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THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE*

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Desidentification and Multiplicity in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

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ABSTRACT

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, there are two characters who are able to create a new space and a unique identity based on their heritage and sexual orientation, without abnegating either part of the individual. This article argues that the process of desidentification and reconstruction of their identity is unique to each individual who belongs to minority groups which may seem separate from one another. In order to analyze and support this argument, the characters were analyzed based on the concept of “desidentification” by Jose Estaban Muñoz and the theory of “borderlands” and the “mestiza” by Gloria Anzaldúa. Additionally, these concepts are seen as a tool to reclaim and strengthen an identity, which is set free from the preconceived definitions that each minority is supposed to embody. bstract

KEY WORDS: Queer Studies, Young Adult Literature, Desidentification, Multiplicity, Chicano Studies.

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When speaking about queer Chicano or queer Latinx, a distance is created between the two communities as if they could not overlap. It is as if being Latinx and adding the dimension of sexuality, shifts the discussion automatically toward a more ethnic or racial problematic, and the queer aspect of the identity is put into a secondary position. A similar phenomenon occurs when a person of color identifies as queer. There is a need to fill a quota of experience, expressions and interactions in order to fulfill both aspects equally, in order to prove that one belongs to both communities. However, it is extremely difficult to find a person who fits into a particular criteria or stereotype of those bodies, and these aspects tend to have different effects on people depending on their own experience and beliefs. For this reason, perspectives that combine and unite categories are needed, as José Quiroga elaborates,

Sometimes categories (sexual and ethnic) deserve to bleed onto each other like an inkspot that leaves a messy residue from one scrap of paper onto another. [...] The spaces themselves do not trace the boundaries from one thought to another, but rather allow some of us to see continuities where others see divisions. (193)

In this sense, by treating the categories as part of each other, there are new spaces to explore, helping to understand different experiences in a new light. Thus, not giving one category more relevance than the other, since there is no beginning or end between the two, neither comes first or second and there is no seam dividing them. Both have the same weight and influence at the moment of shaping the subject's identity, as well as changing and guiding each other. This paper will analyze two characters in the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz in order to show how people who are part of multiple cultural identities are able to create a new space or category in accordance to their multiplicity. This creation does not negate or cancel any of their ingrained categories, but rather it takes different aspects of them and repurposes them to serve the needs of the new space. It is both a reclamation of identity and a tool to be heard and understood, against a ruling cultural space that has worked to silence them. This reclamation is carried because the subjects accept the diverse characteristics of each of their cultural categories as part of their own identity, and not as an obstacle to be removed. This process ensures the

integration of all aspects and cultures so as to not make the subjects feel removed and isolated from either one of their contexts.

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe is a coming-of-age, queer, Young Adult novel by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. It was published in 2012 and, since then, it has received numerous awards in the publishing world, one of the most important being the Michael L. Printz Award, which recognizes literary excellence in the genre. The plot of the story revolves around Aristotle, also known as Ari, who is a fifteen-year-old Chicano boy in search of a place where he belongs and finds his own self. In his journey to find his identity, he discovers truths about his family, his heritage, his friends and himself. This novel portrays the lives of two queer Chicano teens, Ari and Dante, who go through the process of growing up and cementing their identities as the story progresses. Both characters show a different perspective of what it means to be both queer and Chicano, thus showing how both categories can influence the characters differently. This will be examined with Jose Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentificatory performance and Gloria Anzaldúa's *borderland's* approach to identity.

Jose Esteban Muñoz's *Desidentification* refers to a disidentificatory identity performance tracing its origins to what is referred to as "identities-in-difference". This means that the identities are formed and cemented by breaking from the ruling social sphere. Therefore, this disidentificatory performance stems from an ability to break away from the rulings or guidance of the great majority in order to create a new space based on this failed integration to the public sphere (7). In this regard, the queer person of color being not entirely from either community could step away from the established norms in order to form a new identity centered around their specific needs and ideas, which are constantly struggling against each of the ruling contexts. Muñoz further elaborates that "desidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a desidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (12). This new life does not convey complete rejection of the different components that make up their identity, but rather a repurposing of these elements to serve a new context. Desidentification is a process by which a voiceless or underprivileged minority

