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Queer Identity Construction in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's  
*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

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### Abstract

Young Adult Literature has been consistently growing in popularity within recent years for its exploration of various topics such as LGBTQ Identity. Specifically, this canon of literature has begun the inclusive process of portraying minority voices and their navigation of queer identity. In this essay I explore Benjamin Alire Sáenz's young adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Specifically, I explore the novel's main character and narrator Aristotle Mendoza. I move to examine the characteristics of *machismo*, heteronormativity, and internalized homophobia to analyze how Aristotle's identity is at first made up by these characteristics and how he works to move past them in order to create his own queer masculine identity. To show Aristotle's growth I go through the different facets of his identity including his environment, family, emotions, as well as his complex relationship with Dante, the secondary gay male protagonist. By examining Aristotle through queer and cultural lenses I argue that we can see him representing the possibility of being queer, masculine, and a dual minority by pushing past old ways of thinking.

The Young Adult Literature (YAL) genre has been around since the 1950's including some of the firsts such as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as well as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. It was not until the 1960's that the term "young adult literature" was put into use (Cart). Early characteristics of YAL had a heavy focus on books with realistic settings, relatable characters, giving adults anxiety for the "too real" themes that they began to explore (Blakemore). Although the genre has shifted to include realistic fiction to science fiction and fantasy, the deep set themes of the 'coming of age' novel are still present. The YAL genre has grown and constitutes many of the contemporary novels being published. One novel stands out amongst the growing population of YAL, Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Sáenz gives readers a coming of age novel dealing with complex queer identity formation.

Sáenz grapples with the topic of the formation of a gay Mexican-American Identity in *Aristotle and Dante*. By looking at this novel through a queer and cultural lense one can begin to navigate the complex identity formation that becomes apparent with the main character, Aristotle Mendoza. Dante, the other protagonist within the novel, has his own coming of age story and is used as the catalyst for Aristotle, helping to develop Aristotle's queer identity. For the purposes of this essay the focus will be primarily on Aristotle's identity formation and Dante's role in it. This complex formation comes from the internal: domestic life away from society and internalized homophobia as well as the external: *machismo* and societal expectations. Aristotle navigates through these spaces while going from childhood to adulthood. By analyzing Aristotle, we see him representing the possibility of being queer and masculine, pushing past old ways of thinking.

Before we begin it is important to define the terminology that will be used to help understand the complex framework for how *machismo* affects culture, and therefore, how it shapes Aristotle's own queer Mexican-American identity as a result. Three main ideas that will be referenced throughout this essay will be *machismo*, heteronormativity (heterosexuality), and internalized homophobia. These terms will be used to show how they build and structure Aristotle's new identity. *Machismo*, in basic terms, is a man's sense of being "manly." It is often referred to as macho or macho-man. Estrada et al. put it that "machismo is the socially approved way of being a Latino man" (Estrada et al. 358). They go on to discuss *machismo* as an "ailment" in which it created negative effects in men (358). *Machismo* has been found to affect the psychological state of men, causing repressed feelings as well as unorthodox coping methods (Arciniega et al. 21). Arciniega et al. argue *machismo* is the negative attributes of a person's psychology. These negative attributes, I will argue, are harmful to the formation of Aristotle's authentic queer masculine identity. Aristotle is used to show the effects of succumbing to the negative effects of *machismo* as well as showing how one is then able to formulate his own authentic identity. In the case of Aristotle his authentic identity would be one that enables him to push past the negative effects of *machismo*, creating his own masculine identity that is not dictated by a societal standard.

The negative effects of suppressing emotion that *machismo* further develops into Aristotle's internalized homophobia. David M. Frost and Ian H. Meyer define internalized homophobia as "the feeling that one needs to be heterosexual but is conflicted with the attraction to the same sex" (Frost and Meyer 1). Internalized homophobia is the internalization of the feelings of same sex attraction. This creates a conflict with formulating an authentic identity because it reinforces a "fake" standard. The "fake" standard that Aristotle feels obligated to

uphold is *machismo* and heterosexuality. Frost's definition of internalized homophobia correlates to the idea of *machismo* that are provided by Arciniega in the fact that the homosexual identity is forced to be internalized, in this case, because of the standard that *machismo* places on Mexican men. *Machismo* reinforces a heteronormative standard in an aggressive and emotionless way. Heteronormativity is the act in which the assimilation of the accepted heterosexual beliefs as the "normal" function within society are in all social aspects such as falling into the "correct" gender categories of "male/man and female/woman" (Crisp 335). It is a belief in which the default sexual orientation is heterosexuality. Aristotle latches onto these ideas in order to hide his homosexual desire. This establishes a heteronormative standard in which Aristotle believes he needs to live by and forces him to internalize his homosexual feelings creating a sense of internalized homophobia.

Understanding Sáenz's use of place within the novel will lend better insight to Aristotle's queer identity formation. Sáenz sets the novel and the characters in El Paso, Texas which is historically known as a borderland. This borderland setting is important because it presents to the reader that there will be an overlap of two things—in this case the overlapping of a queer and Mexican identity. Gloria Anzaldúa describes her experience as a Mexican-American woman living on the borderlands of South Texas as "living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element" (Anzaldúa Preface). What Anzaldúa acknowledges here is that a borderland identity is one that is shifting, changing, and evolving. This is the conflict that Aristotle begins to face: he is unsure how to effectively navigate these spaces. He is split and trying to find the two worlds to explore his queer identity. Aristotle is split in two ways, he has to navigate going from childhood to adulthood and then within this he must navigate what this means for his masculine

identity. This is where Aristotle must navigate the cultural expectations of *machismo* and his own queer self.

