

Navigating Sexual Identity and Trauma: A Reflection on Aristotle and Dante's
journey in *ARISTOTLE AND DANTE DISCOVERS THE SECRETS OF THE
UNIVERSE*

A POST GRADUATE DISSERTATION



Submitted to

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BODOLAND UNIVERSITY, RANGALIKATA, KOKRAJHAR.

Submitted By: Bele Rani Narzary

Roll No: PGENG408A22005

Registration No:018064/2019-20

Supervisor: Dr Zothanchhingi Khiangte

DECLARATION

I assure that this dissertation title Navigating Sexual Identity and Trauma: A Reflection on Aristotle and Dante's journey in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* submitted for the degree of M.A at Bodoland University is entirely my own work, except for acknowledged contributions, and has not been presented for any other academic or other professional qualification.

I have properly cited all sources of information utilized in the preparation of this dissertation. Contributions from other individuals or institutions have been appropriately acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

Bele Rani Narzary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I owe a lot to my respected guide Dr Zothanchhingi Khiangte who enabled and encouraged me to carry out this dissertation. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Pratusha Bhowmik for her excellent guidance.

In the end I would like to thank my fellow students for their valuable assistance and support in different possible ways to complete the preparation of the dissertation. I am also highly thankful to my parents for their moral as well as financial support to carry out this research work.

Bele Rani Narzary

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS	Pages
1. Declaration	2
2. Certificate	
3. Acknowledgement	3
4. Abstract	5-6
5. Chapter	
1.1 Introduction	6-12
1.2 Literary Review	12-13
1.3 Research Methodology	13-15
1.4 Aims and Objectives	15-16
6. Chapter-2 "I don't think I'm so normal": Vulnerability, Masculinity, Homophobia and Heteronormativity	17-33
7. Chapter-3 "Sometimes I think my father has all these scars. On his heart. In his head. All over.": Silence and Trauma.	34-40
8. Chapter-4 Conclusion	40-44
9. Work cited	45-48

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Benjamin Alire Sàenz's coming of age novel *ARISTOTLE AND DANTE DISCOVERS THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE*. The young adult book, which was first released in 2012, follows the tale of two Mexican American youths living in El Paso named Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza and Dante Quintana. The growing bond between the two characters allow them to delve into themes of family, culture, trauma and sexual identity. Mainly I focus on the novel's main character and the narrator Aristotle Mendoza. This study examines the themes of vulnerability, self- acceptance and masculinity by delving into Ari's internal journey and his interactions with Dante. This paper also seeks to demonstrate how connections with others can facilitate the confrontation and subsequent overcoming of trauma experienced by the protagonists in this young adult coming-of-age novel. Additionally, it will also explore how factors such as sexuality, race, and the severity of trauma endured influence the protagonists' healing journey. I then look at the traits of homophobia, heteronormativity, and masculinity, to analyze how Aristotle's identity is first shaped by these traits and how he strives to overcome them to forge his own queer masculine identity. This paper examines how masculinity is depicted in modern young adult literature through the analysis of the characters in *ARISTOTLE AND DANTE DISCOVERS THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE*. To illustrate Aristotle's development, I examine various aspects of identity such as his surroundings, family dynamics, feeling and his intricate connection with Dante, the other gay male protagonist. Through an analysis of Aristotle from queer and cultural perspectives, I maintain that he can be viewed as embodying the potential of being both queer and masculine, as well as a dual minority, by challenging. This study will help to help to explore the connection between two queer teenagers who felt like outsiders until they discovered each other.

Keywords: Young adult, Coming out, Homosexuality, Teenagers, Family, Ethnicity, Masculinity and Trauma.

Chapter: 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Young Adult Literature (YAL), has existed since the 1950s, with notable early works like J.D Salinger's *Catcher in the Eye* and William Goulding's *Lord of the Flies* being among the first in this genre. The term "Young Adult Literature" was first used in the 1960s. While the genre has shifted from realistic fiction to science fiction and fantasy, the core themes of a 'coming of age' story still persist. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sàenz's stands out among the explosive of YAL novels.

Reviews for *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* were largely positive from the moment of its release. Initially released in 2012, the book has quickly been recognized as a standout narrative of coming of age experience for queer individuals, particularly queer Latinx individual who are underrepresented in popular culture. Critics have praised *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and the author has received numerous awards like Stonewall Book Award for LGBT Fiction (2013), the Lambda Literary Award, the Michael

L. Printz Award (2013) the Pura Belpré Award and Young Adult Literature (2013) and a finalist for the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award. *The Horn Book Magazine* praised how it “skillfully develop[ed] the relationship between the two boys from friendship to romance” (Hunt 120). Equivalently, *Publisher’s Weekly* described the story as “a tender, honest exploration of identity and sexuality” (54).

An investigation of Sàenz’s inspirations for writing *Aristotle and Dante* highlights the conflicts that arise while reading a historical account that touches in issues that are relevant to modern people. At fifty-four years Sàenz’s came out as gay. It took him decades to accept his sexual orientation, and he wanted to write a book for young readers that addressed the intricacies of being gay in the context of Southern United States in the 1980s. This act served as the author’s coming out process in many respects: “I was more than a little afraid of writing the novel because I didn’t feel comfortable coming out in the literary world in such a public manner. I almost told myself to ‘forget it’” (qtd. in R.J. Rodríguez 258). In spite of these reservations Sàenz’s *Aristotle and Dante* was published in 2012. In a way Sàenz’s endeavor to heal the wounds caused by his own “backward birth” was akin to that of *Aristotle and Dante* – a term coined by Kathryn Bond Stockton to characterize the gay kid who is “born” through retrospect. Because this YA book was written with the intention of healing, it is important to analyse how the historical portrayal of gay Latinx youth in it promotes a process of reparation.

In *Aristotle and Dante*, Sàenz addresses the subject of how a gay Mexican American identity is formed. Through the queer and cultural perspective, one can begin to explore the intricate process of identity construction revealed in the story of Aristotle Mendoza, the primary character. The novel’s other protagonist Dante also has his own coming of age tale. He serves as a catalyst for Aristotle’s development of queer identity. This dissertation will mainly focus on Aristotle’s process of identity creation and Dante’s contribution to 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.” (Frank Ur fur@arcadia.edu)

The principles of heteronormativity, internalized homophobia, and masculinity will be emphasized throughout this paper. Protagonist of this novel Aristotle Mendoza’s new identity will be constructed using these terms. In addition to repressed feelings and unorthodox copying techniques, machismo affects the psychological state of men (Arciniega et al. 21). According to Arciniega et al machismo is a person’s negative psychological traits. My argument is that these negative attributes prevent Aristotle from forming an authentic homosexual masculine identity. In Aristotle’s instance, an authentic identity would be the one that allows him to overcome the detrimental consequences of machismo and forge his own masculine identity that is not prescribed by social standard.

We shall examine identity in more detail as it relates to discovering one's sexual identity. By definition, identity is a person's unique personality or character, according to Merriam-Webster. The current notion of dignity, pride, or honor is identity, which connects these ideas to social characteristics in an indirect way. Identity provides us with a sense of self, enabling us to interact with others and our environment. Identity establishes our differences from others who do not hold similar positions as well as our similarities to those who do. The concept of identity has long been central to the social and behavioural sciences. This concept has multiple origins since it was created to explain human intellect and behaviour in a cross-disciplinary manner. In psychology, identity has traditionally been seen as essential to one's self-concept, providing significance to individuals and their self-perceptions. Sociology defines identity as the social roles individuals occupy, contributing to how their social standing influences their self-perception. Through communication and social behaviour, individuals express their identities, which not only shape their personal definition but also mirror societal norms and connections.

Moreover, social behaviour is an outcome of identity expressed through communication (Jung and Hecht, 2004).

