Representation of Alternate Masculinities in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

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Abstract
Masculinity and its practice in contemporary life cannot be divorced from the constructions of masculinity that are dictated by traditional hegemonic assumptions of machismo that centre on the definition of being a man in the 21st century. This paper takes contemporary popular young adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) to delineate how adolescent boys in their daily lives practice masculinity, identity, and existence. The novel is further scrutinised vis-à-vis the protagonists in the novel who negotiate their identities and their sexualities keeping in mind the heteronormativity and the pressures presented by hegemonic masculinity in school spaces. The novel is examined for any alternate ways of being queer, male, and masculine through the protagonists' navigation of their daily lives, their relations with their family and the analysis of anger within machismo discourses.
Keywords: masculinity, queer, hegemonic, sexuality, homophobia, violence

Introduction

Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* (1993) defines masculinity as "a place of gender relations through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture" (p. 71). While theorising hegemonic masculinity, Connell argued how it legitimises men's dominant position not just over marginalised individuals but also justified their dominance over other men and their practices of masculinity across race, class and sexuality, thereby subordinating them. *Masculinities* stated that sex roles and hegemonic masculinity are powerful practices that asserted men's privilege while also oppressing them at the same time because it left no space for alternate practices of masculinity. It is seminal in understanding how very few men, if at all, are hegemonically masculine but all men do benefit, to different extents, from hegemonic masculinity.

Todd W. Reeser in *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (2010) reads the term similarly to Connell but further incorporates a post-structuralist theorising of the same extensively. Masculinity was earlier treated like a singular, stable identity whose characteristics were intrinsic to the idea of being masculine and male. It is this very same stable identity that has been broken down in the last few decades (Connell, 1992; Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Reeser, 2006). Reeser situated the male body as a site of tension and conflict. He sees the contradictions evident in the myriad definitions of masculinity as central to a fuller understanding of the term. This constant tension between various ideas of masculinity leads to a series of paradoxes where culture and representation are the major influence on the definitions and practice of masculinity.

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Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (Sáenz, 2012) centres around two Mexican-American boys, Aristotle Mendoza and Dante and their adventures in El Paso, Texas in the late 1980s. Aristotle is a loner, somebody who does not identify with any of the boys in his neighbourhood and ends up befriending Dante during languid summer holidays spent at the swimming pool. The novel is a coming-of-age narrative that explores Aristotle's relationship with the people around him, his desire to get to know more about his imprisoned elder brother and his isolation from a culture in which he feels alienated and misunderstood. It further explores Dante's adolescent crisis simultaneously, filtered through Aristotle. This coming-of-age novel focuses on their journeys as they get to learn and discover things about the self and the other. This paper examines the novel and its representation of masculinity, taking cues from the theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and connecting it to machismo within Latino families and the rituals surrounding family, especially father-son relationships. The paper will scrutinise the father-son relationships in the novel and attempt to understand its relation to dominant forms of masculinity. It will further attempt to analyse the novel for alternate meanings of masculinity, if any.

Homophobia and Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity is undoubtedly related to the rejection of same-sex desire culturally and socially. Homophobia is not just about the fear of liking men and one's rejection of the same, but about the hegemonically correct way of acting out this masculinity (Kimmel, 1994). It is also an intolerance of homosexuality and the fear of it at the same time. The reason for the fear rises out of the assumption that men will not be seen as masculine if they do not participate in homophobia and its repetitive derision.

Michael S. Kimmel defines manhood in *Theorising Masculinities* (1994) as having "constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world" (p. 120). Furthermore, the meaning of the feminine, the female, the woman, exists in relation to the other because, "everything that is not phallic and in line with traditional masculinity is automatically considered other, that is, feminine" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, p. 239). The heterosexual body is easily assailed by the fear of being a queer body if the former does not conform to all the social and cultural cues of being a man. Within school spaces everybody must conform to ideals of masculinity and participate in what is categorised as masculine followed by aggressive rejection and ridicule of anything that does not resemble hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, there is a constant policing of behaviour by everyone's peer group inside schools and public spaces because "as adolescents we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies" (Kimmel, p. 89).