We as the readers gain full access to this exploration through the first person narrative throughout the novel since Aristotle is the book's only narrator. Nic M. Westrate and Kate C. McLean describe the "narration of personal stories as a mechanism for identity development regardless of one's status as marginalized or not; that is narrating one's experiences one comes to understand one's own identity" (Westrate and McLean 226). Aristotle's firsthand account gives access to his identity formation. The entire novel is Aristotle's personal narrative and coming of age story in which he gives readers the access he wants into his mind. The first person narration gives us a very personal, intimate, but also a very limited point of view in that we need to trust Aristotle. With the first person narration we as the reader are able to feel and see his transformation of identity and the control he has to tell it.

From the beginning of the novel Aristotle feels that his life and actions are not dictated by his own accord. He feels that he is being controlled by something larger than himself. This idea is presented twice within the opening of the novel, once alongside the section title and then again on page eight. The section title reads "The Different Rules of Summer: *The Problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea*" (Sáenz 3). This is the first impression that Aristotle gives us as readers from the beginning of the novel, conceptualizing that his life is dictated by someone/something else and does not feel as if he is living an authentic existence. This dictation and loss of control, I argue, is due to the controlling ideas of *machismo* to dictate how he, as a Latino male, is supposed to behave. As a Latino male Aristotle's control under *machismo* means that he is supposed to remain emotionless and hard, suppressing anything that is not heterosexual. Aristotle's self-realization that he has a lack of control gives him agency to make

the changes to regain a sense of control over his life. With this lack of control, he acknowledges that he is not, at first, in control of his identity formation. The construction of Aristotle's identity is at first, as noted, controlled by the aspects of the culture and his family.

Aristotle's parents play a key role in his identity formation. Tomás Almaguer discusses the role of the family within Mexican culture and asserts that "in Mexico the family remains a crucial institution that defines both gender and sexual relations between men and women. The Mexican family remains a bastion of patriarchal privilege for men and a major impediment to women's autonomy outside the private world of the home" (Almaguer 82). Although the novel does not take place in Mexico, it does still reinforce its patriarchal ideologies. Aristotle's family, from the beginning, is where *machismo* is reinforced. It is Aristotle's mother whose autonomy inside the home goes to reinforce her idea of Aristotle's identity. The idea of patriarchal privilege comes in many different forms and for Aristotle novel he is constantly tied to his father who represents the "old" Mexican culture and ideas regarding 'proper' masculinity. This further exhibits the representation of the "patriarchal privilege" that Arciniega discusses. In part one chapter one Aristotle's mother turns around to him at the kitchen table and states "Let me look at you. *Dejame ver. Ay que muchacho tan guapo. Ta pareces a tu papa*" (Sáenz 9). The most literal translation of this passage is "Let me see. Oh what a handsome boy. You look like your dad". By comparing Aristotle to his father, Aristotle's mother is defining her sons gender privileges and in doing so she is upholding the old Mexican patriarchal standard by linking Aristotle's physical appearance to his father. In doing this there is also a sense that the Mexican masculine identity as inherited from one generation to the next. In this there is the representation of a cycle, one in which Aristotle has been caught in. The inherited traits continue throughout the novel with the link between Aristotle's emotional attributes and his fathers. By the forced

inheritance of these comments Aristotle is compelled to internalize his true feelings and begins to accept the correlation to his father. He admits that “[he] wasn’t very good at asking for help, a bad habit that [he] inherited from [his] father” (15). Aristotle acknowledges that the inheritance of attributes from his father, however he notes them as a “bad habit” (15). In this way Aristotle’s identity is being linked back to the negative effects of *machismo* by not asking for help and internalizing his emotions. In this act of realization, we are able to see Aristotle’s attempt in creating his own identity, one that is separated from expectations of family.

Aristotle’s identity is not only formed from his family impressing their ideas about his masculinity but also by his expression of emotion. In part one chapter four we begin to see into what Aristotle believes as a male gender expectation in the form of emotions that men are supposed to display. The first instance that we see this is when Aristotle poses the question “How could a guy live without some meanness?” in which he describes his encounter with the other protagonist Dante who is nice and does not carry many of the traditional masculine attributes that Aristotle is working through (Sáenz 19). We are able to see how Aristotle views masculine identity as one that needs to be mean in order to be considered a real man. With being mean there is the connotation of being aggressively physical. Michael S. Kimmel describes that “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight” (Kimmel 231). Kimmel argues that from adolescents’ masculine identity is bred to believe in violence to assert manliness. This is the same negative connotation that is associated with *machismo*. From early on in the novel the desire to fight and quarrel permeates through Aristotle. In part one chapter twelve there is an altercation where Dante tries to stop a group of boys from killing a bird with a bb gun and after they threaten Dante, Aristotle steps in and states “‘By kicking your skinny little asses all the way to the Mexican border’ We

stood there for a while, sizing each other up” (Sáenz 52). What becomes complicated here is that Aristotle is not defending his own self but rather defends Dante, another male. He is ready to take on Dante’s fight in order to perform his masculinity. There is no physical altercation but rather the readiness to fight another male. Within this performance Aristotle begins to show his true emotions. By standing up for Dante, Aristotle exemplifies a sense of compassion, breaking through the rigid emotionless identity that *machismo* attempts to construct in Aristotle. However, by standing up for another male Aristotle begins to work through his queer identity.