In the novel, the readers are provided with a comprehensive insight into this exploration through the exclusive use of a first-person narrative, as Aristotle serves as the sole narrator. This narrative perspective allows readers to intimately engage with the character's journey of self-discovery and the complexities of identity formation. 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 narrative provides insight into the construction of his identity. Aristotle offers readers as much access as he desires into his thoughts throughout the entire book, which is essentially his coming-of-age and personal tale. We are given a very limited perspective by the first-person narrative as we have to put our faith in Aristotle, which makes it incredibly intimate and personal. As readers, we are able to experience and see his identity shift and the authority he has over the story because of the first-person narrative.

When talking about the idea of sexual identity, queer theory should be brought up. The scientifically false notion that heterosexuality and cisgenderness are the sole inherent human characteristics is subverted by queer theory, which examines sex, gender, sexuality, and all associated subjects: “Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose 3). Gender and sexuality, according to queer theory, are not as binary, unchanging, or monolithic as they may appear. It encourages discussion and investigation of all the options and how they may affect a person's sense of self. Queer theory examines whether a strictly cisgender and heterosexual identity can continue to exist in society and the natural world on a scientific and cultural level. It's also

crucial to note that, despite several linguistic and numerical modifications, the term "queer" is now used to refer to gay, lesbian, transgender, and other members of the LGBT community. ("List of LGBTQ+ terms").

Butler (2007) suggests that identity is essentially an illusion created by our physical appearance, highlighting the role of stabilizing concepts such as sex, gender, and sexuality in shaping what we perceive as our identity. The concept of the "personal" is challenged by the cultural emergence of individuals who do not fit neatly into traditional gender categories. These individuals are perceived as "incoherent" or "disconnected" gender beings because they deviate from the established gender norms that define how people are traditionally understood in culture. These individuals construct their identities by striving to create consistency and continuity across various aspects of their lives, including their biological sex, gender identity, sexual activities, and desires. They achieve this by reflecting on their self-image and understanding themselves through specific experience.

Although Aristotle and Dante's portrayal of a gay coming-of-age story has drawn praise and criticism for its "utopian dimensions," Angel Daniel Matos makes a strong case that "the novel offers a reparative representation of the past that nonetheless channels the historical resonances of violence and cultural hurt that continue to haunt people today" (49). When Dante enters Ari's life, the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery that extends beyond questioning his sexual orientation. Dante's presence prompts Ari to confront and process past traumas, fostering a path towards healing and self-acceptance. For this paper I also choose to analyse Sàenz's representation of PTSD in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* through Ari and his father Jamie. Ari due to his traumatic experiences develop PTSD. Ari has introverted personality and frequently engages in internal monologues.

These monologues are rife with inquiries concerning his terrible isolation and his failure to make connection with the outside world. His incapacity to interact with others impedes the formation of his identity. Irwin (5) discusses the value of identity during adolescence and emphasizes the necessity for trauma survivors to process their experiences in order to develop a healthy identity later in life. As a result, in order to mature and assimilate into society, Ari must make peace with his past. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the interpersonal relationships of the protagonist play a crucial role in aiding him to confront and navigate traumatic experiences. By engaging with others, Ari is able to embark on a journey of healing and self-discovery, ultimately reaching a point of maturity and growth. By forming relationships with others, Ari will confront and get past his painful pasts. The analysis of the novel is structured in two primary sections: the first section deals with construction of sexual identity, masculinity, vulnerability, and heteronormativity within the novel and the second section deals with trauma and family relationship within the novel.

In the book, literary works also function as tools for mending relationships. Ari and his father have an extremely difficult connection because they are both introverted individuals who struggle with effective communication. Reading emerges as a means a pivotal activity for Ari and his father to bond:

He tried to talk to me but it wasn't working. He pretty much just sat there.

That made me crazy. I got this idea into my head.

"Dante left two books," I said. "Which one do you want to read?"

"I'll read the other." He choose War and Peace. The Grapes of Wrath was fine

with me. It wasn't so bad, me and my father sitting in a hospital room. Reading (Sàenz 135).

This passage demonstrates how much Ari and his father want to connect, but because they are such closed-off individuals, their attempts to do so are not very successful. Hence, Ari proposes that reading could serve as a pathway for them to connect, given their shared love for reading. There's no explanation for why Dante handed him this particular book, but it's safe to assume that Ari's father picked *War and Peace* since he is a war veteran and finds the plot interesting. This could be interpreted as the use of the concept allusion. Maybe "peace" relates to what they both hope can be achieved in the relationship, while "war" is about Jaime's veteran status and the current situation of the relationship. It eventually turns into a custom amongst them: "My father decided he would read everything that I read. Maybe that was our way of talking" (Sáenz 141). In essence, literature becomes a bridge between father and son, filling the void where verbal communication falls short. Unable to find common ground in their daily conversations, they turn to literature as a means of understanding each other's interests and thoughts.

1.2 Literary Review

Frank Ur in his article *Queer Identity Construction in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* states that Aristotle's portrayal as a dual minority—being both Gay and Mexican—holds profound significance within YA literature. His intersectionality is crucial in YA literature as it reflects the nuanced experiences of real-life individuals who navigate multiple layers of marginalization. Within these narratives, characters like Aristotle emerge as essential figures, representing not only personal struggles but also broader societal conversations, especially pertinent within the LGBTQ community. Through

their stories, YA literature becomes a powerful tool for social change, inspiring readers to embrace diversity, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for inclusivity and acceptance.

In numerous contemporary Latinx children's and young adult literature, art emerges as a vehicle for protagonists to exemplify resilience and healing. While the connection between creative expression and trauma recovery is palpable in many of the works *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* shed light on the constraints of this healing. In this piece, there's a gap between generations that shapes the limits of recovery: the youth, equipped with their creative abilities, navigate through trauma using their artistry, while the older generation struggles to overcome their inner struggles. Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez contends that the central characters young Latinas, “creativity is born out of trauma and oppression and therefore functions as more than self-expression; instead, [their] creativity forges a path toward healing that impacts them and their communities”. Similarly to Rodríguez, Tiffany Ana López, Phillip Serrato, Adrianna M. Santos, Trevor Boffone, and Cristina Herrera have also observed the therapeutic elements of artistic expression in narratives featuring Latinx youth.

Julia's books in her review characterizes *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* as a narrative centred on journey of maturation, encapsulating both its tribulations and revelations. It suggest the novel as a beneficial read for youngsters grappling with emotional ambiguity surrounding parental dynamics, familial bonds, companionship and existential navigation.

1.3 Methodology

This paper explores the themes of Sexual Identity and Self-discovery within the novel “*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*” by Benjamin Alire Sàenz’s. Because the data in this study are not quantifiable, it falls under the category of qualitative research. I collected original data in the form of words, phrases, and sentences from Benjamin Alire Sàenz's 2012 Simon & Schuster BFYR book *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Journal articles and theses will be the sources of the secondary data used to support the analysis on the internet.

This study utilizes queer theory as a fundamental framework to investigate the development of queer identity in a novel. By drawing on the ideas of prominent scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ur Frank, Michelle Ann, Putri Manarina and Sabila the research aims to challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality and explore the intricate and dynamic nature of queer experiences. Additionally, the study incorporates an intersectional approach to examine how various aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, class, and gender, intersect and influence the characters' experiences of queerness. By analysing these intersections, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and multifaceted processes involved in the formation of queer identities.

The query concerns the classification and analysis of sexual identity in novel through the narrative journey of main characters. It proposes two primary classifications: the struggle of main characters to discover their true sexual identity and the denial or acceptance of their identity by themselves and those around them. The query suggests that a detailed analysis of the discourse constructed in the novel can provide insight into the main characters' journey and contextual conditions such as historical and social situations. This analysis can help in providing more accurate data for understanding the sexual identity of the main character.

Trauma studies serve as a lens through which to explore the formation of the characters' identities and relationships in the novel. Additionally, it involves investigating themes of healing and resilience, analyzing narrative structure and symbolism, considering intersectionality, and critically engaging with the text while being mindful of ethical considerations. Through this approach, a deeper understanding of the characters' psychological journeys and the novel's exploration of trauma and healing can be achieved.

