

**EXTENDED ESSAY**

***WHY DO BOYS NOT CRY?***

**DESTIGMATIZING TRAITS OF A BICULTURAL IDENTITY**

**TO WHAT EXTENT IS BICULTURALITY PORTRAYED IN THE NOVEL  
“ARISTOTLE AND DANTE DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE” BY  
BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ?**

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## Introduction

First and foremost, it is fundamental to justify the election of this certain research question, which is “To what extent is biculturalism portrayed in the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz?” In order to do so, let us analyze and explain its key points.

Biculturalism is a global phenomenon that influences the reality and *identities* of a significant amount of people across the world. However, like any other social-construct-based condition, the great power it holds over people's identities is capable of tremendously affecting bicultural lives in a negative way full of stigmas and crises. Based on the definition, biculturalism may be considered as a *concealable stigmatized identity*, which is a term used to refer to “Identities that can be hidden from others and that are socially devalued and negatively stereotyped” (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013)

Additionally, when put into perspective, biculturalism and its aspects have a quite different influence over teenagers than over the rest of the population. With a determination of Equality and also keeping Human rights as a priority, this essay addresses biculturalism as a key topic people should be more aware of, a perfect example for the IB English B theme *Social Organizations*.

The coming-of-age novel ‘*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*’ by Benjamin Alire Sáenz provides a perfect example for the main purposes of this investigation: Analyzing the author's choices regarding the portrayal of biculturalism and its aspects in his novel, as someone who experienced the phenomenon themselves, as well as to develop a rich comprehension about the topic; to recognize the way it works, the reasons behind its importance and role in the global society.

The essay's title also provides essential elements: The figurative question "*Why do boys not cry?*" alludes to the novel's storyline, since it is set in the year 1987, an era that is meaningful and noteworthy when it comes to *heteronormativity*, a non-explicitly-mentioned analysis focus that the Theoretical Framework will explain in deeper ways.

The title also introduces the social goal in this essay, which is destigmatizing traits of a bicultural identity with the aim of spreading awareness about this phenomenon and to reduce unfavorable stereotypes around it.

## Theoretical Framework

To analyze the way the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* portrays biculturalism through its main characters, three thematic foci were identified and explored: *Identity*, *biculturalism*, and *heteronormativity*.

As the main and first concept, identity also happens to be the most complex. Regarding the fact that the term identity alludes to a significantly wide spectrum, which in general is deeply determined by the being and the self, it certainly becomes harder to define. Similarly, to what the Author Philip Gleason (1983) suggested in his article ‘*Identifying Identity: A Semantic History*’ “(...) most of us would find it difficult to explain just what we do mean by identity. Its very obviousness seems to defy elucidation: identity is what a thing is!” (Gleason, 1983, 910–931)

The crises arisen from misdirection, regarding identities, are the main area covered during this investigation, because ‘*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz is a coming-of-age novel whose main characters are a couple of teenagers. At this age, social or personal factors tend to negatively affect the formation of identity, character, personality, and behavior (Berdibayeva et al., 2016), thus justifying the chosen delimitation.

However, what is biculturalism? As said by Miriam J. Alvarez in her thesis titled ‘*The Impact Of Bicultural Identity On Perceptions Of Self-Efficacy*’ biculturality or integration — as Berry (1984) names this phenomenon under his four ideologies that describe cultural adaptation for individuals belonging to several cultural systems— is when individuals successfully connect with a host culture while maintaining their cultural identity. (Alvarez, 2016) Nevertheless, biculturality is not only perceived and understood as an ideology, but it is also popularly accepted as a condition, whereas the word bicultural is merely used as an

adjective to describe “people who have access to multiple cultural meaning systems” (Alvarez, 2016) or diverse environments.