Aristotle continues to perform this rigid masculinity by the way he is emotionless towards Dante’s crying as well as his own lack of feelings towards the dead bird. He reflects on the situation stating that “Dante was crying again. And I felt mean because I didn’t feel like crying. I didn’t really feel anything for the bird... I was harder than Dante. I think I’d tried to hide that hardness from him because I’d wanted him to like me” (54-55). Aristotle’s repression of emotion is where *machismo* becomes more ingrained into his identity. Unlike Dante, Aristotle refuses to cry and not show any weakness at all. The only emotion that he feels is being mean. This refusal to show emotion becomes a point of struggle for Aristotle throughout the novel. This rigidity continues later when Aristotle saves Dante from being run over by a car. In a scene after coming home from the hospital Aristotle tells his mom “You think you and Dad are the only ones who can keep things on the inside? Dad keeps a whole war inside of him. I can keep things on the inside too” (134). Keeping everything locked inside relates back to the “unorthodox coping methods” that Arciniega et. al discuss (Arciniega et al. 21). These negative effects of *machismo* serve as a link to heteronormativity because by Aristotle not allowing himself to externalize his emotions, he is forced to conform to the rigid heterosexual standard for men. This

hinders his own queer masculine identity because he is ultimately conforming to these ideas of internalizing emotions to not look weak, even in the comfort of his own home.

Aristotle begins to notice the disconnect from childhood to adulthood by the way in which he processes emotions. This disconnect in processing emotions stems from the idea that he is beginning to formulate his own identity. This is a place in which he has to navigate that particular borderland of adolescents to adulthood. Aristotle notes that

I knew I wasn't a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there was other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness. And I didn't want to be treated like a boy anymore. I didn't want to live in my parents' world and I didn't have a world of my own (Sáenz 81).

This is a place in which Aristotle is stuck searching for his identity and is split in the transition stages of needing to find out who he is as a male. Aristotle equates being a man to needing to feel “lonely” showing that he should not be feeling other ‘non-masculine’ emotions. By remaining silent Aristotle parodies his father's silences, enacting his father's masculinity instead of creating his own form of masculine identity. However, Aristotle does not like the feeling of being like his father and wants to break away to form his own gay masculine identity. To achieve this, Aristotle goes to his family for assistance in order to help figure himself out. However, Aristotle acknowledges that in order to do this he must begin to break away from the familial and societal expectations that bind him. After discussing with his mother about her identity and how she broke away from her own cultural stereotypes to become an educated woman, Aristotle states that “[he] wanted to ask her, *Mom, when will I know who I am? But I didn't*” (148). In this scene Aristotle reaches out for help internally, wanting a solid answer, for a question he has to

figure out his own. He realizes that she was able to break free and create her own identity which he begins the process of doing. His question remains internal, which is a way that he represses his emotions and reliance on another person. By restraining his emotions Aristotle is keeping his queer identity locked away.

Aristotle's struggle for an authentic identity continues in part four chapter seven when he begins to pursue a relationship with Ileana, a girl from school. With this Aristotle works through his feelings for Ileana through a dream. In the following scene he begins to force himself to recognize that he is denying his queer sexuality and accepting the heterosexual terms society has deemed correct in order to go after Ileana:

That night I had a bad dream. I was driving down a street in my pickup.  
Ileana was sitting right next to me. I looked over and smiled at her. I  
didn't see him, Dante, standing in the middle of the road. I couldn't stop. I  
couldn't stop. When I woke up, I was drenched in sweat (Sáenz 169).

Within this dream Aristotle strives to find a greater truth to his identity. Carl Jung once asserted that "Dreams may give expression to ineluctable truths, to philosophical pronouncement, illusions, wild fantasies, memories, plans, anticipations, irrational experiences... The dream is specifically the utterance of the unconscious" (Jung 12-13). Jung's argument is based around the idea of the unconscious, in this case dreams, giving light to unspoken truths. Aristotle's unspoken truth is admitting and embracing his sexuality. The dream is made up of a lot of layered meaning to unpack. One important layer to unpack is the symbol of the truck, which often represents a sense of freedom for many teens, allowing them a chance to explore the world by themselves without their parents. For Aristotle the truck has become a symbol of his Mexican identity since it is a classic and stereotypical red pickup truck, which Aristotle proclaims in a

letter to Dante “*I got a 1957 Chevy Pickup for my birthday! Lots of chrome. I love the truck. A real Mexican truck, Dante!*” (Sáenz 193). Aristotle connects his Mexican identity to the truck and can be seen as a way in which he can now distance his identity from his parents with the image of “freedom” the truck represents. In order to obtain this image of freedom Aristotle must address that the truck acts as a closet, a term often attributed to those in the Queer community. The “closet” can be used as an adjective referring to individuals in the Queer community that repress their identity and/or have not verbalized their sexuality. In the case of Aristotle, it is a way in which individuals internalize their queer identity and feelings for the opposite gender.

