinity within caregiving relations rather than outside them.

Through Rose and Little Dog's family dynamics, the novel demonstrates that identity, and with its masculinity, is neither purely imposed by society nor self-generated. It is inherited, revised, resisted, and re-narrated within intimate relational bonds. The American structures of violence outlined in the previous section are refracted through the mother's figure and voice. In this sense, the maternal relationship is the trope through which the author mediates between external contextual experiences and the internal dynamics of the self. The next relational axis—Little Dog's bond with Trevor—will radicalise this negotiation further, moving from inherited masculinity to erotic and affective reconfiguration.

3.5. Queer Desire and the Reconfiguration of Masculine Norms

If the relationship with Rose reveals Little Dog's masculine identity as inherited through and shaped by violence and care, Trevor's character introduces a different axis of formation, that of a negotiation through erotic intimacy, social difference, and bodily involvement. The bond between Little Dog and Trevor does not merely mark a queer coming-of-age romance; it becomes the novel's most intense laboratory for testing what masculinity can be outside hegemonic paradigms.

3.5.1. Framing the Character of Trevor

When Little Dog first encounters Trevor in Buford's tobacco farm, the latter appears to embody a recognisable American masculine ideal: "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (p. 203), this "hard-stitched boy" (p. 119), an "all-American beef" (p. 158) is presented as physically strong, socially confident, and economically embedded within working-class labour culture, working in the farm alongside Little Dog. Yet, from the first description Vuong starts destabilising this image: indeed, his "boyish face" converges into a "flushed, feminine pout" (p. 95). It is just the first hint on how in Trevor's persona multiple souls cohabit: from "the American boy with a gun" shooting "at a row of paint cans lined on an old park bench" (p. 116) to the guy who, moved by its beauty,

takes pictures of a late summer sunset (p. 99); from the “squirrel shooter” to the one who “stop[s] his truck in the middle of traffic to stare at a six-foot sunflower, [...] his mouth slack” (p. 120).

If, on the one hand these descriptions exemplify what Little Dog *sees*, on the other hand he also focuses, from the very beginning, on the effect this American guy has on him, that of *being seen*—he, “who had seldom been seen by anyone” (p. 96). This notion is crucial, as it is deeply intertwined not with desire, but with “the coiled charge of its possibility” (Ibid.). Within this framework, if you are seen, you exist, you have a position in the world and you *might* therefore be desired. Interestingly, one of their first interactions led by Trevor—“‘I fucking hate my dad.’ [...] ‘I hate my dad, too’” (p. 97)—shows how difference can be bridged by shared feelings, in this case the hatred towards their fathers. Little Dog, before this ‘exchange of hate’ with Trevor, “didn’t think a white boy could hate anything about his life” (Ibid.). In fact, this hate becomes the first common ground on which to build their relationship, given that, in a condition in which somebody finally sees you, “[y]ou take their hatred head-on, and you cross it, like a bridge, to face them, to enter them” (Ibid.). This implies embracing the other person in a comprehensive, unmitigated way.

Throughout his recounting, indeed, Little Dog does not refrain from showing how this latent hatred in Trevor, finding no other realisation, results in beliefs and behaviours resulting from the internalisation of hegemonic masculinity paradigms. At the end of part two, in one of the most powerful sections which deals entirely with the character of Trevor, Vuong employs irregular syntax and lyrical language rich in imagery, suggesting how these memories of Trevor (like Trevor himself) may struggle to be ordered in sentences, or cannot adhere to the rules of regular syntax but required a new, freer, one. One passage specifically encapsulates the boy’s inner turmoil regarding his sexual identity: “*Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not // a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?*” (p. 155, emphasis in the original). In a similar way, in a later dialogue, he addresses Little Dog asking “‘You think you’ll be really gay, like, forever? I mean, [...] I think me... I’ll be good in a few years, you know?’” (p. 188), signalling his incapacity—or unwillingness—to come to terms with his identity that ‘deviates’ from the one he may conceive as the ‘masculine norm’, dictated by the same context that hollowed him from within, spoiling his youth with the marks of economic precarity and drug addiction.

3.5.2. The Erotic as a Site of *Alternative*: Power Reversal and Masculine Innovation

After this introduction on the character of Trevor, the sexual relationship between him and Little Dog, together with its evolution, are worth of analysis for the way these sexual encounters help develop frameworks that destabilise normative patterns of masculine identity. Examining their relationship, there appears to be no ‘reason’ why they indulge in the depicted ‘perpetual hanging out’, as if their relationship were inevitable, something taken for granted or perhaps unavoidable in the context they lived in. The fragmented structure may have a role: in this atypical ‘love story’, where “there were no questions” (p. 110), the reader never really gets to experience the ‘causes and consequences’ for their proximity; the keenness they feel in being each other’s companion is left—probably deliberately—unexplained. In this context, however, the erotic scenes are sites of development; the lyrical precision that marks them strikes for foregrounding verity over spectacle. They expose both characters to forms of dependency in which desire is intertwined with fear, uncertainty, and ultimately tenderness.

Their first physical encounter, the first time they get closer, is nobody’s ‘fault’: Little Dog does not “know if it was [Trevor] or [him] who shifted” (p. 104), allowing their bodies to meet closely. What is remarkable in this scene is that Vuong places a Patriots’ football game spread by the radio as the background sound. American football, the epitome of American masculinity, is the soundtrack for two American boys discovering each other. In a similar fashion, the author makes use of 50 Cent’s song *Many Men*, one of the book’s recurring motifs, to set the scene in Trevor’s room, among the “*Star Wars* poster, [...] the empty root beer cans, [...] one half of a broken skateboard, [...] weed crumbs, fentanyl patches” for their second intimate moment, when they “ma[ke] friction of each other and fiction of everything else” (p. 110). The song appears several times in the book, serving, as Little Dog himself admits, not only as “a bridge”, but also as “the ground [they] stand on” (p. 125). It is the soundtrack that allows the two boys to find a ‘masculine’ common ground, or a fictionalised version of it; a pattern of shared belonging that does not delete but brings to the background the fact that “[Trevor] was white” and “[Little Dog] was yellow” (p. 114).

Proceeding with their sexual awakening, Vuong employs another narratological device to introduce how “[t]he first time [they] fucked, [they] didn’t fuck at all” (p. 113).

Indulging in the description of a “painting of a bowl of peaches”, that “never suggested authenticity, but, rather, an inconspicuous sameness” (Ibid.), the author anticipates the character of *seeming* that their sexual encounter presents. Mimicking “what [they saw] in porn” (p. 114), Little Dog’s hand welcomes Trevor’s penis while mocking the movements occurring during an anal penetration. Once terminated, the boys lay in silence next to each other to cool down, Trevor turning his face away to “cr[y] skillfully in the dark. The way boys do” (p. 115). This conclusion perfectly shows the struggle Trevor has to go through when facing his actions with his beliefs, his desire not corresponding with the one society has prescribed for him.

Moving on to the following instance in which they practice what they have renamed “*fake fucking*” (p. 119, emphasis in the original), a ‘new’ pattern is added to this practice. “When you say *Trevor* you mean you are the hunted” (p. 156, emphasis in the original), writes Little Dog, implying that the roles concerning passivity and activity in their encounters are established and secured, in a way that recalls socially driven hierarchies of age, appearance, and race. From his subservient position, however, Little Dog makes a step ahead, inviting Trevor to use violence within their act. By submitting completely to Trevor, Little Dog is repeating a dynamic that was already familiar to him: “violence”, he argues “was what I knew, ultimately, of love” (p. 119). Being “fucked up, at last, by choice” (Ibid.) is the normalisation of what he has been knowing and living with for all his life, its aware verbalisation. However, the agency he displays by *choosing* to be ‘fucked up’ opens up an understanding of submission as “a kind of power” (p. 118) in relation to his dominant lover, one that might be the most readily available version for all those who have to confront with a dominant structure while not conforming themselves to this dominant side. Within sex then, considering how the other needs the submissive side “[t]o be inside of pleasure” (Ibid.), one can work through these external structures in an intentional way, in order to find new ways of relating to them. The aim is to recast the spaces in intimate relations, legitimising the existence of bodies that decide not to adhere to heteronormative ideals. Engaging with the non-normative, the stereotypical side of submission and therefore of failure, an alternative passage of power is offered, an attempt not to conform is made. This is why Little Dog, embracing submission, is interrogating a different path of progress, which in the end may be more subversive than conforming or inhabiting the norm, the ideal exemplified by hegemonic masculinity.

This ideal is latently present in the persona of Trevor, as the scene when the two guys try to switch positions (and roles) exemplifies. Right on the verge of starting their inversed routine, Trevor realises: “‘I can’t. I just—I mean... [...] I dunno. I don’t wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can’t, man. I’m sorry, it’s not for me [...] It’s for you. Right?’” (p. 120). Trevor here clearly fails to escape the narrative setting that ‘real’ men have to control, that they *desire* but are not *desired*. Because being desired implies being vulnerable, in the way your body is sexualised, liked or disliked. ‘Real’ men, therefore, gaze but cannot be gazed. These are the “rules” that Little Dog was hoping did not apply to them “as long as the world did not see [them]” (Ibid.). However, in this world they “were Americans until [they] opened our eyes” (p. 185) and the rules “were already inside [them]” (p. 120).

If this passage seems leave no room for diversity in the condensed American context where the action takes place, Little Dog/Vuong later reminds us that “[t]he rules, like streets, can only take you to *known* places” (p. 192). Rules are intrinsically unable to embrace the unknown, the new, the alternative. Only experience and feeling can manage to widen our epistemology. To this extent, one last scene is worth analysing, a scene that may constitute the climax of Little Dog’s and Trevor’s relationship: their first approach to a ‘real’ sexual intercourse.

The whole sequence is narrated in a ‘from context to content’ fashion, a recurring pattern in *On Earth*, together with Vuong’s capacity to nestle past (or future) moments in the ‘narrative now’. After remembering the dirt on the barn’s ground, the crop hung to the rafters, and even the “air, close and thick from the summer’s last heat” (p. 200), Little Dog focuses on their tentative approach to a complete penetrative act, informed only by “porn clips” where everything is “quick, immediate, sure, and spotless” (p. 203). As Trevor pushes inside of him, Little Dog experiences pain in a new connotation, his body “having no choice but to accommodate pain by dulling in into impossible, radiating pleasure” (p. 202), in an oxymoronic construction of pleasure that considers pain as inherently part of it. Going on with the penetration, however, the reality of sexual intercourses clashes with the partial knowledge possessed by the two boys, when Trevor’s most external extremity meets the “dark inside” (p. 203) of Little Dog. To the latter, this incident feels like the uttermost failure. His body failed to contain itself, sorrow and fault of having “tainted [Trevor] with [his] faggotry” (Ibid.) are the only feelings Little Dog

can think of. In this crucial moment, confused by these emotions, his senses deranged by trauma and by what he *expects* be Trevor's reaction, he mishears him saying "[I]ck it up" (p. 204). It is an expectation fraught with social beliefs, one which readers may also feel: the 'real' masculine Trevor hurting Little Dog. But here instead Trevor offers an upsetting moment of tenderness, gently leading Little Dog to the river where they can clean and *cleanse* themselves, where he can 'lower' himself to give a cathartic pleasure to Little Dog, with an act characterised "new, concussive power" (p. 206). Finally reversing their roles, Trevor commits to his own desire towards tenderness, in this moment when he breaks completely free from what has been handed down to him so far, from everything around him, allowing himself to be. On the other hand, this "appalling second chance" (p. 205), this "kind of mercy" (p. 206) make Little Dog feel desired again, *gazed* again, alive again. In this way, Little Dog's failure is turned into an *alternative*, into the first stage of innovation, in the form of Trevor's evolution. Presenting us with the tender side of this young white American boy, Vuong offers that alternative space, especially for readers that may not identify completely with Little Dog. With this scene, the author complicates the picture and understanding of this seemingly stereotypical American guy, the one who does drugs, who drives under the influence, who has a degree of internalised homophobia, but who is also capable of tenderness and compassion, in a way that potentially offers many other young Americans an alternative way of being, loving, behaving.

"What have we *become* to each other if not what we've *done* to each other?"
(p. 206, emphasis in the original)

With this rhetorical question, not to Trevor but to himself, his mother and the readers, Little Dog closes the passage and encapsulates at the same time a kind of universality about the essence of every human bond. Just like the one with his mother, in which by *doing* acts of care, by accepting each other they *become* a family, the relationship to Trevor ultimately articulates an alternative masculine possibility—not because it is queer per se, but in the way it reframes submission as agency and permits emotional exposure. The relationship does not culminate in stable partnership or redemptive closure; its eventual failure is embraced as integral to its meaning, aiming to challenge the Western

conception of failure as a taboo, as something to hide, especially for the male subject. Trevor ultimately loses himself in addiction, but his bond with Little Dog momentarily imagines masculinity as relational openness. It is not a utopian, happy ending-oriented alternative—Trevor’s fate prevents that—but it is a glimpse of what masculinity might become when detached from normative schemes.

3.6. Conclusion: *On Earth* Narrating Vulnerable Masculinity

This chapter has approached *On Earth* as a text in which masculinity is neither given nor simply rejected, but narratively reworked through exposure to structural violence, intimate inheritance, and queer relationality. Beginning with the broader American context, the analysis has shown how pressures from the social matrix made of economic precarity and social normativity shape the space in which Little Dog’s subjectivity develops. Within the familial sphere, the relationship to Rose convolutes this framework by revealing an environment in which violence and care coexist to provide alternative conceptions of the notion of family and to situate care in the male body. In the third place, the relationship with Trevor further complicates fixed understandings of personal relationships. Queer intimacy and its capacity to look for meanings outside normative paths destabilise notions of fixed gender and social roles, thus contributing to broaden the readers’ horizons. Through writing and reshaping his lived life, Vuong’s conception of masculinity emerges not as mastery or coherence, but as a process—fragile, reasoned and, most importantly, relational. In this sense, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* expands the repertoire of masculine self-representation by locating power in submission and strength in vulnerability.

Chapter 4. Archiving a Rebel Lifestyle: Hypermasculinity in Gabriel Krauze's *Who They Was*

4.1 On the Author: Gabriel Krauze and the Ethics of Self-Exposure

Gabriel Krauze (b. 1986) is a British writer of Polish descent who grew up in North and North-West London. Krauze's parents migrated from Soviet Poland to England years before the author and his twin brother were born. His parents are both artists; specifically, Krauze's father worked as cartoonist for *The Guardian*. This, together with the numerous books he received as gifts during his childhood and the musical education he received, made Krauze encounter art from an early age. After leaving his parents' home at 17, he moved to a housing estate in South Kilburn, where he experienced first-hand the street culture dynamics that later shape his debut autofiction, *Who They Was* (2020). Alongside his involvement in criminal activities during his youth, he pursued higher education, eventually studying English Literature at the Queen Mary University of London. Once left the criminal environment behind, the author wrote a series of short stories printed by the magazine *Vice* prior to his autofictional debut, while, at the beginning of 2026, he published the anthology *95 Ways to Step in the World*, a work of experimental literature on the roadman culture, also autobiographical in nature and character.

The dual trajectory composed by academic formation and immersion in road culture forms the structural backbone of his autofictional narrative. Krauze has openly acknowledged that the novel draws directly from his own life. As the author confirmed in multiple interviews, much of the material was based on notes and fragments written during the period it depicts (mainly between his ages of 18 and 23), lending the text a documentary immediacy. Interpretative distance is therefore minimised: rather than rewriting his past through the lens of moral hindsight, he seeks to reconstruct the experiential intensity of his younger self as faithfully as possible. Such positioning is crucial for understanding the novel's tone. Krauze does not present himself as a reformed narrator who condemns his former life; nor does he fully romanticise it. Instead, he refuses to overwrite his past self with the moral vocabulary of the present, offering a narrative that remains close to the affective and linguistic textures of the environment it

depicts. The narrator's voice commits to experiential proximity, attempting to inhabit his past consciousness rather than supersede it.

Situated within contemporary British literature, Krauze occupies a distinctive position. Presenting the reality of London's gang and street culture, he offers exposure through documentation and reveals a social underworld rarely rendered from within. His lived proximity to the structures he narrates—crime, hypermasculinity, classed belonging, and their linguistic performance—grounds the novel's refusal of redemptive distance. The authorial figure that emerges is neither moral witness nor repentant survivor, but archivist of a mode of being whose intensity resists easy judgment and rather stimulates a moral confrontation with readers and their set of values. These efforts were rewarded with the book's selection for the 2020 Booker Prize longlist.

4.2 Situating *Who They Was* within Contemporary Autofiction

As previously mentioned, *Who They Was* presents itself as a work of autofiction that closely mirrors the lived experience of its author. Set primarily in South Kilburn, North-West London, the novel¹⁶ follows a young man during his university years. The narrator and protagonist, who shares the name with the author but is often referred to as "Snoopz", navigates a double existence: alongside his life as an English Literature student, he is deeply embedded in the world of street violence, drug dealing, and territorial rivalry. The narrative unfolds episodically rather than teleologically, tracing—through the work's 31 chapters—cycles of assaults, robberies ("eats" and "moves" in the novel), sexual encounters, arrests, and moments of reflection that characterise the protagonist's early twenties.

At the centre of the novel lies not a redemptive arc but a condition of coexistence. The protagonist's academic life does not gradually supersede his immersion in street culture; instead, the two domains persist side by side. Lectures, seminars, and discussions of literature and philosophy occur in temporal proximity to violent confrontations and criminal enterprises. The absence of a clear developmental trajectory complicates expectations traditionally associated with narratives of formation. Education does not catalyse moral awakening; nor does criminality culminate in tragic downfall. The novel

¹⁶ The work is referred to as a novel in its front matter. For this reason, the label 'novel' may be used throughout the chapter to address Krauze's autofiction.

ends without dramatic transformation or decisive break, instead offering a ‘quiet’ cessation of the narration, with the author coming back after years in the areas which used to be the site of his dissolute lifestyle. Even as the conclusion suggests an implicit movement away from sustained criminal involvement, the text refrains from staging this shift as moral conversion. The absence of explicit regret or self-reproach emphasised from the beginning of the narration— “there’s no remorse [...] and it’s not because we’re evil or any basic moral bullshit like that” (Krauze, 2020, p. 8)—reinforces the novel’s resistance to the integrative closure typical of formation narratives. Development is thus replaced by accumulation: the protagonist does not resolve the tension between intellectual and street identities but sustains them simultaneously, thereby challenging the assumption that education necessarily produces ethical transformation.

In this respect, *Who They Was* can be read as a counter-Bildungsroman. Rather than charting the progressive refinement of the self, it documents the persistence of the masculine ethos this chapter aims to reveal across institutional boundaries and personal bonds. The structural refusal of teleology has significant implications for the representation of masculinity. If the Bildungsroman traditionally imagines growth as a movement towards maturity, this chapter attempts to show how Krauze’s novel proposes an alternative model: masculinity as performance, endurance, repetition, and adaptation within the fixed codes of the street.

The novel opens *in medias res*, beginning with the conjunction “And” (p. 1) suggesting a continuation of something already underway. It closes similarly, with an aposiopesis, abruptly stopping the sentence, ‘unending’ it with another “and” (p. 331) that implies continuity, together with the inherent impossibility to end this story with a fixed closing. This framing device resists containment: the narrated events are neither origin nor conclusion. In this way, readers are made aware that they can only gain a limited sight on the author’s life, on *who he were*.

One of the most distinctive formal features of *Who They Was* is its ‘written orality’. The use of London’s slang¹⁷ is dominant: ‘what’s going on?’ is ‘wagwan’, ‘girls’ are ‘gyals’, a group of male friends is ‘mandem’, ‘many, a lot of’ is ‘bare’, ‘nice, attractive’

¹⁷ And of vocabulary that meanwhile has become part of the recognised sociolect Multicultural London English, abbreviated MLE (Cheshire et al., 2011).

is ‘peng’, among many other examples.¹⁸ This linguistic texture permeates the text, asserting itself as the novel’s primary register. Together, recurrent formulations like the dismissive stance marker “whatever” (p. 8, *passim*) or the interactional discourse markers “you get me” (p. 9, *passim*), “lemme tell you” (p. 49, *passim*), “imagine” (p. 15, *passim*) function rhythmically, punctuating narrative time and propelling it forwards without reflection. By directly engaging the readers, these phrases draw them close to the author’s perspective. Sentences flow one into the other emulating the fluidity of oral storytelling, their syntax paradoxically acquiring precision in the most violent scenes and becoming fragmented and fast-paced in the brief moments of reflection, such as during the protagonist’s stays in prison.

Krauze never refrains from using visual and explicit language, one that accurately reports the vividness of the violent scenes as well as of the sexual encounters, to which greater attention will be given later in the chapter. The former are largely present within the narrative, rendered with a prose that does not dissolve into chaos but becomes hyper-aware. In such moments, time contracts into an intensified present in which “there is only Now” (*sic*) and “nothing else exists in this moment” (p. 2). Violence is experienced not as loss of control but as heightened perception: violent dynamics—those of the robberies, for example—are always described with precision. Details like the “smell [of] shampoo and softness” (*Ibid.*) or that of “hair gel” (p. 194) of the victims, Snoopz’s feeling of his “heart in [his] belly, [his] chest hollow and empty now” (p. 121) are brought to the forefront, whereas “everything [Snoopz has] ever known falls away, memory, past, future” (p. 2) either disappearing or “turned invisible” (p. 122). In these scenes, he “feel[s] totally detached from everything” (p. 195): adrenaline nullifies past and future, suspending the subject in a self-contained present.

