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## Out of the Past: Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe, the AIDS Crisis, and Queer Retrosity

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Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is one of the most critically acclaimed LGBTQ-themed books in recent decades. First published in 2012, the young adult novel tells the story of Aristotle "Ari" Mendoza and Dante Quintana, two Mexican American teenagers living in El Paso, Texas. The friendship that develops between the two characters becomes a vehicle for them to explore issues of family, ethnicity, and sexuality. From the moment of its release, *Aristotle and Dante* was showered with overwhelmingly positive reviews. *The Horn Book Magazine* touted the way it "skillfully develop[ed] the relationship between the two boys from friendship to romance" (Hunt 120). Similarly, *Publishers Weekly* called the narrative "a tender, honest exploration of identity and sexuality" (54). As a result, in recent years, *Aristotle and Dante* has been discussed not just in book reviews, but also blog posts, academic essays, and resources for classroom teachers. These discussions have encompassed topics ranging from the portrayal of nonheteronormative sexualities, the representation of Latino identity, and the construction of adolescent masculinity.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of all the attention bestowed on *Aristotle and Dante*, one aspect of the text has not received much critical commentary: its historical setting.<sup>2</sup> Sáenz's narrative takes place during a one-year span that begins in summer 1987 and ends in summer 1988. Far from an incidental backdrop, this time period plays a recurring role in the novel. Over the course of the book, Aristotle references a variety of people and events from this era, such as President Ronald Reagan and popular musicians Madonna, Los Lobos, and U2.

Such references notwithstanding, there is one issue that occupied the forefront of the 1980s that is never mentioned in *Aristotle and Dante*: the AIDS crisis. The disease permeated the American medical as well as mainstream consciousness throughout 1987 and 1988. The virus was spreading at an alarmingly rapid rate throughout the United States. Moreover, it was a universally fatal condition. Accordingly, the disease was a frequent headline in print and television news; it dominated national politics as well as debates about health policy, and it also

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these issues, see Ralph J. Poole's "Boys Kissing in the Desert: Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*," *Explicator*, 74.2 (April-June 2016): 125 – 128; Victoria Singh Gill's "Intersectional Identities from the Margins," *English Journal*, 107.5 (May 2018): 80 – 82; and Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn's "Scenes of Sex and Violence in Recent Award-Winning LGBT-Themed Fiction and the Ideologies They Offer Their Readers," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37.6, (2016): 867 – 886.

<sup>2</sup> For a notable exception to this trend, see Angel Daniel Matos's chapter titled "Narratives of a Future Past: Post-Queerness and the Young Adult Historical Novel" in his dissertation "Feeling Infinite: Affect, Genre, and Narrative in Young Adult Queer Literature."

heavily shaped public opinion regarding homosexuals and homosexuality. Given both the centrality of AIDS to the period, and the role it specifically played in constructing gay male identity and sexuality, it is puzzling that *Aristotle and Dante* omits it. After all, the book is a love story that chronicles the coming out process of two teenage boys. That these events could occur against the backdrop of AIDS without actually mentioning the epidemic seems implausible, even in a work of fiction.

The silence about AIDS in *Aristotle and Dante* raises a number of social, political, and literary questions. Why would Sáenz have his LGBTQ-themed novel take place in the closing years of the 1980s, but then wholly neglect a major event occurring not merely in the nation but especially in the queer community at this time? Additionally, and even more seriously, how does the book's omission of the epidemic undercut or at least complicate popular perceptions about its laudatory engagement with LGBTQ issues? Can *Aristotle and Dante* still be viewed as a positive portrayal of queer identity when it fails to engage with one of the biggest challenges to, as well as catalysts for, the LGBTQ community during the era in which it is set?

This essay explores the answers to these questions using two very different approaches and perspectives. The first portion maps out the literary, cultural, and readerly stakes in Sáenz's narrative being set in the mid-1980s while never referencing the AIDS crisis. As I assert, this absence is not merely historically puzzling, but even politically problematic. The omission of the epidemic can be regarded as undercutting the book's claims to realism, its engagement with LGBTQ issues and identity, and—given its readership of young adults who may not know the history of AIDS in the 1980s—the responsibility it has to its audience.

That said, the second half of this essay shifts gears—or, perhaps more accurately, reverses them. I make a case that there is an alternative and more redemptive way of viewing the omission of the AIDS crisis from *Aristotle and Dante*. What might initially be regarded as a problematic historical oversight can also be viewed as a politically-infused insight. To do so, I draw on—while simultaneously adding to—ongoing critical conversations regarding queer temporalities. Much has been written in recent years about how YA novels featuring LGBTQ content engage with the issue of time. Narratives such as *Boy Meets Boy* participate in what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) has termed *queer futurity*—or the imaginative construction of an upcoming era that is not dominated by homophobia and, by extension, the hardships that arise from it. These novels offer a more utopian vision of what life might be like for LGBTQ