can make new sense of a cultural text that both originates and validates the empowerment of the majority in order to expose its preferential message, and rework it to their advantage (12). In other words, desidentification is not only understanding the underlying message of the cultural text, but is also taking advantage of its legitimacy to represent the disempowered minority. Even though Muñoz's theory is disregarding or "dissing" (5) identity, this paper will consider it as a vital part of building this new space and identity, as a valid response against oppression and/or censure. While desidentification is explained as a way of stepping away from the restraints of an oppressive identity, and therefore a rejection of the concept of boxing oneself in different categories, it can also be used as a tool to not only gain a voice within a jaded system, but also to pave the road for future generations who will be able to enjoy a space tailored to their voices that did not exist before. Rejection does not necessarily have to mean a complete disregard for the system, but an understanding of its flaws and the capability of taking diverse elements from it in to work them to the subjects' advantage.

In the case of Aristotle and Dante, both come from Mexican American families. However, they have different approaches to their mixed heritage. On the one hand, Aristotle's character is markedly more immersed in the Chicano culture. This is shown through the incorporation of different symbols that tie Aristotle to his Chicano roots and which are shown to be of utmost importance to him, especially in critical moments of the story. For example, he listens to Mexican American bands, has a Carlos Santana shirt, desires and later obtains, a red pickup truck. These two elements will later be analyzed to demonstrate the connection between Aristotle and this new landscape he is able to access and create. On the other hand, Dante's character does not consider himself to be close to his heritage, he argues that he does not feel Mexican in several parts of the books, often using other people around him as a point of comparison and divergence. An example of this, is when the characters are comparing each other and saying how Ari is a tragic person while Dante is the opposite. Ari says "I'm just more Mexican, Mexican are tragic people". Dante is "the optimist American" (20). In this aspect, the characters draw a line between each individual personality and, at the same time, mirror characteristics that they see in both cultures. This is made

even more evident when he wants to choose a name for his brother and they are all Latinx names. Ari questions him about it and he simply replies, “if he has a Mexican name, then maybe he’ll feel more Mexican” (269). For both characters, their names are charged with meaning given by society. In this sense, their names have a historical and philosophical meaning from European countries. There is a parallel in their names, however both characters have their own position and reaction to them. Muñoz argues that desidentification not only rejects the societal standards of a ruling society, but it is also used to reclaim an object or parts of oneself in favor of building a new product better suited than the last. In this novel, both Aristotle and Dante are able to reclaim their names and imbue them with the meaning they are comfortable with, instead of bowing down to the expectation of having such famous names. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* does not refer to a metaphysical or otherworldly knowledge, as it might be implied by their names, but to a more intimate universe, their own reality that they spend the book learning, unlearning, reproducing and reclaiming. In fact, the “universe” to which the novel alludes to has nothing to do with the characters’ outer world, but to their inner journey and their ability to find their place and importance in the world by reclaiming their selves and identities.

In the case of Aristotle, this process is gradual and full of conflict. His full name is revealed to be Angel Aristotle (18), but throughout the book this name is never mentioned again, preferring to use either Aristotle or Ari. The name Aristotle feels too big and all-encompassing to be able to comprehend. He constantly feels as though his personality, thoughts and feelings are not big enough to fill the space that this kind of name demands of a person. But he does not reject the name entirely, choosing to go by the shortened “Ari”, instead of creating a whole new persona centered around his feelings of unworthiness. The name Ari does not propose a complete dismissal of Aristotle, but the opportunity and space to grow into his skin and name without placing unnecessary expectations upon himself. Though later on, he does not feel comfortable with the manner in which Dante’s mother says his name, with affection and gratitude following the accident. “I felt I didn’t deserve it or felt maybe that they were hugging the guy who had saved their son’s life. I wanted them to hug me just because I was Ari and I would never be just Ari to them” (242). Ari is a character that

struggles to find his place in the world and his own sense of worthiness, and that can be reflected in the way he treats his name. In the case of Dante, from the beginning of the novel, he owns his name and is completely acceptant of its implication. His reclamation of the name is done more effortlessly than Ari's. He mentions that he had tried to go by a nickname but felt he was being dishonest and he very much rather be himself (18). While he insinuates that his name is part of the reason why he does not feel as Mexican as other Chicanos at the moment of discussing his brother's name, this is not a factor in which he feels less of his own person. Rather, the name "Dante" is part of the identity he initially claims as "other" and separate from the only subjects he has to mirror and compare himself with. The name Dante already sets him apart from his cultures, and this is part of the process that he develops by embracing his identity rather than the expectations or performance of his origin.