At the same time, Krauze frequently inserts unexpected lyrical descriptions of landscape and the surroundings into scenes of violence or right after their conclusion. “[G]lass needles of sunlight piercing through the sky and falling all around” (p. 4), “concrete turning blue as darkness glazes everything in shadow” (p. 120), “[t]he moon sink[ing] into a pit of clouds” (p. 122), “[c]ity lights like scattered jewels, glow[ing] and splash[ing] into the night” (p. 124), “[t]he city flash[ing] by, a blur of noise that sinks into

¹⁸ See for reference the online corpus-based *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, which has been a useful resource to navigate the text and understand its wide usage of London’s slang.

the sea of night, gems of light floating through its depths” (p. 195) are examples of passages whose aim is not to soften the brutality, but to counterbalance it, reminding the reader that such acts occur within an ordinary, indifferent world. The “sun is irrelevant, weather is just weather” (p. 8)—environment continues unchanged. The juxtaposition heightens rather than mitigates the rawness of action: violence, a fundamental trope of Krauze’s writing, unfolds within reality, not apart from it.

What can be defined as an ‘ontology of the now’ developed in the violent sequences deserves further attention for the way the protagonist, sensing to be living in an ‘eternal now’, arrives close to the experience of feeling immortal. As emphasised in a passage towards the end of the novel, “[t]ime is a strange land to walk through” (p. 309), simultaneously endless and compressed. Within the narration, while days pass in repetition— “zoot after zoot after zoot”¹⁹ (p. 196), move after move, one ‘jamming’²⁰ session after the other—each violent episode feels singular, exclusive, absolute. In these instances, “[e]very moment devours the previous one” (p. 121), completely “detached [...] from ordinary life, as if time don’t exist” (Ibid., sic). Normal temporality is thus suspended or turned into a sort of ‘atemporality’ in which “[n]othing is true [and] everything is permitted” (Ibid.), conditions under which he is allowed to “feel immortal” (p. 122). Here, the present replaces the future as the primary horizon of meaning: fear of death and moral concerns are disregarded, the only thing that matters is the violent ‘now’. This sensation is not chaos but lucidity; Krauze, with his stylistic choices, strives to reproduce the immediacy of his lived experience, and does so transmitting the awareness of what is being reported.

Such goal is further pursued by another noteworthy linguistic strategy by Krauze: onomatopoeic sequences— “bang bang bang” (p. 27), “tap tap tap”, “boom boom boom” (p. 105), “jook jook jook jook jook” (p. 153), and “whack whack whack” (p. 235) among others—further intensify this immediacy. They reduce narration—whether it is a door being smashed, a hearth beating faster with adrenaline, a knife piercing the skin of a rival gang member, or fists striking an enemy’s head—to sound, collapsing mediation between event and language.

¹⁹ British slang for a “cannabis cigarette” (Green, n.d.).

²⁰ To jam, in London’s slang, equals the action of ‘hanging about’ somewhere, usually in the novel at somebody’s place smoking weed and playing videogames.

All these techniques insert Krauze's work within the realm of nonconventional narratives to which autofiction as a form of writing belongs. The author's voice remains embedded within the affective economy of the road: pride, intensity, and assertiveness dominate, while regret and therapeutic reflection are largely absent. Krauze's narrative privileges immersion, repetition, and the preservation of intensity. The result is a form of autofiction grounded in experiential proximity: the past self is not judged from above but inhabited from within. Here, the masculine identity of the street is neither dismantled nor nostalgically glorified; it is documented in its lived contradictions. Following an inversed logic from the previous chapter, the next sections will attempt to show how an ethos of strong 'street masculinity' is developed within the book and shaped through reflections on the self, depiction of women, the relationship within the familial sphere, and the institution of regularised brotherhood in the context of South Kilburn's gang life.

4.3. Shaping the self between symbolism, beliefs and hypermasculine coping mechanisms

In *Who They Was*, masculinity first emerges not through relational negotiation but through self-assertion. In the previous section it has been argued that Krauze with his fictional realisation does not resolve the tension between the multiple identities that build up his self but rather considers how these intersect and coexist in his being.

4.3.1. Symbolic Duality Without Dissolution

The novel offers several symbolic markers of this bifold existence. Early on, the image of a packed bag encapsulates the narrator's double life—prepared to move between academic lectures and criminal enterprise: “three bags”²¹ resulting from a previous robbery are placed in the front pocket along with a “textbook on literary theory, sheets of lined paper, a copy of *Das Kapital*, and [his] pens” (p. 100). In a similar fashion, after a night of excess, he looks around in his lover's room to find “pieces of [his] life scattered about without any sense of order”: his “black Nike hoodie”, an “empty weed bag, [...] black and white Nike Air Max 90s”, his “shank with the broken green handle”, his “diamond teeth” (p. 176) visually suggesting chaos, yet showing an image of the self that

²¹ 'Bags' is used British slang to refer to “thousand of Pounds” (Green, n.d.).

remains compound in different contexts. The consistency of his character is also highlighted when he observes how he “wear[s] the same clothes to do a move as [...] to go uni” (sic), how he “kiss[es his] girls with the same lips” he uses to “tell a man to go suck his mum”, how, with the same hand, he can “stroke [his girl’s] hair” (p. 169) and use his shank “to wet someone up”²² (p. 170).

Furthermore, metaphors originating from his times in prison reinforce this structural doubleness: first, the self is compared to a “gigantic column” whose “sides”—the one “that plays the piano”, the one “that writes and wants to write more” as well as the one “that wants to shank man up and rob the rich and do the gang ting” (p. 139)—exist only because observers cannot apprehend the whole at once. Second, life is likened to an “ocean” where “some people keep swimming towards the bottom” (p. 264) either to reach it, to remain there or to then go back to the surface, while he refuses to dive, because he is already drowning. These metaphors do not dramatise psychological fragmentation; rather, they acknowledge multiplicity while maintaining coherence.

This last aspect is further examined in a later reflection on “all these masks we wear that confuse us” (p. 309), suggesting then that one may wear one for so long that it ceases to be distinguishable from the face beneath it. The parallel mask-social role here is clear: you perform one for such a long time that this version of the self outshines the other ones, and “[e]ven the truest parts of yourself can be hidden by lies” (p. 309-310). Still, this metaphor does not culminate in a crisis of authenticity but rather in a ‘coming to awareness’. It signals the sedimentation of performance into habit, the ‘road version’ of his identity being not an inner essence but a set of practices maintained through repetition, emerging thus not as temporary deviation but as the dominant configuration.

The university occupies a curious position in this self-construction. It represents aspiration— “had to do it for the sake of my brain”—and genuine intellectual engagement: books “took [him] to other places”, English “felt natural” (p. 42). Scenes of discussing works of Shakespeare and Nietzsche in seminars, essay-writing overnight at someone’s place “bunning bare zoots of ammi²³ and drinking can after can of Boost” or in the library, classical music playing in the background to connect him to a different heritage, to his “mother’s memory of him”, to the time “when [he] used to play the piano”

²² British slang for “to slash or stab with a knife” (Green, n.d.).

²³ Short for “amnesia”, British slang for “a variety of marijuana” (Green, n.d.).

(p. 189). Yet these scenes do not reconfigure his identity. They coexist with parallel acts: “trying to get a gun” (p. 49) at the beginning of summer before his first year at university; trapping cocaine; maintaining street reputation “doing moves” (p. 74). Graduation, then, is narrated almost parenthetically— “And then I graduate” (p. 280)—a structural anticlimax that underscores its secondary status.

University becomes one environment among others, not a transformative arc. Another arena in which he can perform his personal ethos, where he can “chirps chicks²⁴ in the library” (p. 74), present his understanding of Nietzschean morality as “not actually some universal natural ting” (p. 114, sic), and overtly challenge—“shutdafuckup”—a lecturer who “make[s] random accusations that [she] can’t substantiate” (p. 113), transmitting the same sense of supremacy that his actions in the street grant him with. University, therefore, does not replace the road; it supplements it. The discrepancy between academic settings and street-coded clothing further visualises this coexistence: “[u]ni is a fashion show [...] Brers²⁵ with fresh trims.²⁶ Chicks who smell of shampoo and moisturiser” (p. 73). Attire becomes a portable declaration of allegiance. And he, even within institutional space, carries the semiotics of the road, with his “brand new black leather Avirex jacket” (Ibid.) and “black Nike tracksuit” (p. 78, p. 112).

Objects play a central role in stabilising identity. The acquisition of “my burner, my strap, my mash”²⁷ is narrated as arrival into authenticity— “[r]eal talk” (p. 60). The possession of a gun opens up new possibilities for him: “to take revenge if I have to”, to “do the beef ting on my ones if I need to”, to “protect myself differently” (p. 60). These *possibilities* strongly differ from the possibility of desire analysed in *On Earth*: the capacity to hurt, to have a violent impact on the others is what provides Snoopz with a sense of realisation, one that in *Little Dog* was achieved by being eventually recognised as desirable. In *Who They Was*, desire assumes a completely different tone and will be analysed in depth later in this chapter.

Returning to the role specific items play in socially positioning the protagonist (and his fellow gang members), watches, gold chains, white gold teeth are not superficial luxuries but visible confirmations of achieved status. After obtaining “thirty grand” from

²⁴ British slang for “flirting with” (Green, n.d.) young women.

²⁵ General English slang for men (Green, n.d.).

²⁶ British slang for “haircut or hairstyle” (Green, n.d.).

²⁷ These are all slang realisations for the word gun (Green, n.d.).

his first major “move” with his “brudda Dario” (p. 75), the impulse is not to secure future stability but to display present power, having his “grillz”²⁸ done and buying an “Aqua master watch with diamonds chips around the bezel” and a “gold chain” (p. 78). Belonging is materially encoded; his identity finds relief and confirmation in what he wears and in the items he possesses. Compliments are deflected with “dun know” (p. 232), the only suitable expression when reacting to them, a ritualised modesty that paradoxically reinforces status, because recognition—especially from peers, as we will see—must be acknowledged without appearing to seek it.

4.3.2. Agency, Vitality, and the Rejection of Submission: Snoopz’s Unconventional Worldview

At the level of explicit belief, the narrator’s worldview is defined by defiance. In a direct address to a fictive reader living in London, the narrator argues “even though we live in the same city, where I’m from and where you’re from could be two totally separate worlds” (pp. 37-38), anticipating a recurring argument articulated by Krauze. Differently from the majority of the audience, the narrator has experience of realities that the reader does not have: the “world of wickedness and doing mad tings that earn respect” (p. 184). At the same time, however, he knows the context of university and the ‘normal’ world which is “all about get up, go to work, go on holiday, buy this, buy that, tick this box, tick that box, box tick, box tick, box tick” (p. 184). This “tick box” dimension is what he overtly refuses by performing his lifestyle: an “honest job” (p. 89) is framed as submission, something that “[d]rains your spirit [and t]urn you into a shell” (p. 90). Freedom is equated with risk, illegality, and self-determination: he declines “an easy and boring life”; he wants to “run from the law, [...] fuck gyal like it could be [his] last night on Earth, [...] see fear in people’s eyes and eat [his] own fear”, he wants “to live dangerously, on the edge of existence” (p. 105). The “unnameable energy” (p. 96) that propels him toward criminal acts is described almost physiologically—an internal force demanding expression.

Importantly, moments of reflection do occur, but they seldom destabilise the protagonist’s worldview. Discussions of morality in university seminars—particularly

²⁸ In British slang and fashion, ‘grillz’ are “decorative, often removable, dental covers made of precious metals like gold, silver, diamond or platinum” (Green, n.d.).

around Nietzsche—together with his reflections “behind the door” (p. 257) when he spends time in prison remain parallel to the road’s own relativised ethics. Morality in Krauze is contextual: “just a rule of behaviour relative to the level of danger in which individuals are” (p. 114); instincts, like those of taking “proper revenge” (p. 209) govern action; “stronger wolves and weaker wolves” (p. 215) replace good and evil as structuring categories. Within this framework, laughter often follows brutality. After a stabbing or robbery, the recurrent response is not horror but exhilaration. Such reactions signal not sociopathic detachment but the normalisation of violence as lived reality. It is woven into everyday life to the extent that sorrow becomes reserved not for injured bodies but for a “favourite little shank” (p. 173) that goes broken or a fellow “riding a four-year sentence” (p. 185). This aligns with a worldview in which remorse is redundant— “fuck remorse” (p. 9)—and regret would be “more painful to feel [...] than it would be to get stabbed or shot” (p. 145). As the maxim “[n]o point wasting time to feel anything if it doesn’t come naturally to you” (p. 9) elucidates, everything that distances from the inner instincts, all the feelings that do not arise naturally, is dismissed as artificial and not worth the effort of being experienced.

Thus, the ethical axis Snoopz adheres to is not good versus evil but power versus lack of it. The statement “[t]he only bad thing is powerlessness” (p. 216) crystallises the ontology of the text. Agency, even destructive agency, is preferable to passivity, an early lesson established when being victimised at thirteen: victimhood is intolerable, to “run away like a pussy” is unbearable, allowing others “to make [him] feel like nothing” in unacceptable. The solution lies in “being ruthless” and “coldhearted” (p. 302); agency must be reclaimed through force. When confronted with his girlfriend’s traumatic past—something he “couldn’t change one bit of” (p. 44)—the intolerable element is precisely the lack of agency. Here, the only possible scenario in which control is restored is the fantasy of revenge. Similarly, while recovering from an attack he suffered from, “all [he] can think of is revenge” (p. 239). In both cases, the need for physical retaliation supersedes the possibility of verbal articulation as a way to process trauma.

Violence, then, is not simply something the protagonist does. It is the condition under which selfhood and belonging are articulated; it generates vitality. In the aftermath of one of his “eats”, he states: “I’ve done what I had to. I feel good. Really good. No. I feel amazing” (p. 124). Considering then the possible prospect of being caught, he realises

how this thought is less a threat than a source of vitality: “what a way to feel alive; the possibility of that downfall” (Ibid.). This is another point in which Krauze clashes with Vuong. While the latter climbs back from the oblivion of his ‘unseenness’ by being recognised and desired by his lover, the former—starting instead from a privileged, desiring, that is, hegemonic masculine position—gains vital energy from the possibility of falling. When faced with the prospect of imprisonment then, his reaction is one of acceptance without sentimentality: no “moist talk [...], just accept reality” (p. 254). Emotional display would signal weakness. Reality must be absorbed, actively reacted to, not dramatized or elaborated into words.

4.3.3. Drugs and Violence as Emotional Technologies

This last aspect discloses the most revealing dimension of self-relation, that of the management of affect. Emotional life in the novel is not absent; it is regulated through specific, gender-coded mechanisms. The protagonist does not lack feeling. He lacks acceptable forms to process it. Anger, desire, frustration, sorrow—these circulate constantly, but their translation into language is limited. Emotional vocabulary is sparse; what replaces it are action and intoxication.

Snoopz’s conflicts with his mother produce visceral sensations— “burning angry tears” (p. 27), feelings “clutching [his] heart” (p. 92). The response is immediate: punching his bedroom door with his fists (p. 27), “throwing a brick through the kitchen window” (p. 92) of any house where people sit at the table, or looking for some “purple haze”²⁹ to “drown this thing that’s dancing in [his] chest” (Ibid.) are the coping mechanisms that help him elaborate his feelings and go through difficult moments with his mother.

This pattern recurs. Feelings of sickness and emptiness are countered by “six zoots back to back until [he] feel[s] like the sky’s underneath” (p. 221) him. When everything around him “looks artificial and deadout” (p. 222, sic) after he has been betrayed, when he feels “cold inside and [his] stomach swims” (p. 225), he drinks and smokes until thought dissolves. Similar to his need for revenge after being attacked, the “red hot, melting” anger that fills his heart becomes something that must be physically expelled,

²⁹ British slang for “a strong variety of cannabis” (Green, n.d.).

almost surgically removed— “like the only way to remove it would be to cut my chest open and pull it out” (p. 230).

Drugs are described repeatedly as drowning mechanisms— “drown my thoughts in clouds of loud – bunning amnesia non-stop, morning to night” (p. 229). Violence operates similarly: it restores coherence and presumed order. Both are framed not as loss of control but as reassertions of it. Crucially, these mechanisms are not portrayed as tragic compulsion. On the contrary, they are presented as chosen strategies, as the only forms through which feeling can be metabolised. Thus, they are consistent with a masculine code that privileges action over articulation. Emotional vocabulary remains limited, but emotional intensity is high. The self does not lack feelings; it channels them into sanctioned behaviours.

4.3.4. Control, Defiance, Hyper-Awareness

Across these domains—symbolic duality, institutional coexistence, material markers of status, ethical framework, regulation mechanisms—the dominant tonal qualities are control, defiance, and hyper-awareness. Control is presented in narrative lucidity, in refusal of regret, in disciplined acceptance of consequences. Defiance against submission, moralising frameworks, and vulnerability shape Snoopz’s understanding of the world and guide his experience. Hyper-awareness is mirrored in the heightened perception of violent scenes, in the recognition of masks and social roles to which one more or less consciously complies, and in the explicit articulation of his worldview. Masculinity here is not a journey towards self-knowledge. It is an insistence on agency within a world where powerlessness is the only true failure.

4.4. Masculinity in Relation to Women: Desire, Validation, and the Refusal of Containment

If the masculine self in *Who They Was* is defined by control, defiance, and hyper-awareness, its interaction with women reveals both its consolidation and its limits. Women, more often referred to in the novel as “gyals” and “chicks”, occupy a structurally ambivalent position: they are simultaneously shaped by the road’s masculine economy and implicated in sustaining it.

4.4.1. Women in the Arena of the Road: Audience and Script

As the last section of the chapter will show, the road is a performative space. Reputation circulates through visibility, and women form part of that ecology of recognition. Early in the novel, the narrator reflects on how “some chicks fall in love with the badness”, attaching themselves to “the baddest brer they can find” (p. 45, sic). Protection, status, material display—Gucci belts, trainers, jewellery—provided by their partners are presented as currencies within a pressure-filled environment where appearance determines value, since “it’s all about image here” (Ibid). In such a system, women are not passive victims alone; they are also participants in a symbolic economy that rewards hypermasculinity.

The importance of a man’s status—whether he is feared, gang-affiliated, known on YouTube for his rap bars—becomes central to female attachment. Violence, in this logic, increases desirability. Women are sometimes shown requesting spoils— “make sure you get me some jewellery” (p. 308)—from criminal moves, fuelling the very lifestyle that endangers them. Yet the novel does not homogenise them. It distinguishes between those “sucked into” (p. 46) the spectacle of danger, “badderz” problematically described by the narrator as loving “money more than anything” and as “[o]nly good for a quick beat and leave” (p. 169) and “bare good tings” who “resist the pressure”, who “learn that there’s more to life than this place [South Kilburn and the street setting] and these reputations” (p. 46). Yinka, the woman who comes closest to having a stable relationship with the protagonist, is a “good ting forreal” (Ibid.) in the protagonist’s eyes. Davina, a friend of Snoopz’s pregnant girlfriend also belongs to this category, as she is not seduced “by Gucci belts and thugged-out talk” but still resigned to limited horizons, being aware that in South Kilburn “dreams are only meant to pass the time when you’re sleeping” (p. 169).

The depiction of violence against women further complicates this dynamic. Girls who “get beaten out in the stairwells of [the] massive blocks” or whose sexual performances are filmed and circulate around the “bredrins” represent the normality, because the woman “doesn’t really have a choice” (p. 45) within this economy of the block. In one scene, Snoopz witnesses abuse but is advised by a fellow not to intervene— “if it’s not your business just leff it alone” (p. 164, sic). This is not indifference alone; it is adherence to the road’s logic of consequence and retaliation. Moral impulse yields to strategic survival. The refusal to intervene reveals how masculine codes prioritise reputation and self-

preservation over standing up against injustice. Thus, women appear as both subjects of structural violence and as figures embedded within its circuits of validation. The road's masculine ethos is not sustained by men alone; it is socially reinforced.

4.4.2. Sexual Encounters and the Consolidation of Masculinity

Sex in the novel is explicit, physical, and intensely embodied. Desire is immediate and assumptive: the protagonist gazes, wants, and acts. Pleasure is framed as something already available, just awaiting its activation by the male agent. The many female partners always appear to “know what time it is” (p. 86, 156). Sexual encounters then unfold with minimal negotiation: the ‘she on duty’ either “climbs onto the bed and turns round for [him] to fuck her from behind” (p. 156), “rides [him] with her back to [him]” (p. 175) or even “los[es] her virginity to [him]” (p. 206). Partners are constantly depicted as waiting *for* him and to give pleasure *to* him; agency thus remains overwhelmingly his.