individuals after the most insidious forms of socio-political oppression have been eradicated. Accordingly, the closing portion of my discussion makes a case that *Aristotle and Dante* expands the range or repertoire of queer temporalities to a new realm that I call *queer retrosity*—the imaginative construction of a past that was not dominated by homophobia and the hardships that arose from it. Sáenz’s text offers a window onto the lives that might have been led and the stories that might have been told about them had the AIDS crisis not taken place—or, at least, had it not been allowed to grow to such epidemic proportions through homophobia-fueled neglect, fear, and apathy. In so doing, *Aristotle and Dante* can be regarded not merely as a historical novel, but as a new type of queer speculative fiction. By carefully probing the book’s historical omission and then exploring the disparate ways in which that absence might be interpreted, the pages that follow seek to do more than offer a new way of viewing Sáenz’s narrative; they also strive to model a potential interpretive approach to other LGBTQ-themed young adult novels that engage with history.

#### **“Dad Says Reagan is a Fascist”: *Aristotle and Dante* and the 1980s**

The opening chapter of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* firmly establishes the book’s temporal setting. The novel’s fifteen-year-old narrator-protagonist wakes up one hot summer morning and groggily turns on his radio. “Wake up, El Paso! It’s Monday, June fifteenth, 1987! 1987! Can you believe it?” the DJ announces (6). Lest readers forget this date, Ari repeats it at multiple other points in the text. For example, when classes commence in the fall, he reflects: “First day of school, Austin High School, 1987” (158). On New Year’s Eve, he tells his mom before heading out the door: “1987. Glad that’s over” (214). When Mrs. Mendoza reminds her son that the past year was a good one for their family, Ari concedes: “I raised my coffee cup toward her in a toast. ‘Here’s to ’88’” (214). The following page contains additional references to the specific time period. “Work wasn’t so busy,” Ari informs reader, “The rain kept people away, so the four of us who were working took turns trying to sing our favorite songs of 1987” (215).

Far from an isolated comment, Ari loves music, and he frequently references popular songs and musical groups. On the opening page, for example, he tells readers that the radio played “the remake of ‘La Bamba’ by Los Lobos” (6). Ari mentions this song, which was a nationwide hit in 1987, no fewer than five times in the following two pages alone. Then, he

brings it up again twice more before the novel ends (149, 215). Los Lobos is not the only popular band mentioned in Sáenz's novel. He also names the song "Faith" by George Michael, and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" by U2 (215). When Ari is reminding readers about popular culture in the 1980s, he is reminding them of the socio-political landscape. During a conversation with his mother, for example, he relays his father's view of the president: "Dad says Reagan is a fascist" (68). As these examples demonstrate, *Aristotle and Dante* repeatedly locates its characters and plot in this specific historical moment.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz has discussed in articles and interviews why he chose to set his novel in the 1980s. As he remarked to *School Library Journal*, "I didn't want to have all this texting stuff in the book" (qtd in Peterson 18). Because Aristotle and Dante live in a world that predates the immediacy of digital and cellular technology, their interactions occur more slowly and deliberately. The pair's relationship develops through phone calls, face-to-face conversations, letters sent through the mail, and, paradoxically, time spent apart. For example, Dante's father, who is an English professor, accepts a visiting faculty position in Chicago, Illinois. Consequently, the whole Quintana family moves to Illinois in August 1987 and stays there until May 1988. Aristotle and Dante communicate with each other during this time via lengthy, and often very touching, letters. Had the book taken place from 2007 to 2008 instead of 1987 to 1988, these epistolary elements would have looked different; the boys probably would not have written each other mailed letters. Instead, they would have sent emails, texts, or instant messages over some form of social media platform. Given the often staccato nature of communication in these digital venues, much of the personal detail as well as emotional tenderness of their missives might have been lost.

A desire to avoid twenty-first century technology was not the only factor fueling Sáenz's decision to situate his book in the 1980s. As he has also remarked about *Aristotle and Dante*, "I wanted it to be set not in the present time, because I think it's easier now for boys to admit they're gay. In the 1980s I don't think it was so easy" (qtd in Peterson 18). Few would disagree with this assertion. In 1987, the LGBTQ community in the United States faced a myriad of social, economic, and political obstacles to living openly that have now been—if not wholly eradicated—then at least seriously eroded. Throughout the 1980s, for example, nonheteronormative individuals were barred from being foster or adoptive parents ("Stonewall Inn"). In addition, they did not have the right to marry or even form civil unions. Similarly, the

LGBTQ community did not have legal protections from employment discrimination, either on the state or on the federal level. As a result, coming out could and often did mean losing one's job. Given that many Americans during this era still erroneously linked homosexuality with pedophilia, this possibility was a near certainty for gay men and lesbians who worked with children: teachers, daycare workers, camp directors, coaches, pediatricians, etc.