The approach each of these characters take toward their names can be considered as a prelude to how they will have a very different development of desidentification throughout the novel. Aristotle's desidentification process is linear and gradual. There is a longing in him that makes him feel lost and alienated from the rest of the world; it makes him search and question everything he does and feel, as well as what everyone else does. He is constantly plagued with a feeling of emptiness which compels him to look for in others what he cannot find in himself. However, this begins to change as he starts to discover more information about his family and when he starts to allow himself to accept things outside the norm; this is the point where he desidentifies. Since Ari is the narrator of the story, and his thought process can be followed more easily as the events of the novel progress, his process can be seen more explicitly as more information is revealed to him, and he begins to accept more things about himself and the world around him. This is unlike Dante, who the reader only observes through Ari's eyes. One of the main conflicts with Ari's identity comes in the form of his imprisoned brother, whose parents act as if he did not exist at all. This makes Ari feel disconnected from his family, and guides part of his thought process. During the development of the novel, Aristotle is shown to have conflicting emotions about who his brother is and whether he would like the kind of person Ari has become. Since the brother does not appear throughout

the book, Ari's search can be seen as a metaphorical search of approval from a distant figure that replaces his own sense of self-worth and belonging. The brother is a figure that is forbidden and the main character cannot reach, as seen when he is delirious with fever and sees him far away.

He was on the other side of the river. He was in Juárez and I was in El Paso and we could see each other. And I yelled, "Bernardo, come over!" and he shook his head. And then I thought he didn't understand, so I yelled at him in Spanish. "Vente pa'aca, Bernardo!" (77).

This is significant, as Ari cannot reach his brother and tries to communicate with him in both languages, but also, because they are across the border and it is explicitly seen how Ari makes the distinction between himself and his heritage. Moreover, placing the weight of approval on a figure that cannot be seen and is not spoken about creates a division as strong as a border in which the character struggles to accept who he is as a whole, since the shadow of his brother's violence and mistakes keep him from accessing his own feelings and his own anger. Ultimately, the brother is what helps Ari go through his desidentificatory journey since he takes a conscious stand in the creation of his identity.

Dante's desidentification, on the other hand, is harder to analyze since he is presented from Aristotle's perspective and he appears to be confident and secure about who he is throughout the novel. In contrast to Ari, Dante accepts himself and is comfortable being who he is; he shows Ari how he bends the "rules" unapologetically. As any teenager, he wavers at times, but his ability to appear confident in his own skin is the one characteristic that Ari notices the most. Dante has an acceptance of his heritage without question of what it actually means, and he thinks he knows where he stands in that culture, even if that stance is that he does not belong in it. Regardless if this is in a negative manner, he is still aware of it and has embraced this distance. Nonetheless, he would still like his younger brother to have the connection that he lacks. His change and growth happen due to conflicts more related to his sexuality and it makes him think that this also moves him further away from his heritage, because he does not see himself being Chicano enough, due to his sexuality. While Dante was living in Chicago, he writes letters to Ari to keep in touch for the time he is away. He starts to go to parties and try new things and experimenting for the first time with different people.

Quickly after he realizes that he is only interested in kissing boys, he feels wary regarding how his family is going to react and how he will disappoint them, including Ari (226). However, he does not reject the idea of his sexuality; rather he rejects the idea of lying about his identity, especially to the people that he loves. He does not feel rejection directly from his family or Ari's family, rather he is able to feel comfortable around the people that he loves, even though he thought it was not the norm to react so acceptingly towards homosexuality. Thus, his feeling of disappointing his family is very disconcerting to him, even more so than his sexuality. This is not to say that he did not struggle with the idea, it was just that coming out was his biggest struggle. However, he does question whether or not "a real Mexican" (273) would like boys, and with a certain resignation he agrees that they probably would not. It is important to note that this book is set in 1987, hence the letters and how unspoken the topic was.