1.4 Aims and

This proposal aims to explore the depths of Ari's emotional landscape, highlighting the challenges, doubts and momentous acceptance that he has faced along the journey. The purpose of this study is to analyse the narrative complexities surrounding Ari's exploration of his sexuality and the dynamics of his friendship with Dante and his relationship with his parents in order to illustrate not only the personal experiences of the characters but also larger societal constructs and challenges faced by individuals in their quest for self-acceptance.

My goal in conducting this research is to provide light on how young adult literature depicts sexual identity and to encourage conversations about diversity, representation, and the value of narrative. By dissecting the intricacies of Ari's self-discovery, I hope to expose the novel's significance in addressing identity, cultural attitudes and the human need to know and embrace one's own self.

I also examine the family dynamics, notably comparing Ari's strained familial ties with Dante's nurturing and understanding family. Ari's father, a Vietnam War veteran grappling with PTSD, and Ari's older brother, incarcerated and rarely acknowledged.

Ultimately, this proposal seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis that acknowledges the importance of sexual identity research and inclusion in literature. Through scholarly research, it hopes to highlight the novels significant contribution to the discussion on sexual identity, self-discovery and the complexities of adolescent identity formation.

Objectives:

Character analysis: Highlights Aristotle and Dante's individual path toward discovering and embracing their sexual identities. Analyses their relationships, behaviours, actions and ideas within this framework.

Themes of Acceptance and Self Discovery and Trauma: Examine how the book addresses the concepts of Authenticity, Self -Discovery, and Acceptance in regard to sexual identity.

Trauma and Internalized Homophobia: Ari has both internalized homophobia and a dread of being viewed as feeble. His inability to communicate his feelings and build intimate connections is a result of this internalized trauma.

PTSD and Trauma: The repercussions of trauma and PTSD on people are discussed in the book, with special attention to Ari's father. This novel demonstrate the impact trauma may have on relationships and mental health.

Recovery via interpersonal bonds: The story places a strong emphasis on how crucial human connection is to getting over trauma. Ari finds comfort and stability in Dante's companionship and sexual relationship, which aid in his emotional processing.

Examines the impact of trauma, familial, toxic masculinity, culture and individual influences on the characters journeys to accepting their sexual identities.

Chapter-2 “I don’t think I’m so normal”: Vulnerability, Masculinity, Homophobia and Heteronormativity.

The reader is given an encounter with masculinity as it is portrayed in Sàenz’s book through Ari, the narrator and the protagonist. This section offers a thorough analysis of the novel’s portrayal of masculinity by focusing on a number of male characters in Ari’s life in addition to Ari. Among these figures are Ari’s father, Dante, Dante’s father and Ari’s brother. Sàenz depicts the conflict gay males have in the book between wanting to accept their feelings and sexuality and their fear of being feminized. Ari first displays a stereotypically masculine reluctance to express his feelings, embrace his sexuality, and show affection. Additionally, there can be broader allusions to masculinity made by other characters in the book.

In his book *Masculinities*, RW Connell a prominent researcher on masculinity claims that masculinity is “not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced” (67) but requires “an account of the larger structure and how masculinities are located in it” (67).” According to Connell, “‘masculinity,’ to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell, *Masculinities* 71). However, ideas of masculinity have traditionally provided varying perspectives on the matter, making it difficult to define masculinity in precise terms.

As a result of growing public awareness of the limitations of traditional masculinity, masculinities are becoming more cognizant of minorities, and Sàenz may have included some of these themes in his book. More often than any other community, same sex sexual orientation has been reported to be stigmatized in the US Latinx setting (Ramirez- Valles 303). Frank Ur

explores the representation of masculinity in Sàenz's novel, focusing on the concept of machismo, which is culturally accepted way of demonstrating manliness in Latino communities (4) comparable to hegemonic masculinity. These readings suggest that Sàenz's novel is highly influential in offering perspectives on both ethnocultural and modern portrayals of masculinities.

Ari is portrayed early in the text, as someone who is confronted with a dominant atmosphere. Aristotle senses from the outset of the book that his actions and way of living are not determined by himself. There is something bigger than him that he feels is in control of him. This concept is mentioned twice at the start of the novel, first in the section title and then reiterated on page eight: The title of the section is "The Different Rules of Summer: The Problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea" (Sàenz 3). I contend that the imposition of strict gender norms and expectations, often associated with masculinity, is responsible for the loss of autonomy and control experienced by Latino men like him. Aristotle, as a Latino male, is expected to conform to the rigid ideals of machismo, requiring him to maintain stoic and heterosexual façade, while suppressing any non-heteronormative emotions and behaviour. Initially he acknowledged that he is not in charge of constructing his identity, as a result of this lack of control. It is initially observed that Aristotle's identity is shaped by the elements of his family and culture.

Ari feels uneasy about not fitting in as a boy and notices the differences between himself and other boys. Overhearing two males make crude jokes about how "A girl is like a tree covered with leaves. You just want to climb up and tear all those leaves off" (Sàenz 16) gets Ari to think "See, the thing about guys is that I didn't really care to be around them. I mean, guys really made me uncomfortable. I don't know why, not exactly. I just, I don't know, I just didn't belong. I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy. And it really depressed me that there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes"

(Sàenz 16). This passage makes Ari's insecurity quite clear. Though that may seem like an innocent enough concept, it's possible that Ari is trying to rationalize his feelings for guys, which go beyond platonic; perhaps it's easier to avoid having the same sex completely than it is to deal with the fact that he is gay.

Aristotle's parents have an important part in shaping his identity. Tomas Almaguer addresses the function of the family in Mexican society, claiming 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). Patriarchal privilege manifest in various ways, and for Aristotle, it is closely associated with his father, who embodies traditional Mexican cultural norms and definitions of masculinity. This demonstrates the "patriarchal privilege" Arciniega discusses. At the kitchen table in Part I Chapter I Aristotle's mother turns to face him and says "Dejame ver. Ay que muchacho tan guapo. Ta pareces a tu papa" (Sàenz 9) This passage's most accurate translation is "Let me see. Oh what a handsome boy. You look like your dad". By equating Aristotle's physical attributes with his father, Aristotle's mother is maintaining the traditional Mexican patriarchal norm while also establishing her son's gender privileges. This also gives rise to the idea that the Mexican masculine identity is passed down from generation to generation. Aristotle admits that "[he] wasn't very good at asking for help, a bad habit that [he] inherited from [his] father" (15). Aristotle admits that he inherited certain traits from his father but he refers to them as "bad habit" (15). By refusing assistance and internalizing his feelings, Aristotle identity is thus connected to the detrimental repercussions of masculinity.

Sàenz suggest that for men to find meaningful relationships, they must embrace vulnerability. This theme of vulnerability is central to numerous characters in novel. For Ari the concept of friendship and belonging is intertwined with ideas of masculinity and maturity. The quest for

connection is essential for both boyhood and manhood fulfilment, as expressed by Ari: “I was a chair. I felt sadder than I’d ever felt. I knew I wasn’t a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there were other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness” (p. 81).

Ari sees his loneliness as a part of his journey toward maturity feeling the pressure to become “a man”. He never felt like he belonged among boys. When discussing other boys who view a female pool guard in a purely sexual manner he expresses: “...but I always kept my distance from the other boys. I never ever felt like I was a part of their world. Boys. I watched them. Studied them. In the end, I didn’t find most of the guys that surrounded me very interesting. In fact, I was pretty disgusted” (p. 22). As Ari seeks to overcome his loneliness, he voices valid concerns that challenge the sense of community he shares with other boys. His deepest vulnerability and fear revolve around the prospect of loneliness, “I wanted to tell her the same thing I wanted to tell Gina Navarro. *Nobody knows me*.... Being on the verge of seventeen could be harsh and painful and confusing” (p. 238).