This historical reality is depicted in *Aristotle and Dante*. In the closing chapters of the book, Dante is brutally attacked in an alley by a group of boys who see him kissing Daniel. As Mrs. Quintana 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 rushes to the hospital, and he is shocked by how seriously his friend has been hurt: "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). Enraged, Ari learns the names of the boys who attacked Dante, tracks one of them down and beats him. Later, while talking with Mr. Quintana, Ari explains that one of the reasons he took action against the other boy is because he knew that the attack against Dante would not be taken seriously due to 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)

While experiencing external forms of homophobia from family members, peers, and society at large, Aristotle and Dante also experience internalized homophobia—or their own feelings of shame about being homosexual. In one of the letters that Dante writes to Ari while he is living in Chicago, he imagines coming out to his parents and how they might react to this news. His musings on the subject are filled with self-loathing: "*I hate that I'm going to disappoint them, Ari. I know I've disappointed you, too*" (227). Dante closes his letter with remarks that suggest an even lower sense of self-worth because 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 best-friend material, am I?*" he writes (228). Not only does Dante think that he has failed as a son because he is homosexual, but he also believes that his sexual orientation renders him undesirable as a friend.

Ari also struggles with powerful feelings of internalized homophobia. In the closing pages of the novel, when the narrator-protagonist's parents have a frank talk with him about his feelings for Dante, these sentiments are vividly apparent. Mr. Mendoza rightly remarks "I think you love [Dante] more than you can bear" and Ari responds "What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed" (349). When his mother tries to dissuade him, he reiterates: "I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be. [. . .] I hate myself" (349). Mr. and Mrs. Mendoza reaffirm their acceptance and support, but Ari feels undeserving because of his attraction to Dante. "How can you love me so much?," he asks in a heartbreaking question (349).

Both Aristotle and Dante's feelings of shame can be placed in dialogue with what Sara Ahmed has termed the "unhappiness archive" of LGBTQ lives. As she explains, "the queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life, as a life without the 'things' that make you happy," namely a socially-sanctioned spouse and children that are the product of that union (Ahmed 93). That said, the unhappiness associated with nonheteronormative lives extends beyond the feelings of discontent experienced by the queer individual; it also negatively impacts their kinship circle. "The queer child fails to inherit the family by reproducing its line," Ahmed writes. "This failure is affective; [they] become an unhappiness-cause" (Ahmed 95). Dante gives direct voice to these sentiments. As Aristotle shares with Mr. Quintana near the end of the novel, Dante "was so happy that you were going to have another baby. And not just because he was going to be a big brother. And he said, 'He has to be a boy and he has to like girls.' That's what he said. So that you could have grandchildren. So that you could be happy" (303). As these comments reveal, Dante feels that he failed as a man, as a friend, and especially as a son because he is gay.

### **"A Pivotal Social Issue in 1987": The AIDS Crisis in the United States and in the LGBTQ Community**

While *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* depicts both the external and internal forms of homophobia that pervaded the 1980s, it omits one of the main issues fueling these sentiments: the AIDS crisis. By summer 1987, when the novel commences, AIDS had taken a devastating toll on the gay community in the United States. As Randy Shilts has documented, HIV infection rates had reached epidemic proportions: nearly 30,000 Americans "were dead or dying of the disease" (588). Meanwhile, doctors speculated that for every one

person who knew they were HIV+, there were as many as five others who carried the virus but did not realize it (Shilts 585).

Although anyone could contract the disease through sexual contact with an infected person or by receiving contaminated blood or blood-related products, AIDS was associated almost exclusively during the 1980s with a specific demographic: gay men. As G. Thomas Couser notes, “AIDS [was] seen not only as a disease of excess but of perversity” (87). In a now-infamous editorial that appeared in the *New York Post* in 1983, Reagan advisor Pat Buchanan asserted, “The poor homosexuals—they have declared war against Nature, and now Nature is exacting an awful retribution” (31). Buchanan was not alone in this viewpoint. Many believed AIDS “to be God’s method of punishing homosexuals” (Couser 103). Some even welcomed the epidemic as a means of “cleansing” the population of “deviants.” As Virginia Anderson reported, “In March of 1985, *Daily News* gossip columnist Liz Smith reported that *New York* magazine critic John Simon was overheard by several people following a Broadway production declaring, ‘Homosexuals in the theatre! My God, I can’t wait until AIDS gets all of them!’” (231). Meanwhile, even those who did not see the disease as divine retribution regarded it “as the symptom of a ‘sick’ and depraved lifestyle” (Couser 103).