Homophobia is seen as synonymous with identifying as male and masculine and being treated like one socially if one practices it in as vocal a manner as possible. Words like "faggot" and "gay" are used as insults and the worst insult a boy can be attacked with at school (Pascoe, p. 55). C. J. Pascoe goes further and uncovers the homophobic discourse that is prevalent in high school spaces in *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (2012) and states how the reiteration of words like fag and gay is just a way of affirming that they exist in the first place, against which the heterosexual and dominant masculine male must define itself or fear not being "sufficiently masculine" (p. 60).

Normativity creates and constructs an othering of homosexuality. This act of othering is what reinforces homophobia and renders homosexuality as non-normative and unnatural. Aristotle voices a similar sentiment when it is pointed out, "I'm a guy. He's a guy. It's not the way things are supposed to be" (p. 349). He is referring to the socio-cultural rules of courtship and penetrative sex also hinting at the assumptions about gender and its associations with power dynamics within heterosexual relationships. Heteronormativity builds an argument that is borrowed from compulsory heterosexuality where heterosexuality "constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" (Ingraham, p. 275). Richard T. Rodríguez notes how queer Latino men have been historically marginalised and exiled from larger discourses on masculinity, manhood and nation because of the problematic and heterosexual way that they have been treated and interpreted. He further remarks about how queer men are understood as follows:

> as failed men, literally and figuratively converted into failed women, subjected to a nonreproductive, sexually submissive (that is, anally receptive) role, simultaneously branded as confused men who require a sex change to become women. In either case they thwart the generation of *la familia* and its heteronormative codification. (2011, p. 131)

It is this codification that Aristotle is desperately trying to fight against through his denial of everything at an emotional and verbal level. His self-perception of his machismo does not let him imagine that he could be queer or that alternate sexualities can exist without threatening his masculinity and binaries of dominance/submissiveness within heterosexual relationships. He also practices compulsory[1] heterosexuality because of his own internalised homophobia. Compulsory heterosexuality does not allow Aristotle to entertain any other alternative apart from heterosexuality, for anything removed from the normative is not acknowledged or even thought of as a possibility. David M. Frost and Ian H. Meyer define internalised homophobia as "the feeling that one needs to be heterosexual but is conflicted with the attraction to the same sex" (Frost and Meyer, 2009, p. 1). While internalised homophobia is directed inwards more than outwards for Aristotle, on the other hand, Dante questions that homophobia and wishes to stand up to it.

It is the fear of the feminine and of the othering that leads to the kind of homophobia we see Dante be victim of in the novel. Gender and sexuality being conflated is what is problematic. One of the most important instances of homophobia within the novel is when some boys end up witnessing Dante kiss Daniel (his date) in a back alley. Their automatic response is to assert their own masculinity and define it against what Dante and Daniel represent for them in their queerness and sexual desire. Their violence (physical, verbal and psychological) is a result of their own fear of their sexualities which feels threatened by what they consider non-normative and restructures their own understanding of gender and sexuality. Their violence is a social rejection of such behaviour and assertion of their normative sexual identity through the visibility of "bruises everywhere" on Dante (p. 304). It is this visibility of violence that polices

[1] Compulsory heterosexuality is a term coined by Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). Adrienne refers to the obligatory practice of heterosexuality that keeps women's sexuality under check while denying them other forms of sexuality. I use the term to refer to the practice of heterosexuality, which is seen as a default sexual orientation, and the practice of the same regardless of personal preferences.

any such behaviour that might happen in the future, consequently silencing any other alternate forms of desire and masculinity.