Sáenz novel delves into the dynamics between fathers and sons, shedding light into the portrayal of masculinity among adult characters. Contemporary academic discourse challenges the notion that fathers play a crucial role in shaping their son’s masculinity, insofar as “fathers are expected to model, encourage, and even demand masculinity in their sons,” has been largely discredited (Levant et al 325). Considering recent discoveries, Levant et al have consequently concluded “that fathers are an important source of boys’ masculine gender role socialization” (325) and influence whether their sons embrace traditional or more adaptable and diverse masculine (325-26). Ari encounters difficulty in forming a connection with his reticent father, Mr Mendoza “He didn’t give lectures. Not real ones. Which pissed me off. He wasn’t a mean guy. And he didn’t have a bad temper. He spoke in short sentences [...] How was I supposed to know him when he didn’t let me? I hated that” (Sáenz 23). Both characters are yearning for a

deeper bond, hindered by their individual shortcomings and misunderstandings. Ari expresses, “Why could not he just talk? How was I supposed to know him when he did not let me? I hated that” (p. 23). Before they could embark on the journey of healing and seeking connection, both Ari and his father had to disclose emotional traumas to each other. For Ari understanding his father is essential to understanding himself, which is unsurprising given the common transmission of masculinity across generations. The narrative also offers insight into how upbringing shapes male character’s behaviour. Ari frequently reflects on his limited knowledge of his father, choosing observation over direct conversation, “Someday all the clues would come together. And I would solve the mystery of my father” (Sáenz 37). In that regard, Ur has highlighted that Ari “is constantly tied to his father who represents the ‘old’ Mexican culture and ideas regarding ‘proper’ masculinity” (7), that refers to hegemonic masculinity and aspect of machismo. Their mutual experience of recurring nightmare symbolizes a mutual emotional trauma. By opening up to each other about their intimate vulnerability, their relationship became viable. Their conversation about their dreams illustrates a deep intimate longing for connections. After Ari’s father enquires about Ari’s nightmares, the two engage in a short heartfelt talk:

“Are you always lost?”

“In most of them, yeah.”

“And are you always trying to find me?”

“Mostly I think I’m trying to find me, Dad.”

[...]

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I’m so far away.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“No,” he said. “No, it’s not.”

[...]

“I have bad dreams too, Ari.”

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

All I did was smile at him. He’d told me something about himself. I was happy. (Sáenz 65-66).

Following this conversation both Ari and his father begin to experience what can be described as “the liberating power of connection,” as highlighted in one of the key chapters of Adams and Frauenheim’s book on redefining masculinity (113). Through this dialogue Ari and his father exhibit emotional vulnerability and bravery by engaging in a form of positive intimacy, where men share inner struggles or uncertainties with each other, leading to the formation of deep and fulfilling connections that address emotional voids (Adams and Frauenheim 119). Overall, their bonding represents another example of how the novel advocates for healthy expressions of masculinity.

The fulfilment of their relationship and their mutual exploration starts when they open up and share their vulnerabilities with each other. The potential of vulnerability is further exemplified during a lengthy drive, where the two characters disclose ongoing personal and emotional challenges within their relationship and their self-perception.

“I’m sorry about last night,” I said. “It’s just that sometimes I have things running around inside me, these feelings. I don’t always know what to do with them. That probably doesn’t make any sense.”

“It sounds normal, Ari.”

“I don’t think I’m so normal.”

“Feeling is normal.” (p. 280)

Alongside Ari’s candid discussion with his father about his personal life their newfound willingness to communicate authentically and trustingly initiates the process of breaking the silence surrounding Bernardo, Ari’s incarcerated brother (p.283). Moreover, Ari’s father begins to heal from his wartime traumas after sharing more about his past and Ari(p.347). Thus this narrative arc presents a fresh and captivating storyline, advocating that boys and men should not suppress their feeling for others but instead openly converse and address emotional wounds together.

In Part 1 Chapter 4 we glimpse into Aristotle’s perception of male gender norms concerning the expressions of emotions. The first instance of this is when Aristotle questions “How could a guy live without some meanness recounting his interactions with Dante, who lacks many traditional masculine traits Aristotle is grappling with (Sàenz19). It suggests that Aristotle associate masculine identity with a certain level of aggression and physicality, commonly linked with meanness. Michael S. Kimmel depicts “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight” (Kimmel 231). He argues that violence serves as a prominent indicator of manhood, not necessarily in the act itself, but in the readiness and willingness to engage in conflict (Kimmel). This indication towards violence is reminiscent of the negative connotations associated with masculinity.

Early in the novel, Aristotle’s desire to fight and confront is evident. In Part One Chapter 12, an altercation arises when Dante intervenes to stop a group of boys from harming a bird with bb gun. Aristotle intervenes than says ‘By kicking your skinny little asses all the way to the Mexican border’ We stood there for a while, sizing each other up” (Sàenz 52). Complicating matter is the fact that Aristotle is defending Dante, a guy rather than himself. He is prepared to

engage in combat with Dante in order to demonstrate his manhood. Instead of physical altercation, there is a willingness to battle another man. By defending Dante, Aristotle transcends the stiff, impersonal persona that masculinity tries to impose on him and instead demonstrates sympathy. But while defending a fellow man, Aristotle explores his own queer identity.

Aristotle again perpetuates rigid masculinity through his emotional detachment, evident in his unresponsiveness to Dante's tears and his lack of empathy towards the dead bird. Reflecting on the situation he admits, "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 suppression of emotion deepens the roots of masculinity in his character. Unlike Dante he refuses to vulnerability by withholding tears, only acknowledging a sense of meanness. This emotional restraint becomes a persistent struggle for Aristotle throughout the narrative. His rigidity is further exemplified when he saves Dante from a car accident. Returning from the hospital, Aristotle confronts his mother saying, "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). This inclination to internalize emotions aligns with the "unorthodox coping methods" that Arciniega et. al discuss (Arciniega et al. 21). The adverse effects of masculinity underscore its connection to the heteronormativity. By suppressing his emotions, Aristotle conforms to the heterosexual male standard, hindering his own exploration of a queer masculine identity. This conformity the notion of internalized emotions to avoid appearing weak confines him within the sanctuary to his own home.

Sàenz delves into themes of vulnerability, self-acceptance, and masculinity through Ari's introspection and his bond with Dante. Throughout Ari's journey towards connection and

fulfilment, numerous barriers crumble leading him to confront and embrace his romantic sentiments for Dante. As they initially acquaint themselves, Ari finds solace in Dante's presence, "Dante. I really liked him. I really, really liked him" (p. 35). As Ari and Dante revel in the delight of their companionship and shared activities, and Dante's inner contentment stemming from self-acceptance contrasts sharply with Ari's inner turmoil and self-denial. While Ari admires Dante's ability to embrace himself fully, he also grapples with feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing, unable to extend that same compassion and acceptance towards himself, "Until Dante, being with other people was the hardest thing in the world for me. But Dante made talking, living, and feeling seem like all those things were perfectly natural. Not in my world. They were not" (p. 31).

Aristotle observes that, "I knew I wasn't a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there were 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). In this place, Aristotle is caught in the process of figuring out who he is as a man and is stuck trying to find his identity. Aristotle suggest that man should not experience other "non- masculine" emotions by equating being a man with the necessity to feel "lonely". Remaining silent, Aristotle unwittingly mimics his father's reticence, embodying a form of masculinity inherited rather than self-fashioned. Discomforted by the resemblance to his father, Aristotle yearns to carve out his own gay masculine masculinity. Seeking guidance, he turns to his family for support in navigating this journey of self-discovery. However, Aristotle recognizes the necessity of breaking free from the familial and societal norms that constrain him. Following a poignant conversation with his mother about her own defiance of cultural stereotypes to pursue education, Aristotle refrains from voicing his innermost query: "[he] wanted to ask her, Mom, when will I know who I am? But I didn't" (148). Realising his mother's ability to emancipate

herself and shape her own identity serves as inspiration for Aristotle to embark on a similar journey. He initiates the process of self-discovery, recognizing the need to liberate himself from societal constraints. However, his internal questioning reflects a reluctance to fully confront his emotions and rely on external guidance. By keeping his inquiries confined within, Aristotle inadvertently suppresses his emotions, consequently keeping his queer identity concealed and inaccessible.