The language emphasises possession, intensity, and physical response. Female bodies are described in terms of curves, textures, heat—sites of sensory stimulation. The women he encounters within the narrative are defined as “little peng ting” (p. 111), as “mad peng, [...] with curly hair and a body that made any man stop and look twice” (p. 171), or as “a whole snack” (p. 206). As the recurring usage of the slang realisation of *thing* suggests, women are described without many concerns as objects from which the protagonist (and with him the other male figures in the book generally) can and does easily derive enjoyment. The emphasis is therefore less on reciprocity than on performance and affirmation. Being desired and praised—“fuuuck you’re so big [...] it’s scary, I can feel it in my belly” (p. 175)—confirms masculine authority. Being envied by other men—“[s]he loved me off and bare men at uni were mad jealous” (p. 171)—reinforces status. The sexual arena mirrors the logic of the road: recognition, competition, display.

Importantly, sexual pleasure does not destabilise the narrator. Unlike in *On Earth*, where desire unsettles identity and exposes vulnerability, here it consolidates the self. Desire operates in the safe arena of heteronormativity and affirms the protagonist's role and intensified presence as a ‘strong masculine man’. This pattern suggests that heterosexual intimacy here functions as extension of the same logic of immediacy, physical assertion, heightened awareness that governs violence performed in the street setting. Desire becomes another domain in which control is exercised and confirmed.

4.4.3. Love, Intimacy, and the Burden of Containment

The relationship with Yinka introduces greater complexity. Though also referred to as “this peng ting with amber skin and eyes that look as if they’ve always got the sun in them” (p. 43), she is differentiated from “other gyal” (p. 53, sic) early on. She is the only one allowed access to his “feelings”, the only one “who gets to fall asleep beside” (Ibid.) him. Yet even here, intimacy is narrated in intensely physical terms. Sexual desire remains central to how attachment is experienced. When he questions whether he loves her, the answer oscillates: “[w]hen I’m not with her that’s when I’m thinking I love her. When I am with her I know that I don’t” (p. 170). Absence produces longing; presence produces certainty of withdrawal.

This oscillation reveals something crucial. Love, in his conception, thrives in distance and imagination, the corporality of desire playing the most important role. When unattainable, her body and its “ripeness” become “almost mythical” (p. 170) an *object* of craving. When available, instead, desire converts into familiarity, and emotional certainty dissolves. The problem is not simply incapacity to love; it is the incompatibility between exclusivity and the masculine economy that structures him, a condition that implies emotional volatility and dictates his “link[ing] other gyal all the time” (p. 53) and “always fucking around with next gyal” (p. 170).

Yinka pressures him toward a different future: a “nine to five” (p. 54) job, stability— “[w]hen are you gonna move in” (p. 205), containment— “I just want you to make more effort to spend time with me” (p. 149). He rejects this not merely as economic limitation but as identitarian betrayal: “I’m not gonna become a version of myself that doesn’t exist” (p. 54), “I’m stuck in this life. Maybe she’s just witing for some change. But I ain’t gonna change” (p. 169). Commitment, like honest employment, threatens to restrict the multiplicity and intensity that define his self-conception.

Even his declarations of love are self-conscious. He recognises that the effort required to articulate them “means they’re not real” (p. 149), sensing their artificiality as soon as they leave his mouth. Later, upon breaking up, he feels emptiness rather than devastation. With “nothing inside” him, he walks “[b]ack to South Killy. The love song is over” (p. 206). The movement is symbolic: from intimacy to outwardness, from relational vulnerability to spatial familiarity.

Yinka's letter to Gabriel when he is in prison intensifies the dynamic. Even after breaking up, she confesses "[y]ou're a drug which I'm addicted to", and though she is aware this is an addiction "which is no good" for her, offers herself entirely, even sexually—"this pussy is yours xxx" (p. 265). His reaction is telling: he feels the urge to discard the letter, unable to bear "the burden of someone loving me like this" (Ibid.) Love becomes weight. Responsibility becomes constraint. Being loved implies accountability and reciprocity, forms of containment incompatible with his cultivated autonomy. He desires her most when she is not fully his: the perspective of possession excites; its prolonging into permanence confines. This pattern suggests that masculinity in the novel is structured around resisting enclosure—whether economic, emotional, or relational.

Across the analysed relational configurations, women do not fundamentally destabilise the narrator's masculine identity. They validate it, complicate it, occasionally confront it but do not undo it. The self remains aligned with its core commitments: agency, intensity, refusal of submission. If cracks appear, they do so subtly—in a brief moment of emptiness after a breakup, in the recognition that he cannot (and does not want to) be Yinka's "cement", that he may love the road and his "mandem" (p. 206) more than he loves her. Yet these recognitions do not culminate in transformation but rather in the stabilisation of his ethos. Thus, masculinity here is not fragile, but neither is it fully secure. It still must be continually affirmed, through sex, status, and defiance of emotional containment. Women operate within that system as mirrors, interlocutors, and sometimes casualties—but rarely as forces capable of reorienting the self.

4.5. Masculinity in Relation to Family: Inheritance, Conflict, and the Cracks in Hardness

If the road intensifies masculinity and women consolidate it, the family reveals its origins and, crucially, its fractures. The domestic sphere in *Who They Was* does not simply oppose the street; it grounds the protagonist's development while simultaneously exposing his breaches.

4.5.1. Original and Alternative Family Settings

The protagonist grows up "in a flat full of paintings and drawings" (p. 24), an environment marked by artistic labour rather than criminality. Yet this space never fully offers an

emotional refuge. He recalls never having hugged his mother, even as a child: distance predates open conflict. The family's flat feels like home only "in terms of memories and familiar spaces" (p. 26), not intimacy. Soon, his bedroom ceases to function as his shelter. After violent arguments—his mother snapping CDs, ripping posters, piercing basketballs; him smashing doors and air vents in the flat—the room becomes merely "the room that [he] slept in" (p. 27). This "home life was choking" (p. 33) him also because of the comparison with his twin brother Danny who, consistent in his goal of becoming a violinist, "never caused [his mother] any problems" and therefore probably "felt easier" for her "to understand" (p. 41). This mismatch translates into an original internalised pain, hurting him "somewhere deep inside like a splinter", breaking through his seemingly impenetrable armour, the more he "picked at it, the further [he] pushed it in, deeper and deeper until [he] couldn't get it out" (p. 41). Domestic space, then, deteriorates into contested territory.

In contrast, Uncle T's apartment in South Kilburn, where he moves at the age of seventeen, offers uncomplicated hospitality. There is always food, always weed, always repeated gestures: "welcome home son" (p. 147, 267), a "plate of fried plantain and scrambled eggs [...] for breakfast, and dinners of curry goat and rice n peas" (p. 28, sic), readily available "zoots" waiting for him. Care is expressed through provision, not interrogation. Unlike the maternal home—charged with accusation and expectation—Uncle T's domesticity requires nothing beyond presence: "[a]t Uncle T's I could be myself and no one questioned it" (p. 42). It is an alternative model of belonging: materially supportive, emotionally undemanding. Yet even this space reinforces certain masculine patterns. Care is mediated through consumption—food and drugs—rather than relational openness, and from this pattern the setting finds its comfort.

4.5.2. The Mother: Conflict, Control, and Recognition Denied

The protagonist's relationship with his mother is structured almost entirely by friction. She criticises his friends—the "criminal friends who do nothing with their lives" (p. 91), his girlfriend Yinka— "she's beneath you, she's primitive" (p. 47, 91), his trajectory—"Gabriel where are you going? [...] Are you a drug dealer?" (p. 90). Repeated confrontations escalate into mutual hostility. He calls her names; she slaps and shouts at him; he tears up photographs of himself from her desk. In their relationship, it appears

“easier to maintain the distance [...] than to try and cross it” (p. 241), altercations strongly exceeding moments of peaceful communication. When, later in the novel, she demands a family meeting about his drug dealing, it feels like a public trial. Her insistence on discussion contrasts sharply with his (and his father’s and brother’s) preference for avoidance. Yet her antagonism is not simple hostility. Following the ‘family trial’ about his drug dealing, he observes how his mother is “covered in spikes” and how “[m]aybe that’s how she survives the world. Maybe that’s how she survives me” (p. 285). This moment marks a subtle shift: recognition of her defensiveness as protection rather than aggression, coupled with the awareness that “parents are grown-up children with their own fears and sadness which they carry with them all the time” (p. 231), that thus dismantles the idea of an invincible parental figure.

The mother represents for him another source of containment. She demands accountability, stability, consistency: “do something proper with your life before it’s too late” (p. 316). To him, this feels like attempted control— “you’ve been tryna control me since I was a child” (p. 317). His repeated insistence— “I’ll say what I want and I’ll do what I want [...] as I’ve always done” (p. 316)—reveals how deeply autonomy and self-determination are bound to his masculine identity.

4.5.3. The Father: Model of Responsibility and Mediated Love

If his mother provokes confrontation, his father embodies restrained care. He works “mad hard, practically seven days a week doing drawings for various newspapers and publications” (p. 27). The son remembers hugging him at night, smelling “sweat and tiredness” (p. 28). Hard work becomes paternal love translated into endurance. Unlike many of his friends’ absent or destructive fathers, his own is admired—even by his “mandem”, who refer to him as “whata g, whata legend, your pops³⁰ is mad safe,³¹ [he] is da truth” (p. 191, sic). He represents a stable male model, disciplined and responsible, the ideal standard of fatherhood for the narrator, as opposed to those of his friends or to Yinka’s abusive one. In his father’s proposal of a masculine model, strength is not proven through dominance but through responsibility towards the family, a conception that differs from the road’s one not so much in firmness as in its orientation. Yet as we will

³⁰ An informal, affectionate term to refer to fathers in colloquial English.

³¹ In British slang and MLE the adjective assumes connotation of “approval”, of the object “being socially acceptable to a given peer group” (Green, n.d.).

see, even this alternative, while impacting the protagonist, does not fully displace his chosen path.

In family conflicts, the father often acts as mediator. When the mother pushes for confrontation, he seeks to defuse, expressing disappointment through quiet appeal rather than via rage. His letter to his son in prison is strikingly tender, emphasising the beauty of life and its brevity and the need to communicate with each other, anticipating a later recurring argument. The son's reaction to the letter—“trying to bury it” (p. 265)—mirrors his response to Yinka's emotional declaration. Again, love generates weight. Soon later, an uneasy dinner with his parents reveals further estrangement. Conversation falters: parents and son feel “[d]istant, strangers almost” (p. 268); he struggles to speak about anything other than violent episodes. So, they “carry on eating” (Ibid.) in silence, unable to find a common ground. The conclusion of this scene—“only love can hurt me” (Ibid.)—is perhaps one of the most revealing statements in the novel, one rare instance in which he articulates emotional truth without irony. Violence, prison, and conflict do not destabilise him but help shape his own hard-shelled being; however, the heavy, unbearable conception of love does. This acknowledges vulnerability as real and existing for him too, even as he tries to oppose to it.

4.5.4. The Cracks in the Performed Stoicism

It is within the family setting that visible cracks appear in the narrator's masculine armour. One of the most striking moments occurs after the aforementioned ‘family trial’. The father wisely concludes the confrontation, stating “I cannot accept that anyone in my family is involved in criminal things, especially my son who is the most talented person I know, who can do so many artistic things, for you to choose to sell drugs” (p. 287, sic). His father's role within the family is again that of bringing back peace; he thus approaches his son differently from his wife, aiming to defuse thorny situations and showing affection and care, symbolised in this instance by a “box of mince pie” (p. 287) handed over for Gabriel and his friends while he is on his way out of the flat after the confrontation. As he leaves then, he starts “crying silently”—unable to determine whether the tears stem from sadness or from the realisation that his father's love “has no limits” (p. 288). The reaction is immediately followed by self-rebuke: “stop being a fucking pussy” (Ibid.). The reflexive policing of vulnerability is instantaneous: masculine

ideology reasserts itself, but the crack has already formed, laying the foundations for conceiving a future that distances itself from the logic of the street.

Another moment unfolds around a previous Easter celebration. After missing the family meal and the related egg-painting tradition for having slept all day after one of his ‘moves’ followed by “zoot after zoot after zoot” (p. 196), he returns to find only a few dyed eggs remaining. Holding a green egg—his favourite colour—he thinks “somewhere out there I have lost a part of myself” (p. 197). The symbolism is unmistakable: tradition, innocence, and continuity are all quietly eroded. The scene suggests not dramatic remorse but muted (and unshareable) shame.

The last episode presenting a breach in his masculine stoic performance is the late confrontation at home, when he claims his continuous autonomy towards his mother. The narrator insists on inevitability: “[t]his is how I’ve always been, [...] there was nothing anyone could ever do to stop all of this” (p. 318) He constructs his trajectory as predetermined, beyond parental intervention, beyond imagination. The claim performs two functions: it absolves others and himself of responsibility while crucially granting himself the agency of following this path. If nothing could have stopped it, then change is neither required nor possible. His father’s response directly challenges this fatalism. He reframes reality not as autonomy but as interaction: “[r]eal life it’s only contact between people and we must find a way” (Ibid., sic). Anger is acknowledged as “a part of humanity” (Ibid.), but it must be trained, disciplined, as “[l]ife is too short for all this anger, all these violent feelings” (p. 319). Where the son equals authenticity with doing what he wants, the father equates maturity with learning how to mediate the instincts.

This is the most explicit alternative model of masculinity offered in the novel: not dominance, not emotional suppression, but relational effort. Training rather than unconditioned explosion. The mother’s re-entry in the scene shifts it from argument to gesture. Without speech, he hugs her. She responds with a bittersweet joke—offering a chocolate so that his “last memory” of her will be sweet, so that he cannot say she is “not a good mother” (Ibid.). Beneath the humour lies fear: the possibility of loss and rupture, the awareness of limited temporality. He then replies, “you’ve always been a good mother” (Ibid.), staging the first unguarded affirmation he gives her, which is also the only fully reciprocal loving act between them in the narrative. The embrace is brief, unspectacular, almost awkward. But it punctures the logic of inevitability he has just

asserted. If he can hug her, if he can say “I love you Mama” (Ibid.), then he is not purely what he claims to have always been. And yet the text does not stage conversion, in the form of a possible grand renunciation. Instead, what remains is the father’s repeated insistence: life is too short and too beautiful for perpetual anger. The crack, then, is not emotional collapse: it is the exposure of choice. By declaring “[t]his is how I’ve always been” he attempts to establish himself as a fixed and unbreakable entity. But the father’s discourse of “training” (p. 319) implies that identity, and with it masculinity, is not essence—it is practice. And practice can change. The hug does not dismantle his ethos, but it reveals that hardness is not sealed fate.

The family does not convert him. It does, however, expose the limits of his stoic ethos. Tears, shame, tenderness are surfacing briefly before being reabsorbed into hardness. If the road dispenses intensity and validation, the family provides the only space where love threatens to destabilise him.

4.6. The Masculine Infrastructure of the Road and Its Dynamics

The geographical and social contexts are important variables in Krauze’s narration and function as the arena in which a powerful masculine ethos can strive unquestioned and empowered. Reputation functions as the principal currency of existence: to be feared is to be acknowledged; to be acknowledged is to exist. This section aims to outline the logic of this lifestyle, presenting both its origins and eventual inherent failure.

4.6.1. South Kilburn: Spatial Surveillance and Social Regulation

South Kilburn is introduced as a space of contradiction and compression. Geographically, it sits between Maida Vale’s “red-brick Victorian mansions and houses” and Queen’s Park station, “where streets bleed off into areas full of lifestyles that contradict each other” (p. 16). The housing estate becomes a threshold zone: the naming of the “concrete towers on the D-Block side” after canonical English authors—Blake, Austen, Bronte, Dickens, Wordsworth—adds a layer of bitter irony. These monuments to literary culture preside over a space where “mandem” are always “on the lookout for nittys and feds and enemies” (p. 18), where “law is just another force of power that descends on this place” (p. 21), where government campaigns against widespread violence are just a “a load of empty bullshit” (p. 155).

The architecture itself enforces visibility and exposure. CCTV cameras are omnipresent, functioning not as protectors but as silent witnesses. They record without causing intervention, trust in the police being either absent or frowned upon; they foster a sense of permanent observation paired with aware helplessness: “[n]othing's getting worse. This is just how it is. It's South Killy. It was and it is and it will be. The mandem are in its veins and this place is in theirs” (p. 107). Violence is neither hidden nor prevented; it is merely archived. This contributes to a fatalistic acceptance— “that’s how life works”—of brutality, of “any act of violence, exploitation” (p. 21) as structural rather than exceptional, not incidents but “just the punctuation of [this] reality” (p. 38). South Kilburn is described as a place that shows you the worst and therefore prepares you for it. Acceptance of brutality becomes a coping strategy. Once life is understood as inherently violent, survival feels manageable—not because danger disappears, but because it is expected. This logic underpins the masculine posture of a “constant sense of threat and readiness” (p. 37) that the novel repeatedly foregrounds.

4.6.2. Unquestioned Closeness: Male Bonding and Brotherhood

Male sociality in South Kilburn is structured around presence, proximity, and shared inertia as much as action. Hanging out—at “Bimz’s yard”, on estates, in flats filled with men “spitting bars over grime or rap beats, bunning cro and playing Soulcalibur or GTA on the Xbox” (p. 79)—is both aimless leisure a form of collective waiting, for the next ‘eat’ as for the next ‘gyal’ to link up. These spaces, filled with “the emptiness of the day” that “clings to” the ‘mandem’ foster intimacy without emotional commitment, closeness without verbalisation.

Brotherhood is forged through shared risk rather than emotional disclosure. Criminal activity—robberies, moves, licks—functions as a bonding mechanism that bypasses language. With figures like Dario, as with Gotti later, “doing this kinda licks” (sic) is the way how they “became bredrins in the first place” (p. 88); the higher the stakes, the closer the bond, becoming “like brothers forreal” after the “move for thirty bags” (p. 89).

Gotti, Snoopz’s main partner in his criminal enterprises, operates in particular as the protagonist’s double. He embodies the same logic— “I have only two things on my mind: cro³² and eats” (p.95)—but pushes it further, towards total moral disengagement. Their

³² British slang for “extra-strong marijuana” (Green, n.d.).

bond is sustained by adrenaline, ambition, and mutual validation. When they meet for the first time, Snoopz's recognition of Gotti is immediate and instinctive: “a spark in his eyes like embers stirred by something unspeakable” (p. 97), “the excitement like a wave crashing inside his voice” (p. 104). There is no need of explanations: masculinity here is relational but non-reflected; it is affirmed through mirrored recklessness. Recognition from such a peer carries immense weight: “[n]uff of these man ain't got heart like you Snoopz” (p. 104, sic), “Snoopz, you're different fam, I swear you're one of the realest people I know” (p. 119). These recognitions, as well as being called “shower”³³ (p.210), all become transfers of symbolic power. Even when the narrator doubts this last label, he feels “gassed when Gotti said that” (p. 211)—reputation has begun to act upon him.

By contrast, Kaos represents a longer, deeper form of brotherhood— “he's my brother in a way no one else is” (p. 178). Their bond predates ambition and is rooted in loyalty during moments of abandonment. Kaos is “known and feared and loved” (p. 180), the ideal masculine figure within this environment. His tattoo, “P.O.M.E. [...] Product Of My Environment” (p. 280) crystallises the logic of South Kilburn's streets: identity is framed as consequence, a byproduct of the circumstances, not choice.

Yet these bonds can be fragile. The break with Gotti, his “betrayal”, occurs “[n]ot in some dramatic way, not in some complicated way”, but through a quite disappearance, through dissipation: “not with a bang, but with a whimper” (p. 225). Brotherhood, like reputation, proves contingent and exhausting. When it collapses, the response is not confrontation but numbing, with the already presented solutions offered by alcohol, drugs, and isolation. There is no other ritual for mourning “[t]he end of the [male] friendship” (Ibid.).

4.6.3. Reputation: inheritance, Performance, and Symbols

Reputation in South Kilburn is both inheritance and performance. It is learned early and enforced relentlessly. Violence is normalised, not only as reaction but as pedagogy: it sets standards for “young g's to live up to” and serves as “inspiration for everyone's lyrics when they spit rap and grime bars” (p. 20). To survive in this environment, “you absolutely can't show weakness, you can't be seen as a pussy who lets shit slide” (Ibid.).

³³ “Being shower is having mad heart, going to mad lengths, never backing down – it's having no heart in fact. Moving so badmind that the wickedness you do come like you got no heart inside you to feel anything” (p. 210-11, sic).

Violent retaliation, then, is framed as a moral necessity: revenge restores equilibrium, even when it triggers feuds between gangs and cycles of ferocity that are passed down through generations. If the enemy is inaccessible, their relatives become legitimate targets to send messages and establish status. In this logic, violence is not transgressive but regulatory.