The trauma at the hands of homophobia is never as simple as it seems, as Aristotle recognises this about Dante, "a part of him would never be the same. They cracked more than his ribs" (p. 325). He sees the everlasting psychological damage that boys did to Dante, something that homophobic acts of violence, make visible and hope to correct. What is broken down for Dante is his interpretation of his sexuality and what it represents about his failure as a man. Within the discourses of machismo, Dante's desire for Daniel threatens the society that metes out violence to him, in turn reinforcing the idea that queer men are failing at being men. Furthermore, Daniel is unable to stand his ground or help Dante in anyway because he runs away, habitual violence of his past making him remember he cannot stop these acts of violence, not if he is not stronger than these boys and the strength in numbers.

The hegemonic standards of masculinity and its performance are what Dante fails at, which he himself feels ashamed of. It is these same hegemonic standards that leads to the homophobic act of violence against him to correct such behaviour. The act of violence against Dante presents itself as one of the instances in which the fear of one's identity (the perpetrators) and its resultant assertion becomes paramount against witnessing acts of romantic love between two boys. The very act of witnessing kissing between boys is seen as self-reflexive of the viewers' gender identity, in this case, his classmates. The act of engaging in homophobic discourse through violence is just one of the ways through which the boys assert their own gender identity that feels threatened at witnessing Dante's sexuality. Violence is also the first reaction that makes the boys refute any homosexual accusations that might be flung against them if they do not respond aggressively to the destabilising of gender boundaries via sexuality. Through their violence, these boys are not just defending a sense of self but also what they think is fundamentally important, the centrality of their gender, mistakenly conflating their gender and sexuality together. Kimmel describes that "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight" (p. 231). Homophobia is not merely a condemnation of sexual activity and identity between boys but also the expression of the perpetrator's own gender identity through an organised form of violence against non-conforming bodies while reinforcing hegemonic masculinity.

Aristotle realises that he is different from the other boys in his neighbourhood and school because he does not participate in locker room conversations or practice any of the standards of hegemonic masculinity extensively. He notes his own behaviour at the shower stalls in the swimming pool and remarks: "guys really made me uncomfortable. I do not know why, not exactly. I just, I don't know, I just didn't belong" (p. 16). Moreover, he does not feel part of any boy's group because he does not constantly perform and prove his masculinity to other boys, not in the way they expect him to and admits when he says: "I always kept my distance from the other boys. I never ever felt like I was a part of their world … Boys. I watched them. Studied them … Being around guys made me feel stupid and inadequate. It was like they were all a part of this club and I wasn't a member" (p. 22).

This sense of loneliness, alienation, and lack of belonging that Aristotle feels is because hegemonic masculinity gives access to privileges that are not accessible to anybody who does not participate in it. One of the privileges is friendship and camaraderie that is granted to anybody who engages in the act of dominant masculinity. Aristotle feels inadequate, a direct

consequence of his inability to conform with the boys that surround him, both because of his Mexican identity and an alienation that is a direct result of his emerging queer identity.

One of the first instances in which Aristotle's masculinity and Mexican identity is called into question is when Charlie Escobedo (local neighbourhood guy who sells drugs) ends up flinging words like "*pinchi joto*" (fucking faggot) and "*gabacho*" (English-speaking non-Hispanic), because Aristotle does not want to use heroin. Aristotle hates that his Mexican identity is always called into question despite being, "as Mexican as he [Charlie] was" (p. 205). Aristotle's sexuality becomes the second thing attacked because he is not being masculine and courageous enough to try heroin. When Aristotle threatens to kiss Charlie in a playful manner, Charlie instantly retorts with anger, "I ought to kick your ass" (p. 205). Charlie's masculinity is threatened the moment anything resembling homosexuality is uttered, and consequently leading to proving his masculinity through homophobic insults. Pascoe discusses the idea of the "fag identity" and she explains it as following:

> becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity. Fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the spectre of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police their behaviour out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behaviour and strive to avoid it. (p. 210)

Pascoe argues that boys will attempt to refute the "fag" identity that is placed on them, much like how Charlie calls Aristotle a "*pinchi joto*" through which he is attributing to him the "fag identity" and pointing it out. It is as much a recognition of what he considers non-masculine as well as definitive enough for him to employ disciplinary mechanism through insults. Pascoe further elaborates on how this discourse is racialised. This discourse is differently invoked in relation to Aristotle and Dante as they are Mexican American than it would for his white counterparts.