Since biculturalism is an immensely extensive phenomenon, several studies on its patterns have been made, although there is specifically one that certainly resonates with this investigation’s purposes. Phinney & Devich-Navarro defined three types of bicultural identification patterns in the year 1997 as alternating, blended, and separated adolescents; similar to what their given names describe, blended bicultural smoothly experience both of their cultures and allow them to come together. Finally, it is separated adolescents, the individuals under this group struggle to connect with their host culture, being compelled to figure it out by themselves. (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997)

When it comes to portraying biculturalism’s direct effects over bicultural individuals — without a previous context about the individual’s lifestyle — the easiest path may be doing it through stereotypes, but despite that, according to Henri Tajfel’s *Social Identity Theory*, it is stipulated that humans self-categorize to fit into a social group. (McLeod, 2019) This involuntary behavior leads to social identification and comparison, allowing stereotypes to emerge.

Likewise, “Inaccurate stereotypes towards Latinos are less likely to be present in the work when it is written by someone of a Hispanic background.” (Lofton, 2015) *Aristotle and Dante* remarks its worth as a primary source for this research, with Benjamin Alire Sáenz, a bicultural man being behind its creation. In another light, it is also intended to observe how the author represents the influence of stereotypes over the development of his story and characters while considering their self-awareness.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, heteronormativity is a term referring to the social belief that being heterosexual is the only natural and normal condition. (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016) This social belief was further elaborated by

many academics, such as Jilian Todd Weiss, who introduced it as “the idea that people are, by heredity and biology, exclusively and aggressively heterosexual” in which “males are masculine men and are only attracted to women.” and vice versa with women and feminists. (Weiss, 2001)

Nonetheless, a delimitation of mainly focusing on the influence gender norms and heteronormativity has over those assigned males at birth was decided, to keep relevance with the book’s storyline and the research question. This being so due to, masculinity being a standard to be met by the Novel’s main characters is an aspect to be analyzed in its chapter as well.

## Chapter 2/ Author's insight

### **2.1 Biculturalism**

Biculturalism is not only one of the main aspects in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*'s storyline, but it is also essential when analyzing the author's background. Benjamin Alire's writing works are generally introspective self-discovery strategies, as evidenced in the chosen novel's title, which openly mentions discovery. He uses his artistic creations to portray his own *identity*, or as put into words by the journalist Cecilia Ballí, Sáenz's poetry and novels are an ode to his inner state. (Ballí, 2013)

In addition to that, there are many similarities between the author and his works. "Sáenz lived a childhood that resembled that of many of his young characters." (Ballí, 2013) Benjamin has lived his entire life as a bicultural man, experiencing the direct influence biculturalism and its stereotypes have over an individual's *identity*. Consequently, he chooses to represent it through his big passions: Art and literature.

Further, Benjamin is very open about his biculturalism; the self-proclaimed *Border Poet* is also the fourth of seven children, born in the year 1954 to a Mexican American family and raised on a small cotton farm near Las Cruces, New Mexico, 45 miles northwest of El Paso, where he currently lives at. (Sáenz, 2014)

### **2.2 Heteronormativity**

The novel *Aristotle and Dante* does not only resemble Sáenz's own bicultural *experiences*, but also his journey and feelings as a — now openly— homosexual man, which leads us to the second topic of this chapter: Heteronormativity, whose importance intensifies when we discuss the novel's specific case. As evaluated before, Benjamin tends to use his works to represent his own *identity*, in this case, he does it through the story's main characters, a duo of bicultural teenagers who explicitly explore their sexual orientation and eventually fall in love as they accept their *queerness*.



Summarized, Benjamin Alire's novel traces the impact and peculiarities of living as a gay teenager under a Mexican American roof, something that he underwent; various aspects such as stereotypical toxic masculinity in Latino men, conservative thinking, and LGBT phobia in bicultural communities are openly depicted. These two aspects are considered pieces of *identity*, yet, to what extent does their blended coexistence change their connotation?

## Chapter 3/ Backgrounds and Environments

### 3.1 The Protagonist: Aristotle Mendoza

Sáenz chose to represent the direct influence of stereotypes over bicultural individuals from a personal perspective, considering that the novel's narrative style is in the first person.

The fifteen-year-old Ari appears as soon as the novel begins, and even without a personal introduction, the reader can infer his biculturalism from small details, such as the music mentioned, which was the remake of *La Bamba*” by Los Lobos, a famous *rock-and-roll* band of the time in which the novel is set (1987) whose members were mostly Mexican Americans (Sáenz, 2012, p. 10-11).