Reputation operates symbolically as well as physically. If “only money and status matter”, if life is all about “fuck the law, get paper by any means, rob, shoot, trap, [...] fuck gyaldem, bun cro”, then personal fulfilment only equates the possibility to display acquired wealth and status, with the already mentioned “diamond grillz” and “iced-out Rolex[es]” (p. 21) as condensed signs of belonging and ‘road prestige’. The guiding principle is therefore “live life at 100 miles an hour and just don't stop” (Ibid.), a teaching which is crucially soon learned by the younger generations, that grow up “idolising killers and shooters” (p. 38). The elders set the standards, the “youts” perform them, both restrained by the lack of alternative—“because what else is there to do?”—and moved by the “pressures and expectations and the greed to get to the levels that [they] see the elders on” (sic), as well as to “feel more than just the average person” (p. 305), to escape the ‘mediocrity’ of a normal life and perform a lifestyle that rewards wickedness over legality, in which you only have to be “more savage, more badmind” (p. 53, sic) to reach your goals.

However, reputation within this context reveals itself as a double-edged sword. Once established, indeed, repute exerts “pressure [on the individual] to live up to” (p. 315) it. The narrator recognises this in a late reflection: reputation does not simply protect you—it possesses you. Its deriving power is absorbed, internalised, and enacted until the very identity it was meant to secure becomes a dead end, consciously trapping the individual into their own “greazy³⁴ life” (Ibid.).

4.6.4. The System’s Decline: Inevitability Without Victory

Despite its apparent internal coherence, this system is shown to be unsustainable. In the final chapters of the book, when Snoopz comes back to South Kilburn years after the narrated events, Krauze uses a conversation the protagonist has with Smurf, Uncle T’s

³⁴ British slang for “serious, intense” (Green, n.d.), badly connotated.

nephew,³⁵ to draw a line about the narrated lifestyle and its outcomes, the effects it has on the person who lives it. This discussion articulates what the narrative itself demonstrates: the street paradigm of life offers their performers no winning condition— “you cannot win [...] you think they won, but they ain't won. They *will* lose, doesn't matter how [...] coz at the end of the day, you cannot fucking win” (p. 306).

Former “top badm[e]n” (Ibid.) end as addicts, prisoners, or forgotten figures on the block. The “constant tensing up” (p. 308) these existences must live with, the “extreme cycles of preparedness” to “sudden violence” (p.309) produce exhaustion and paranoia, a heavy reliance on drugs being the only way one can deal with their reality. It is a vicious cycle in which “even after all [the] madness, a man won't feel satisfied”, a spiral of wanting more money and more status and more drugs, without realising how nothing “fulfils you coz you're empty all the time and there's this hole in you that can't be filled” (p. 308). Time becomes distorted: a few years of “this mad life” feel eternal, as though this violent and powerful present would never end, “as if things [could] never change [...] and nothing could come after” its protagonists. Yet the opposite is also true: everything passes, and nothing is remembered. Uncle T's own two sons ending up one completely paralysed in a care home, the other locked up also represent the aftermath this lifestyle has on generations of young men: “lost in a twilight of existing without being seen” (p. 325).

This personal decline mirrors the physical erasure of South Kilburn itself. Tower blocks are demolished, replaced by sanitised architectural marketing renderings of “New Homes Coming Soon” (p. 313). The lives and moments lived there are “turned into dust and broken concrete” (p. 314) and will survive only in memory and stories, like those told by the narrator himself, as the final meta-reference “I'm writing a book” (p. 327) confirms. Walking around, the narrator still notices some violent coherence: “round here some things never change never change never change” (p. 321). Still, by the end the estate is quieter, lonelier, emptied of recognisable faces. Silence “runs the block now” (p. 322), the yard “never as noisy as it used to be” (p. 323).

It is in this scenario that Snoopz, Gabriel, the protagonist and narrator eventually questions himself: “[s]ometimes I'm not sure who I am any more” (p. 309), opening up

³⁵ This is a character that never appeared in the narrative before. The choice of placing this conversation at the end with him (rather than with some other recurring ones) might signal Krauze's intention to highlight detachment to the lifestyle previously conducted and narrated.

for a final possible destabilisation of his fixed and stable masculine identity. This is not to be understood as a redemptive conclusion; the author never offers one. Still, by allowing doubt, Krauze stages the insecurity that his character always refused, making room—without disowning his past—for possible alternative futures.

4.7. Conclusion: *Who They Was* Engaging the Hypermasculine Reality of the Street

This final section makes clear that the masculinity performed in the novel is not an individual original pattern but a contextual product—learned, rewarded, and punished within and by a closed system. South Kilburn trains its young men (and women, as previously shown) in violence, reputation, and domination long before they can imagine alternatives. Yet the novel also eventually exposes both the cost of this practice (exhaustion, alienation, and the gradual erosion of selfhood), and a different notion of training—brought by the protagonist’s father—towards a more peaceful understanding of human relations and confrontations.

Although it can undoubtedly be read as problematic in its partial mystification of violence and depiction of female figures, Krauze’s work has the merit of maintaining a voice which deeply mirrors that of the lived experiences it recounts. The novel sheds light into a world which is seldom reported without applying moral filters that do not belong to this same environment. In employing the real language spoken in these contexts, it minimises the distance between narrator, narrated events, and reader. With its style and content, this work can really be appealing to a readership made of young men, an audience that is commonly acknowledged as distant from the world of literature. Though considering the risks of mystifying hypermasculine behaviours, the book also displays the eventual drawbacks of such a lifestyle. Importantly, the feeling arising while reading is that of an open confrontation with a world that may be disturbing but is depicted in an extremely vivid and truthful way, with makes this encounter uneasy and unsettling but at the same time real, engaging and thus potentially fruitful, in the way readers experience a different underworld and its controversial dynamics to make sense of it and their own.

Chapter 5. Between Systemic Constraint and Emotional Relationality: Black Masculinity in Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water*

5.1. On the Author: Caleb Azumah Nelson and the Aesthetic Legitimation of Black Masculinity

Caleb Azumah Nelson³⁶ (born 1993) is a British-Ghanaian writer and photographer based in South East London. Born to Ghanaian parents who migrated to the United Kingdom as children, he grew up in Bellingham and later attended a private secondary school on a scholarship. His experience as one of the few Black³⁷ students in his year, alongside his upbringing within a Ghanaian diasporic context, has frequently influenced his reflections on belonging, visibility, and racialised perception.

During his schoolyears he used to play violin and basketball at a high level. A series of injuries prevented him from pursuing a career in sport and led him to devote himself to photography and writing, passions he cultivated alongside his degree in Sports and Exercise Science at Coventry University. In 2019, while writing his first novel *Open Water* (2021), he was working at an Apple Store in London, a job he eventually left once his work gained commercial success becoming a *Times* bestseller. The novel received significant critical acclaim too, winning the Costa First Novel Award and Debut of the Year at the British Book Awards, and being shortlisted for several major literary prizes. The book, though presented and publicised as a novel, draws on emotional and experiential realities connected to navigating the world as a young Black man in contemporary Britain.

His previous short story *Pray* (2020) was shortlisted for the BBC National Short Story Award and later turned in a short film (2023), also directed by Nelson himself. In 2023, he published his second novel *Small Worlds*, which also draws from personal experiences of cultural heritage and migration and, like his first work, received praises from audiences

³⁶ As in the most interviews and articles on the author, throughout this chapter I will also refer to him only with *Nelson*.

³⁷ Nelson capitalises Black in his novel. In this chapter I also adopt this way of writing.

and critics alike, winning the 2024 Dylan Thomas Prize. Both his two works of fiction are currently being adapted for film.

Nelson's writing is deeply informed by his lived experience and the cultural environment he is immersed into. Music—particularly rap, jazz, and gospel—shapes his narratives, as the numerous musical references in his works confirm. Moreover, his activity as a photographer has a big impact on his writing process: he has observed in many other instances how images play a fundamental role in both inspiring his work and being its outcome. *Open Water* is with its relevant presence of imagery a fundamental example of this tendency.

Nelson's interdisciplinary formation—at the intersection of sport, photography, music, and prose—provides crucial context for understanding the stylistic restraint and attentiveness to atmosphere that characterise his fiction. As this chapter aims to show, his work emerges from a cultural and artistic environment concerned not only with representation, but with creating space for masculine Black subjectivity beyond reductive narratives of danger, hypermasculinity, or marginality.

5.2. Situating *Open Water* within Contemporary Autofiction

Open Water follows the evolving relationship between two young Black British artists—a photographer and a dancer—living in South London. Their casual encounter at a pub gradually develops into a fragile love story unfolding across everyday spaces: warm bedrooms, lively bars, and busy city streets. The narrative charts the protagonist's interior negotiations with intimacy, vulnerability, and racialised precarity, particularly in moments where personal tenderness collides with experiences of social surveillance and structural violence. The relationship between the two characters forms the emotional centre of the novel, yet the narrative repeatedly expands to reflect on the broader conditions shaping the lives of young Black men in the landscape of contemporary England.

Although the novel is not presented as autobiographical, several elements resonate with Nelson's background. The parallels between author and protagonist—family setting, educational upbringing, professional occupation—function less as claims to factual authenticity than as part of a broader autofictional strategy: the mobilisation of experiential proximity without full confessional transparency. In the novel, the artistic milieu, the diasporic belonging, and the attention to collective grief deeply resonate with

the author's own trajectory and are thus inserted in the poetics that Nelson himself has described as "fictionalising memory" (Penguin UK, 2021). His work may not recount events directly drawn from his life but is notwithstanding "personal" (Ibid.) in the way it emerges from emotions and experiences he has known.

In one of the several reflections on art and writing within the book, the narrator observes how one of the few "plot devices when writing" is exemplified by "a person [who] goes on a journey" (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 40). To situate the work in a framework of formation, then, the author himself has noted how in the novel a "journey" takes place, one in which the "narrator grows, regresses, and grows again" (Wang, 2021). Importantly, this is not inscribed in the canonical, resolution-oriented model of the Bildungsroman, but framed as "not a straightforward path, but one that's meandering, non-linear" (Ibid.). In this sense, *Open Water* exemplifies a form of autofictional writing grounded less in factual correspondence fostering a clear developmental arc than in what might be described as affective truth oriented to introspective self-analysis, in a way that attunes to Vuong's and Krauze's projects previously analysed.

Within the narrative, then, reflections on artistic practice foreground the process through which lived experience becomes narrative form. The protagonist repeatedly meditates on the relationship between photography and writing, describing literature as "something to supplement my photography, really. Trying to find another form to tell stories with" (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 40). Such moments introduce a self-reflexive dimension that subtly mirrors Nelson's own creative trajectory as both writer and photographer. Early in the novel, the two protagonists grow closer embarking on project that aims to "document people, Black people" through images and stories, insisting that "[a]rchiving is important" (p. 12)—a statement that resonates with the novel's broader attempt to document moments of intimacy, grief, and everyday beauty within Black communities.

Yet the novel simultaneously insists on the limits of representation. Throughout the text, language is repeatedly described as "flimsy" (pp. 56, 70, 71), "insufficient" (pp. 46, 56) or "inadequate" (pp. 70, 94) in the face of emotional intensity. In moments of intimacy between the protagonists, words normally "fail" (pp. 19, 46), and are often replaced by gestures, glances, and physical proximity. As the narrator reflects during one such encounter, "language [is] flimsy and insufficient, the feeling honest" (p. 56). This

recurring motif situates the narrative within a broader quest for expressive forms capable of approaching affective experience. The protagonist himself explains that he began writing precisely because the image he photographed proved insufficient to capture the conflicts and emotions he felt. This reflects deeply with Nelson's goal as author to "write a novel a reader could hear and see and feel" (Azumah Nelson, n.d.).

Formally, this search for expressive adequacy manifests in a highly rhythmic prosaic style shaped by repetition and variation on recurrent themes. Nelson has often described the novel as conceived in dialogue with musical composition, explaining that he wanted the text to "read like an album" where refrains and recurring motifs acquire new meaning each time they reappear and the deriving "rhythm" could operate "as a narrative device" (Ibid.). The narrative therefore progresses less through conventional plot development than through "loops" (Ibid.) and "echo[es]" (Wong, 2022, p. 184), returning to certain images, phrases, and emotional states while subtly shifting their resonance depending on the changing surroundings in which they reappear. Repetition thus becomes a narrative method that mirrors the processes of memory and reflection—the same moment can be revisited, but never experienced in exactly the same way, as this novel passage on memory and its fallibility emphasises: "[e]very time you remember something, the memory weakens, as you're remembering the last recollection, rather than the memory itself" (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 81). Such reflections resonate strongly with the autofictional challenge of narrating the self: if memory is unstable and language partial, narrative becomes less a transparent record of experience than an attempt to display what inevitably remains unresolved.

The novel also situates its exploration of Black subjectivity within a broader intermedial network of artistic references. In particular, film plays a significant role in shaping the protagonist's understanding of himself and his environment. Important moments occur when he recalls watching Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), recognising aspects of his own experience "in the action of others" (p. 102), his self "in each version of Chiron,³⁸ [...] in the muting erasure of his various expressions, [in] crumpling small to fit" (pp. 74–75), responding to such inputs with a profound emotional stillness and "silent tears" (p. 75). Similarly, *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) later also helps provide cultural frameworks through which the protagonist

³⁸ *Moonlight*'s protagonist.

interprets the vulnerability and constant threat surrounding Black male bodies. These intertextual references situate the narrative within a wider cultural conversation about Black masculinity while reinforcing the novel's broader concern with representation and recognition. Music, another recurring presence throughout the text, contributes further to the novel's rhythmic structure and emotional atmosphere, a dimension that will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

5.2.1. The *You*-Narration Between Introspection and Address

Perhaps the most distinctive formal feature of *Open Water* is its use of second-person narration. Rather than adopting the conventional first-person voice associated with writing dealing with the self and its development, the narrative addresses its protagonist as *you*,³⁹ in what Denise Wong (2025) calls “autodiegetic you-narrative” (p. 134). In such a framework, “the narrator is the older narrating-I addressing their younger, experiencing self” and there is a correspondence between “narrator, you-protagonist and you-narratee” (Ibid.), with temporal distance being the only pattern separating the three figures. Importantly, the addressed protagonist, and with him his female counterpart, is never given a name in the narrative, remaining therefore nameless.

In her analysis of the usage of the pronoun *you* in *Open Water*, Sandrine Sorlin (2024) identifies its multiple and interchangeable referential uses: from the predominant form of “self-address hiding a speaking *I*” (p. 9, emphasis in the original), to the alternative conceptions of *you* as reference to the protagonist and “his black fellow-sufferers”, which implies a “generalization to a whole Black community” and other instances where it “tends to shift or to allude to superimposed entities” (p. 6). These observations lead Sorlin to frame *you* as a “chameleon-like pronoun” that weaves its way “through different references, categories, discourses and narratological levels” (p. 16).

This chameleon-like nature of the pronoun has earlier been described by David Herman (2004) as “doubly deictic *you*” (p. 345, emphasis in the original). As he notes, the second-person pronoun can simultaneously refer to a fictional character within the narrative and to an extratextual addressee, thereby “*superimposing two of more deictic roles*, one internal to the storyworld represented in or through the diegesis and the other(s)

³⁹ Considering the ambiguity this narrative choice brings with it (the narrator addressing the protagonist—his fictional realisation—with *you*), the terms narrator and protagonist will be used in this chapter interchangeably.

external to that storyworld” (p. 343, emphasis in the original). In *Open Water*, then, the *you* designates the protagonist while it might at the same time implicate the reader in the narrative act of address. In Wong’s (2025) reading of Herman’s term with regard to *Open Water*, double deixis manages to overcome the possible “racial specificity” of *reference*, addressing both “Black and non-Black extratextual readers” as witnesses to the experience of the “specific Black male *you*-protagonist” (p. 141) within the storyworld.

The pronoun’s referential flexibility invites readers to inhabit the narrative perspective, fostering what Sorlin (2024) charts as a “dynamic reader-dependent meaning-making of the telling” in which readers enact the “character’s consciousness” (p. 14). This inserts in Alison Gibbon’s (2012) logic of “doubly-deictic subjectivity”, a mechanism that—though in her discussion centred on the role of images⁴⁰ in multimodal print fiction—allows the reader “at once both an observer of the fiction and powerfully involved in that fiction” (p. 77). As Alice Bell, Jan Alber, Nadia Georgiou, and Denise Wong (2025) have noted then, the narrative voice in *Open Water* ultimately aims to “foreground the experiences of Black characters”, inviting “readers to empathize with these figures by putting themselves in their shoes” (p. 352). This is not always easily achievable, as the racial specificity of the protagonist might complicate this identification, on the one hand fostering a more straightforward inhabitancy of the *you* for readers who “have a similar lived reality”, while on the other hand making visible to the “non-members of this particular set [that is, non-Black/white readers]” an “undeniable difference [in the] mode of being in the world” (Wong, 2022, p. 172).

As scholars (Wong, 2022; Sorlin, 2024) have noted, the second-person voice in *Open Water* oscillates therefore between inclusion and exclusion. However, the co-existence between “self-reflexivity and immersion” (Bell et al., 2025, p. 352) is what makes Nelson’s work both personal and collective. His way of presenting themes like love and masculinity unveils—through the universality of feelings like love, fear, shame—the particularity of the experience of a young Black man in contemporary Britain, even to those readers who may not be able to relate to this reality.

Within the context of contemporary autofiction, this narrative strategy becomes especially significant. By replacing the autobiographical *I* with the addressing *and*

⁴⁰ As we will see, the images Gibbons discusses about are replaced in *Open Water* by songs and music, without modifying the outcome of achieving what can be called as a ‘shared subjectivity’.

addressed *you*, Nelson undoubtedly destabilises the traditional alignment between narrator, author, and protagonist while maintaining referential voice and at the same time aiming to dignify the recounted experience in the text as worth being made visible: “[y]ou want to lay claim to this life you lead” (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 115). The narrative voice becomes simultaneously introspective and outwards-facing, capable of addressing the self while also engaging the reader as witness. Thus, the autofictional writing of *Open Water* resembles a two-way mirror: while the narrator-protagonist addresses himself as he embarks in reflections on his self and his lived experience, the reader is granted immediate observatory access to the ongoing meditation. Hence, the novel constructs a narrative space where memory, feeling, and artistic representation intersect, allowing (Black) masculinity to emerge not as a stable identity but as an ongoing process of reflection, vulnerability, and relational encounter. The chapter now moves to analyse how the Black masculine experience of the protagonist is depicted in the novel through the lenses of art, music and the protagonist’s introspection accompanied by reflections on freedom and systemic fear.

5.3. Identity, Emotional Awareness, and the Conditions of Black Masculinity

In addition to the protagonist’s romantic relationship, *Open Water* takes an in-depth look at the development of his identity as a young Black man in contemporary society, alternating between memories of events and reflections on broader social structures. Fundamentally, all of Nelson's thinking and writing, and therefore his ideas about masculinity, are always influenced by his identity as a Black man. Thus, in the following analysis, the underlying intersectionality in his work is taken into account to frame a picture of the portrayed experiences.

5.3.1. Emotional Awareness and the Limits of Articulation

One of the defining features of the narrator in *Open Water* is his heightened emotional awareness. Throughout the novel, the protagonist repeatedly turns inwards, engaging in acts of introspection and emotional self-interrogation. At several points he pauses and asks himself directly: “[h]ow *are you feeling? Be honest, man*” to then “confess, your joy, your pain, your truth” (p. 31, emphasis in the original). Such moments reveal a character

who is deeply attuned to his emotional life. Yet this awareness does not necessarily translate into capacity for communication and interpersonal expression. Rather, the narrator's reflections often remain internal, producing a persistent tension between emotional recognition and articulation. Like Vuong's and Krauze's,⁴¹ Nelson's protagonist-narrator is not characterised by an absence of feeling. He is rather marked, especially in the cases of *Who They Was* and *Open Water*, by the difficulty of translating emotional awareness into language and shared experience.

In the first place, the family setting is presented as a background in which emotional sharing is to a certain extent penalised. The narrator evokes the metaphorical 'house of the father' suggesting that behaviours are learned and inherited within familial settings, and that to inhabit this "house" means also carrying "a part of the house he carried, your father's father" (p. 19). Importantly, the *masculine* way one experiences their feelings is something carried across time, something that connects present emotional events to a lineage that stretches "across the water, across continents and borders" (Ibid.) and is passed down from generation to generation. For example, when the protagonist, consumed with grief for the loss of his grandmother, thinks of dialling members of his family to seek solace and share his pain, he finds multiple reasons to avoid it. His mother, who is herself in the process of grieving, "would need you intact", his father "will not have the words, [...] he will tell you to be a man. He will not tell you how much he hurts too", his brother "too carries the house of your father. He will not have the words" (p. 31). Emotions are recognised, but must also be elaborated in the intimacy of his solitude: "[y]ou need to face this alone, you think" (p. 32).