Heterosexuality is what is proper, normative and standard for Aristotle and he sees no other alternatives apart from that. It is the only means through which he can navigate his transition from childhood to adulthood and what it means to be masculine and Mexican because of its performance all around him. However, within normative things like sex and masturbation, Aristotle remains embarrassed and ashamed, even when it is Dante, a close friend, that initiates conversations around it through letters. He even finds the idea of masturbation embarrassing because he feels as if his body is not his anymore, the horror of a lack of control over his body, a direct contrast to claims about machismo and virility of men that men should flaunt and assert it within locker room spaces. It also points to his larger concern of losing control over himself and failing to repress whatever latent feelings he is having regarding Dante, his own body and sex. Even within dreamscapes, his latent desires shock and arouse him in equal measure, something he runs from by obsessing over Ileana (a classmate). It arises out of his desire to counter his feelings for Dante and assert his heterosexuality. He always ends up having nightmares of hitting Dante with his car while sitting behind the wheel with Ileana. His nightmares reflect his latent desires that lie dormant beneath the surface and his desire to suppress them because of his internalised homophobia. Ileana represents Aristotle's forced heterosexuality and Dante, his potential homosexuality.

Aristotle does not see anything in popular culture that even remotely resembles his struggle for a queer, masculine, Mexican identity or might give him the chance to try to make sense of his embodied existence and sexuality. The feeling of anger transforms to feeling of shame and embarrassment in the last few chapters of the novel when Aristotle must finally confront his feelings for Dante after being forced by his parents to see the truth. He feels ashamed for having feelings for Dante because heteronormativity dictates his own reactions to his own desires that he deems disgusting which justifies his self-loathing: "What am I going to do? I'm so ashamed" (p. 349). His love for Dante is something that he does not know how to start comprehending because of the lack of language he has at his disposal to articulate it. He sees his feelings for Dante as arising out of a shameful part of his identity that is not normative, and he articulates this self-hatred when he says, "I hate myself" (p. 349).

The transformation of Aristotle's identity and his own responses to his body and his desires can only happen when his understanding and interpretation of machismo is reached through the transformation in the father-son relationship. It is through the narration of his own life and his experiences that by the end of the novel Aristotle's repressed identity comes out of the closet and he confesses to it to Dante, opening up possibilities.

Father-Son Relationship

Masculinity and its cues are observed silently and imbibed by boys starting from a very young age (Kuebli and Fivush, 1992). A father is the first male influence in any boy's life and becomes a role model for masculinity from thereon. Manhood becomes complicated when Aristotle meets his war-torn father and not the kind of father he was expecting to meet. He reflects his father, emotionally and physically, a fact commented upon by the Church ladies when they spot Aristotle, a resemblance he is not so fond of. It is also a resemblance that his mother's Catholic-Church-Lady friends remarks upon when she says, "Let me look at you. *Dejame ver. Ay que muchacho tan guapo. Ta pareces a tu papa*" (p. 9). Literally translated it means that he looks handsome and resembles his dad. A comparison across generations within Latino families ensures the burden of masculinity is not ever lifted. At the same time Aristotle identifies his dad's qualities in himself when he admits that "[he] wasn't very good at asking for help, a bad habit that [he] inherited from [his] father" (p. 15). The correlations that people around him remind him of are something that Aristotle struggles with because while he aspires to be like his father as he thinks he should, he finds it harder to be like him in the exact same way as the novel progresses. Furthermore, as noted by Jacob Bucher in his essay ""But He Can't Be Gay": The Relationship Between Masculinity and Homophobia in Father-Son Relationships" (2014), the author remarks that "sons not only learn how to be masculine from what they hear their fathers tell them, but from what they see their fathers do. In this sense fathers not only teach the standard but become the standard of masculinity - serving as the reference point" (p. 224). Aristotle's standard of manhood is his father's silent personality where he does not really communicate with Aristotle, choosing to keep it all to himself, a reference point that Aristotle spends the entire novel trying to understand. His father's silence also buries long held secrets about Vietnam War, his elder brother's incarceration in prison and his inability to articulate any of his pain.

