

# Living in the Space Between: Finding the Modern Fight for LGBT+ Equality in Benjamin Alire Sáenz' *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

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## Faculty Introduction

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Dr. Kandi Tayebi

Ms. Olivieri wrote this paper in our undergraduate Literary Theory course. She takes a New Historicist/Queer theory approach to the Sáenz novel, illustrating how the epistemes of the time (both when the novel was written and the time when the story takes place) affect the theme of the novel and its illustration of the “coming out” story. She demonstrates Sáenz handling of the complicated concept of coming out of the closet while addressing the historical practice of defining those in the LGBT+ community as diseased and broken. Our discipline has just started to analyze Young Adult literature geared toward the LGBT+ community, so this paper takes on a current trend, and Sáenz is an award-winning writer. The importance of the topic to today’s society and the LGBT+ community’s struggle for equality makes the paper an important contribution.

## Abstract

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Throughout history, queer identities have been fundamentally linked to disease. This paradigm complicates the process of identity formation for many in the LGBT+ community who have learned that leaving the closet often means being seen as threatening and diseased. These concepts have been exacerbated by moments in queer history like AIDS Epidemic and the fight for marriage equality. This struggle is exemplified in Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a story of two queer boys, Ari and Dante, growing up in El Paso, Texas, during the late 1980s. Through a historical examination of the text, a message of hope is found within the throws of the AIDS Epidemic for the young queer people who, in 2012, were bearing witness to one of the longest standing fights of queer history.

Throughout history, the LGBT+ community has often been viewed as dangerous and their identities fundamentally linked to disease. This paradigm complicates the process of identity formation for many in the LGBT+ community who have learned that leaving the closet often means being seen as threatening, diseased, and broken. In “The Epistemology of the Closet,” queer theorist Eve Sedgwick recognized the 1986 ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick* as a key event for the LGBT+ community that led to further discrimination as the justices ruled that sexual acts in one’s bedroom were not private if one were homosexual and thus could lead to prosecution (71). Seen as sick and immoral, homosexual men became subject to legal and social attacks. This shift led some in the LGBT+ community to understand that the “closet door—never very secure as protection—[was] even more dangerous” in the 1980s (71). Coming out or not, both became untenable positions, which potentially subjected one to the danger of being labeled diseased or broken. Consequently, when the AIDS Epidemic attracted global attention during the 1980s, affecting primarily homosexual men, fear translated into legal and social boundaries that only served to increase AIDS scare. This fear was reignited in the late 2000s and early 2010s when the fight for marriage equality began to gain traction in the United States and fights broke out across the world to push back by means of social, political, and legal campaigns. Both of these major events have shaped the way people talk about the LGBT+ community, and their traces can be found throughout queer media, especially in literature.

In 2012, Benjamin Alire Sáenz published his first queer novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. At first, the novel sounds like a typical coming out narrative as Sáenz tells the story of two queer boys, Ari and Dante, growing up in El Paso, Texas, during the late 1980s; however, upon further examination, the story grows into a message for young queer people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century about overcoming biases and embracing the multiplicity of identity. This message is found in Ari and Dante’s journey to accepting themselves and understanding how, despite being set in what would have been an incredibly hostile environment for young queer men, they face little adversity. In what has been described as a “star-spangled finale” (Poole 1), the novel ends with the two boys admitting their love for each other with both of their parents in full support and Ari thinking to himself, “How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (259). In fact, Ari’s father “disrupts heteronormative stereotypes by nurturing, rather than suppressing, his son’s homosexuality” (Matos). While it is a truly beautiful and hopeful scene, the idea of its taking place during the height of the AIDS Epidemic in a state that was openly hostile to homosexuality requires a stretch of the imagination.

Despite being set in the 1980s, readers must remember that this novel is for those who were shaped not by the AIDS Epidemic, but by the fights for marriage equality and equal rights under the law.