Aristotle’s internalized homophobia is the result of him suppressing his feelings. He runs Dante over with his truck claiming “I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop” showing that there is something forcing him to keep going (Sáenz 169). Aristotle is constantly captivated by Dante’s openness with his emotions, which is everything he forces himself to work against. What complicates this further is when Aristotle runs Dante over because he “looked over and smiled at [Ileana]” the heterosexual distraction for Aristotle (169). In the act of running Dante over with his truck Aristotle reveals his dangerous desire to be heterosexual, trying to kill his gay possibility. Within this passage, Aristotle’s subconscious uses his dreams to inform him that by masking his sexuality with forced heterosexual connections, he is denying his queer identity as a man which will ultimately harm and therefore silence his queer identity. This point in the novel is where Aristotle begins to realize his queer potential as well as understanding the harmful effects of pretending to be heterosexual.

Even though Aristotle is able to see his queer potential in his dreams he finds it hard to verbally admit his feelings of same sex desire. This is linked to the negative effects of *machismo* which then informs Aristotle’s turn to internalized homophobia. This is because *machismo* is a

type of hypermasculinity in which emotions are viewed as being more feminine when shown or verbalized. Aristotle begins the process of disregarding the *machismo* way of looking at emotions through his letter correspondences with Dante. He begins the process of pushing past these hypermasculine views which gives him room to open up to another male, further working through his internalized homophobia. Aristotle understands that he does not write to Dante as often and explains that “*I’m not doing it to upset you, okay? This is my problem. I want other people to tell me how they feel. But I’m not so sure that I want to return the favor. I think I’ll go sit in my truck and think about that*” (194). Aristotle begins to realize and verbalize his inability to connect to others through his emotions. He suggests that he is able to accept Dante’s feelings but it is something that he will have to work for in order to “*return the favor*” and allow others to know how he is feeling (194). This connects to the negative effects of *machismo* because it is how the classic idea of masculinity is constructed. Michael Kimmel states that “our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk...Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language” and he goes on to discuss that people believe that a homosexual male is “very emotional; he shows his feelings” (231). This is a common stereotype that is placed on those who do not fit into heterosexual normalities, such as being emotionless or only displaying crude emotions. Aristotle, throughout most of the novel, has held back his feelings. In this section he acknowledges that he has been enacting this and begins to work through them. In the act of going to “sit in [his] truck and think about that” he returns to the closet in order to process his emotions (Sáenz 194).

Aristotle realizes these intrinsic feelings, starting to understand himself, seeing his queer masculine identity starting to form. On the conscious level Aristotle begins the movement towards connecting with his feelings. In order to be fully able to construct his own authentic

identity Aristotle must begin divorcing himself from the expectations placed on him. This specifically starts with removing the forced connection to his father. During driving lessons with his father, Aristotle analyzes him, talking about how he and his dad are alike but also different in that “maybe my dad just didn’t need words to get by in the world. I wasn’t like that. Well, I *was* like that on the outside, pretending not to need words. But I *wasn’t* like that on the inside” (Sáenz 200). What Aristotle shows us is that he fully recognizes that the similarities between him and his father are more of a performance. The silence that has separated them from the beginning of the novel is a learned and practiced trait, not as inherited as he once believed. On the outside Aristotle performs his masculinity based on his father, beginning to realize that on the inside he is different. He states that “I’d figured something out about myself: on the inside, I wasn’t like my dad at all. On the inside I was more like Dante. That really scared me” (Sáenz 200). We as the reader are able to see Aristotle’s juxtaposition between his external self and internal self. Estrada et al. discuss that *machismo* “has largely been understood as a cultural and social ailment believed to cause violence, alcoholism, and other maladaptive behavior” (Estrada et al. 358). The “maladaptive behavior” that Aristotle mimics is his inability to express his feelings externally and differentiating himself from his father (358). His realization of these differing characteristics is a key moment in which Aristotle works past the cultural ideas of a heterosexual masculine identity and understanding that he is more like Dante. Admitting that “On the inside I was more like Dante” (Sáenz 200) gives us as the reader access into the fact that being like Dante means that he wants to be more expressive with his identity and emotions. At this point in the novel Dante has not fully come out to Aristotle. This can further be linked to the fact that Aristotle being like Dante means that he has begun the process and acknowledge his homosexual identity. Within this section Aristotle leaves the language coded and ambiguous.

One major transition scene within the novel involves heavily coded language in which Aristotle begins to accept his queer identity, pushing past *machismo* as well as attempting to overcome his internalized homophobia. Corrine M. Wickens constructs the argument that “through language and discourse, culture constructs the boundaries that define properly manifested expressions of gender” (Wickens 150). In regards to Aristotle the boundaries that define his proper masculine gender is *machismo*, however he himself begins to police these boundaries when he describes his own coded language. This is where Aristotle's intrinsic self begins to clash, moving away from the boundaries of *machismo* which begins the process of removing his internalized homophobia. The scene that follows shows how this clash of coded language both portrays Aristotle's own internalized homophobia as well as how he formulates the internal feelings to the external through the use of his language.