However, this orientation does not translate into lack of interest towards his family members. The relationship to his younger brother, for instance, is depicted by the protagonist in a twofold manner: "[h]e's my best friend but sometimes he's like my son too" (p. 48). He is described as both "partner in crime, stubborn opponent, gentle man" (p. 22) and "your charge, your duty, your son" (p. 23) by the narrator, who considers how "when [their] father's love failed, when [their] father was far, in body or in spirit" (p. 22) during their childhood and adolescence, the affective responsibility fell on him, who did

⁴¹ In my view, the former uses narration as a place in which, aware of his path and feelings characterising it, he can come to terms with his identity and his heritage, while the latter sees the autofictional realisation of his past experiences as a way to display (and to a certain extent legitimise) a worldview and lifestyle which is rarely accounted for in literary works.

not refrain from looking after his younger brother. Thus, care and attention usually work unilaterally in their relationship, and the inversion of this dynamic will be proved as fundamental in the protagonist's final emotional growth, as we will later see.

The inward-outward tension emerges in recurrent scenes of solitary emotional release, particularly through the motif of crying. From the beginning, the narrator acknowledges “[s]ometimes, you cry in the dark” (p. 2), suggesting that vulnerability is not absent but instead displaced into private spaces. These moments of emotional release frequently appear unexpectedly—“tears streaming down, down, down. Caught you unawares” (p. 20). Crying, in this sense, although not denied from the setting of the romantic relationship (pp. 48, 78), functions less as an outward expression of grief than as an involuntary and at the same time welcomed manifestation of emotional pressure. At times, the narrator himself struggles to interpret these reactions— “[y]ou don't know why you're crying” (p. 106). In an analogous way, when contemplating the passing away of his grandfather, ashamed for not having given him enough attention and affection, he wonders: “what your tears are for: the loss of him or the loss of yourself?” (p. 61).

Questioning the origin of his tears is a first parallel that can be drawn with *Who They Was* and its protagonist Snoopz. In Krauze's narrative, moments of emotional exposure are often immediately followed by acts of self-policing or repression, as the protagonist seeks to maintain a version of masculinity rooted in toughness and performative resilience. In contrast, the narrator of *Open Water* does not attempt to deny or erase emotional ambiguity. His tears do not require justification, nor are they framed as a failure of masculinity: they mark the presence of an emotional life that resists simple dismissal and categorisation, but whose realisation often remains contained within the boundaries of the self set by the expectations of the masculine gender performance.

The complexity of this psyche is further illustrated through the narrator's reflections on anger. Rather than erupting outwardly as in *Who They Was*, anger appears as something internalised and carefully managed. The narrator describes this sentiment as “cool and blue and unshifting”, expressing a desire for it to become explosive and visible, yet acknowledging that he is “too used to cooling this anger” (p. 118). As a result, the emotion lingers unresolved, producing both physical and psychological strain: “some days, this anger creates an ache so bad you struggle to move” and “makes you feel ugly and undeserving of love” (Ibid.). However, as we will soon see, such feeling is not framed as

innate but as a result of contextual dynamics that oppress the protagonist as a young Black man. Still, these passages illustrate how emotional containment becomes habitual, shaping the narrator's experience of masculinity as a form of continuous internal negotiation and retention.

In a similar fashion, the narrator observes that “[t]o be you is to apologize and often that apology comes in the form of suppression” (pp. 61, 115). Apology, in this context, does not signify the acknowledgment of wrongdoing; rather, it becomes a mechanism through which emotional expression itself is regulated. A similar motif also appears in Vuong's *On Earth*, where the act of overtly apologising frequently operates as a strategy for navigating social hierarchies within contexts shaped by migration and class like those of the nail salon and the tobacco farm. In *Open Water*, the narrator notes, “suppression is indiscriminate” (Ibid.), suggesting that the oppression of feeling can extend beyond specific situations to shape one's broader relationship with vulnerability. The result is a paradoxical situation in which emotional concealment appears less demanding than exposure: “it's easier [...] to hide in your own darkness than to emerge cloaked in your own vulnerability” (p. 61). Yet the narrator, displaying once again his emotional awareness, recognises the dangers of such containment, acknowledging that “the longer you hold it in, the more likely you are to suffocate” (Ibid.). Emotional restraint appears therefore to function both as a source of psychological tension and as a strategy of self-protection.

To draw another parallel between Krauze and Nelson concerning the way their protagonists express their beliefs, it is interesting to focus on how the latter too makes his narrator-protagonist overtly state what he desires from life.

[Y]ou're craving a simpler existence. You want to read. You want to write. You want to meet strangers for dinner, and not refuse another drink at another bar. You want to dance [...] you're looking forward to worrying less [...] You're looking forward to the safety in pleasure, [...] to forgetting that, leaving the house, you might not return intact. You're looking forward to freedom, even if it is short, even if it might not last. You're looking forward. (p. 69)

While Krauze's protagonist craves for risk, illegality and a dangerous lifestyle (see section 4.3.2), Nelson's one aims to escape a sense of constant threat that is perceived as superimposed, to enjoy the ‘small things’ a normal life has to offer. Both protagonists

claim agency; it is although pursued in a diametrically opposed way. Snoopz's engagement with violence and criminality is framed as a form of vitality and self-assertion, while in *Open Water* these features are imagined as the possibility of safety, stability, and artistic expression. What the narrator longs for is not the adrenaline of risk but the possibility of existing without the constant threat of misrecognition or harm that, as we will soon see, accompanies the life of young Black men. The vitality to which Nelson's narrator aspires is thus an 'simpler' one. While the protagonists' different backgrounds and social positions play a role in shaping this dissimilarity, this can probably also be associated with the different stages of life the two find themselves in, with Nelson's one leaving behind the restlessness of late adolescence to approach a more aware composure of early adulthood.

5.3.2. Art, Sport and Music as Emotional Languages of the Black Self

Since their times in predominantly white private schools, both the protagonist and his lover have learned how the mainstream British context inherently carries particular and inscribed meanings on their Black bodies, between "obvious" (p. 25) comparisons with the other (few) Black students and a constant sensation of not being "privy to" (p. 24) the ongoing dynamics. This is why, in the corporal performances of dance and basketball they both found ways in which they could reclaim their agency. Dance, for the female protagonist of the novel, is associated with a sense of liberation and self-definition: "[w]hen someone sees you [...] you're either *this* or *that*", she recalls, "[b]ut when I'm doing my thing, I get to choose" (p. 28, emphasis in the original). Dancing allows her to create a space that belongs entirely to herself: "[i]t's my space. I make a little world for myself, and I live" (p. 37). Similarly, basketball represents for the narrator the way to temporarily escape the externally imposed categories that structure everyday life. What begins as a simple act—putting "a ball through a hoop"—becomes "a new way of seeing, a new way of being" (p. 26), opening the possibility of inhabiting the body differently. The game offers moments of joy and expansiveness, allowing him to "stretch into the outer limits of [his] body and beyond", driven by the desire "to smile, [...] to feel something like joy, even if it was small", to reach what he recognises as the ultimate goal: "you just wanted to be free" (p. 27). In both cases, bodily movement becomes a form of

self-creation and expression, offering temporary refuge from the constraints imposed by the outside world.

However, it is music that occupies throughout the whole book an especially significant place within the network of expressive practices that the “Black personhood” (p. 34) can enjoy of. Indeed, “Black music” is recounted of as “some of the greatest expression of Blackness—the ability to capture and portray a rhythm” (p. 89), fostering the idea that music is one of the only spaces where Black people do not occupy a marginal position. The text contains several references to artists and songs, which are then collected in a playlist on the music platform Spotify. This can be accessed by scanning the ‘Spotify code’ positioned in the endpaper. Either recalling or listening to the different tracks, readers develop what Bell et al. (2025) call “aural doubly-deictic subjectivity” (p. 353), conceived as the alignment of perspectives between narrator-protagonist and reader proposed by Gibbons (2012), in this case via intermedial references to music. Through this medium, readers get to experience the same cultural products as the protagonist, “thereby enhancing their access to and understanding of the protagonist’s world” (Bell et al., 2025, p. 353). At the level of reception then, music may serve as a powerful tool through which a non-Black audience significantly draws close a world they may not have extensive experience of, while at the same time offering those who instead share a musical and cultural background a foundational instrument of identification.

Coming back to music’s role within the narrative, the narrator repeatedly associates music with forms of collective freedom and emotional recognition. Where jazz music is played, for instance, the protagonists can find “an energy that’s very... very freeing. A bunch of Black people just being themselves” (p. 37). Listening to music allows the narrator to participate in a shared cultural rhythm that transcends individual isolation: “dance, sing, please, do what you must; look at your neighbour and understand they are in the same position” (p. 34). It transcends the individual dimension to shape a condition of shared belonging, creating a common ground upon which to stand together, in a comparable dynamic as the one in *On Earth*, where a repeated reference to 50 Cent’s *Many Men* serves to form a shared cultural framework between the two young lovers in which to situate their romantic and emotional experience.

At a personal level, music in *Open Water* often serves as a vehicle through which the protagonist manages to experience the emotions that he fails to articulate with language,

often considered insufficient and “flimsy”, as the previous section has shown. Indeed, music makes him stop and question himself about his feelings (p. 31), triggering what can be defined as ‘coming-of-feeling’ moments, in which the protagonist overcomes his doubts and fears to trust his emotions and let them lead him “towards something else which has no name, needs no name” (p. 92). Under such conditions, bodily responses become almost involuntary as he notices his “shoulders and hips are moving to the bassline” (p. 72), experiencing a rare moment in which he does not need to consciously regulate himself. Such experiences offer fleeting yet powerful relief, prompting the narrator to ask: “how wonderful are moments like these, where you don’t have to hide?” (pp. 72–73).

While presenting music as a site of freedom, this last passage crucially signals the Black individuals’ need to look for places and situations that allow them “to breathe”, which in turn unveils a context in which the Black person has to “to seek permission for something so natural, the basis for life; [...] to seek permission to live” (p. 101). Music in *Open Water* can then be described as a coping mechanism that the protagonist uses to deal with the hardships of the world he lives in, as well as a constant reminder of both security and shared struggle:

[y]ou are safe here [...] you are seen here. You can live here. We are all hurting. We are all trying to live, to breathe [...] We find ourselves unseen. We find ourselves unheard. We find ourselves mislabelled. We who are loud and angry, we who are bold and brash. We who are black. (p. 34)

5.3.3. Hypervisibility and Misrecognition in Black Masculinity

The social environment framed in the novel is one deeply structured by racialised visibility. A recurring theme throughout the novel is the paradoxical experience of being both hypervisible and unseen. As the narrator repeatedly observes, “it’s one thing to be looked at, and another to be seen” (pp. 88, 91, 139, *passim*). This distinction recalls Mark Anthony Neal’s (2013) reflections on the (il-)legibility of the Black male body, grounded in its binary social understanding as either hypermasculine or queer, good or bad, leading to “causal links in the public imagination that create antagonisms towards black males” (p. 5), who appear in turn “seemingly bound to and bound by their legibility” (p. 6). At the same time, it encapsulates a central tension in the novel’s exploration of Black

masculinity, poignantly described by Wong (2025) as “at once scripted and illegible” (p. 140). Black bodies are frequently subject to intense scrutiny, yet this visibility rarely leads to genuine recognition. Instead, the narrator describes a life lived “forever seen and unseen, forever heard and silenced” (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 72) in which identity is repeatedly shaped by external perception. To this extent, Wong interprets Nelson’s second person narration as “a mode of making a Black male you-protagonist’s affective interiority legible while confounding the hegemonic script of Black masculinity based on reductive and vilifying cultural assumptions” (Wong, 2025, p. 141), which can be read as another attempt to make accessible this reality to a broader audience.

This dynamic of what I would like to call ‘unseenness’ produces a profound sense of misrecognition. The narrator reflects that to inhabit his body often means being reduced to simplified categories: “sometimes you forget that to be you is to be a Black body and not much else” (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 118). In this context, the individual becomes a “container, a vessel, a body” (pp. 131, 136), a “property” (p. 136), reductions that fail to capture the complexity of a human being. The psychological weight of such reduction can be overwhelming, as the narrator admits that “[s]ometimes this weight is too heavy” (p. 131). The result is a condition in which amplification and erasure coexist, leaving the narrator both exposed and unseen.

5.3.4. Living Under Threat: Violence and Precarious Existence

The consequences of this condition become particularly evident in moments involving police surveillance and racial profiling. In one episode, the narrator recalls being stopped by police officers who claim, “many residents describe a man fitting your description” (p. 58). Despite his attempts to explain himself, he realises that “they don’t hear your voice. They don’t see you” (Ibid.). The encounter leaves him feeling “hollowed out, like it’s not just your bag they emptied” (Ibid.), suggesting that such experiences extend beyond the physical act of being searched to produce deeper forms of psychological violation, which in turn translates into inability share: “[y]ou tell no one about that incident” (Ibid.). Importantly, this event is presented as “a memory of something yet to happen” (Ibid.), suggesting that such a procedure is inserted in a framework of repeated and consolidated threats, thus acquiring “the additional sense of history repeating itself, [...] of an

unabating hegemonic structure that continues to antagonise the Black man” (Wong, 2025, p. 140).

This event is subsequently followed by its replication, another stop-and-search carried out only because “[y]ou fit the profile. You fit the description. You don’t fit in the box but he [the police officer] has squeezed you in” (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 59). In this scene, the protagonist and his friend are forced to the ground “for symbolic purposes” (Ibid.), while a policeman searches their car. The officer too looks scared, “of what he did not know, of what was different, [...] scared because instead of questioning himself, of interrogating his beliefs, of not filling in the gaps, he continues to look at you as a danger” (Ibid.). As Wong (2025) notes, in this sequence “[n]either the you-protagonist nor his fear is legible for the policeman” (p. 140); instead, he interprets the protagonist as a threat precisely at the moment when he himself feels endangered. Not being guilty yet still ‘fitting the profile’ evokes “an entire transatlantic history” (Ibid.) in which many young Black men have been—and continue to be—stopped, searched, or arrested for crimes they did not commit simply because corresponding to racial profiling. Such descriptions repeatedly imply that being a Black man is, in itself, treated as presumptive guilt in the eyes of law enforcement, in a way that recalls Frantz Fanon’s internalised dynamics of racialised visibility, according to which the Black subject becomes hypervisible as an object of perception while at the same time being denied recognition as a complex individual: “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can’t be wrong. I am guilty. I don’t know what of, but I know I’m a wrench” (Fanon, 1986, p. 118).

Fanon’s white men are embodied in *Open Water* by the police, constantly depicted as a threatening agent rather than a security provider one. Being glanced at corresponds for the narrator to the confirmation of a broader societal pattern, “that your bodies are not your own” and triggers the fear that “they will take them back” (Azumah Nelson, 2021, p. 102). In another episode, the barber shop—first described as a safe place where the protagonist “can be free” (p. 112)—is turned into “immediate chaos” (p. 117) when Daniel, another Black man, is attacked by a gang. Even in this case, the “sirens in the distance” do not cause relief but growing panic, as “when they, the police, are close, you lose your names and you have all done wrong” (Ibid.). Again, the “complicit” police are presented as unable to listen and understand their reasons: even attempting to “say the

ache”, to denounce how the protagonist feels “heavy and scared” (p. 118) would prove pointless.

These episodes are not presented as isolated incidents but as manifestations of a broader social pattern in which Black masculinity is frequently associated with danger or criminality. The narrator’s awareness of these dynamics shapes his experience of the world in profound ways, infusing everyday life with a sense of precariousness. Leaving the house “not knowing if you will return intact” (p. 136) becomes an act marked by uncertainty, just like walking home at night, as the narrator reflects that he never knows “whether [he] would arrive home without incident, and live to fear another day” (p. 77).

This sense of threat and fear underpins the life of the narrator-protagonist: “[t]his living is precarious. [...] You live precarious” (p. 136). The ever-present possibility of violence (see pages 58–59, 64, 76–77, 102, 117, and 133) both recalls and assumes a different connotation from the one in *Who They Was*. The same “possibility of [...] downfall” (Krauze, 2020, p. 124) which provides Snoopz with a sense of vitality, drains Nelson’s protagonist, creating breaches in his peaceful and art-centred life, breaches that undermine, as we will see, his emotional stability and romantic life. This is a new *possibility* we are here confronted with: from the possibility of desire in *On Earth*, the one of collapse in *Who They Was*, it is the constant sense of a possible deprivation of freedom and recognition that characterises *Open Water*’s adult protagonist, whose awareness marks the complex understanding of the world that surrounds him. As he ironically notes, “[y]ou cool, you real cool, playing it cool. Keeping it real, cool, until—Sigh into the darkness” (p. 136). His awareness is always coupled with an intrinsic inability to involve others in the process of feeling elaborations, leaving him to the symbolic action of crying in the darkness. As the next section will attempt to show, this is a cycle which is destined to failure, especially when confronted with the reality of a romantic relationship.

5.3.5. Freedom as an Open Question

Before moving to this fundamental theme in the book, it is worth focussing on the concept of freedom, which in *Open Water* acquires a particular complexity. Rather than appearing as a stable or permanent condition, freedom in *Open Water* emerges as something fragile and provisional, especially in light of the contextual pressures analysed in this section.

The narrator acknowledges that “if freedom isn’t as full as you imagine, [...] if freedom is not an absolute” (p. 89), it may nevertheless exist in partial or “temporary” (p. 128) forms. At one point he reflects that “freedom might be a narrative” (Ibid.), something imagined and pursued rather than definitively achieved. These reflections suggest that his freedom is less a fixed state than a shifting horizon, one that can be experienced in moments of artistic enjoyment and expression, of bodily movement, and of human connection like the protagonists’ relationship, as we will see. Offering temporary reprieves from the pressures of surveillance and misrecognition, these occasions do not eliminate the structural constraints shaping the narrator’s life, but they nonetheless provide glimpses of an alternative way of inhabiting the world.

Ultimately, the narrator’s experience of masculinity unfolds within this complex interplay of emotional awareness, social constraint, and fleeting liberation. His journey is not one of definitive emancipation but of navigating the fragile spaces in which emotional expression, recognition, and human connection become possible. It is within these spaces that the novel’s exploration of masculinity takes shape: as the next section will eventually show, emotional openness, rather than emotional repression, may in the end constitute a crucial dimension of a mature masculine identity.

Yet the path towards emotional openness is not without hurdles: the tension between vulnerability and connection becomes particularly significant in the narrator’s romantic relationship, which forms the emotional centre of the narrative. If the external world repeatedly constrains the protagonist’s sense of freedom and recognition, the intimate relationship at the heart of the novel offers a space in which another form of freedom might momentarily emerge. The dynamics of love, intimacy, and emotional reciprocity therefore become central to understanding how masculinity is negotiated within the narrative—a question that will be explored in the following section.

5.4. Love, Intimacy and Relational Masculinity

In *Open Water*, Caleb Azumah Nelson portrays intimacy not simply as a narrative subplot but as a crucial site for the negotiation of masculinity. Through the evolving relationship between the protagonist-narrator and the female protagonist, the novel explores how emotional recognition, mutual care, and vulnerability contribute to the formation of what may be described as relational masculinity. Love becomes both a space of safety and a

source of anxiety: while intimacy offers the possibility of emotional freedom and self-realisation, it also confronts the narrator with the fear of exposure and the difficulty of articulating his inner life. The following sections trace this development, moving from the emergence of desire and recognition to the breakdown of the relationship and the narrator's subsequent process of emotional reckoning.

5.4.1. Recognition and Desire: The Emergence of Relational Identity

In the novel, desire is shaped not as conquest but as a process of recognition through which relational identity begins to emerge. The narrator's first descriptions of the female protagonist already signal a markedly different dynamic from the hypermasculine and often objectifying portrayals of women in *Who They Was*. Rather than reducing the woman to a sexual object, the narrator encounters her through a moment of attentive perception: "you catch a glimpse of something, something like kindness in her open features" (p. 4). This encounter is further framed through language that legitimises and dignifies the female counterpart. When the narrator recalls the first moment of attraction, he corrects himself mid-sentence: "there was this girl, no, this woman, who just took my breath away" (p. 6). This correction subtly signals an ethical repositioning of the gaze. The narrator actively rejects the diminishing language of "girl" choosing instead a form that acknowledges maturity and subjectivity.

The depiction of the female body similarly departs from the aggressive visual consumption typical of the hypermasculine discourse we encountered in *Who They Was*. Observing her at close proximity, the narrator notes "how tidy and slender her frame is" (p. 28) while later pondering "a weight to her which didn't match the lean figure you studied" after having playfully grabbed her, a weight which is promptly interpreted as "more life in your hands than you expected" (p. 29). The body is not presented as an object to be mastered but as something complex and alive, a presence that exceeds the visual surface. As the relationship develops, this perception evolves into a sense of embodied familiarity: "Her curves and jets are familiar. The shape of her recognisable [...] she smells like her, [...] she smells like a place you call home" (p. 95), suggesting a feeling of genuine comfort deriving from her presence.

Nelson further conceptualises desire through organic metaphors that emphasise growth rather than immediacy. Early in the novel, the narrator considers how to "give it voice is

to sow a seed knowing that somehow, someday, it will grow” (pp. 7–8). Desire thus appears as a process unfolding over time rather than a fleeting act, as “sometimes to resolve desire, it’s better to let the thing bloom” with the questioning awareness that “[w]hat is better than believing you’re heading towards love?” (p. 8). This botanical imagery is recalled at a later stage of their relationship, when he realises how “the seed you planted so long ago [has] grown, roots clutching in the darkness, pulling each other closer” (p. 98) Through this imagery, Nelson constructs desire as a ‘quiet’ relational phenomenon that develops gradually through emotional proximity and shared experience.