Aristotle’s biculturality is not explicitly mentioned until the second chapter when he makes a bitter joke about the negative stereotypes of being a Mexican saying that he was going to join a gang while casually chatting with his mom, who did not seem to enjoy the comment (Sáenz, 2012, p. 13). Aristotle shows his awareness about joining gangs being a stereotype towards his own culture by responding “I’m Mexican. Isn’t that what we do?” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 13) towards his mother’s previous disapproval. This allows us to confirm Sáenz’s choice to represent the direct influence of stereotypes over bicultural individuals from a personal perspective, from both the good and bad side.

The biculturality of the protagonist has a great influence on his daily life and the way he interacts with his love interest Dante, even when it was only a friendly relationship, which can be seen from the moment they meet, when they both joke about their names (Sáenz, 2012, p. 21), which are, in fact, cultural Latino names that follow the common tradition of naming your kids after a family member and fall into the stereotype of being long and unusual.

Based on the *Social Identity Theory*, it is completely logical for Aristotle’s biculturality to play a significant role in his daily life, since humans tend to involuntarily self-categorize to fit

in social groups. In multiple times Ari identifies as a Mexican and does rarely acknowledge his American side. However, not being American enough was a big insecurity of his as a kid, as seen on chapter ten, when he tells: “I made up my mind that year—when I was ten—that I wasn’t going to sound like another Mexican. I was going to be an American. And when I talked I was going to sound like one.” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 78) The fact that Aristotle at fifteen years old identifies himself as Mexican is proof of him being an embodiment of Henri Tajfel’s theory since he makes a part of this social group and was afraid of not belonging to the Americans when he was a kid.

Thus, biculturalism affects the main character’s life, which is the only explicitly named phenomenon in the research question. Nonetheless, it is vital to understand how heteronormativity is characterized by him as an independent piece of identity, before analyzing the traits of a fusion of both concepts.

Regarding heteronormativity, he is falling into the *macho* stereotype when he defends himself by acting tough. Aristotle knows that his behavior is far from pacifistic, and he acknowledges it in the third chapter after he obscenely responds to a group of boys that messed with him, confessing in his inner thoughts that he had already punched one of those guys once and did not regret it. As he put it into words himself: “I’d punched the guy. Enemies for life. I wasn’t sorry. Yeah, well, I had a temper. I admit it.” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 16)

Regardless of his hostile reactions and involuntary ways of asserting power—which is a trait of toxic masculinity influenced by gender norms—Aristotle despised *machismo*. His situation respecting masculinity reached the point of him feeling uncomfortable and misunderstood. Ari mentions it in the fourth chapter when he says in his inner monologue: “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 (...), I just didn’t belong.” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 19)

Right after he overheard two eighteen-year-old lifeguards make disrespectful comments about girls' bodies.

Nonetheless, his behavior and feelings towards masculinity are mixed and harsh. While on one side Ari did not decipher the *macho* attitudes; he felt like he was another breed and ashamed about being a boy "I think it embarrassed the hell out of me that I was a guy." (Sáenz, 2012, p. 19-20) On the other side, he unconsciously acknowledges the possibility of falling on the gender norms, scared and insecure "And it really depressed me that there was the distinct possibility that I was going to grow up and be like one of those assholes." (Sáenz, 2012, p. 20) Thus Aristotle is only a teenager in formation and his *identity* is not fully built yet.

### **3.2 The Deuteragonist: Dante Quintana**

Both phenomena, biculturalism, and heteronormativity are represented by Benjamin Alire through a personal viewpoint, but there are also diverse components of the book that embody both aspects well from a derivative perspective. Hence surges the second main character, Dante Quintana. More than just another character, Dante is sensitive, open, and communicative, he has qualities that Aristotle lacks since his main purpose in the novel is complementing Ari, so that they both can develop together in their self-discovery journey.