## Pre-1980s - The Homosexual Disease

Homosexuality and other forms of same-sex attraction have a long history of being equated to illness and disease. It was not until 1974 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a mental illness, and even then it was only renamed to ego-dystonic homosexuality until 1988 (Haldeman 149). Yet this definition neither began nor ended the correlation between sexuality and disease. Before its removal from the DSM, the “condition” of homosexuality was talked about by

psychiatrists as either a disease or a choice, as exemplified by Edmund Bergler’s controversial book *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* published in 1956. Even after homosexuality was removed from the DSM, those in the medical field—specifically

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psychology—viewed it as an abnormality that could be traced, explained, and avoided, as Richard R. Troiden argues in his paper on the subject in 1979. These views of homosexuality spread throughout the public and brought about a spike in homosexual conversion therapy in the 1960s and ’70s, when the treatment was modeled and popularized by Irving Bieber (Haldeman 150-151). As homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness, the public began attaching LGBT+ identities to perversion—specifically pedophilia—which led to laws criminalizing homosexual acts as well as spikes in violence against people in the community.

If homosexuality and disease have a long-standing history together, then violence and homosexuality have a codependent relationship going back to well before modern science. It was not until 1986 that Congress first held a hearing about violence against LGBT+ people with the intention of adding sexual orientation to the Hate Crime Statistics Act (HCSA). The HCSA ultimately passed in 1990, but not before the Simon-Hatch Amendment was added that carried with it the view that homosexuality was against “American family life,” which was the “Foundation of American Society” (Herek). Since violent crimes against queer people have been recorded, sexual orientation has remained the third largest contributor to hate crime

attacks at 17% overall (Marzullo 5), with occasional spike years like that of 2016, which was named the deadliest year on record for LGBT+ people by the FBI (“National Report” 1).

## The Novel’s Reflection of the 1980s

The novel begins when Ari Mendoza wakes up to an El Paso radio station announcing that it is the fifteenth of June 1987, placing this story’s beginning just over two weeks after President Reagan first publicly announced plans to address the AIDS Epidemic (“A Timeline of HIV”). This announcement came when the number of reported cases in the United States was around 47,000 with over 71,000 globally (“History of HIV”). Along with being at the height of the AIDS Epidemic, this story also takes place just two weeks shy of the one-year anniversary of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, a Supreme Court decision that upheld the criminalization of same-sex sodomy in twenty-six states, including Texas (“Bowers v. Hardwick”). With these kinds of events preceding that of the story, readers are inexplicitly shown the weight of the situation for these two boys and what obstacles they are likely to face.

Throughout the novel, homosexuality is linked to violence, mirroring the experiences of the LGBT+ community at the time. The most jarring example of violence in the story is when Dante is beaten by a group of boys when they find him and another boy kissing in an alley (307). He spends four days in the hospital to monitor his concussion from the attack, and from the moment he gets out, Ari can tell that “they cracked more than his ribs” (325). Being beaten for something as personal as one’s sexuality wounds deeper than broken bones, and in the 1980s, gay men experienced this all too frequently. According to a study conducted in 1984 by Kevin T. Berrill in association with the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 19% of the 2,074 participants had been physically assaulted at least once in their lives and 47% of those had been assaulted multiple times (275). Violence has always been a part of the LGBT+ community, a result of queer people being seen as broken, sick beings who should remain in the closets they have left behind, and Dante learns this lesson the hard way.

Violence, while being the most obvious, was not the only reality of the time Sáenz alludes to in the novel. The AIDS Epidemic rears its head at several points in the story, not through explicit mentions, but by images and themes that are recognizable within their contexts. The first is a reoccurring theme of sickness and hospitalization throughout the story. It begins when Ari wakes up with the flu only about three weeks after he meets Dante (64). This flu stays with him for over a week, causing

terrible nightmares filled with solitary imagery, and he describes them to his father as dreams in which he was trying to find himself (65). Aside from the implication that this flu was triggered by meeting the boy he will eventually admit to loving, this image of loneliness during sickness was the reality for many AIDS victims who died alone. Additionally, both boys are hospitalized either directly or indirectly due to their sexuality. Dante is beaten for kissing another boy while Ari is hospitalized for pushing Dante out of the way of a speeding car, a sacrifice that will lead to two broken legs (107). This connection between sexuality and harm was an unavoidable correlation for people throughout not only the AIDS Epidemic, but also the majority of queer history due to the violence and sickness that has affected the LGBT+ community disproportionately since long before its members were given labels and communities to claim.