In a pivotal scene within the novel, Aristotle grapples with heavily coded language as he starts to embrace his queer identity, challenging the constraints of masculinity and confronting his internalized homophobia. Corrine M. Wickens argues that “through language and discourse, culture constructs the boundaries that define properly manifested expressions of gender” (Wickens 150). For Aristotle these boundaries are defined by masculinity, yet he begins to police them himself as he reflects on his own coded language. This internal conflict marks a departure from the confines of masculinity, initiating a process of dismantling his internalized homophobia. Subsequently, the ensuing scene illustrates how this clash of coded language not only reflects Aristotle’s internal struggles of homophobia but also how he translates these internal sentiments to external expression through language.

Pascoe argues that boys typically strive to distance themselves from the “fag” identity imposed on them, akin to how Charlie derogatorily labels Aristotle a “pinchi joto,” attributing to him the “fag identity” (Sàenz 2005). Aristotle adopts this identity in an effort to overcome the traditional heteronormative masculinity that is imposed on him by both macho and heterosexual culture, where Pascoe talks about how “boys will strive to avoid it”. Pascoe posits that being associated with “fag identity” often arises when a male displays vulnerability and nonconformity among peers, leading to the imposition of this derogatory label (Pascoe 210). Aristotle, however, subverts traditional masculinity by rejecting Charlie’s invitation to engage

in drug use and boldly affirming his homosexual identity by openly declaring himself as gay. Through this act of reclamation, Aristotle initiates the process of affirming and consolidating his queer identity.

When Ari starts to see and appreciate who he is, he at last achieves contentment. His impotence after the accident is hard to comprehend. According to Ari, "I hated that my parents were so patient with me. I did. That's the truth. They didn't do anything wrong. They were just trying to help me. But I hated them. And I hated Dante too. And I hated myself for hating them. So, there it was, my own vicious cycle. My own private universe of hate" (p.147).

Ari comes to realise that his self-loathing and his reluctance to comfort his emotional wounds are the root causes of his loneliness. He confesses "But I had learned how to hide what I felt. No, that's not true. There was no learning involved. I had been born knowing how to hide what I felt" (p. 242). Only when Ari opens up more about his vulnerabilities to someone else and he can begin to cultivate self-love. By acknowledging his flaws, embracing his emotions, and recognizing his self-worth, Ari embarks on a journey towards self-acceptance and inner peace.

Aristotle discovers and investigates his sexuality in two very significant scenes that place in part five, between chapters five and six. Aristotle examines his emotional identity and gay sexuality in these moments. Aristotle and Dante, in chapter five, converse about kissing and whether or not one of them has ever done it before. Dante directly questions Aristotle: "how do you know that you don't like kissing boys if you've never kissed one?" (Sàenz 254). Dante becomes the first character in the book to question Aristotle's sexual orientation by raising this query. Aristotle initially rejects the notion of kissing Dante, which makes him more internally gay. However, after Dante's coaxing, Ari is prompted to "stand up" signaling the beginning of a significant scene.

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. (225)

When Dante begins to kiss Ari more intently, he pulls away and tells him that “didn’t work for [him]”. When Dante kisses Ari he goes back to his usual behaviour, which is to isolate himself whenever he needs to confront an uncomfortable aspect of him. Even after Dante has become Ari’s refuge and with someone whom he feels truly authentic, the challenge of acknowledging his feelings for Dante persist over an extended period. This difficulty isn’t unexpected, given that individuals belonging to sexual minorities often grapple with a strong internal urge to confirm and conceal their sexual orientation. Their situation is not the same as that of members of ethnic minorities, whose identities are continuously visible to the world (Diaz 24). Ari’s Latino heritage has been a fundamental aspect of his identity, evident to himself and others from birth. However, his belonging to queer community is a facet of himself that others are unaware of, and it’s a process for him to embrace and incorporate it into his sense of self.

His parents intervene to effectively out him to himself since Aristotle is too committed to maintaining a heterosexual performance to acknowledge his homosexual yearning for Dante. His parents intervene instead, effectively exposing him to himself. More significantly, Ari’s loneliness is resolved when he acknowledges and embraces his loving feelings for Dante. At last, his father strikes up a discussion saying,

“Ari, it’s time you stopped running ... If you keep running, it will kill you.”

“What, Dad?”

“You and Dante.”

Me and Dante?”

“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.”

“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 ... I hate myself.”

“Don’t, *amor. Te adoro*. I’ve already lost a son. I’m not going to lose another...”

“How can you love me so much?”

“How could I not love you? You’re the most beautiful boy in the world.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. *You are*.”

“What am I going to do?”

My father’s voice was soft. “Dante didn’t run. I keep picturing him taking all those blows. But he didn’t run.”

“Okay,” I said. For once in my life, I understood my father perfectly.

And *he* understood *me* (pp. 347–349).

In this passage, there's a notable change in the family dynamic for Aristotle as his father openly acknowledges his son's sexuality identity. This moment both reinforces the patriarchal structure within the Mexican family, as discussed by Almaguer, and also signals a progression beyond it. It is significant that Aristotle's father acknowledged his son's homosexual identity because it shows how traditional values can embrace a new Mexican American identity. According to Annamarie Jagose, "homosexuality was represented as an identity repressed by heterosexist power structures which privileged gender-asymmetry, sexual reproduction and the patriarchal nuclear family".

Aristotle has internalized both his love for Dante and his homosexuality up until this moment. The section that follows how Aristotle's actual homosexual identity clashes with his self-expected macho and heterosexual 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).

Rather than fully embracing his true self, Aristotle continued to suppress his feelings, yet the distinction lies in his willingness to vocalize them. He starts to release the emotionless demeanour he maintained since the start of the novel. After Aristotle's parents acknowledge and accept his identity as a queer male during their conversation, Aristotle persists in feeling ashamed of his homosexuality and his love for Dante. Frost and Meyer delve the idea of "The anxiety, shame, and devaluation of LGBT 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). These feelings arise due to the negative effects of societal expectations of masculinity on Aristotle. He continues to hide his romantic feelings for another man because he reaches a point where all aspects of his identity conflict. At this moment, Aristotle must confront his internalized queer emotions and allow them to surface. This is necessary for him to live genuinely, free from societal pressures and his family's expectations.

Aristotle finally moves beyond the pressure of masculinity, heterosexuality and his internalized fear of being homosexual and kisses Dante, "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). Ari initiating the kiss reinforces my argument that Aristotle finally affirms his queer masculine identity. Carlson and Lenville present the argument that a kiss "is an intimate, social, and political act in the struggle for recognition" (Carlson and Lenville 888). By kissing Dante, he gains certainty and no longer wrestles for acceptance but instead acknowledges himself that he is indeed gay. In this role, he asserts himself and can be seen as the dominant male because he initiated the kiss. This aligns with queer masculinity as it stays faithful to the notion of men being assertive and dominant. Aristotle retains some aspects of societal masculine while starting to forge his own. Breaking away from masculinity, heterosexuality, and internalized homophobia, he takes the step of initiating a kiss with Dante.

This action solidifies his action as a queer identity. By willingly kissing Dante and reflecting on his journey, Aristotle understands the process that has contributed to his queer identity. He acknowledges the internal struggle he has faced in forming this identity. Finally, he can embrace the homosexual desire he had kept buried. Through the intricate relationships depicted between Ari and Dante, Ari's inner self and Ari's family Sàenz appears to suggest that masculinity necessitates a level of vulnerability. Ari's journey towards self-acceptance and acknowledgement of his private emotions was a battle against the societal norms and expectations surrounding him. His personal struggle involved coming to terms with his sexuality, which challenged traditional notions of masculinity. Upon embracing himself amidst the supportive community, Ari experiences the freedom he sought, akin to unlocking the "secrets of the universe". The ultimate secret comprehended and embraced, is fulfilment and the attainment of happiness Ari concludes, "All this time. This was what was wrong with me. All this time I had been trying to figure out the secrets of the universe, the secrets of my own body, of my own heart. All of the answers had always been so close and yet I had always fought them without even knowing it. 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.... As Dante and I lay on our backs in the bed of my pickup and gazed out at the summer stars, I was free. Imagine that. Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn't afraid anymore" (p. 359).