The second instance where Dante's conflict regarding his sexuality is presented takes place when he is attacked by a group of men for kissing another boy in an alley (307). This event changed him profoundly, "I knew a part of him would never be the same. They cracked more than his ribs" (325). He was quieter and sadder, so unlike his usual talkative personality. This incident pushed him out of the closet forcefully. As careful and apprehensive as he had been about his sexuality, everyone in their immediate circle finds out the reason for the assault. In this aspect, he became afraid of what could happen to him because of his sexuality and which could expose him to the world.

Gloria Anzaldúa rejects the binary of being either one (white) or the other (Mexican) and, instead, proposes a dual consciousness that is enclosed by both sides of the duality. She argues that duality can be applied to queer people who are also Chicano as they live within multiple cultures, and never in a "neutral space". The inhabitants of the borderlands are always defying what is considered normal, as they are either outside or in between it (63). Unlike Anzaldúa's idea of *la mestiza*, the approach taken in this paper is that anyone, not just the *mestiza*, can be part of this third realm since it is a creation of one's own, understanding the position in which Anzaldúa speaks from. It has, as explained with Muñoz' theory, characteristics of other collective identities, but the union of these is what makes up the new signifier/label/identity of a person. The concept of mixed or *mestiza*,

multiplicity, can be explicitly seen in Aristotle's character more so than in Dante's. Although, this example does not mean everyone who is in this multiplicity is searching for this space, but it is a concrete way to exemplify what the thesis of this paper entails. Aristotle treats the desert as a neutral unknown space he uses, albeit unconsciously, as a place where he can grow and explore outside the realms of the normative in society. A place where he constantly searches for answers that he cannot find in the known world. In this sense, it is as if he is looking for a place where he can step away from everything that is already established. Dante's experience with the desert can be read as similar since he is the one that introduces Ari to the space. Nonetheless, he still finds other spaces, his home in particular, to be safe and where he is able to create what Aristotle does in that vast land. This links to Anzaldúa's perspective of being half and half, "We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one" (63). Aristotle uses the desert to physically see this cancellation of being either constructed identity or the other. "What did words matter to a desert?" (281), when he could just be. Throughout the book, the character goes to this place to find the peace he cannot reach where he usually inhabits, a place where he can be free of the conflicts that arise within him. There is a freedom of not belonging, where he can figure out who he really is. Even when he was not able to drive himself to this area, he pictures himself doing so:

I see myself driving down a desert road in a pickup, no one else around. I'm listening to Los Lobos. I see myself lying on the bed of the pickup truck, staring up at all the stars. No light pollution (149).

Within this neutral space he still manages to keep a part of himself, which is both Chicano and queer, and child and adult, all mixed within him. He references the American band that is heavily influenced by Mexican and Latino heritage as a hint toward this synergy within himself, something that is two things at once. Another reference to Ari's tie to his culture is the use of a pickup truck, something commonly associated with the labor of Chicano men. The latter is constantly brought up to also illustrate Ari's independence, as it is the car he owns once he obtains his driver's license, and

it is what allows him to travel to the desert whenever he feels turmoil within him. The desert acts as a place where Aristotle is free of social and cultural constraints.

Simultaneously, this place is often associated with Dante, as it is where they go together and where important milestones in their relationship take place. The first time Ari visits the desert is with Dante's family, when they go out to look at the stars. This is the starting point of Ari's attachment to the desert, since this is the first instance in the novel where he is truly able to exist without all other outer influences, such as others expectation's, and realize his value as "Ari" and not as a halfway finished construction. In this moment, Ari can look up to the stars and see the universe above him and drown out the voices inside him to feel at peace with himself. He thinks:

Something happened inside me as I looked out into the vast universe. Through that telescope, the world was closer and larger than I'd ever imagined. And it was all so beautiful and overwhelming and—I don't know—it made me aware that there was something inside of me that mattered (42).