During an exchange between Ari and Dante towards the beginning of their friendship, Sáenz again alludes to the AIDS Epidemic as a harbinger for the destruction of the world, an apocalyptic destruction tied to the idea of AIDS being a disease brought about by moral corruption. The boys are talking about one

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of Dante's drawings, and the conversation shifts to Ari and how he always has a look of sadness in his eyes. Dante says, "I used to wake up thinking that the world was ending... The world isn't ending, Ari" (73). This feeling of destruction and annihilation was an all-too-real possibility for queer people in the 1980s. As Douglas A. Feldman and Julia Wang Miller report in their documentary on the history of the AIDS Epidemic, in the early days of AIDS, the majority of fatal cases were homosexual and bisexual men, leading many to believe that the illness was a "gay plague" (17). Not until the 1990s would the public definition be changed to include heterosexual people (21). As test results began showing positive readings for AIDS and HIV, people were given a life expectancy of two years on average. In a study done on gay men who lived through the AIDS Epidemic, Perry L. Halkitis says, "This sense of life ending within a brief period of time... was a sentiment almost all of the men of the AIDS Generation experienced and expressed" (78). For the queer population of the 1980s, the AIDS Epidemic felt like the beginning of the end of the world, and though Ari and Dante do not have explicit contact with the epidemic, their views of the world ending offer a point of connection between them and the men like them who were facing their ends.

## The Transition from Past to Present

While these allusions to the AIDS Epidemic place the novel firmly in the 1980s, there is one line in particular that breaks the impression of a truly historical novel. When Dante is spending the school year in Chicago, he and Ari exchange regular letters. In one of these letters, Dante writes that “someday [he] want[s] to marry a boy” (227). This simple line dropped in the middle of a paragraph is the most glaring sign of its modern conception. The whole fight for equality and civil rights has always been a “two steps forward, one step back” march towards the end goal, especially in the United States. The idea of same-sex marriage, though a common hope in the LGBT+ community, was used more as a political tool than as a concrete demand during the early days of the LGBT+ rights movement. By the height of the AIDS Epidemic, same-sex couples were petitioning for the right to care for their sick partners the same way a heterosexual couple would, and this tension led to *The Wedding* of 1987. On October 10, 1987, 2,000 same-sex couples were unofficially married by Dina Bachelor as part of the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights to protest the lack of domestic rights for same-sex couples (“The Wedding”). As Katrina Kimport writes about in *Queering Marriage*, the focus of the preliminary fight for marriage was the legal rights associated with marriage, such as spousal and family benefits, not the traditional commitment and symbolism found in later activism (43-47).

However, as social progress was made, people began to hope. The arguments in favor of same-sex marriage shifted from legal terms to more abstract, emotionally-appealing ideas. Instead of talking about power-of-attorney and next-of-kin definitions, lawyers began arguing for the right to legitimize life-long commitments of love and affection, and this appeal to the humanity of partnerships worked (Frank 136-137). In 2003, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage (“A Timeline of the Legalization”) and in doing so, sparked a wave of battles across the nation. By 2008, states began to ban same-sex marriage while others legalized it, causing a back and forth that would continue until June 26, 2015, when same-sex marriage was legalized throughout the United States. During the 1980s, the notion of same-sex marriage was a radical idea that was used primarily as a political tool, but in 2012, six states had legalized it, and in 2013, that number would be doubled (“A Timeline of the Legalization”).

The way Dante speaks in future tense about marrying another boy does not share the common view of his generation. For same-sex couples in

the 1980s, the idea of marriage did not represent an institution but rather rights that they were being denied. As the possibility of marriage equality grew from an abstract idea to a genuine hope, the focus shifted from the rights that come with legal marriage to the traditional meaning of marriage: an institution in which two people vow to spend the rest of their lives together. It is this image that Dante's words bring to mind.

This conclusion, however, raises a significant question: why would Sáenz go through the hassle of placing his story during such a specific time-period and winding in allusions to one of the darkest times of queer history? The short answer to this question is that it shows that even in the darkest of times, there is still hope. This hope emerges from embracing the multiplicity of queerness and rejecting the label of disease.