Dante belongs to the same social groups as Aristotle, he is also Mexican American. Still, his bicultural *experiences* differ significantly from Aristotle's: As said by Ari himself "I was darker than he was. And I'm not just talking about our skin coloring. He told me I had a tragic vision of life." (Sáenz, 2012, p. 23) The factor that connects this philosophy with biculturalism is when he proceeds to specify that to his mind he is just more Mexican, and "Mexicans are a tragic people." (Sáenz, 2012, p. 23) Additionally, Aristotle is not the only

one who perceives Dante as less Mexican, the alluded has called himself a *pochó*<sup>1</sup>. This is proof, that even if Dante is a *pochó* and not as Mexican as Ari, his purpose in the novel is portraying a different side, with its lows and highs as well.

According to the characteristics of Phinney & Devich-Navarro's bicultural identification patterns (1997) both Aristotle and Dante share the traits of separated adolescents' type. The difference is that while Aristotle's host culture (the one he struggles to connect with the most) is the American, Dante struggles to connect the most with his Mexican side, shown in some of his statements such as "*You know what I think, Ari? I think Mexicans don't like me.*" (Sáenz, 2012, p. 37) Thus the connotation of both phenomena manifested themselves in different ways during the formation of their *identities*, although they have things in common and share social groups.

When it comes to heteronormativity, there is a world of differences between Aristotle and Dante, even though they are both directly affected by it. Unlike Ari, Dante does not seem to care much about demonstrating his masculinity, he is certainly open about his emotions and way more expressive with his affection. Dante lacks the unconscious need that Aristotle has to fit the mold of 'proper and traditional masculinity, and he is not afraid of crying. Just how Ari expressed in his monologue from the twelfth chapter right after Dante cried in front of him: "*And why was it that some guys had tears in them and some had no tears at all? Different boys lived by different rules.*" (Sáenz, 2012, p. 51) While gender norms exist and influence both of them, they are identified as unique boys in agreement with Dante's role in the novel, which is encouraging Aristotle to be more communicative, open, and vulnerable, as well as complementing him on their road to *discover the secrets of their universe*.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Aristotle a *pochó* is "A half-assed Mexican." (Sáenz, 2012, p. 42)

### 3.3. Development background

The development background of both characters allows us to start from the fact that their Mexican American origin is not the only factor that defines the growth of the members of both families. As for all adolescents of any culture, the background of a family determines the formation of personalities and characteristics beyond genetics, not to mention their impact on identities yet. (Berdibayeva et al., 2016)

To give an illustration, we can look back at the previous descriptions made in the past chapters; we have two Mexican-Americans who experience their biculturality in different ways. Despite both of them fitting the description of a separated adolescent type of bicultural (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997), their comfort is aimed to opposite conditions. Additionally, when it comes to their heteronormativity, they are quite complementary opposites as well: A hard and a soft boy, a *macho* and a nice guy who like each other. But, how come they are so different?

The answer to this question is simply their background, which in this case are the dynamics, education, morals, and parenting in their homes. Starting with the Family Mendoza: Aristotle's father, Jaime is an ex-Marine mailman who went off to Vietnam's war (Sáenz, 2012, p. 17-18), and Liliana, his wife is a normal school teacher. (Sáenz, 2012, p. 12) They both raised Ari together and by themselves since he was born right after Jaime came back from the war. Aristotle had three older siblings which he did not get to know well, because of their age difference of more than eleven years. The dynamic issue emerges with Ari's older brother, Bernardo who is in prison for a motive that the Mendoza parents kept hidden from their youngest child, Ari. (Sáenz, 2012, p. 17-18)

Significantly, Jaime's post-traumatic stress from the war aligned with the secrecy and mysteries harmed the family's communication. "*It's not such an easy thing to be the son of a man who's been to war.*" (Sáenz, 2012, p. 17) Thus, according to Stiles, Schuster &

Harrigan's (1992) *Fever Model* keeping secrets is often associated with psychological distress. Therefore, the Mendoza family's lack of communicative skills resulted in Ari being an introverted and insecure but brave child who is only capable of communicating with his mother, a high school teacher who knows how to deal with adolescents by profession. "*My mom and I, sometimes the thing we had between us was easy and uncomplicated. Sometimes. But me and my dad, we didn't have that.*" (Sáenz, 2012, p. 28)

By contrast, the Quintana Family has a simple dynamic with an optimal communication. Dante's parents, Sam and Soledad are respectively an English professor and a therapist, who raised their son in an intellectual and healthy environment. (Sáenz, 2012, p. 26) Due to their open and healthy family relationship, Dante resulted in an extroverted, confident, and decided boy with amazing social skills. In other words: Dante is Aristotle's complementary opposite.