The years 1987 and 1988 were particularly noteworthy both in the fight against the disease and in the fight for LGBTQ rights in the United States. The AIDS crisis energized, united, and mobilized the queer community in a way that hadn’t occurred before. As I have written on this subject, the epidemic precipitated “a level of organization, urgency, and activism that was unprecedented” (*Tomboys* 228). The year 1987 can be seen as the flashpoint for this phenomenon in many ways. From the year’s opening months through its closing weeks, it was filled with significant events in the battle against the disease and against homophobia. On March 19, 1987, for example, the drug AZT was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment for HIV (“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS” 4). The antiretroviral medication marked the first official therapy for the disease, thus beginning the shift from AIDS being a fatal condition to one that could be managed and survived. Accordingly, news of AZT made front-page headlines in newspapers around the nation. Although it would still be years until the death rates from AIDS slowed, AZT was a major turning point in the battle against HIV. Also in March 1987, the activist group ACT UP—an acronym for “AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power”—was founded in New York City by Larry Kramer. The organization would quickly

become one of the most visible as well as successful in advocating for AIDS research, drug trials, and patient treatment (Abate *Tomboys* 228–29).

Later in the year, on October 11, 1987, the first National Coming Out Day was held. The event was organized to combat the personal shame and social stigma associated with being LGBTQ, especially amidst the national hysteria over AIDS. As part of the celebration for National Coming Out Day, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt went on display for the first time on the National Mall. Started by Cleve Jones in San Francisco, the Quilt, which was comprised of 4-foot by 8-foot cloth panel tributes sewn by friends and family members from around the nation who had lost loved ones to the disease, helped to foster compassion for victims of AIDS. The exhibit of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt exhibited in Washington D.C. featured 1,920 panels and attracted “a half a million visitors” (“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS” 4). Finally, in November 1987, Randy Shilts published his landmark book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. His painstakingly detailed account of how the AIDS crisis unfolded year by year, month by month, and often day by day became a *New York Times* Bestseller and was nominated for the National Book Award. Given all of these events, as Shilts rightly noted in his book, AIDS was “a pivotal social issue in 1987” (587).

The following year had fewer AIDS-related milestones, but the ones that did occur were just as significant. On May 26, 1988, “The U.S. Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, launch[ed] the United State’s first coordinated HIV/AIDS education campaign by mailing 107 million copies of an 8-page booklet, *Understanding AIDS*, to all American households” (“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS” 4). The act was unprecedented. As Dan Rather noted on *CBS Evening News* on May 3, 1988 about the mailing, “It marks the first time the government has tried to reach every resident regarding a public health crisis” (“The Fight Against AIDS”). To this day, the booklet remains “the largest public health mailing in history” (“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS” 4). Later that year, on December 1, 1988, the first World AIDS Day was observed. The event, which was organized by the World Health Organization, was recognized in countries around the globe as well as supported by the United Nations (“A Timeline of HIV and AIDS” 5).

Even though *Aristotle and Dante* takes place from mid-summer 1987 to mid-summer 1988 and features a romance involving two young men, the AIDS crisis is entirely absent from the book. Neither central character mentions it. Furthermore, the boys never indicate encountering a discussion of AIDS on television or the radio, hearing about the disease from a

friend, classmate, or acquaintance, or reading about the epidemic in a newspaper or magazine. Similarly, while both the Mendoza and the Quintana households presumably received a copy of the Surgeon General's booklet about AIDS in May 1988, it is never discussed. The lack of reference to the mass mailing is especially surprising within Aristotle's family, given what Mr. Mendoza does for a living: he works as a mailman. Aristotle mentions this fact multiple times on multiple pages of the novel. On page 36, for example, these references occur in very quick succession: "I guess I saw him as an ex-Marine who became a mailman after he came home from Vietnam. An ex-Marine mailman who didn't like to talk much. An ex-Marine mailman who came home from a war and had one more son," Ari tells readers (36). Given Mr. Mendoza's profession, he would have delivered a copy of *Understanding AIDS* to every address on his route. Finally, and just as surprisingly, when Ari and Dante come out at the end of the novel, not one of their parents mentions AIDS as a possible concern that they have about their son's future. Neither Mr. and Mrs. Mendoza nor Mr. and Mrs. Quintana bring up the disease as a challenge that Ari and Dante are going to face as queer young men—and especially queer young men of color.<sup>3</sup> As the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported, from its origins, "The greatest impact of the epidemic is among men who have sex with men (MSM) and among racial and ethnic minorities" ("HIV and AIDS"). Moreover, the years 1986 and 1987 were significant ones in both the awareness of this fact and efforts to stem it. In 1986, a special issue of the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* revealed that "Hispanics/Latinos have an overall AIDS rate nearly 3.5 times higher than whites" ("30 years of HIV"). Given this statistic, the following year the CDC held "its first National Conference on HIV and communities of color" ("30 Years of HIV").