However, Dante's disidentification proves challenging due to the perspective through which readers encounter him—he is primarily portrayed through Aristotle's lens, presenting a character who appears confident and secure in his identity throughout the novel. In the concluding chapters of the book, Dante undergoes a harrowing experience when he is violently assaulted by a group of boys in an alley, simply because they witness him sharing a kiss with

Daniel. Dante's mother tells Ari "They beat him. . .They beat my Dante all to hell. They cracked some ribs, they punched his face. He has bruises everywhere" (304). Ari hurries to the hospital and is taken aback by how seriously hurt Dante is: "He was unrecognizable. I couldn't even see the color of his eyes. I remember taking his hand and whispering his name. He could hardly talk. He could hardly see, his eyes nearly swollen shut" (306). Moreover, Dante's injuries serve as a powerful symbol of the broader societal violence and discrimination faced by LGBTQ individuals. The severity of his condition highlights the real and immediate dangers posed by homophobia. Filled with anger, Ari discovers the identities of the boys responsible for attacking Dante, and he takes it upon himself to confront one of them, resorting to physical violence. Subsequently, during a conversation with Mr. Quintana, Ari reveals that one of the motivating factors behind his actions was his belief that the assault on Dante would not be treated with the seriousness it deserved due to prevalent homophobia.

"They're never going to do anything to those boys, are they?"

Maybe not."

Yeah," I said, "like the cops are really working this case." (327)

In a letter to Ari from his time in Chicago, Dante explores the hypothetical scenario of coming out to his parents and anticipates their potential reactions. However, his reflections on this matter are tinged with self-loathing, revealing the internal struggle he faces regarding his own sexuality: "I hate that I'm going to disappoint them, Ari. I know I've disappointed you, too" (227). Dante concludes his letter with sentiments that hint at an even deeper sense of diminished self-worth, stemming from his awareness of his homosexuality. "Look, I just want you to know that I don't want you to feel like you have to be my friend when I get back. I'm not exactly bestfriend material, am I?" he notes (228). Dante not only perceives himself as failing in his role as a son due to his homosexuality but also believes that his sexual orientation makes him undesirable as a friend.

CHAPTER-3 “Sometimes I think my father has all these scars. On his heart. In his head. All over.”: Silence and Trauma

To thoroughly examine the paternal trauma depicted in "Aristotle and Dante", I had to prioritize one crucial aspect: the fathers' tendency to remain silent and emotionally distant, which results in Liliana Mendoza bearing the primary burden of parental caregiving. Additionally, by portraying the mother as the "strong" caregiver and the father as the "fragile" one requiring protection, this story challenge certain gender norms. However, this assertion holds weight only if the mother herself was devoid of trauma. Yet, Liliana have also suffered traumatic experiences. Ari come from two-parent household with dual incomes, where both parents grapple with emotional baggage. Despite this, his mother takes on the bulk of day-to-day parental responsibilities. By attributing this traditionally gendered division of childcare to trauma, "Aristotle and Dante" introduce a factor that complicates easy dismissal of the arrangement as solely a product of patriarchal family structure. This allows for a nuanced examination of how stereotypical roles might arise from unexpected circumstances. However, the novel doesn't address the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. In this omission, the story overlooks an opportunity to challenge the notion that parenting inherently belongs to the mother.

Within Trauma Studies, the notion of trauma “is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world” (Balaev 360). Trauma, much like pain, frequently eludes expression, with silence emerging as a prominent characteristic as survivors wrestle with indescribable emotions that linger in both their present and future. In "Aristotle and Dante" this conflict between

healing and silence unfolds both parents and teenagers navigate tense and complex relationships.

At the start of *"Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe"* (2012), the author introduces a teenage protagonist who faces difficulties within their family dynamic. By indirectly depicting Ari's reflections on his father's trauma stemming from war experiences and portraying the external conflict between Ari's parents as they grapple with the circumstances surrounding their son's imprisonment, Sàenz illustrates how the Mendoza family's choice to conceal traumatic events leads to suffering and grief among its members.

First of all, Bernardo, his brother, is incarcerated. Because of his brother's circumstances, Ari has had no interaction with him for the past ten years, and the reader is continuously reminded of how upsetting the situation is for our main character. The fact that Ari's parents have made the decision to fully cut Bernardo out of their lives adds to their misery. Ari spends the most of the book wondering about his brother and trying to get his parents to talk about him, but he is never successful because of the deafening silence surrounding his existence. Ari will be greatly impacted by this choice to fully cut him off from his brother because it is well known that this kind of separation can be painful, and that it can be even more so if the individual in question has experienced multiple separate separations (Planellas 7). In addition Ari's connection with his parents has become complex due to the bitterness he has internalized as a result of his brother's silence.

The mental health of Ari's father also contributes to the development of the protagonist's trauma. Novel suggest that Jamie's emotional detachment and silenced are caused by Vietnam trauma war. Jamie Mendoza "was beautiful" but the experience left him haunted by nightmares and burdened with survivor's guilt. Since he has never witnessed it Ari wonders "what happened to all that beauty" (Sàenz 11). Violence shattered his crucial part of personalities,

impacting his capacity to offer emotional support to his children. Coping with his own nightmares, flashbacks, and war-related regrets has led him to become emotionally distant from his son, making him an absent father. Research confirms that trauma of this nature can be passed down through generations, alongside disorders like depression and anxiety (Bachem et al. 746), It may even result in the child developing their own symptoms of PTSD, frequently, these effects manifest subtly in behaviours like adopting a worldview akin to their parents', seeing the world as threatening, and echoing their parents' emotions of social isolation, guilt, and detachment (Dekel and Goldblat 284). With this in consideration, it's apparent that Ari experiences feelings of loneliness and isolation from the world, influenced not only by his own encounters but also by his father's trauma. Ari's father's mental condition has even caused Ari to endure symptoms of PTSD, such as recurring nightmares involving his father, and a sense of detachment that impedes his ability to engage in society like a typical teenager. Ari's mother even acknowledges their resemblances in these regards “You and your father, you’re fighting your own private wars” (Sàenz 170). Simultaneously, when we delve into Ari's emotions surrounding separation and abandonment, we observe parallels between the overt abandonment of his brother and Ari's complex dynamic with his emotionally distant father. This passage demonstrates the negative impact the protagonist experiences from his father's attitude: “Once, when I was about six or seven, I was really mad at my father because I wanted him to play with me and he just seemed so far away. It was like I wasn't even there” (Sàenz 11). Unlike Ari's brother, who is physically absent, Ari's father resides in the same household. Nevertheless, the effects of PTSD have rendered him an almost invisible parental figure. As he continues to grapple with wartime memories, he grows increasingly distant from his son.

In the field of Trauma Studies, the concept of trauma “is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception

of the external world” (Balaev 360). Cathy Caruth states that “the wound of the mind... is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event” (Unclaimed 4). Trauma, much like pain, frequently eludes expression, and silence emerges as a defining characteristic as survivors confront indescribable emotions that linger in their present and shape their future. The timing and aftermath of trauma are often depicted in young adult fiction through healing storylines involving teenage protagonists “expected to work through their grief at a demanding pace” (Kokkola 191) and “talking through the traumatic experience... [is] presented as a demand” (Kokkola 1920). In "*Aristotle and Dante*" the tension between healing and silence is depicted as parents and teenagers navigate complex and strained relationships.