Thus, it is necessary to remind the complexity surrounding identities as a social construct; as formulated in the theoretical framework it is essential to perceive the massive area this term covers besides acknowledging the rare tendencies of the several notions of a given identity matching each other. Last chapter established that Sáenz's work understands identity as a result of the influence various social aspects have over the self. On top that, this *coming-of-age* novel exhibits the development and growth of two teenagers who *identify* as Mexican-Americans in two distinct ways.

Aristotle and Dante meet at the age of fifteen, and by the end of the novel they are about to become eighteen-year-olds. As a critical age for the build of identities (Berdibayeva et al., 2016), many identity crises can be seen from the readers point of view, since Aristotle's inner thoughts and monologues are shown in the first person.

Under previous verdicts, Ari and Dante's self notions differ that much from each other due to their particular *experiences* regarding the discussed phenomena. In other words, the aftermath of a social construct's manifestation is to modify the other's connotation: For

example, the heteronormative situations Ari and Dante experience are interpreted from their bicultural brains, but their reactions are not quite alike. While Aristotle reacts to gender norms in a typical Mexican *macho* way, Dante does not give them the same amount of importance, ignoring heteronormative masculinity, since he feels more connected to his American side. Even if the Mendoza family emphasized their education from Mexican morals and values, and the Quintanas were a lot more flexible about their cultural heritage, identity remains at the end of the day as an individual experience, regards of *social groups and organizations*.

The book concludes with Aristotle finally standing up against his toxic masculinity and the *macho* stereotype, when he admits his romantic feelings towards Dante. This reaffirms Dante's purpose for the coming-of-age novel, but his own growth regarding heteronormativity was battling against homophobic oppression as soon as he came out.

Summarizing, identities are defined by individual and group experiences that work together and influence each other, biculturalism is one of those.



## Conclusion

In the song, *Boys Don't Cry* (1986) the English-speaking band *The Cure* illustrates a guy trying to act the way society expects him to, masculine. In parallel, a couple of years later in 1990, Spanish-speaking singer-songwriter Miguel Bosé released his album entitled *Los chicos no lloran* which translates to “*boys don't cry*”. It is not a coincidence that Benjamin Alire chose to set *Aristotle and Dante* in the year 1987. All of the three above mentioned pieces of work share something in common: they are attempts to depict shared *experiences* related to the male identity from a critical perspective towards heteronormativity.

However, what makes Sáenz's work so unique? The answer is simple: He took advantage of his opportunity, and conjoined both perspectives, the English-speaking and the Hispanic, to create a new research point. Benjamin Alire brought culture as an element to explain the reason behind boys not crying. The analyzed novel implicitly deciphers that, the motive why boys in the 80's did not cry is their *identity* and its crises.

As shown, *identities* are defined by individual and group *experiences* that work together and influence each other, biculturalism is one of those. The main goal of this essay is to analyze to what extent is biculturality portrayed in the novel, yet the research did not only explore and work this question out, but also help us notice the whole magnitude behind the novel's purpose and message.

Benjamin Alire has previously stated his intentions behind writing, for instance when he told Cecilia Ballí: “I write all my books to save my life, I think.” (Ballí, 2013) His work is clearly introspective, he probably wanted to find out why boys did not cry too. Still, when he shared his own work with the world, he also helped many people to open their eyes and learn about various topics, such as the struggle teenagers facing the in 80's regarding their identities and gender norms, not to mention how it particularly increased for bicultural separated adolescents, such as Ari, Dante and maybe Sáenz himself.

All things considered, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a splendid and successfully executed attempt to portray biculturalism. Not only is the phenomenon of biculturalism well and realistically represented, but the novel is also a piece of *human ingenuity*. Hopefully, stigmas surrounding biculturalism, will reduce within time.

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