The omission of the AIDS crisis from *Aristotle and Dante* is not only conspicuous and perplexing, but frustrating and even disappointing. After all, why would Sáenz call repeated attention to the specific years over which his LGBTQ-themed novel is set, only to neglect this socio-political particularity? Sáenz includes scenes of homophobia-fueled violence, but not ones showing the tragedy of AIDS. Does the author think that his readers can handle Dante being brutally beaten, but not him contracting HIV? This omission is especially problematic, given how often the struggles, problems, and injustices faced by the LGBTQ community have

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word "queer" here instead of "gay" to leave open the possibility that one—or both—of the characters may ultimately identify as bisexual. Given the interest that characters show in girls at various points, I do not wish to erase bisexuality from the novel.

historically been ignored and even erased by heteronormative American society. In many ways, the omission of the AIDS crisis in *Aristotle and Dante* connects it with this practice. Ultimately, this situation invites the question of whether the exclusion of the epidemic be regarded as another example of pinkwashing, the phenomenon of a person or a company presenting themselves publicly as LGBTQ-friendly, but then also engaging in politically regressive and even overtly homophobic practices. A common example is a company that advertises its products to LGBTQ communities, but then also donates to organizations that fight against LGBTQ rights.

*Aristotle and Dante* has been praised for its sensitive treatment of gay male sexuality. As Karen Coats observes, the narrative “explores the boys’ emotional lives with butterfly-wing delicacy” (370). Likewise, *Publishers Weekly* touted the novel as a “passionate reminder that love—whether romantic or familial—should be open, free, and without shame” (54). In light of these features, *Aristotle and Dante* received both a Lambda Literary Award and a Stonewall Book Award, two of the highest accolades that can be bestowed on a text featuring LGBTQ content. As the website for the Stonewall Book Award explains, the honor recognizes literary works that possess “exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience” (“About”). I question how the selection of *Aristotle and Dante* for awards of this nature appears to affirm a laudatory portrayal of LGBTQ identity when it ignores a major event occurring within the queer community during this time. None of the extant reviews about Sáenz’s book acknowledge the problematic paradox that the text is set in the closing years of the 1980s, yet never discusses the AIDS crisis. Especially for its intended young adult audience who did not live during the early days of the disease, may not know its history, and thus might not be aware of the significant role that it played in the LGBTQ community during the 1980s, this omission raises the question of whether *Aristotle and Dante* does more harm than good. Can the novel still be regarded as having “exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender experience” when it ignores or, at least, sidelines a major aspect of that experience to readers?

In March 1987, just months before the plot of *Aristotle and Dante* begins, the AIDS advocacy group ACT-UP was formed. The motto or slogan of ACT-UP was as simple as it was powerful: “Silence = Death.” For too long, the health care system, the general public, and the federal government had either ignored the epidemic altogether or, at the very least, had muffled

the voices of its overwhelmingly queer victims. Only by making the problem of AIDS within the queer community known—to neighbors, friends, family members, employers, and, of course, elected officials—would the epidemic be stopped. For this reason, ACT-UP asserted, it was imperative for LGBTQ individuals to speak up about the crisis (Gould 4–6).

When it comes to the issue of AIDS, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* does not heed this advice. In spite of receiving both a Stonewall Book Award and a Lambda Literary Award, the novel disregards this well-known slogan from the history of the LGBTQ movement. The efforts of ACT-UP helped to break the silence surrounding AIDS in the 1980s, but Sáenz's narrative can ironically—as well as regrettably—be seen as reinstating it.

### **“Wow, A World Without Darkness. How Beautiful Was That?”: A Reparative Reading and Imagining the 1980s without AIDS**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997), commented on a growing trend in the burgeoning field of LGBTQ studies. She observed that, while the number of queer-themed critical readings of literary texts was expanding, the range of their analysis was contracting. The arguments being advanced, along with the conclusions being drawn, were all remarkably the same—and remarkably pessimistic. Overwhelmingly, Sedgwick wrote, they involved scouring a novel or film for any trace of homophobia, identifying at least one instance of it, and then denouncing the work as damaging and detrimental (7). Sedgwick referred to this practice as “paranoid reading.”

This phenomenon did not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, it was a byproduct of the longstanding socio-political experiences of the LGBTQ community. As I have commented, “The negative portrayal of LGBTQ individuals has been so historically pervasive in American culture that it has been normalized. For generations, characters in books, films, and television shows who were coded as queer have served as the object of ridicule, the source of laughter, or the justly-maligned villain” (“Capitol” 405). Stock characters like the effeminate sissy and the mannish lesbian have permeated national print, visual, and popular culture for generations. To quote my previous work on this topic once again, “Given the likelihood that a book, film or television program would contain some negative comment about LGBTQ identity or individuals, the queer community routinely approached popular entertainment with a sense of anxiety, dread,

and even defensiveness” (“Capitol” 399). The question was not *if* they would encounter a homophobic element, but merely *when* this event would occur.

The omission of the AIDS crisis from *Aristotle and Dante* opens up the book to a paranoid reading. While the novel is not homophobic, it does elide the biggest issue facing young gay men, and indeed all people, regardless of their age or sexual orientation, during the years in which it is set. For the narrative to be entirely silent about this issue is not simply disappointing but irresponsible. The book’s lack of engagement with the AIDS crisis can cause it to be seen as artistically flawed, historically inaccurate, and politically problematic.