5.4.2. Embracing *Seemness*: Intimacy Beyond Language

If desire initiates the relationship, intimacy in *Open Water* develops primarily beyond language, repeatedly emphasises forms of communication that occur through gaze, touch, and shared presence rather than verbal articulation. Early in the novel, the narrator describes the dynamics of mutual looking: “your eyes meet in the silence. The gaze requires no words at all. It is an honest meeting” (p. 54). This statement recurs throughout the narrative (pp. 2, 135), establishing the dynamic of ‘healthy’ gaze as a central motif: looking becomes a moment of reciprocal recognition rather than unilateral lust.

Physical closeness similarly becomes a medium through which emotional understanding is expressed. In one of their early casual intimate moments, the narrator observes how their hands rest together “fitting together like this is an everyday” (p. 44), signalling from the outset the already mentioned pattern of familiarity which marks the evolution of stable connections. The verb ‘to fit’ acquires here a diametrically opposed meaning as that in the dimension of ‘fitting the profile’ presented in the previous section. Here, to fit is to belong, it is a conscious and positive bond the one it implies. The repetition of this expression throughout the novel to highlight the spontaneity of their proximity (pp. 44, 46, 55) reinforces the sense that intimacy is built through small gestures of habitual closeness. Such moments are frequently accompanied by a suspension of conscious reflection: “[y]ou’re not thinking. You’re feeling” (p. 50). Hence, emotional knowledge emerges through bodily sensation rather than rational articulation. When the two characters lie together in the bedroom “being clasped in an embrace by something much larger than you” (p. 46), the narrator reflects that even if they were to speak, “the words would fail [them], language insufficient to reflect the intense mess of being

intimate with another” (pp. 46–47). Instead, communication occurs through gestures, glances, and physical presence, their bodies engaging in a subtle choreography of proximity: “taunting and teasing, short gazes, soft sighs [...] the noise protecting your truths” (pp. 45–46).

As in other instances throughout the novel, the narrator also reflects on the transformative effect of being seen by another person. When she gently “reaches” for his face, “tracing your outline, giving you form and detail” (p. 70), the gaze is realised through the act of touching and becomes a form of creation: the other *lets* the partner *make* him; the self emerges through the gaze of the other, suggesting that relational intimacy contributes to the narrator’s evolving sense of identity. In this respect, Nelson’s exploration of intimacy resonates with similar themes in *On Earth*, where Little Dog discovers his self and his potentiality for desire expressively by *being seen*, noticed and recognised by Trevor.

It is not only desire which is depicted differently from the two other works which have been examined, but the intimate encounter itself is framed in a different manner. Moments of physical intimacy are framed through mutual care rather than dominance. When the couple first sleeps together, the action is described in a smooth, consecutive, almost naturalistic way. The scene unfolds through repeated and reciprocal questions— “Is this OK? [...] Are you sure?” (p. 86)—that foreground trust, consent, and attentiveness. The narrator describes the encounter not through explicit detail but through emotional immersion accentuating emotion over action: “you’re not thinking but feeling, and you’re not talking but your bodies are confessing their truths out loud” (Ibid.). The metaphor of swimming together in open water further reinforces the sense of shared sensuality: “[s]he swims out into the open water and you join her” (Ibid.). Intimacy thus becomes a space in which both characters enter a state of mutual trust and complicity.

5.4.3. Love as a Space of Safety and Freedom

As the relationship develops, love in *Open Water* increasingly functions as a space of emotional refuge, offering a site of freedom within the wider context of racialised vulnerability and social precarity, as when the narrator acknowledges “you have freedom in her presence and it means you don’t have to hide” (p. 77). The moments of physical closeness listed above are also often described through the sensation of comfort and

protection: “lying together, [...] feeling safe. Is that what love is? The feeling of safety?” (p. 47) or holding hands silently, after a moment of emotional release, when the narrator observes that “this closeness, this comfort, is enough” (p. 49). These understated moments foreground emotional security rather than dramatic passion, suggesting that the relationship’s significance lies in its capacity to provide stability and calm.

This dynamic also extends to the emotional rhythm of their relationship. Spending time together without the need for constant activity becomes itself a form of trust: “you while away the evening together, doing nothing really, which is something, is an intimacy in itself. To not fill your time with someone is to trust, and to trust is to love” (p. 84). Then, the relationship also produces a distinctive experience of time: during scenes of calm intimacy, “past, present, future [are] melding in the warmth of their touch”, in a way that these moments seem “to be going on forever” (p. 99). The same feeling of detachment from the *now* that was generated by the adrenaline of violence in *Who They Was*, is here propagated by the quiet completeness of their bond, showing how similar sensations can be experienced in different ways depending, again, on the context and stage of life which are lived.

As already shown, the narrative repeatedly emphasises the reciprocity that underpins their tie; love is portrayed as a collaborative process sustained by the mutual effort of both partners, an effort which, if not constantly sustained, can bring to the collapse of the relationship, as we will later see. Together with the couple’s frequent check-ins during moments of intimacy, this reciprocity is made particularly visible by a pronounced emphasis on the language of safety and mutual care: his “[d]on’t worry. You’re safe here” (p. 74) is followed at close distance by her “[i]t’s OK. You’re safe here” (p. 78), displaying a dynamic of circular attentiveness and care that underscores the relationship’s function as a protective space in which emotional openness becomes possible. The declaration of love further reinforces this sense of *possible* shared vulnerability. When she confesses, “I love you, you know?”, the moment is framed through the novel’s central metaphor of open water: she “has swum out into open water”, and he follows her shortly after— “I love you too” (p. 83). Love is thus imagined as a collective act of entering a space that is both liberating and potentially dangerous.

Ultimately, love might allow the narrator to reconfigure his sense of self. When told he is loved, he importantly realises: “you don’t have to be the sum of your traumas” (p.

108). The safe environment of the relationship opens up the possibility of a more expansive identity, one in which pain and vulnerability coexist with joy and emotional connection. In this sense, Nelson frames love as “a form of meditation, reaching towards a more honest expression of the self” (p. 110). Through the relational intimacy depicted in *Open Water*, masculinity becomes associated not with control or emotional restraint but with the capacity to inhabit vulnerability within a space of trust.

5.4.4. Exposure and the Fear of Being Seen

The relationship has so far been portrayed in tender and virtuous terms. Indeed, in many ways it stages positive examples of how a secure partnership can develop. However, if love creates the possibility of emotional exposure, it simultaneously demands a full commitment to this expression, one which is not limited to acts but involves words too, something which the protagonist may not be prepared for. Furthermore, despite the safety the relationship appears to offer, intimacy also introduces a new source of anxiety: the fear of being *fully* seen. This ambivalence emerges early in the relationship, when the narrator notices how he finds himself “on the process of beginning to share [his] life in a way [he has never done] before” (p. 48). The process of emotional disclosure carries both excitement and apprehension, especially for someone who is used to elaborate his feelings in the private secure arena of the self like the protagonist does, as the previous sections showed. Vulnerability then appears as a double-edged condition: necessary for intimacy yet deeply unsettling.

The narrator’s fear becomes particularly explicit when he reflects on the implications of being truly recognised by another person, in another declination of the novel’s motif “it’s one thing to be looked at, and another to be seen” (p. 91). Because if being looked at implies a superficial form of attention, being seen involves a deeper form of recognition that includes both positive and negative aspects of the self. What unsettles the narrator is the possibility that the partner might perceive not only his “beauty” but also his “ugly” (Ibid., sic), a pattern that can be read as a legitimate fear of exposure driven by the tendency towards self-protection, but also as signalling a latent avoidance of commitment, a trait which seriously hinders the development of stable relationship.

This anxiety shapes the narrator’s difficulty in articulating his feelings. When she exposes herself, telling him of things he is “gonna have to learn and understand” (p. 98),

he would like to do the same, to tell her how deeply he loves her, but he is “met with an impossibility” and redirects his emotions into physical gestures, gently lifting her chin and kissing her “hoping she understands” (p. 99). Actions again deputise for the linguistic articulation of emotions, reflecting the narrator’s ongoing struggle to verbalise emotional vulnerability.

The metaphor of open water once again captures this ambivalent experience of intimacy. As previously mentioned, love is described as an act of diving into the same ocean together, yet with the possibility of resurfacing in different places, forming “a joint only to fracture, only to break” (p. 100). The narrator reflects that to love someone is simultaneously “to swim and to drown, [...] to bleed and heal”, to place them “next to your beating heart [...] and trust they will hold you close” (Ibid.). He thus acknowledges the complexities of a constructive relationship, just as he is aware that he “must explain”, he “must be heard” (p. 106). Still, he finds himself stuck in his inability to express the way he feels “[h]eavy and tight and tired” (p. 109). If again “to love is to trust” and to “trust is to have faith” (p. 100), her invitation “[d]on’t hide from me” (p. 105) represents her demand for him to embrace this trust, opening up, sharing his fears and concerns, showing every side of himself. However, such call is (or cannot be) heard: “[w]henver she asks if you're OK, you nod, mute, convincing her, trying to convince yourself” (p. 106). In this sense, the very condition that makes intimacy meaningful—radical openness—also generates the fear that ultimately destabilises the relationship.

5.4.5. Masculine Silence and the Collapse of the Relationship

The tension between vulnerability and inability of exposure eventually culminates in the breakdown of the relationship. Crucially, this collapse does not occur because love disappears but because the narrator remains unable to communicate the emotional turmoil he experiences after witnessing another scene of violence. Following the aforementioned episode at the barber's, that same afternoon the protagonist encounters Daniel again on the street, the boy who was attacked in the shop and who now, smiling to him, seems to have already forgotten what happened. However, within a few minutes Daniel is attacked again, this time fatally, and the protagonist manages to reach him only to see him pass away. This is the moment that, added to all the events mentioned in the previous section, eventually breaks him. Precisely in its aftermath, Nelson presents the quintessentially

masculine dismissal of emotions, when the protagonist, unable (or unwilling) to deal with and share his pain, does not allow even the closest person, like his partner, to access his sorrow and help him elaborate it.

Being back in Dublin for her university, she calls the protagonist to check on him, who repeatedly responds “there’s nothing” (pp. 121-122). The refusal to articulate his feelings creates a growing distance between them until communication collapses entirely: “[a]nd like that, a joint, fractured, broken” (p. 122). Soon the narrator withdraws completely: he stops returning her calls and eventually turns off his phone entirely, recognising that “it’s easier to retreat than to show her something raw and vulnerable. Than showing you” (Ibid.). An incredible self-awareness characterises this process of distancing: “[i]t’s harmful where you’re going. You know this, and still you go, you hide. It’s easier this way” (p. 123).

But when he distances himself, she displays the stubbornness typical of those who love: she returns from Dublin to see him, to confront him, to show him that she cares about him. She accuses him of shutting her out, explaining that all she wanted was honesty and openness: “I just wanted you to *communicate*. Just open your mouth and talk to me [...]. I thought we could be honest here” (pp. 124-125, emphasis in the original). Her frustration highlights the relational imbalance produced by the narrator’s inability to express his vulnerability. While the relationship initially offered a space of openness, his retreat into silence ultimately renders intimacy impossible: though acknowledging how “[t]his was a place you could be honest”, he remains silent as, again, “[i]t’s easier to hide in your own darkness, than to emerge, naked and vulnerable” (p. 125).

Now, even the refuge offered by reciprocal gaze and physical contact becomes ineffective. “You watch her watching your internal struggle. Her features soften” (Ibid.): she is still there for him, still willing to offer him help, but when she tries to get closer and reach him, he takes a step back, depriving the physicality that had always united them of its power and resulting in her walking away, leaving the protagonist “stand there, frozen, hiding in plain sight” (Ibid.).

Inaction and masculine silence thus become the mechanisms through which the relationship collapses. The breakdown shows how gender expectations of masculine performances can trap men in themselves and their inability to communicate, even with the closest persons. Rather than risking exposure, the narrator chooses emotional

isolation—even as he acknowledges the damage this choice causes. This internal paradox between emotional awareness and refusal of articulation reflects a broader crisis of masculinity: the tension between emotional experience and the socialised inability to express it, a gap which appears to be unbridgeable, at least as long emotional policy is mastered by silence and retreat.

5.4.6. Shame, Self-Recognition, and Emotional Reckoning

Following the separation, the narrator gradually confronts the consequences of his (non)actions. This period is marked by an intense process of self-reflection in which shame becomes the catalyst for emotional reckoning. Significantly, one of the first moments of outward elaboration occurs his brother, in an inversion of the logic of care that saw the protagonist always looking after his brother. When they meet, mutually recognising dynamics of missing words and rising panic, his brother embraces him and “holds [him] close [...] with care” (p. 124). In this moment the narrator finally lets his pain cross the boundaries of his self: “[y]ou allow yourself to be held, [...] you allow yourself to be soft and childlike in his arms. You allow yourself to break” (Ibid.) The contrast with his earlier refusal to accept similar emotional support from his partner highlights the complexity of his defensive mechanisms.

Alone, the narrator begins to recognise the extent of the harm he has caused. Looking at himself in the mirror, he acknowledges the contradiction between intention and behaviour: “you’re not a coward, but you have done a cowardly thing [...] you’re not malicious but you have hurt her” (pp. 126–127). The reflection culminates in a powerful moment of self-embrace: “[y]ou wrap your long arms around your own body and allow yourself to be soft and childlike in your own arms” (p. 127), representing the second instance in a sequence of liberating breaking points that will lead the protagonist to reach out again towards his lost love and recognise the possibility of completely revealing his vulnerabilities to the other.

This confrontation with shame forces the narrator to reconsider the relationship he wilfully abandoned. He realises that he effectively stood aside and watched the relationship disintegrate, recognising that it was “simpler and cowardly” (p. 128) to remain silent. Loving someone so deeply, knowing “how beautiful and wholesome and healing” that love is, and then turning away from it, he concludes, “required no strength

at all” (Ibid.). After several months, this realisation leads to a desire for honesty. The narrator decides that he no longer wishes to hide, even if speaking the truth proves painful. This decision marks the beginning of a new stage in his emotional journey—one that unfolds through the act of writing itself.

5.4.7. Writing, Confession, and the Possibility of Renewal

The final part of the novel introduces writing as a means through which the narrator attempts to articulate the emotions he previously suppressed. The narrative voice becomes explicitly self-reflexive, addressing both the absent beloved and the reader through a series of confessional statements beginning with the repeated phrases “you want to” and “you came here to” (pp. 129-135). Through this rhetorical structure, the narrator gradually clarifies what might be one of the purposes of his storytelling. He “came here to speak of what it means to love your best friend” (p. 135) but also “to ask for forgiveness”, and ultimately “to tell the truth” (pp. 131, 143). Writing, coming “to the page” (p. 131) functions thus as a space in which emotional articulation becomes possible after the failure of spoken communication.

In this process, the narrator confronts the lingering effects of the traumatic events he has experienced and that continue to influence his daily life. He acknowledges that certain wounds cannot simply disappear, yet he insists that acknowledging them does not negate the possibility of joy: “[m]ultiple truths do exist, and you do not have to be the sum of your traumas” (Ibid.). Accepting both pain and beauty becomes a crucial step toward emotional integration. The metaphor of open water reappears here with renewed significance. The narrator reflects that he once believed speaking openly would cause him to drown: “if you opened your mouth in open water you would drown” (p. 143). Now however, he realises that silence is equally destructive, because “if you didn’t open your mouth, you would suffocate” (Ibid.). Writing therefore becomes a form of necessary risk, a preliminary step that guides the understanding of the self and prepares it to the confrontation with the other—a way of entering the open water of vulnerability rather than remaining trapped in the isolating solitude of the alleged safe island.

5.4.8. The Closing of the Circle: Seeing and Being Seen

The novel concludes by returning to the motif of seeing that lies at the heart of the narrative, “it’s one thing to be looked at, and another to be seen” (p. 79). The protagonists meet again after a year has passed since the breakdown of their relationship. She tells him how meanwhile she has also started to take photographs, and he wonders whether she might now understand how holding a camera feels heavier “than it should” (p. 145). He realises that “seeing people is no small task” (Ibid.): the act of photographing someone involves accepting their honest and exposed self and attempting to capture their presence with care, as he in a previous moment did “as she handed [him] her vulnerability” (p. 79).

In the final image, as they are “enjoying the comfort of each other’s silence” (p. 145), the direction of the gaze is reversed. Instead of the narrator photographing her, she now turns the camera towards him. Photographed becomes photographing, the exchange of vulnerabilities has turned around. As she studies the image that might emerge from the roll, she observes details that reflect a deeper understanding of his emotional state: the shadows across his skin, the honesty in his expression, and perhaps “a tear making a journey from eye to cheek” (Ibid). Most importantly, if one looks closely, one might see “what she has always seen, what she always will: you” (Ibid.). This moment symbolically resolves the novel’s central tension between visibility and vulnerability. The narrator is no longer simply looked at but genuinely recognised, eventually allowing his loved one to *see* the entirety of him.

5.5. Conclusion: *Open Water* Moving from Awareness to Articulation

Taken together, the dynamics depicted in this chapter illustrate how *Open Water* offers alternative and, eventually, emotionally mature narratives of masculinity. Rather than presenting masculine identity as a stable or self-sufficient category, the novel depicts it as a relational process shaped through systemic pressures, encounters with others, moments of vulnerability, and the struggle to articulate emotional experience. The narrator’s journey—from the tentative emergence of desire, through the intimacy and eventual collapse of his relationship, to his later attempt to confront shame and speak honestly—reveals masculinity as something negotiated rather than possessed. This process takes place informed by the lenses of otherness provided by the author’s (and narrator’s and protagonist’s) experience of being a young Black man in today’s British society.

In this sense, Caleb Azumah Nelson challenges traditional associations (often even exaggerated in the case of Black hypermasculine models) between masculinity and emotional restraint, suggesting instead that vulnerability, recognition, and the desire, first, and willingness, then, to be seen constitute central components of a more open and reflexive masculine identity. In *Open Water*, masculinity is not defined through dominance or control but through relational exposure and the ability to fully engage in dynamics of sharing rather than retaining. The protagonists' relationship's evolution suggests that intimacy requires a willingness to be seen in one's entirety—a process that is at once frightening, transformative, and ultimately liberating.

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed how contemporary autofiction reconfigures the representation of masculine identity in literature. By bringing together theoretical perspectives from masculinity studies and narrative theory, it has examined how recent autofictional narratives challenge traditional models of male development and contrast the linear and teleological trajectory often associated with the classical Bildungsroman. Hence, one of the central premises of this study was that autofiction provides a particularly productive narrative framework for examining masculinity in contemporary literature. By blurring the boundaries of referentiality, autofiction foregrounds the instability of the narrating self and the processes through which identity is constructed, thus allowing it to be questioned and reimagined. Rather than presenting a unified and retrospective account of a life, as in the case of conventional autobiographies, autofictional writings often privilege fragmentation, introspection, and emotional immediacy, which makes it particularly suitable to representing forms of masculinity that may resist coherence and transcend traditional framing.

The three texts examined in this dissertation illustrate different ways in which masculine identity is negotiated across distinct stages of life. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* situates the emergence of masculine subjectivity within the context of retrospectively re-elaborated childhood and adolescence, foregrounding an honest dialogue with themes of traumatic familial legacies and the development of a queer identity in the heteronormative context of Hartford, Connecticut at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The novel challenges the narrative of hegemonic masculinity by presenting vulnerability, emotional openness, and tenderness not as signs of weakness but as essential components of the protagonist's self-understanding. In implementing lyrical language and framing the text as a fictive letter to the narrator-protagonist's (and author's) mother, the text meditates on masculinity, depicting it as an affective and relational experience shaped by memory, familial bonds, and the complexities of queer desire.

Gabriel Krauze's *Who They Was*, by contrast, offers a portrayal of masculine identity rooted in the performative dynamics of violence and hypermasculinity. Set in the urban

environment of contemporary London, the narrative explores how masculine identity is constructed and maintained through acts of aggression and risk within a tightly knit social group. Yet the text simultaneously exposes the fragility of these performances. The protagonist's participation in violent behaviour as well as his attitude towards women as readily available objects desire are shown to be both a means of asserting masculine belonging and a claim towards moral independency and personal legitimation. The narrator-protagonist never disowns this lived and fictionalised experiences, yet he acknowledges how the performance of such an appearance-oriented, hypermasculine, and ruthless lifestyle proves damaging in the first place for the ones who perform it. In this autofictional account, this way of being is primarily *archived*, and, through its fragmented and slang-rich style, presented to a wider audience in the most authentic and immediate way possible, fostering a powerful moral confrontation between the staged worldview and the mediated literal form.

Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* introduces yet another configuration of masculinity, one centred on intimacy, emotional vulnerability, and relational connection, but whose realisation is seriously hindered by contextual pressure, systemic racism, and a socially interiorised struggle to articulate feelings. Focusing on the experience of early adulthood in present-day London, the novel traces the development of a romantic relationship that becomes a space for exploring alternative modes of masculine selfhood. In contrast to the aggressive performances that dominate Krauze's narrative, Nelson's text foregrounds tenderness, care, and emotional reciprocity as central aspects of masculine identity. At the same time, the novel stages the abiding contradiction between emotional awareness and capability of articulation which—I venture to say—mirrors broader social behavioural tendencies in men at this life stage, demonstrating how deeply ingrained patterns of masculine silence and emotional repression continue to shape the protagonist's behaviour.

Taken together, the three works have been shown to give specific attention to the weight interpersonal relationships have in shaping the protagonists' masculine identity. In the teenage world of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, through the sharing of intergenerational trauma and the discovery of queer desire, relationships provide imaginable *alternative* scenarios that destabilise traditional masculine scripts. Scripts that are often staged and performed instead in the turbulent reality of late adolescence staged

in *Who They Was*, where interpersonal bonds, especially with women, function less as spaces of emotional negotiation than as structures reinforcing hypermasculine codes of domination, aggression, and autonomy, in an environment that at the same rewards and legitimate violent performance. Ultimately, *Open Water*'s more mature emotional ecology presents the romantic relationship as the primary site through which masculine identity can evolve through a necessary negotiation with the other, taking emotional awareness to the next stage represented by complete openness and full articulation of feelings, overcoming the persistent weight of masculine silence.

The texts portray masculine subjectivity as *dispersed* across moments of vulnerability, conflict, and relational encounter. Masculinity emerges not as a fixed state or identity but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by several factors, like social pressures, personal history, emotional experience, changing contexts and stages of life. In this sense, the three narratives oppose the traditional logic of the Bildungsroman by refusing to resolve the tensions that define the protagonists' lives: rather than culminating in integration and stability, their stories remain open, marked by uncertainty and the continuous process of self-redefinition but still acknowledging and embracing the complexity that truly characterises men and their lives in the world. Considered together, the three works outline a movement from vulnerable survival through performative violence and towards a form of emotionally aware reflection that eventually leads to a full articulation of emotion.

To this extent, all three works embody what can be defined as a 'coming-to-page' moment, in which writing itself becomes a means of creating distance from experience while at the same time reapproaching it, allowing the narrator-protagonists to revisit their adolescence and early adulthood through a reflective lens that may foreground elaboration, immediacy, or introspection. Writing, then, becomes a cathartic place of fundamental self-reflection, where the authors and their fictional realisations can both legitimise and come to terms with their pasts.

The analysis has highlighted how the representation of masculinity in these texts is deeply intertwined with broader questions of race, sexuality, and cultural belonging. Both Vuong and Nelson foreground the experience of marginalised and diasporic, Black and queer masculinity, exploring how emotional subjectivity intersects with the biases of public perception. Krauze's narrative, while operating in a different framework, similarly

situates masculine performance within a specific social and cultural environment shaped by class dynamics and urban marginality and carefully maintained by a deeply aware and context-driven self-regulation. By situating masculinity within these intersecting contexts, the three works reveals the ways in which masculine identity is always embedded within larger structures of power and social expectation.

Ultimately, the texts analysed in this thesis suggest that contemporary literature is increasingly interested in imagining *alternative* possibilities for masculinity. While the narratives do not offer definitive solutions to the tensions they depict, they nevertheless open up spaces in which masculinity can be rethought beyond the rigid frameworks of dominance, emotional restraint, and self-sufficiency, either by not subscribing to such configurations as in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Open Water*, or depicting their inherent limitations like it is done in *Who They Was*. Vulnerability, intimacy, and relational openness emerge as crucial elements in these reconfigurations of masculine identity.

In this sense, autofiction becomes not only a mode of self-exploration but also a literary space in which new ways of being a man can be tentatively articulated. By examining the interplay between narrative form and gender identity, this dissertation has sought to demonstrate how contemporary autofiction provides valuable insight into the shifting landscape of masculinity in the twenty-first century. As cultural conversations around gender continue to evolve, literary texts such as those analysed here play an important role in reflecting and shaping these transformations. The fragmented and self-reflexive nature of autofiction mirrors the complexity of contemporary masculine experience, offering narratives in which identity does not need to stick to dominant narrations but remains open, provisional, and continuously in the process of becoming.

This leaves me hopeful that the texts in question might also serve to encourage young men to reconcile with reading since, as I hope this thesis has demonstrated, one of the main benefits of literature is offering an *alternative* to the mainstream, unveiling ideas and ways of *thinking* that can slowly become *being*, to make our experience as men, as human beings, more aware.

Sommario in italiano

La presente tesi analizza la rappresentazione delle identità maschili nella narrativa autofinzionale contemporanea, concentrandosi in particolare su tre opere pubblicate negli ultimi anni: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) di Ocean Vuong, *Who They Was* (2020) di Gabriel Krauze e *Open Water* (2021) di Caleb Azumah Nelson. Attraverso l'analisi comparata di questi testi, il lavoro indaga le modalità con cui la letteratura contemporanea mette in scena soggettività maschili segnate da vulnerabilità, violenza, consapevolezza emotiva e tensione identitaria, interrogando al contempo i modelli di mascolinità dominanti e le loro possibili realizzazioni alternative.

Il punto di partenza della ricerca risiede nell'osservazione che, negli ultimi decenni, la mascolinità è diventata oggetto di un intenso dibattito culturale e accademico. Le trasformazioni sociali, politiche e culturali che hanno caratterizzato le società occidentali dalla seconda metà del Novecento in poi hanno progressivamente messo in discussione i modelli tradizionali di identità maschile, storicamente associati a valori come forza, dominio, autonomia e controllo emotivo. All'interno di questo contesto, i *Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities* hanno evidenziato come la mascolinità non sia una realtà naturale o immutabile, bensì una costruzione culturale e sociale che si definisce attraverso pratiche, discorsi e relazioni di potere.

In questo senso, l'autofiction rappresenta un terreno particolarmente fertile per l'indagine delle identità maschili contemporanee. Nato negli anni Settanta con il termine coniato da Serge Doubrovsky, il concetto di autofiction indica una forma narrativa che combina elementi autobiografici e finzionali, mettendo in discussione il confine tra esperienza vissuta e costruzione letteraria. Più che limitarsi a raccontare la vita dell'autore, l'autofiction problematizza la relazione tra autore, narratore e personaggio, creando uno spazio in cui l'identità può essere esplorata come processo narrativo.

Negli ultimi decenni, questo genere ha conosciuto una crescente diffusione nella letteratura internazionale. Molti autori contemporanei utilizzano infatti l'autofiction per interrogare la propria posizione all'interno di specifici contesti sociali e culturali, affrontando temi quali la memoria, il trauma, l'appartenenza e la costruzione del sé. All'interno di questo quadro, l'autofiction consente di rappresentare l'identità maschile

non come una categoria stabile, ma come una realtà in continua negoziazione tra esperienza personale e strutture sociali.

La scelta del corpus di questa tesi si inserisce in tale prospettiva. I tre romanzi analizzati condividono una forte dimensione autofinzionale e sono stati scritti da autori giovani, le cui opere riflettono sulle proprie esperienze biografiche e generazionali inserendole in un più ampio contesto di riflessione su temi sociali e culturali. Inoltre, i testi permettono di costruire una sorta di simbolico arco cronologico-narrativo che attraversa diverse fasi della vita maschile: l'adolescenza e la formazione identitaria in Vuong, la tarda adolescenza e i primi anni dell'età adulta nel contesto urbano e violento descritto da Krauze, e infine una fase di maggiore maturità emotiva e riflessione affettiva nel romanzo di Azumah Nelson. Questa progressione consente di osservare come la mascolinità venga negoziata e ridefinita in momenti diversi della vita, mostrando come l'identità maschile non sia un'entità monolitica ma un processo dinamico che evolve nel tempo.

Il **primo capitolo** della tesi è dedicato alla costruzione del quadro teorico relativo ai *masculinity studies*, disciplina che negli ultimi decenni ha contribuito a ridefinire il modo in cui il genere maschile viene analizzato nelle scienze sociali e negli studi culturali. Il capitolo introduce innanzitutto il passaggio da una concezione essenzialista della mascolinità — intesa come insieme stabile di caratteristiche naturali associate al corpo maschile — a una prospettiva costruttivista, secondo cui le identità di genere sono il risultato di processi sociali, culturali e storici. In questo contesto viene discusso in particolare il concetto di *mascolinità egemonica* elaborato da Raewyn Connell, che descrive il modello dominante di identità maschile all'interno di una determinata società e le gerarchie che esso stabilisce sia nei confronti delle donne sia tra uomini stessi. Il capitolo analizza inoltre le critiche a questo modello e le evoluzioni che ne sono scaturite, che hanno tutte in comune la fondamentale idea che la pluralità delle esperienze maschili renda impossibile parlare di un'unica e universale mascolinità, ma di come le identità maschili siano profondamente influenzate da fattori quali classe sociale, etnia, sessualità e contesto culturale, in quella che si può definire 'svolta intersezionale' nello studio delle mascolinità.

A partire da questo quadro teorico, il capitolo poi approfondisce gli approcci postcoloniale e queer al tema, offrendo poi un approfondimento sulla *Black masculinity*,

che sarà poi rilevante nell'analisi del romanzo di Azumah Nelson. Per concludere la disamina, il capitolo poi si concentra sulla narrativa di *crisi della mascolinità* e della sua evoluzione nel tempo dal movimento mitopoietico della fine degli anni Ottanta al contesto odierno fortemente influenzato dai social media e i comunicatori di successo su queste piattaforme.

Il **secondo capitolo** si concentra sull'impianto teorico letterario della tesi. Dopo una breve introduzione sul *Bildungsroman* e la sua natura di genere storicamente dedicato alla formazione di un'identità mascolina che si adatta ai canoni normativi della società, il focus è dedicato alla definizione e alla contestualizzazione del concetto di autofiction, che rappresenta il quadro teorico e formale entro cui si collocano i testi analizzati nella tesi. Il termine, coniato dallo scrittore francese Serge Doubrovsky nel 1977, indica una forma narrativa che combina elementi autobiografici e finzionali, mettendo in discussione il tradizionale patto autobiografico tra autore e lettore. A differenza dell'autobiografia classica, che si fonda sull'idea di una corrispondenza tra autore, narratore e protagonista, l'autofiction introduce una dimensione di ambiguità e di instabilità identitaria, trasformando l'esperienza personale in materia narrativa e allo stesso tempo problematizzando la possibilità di rappresentare il sé in modo trasparente. Il capitolo ripercorre quindi le principali definizioni critiche del termine e discute le caratteristiche formali che distinguono l'autofiction da altre forme di scrittura autobiografica, come l'uso di narratori ambigui, la frammentazione del racconto e la tensione costante tra memoria e invenzione.

Il capitolo presenta poi l'approccio olistico all'autofiction, che prevede il coinvolgimento attivo del lettore nel processo di *meaninig making* dei testi. Ci si sofferma in seguito sul tema della *verità* in relazione alla narrazione autofinzionale, discutendo di come in un racconto di questo genere la nozione stessa di verità possa trascendere la sua accezione fattuale per assumerne una affettiva. Questa riflessione orienta il capitolo verso la sua conclusione, che delinea come questa forma di scrittura si presti per esplorare il rapporto tra esperienza individuale e contesto sociale, nel modo in cui la scrittura viene utilizzata come strumento di interrogazione identitaria, rappresentando il soggetto non come un'entità stabile e coerente, ma come una costruzione narrativa in continua evoluzione. All'interno di questo quadro, i lavori di Ocean Vuong, Gabriel Krauze e Caleb Azumah Nelson possono essere letti come esempi significativi di autofiction

contemporanea, in cui l'esperienza personale degli autori viene rielaborata e messa al servizio della narrazione per riflettere su temi quali identità, memoria, desiderio e costruzione della mascolinità.

Il **terzo capitolo** introduce il primo dei tre testi analizzati, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* di Ocean Vuong. Prima di entrare nell'analisi tematica, il capitolo offre una presentazione del percorso biografico dell'autore (in una sezione che verrà poi replicata per tutti e tre gli autori), seguita da una contestualizzazione dell'opera all'interno del *framework* dell'autofiction. Vuong, nato in Vietnam e cresciuto negli Stati Uniti nel contesto di una famiglia di rifugiati, utilizza la forma di una lettera indirizzata alla madre analfabeta (qui giace il principale paradosso creativo-narrativo, scrivere a un destinatario che non potrà mai effettivamente essere tale) per raccontare la propria esperienza di crescita segnata da marginalità sociale, violenza familiare e scoperta della propria identità queer.

Il capitolo analizza come il romanzo costruisca una rappresentazione della mascolinità profondamente diversa dai modelli dominanti. L'identità del protagonista, Little Dog, emerge infatti come il risultato di una complessa rete di relazioni familiari, sociali e affettive. La scrittura diventa lo strumento attraverso cui il narratore può riosservare proprio passato con lo sguardo maturo e critico della sua età attuale e rielaborare le esperienze che hanno segnato la sua formazione.

L'analisi avviene seguendo una logica 'dal generale al particolare'. In primo luogo viene analizzato il contesto americano di Hartford, Connecticut dei primi anni 2000 in cui l'azione viene narrata. Sono gli anni della crisi degli oppioidi, che colpì profondamente gli ambienti più marginali della società americana, mietendo vittime specialmente tra i più giovani, che si vedevano così limitare prospettive future più positive. Viene poi mostrato come la sfera sociale sia intrisa di valori riconducibili a mascolinità tossica, forte gerarchizzazione sociale ed eteronormatività obbligatoria.

A questa analisi fa seguito quella sul contesto familiare formato dal narratore, Little Dog, sua madre e sua nonna. La sua esperienza familiare è segnata dall'eredità della Guerra del Vietnam: la madre, che soffre di PTSD, sfoga i suoi traumi in frequenti atteggiamenti violenti nei confronti del figlio; la nonna, anch'essa affetta da schizofrenia, cerca di mantenere un equilibrio nel contesto casalingo. Nonostante le difficoltà comunque, l'ambiente familiare si distingue come luogo di cura e attenzione reciproche

e per questo viene inquadrato nella tesi come primo *provider* di alternativa nel libro di Vuong.

Particolare attenzione viene poi dedicata alla relazione tra Little Dog e il giovane ragazzo *stereotipicamente* americano Trevor, che rappresenta uno dei ‘luoghi’ principali nel romanzo in cui l’identità maschile e mascolina del protagonista si sviluppa. Attraverso questa relazione, il testo esplora la dimensione queer del desiderio e presenta una serie di modelli di comportamento *alternativi* che abbracciano la vulnerabilità invece dello stoicismo tipicamente associato all’essere uomo. Tra le altre cose, essa mette in discussione la tradizionale logica del *male gaze*, mostrando come l’esperienza di essere visto e desiderato, per chi è abituato a vivere un’esistenza nella marginalità, possa trasformare radicalmente la percezione di sé.

Il **quarto capitolo** della tesi è dedicato a *Who They Was* di Gabriel Krauze, un libro che rappresenta un caso particolarmente significativo all’interno della narrativa autofinzionale contemporanea. Pubblicato nel 2020 e inserito nella *longlist* per il Booker Prize dell’anno, il testo si presenta come una narrazione fortemente radicata nell’esperienza personale dell’autore, che ha vissuto per anni tra l’ambiente accademico universitario e la realtà delle gang londinesi. Questa duplice appartenenza costituisce uno degli elementi centrali del romanzo e offre uno sguardo diretto su un contesto sociale spesso rappresentato dall’esterno o attraverso stereotipi.

Il capitolo situa anzitutto il lavoro di Krauze all’interno delle logiche narrative dell’autofiction, enfatizzando in primis il carattere di ‘oralità scritta’ dell’opera, che si prefigge di minimizzare la distanza tra l’esperienza vissuta e il suo racconto, mettendo in primo piano immediatezza e autenticità ottenute principalmente tramite il ricorso esteso allo slang londinese e a una narrazione frammentata. L’analisi mette in evidenza come il lavoro di Krauze rappresenti questa cultura della violenza senza ricorrere a una prospettiva moralizzante o esterna ma si focalizzi sull’archiviazione (e forse la conseguente legittimazione) di uno stile di vita ai limiti del vivere sociale comunemente inteso come *normale*. La narrazione in prima persona e l’uso di un linguaggio fortemente immersivo contribuiscono infatti a restituire la logica interna di questo sistema sociale, permettendo al lettore di comprendere le dinamiche che regolano la vita dei personaggi, favorendo un confronto tra realtà e sistemi di valori diversi e probabilmente contrastanti.

L'analisi del testo si concentra in primo luogo il modo in cui la mascolinità viene costruita all'interno dell'ambiente urbano descritto nel testo. Nel quartiere londinese di South Kilburn, dove ha luogo gran parte della narrazione, l'identità maschile appare strettamente legata a un sistema di valori che privilegia la forza fisica, la reputazione e la sicurezza di sé legittimata dalla capacità di esercitare violenza. In questo contesto, la performance ipermaschile diventa una strategia di sopravvivenza e uno strumento di legittimazione sociale, nonché un meccanismo in cui le emozioni vengono vissute ed elaborate dal narratore-protagonista.

Il capitolo muove poi a discutere il ruolo e la percezione delle donne all'interno di questo ambiente. Se da un lato esse vengono presentate come allo stesso tempo vittime e sostenitrici di questo sistema gerarchico, violento e orientato all'apparenza, nell'ambito delle relazioni intime con il protagonista queste vengono riportate come semplici oggetti di piacere, sempre disponibili a soddisfare le necessità della controparte maschile, in un'inquadratura del desiderio che si discosta sensibilmente da quella di Vuong e assume toni decisamente più unilaterali e dominanti.

L'attenzione viene poi portata alle nozioni di reputazione e di *brotherhood* all'interno del contesto ipermascolino della strada e alla loro importanza nella gestione della realtà. Il protagonista e i suoi amici sono costantemente impegnati a dimostrare la propria durezza e il proprio coraggio, in un ambiente in cui la durezza e l'assenza di rimpianti morali vengono premiate e qualsiasi segno di vulnerabilità può essere percepito come una debolezza.

Successivamente, vengono presentate le situazioni e le modalità che riescono a mettere in discussione questo sistema tossico. A riguardo, il focus viene messo in primo luogo sulla famiglia, che rappresenta allo stesso tempo un luogo di conflitto, specialmente con la madre che affronta e critica ripetutamente il figlio e le sue scelte, e di confronto costruttivo, nel rapporto con il padre che stimola il protagonista a riflettere sui veri valori di bellezza e creatività nella vita. In secondo luogo, viene mostrato come il testo lasci emergere progressivamente le contraddizioni di questo modello di mascolinità. Se da un lato la violenza rappresenta un mezzo per ottenere rispetto e riconoscimento, dall'altro essa produce un progressivo svuotamento dell'identità individuale. Il narratore, anni dopo essersi lasciato alle spalle questa vita, riflette su come lo stile di vita narrato intrappoli chi lo vive in una spirale di comportamenti che sembrano necessari per mantenere la propria

posizione all'interno del gruppo, ma che allo stesso tempo lo allontanano da altre possibili forme di realizzazione personale.

Il capitolo mostra quindi come *Who They Was* possa essere letto come una riflessione sulla dimensione performativa della mascolinità. I comportamenti violenti messi in atto dai personaggi non sono semplicemente il risultato di una predisposizione individuale, ma costituiscono piuttosto una forma di performance sociale attraverso cui gli uomini del romanzo cercano di affermare la propria appartenenza a una specifica comunità. In questo senso, la violenza diventa una modalità attraverso cui la mascolinità viene continuamente messa in scena e riconfermata.

Il **quinto capitolo** si concentra su *Open Water* di Caleb Azumah Nelson, un romanzo che si distingue per il suo stile lirico e per la sua intensa attenzione alla dimensione emotiva e relazionale dell'esperienza umana. Ambientato nella Londra contemporanea, il testo racconta la storia di un giovane fotografo e della sua relazione con una ballerina, entrambi di colore, esplorando il modo in cui amore, arte e identità si intrecciano nella costruzione del sé maschile, in un'arena sociale caratterizzata da un senso di tensione e costante minaccia percepite dal narratore, che rendono il soggetto nero ipervisibile e allo stesso tempo non riconosciuto.

Uno degli aspetti più significativi del romanzo è l'uso della narrazione in seconda persona. Questa scelta stilistica crea un effetto di intimità e di introspezione che permette al lettore, uno dei due possibili destinatari dello 'you' nella narrazione insieme al narratore-protagonista stesso, di entrare nella coscienza di quest'ultimo, seguendo da vicino il suo processo di riflessione emotiva e allo stesso tempo avvicinando il lettore che non condivide il background esperienziale con l'autore alla sua esperienza intrisa di pregiudizi razziali.

Un elemento centrale dell'analisi riguarda infatti il modo in cui il romanzo affronta l'esperienza della soggettività nera nello spazio urbano contemporaneo. Il protagonista vive costantemente sotto il peso di uno sguardo sociale che riduce il suo corpo a una categoria astratta, trasformandolo in un oggetto di sorveglianza e sospetto. Episodi come i controlli di polizia o la percezione costante di essere osservato nello spazio pubblico rivelano la dimensione precaria dell'esistenza dei corpi neri all'interno della società britannica.