Enraged with his father one day, Ari envisions an argument in which he confronts him “I don’t really care that you can’t tell me about Vietnam. Even though I know the war owns you” and his father replies “All that silence has saved me, Ari” (Sàenz 260). Here, the novel overtly characterizes Jaime's silence as a coping mechanism for his traumas from Vietnam. As stated by Wertheimer and Casper “after trauma, the subject may be voiceless, unable to articulate her experience or who she has become”(11). As the novel concludes, Jaime's regret over abandoning nineteen-year-old Louie during a skirmish emerges as a recurring nightmare. The actions he took and those he failed to take in Vietnam continue to haunt him, significantly impairing his capacity to live a "normal" life, even years after his return home.

Ari's horrific ordeal is intimately linked to Jaime's duties as a father. Jaime feels a societal expectation to endure his trauma silently to avoid causing harm to others, particularly his son. Jaime's burden of wartime memories renders him incapable of being fully present in Ari's life, as he is incessantly haunted by a traumatic past from which he cannot escape. Jaime becomes keenly conscious of Ari's suffering and his own contribution to it. Jaime apologizes for his

emotional distance, acknowledging that he has been "so far away" and Jaime chooses to read the same books as Ari during his hospital stay, using this shared activity as a means to communicate with his son indirectly. This approach allows him to avoid discussing Vietnam or engaging in emotionally charged conversations, which he finds challenging at the moment (Sàenz 141). In a later part of the novel Ari sarcastically speaks "about all those war stories his dad talks about" Jaime reaches for Ari's hand and says "deserved that one" as he hasn't discussed the war or much else with Ari (Sàenz 3450). The impact of the indescribable horrors of Vietnam intensifies as trauma spreads, and the novel vividly portrays the depth of Jaime's psychological wounds and PTSD.

Nevertheless, Ari's internal conflict with his sexuality intensifies these challenges, potentially amplifying his sense of isolation and solitude, and rendering his home life anything but serene. Being part of a devout Catholic family, Ari observes how his mother's church acquaintances, when they visit, suffocate him emotionally (Sàenz 8-9). Being devoted to a fundamentalist religion, or any religion, might, among other things, increase one's sense of internalized homophobia, according to Diaz (34). Given these details, we can only surmise that Ari's apprehensive view of coming out as gay is shaped by the potential response it would receive from his family.

At the beginning of the novel, Ari recollects overhearing Lilly (his mother) mention that, "that the war will ever be over for her husband" (Sàenz 14). Jaime's persistent inability to shake off the war illustrates the disrupted timeline of trauma, as he continues to relive Vietnam even more than fifteen years after coming home. Gradually, Jaime starts to break his silence, making an attempt to bond with Ari by revealing some details about his inner struggles. He exposes his vulnerability, and by the end of the novel, Ari witnesses him finally letting go and crying into

his own arms. Ari claims that there was something about a man in agony's sound that "resembled the sound of a wounded animal.....All this time Ari wanted his father to tell him something about the war and now he couldn't stand to see the rawness of his pain, how new it was after so many years, how the pain was alive and thriving just beneath the surface." Ari acknowledges these animalistic sounds as unspoken expressions that disrupt the pervasive silence that has afflicted the Mendoza household for as long as he can remember. However, he also realizes that the weight of Jaime's burden is so immense that it seems insurmountable, resistant to any remedy. Witnessing Jaime's grief prompts Ari to grasp his father's silence, offering him the solace of not needing to discuss the matter any further. Yet, Jaime declines this offer to retreat back into silence, indicating a reluctance to suppress his emotions once again. Jaime's experience in Vietnam has left him with lifelong psychological scars "between hurting and healing...in that in-between space" (Sàenz 335). Sáenz makes it apparent that Ari experiences the intergenerational effects of trauma because he is a quiet, reclusive adolescent who has a violent tendencies and frequent nightmares.

Nonetheless, Ari's family dynamics undergo a transformation following the sudden death of his aunt, his mother's sister, near the story's conclusion. This event compels Ari's parents to confront their own vulnerability, as they grapple with the emotional loss of Ari's aunt, Ophelia. During their journey to the funeral, Ari's father opens up to his son, revealing the significant support Ophelia provided during the time of Ari's brother's arrest. He becomes emotional, shedding tears as he reflects on the suffering his wife endured during that period. Moved by his father's vulnerability, Ari decides to offer comfort, realizing that he finally feels a genuine connection with him. Moreover, he recognizes that it's the first time in a long while that his father has openly discussed Bernardo, Ari's brother, and expressed his emotions about the

situation. Furthermore, Ari becomes acutely aware of the profound pain that his parents endured due to their separation from Bernardo:

I left him alone for a while. But then, I decided I wanted to be with him. I decided that maybe we left each other alone too much. Leaving each other alone was killing us.

"Dad, sometimes I hated you and mom for pretending he [Bernardo] was dead."

"I know. I'm sorry, Ari. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." (Alire Sáenz 283)

In Ari's mother's case, it's also following her sister's death that she chooses to confide to her son. After a poignant moment between them at the funeral, she shares photos of Ari's brother and initiates a conversation about him. As both his mother and father begin to address their personal struggles, Ari starts to perceive them in a new light. He gains a deeper understanding of them, which allows him to recognize the extent to which they were drifting apart from each other (Alire Sáenz 324).

4. CONCLUSION

After examining the novel, it becomes evident that Ari has been positively affected by his intimate connections and relationships. These relationships have helped him face his trauma and begin his coming-of-age process. The bond formed with his parents, who eventually strive to foster a welcoming atmosphere of him has played a significant role in making Ari more resilient and self-assured as he confronts his trauma. Likewise, the friendships depicted in this essay have enabled the protagonists to embrace social connections and Interpersonal relationship. Consequently, he found solace associated with his inherent loneliness and discovering individuals he can confide in and rely on. Ultimately, Ari's romantic involvement with Dante has proven profoundly advantageous for Ari. Thanks to him Ari is able to perceive

the world through a much more optimistic lens and effectively navigate his journey. It's important to acknowledge that Ari belongs to two marginalized communities. The internalized homophobia he has faced, along with the family dynamics shaped by his Latino identity, have significantly influenced Ari's perception of life, often casting it through a more challenging perspective.

"*Aristotle and Dante*" offer readers a chance to explore trauma and healing while acknowledging the enduring impact of the former. The absence of miraculous healing from trauma for Jaime in this YA novels prevents readers from concluding with a comfortable sense that all issues can be neatly resolved. However, the audience is left with the understanding that communication, community, and artistic expression can gradually diminish the grip of trauma within a family, opening doors to more hopeful possibilities. Kenneth Kidd asserts boldly that "there seems to be consensus now that children's literature is the most rather than the least appropriate literary forum for trauma work" (161, original emphasis), however, López asserts that "Latina/o children's literature is essential to understanding trauma narratives because it powerfully reminds us that violence impacts the lives of children as well as adults" (225). *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* vividly illustrate that "the discrimination the adults experience in public spaces negatively affects their private world" (Rodríguez 18). The significant impact this novel have in highlighting mental health issues is undeniable.

Future research could delve into how trauma, particularly PTSD, is depicted in other young adult novels, especially those featuring protagonists from minority backgrounds. Additionally, it's crucial not only to analyse existing narratives but also to encourage the creation of more story like this, with protagonist who navigate additional layers of trauma stemming from their

experiences as racial, sexual, or socioeconomic minorities. Furthermore, it's pertinent to highlight that adolescents with PTSD deserve to see themselves reflected in mainstream media, as such representation can be pivotal for their comprehension of their own struggles. Moreover, these narratives serve as valuable educational tools for those unfamiliar with mental health disorders. By deliberately centering on mental disorders in stories aimed at adolescents, we actively contribute to destigmatizing these conditions, as affected individuals find validation and representation in these narratives.