Wickens asserts that the idea of coded language in LGBTQ communities as a way to talk, express, and be themselves within the normalized culture, stating that “communities often used metaphors or roundabout phrases to discuss themselves” (155). Aristotle uses coded language in the form of a “roundabout phrase” to talk and embrace his sexuality. In part four chapter twenty-two, after his parents go to a wedding, his acquaintance Charlie Escobedo comes to his porch. Aristotle internally describes Charlie as “He was the skinny type. Always looked like a coyote in the middle of a drought. I knew about coyotes. I was way into coyotes” (Sáenz 204). The use of the word “coyote” is coded and used to replace the word “boys.” In depicting Charlie as a coyote, Aristotle strips away the human maleness of Charlie in order to better relate to the idea that he “was way into coyotes” (204). What complicates things is that Aristotle codes the language to himself as internalized dialogue. By coding the language to himself Aristotle further

builds a barrier for his internalized homophobia. He suppresses the male/male attraction by disguising it as “coyotes,” distancing himself from his true queer masculine identity.

The following page in the novel presents verbal dialogue between Charlie and Aristotle after Aristotle refuses to do drugs with Charlie in the desert, ultimately refusing to submit to a cultural stereotype. During the verbal altercation Charlie calls Aristotle a “pinchi joto” which is slang for “fucking faggot” as well as “Mr. Gabacho” which is a slang word used to call someone ‘white’ (205). By using this slang, Charlie is othering Aristotle in that he demeans both his sexuality as well as his ethnicity of being Mexican-American. Estrada et al. discuss the use of Mexican slang by using real patients and shows valuable insight into the *machismo* identity as well as internalized homophobia. The authors assert that “in Latino communities, where the belief exists that being gay is the worst thing a man can do (Mirande, 1997) and where the usage of epithets such as *maricon* (sissy) and *joto* (fag) runs rampant, gay men are tormented with doubt about their masculinity (Diaz, 1997)” (Estrada et al. 359). Charlie’s use of slang terms is his attempt to torment and degrade Aristotle of his masculinity. In this act Charlie is showing his own normalizations of a heteronormative culture that would not accept Aristotle as gay, providing more insight into a collective/group thought. Wickens frames her argument through the ideas of Connell and Plummer when she states that “one of the ways that boys and men have shown to create group, solidarity and establish social dominance, suggested by hegemonic masculinity, is through homophobic insults” (Wickens 159). Charlie is trying to establish his own dominance over Aristotle by demeaning him with Mexican slang terms. Charlie’s pursuit to degrade Aristotle shows his normalizations of a heteronormative culture that would not accept Aristotle as gay, but also allows Aristotle an opportunity to essentially “come out” in defense of himself.

To defend himself Aristotle turns to Charlie and exclaims that “Yeah. I’m gay and I want to kiss you” (Sáenz 205). The internalized coded language that Aristotle used before to define his attraction to Charlie as a “coyote” is now becoming external with no coding at all (204). This verbal proclamation is in defense of his masculinity that Charlie attempts to undermine. Though it is in defense that Aristotle admits he is “gay” and wants to “kiss” Charlie, he is verbalizing the coded truth that happened on the previous page (205). Pascoe discusses the idea of the “Fag Identity” in that she explains the “fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such as powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police their behavior out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it” (Pascoe 210). Pascoe argues that boys will attempt to refute the “fag” identity that is placed on them, much like how Charlie calls Aristotle a “*pinchi joto*” in which he is attributing to him the “fag identity” (Sáenz 205). Where Pascoe discusses that boys will “strive to avoid it” Aristotle embraces this identity in an attempt to push past the conventional heteronormative masculinity that is placed on him through both *machismo* and heterosexual culture. Pascoe’s idea that being placed with the “fag identity” is often due to a male showing a weakness and nonconformity in front of other males, causing him to be labeled as a fag (Pascoe 210). Aristotle is turning around the masculine standard in the fact that he refuses to do drugs with Charlie and embraces his homosexual identity by claiming himself to be gay. In his reclamation of a queer identity Aristotle essentially begins his process of solidifying his queer identity.

With this turn in the novel Aristotle begins to realize his sexual identity. He begins to accept and process the transitional state that he is in. To better understand this, he turns to his

family and specifically his mother for guidance. Aristotle's mother prompts the following discussion:

“Ari, do you know what an ecotone is?”

“It's the terrain where two different ecosystems meet. In an ecotone, the Landscape will contain elements of the two different ecosystems. It's like a natural borderlands.”

“Smart boy. In transition. I don't have to say any more, do I?”

“No mom, you don't. I live in an ecotone...” (Sáenz 238)

These moments with his mother happen in the private sphere of the household, where she has the most control. In this instance, unlike before, she is leading Aristotle to figure out his own identity and guides him to understand where he is in life instead of outright telling him. Earlier in this passage she points out that her son is almost seventeen, creating his own “ecotone” and he begins to describe what exactly an “ecotone” is. He concludes it as a “natural borderland” (238). The word “natural” that Aristotle uses serves as a specific purpose that it is “elements of the two different ecosystems” (238). His mother leads him to the understanding that her son “live[s] in an ecotone” which connects back to the borderland identity discussed earlier. Whereas before Aristotle's mother imposed her own views of how Aristotle's identity should be, here she acts as a catalyst for Aristotle to recognize and claim the transitional state he is in. This transitional state is reinforced with Aristotle's progression in age. Town describes the “idea of body as a ‘threshold’ is particularly useful when describing the adolescent body on the threshold to adulthood” (Town 8). Aristotle fits perfectly within this “threshold” that Town discusses in the idea that he is growing up as well as finding his queer identity. This identity that he begins to create is curated from the cultural expectations of *machismo* placed on him as a Mexican-

American boy along with the heterosexual expectation he places on himself to fit in. The transitional state that Aristotle is facing at this point in the novel is navigating his sexuality, further removing himself from a societal mold. He begins to realize his sexuality, breaking down the barriers keeping him back.