That said, the critical meaning as well as cultural implication of the AIDS crisis being omitted from *Aristotle and Dante* is neither this simple nor this straightforward. There is an alternative and more positive way to view this facet of the text. While the engagement in paranoid reading is both culturally understandable and, of course, critically valuable given the pervasiveness of homophobia, Sedgwick lamented that this practice had become so universal. After all, not only is paranoid reading disheartening—as critics spend their time pointing out instance after instance of homophobia—but it also often becomes its own reinforcing feedback loop. As Heather Love observed, “paranoia is thinking about all the bad things that have happened in order to be ready for all the bad things that are still to come” (“Truth” 237). For this reason, paranoid reading embodies a type of self-fulfilling prophecy: “LGBTQ audiences expect to see homophobic elements in mainstream forms of popular culture and, accordingly, they find them” (Abate “Capitol” 407).

In light of this situation, Sedgwick proposed a new and radically different approach: what she called “reparative reading.” This practice, Sedgwick asserted, is “no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival” (35). However, in a key distinction, “the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, risks and ambitions” (Sedgwick 35). Rather than being focused on the ways that texts disappoint us, reparative reading reveals the ways in which they surprise us. In the words of Heather Love, a reparative reading “gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions, it prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole” (“Truth” 237–38). Whereas paranoid reading confirms “what we already expected, previously knew and habitually fear” (Abate “Capitol” 407), reparative reading defies our expectations, undercuts our

assumptions, and upends our preconceptions. Consequently, Sedgwick sees reparative reading practices as both more critically complex and, ultimately, more politically productive.

I contend that the lack of reference to the AIDS crisis in *Aristotle and Dante* can be viewed in a reparative way. The book's omission of the disease offers a window onto the lives that might have been led and the personal experiences that might have occurred had the crisis not taken place—or, at least, had AIDS not been allowed to grow to such epidemic proportions through homophobia-fueled fear, prejudice, and apathy. If homosexual men had not been so consumed with fighting the disease, how might they have spent their time and focused their energy? What kind of stories might these individuals have told about exploring, discovering, and revealing their sexuality? Put simply, if homosexual men in the United States during the 1980s did not have to spend time fighting for their lives, what might their lives have looked like?

*Aristotle and Dante* offers a portrait of this world. Of course, happiness, pleasure, and joy coexisted with sorrow, tragedy, and rage during the early years of AIDS. However, Sáenz's book presents an environment where the crisis and its accompanying hardships do not exist. The lives of young gay men, and especially nonwhite young gay men who were disproportionately impacted by AIDS, do not need to share space with a deadly epidemic. Instead of possibly spending their summer sewing a panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the protagonists spend June, July, and August of 1987 engaged in another endeavor: "All that summer, we swam and read comics and read books and argued about them" (19). Similarly, rather than potentially participating in protests with ACT-UP, the pair engages in an alternative activity:

Then I got this idea. "Let's ride the bus and see what's out there.""

Dante smiled. We both fell in love with riding the bus. Sometimes we rode around on the bus all afternoon. (21)

Likewise, in place of scrutinizing their bodies for possible symptoms of the disease, the pair scrutinizes a far different body: the cosmos. As Ari tells us, "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). Meanwhile, as a substitute to perhaps listening to the names of those who had died from AIDS being read aloud on the National Mall during the first Coming Out Day, Aristotle listens to Dante read something else aloud: a book of poems by William Carlos Williams. "I didn't worry about understanding them. I didn't care about what they meant," he tell us, "I didn't care because

what mattered is that Dante’s voice felt real. *And I felt real*” (31). In short, rather than being focused on the medico-scientific mystery of AIDS—how it started, the pathways by which it can be transmitted, whether there will ever be an effective treatment or even a cure—the boys are focused on the physical, emotional, and psychological mystery of each other. “Dante became one more mystery in a universe full of mysteries,” Sáenz’s narrator-protagonist remarks in one of many comments along these lines (19).

Additionally, the absence of the AIDS crisis allows Aristotle and Dante to do more than simply explore their burgeoning sexuality. It also opens up time, space, and energy for them to explore other facets of their lives, including their family, their ethnicity, and events from their past. Both young men, for example, struggle to navigate their identity as Mexican Americans. Throughout the book, the boys debate what it means to be a “real Mexican” living in the United States. When Dante brings his sketchbook to draw Ari, for example, the subject appears:

He studied me. “You look a little pale.”

“I still look more Mexican than you do.”

“Everybody looks more Mexican than I do. Pick it up with the people who handed me their genes.” There was something in his voice. The whole Mexican thing bothered him. (72)

With his fair skin, light brown hair, Italian first name, and inability to speak Spanish, Dante does not feel a strong connection to his racial and ethnic heritage—a detail that is a source of frustration and even shame. In one of the letters that Dante writes to Ari during the year his family is living in Chicago, he muses: “You know, I still don’t really know if I’m a Mexican. I don’t think I am. What am I, Ari?” (172).