### **The Multiplicity of Queerness**

As Jose Esteban Muñoz says in his book, *Cruising the Utopia*, “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). In essence, queerness is a liminal space that defies definition, just like the story of this novel. The story takes place in El Paso, a city named for its constant status of in-between, and the desert surrounding it becomes the place in which Ari comes to understand and embrace his own queer identity. The desert becomes an “ecotone,” as Ari’s mother calls it—a natural borderland, bringing together the alien and transitional (238). Ari feels out of place everywhere except in the desert, which becomes a utopian space of possibility. Catrin Gersdorf claims that Sáenz, in his earlier novel *Carry Me Like Water*, makes the desert into a utopic space that embraces the strange and unfamiliar but also “becomes a marker of cultural . . . gender and generational difference” (307). It is in this space of possibility that both Ari and Dante come to understand and celebrate their identities as young queer men.

Before this celebration, however, both Ari and Dante inhabit a liminal world caught between the realities of the LGBT+ community in the 1980s and the hopefulness of the legalization of same-sex marriage that occurs at the time Sáenz writes, between the dangers of being in the closet and the dangers of being out. Ari expresses this desire to be both in the closet and outside it when he renames himself. Named Angel Aristotle after his grandfather, Ari renames himself Ari, so he could just switch a letter and be “air” (84). In this way, he “could be something and nothing at the same time . . . necessary and also invisible” (84). Ari, whose real name is Angel, views himself as a fallen, monstrous angel, but by the end of the novel, he



has found hope for salvation.

In that utopic ending mentioned earlier, Ari and Dante drive out to the desert one final time, and along the way, Ari concludes that it is time to stop running from his identities, from his emotions, and from himself (357). The simultaneous simplicity and weight of this moment is exemplified in how Ari does not define himself outside of “Aristotle Mendoza, a free man” (359). During his moment of salvation in the desert, his place of refuge, Ari is nothing more than a boy in love, a boy who has healed and rebuilt himself from a fallen angel to a free man. It is with this picture that Sáenz ends the novel, a clear message that the only way to escape the labels of broken and diseased are to embrace the multiplicity of one’s own identity and all the queerness that comes with it.

### **Conclusion: Live to Fight another Day**

By setting the novel in a time when people in the LGBT+ community were fearing for their lives, when people were assuming that their deaths were signs of divine wrath (Baggett 79), Benjamin Alire Sáenz tells a story of survival. Reality would not have been as kind to Ari and Dante as it appears on paper. These boys would be living in a state that strongly enforced its ban on their relationship; they would be reading news stories that spoke in passing of the deaths of men just like them; they would have faced serious risk of further violence, and the chances of their parents’ acceptance would have been nearly nonexistent. Yet that is not the story that is written. Instead, it is one of hope, of celebrating the liminal nature of being queer, of embracing multiplicity.

The young queer people reading this novel at the time of its publication were living in a country where they were still considered broken. They were seeing ads like the infamous *Gathering Storm*, released by the National Organization for Marriage in 2009 when five states were considering legalizing same-sex marriage, in which people describe the growing fight for equal rights as a storm that will strip the religious of their freedoms (“Human Rights Campaign”). Their preachers were taking hard stances like that of Reverend John Piper, who said in a sermon in 2012, “There is no such thing as so-called same-sex marriage.” The Federal Bureau of Investigation had reported that 20.4% of all hate crimes committed in the United States in 2011 were due to the victim’s sexual orientation (“Victims”). By 2012, the United States was a battleground for civil rights, and the intended audience of this novel was stuck in the middle of it all.

By placing the novel in one of the darkest modern moments for the



LGBT+ community and yet leaving the reader with a story of triumph and hope, Sáenz provides a path for young LGBT+ youth to follow—a path embracing the multiplicity of queerness and discarding the pain and labels of a heteronormative society. He creates a utopia in the undefined space between boy and man, between straight and gay, where readers can draw hope for the battles to come.

Early in the novel, Dante asks Ari when they will “start feeling like the world belongs to [them],” and after a moment, Ari answers, “Tomorrow” (88). Tomorrow came for them, tomorrow came for the young LGBT+ people who read this novel in 2012, and tomorrow will come for those who follow. ■

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## *Student Biography*

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Michelina Olivieri is a senior at SHSU who will be graduating with a degree in English in the spring of 2019. She began her research in the spring of 2018 for Dr. Kandi Tayebi's class on literary theory and criticism, combining her love of history and literature in what began as a passion project for her favorite novel and ended in a truly humbling look into the harsh realities of queer history. After graduation, Olivieri plans to attend graduate school where she hopes to continue her research into how history shapes the fiction that follows it and how fiction, in turn, shapes how we view the future.