Two largely important scenes in which Aristotle realizes and explores his sexuality are in part five between chapter five and six. Within these scenes Aristotle explores both his queer sexuality as well as his emotional identity. In chapter five Aristotle and Dante are in Dante's room and discuss kissing people and if either one of them has done it before. Specifically, Dante asks Aristotle "how do you know that you don't like kissing boys if you've never kissed one?" (Sáenz 254). By posing this question Dante becomes the first person in the novel to openly question Aristotle's sexuality. At first Aristotle is closed off to the idea of kissing Dante, forcing his homosexuality further inward. After coaxing Dante tells Ari to "stand up" in which the scene begins to unfold:

I don't know why I did it, but I did it. I stood up.

And then he stood right in front of me.

"Close your eyes."

And he kissed me. And I kissed him back.

And then he started really kissing me. And I pulled away. (255)

We are let into Aristotle's thoughts and actions and get a place in which Dante is performing a homosexual act on Aristotle, enacting his sexuality. Dante has taken full control and Aristotle has given this control up willingly. He is guided by his trust for Dante because he completely listens but he does not know why. I argue that this is Aristotle's homosexual identity fighting it's way forward. He, in this instance, begins to let go of his *machismo* tendencies of full control and

hyper masculine behavior, in order to allow his queer potential to show. Not only then does Dante kiss Aristotle but he then “kissed him back,” showing a want to reciprocate (205). Once Dante “started really kissing” Aristotle, does he then return inwards closing himself back off. He admits that the kiss “didn’t work for [him]” as well as going onto say that ““I’m more mad at myself,”” I said. ‘I always let you talk me into things. It’s not your fault’” (255-256). Aristotle strives to reclaim what he feels he lost which is his sense of superiority as a male. I would further argue that Aristotle is confused here and in that confusion feels the need to close himself off. In this scene Aristotle on some level comprehends that he has taken on the passive role for Dante to explore his sexuality.

Taking the passive role in front of Dante comes in chapter six in which Aristotle sets up that it has been a few days since he talked to Dante due to the kiss. In the beginning of the chapter he recognizes his need for Dante and states that “I needed us to be all right. And he needed us to be all right too. And so we were” (257). There is a feeling of reliance on one another within this phrase in that Aristotle admits that he needs them to be “all right” and no longer keep anger towards him (257). This reliance is a progressive point towards Aristotle’s queer identity formation because it exhibits his complete reliance and closeness to another male that is more than friendship. The way he describes it in this sentence brings up images of safety and closeness to Dante that we have not seen up to this point in the novel. Admitting this safety Aristotle is opening up to his emotional identity. He does this later when he and Dante are in the desert he gets out his truck and exclaims ““We need the beer! We need the fucking beer, Dante!’ I don’t know why I was yelling. The yelling. The yelling turned into sobs. I fell into Dante’s arms and cried. He held me and didn’t say a word” (261). Aristotle relies on the image of beer as a coping mechanism to all of the emotions that he has kept internalized. The beer in this instance

is Aristotle reaching for a depressant in order to subdue and avert the breakdown he then has moments later. After realizing there is not beer his “yelling turned into sobs” (261). This is a particularly large moment for Aristotle because he completely gives himself over to Dante willingly. Whereas before Dante seemed to command the scene with the bedroom kiss, Aristotle allows Dante to see him in this weak state. This is a pivotal moment for Aristotle’s queer identity formation because he moves past the rigidness of *machismo* and heterosexual normalities of being emotionless and tough, not only pushing past this but gives himself emotionally over to another male.

Aristotle’s final realization of identity and break away from society comes with his coming out moment. Aristotle himself is too entrenched in keeping a heterosexual performance that he refuses to come to terms with his homosexual desire for Dante. Instead, his parents step in to essentially out him to himself. They sit Aristotle down and his father takes the stage: “‘Ari, the problem isn’t just that Dante’s in love with you. The real problem—for you, anyway—is that you’re in love with him’” (348). The family dynamic for Aristotle has shifted in this passage in that Aristotle’s father verbalizes his son’s sexual identity. This passage serves to reinforce the patriarchal system within the Mexican family that Almaguer discusses as well as move past it. Aristotle’s father enacts his patriarchal control to tell Aristotle who he is and in a sense reverse the negative effects this has had before, these being Aristotle’s forced connection to his father. The act of Aristotle’s father verbalizing his son’s queer identity is important because it represents the old ways giving acceptance to a new form of Mexican-American identity. Annamarie Jagose discusses that “homosexuality was represented as an identity repressed by heterosexist power structures which privileged gender-asymmetry, sexual reproduction and the patriarchal nuclear family” (Jagose 36). Jagose makes a good point in the repression of a homosexual identity by the

nuclear family, which was apparent in the beginning of *Aristotle and Dante*. However, I claim that Aristotle's homosexual identity is not being repressed by the heterosexist power structure that is Aristotle's family, but instead is being aided in allowing Aristotle to not feel as though he has to conform to these old ways of thinking, in which his parents represent. In this case, Aristotle's father takes on the control of being authoritative and telling Aristotle, in a very blunt manner, that he is in love with Dante. It is not until Aristotle's mother steps in does Aristotle begin to process his emotions to a fuller extent.