Within the structures that Aristotle finds himself a part of, there is a stifling sense of urgency with which his exploration of his identity is connected primarily to his relationship with his parents, especially his dad and the strict structures of Latino masculinity and what machismo represents. Aristotle's father is somewhat of a mystery to him when he confesses, "I didn't

believe he wanted me to know who he was. So, I just collected clues … someday all the clues would come together. And I would solve the mystery of my father" (p. 37). Unlike Dante's father who is overflowing with emotion and easy affection for his family, Aristotle's father never shows emotions openly and his father's overpowering silence frustrates Aristotle in the novel making him think it's because of a lack of affection and tenderness. This is evident when Aristotle remarks, "why couldn't he just talk? How was I supposed to know him when he didn't let me? I hated that" (p. 23). Aristotle's father, as noted by him, is a "careful man," somebody who measures his words carefully. Meaningful conversations that do not keep things repressed are what Aristotle desires and wishes to practice with him. He wants to break the silence around his brother that has kept his family imprisoned for years but assumes that his father would not want to when he remarks, "I wanted to talk, to say something, to ask questions. But I couldn't" (p. 36). This helplessness is what renders his relationship with his dad so complicated and comments on the larger socio-cultural context of his Latino identity. His father never recovered from the Vietnam War as stated by his mother and later admitted by his father, the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) making it harder for him to connect with his son. Aristotle's desire to get to know his father also speaks to his desire to get to know his role-model, his mother's husband, his own father and as a man.

Tomás Almaguer remarks how family as an institution dominates in Mexico and what decides relations between individuals and asserts gender and heterosexuality (p. 82). Manhood and masculinity are complicated terms for Aristotle because of his Mexican- American identity and the lack of involvement of his father in his personal life. He feels that his own sense of self and masculinity suffers because his father does not interact with him, and his brother's presence is non-existent in his life. This is evident when he laments: "I wondered what it would have been like if my brother had been around. Maybe he could have taught me stuff about being a guy and what guys should feel and what they should do and how they should act. Maybe I would be happy" (p. 299). He complaints not having a male role model to emulate and teach him the ropes about masculinity, and we can feel this sense of loss throughout till he meets with an accident.

Aristotle's accident where he saves Dante instead of saving himself is the turning point in the novel in his relationship with his father. It is at this point that Aristotle discovers a different facet of his father as the latter cares tirelessly for him at the hospital. Within the silence shared between them, what Aristotle discovers is a different style of communication his father initiates and participates in. His father converses with him through books after his accident when Aristotle admits "my father decided he would read everything that I read. Maybe that was our way of talking" (p. 141). These silent moments are moments of confinement for Aristotle's body and his desire to escape it through the world of imagination and he shares that world with his father through offering either *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1869) or *Grapes of Wrath* (Steinback, 1939). These silent interactions are a way for Aristotle to mask his physical pain, limited mobility and resultant helplessness and loneliness through sharing that space with his father who demands nothing of him unlike others who comes to visit him in the hospital who fuss all around him. He notices and further becomes aware of his father's way of conversation when he starts taking driving lessons from him post his accident recovery. Their form of communication is not focused on words, rather it is focused on reading books to occupy time together, a sharing of the solitude and co-presence that they both value a lot. Both are solitary creatures, comfortable in their own company without many people to call friends. Through Dante's

introduction into Aristotle's life, by extension Dante's father also enters Aristotle's father's life and ends up becoming a dear friend.