Ari also struggles with this issue, but in the opposite way. “I felt the weight of a son in a Mexican family,” he tells readers (93). Rather than worrying that he is not sufficiently Mexican, Ari’s concern is that he is “too Mexican.” As a result, the narrator-protagonist often seeks to distance himself from his ethnic heritage. As he reveals in one of his journal entries: “*When I was ten, I was kinda small and... The only thing I was worried about was trying to speak perfect English. 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*” (94). Had the AIDS crisis been included in the novel, Aristotle and Dante would likely not have the same amount of time or energy to explore these issues. The life-and-death urgency of

the epidemic, combined with its rapid escalation, would have understandably pushed many of these concerns to the background.

Viewed from this perspective, Aristotle and Dante are not hiding from history; they are simply unburdened by it. The text allows the protagonists to explore their lives, identities, and sexualities free from the all-consuming or, at least, overwhelming burden of the AIDS crisis. As Ari muses at one point, “And it seemed to me that Dante’s face was a map of the world. A world without any darkness. Wow, a world without darkness. How beautiful was that?” (56). If the epidemic had been included in the book, it would have cast a shadow over the world of these two young men. By omitting it, Sáenz allows readers to imagine what life might have been like for an entire generation of young gay men who came of age—and came out—during this era.

This interpretive viewpoint adds a new aspect to the literary tropes with which *Aristotle and Dante* can be connected—and even classified. More specifically, it brings Sáenz’s novel in dialogue with what Catherine Gallagher has identified as the “counterfactual tradition” in U.S. literature and popular culture. As she explains about this phenomenon that encompasses not simply books but also films and television, “Late in the last century, a certain kind of historical speculation took root in a surprisingly diverse set of venues... Americans seized on past moments of historical indeterminacy and imagined possible but unrealized alternative consequences that might have resulted” (Gallagher 1). To illustrate, Gallagher provides a specific example: “‘If John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963 and had lived to be a two-term president, the war in Vietnam would have been over by 1968’—is a historical counterfactual... The sentence is not attempting to call the assassination into question or to imply that we should look into it more deeply; it is simply asserting that *but for* the assassination, history would likely have taken a different path” (Gallagher 2). Whether such speculations take the form of a novel, essay, film, or television series, “We give the general name ‘counterfactual history’ to such thought experiments” (Gallagher 1).

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* can be seen as engaging in a similar intellectual project. The omission of the AIDS crisis from the novel is not an invitation for readers to question the historical veracity of the epidemic’s existence during the 1980s—or a statement that this phenomenon was actually a hoax. Instead, akin to speculation about the trajectory that the Vietnam War might have taken had JFK lived, the YA narrative ponders what life in the LGBTQ community—especially for young men of color—might have been like had

AIDS not taken such a powerful hold and devastating toll. As Gallagher notes, both past and present works of the counterfactual tradition share one common trait: they “are hinged onto the actual historical record, usually at a juncture that is widely recognized to have been both crucial and underdetermined” (2). The years 1986 and 1987, in which *Aristotle and Dante* is set, embody a critical point in many ways. As various histories about the epidemic note, “By the end of 1985, every region in the world had reported at least one case of AIDS” (“History of HIV and AIDS Overview”). Sáenz’s young adult novel imagines a far different socio-political trajectory for the two gay characters in the year that immediately followed.

### **Conclusion: Queer Retrosity and a Different Future For the Past**

José Esteban Muñoz, in his groundbreaking book *Cruising Utopia* (2009), offered a controversial critique of the current state of LGBTQ politics. For too long, Muñoz argued, the movement has been focused on the present. From the fight for marriage equality to the battle against workplace discrimination, advocacy work has been preoccupied with pragmatic concerns that are firmly located in the here and now. While the gains made by these efforts have been undeniably beneficial, they have also come at a cost. Instead of questioning the socio-cultural value of monogamous, dyadic, procreative, state-sanctioned sexual couplings, the LGBTQ movement has been working to join those ranks. Muñoz makes a case that if nonheteronormative individuals truly seek to eradicate homophobia, they need to shift their focus away from this queer presentism to what he calls “queer futurity.” Rather than concentrating on joining the status quo in our current era, it ought to direct its energies towards imagining an entirely new socio-sexual system for an epoch that is to come.