The book concludes with Aristotle fully embracing his identity and essentially coming out of the closet. He declares 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). The pivotal moment when Aristotle lies on the truck and declares himself "free" signifies his true liberation regarding his sexuality. This act, occurring within the ecotone of the desert, symbolizes the merging and integration of the various elements that have led Aristotle Mendoza to wholeheartedly embrace his identity as a queer Mexican-American male. The truck undergoes a significant transformation, no longer symbolizing a repressive closet but instead serving as a manifestation of Aristotle's Mexican identity and a metaphorical vehicle for freedom. Its symbolism lies in the presence of Dante alongside Aristotle in the desert, illustrating that this space is where his identity converges and merges once more. Here, Aristotle's borderland identity reaches its culmination as he fully embraces himself as a gay Mexican-American individual, but more profoundly, he accepts himself wholly as Aristotle Mendoza.

"Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" vividly portrays the journey towards the freedom of identity and the development of a multicultural queer identity. Aristotle's identity formation is intricate, involving the navigation of traditional Mexican cultural norms of machismo and societal expectations of heterosexuality imposed on males from a young age. Throughout the narrative, readers witness Aristotle grappling with these external pressures as well as his own internalized homophobia, stemming from the repression of his true identity and emotions due to societal expectations. Aristotle's journey also showcases his capacity to influence a more inclusive and empathetic family environment. Through experiencing his identity formation, readers gain insight into a culture and narrative rarely depicted within the Gay YA genre.

What's particularly compelling about the theme of identity in this novel is its subtle approach, unlike some YA novels that may overtly emphasize certain themes. Sàenz's treatment of themes is nuanced and seamlessly integrated into the narrative, enhancing its effectiveness. Moreover, the novel offers diverse representation, including aspects like race, sexuality, and mental health, in a manner that resonates with a wide range of readers. This comprehensive representation likely aids many readers in coming to terms with their identities, showcasing the power of a well-crafted novel in fostering understanding and acceptance.

The significance of portraying identity transformation through YA texts lies in their role as a vehicle for individuals who need an outlet or seek solace in knowing that they can relate to such narratives. Discussing Aristotle and his experiences opens up a dialogue for minorities within the LGBTQ community. Aristotle represents a dual minority as both gay and Mexican. Depicting such dual minority identities in YA novels is crucial as it gives individuals a voice they can relate to and helps them feel included in society beyond their internal struggles.

"Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" offers an authentic coming-of-age narrative that contributes to shaping the current discourse on identity formation and underscores the importance of inclusivity for everyone.

Work Cited

<https://theboar.org/2020/06/lgbtq-aristotle-dante/>

<https://qplusmagazine.com/aristotle-and-dante-discover-the-secrets-of-the-universe-book->

<https://champaca.in/blogs/news/book-review-benjamin-alire-Saenz-s-aristotle-and-dante-discover-the-secrets-of-the-universereview/>

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

Whitehead, Stephen M. *Toxic Masculinity: Curing the Virus: Making Men Smarter, Healthier, Safer*, Andrews UK Ltd., 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, ebookcentral-proquestcom.ezproxy.uef.fi:2443/lib/uef-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6109088.

Ramirez-Valles, Jesus. "‘I Don’t Fit Anywhere’: How Race and Sexuality Shape Latino Gay and Bisexual Men’s Health." *The Health of Sexual Minorities*, edited by Ilan H. Meyer and Mary E. Northridge. Springer, Boston, MA. 2007, pp. 301-319. doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-31334-4_12.

Levant, Ronald F., et al. "Development and Evaluation of the Fathers’ Expectations About Sons’ Masculinity Scale (Short Form)." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2018, pp. 325– 39, doi.org/10.1037/men0000108

Kimmel, Michael S. "Masculinity as Homophobia." *Understanding Society: An Introductory Reader*, Thomson Wadsworth, 2005, pp. 230–234.

Ur, Frank, "Queer Identity Construction in Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*" (2018). Senior Capstone Theses. 42. https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/senior_theses/42

Wickens, Corrine M. "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature."

Children's Literature in Education, vol. 42, no. 2, 2011, pp. 148–164., doi:10.1007/s10583-011-9129-0.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Dekel, R. and Goldblatt, H. “Is There Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma? The Case of Combat Veterans' Children.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78:3, 2008, pp. 281-89 (2008)

Pascoe, C. J. “Dude, You're a Fag: Adolescent Male Homophobia.” *Composing Gender*, by Rachael Groner and John F. O'Hara, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014, pp. 208–221.

Diaz, Emily. *Intersectional Identity: Psychological Well-Being of Queer of Color Individuals*. 2015. Haverford College, Senior Thesis. Institutional Scholarship, hdl.handle.net/10066/16643

Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory an Introduction*. New York University Press, 2010

Frost, David M, and Ilan H Meyer. “Internalized Homophobia and Relationship Quality Among Ur 30 Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals.” *Journal Counseling Psychology* , no. 56, Jan. 2009, pp. 97–109

Carlson, David Lee, and Darla Linville. “The Social Importance of a Kiss: a Honnethian Reading of David Levithan's Young Adult Novel, *Two Boys Kissing*.” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2014, pp. 887–901., doi:10.1080/01596306.2014.940237

Balaev, Michelle. “Trauma Studies.” *A Companion to Literary Theory*, edited by David H. Richter, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 360-371.

Planellas, Irina, et al. “Do teenagers recover from traumatic situations? Identification of types of change and relationship with psychopathology and coping.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 116, 2020, pp. 1-9. doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105147

Balaev, Michelle. "Trauma Studies." *A Companion to Literary Theory*, edited by David H. Richter, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 360-371

Casper, Monica J. and Eric Wertheimer. *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. New York University Press, 2016.

Diaz, Emily. *Intersectional Identity: Psychological Well-Being of Queer of Color Individuals*. 2015. Haverford College, Senior Thesis. Institutional Scholarship, hdl.handle.net/10066/16643

Rodríguez, Sonia Alejandra. "Conocimiento Narratives: Creative Acts and Healing in Latinx Children's and Young Adult Literature." *Children's Literature*, vol. 47, 2019, pp. 9-29

Arciniega, G. Miguel, et al. "Toward a Fuller Conception of Machismo: Development of a Traditional Machismo and Caballerismo Scale." *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 55, no. 1, 20 Aug. 2007, pp. 19–33., doi:10.1037/0022-0167.55.1.19.

Matos, Angel Daniel. "A Narrative of a Future Past: Historical Authenticity, Ethics, and Queer Latinx Futurity in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe." *Children's Literature*, vol. 47, 2019, pp. 30-56.

Hunt, John. Review of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. *The Horn Book*, March/April 2012, p. 20.

Jung, E., & Hecht, M. L. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(3),265–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370409370197>

Butler, J. (2007). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and UK: Routledge

Weststrate, Nic M., and Kate C. Mclean. "The Rise and Fall of Gay: A Cultural-Historical Approach to Gay Identity Development." *Memory*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 225–240., doi:10.1080/09658210903153923.go

Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press, 1996, cloudflareipfs.com/ipfs/bafykbzacedyo fryd2zgzldmmp7wcnspqqadseil7dl5ziy6v7abql2skzqunl4?filename=Annamarie%20Jagose%20%20Queer%20Theory_%20An%20Introduction%20%2819%2097%29.pdf. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022

“List of LGBTQ+ Terms.” Stonewall, 25 Oct. 2021, www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-andglossary/list-lgbtq-terms. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Irwin, Katherine. “‘You Kind of Find Yourself Helpless’: Teens’ Identity Constructions and Responses to Childhood Trauma.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 51, no. 1, Feb 2022, pp. 59-84. doi.org/10.1177/08912416211026725

R. Roxana Loza. (2021) “He doesn’t talk” “Silence, Trauma, and Fathers in Aristotle and Dante Discovers the Secrets of the Universe and I am not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter” *Label Me Latina/o 2021 Volume XI Special Issue: YA Latinx Literature*

Rodríguez, Sonia Alejandra. “Conocimiento Narratives: Creative Acts and Healing in Latinx Children’s and Young Adult Literature.” *Children’s Literature*, vol. 47, 2019, pp. 9-29.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Simon & Schuster, 2012

Julia’s books, October 3, 2021, Children’s books, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Blog, bookblogging, books, fiction, Growing up, Reading, reading challenge, sexuality, Simon and Schuster, teen fiction, YA fiction.