Aristotle is caught in between identities and is unsure how to properly process his emotions. Up to this point Aristotle has internalized his homosexual feelings as well as his love for Dante. The following passage shows Aristotle's self-expected identity of being *machismo* and heterosexual collide with his true queer identity:

“What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed.”

“Ashamed of what?” my mother said. “Of loving Dante?”

“I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. Mom—  
”

“I know,” she said. “Ophelia taught me some things, you know? All those letters. I've learned some things. And your father's right.”

“I hate myself.” (349).

Instead of fully accepting himself he further denies his feelings. The difference is that Aristotle is not keeping his feelings inside and instead is verbalizing them. He begins to let go of the emotionless attitude that he has had from the beginning of the novel. Frost and Meyer discuss the idea of “The anxiety, shame, and devaluation of LGB people and one's self are inherent to internalized homophobia and are likely to be most overtly manifested in interpersonal

relationships with other LGB individuals” (Frost and Meyer 2). After Aristotle’s parents discuss their acceptance of his identity as a queer male, Aristotle continues his feelings of being ashamed of being gay and loving Dante. He continues to want to suppress his homosexual feelings when he states, ““What am I going to do? I’m so ashamed”” (349). This, I argue, is Aristotle’s internalized homophobia preventing him from accepting his feelings for Dante, and further his queer identity. These feelings are stemmed from the negative effects that the cultural expectations of *machismo* have had on Aristotle. He continues to suppress these romantic feelings for another male because he has come to a point where all of his identities are colliding. In this moment Aristotle has to work through his internalized queer feelings and how they need to come forth. He needs to do this in order to live an authentic existence, one that is separated from society's expectations, as well as away from his family.

In a way Aristotle’s mother admits her role in denying her sons sexual identity with her dialogue about her sister Ophelia, who was a queer woman living with her partner. As a child, Aristotle would visit her often but years go by without seeing her until he has to attend her funeral. By saying “I know” Aristotle’s mother recognizes that she once believed that being homosexual “is not the way things are supposed to be” (349). Corrine Wickens brings up the idea that “In a heteronormative society that *naturally* presumes children are heterosexual until told otherwise, a child’s awareness of a nonnormative sexual identity is denied” (Wickens 156). This idea permeates *Aristotle and Dante* and is pushed back in this passage. The emotional effects of *machismo* and heteronormativity are expectations that Aristotle himself has internalized and began to live his life by. They are reinforced in the familial structure he has been exposed to and by not seeing Ophelia for years he is denied the experience of knowing someone who also had a queer identity. Aristotle’s mother gives way to understanding nothing that her

sister has “taught [her] some things” (349). By admitting this she is telling Aristotle that it is okay to be who he is. Nevertheless, the negative effects that Aristotle has dealt with comes through in the last phrase when he admits that “[he] hates [himself]” which goes back to the ideas that Frost and Meyer discuss that he devalues himself because of his new queer masculine identity. In this moment his feelings are being, in a way, validated because his queer masculine identity has been verbalized as well as been accepted by his parents. In Aristotle’s environment he is being accepted by his heterosexual parents who admit to their shortcomings with Aristotle’s lesbian aunt. This in return is an admittance to their shortcomings with Aristotle. With this reinforcement Aristotle is able to better understand, recognize, and begin the process of accepting his own queer masculine identity.

With the process of accepting his new queer masculine identity Aristotle must also face his love for Dante. At the end of the novel Aristotle picks Dante up in his truck and they drive into the desert. The desert has played a key role within the novel in that it is a place which Aristotle is able to escape and started with Dante, so it only makes sense to end with Dante. Ralph J. Poole asserts that “The desert, for Ari, enhances his sense of existence in the borderlands; here the cultural, social, and personal merge in an environmental space that both encapsulates and transcends his hybrid Chicano identity” (Poole 127). For Aristotle the desert is where he can find peace and above all else his true identity. Poole makes the valid claim that Aristotle has had many of his “firsts” within the desert, in this case however this is not his first Kiss with Dante (127). The desert for Aristotle has formed his own personal ecotone where he has been able to explore different facets of his identity from stargazing with Dante to drinking with high-school friends (127). It acts as a place where he can freely shift between the different spaces in his life and is able to function as a queer male. In the last few pages the desert acts as

no different a space for Aristotle because it is the place in which he is able to completely confirm his queer identity as well as his love for Dante.

After driving into the desert Dante professes that he is mad at Aristotle with the underlying assumptions it is because of the feelings he has for him. Aristotle brings up the last time they kissed and said that it has actually worked for him describing that: “I took him by the shoulders. I looked at him. And he looked at me. ‘You said I wasn’t scared of anything. That’s not true. *You*. That’s what I am afraid of. I’m afraid of you Dante.’ I took a deep breath. ‘Try it again,’ I said. ‘Kiss me’” (Sáenz 358). This fear, I argue, is because Dante is an out queer Mexican-American boy who was not afraid of the societal repercussions of coming out. He was beat up by a gang of boys, but did not return to the closet and remained proud of himself. This is what Aristotle is afraid for, he is afraid to claim this queer masculine identity which would essentially undermine everything he has known and the identity he has masked himself with. Aristotle uses this as another moment to seek some form of validation from someone else, in this case Dante. He does this when he says “‘Try it again,’ I said. ‘Kiss me’” and instead wants Dante to enact the kiss again. Having Dante enact the kiss is a form of suppressing his queer identity because it is being enacted upon Aristotle instead of the other way around.