Moreover, it is during this moment that Dante, while looking at Ari's contemplation of the sky, announces he will discover all the secrets of the universe which he will use to change the world. Later in the same passage, once Ari and Dante have returned home and left the quiet revelations of the desert behind, they stay outside to continue to look at the stars, this time from the restriction of both of their contexts. They lie down on the ground in Dante's backyard where they can hear his parents talk in English and Spanish through the open door. Dante says that they speak in this manner all the time, one in English and the other in Spanish, to which Ari replies that his parents do the same thing. Right after this, they both agree that there is too much air pollution, and the feeling they had had while in the desert is nowhere to be found now. Staring up at the sky, they try to mimic what happened while they were in the desert, the "neutral ground" where they are free of social constraints, but by doing it within the social construction they both have been struggling with; they are left feeling the oppression of their environment and their own alienation more keenly than ever. When they were out in the desert there was a certain freedom that they now found lacking. In that moment, Dante's parents and the two boys share a moment together, where there are no breaches

and they are able to reach a moment of understanding. It is by trying to replicate this experience that Dante and Ari are confronted by the reminder of the social constraints they had been struggling with. The “air pollution” then takes on a metaphorical tint and refers to the elements that both characters find problematic about their situation, and which must be dealt with in order to go back to the moment they had while in the desert.

Another significant moment that takes place in the desert is when Ari is upset about his parents withholding information about his brother. He drives to the desert with Dante and breaks down once they get there. “I just drove. I could have driven forever. I don’t know how I managed to find my spot in the desert, but I found it. It was as if I had a compass hidden somewhere inside me” (261). Once again, Aristotle’s identity and his freedom to express himself are heavily tied to this spot in the desert he has unknowingly managed to claim as his own. The final moment of importance, both in the novel and the desert, comes when Ari is finally ready to confront and express how in love he is with Dante, and drives them to the desert to do so. In this safe space Ari is able to come forth and face his feelings for Dante and makes amends for not realizing it before, that he wanted more than a friendship with another boy. He admits to having been scared of Dante, and what he represented in his life, and then he reaches the same quiet of that first time in the desert. He decides he will not be insignificant and inadequate and faces his fears by opening himself up to loving, and being loved by, Dante. It is also in this desert where he has felt free before and states “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” (356). This is the moment where the process of *desidentification* is at its highest point. By accepting his feelings, accepting his actions, his words, and his place, Ari is able to create another category that is Chicano and queer, but in his own terms. Empowering him and setting him free at last.

It is the desert that lends them a neutral space to come to terms with their own identities and allows them to piece themselves together. At the same time, with the acceptance of their identities, their relationship is able to flourish and the love that both character experience is out in the open. However, Dante’s realization of his own queerness takes place far away from Ari and his desert, and

Ari's acceptance of his feelings for Dante's as well as the traits he found to be problematic about himself occur away from the desert. What this neutral space allows them to do is to step away from the influences of the ruling social spheres in order to think, decompress and build themselves back up from the knowledge and results of struggles throughout the story. The building of their identity is a process that takes place at all times there is a failure in communication or communion with the encompassing social cultures, but the cementation of these *mestiza* identities takes place away, in the desert, where the subject can, according to Muñoz' theory, "read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject" (12).

A new space or category can be created by taking the existing parts of the prevailing categories, thus creating a unique individual identity. It does not necessarily cancel any of the other categories, but it takes pieces to create a new version of it. It is a reclamation of identity. This reclamation is done by accepting those characteristics that make someone who they really are without compromising their own integrity. "Desidentification is a point of departure, a process, a building. Although it is a mode of reading and preforming, it is ultimately a form of building" (200). Minorities are able to use desidentification as a manner of both fighting back against a society, that oppresses and targets them, and building a foundation for a future they might not be able to see. The characters and people are able to build a new space for themselves to grow and nurture their own individualities. The purpose of this process is the reclamation of the objects and parts that people of color hold dear to them, without losing any aspect of their identity, just as a character from a Young Adult novel can claim back his name, his family, his land and his identity. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a good example of how two queer Chicanos exist in this multiplicity and flourish to create their own personal identity.

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