All'interno di questo contesto, il romanzo attribuisce grande importanza alle forme di espressione artistica e corporea, come la musica, la danza e lo sport. Queste pratiche diventano spazi in cui i personaggi possono temporaneamente sottrarsi alle definizioni imposte dall'esterno e sperimentare forme alternative di libertà, appartenenza ed espressione. La musica, in particolare, assume un ruolo centrale come linguaggio capace di esprimere ciò che spesso rimane inesprimibile nelle parole.

Il narratore appare infatti profondamente consapevole dei propri sentimenti e delle proprie paure, ma allo stesso tempo fatica spesso a trasmetterli apertamente con il linguaggio, soprattutto all'interno della relazione amorosa che costituisce il cuore del romanzo. Il capitolo analizza come la mascolinità nel testo emerga proprio all'interno di questa tensione tra consapevolezza emotiva e difficoltà di articolazione. Il protagonista è in grado di riconoscere la profondità dei propri sentimenti e l'importanza della relazione con la donna amata, una relazione che per larghi tratti è descritta con termini che esaltano il rispetto della controparte femminile e la reciprocità costruttiva del rapporto, mostrando quindi un esempio virtuoso di una relazione sana ed equilibrata. Ciononostante, il protagonista incontra allo stesso tempo difficoltà nel condividere pienamente le proprie vulnerabilità. Questa dinamica riflette una tensione più ampia tra il desiderio di una mascolinità più aperta e relazionale e il peso delle norme sociali che continuano a scoraggiare l'espressione emotiva degli uomini.

Nel complesso, l'analisi comparata dei tre romanzi mette in luce modalità differenti attraverso cui l'identità maschile viene negoziata e ridefinita in diversi momenti della vita.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous di Ocean Vuong colloca l'emergere della soggettività maschile all'interno di una riflessione retrospettiva sull'infanzia e sull'adolescenza, mettendo in scena il confronto con eredità familiari traumatiche e con la formazione di un'identità queer nel contesto eteronormativo degli Stati Uniti dei primi anni 2000. Attraverso la forma della lettera indirizzata alla madre e una prosa fortemente lirica, il romanzo propone una rappresentazione della mascolinità fondata su vulnerabilità, apertura emotiva e tenerezza, elementi che vengono presentati non come segni di debolezza ma come componenti fondamentali del processo di autoscienza del protagonista.

Un'immagine radicalmente diversa emerge invece in *Who They Was* di Gabriel Krauze, dove la mascolinità è rappresentata come una performance costruita attraverso dinamiche di violenza, rischio e competizione all'interno di un ambiente urbano marginale. Ambientato nella Londra intorno al 2006, il racconto mostra come l'identità maschile venga continuamente affermata attraverso atti di aggressione e attraverso un atteggiamento di dominio nei confronti degli altri, in particolare delle donne. Tuttavia, il testo rivela allo stesso tempo la fragilità di queste performance: la violenza e l'ipermascolinità appaiono infatti come strumenti attraverso cui il protagonista cerca legittimazione e appartenenza, ma che finiscono per produrre alienazione e autodistruzione. Attraverso il suo stile frammentato e fortemente immersivo, l'opera conserva e archivia questa esperienza vissuta, presentandola al lettore con una forma di immediatezza che stimola un confronto critico tra diversi set valoriali, tra la realtà narrata e la sua rielaborazione letteraria.

Open Water di Caleb Azumah Nelson introduce infine una terza configurazione della mascolinità, centrata sulla dimensione dell'intimità, della vulnerabilità emotiva e della relazione con l'altro. Il romanzo racconta l'esperienza della prima età adulta nella Londra del 2017, seguendo lo sviluppo di una relazione sentimentale che diventa il luogo principale di esplorazione identitaria. In contrasto con la violenza performativa che caratterizza il testo di Krauze, Nelson mette in primo piano forme di tenerezza, cura reciproca e attenzione emotiva. Allo stesso tempo, il romanzo evidenzia una tensione persistente tra consapevolezza emotiva e capacità di articolazione dei sentimenti, mostrando come modelli sociali di silenzio e repressione emotiva continuino a influenzare profondamente il comportamento maschile.

Considerati insieme, i tre romanzi mostrano come le relazioni interpersonali svolgano un ruolo centrale nella formazione delle identità maschili. Nel mondo adolescenziale di *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, la condivisione del trauma familiare e la scoperta del desiderio queer aprono la possibilità di immaginare alternative ai modelli tradizionali di mascolinità. In *Who They Was*, al contrario, le relazioni — in particolare quelle con le donne — tendono a rafforzare codici ipermaschili fondati su dominio, aggressività e autonomia, all'interno di un contesto sociale che premia e legittima tali comportamenti. In *Open Water*, infine, la relazione amorosa diventa il luogo privilegiato attraverso cui la

mascolinità può evolvere, passando dalla semplice consapevolezza emotiva verso una possibile articolazione piena dei sentimenti.

Nel complesso, i tre testi delineano una traiettoria simbolica che attraversa diverse fasi della vita maschile: dalla vulnerabile sopravvivenza emotiva dell'adolescenza alla performance violenta della tarda adolescenza e della prima età adulta, fino a una forma più riflessiva e consapevole di identità maschile. Le narrazioni analizzate rifiutano tuttavia la struttura risolutiva tipica del *Bildungsroman* tradizionale: invece di culminare in una piena integrazione sociale o in una stabilizzazione identitaria, i percorsi dei protagonisti rimangono aperti e segnati da tensioni irrisolte, riflettendo la complessità e la continua ridefinizione che caratterizzano l'esperienza maschile contemporanea.

In questo contesto, l'autofiction emerge come uno spazio privilegiato di elaborazione identitaria. Attraverso la scrittura, i narratori-protagonisti riescono a creare una distanza riflessiva rispetto alle proprie esperienze passate allo stesso tempo riavvicinandole, trasformando la narrazione in un luogo di confronto con momenti cruciali dell'adolescenza e della prima età adulta. Il gesto stesso dello scrivere diventa così una forma di rielaborazione e di legittimazione dell'esperienza vissuta, permettendo agli autori di tornare su eventi traumatici o conflittuali e di inserirli in una più ampia riflessione sulla costruzione del sé.

L'analisi ha inoltre mostrato come la rappresentazione della mascolinità nei testi considerati sia strettamente intrecciata a questioni di razza, sessualità, classe e appartenenza culturale. Nei romanzi di Vuong e Nelson, in particolare, la soggettività maschile viene rappresentata all'interno di contesti segnati da dinamiche di marginalizzazione razziale e diasporica, evidenziando come l'esperienza emotiva e identitaria sia influenzata dalla percezione sociale dei corpi neri e queer nello spazio pubblico. Anche il testo di Krauze, pur operando in un contesto differente, colloca la performance della mascolinità all'interno di un ambiente urbano specifico, profondamente segnato da dinamiche di classe e marginalità sociale.

Nel loro insieme, i romanzi analizzati suggeriscono che la letteratura contemporanea stia progressivamente esplorando nuove possibilità di rappresentazione della mascolinità. Pur senza offrire soluzioni definitive alle tensioni che mettono in scena, queste opere aprono spazi narrativi in cui l'identità maschile può essere ripensata al di là dei modelli rigidi di dominio, autosufficienza e repressione emotiva. Vulnerabilità, intimità e apertura

relazionale emergono così come elementi fondamentali nelle nuove configurazioni della soggettività maschile.

In questo senso, l'autofiction non si limita a funzionare come una modalità di autoesplorazione individuale, ma diventa anche un luogo letterario in cui nuove forme di identità maschile possono essere sperimentate e immaginate. Attraverso l'intreccio tra esperienza autobiografica e costruzione narrativa, le opere analizzate offrono uno sguardo significativo sulle trasformazioni della mascolinità nel XXI secolo, mostrando come essa rimanga una realtà fluida, in continua negoziazione e sempre aperta a nuove possibilità di definizione.

Works cited

Primary literature

- Azumah Nelson, C. (2021). *Open Water*. Penguin Books.
- Krauze, G. (2019). *Who They Was*. 4th Estate.
- Vuong, O. (2019). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Penguin Books.

Secondary literature

- August, T. K. (2024). Staying in Character: Ocean Vuong and the Usefulness of Refugee Beauty. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 70(4), 678–699. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2024.a950448>
- Abel, E., Hirsch, M. & Langland, E. (1983). *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. Dartmouth College.
- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity : the changing nature of masculinities*. (1. publ.). Routledge.
- Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2018). Inclusive Masculinity Theory: overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(5), 547–561.
- Allan, J. A. (2020). Queer theory and critical masculinity studies. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 72–81). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-7>
- Armengol, J. M. (2020). Masculinities and literary studies: Past, present, and future directions. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 425–433). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-42>
- Azumah Nelson, C. (n.d.). *Moments of Freedom*. The London Magazine. <https://thelondonmagazine.org/article/essay-moments-of-freedom-by-caleb-azumah-nelson/>
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel). In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Ed.), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (pp. 10-59). University of Texas Press. <https://doi.org/10.7560/720466-004>

Bell, A., Alber, J., Georgiou, N., & Wong, D. (2025). Multimodality, Transmediality, and Ethics in Post-Postmodernist Fictions of the Digital. *Narrative (Columbus, Ohio)*, 33(3), 338–360. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2025.a971661>

Bly, R. (1992). *Iron John : a book about men*. (1. Vintage Books ed. Repr. [d. Ausg.] Reading, Mass., 1990). Random House.

Boes, T. (2006). Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends. *Literature Compass*, 3(2), 230–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00303.x>

Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, 8(3), 246–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12134>

Buchbinder, D. (2013). *Studying Men and Masculinities* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852224>

Butler, J. P. (1999). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* ([10th anniversary ed.]). Routledge.

Cheshire, J., Kerswill, P., Fox, S., & Torgersen, E. (2011). Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English. *Journal of sociolinguistics*, 15(2), 151-196.

Christensen, A.-D., & Jensen, S. Q. (2020). Intersectionality. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 82–91). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-8>

Coleridge, S. T. (1817). Biographia literaria, chapter XIV. *Vincent B. Leitch (gen. ed.)*, *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism*, 677-682.

Cohn, D. (2000). *The distinction of fiction* (Johns Hopkins Paperbacks edition). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2. ed.). Polity Press.

Connell, R. W. (2015). MASCULINITIES: THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE. *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* (Vol. 58, pp. 39–51). BRILL.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society*, 19(6), 829-859.

- de Boise, S. (2019). Editorial: is masculinity toxic? *NORMA*, 14(3), 147–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2019.1654742>
- Demetriou, D. Z. (2001). Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique. *Theory and Society*, 30(3), 337–361. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017596718715>
- Dix, H. (2018). Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story so Far. In H. Dix (Ed.), *Autofiction in English* (pp. 1–23). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_1
- Doubrovsky, S. (1977). *Fils : Roman*. Éd. Galilée.
- Effe, A., & Gibbons, A. (2022). A cognitive perspective on autofictional writing, texts, and reading. In A. Effe, & H. Lawlor (Ed.) *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (pp. 61-81). Springer International Publishing.
- Esty, J. (2012). *Unseasonable youth : modernism, colonialism, and the fiction of development* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199857968.001.0001>
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black skin, white masks*. ([Reprint.]). Pluto Press.
- Farahani, F., & Thapar-Björkert, S. (2020). Postcolonial masculinities: Diverse, shifting and in flux. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 92–102). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-9>
- Ferreira-Meyers, K. (2015). Autobiography and Autofiction: No Need to Fight for a Place in the Limelight, There is Space Enough for Both of these Concepts. In K. W. Shands, G. Grillo Mikrut, D. R. Pattanaik, & K. Ferreira-Meyers (Ed.) *Writing the self: Essays on autobiography and autofiction*. Södertörns högskola.
- Ferreira-Meyers, K. (2018). Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only? In H. Dix (Ed.), *Autofiction in English* (pp. 27–48). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_2
- Frow, J., Hardie, M., & Smith, V. (2020). The Bildungsroman: form and transformations. *Textual Practice*, 34(12), 1905–1910. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1834692>
- Gardiner, J. K. (Ed.). (2002). *Masculinity studies and feminist theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Gasparini, P. (2008). *Autofiction : une aventure du langage*. Éd. du Seuil.

Gibbons, A. (2019) 'The "dissolving margins" of Elena Ferrante and the Neapolitan Novels: A Cognitive Approach to Fictionality, Authorial Intentionality, and Autofictional Reading Strategies', *Narrative Inquiry*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/NI.19017.GIB>

Green, J. (n.d.). *Green's Dictionary of Slang*. Retrieved February 20, 2026, from <https://greensdictofslang.com/>

Halberstam, J. (2014). *Female masculinity / by Judith Halberstam*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378112>

Hammarén, N., & Johansson, T. (2020). The Transformation of Homosociality. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*. Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, Tamara Shefer (red.) (p. 213). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165>

Harrington, C. (2020). What is "Toxic Masculinity" and Why Does it Matter? *Men and Masculinities*, 24(2), 345-352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X20943254>

Hearn, J. (2004). From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men. *Feminist Theory*, 5(1), 49–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700104040813>

Hearn, J. R. (2015). *Men of the world: Genders, globalizations, transnational times*. Torrossa

Herman, D. (2004). *Story logic: problems and possibilities of narrative*. (1. Nebraska paperback print.). Univ. of Nebraska Press.

hooks, B. (2004). *We real cool : Black men and masculinity*. Routledge.

Horlacher, S. (2015). CONFIGURING MASCULINITY. In Stefan Horlacher (Ed.), *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* (Vol. 58, pp. 1–10). BRILL. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004299009_002

Horlacher, S. (2025). Narrative and Literary Constructions of Gender Beyond Binaries:(Re-) Defining the Concept (s) of Masculinity. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Feminist, Queer and Trans* Narrative Studies* (pp. 71-91). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Howson, R., & Hearn, J. (2020). Hegemony, hegemonic masculinity, and beyond. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 41–51). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-4>

Jones, C., Trott, V., & Wright, S. (2019). Sluts and soyboys: MGTOW and the production of misogynistic online harassment. *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1903-1921. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819887141>

James, A. (2022). The fictional in autofiction. In A. Effe, & H. Lawlor. (Ed.) *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (pp. 41-60). Springer International Publishing.

Jensen, M. (2018). How Art Constitutes the Human: Aesthetics, Empathy and the Interesting in Autofiction. In H. Dix (Ed.), *Autofiction in English* (pp. 65–83). Springer International Publishing.

Kimmel, M. (2006). *Manhood in America : a cultural history*. (2. ed.). Oxford Univ. Press.

Kimmel, M. S. (2016). Masculinity as Homophobia. Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity in Rothenberg, P.S. (ed.) *Race, Class and Gender in the United States. An Integrated Study*. Worth Publishers. New York

Kimmel, M. (2013). *Angry white men : American masculinity at the end of an era*. Kimmel.

Kimmel, M., Hearn, J., & Connell, R. (2005). *Handbook of studies on men & masculinities*. Sage

King's College London (2024) *Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality* <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/masculinity-and-womens-equality-study-finds-emerging-gender-divide-in-young-peoples-attitudes>

Lejeune, P. (1975). *Le pacte autobiographique*. Ed. du Seuil.

Love, T. P., Prskalo, E., & Moloney, M. E. (2025). Hatespeech or Tatespeech? Andrew Tate and the rise of the radical misogynist. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251374158>

Majors, R., & Billson, J. M. (1993). *Cool pose: The dilemma of Black manhood in America*. Simon and Schuster.

Marchese, L. (2014). *L'io possibile. L'autofiction come paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo*. Transeuropa.

Meretoja, H. (2022). Metanarrative autofiction: Critical engagement with cultural narrative models. In A. Effe, & H. Lawlor. (Ed.) *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (pp. 121-140). Cham: Springer International Publishing

Missinne, L. (2019). Autobiographical Pact. In M. Wagner-Egelhaaf (Ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (3 volumes, pp. 222–227). Walter de Gruyter GmbH. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110279818-026>

Moretti, F., & Sbragia, A. (2000). *The way of the world: the “Bildungsroman” in European culture / Franco Moretti ; translated by Albert Sbragia*. (New edition). Verso.

Neal, M. A. (2013). *Looking for Leroy: Illegible black masculinities*. New York University Press.

Neal, M. A. (2015). *New black man*. (10th Anniversary edition). Routledge.

Nicol, B. (2018). Eye to I: American Autofiction and Its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers. In H. Dix (Ed.), *Autofiction in English* (pp. 255–274). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_14

Neumann, B. (2020). “Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all – but an orphan”: The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. *Anglia (Tübingen)*, 138(2), 277–298. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2020-0023>

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Fiction, n., Etymology. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved January 14, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5299791457>

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Fiction, n., 4.a. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved January 14, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1193679820>

Over, H., Bunce, C., Konu, D. and Zendle, D. (2025), Editorial Perspective: What do we need to know about the manosphere and young people’s mental health?. *Child Adolesc Ment Health*, 30: 272-274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12747>

Pappas, S. (2019). Apa issues first-ever guidelines for practice with men and boys. *Monitor on Psychology*, 50(1). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner>

Penguin Books UK. (2021, February 1). “I met Malorie Blackman and was starstruck”: 21 questions with Caleb Azumah Nelson. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/caleb-azumah-nelson-open-water-author-interview>

Quong, S. (2019, June 5). *Survival as a Creative Force: An Interview with Ocean Vuong*. The Paris Review. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/06/05/survival-as-a-creative-force-an-interview-with-ocean-vuong/>.

Ratele, K. (2020). African and black men and masculinities 1. In *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 125–134). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-12>

Ravn, S., & Roberts, S. (2020). Young masculinities: Masculinities in youth studies. *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 183–191). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-18>

Redfield, M. (1996). *Phantom formations : aesthetic ideology and the Bildungsroman*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7298/p0m6-aw70>

Reeser, T. W. (2015). CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY AND MASCULINITY STUDIES. *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice* (Vol. 58, pp. 11–38). BRILL. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004299009_003

Reeser, T. W. (2020). Approaching affective masculinities. *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 103–111). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-10>

Reeser, T. W. (2023). *Masculinities in theory : an introduction* (Second edition). Wiley Blackwell.

Reeser, T. W., & Gottzén, L. (2018). Masculinity and affect: new possibilities, new agendas. *Norma : International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 13(3–4), 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2018.1528722>

Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in women: Notes on the “political economy” of sex. In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, 157-210. Montly Review Press.

Schmitt, A. (2019). Self-Narration. In M. Wagner-Egelhaaf (Ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (3 volumes, pp. 658–662). Walter de Gruyter GmbH. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110279818-083>

Schmitt, A. (2022). The pragmatics of autofiction. In A. Effe, & H. Lawlor. (Ed.) *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (pp. 83-99). Springer International Publishing.

Sedgwick E. K., & Koestenbaum, W. (2016). *Between men : English literature and male homosocial desire; foreword by Wayne Koestenbaum*. (Thirtieth anniversary edition). Columbia University Press.

Seidler, V. J. (1989). *Rediscovering masculinity : reason, language and sexuality*. (1. publ.). Routledge.

Seidler, V. J. (2007). Masculinities, Bodies, and Emotional Life. *Men and Masculinities*, 10(1), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X07299636>

Soler i Arjona, S. (2025). "I'm not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck": submerged legacies, diasporic kinship, and queerness in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. *European Journal of English Studies*, 29(3), 469–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2025.2592971>

Sorlin, S. (2024). You as a stylistic vector of otherness: from self-ascription to enactment in Kincaid (1988), Adichie (2009) and Nelson (2021). *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 53(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2024-2001>

van de Ven, I., & van Gemert, T. (2020). Filter bubbles and guru effects: Jordan B. Peterson as a public intellectual in the attention economy. *Celebrity Studies*, 13(3), 289–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1845966>

Wagner-Egelhaaf, M. (2022). Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional. In A. Effe, & H. Lawlor. (Ed.) *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (pp. 21-39). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Wang, M. (2021, April 23). *Caleb Azumah Nelson: "The confrontation with myself enabled me to find a brief freedom."* GUERNICA <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-caleb-azumah-nelson/>

Ward, M. R. M. (2020). Men, masculinities and social class. *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (1st ed., pp. 201–210). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315165165-20>

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & society*, 1(2), 125-151.

Wong, D. (2022). The Poetics of Irony and Anticipatory Shame in Contemporary You-Narration. <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/79999>

Wong, D. (2025). YOU-Narration and Anticipatory Shame in the Millennial Novel. In Bourdeau, L., & Lloyd, C. (Ed.). *The Edinburgh Companion to the Millennial Novel* (pp. 132–149). Edinburgh University Press.

Worthington, M. (2018). *The story of "me": contemporary American autofiction*. University of Nebraska Press.

Zhu, J. (2026). For the "Briefly Gorgeous" Moment: Imagism and Queer Aesthetics in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. *Critique - Bolingbroke Society*, 67(1), 12–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2421324>