Dante refuses to kiss Aristotle first unlike the kiss he enacted earlier in the novel. Instead Dante simply states, “‘No. And then he smiled. “*You kiss me*’” (Sáenz 358). Dante denies Aristotle his identity, because Dante realizes it is not his to give to Aristotle. Instead he makes Aristotle work for the kiss and in doing so makes him acknowledge his queer identity as a Mexican male, no longer hiding behind his internalized homophobia and heterosexual masking. This is a place in which Dante is showing Aristotle that accepting emotions is okay through their kiss. Aristotle finally pushes past *machismo*, heterosexuality, and his internalized homophobia to

enact the kiss, “I placed my hand on the back of his neck. I pulled him toward me. And kissed him. And I kissed him. And I kissed him. And I kissed him. And he kept kissing me back” (358). The act of kissing Dante being the one to initiate the kiss forwards my claim that Aristotle finally solidifies his queer masculine identity. Carlson and Linville argue that a kiss “is an intimate, social, and political act in the struggle for recognition” (Carlson and Linville 888). Carlson and Linville are right to discuss the homosexual kiss as these acts, all of which happen in this scene between Aristotle and Dante. Aristotle’s main struggle has been the struggle to accept his own identity as a queer masculine male. However, through the act of kissing Dante he is now assured and no longer struggles for recognition, but rather reveals to himself the he is in fact gay. In this role he takes charge and can be considered the dominant male because he has initiated the kiss. This combines with queer masculinity because it is keeping true to the idea of men being aggressive and dominant. The language that is used to describe the kiss that he “pulled” Dante towards him and that he began to kiss him over and over reveals the very masculine way of taking control (Sáenz 358). In this regard Aristotle still is retaining a bit of societies masculine identity to begin the process of creating his own. Aristotle breaks from the *machismo*, heterosexual, and internalized homophobic views in that he is willing to initiate this kiss between himself and Dante, and with this kiss he solidifies his identity as a queer male.

Upon realizing this, Aristotle reflects on what has happened that has brought him to this point in finding his identity. He admits that “From the minute I’d met Dante, I had fallen in love with him. I just didn’t let myself know it, think it, feel it. My father was right. And it was truly what my mother said. We all fight our own private wars” (358-359). Aristotle combines the interior home life to his identity formation in that he acknowledges his parent’s role in forming his identity as well as get him to accept his queer identity. Aristotle understands the negative

traits that have prevented him from accepting himself when he states that “I didn’t let myself know it, think it, feel it” (359). In being able to admit this to himself Aristotle is taking the steps in accepting his new queer Mexican-American identity. He is able to accept that he has been preventing himself from achieving his true identity and in doing so is able to show one's ability to work past cultural and societal expectations. Through the process of kissing Dante willingly as well as realizing the process he has gone through, Aristotle knows what he has gone through and what has helped to shape his queer identity. Aristotle's private war of fighting the internal struggle of a queer identity formation has come to a point. He is finally able to accept the homosexual desire he has suppressed.

The book ends with Aristotle fully accepting his identity and essentially coming out of the closet. He states that “As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free” (359). It is the act of laying on the truck and exclaiming that he is “free” is when Aristotle is able to truly become free with his sexuality (359). Having this take place within the ecotone of the desert is symbolic of combining and merging of the aspects that have brought Aristotle Mendoza to fully accept his identity as a queer Mexican-American male. The truck no longer represents a repressive closet, but rather as a piece of Aristotle’s Mexican identity as a physical and metaphorical vehicle for freedom. It is symbolic in the fact that he is there with Dante and not alone in the desert, showing that this is a place in which his identity has again collided and merged. His borderland identity has officially been merged in the fact that he accepts himself as a gay Mexican-American boy, but more importantly he accepts himself for who he is: Aristotle Mendoza.

It is this freedom of identity and the formation of a multicultural queer identity that *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* portrays. Aristotle’s identity formation

is complex in that it involves pushing past the old Mexican cultural expectations of *machismo* as well as the heterosexual expectations placed on males from an early age. As a character we as readers are privy to see him battle through these as well as his own internalized homophobia caused by the repression of his true identity and feelings because of the mentioned expectations. Aristotle also reveals the ability to change a family environment to be more inclusive and understanding. We as readers being able to experience this identity formation are able to also get a glimpse into a culture and experience that is not too often represented within the Gay YA genre.

The importance of showing such identity transformed through these YA texts prove as a vehicle for those that need to have an outlet or can find comfort in knowing that they will be able to relate to such a novel. It is the importance of talking about Aristotle and his experience, in which there is the ability to open a discussion for minorities in the LGBTQ community. Aristotle represents a dual minority in that he is Gay as well as Mexican. Portraying a dual minority in YA novels is important because it gives those a voice in which they can relate to as well as feel apart of society beyond what they feel inside. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* presents an authentic coming of age novel, one which helps to influence the current climate of identity formation and the importance for inclusion of everyone.

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