A number of LGBTQ-themed young adult novels released in the opening decades of the twenty-first century engage in queer futurity. Books like David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) present a utopian world that is virtually free from homophobia. Levithan’s narrative takes place at a suburban high school where homosexuality has not simply been progressively accepted but wholly normalized: the quarterback of the football team dresses in drag and the gay-straight alliance was formed, not to support LGBTQ students, but to teach the heterosexual kids how to dance. In so doing, the novel is simultaneously a wish and a wish fulfillment. *Boy Meets Boy* helps its LGBTQ readers cope with problems in the present by allowing them to escape to a world where homophobia is extinct. As one reviewer on Goodreads commented:

Sure, I know there probably doesn't exist a place where... the Boy Scouts quit and reform as the Joy Scouts because the Boy Scouts wouldn't accept gay members. But it's nice to suspend your disbelief and just *enjoy* this magical, happy place with it's accepting, encouraging populace where being gay is no more unusual than being straight. (Vinaya, par 2)

That said, utopian LGBTQ-themed novels like *Boy Meets Boy* do more than simply provide escapist fantasy for their young adult readers. They also give their audience hope for a better future. Through their presentation of a world where nonheteronormative individuals do not face discrimination, titles like *Boy Meets Boy* suggest that this current fictive possibility might become a future factual reality.

*Aristotle and Dante* is set in the 1980s, so it obviously does not engage in the queer futurity that is operating in contemporaneous LGBTQ-themed YA novels like *Boy Meets Boy*. But Sáenz's narrative can be seen as suggesting a new temporal variant on this idea: what I am calling *queer retrosity*. This phenomenon participates in the same practice as its predecessor, but it reverses the direction of the chronology: it invites individuals to imagine how a previous time period might have looked had it not been so permeated by homophobia. If *queer futurity* is the creation of an alternative and more utopian vision of the future for LGBTQ individuals and identity, then *queer retrosity* is the imagination of an alternative and more utopian past. This scenario is precisely what Sáenz's novel does. Rather than presenting a world where homophobia has been eradicated, it creates one where a homophobia-fueled event has not been allowed to unfold in the first place. While *Aristotle and Dante* cannot actually go back in time and change history, it can provide a sense of solace and even justice. The narrative acknowledges, honors, and pays tribute to the lives and experiences that were lost. The queer retrosity operating in the book is not intended to inspire action, but to engender healing.

Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), observes that a conundrum in the LGBTQ community "is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of loss, stigma, and violence" (1). For generations, nonheteronormative individuals were seen as mentally ill, sexually deviant, and physically freakish. For groups who have been constituted by such forms of historical injury, Love goes on to remark, "Sometimes it seems it would be better to move on" (1). That is, to forget about these difficult periods and focus on better times and more hopeful circumstances. Love argues, however, that doing so is a

mistake. After all, as she reminds us, “it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting” (1). For this reason, Love encourages those working in LGBTQ studies to engage in what she calls “Feeling Backward”—or an affective stance that embraces rather than avoids difficult moments in its history. “We need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century,” Love asserts (127). Only by doing so, can the community make peace with their past pain, trauma, and suffering.

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* heeds this advice. The YA novel revisits one of the most tragic periods in LGBTQ history. But it does not go there to wallow in the sadness or rage over the injustice—reactions and emotions that have been explored in many previous works about AIDS. Instead, the novel returns to this era to depict the wonder that was denied, the splendor that was stifled, and the joy that was missed.

Catherine Gallagher, in *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Culture*, poses the question, “Why, despite its odd-looking logic, does the counterfactual-historical mode deserve our serious attention?” (4). She identifies three primary reasons: “the role of human agency and responsibility in history”; “the coherence of identity—of individuals, nations, and peoples—through time”; and, finally, as well as arguably most importantly, “the possibilities of historical justice and repair” (Gallagher 4). In contemplating what *could* have been, counterfactuals often reveal what *should* have been. These works, of course, cannot reverse time and right historical wrongs. However, they can “help strengthen collective historical awareness by stitching together decisions about what the nation should do next with judgments about what it has done” (Gallagher 5). Phrased in a different way, by imagining “what the probable alternatives might have been, which is a necessary step in judging them and making use of those judgments in deciding about the future” (Gallagher 5). In so doing, counterfactual narratives provide an unexpected link between the past and the present; their unique form of revisionist history is also, in many ways, a speculative future. Whether dating from the nineteenth-century or appearing in the new millennium, works belonging to this tradition share the same underlying assumption: “to change the status quo in the present, we should try to imagine what sort of past could have led to a present we’d like to inhabit and a future we could wholeheartedly desire” (Gallagher 147). By imaginatively correcting mistakes that were made in the past, we can hopefully avoid repeating those errors in our future decisions.

Ward Moore, in his landmark novel *Bring the Jubilee* (1953) which imagined that the Confederate States of America had prevailed in the Civil War, observed: “That the past is past becomes ever less important. Except for perspective it might as well be the present or the future or, if one can conceive it, a parallel time” (117). Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* offers a similar temporal parallel. Many secrets of the universe went unexplored for members of the LGBTQ community in the 1980s because of the urgency of AIDS. Sáenz’s YA novel offers a compelling portrait of how lives like those of Aristotle and Dante were among them. The omission of any aspect of the AIDS crisis from the novel is not the regrettable flaw that it might first appear; on the contrary, it can be seen as a reparative asset. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is not retreating from history; the narrative is revisiting, reimagining, and redeeming it.

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