Within Aristotle's understanding of a machismo identity, there are also burden of expectations that he and Dante struggle with through their quest to prove their masculinity and their Mexican American identity. Aristotle must act within a rigid set of boundaries and expectations which is evident from his words when he remarks about the burden of his identity: "I felt the weight of a son in a Mexican family" (p. 93). Latino families are particularly traditional in their ideas about masculinity and Aristotle borrows most of these ideas from the way he sees it being performed around him to feeling burdened with expectations of being an ideal son, unlike his brother. These expectations overburden him: "everyone expected something from me. Something I just couldn't give" (p. 84). Aristotle's burdens are like Dante because both, being Mexicans, feel even more pressure to be ideal and authentically Mexican, i.e., cisgender, heterosexual, visibly masculine.

Dante's own fear about his Mexican American identity is reflected in his desire to carry on his father's bloodline but being unable to due to his sexuality. He sees that as his failure as a son and exclaims: "And I keep wondering what they're going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy. I wonder how that's going to go over? I'm the only son. What's going to happen with the grandchildren thing? I hate that I'm going to disappoint them, Ari" (p. 227).

Dante's disappointment is a result of his sexuality and his inability to father sons now that he knows he will always be attracted to men. Fatherhood and masculinity are directly related because the ability to father children is a clear proof of one's virility and masculinity over other men who are unable to do so (Hoffman, 1977). Modern interventions in reproduction have not yet taken place in the 1980s so Dante's anxiety regarding his sexuality seems devastating for him.

Dante's parents are the ones who reassure him that the continuation of their bloodline is not as important to them as their son. Dante continues to worry about his responsibility as the son of the family, quite like Aristotle. Dante does not see himself as an authentic Mexican because of his sexuality, which he thinks, dictates his claim to his nationality when he says, "I'll never be a real Mexican" (p. 245). Moreover, he does not see himself as Mexican especially because of his sexuality "do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?" (p. 273). His ideas of masculinity are also reflected in his strong desire to have a baby brother rather than a sister to carry on his father's bloodline: "I hope to God my mother has a boy. And he better like girls because if he does not, I'll kill him" (p. 2). As the only son of a Mexican family, he feels the burden of carrying on the family bloodline on his shoulders and meting out violence if in case his younger sibling also turns out queer.

An alternate path to manhood and masculinity is presented to Aristotle when he meets Dante at the pool that makes him question his long-held beliefs on masculinity, father-son relationships, and sexuality. The differences between Dante and Aristotle's masculinity are starkly apparent when Aristotle encounters Dante's father, so very different in his iterations of fatherhood and his practices as a man than his own father. Home is the foremost place where masculinity is reinforced and performed. Their different masculine identifiers force Aristotle to encounter his own masculinity in ways that are opposing and challenging. For example, when he visits Dante's house, he is surprised to see him unashamedly crying, a trait that Dante has also inherited. Emotions and vulnerability through crying does not hold any negative

connotations in the novel for other characters but for Aristotle they are signifiers of a failed masculinity, a thought that Dante challenges.

Dante's masculinity resembles his father as both of them are comfortable in their expressions of love and affection evident in their easy physical affection that shocks Aristotle. Contrastingly, Aristotle is uncomfortable with physical affection and expressing any intimacy of that sort throughout the novel because of strict rules of affection and bonding between men dictated by hegemonic masculinity. It is evident in the way he is surprised after witnessing Dante and his father's physical demonstration of love and how he himself yearns for it:

> It made me smile … the easy and affectionate way they talked to each other … 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. I wondered what that would be like, to walk into a room and kiss my father. (p. 26)

Dante's masculinity is softer and more delicate than Aristotle's, something the latter recognises and celebrates. Aristotle and Dante complement each other as friends and so does their different practice of masculinities when Aristotle admits, "maybe he could like the fact that I was hard just as I liked the fact that he wasn't hard." (p. 55). Dante's desire to not suppress his emotions but to articulate them is what is sorely missing in Aristotle's own life before Dante's entry into it. At the same time Aristotle's own growing awareness of his machismo and hypermasculinity helps in him pushing past his own internalised homophobia.

Aristotle and his father's relationship, though less demonstrative, is later shown to be equally loving and affectionate as we later find out when his father finds alternate ways to communicate with his son, not the way Aristotle wants or expects but a way that works for their relationship as father and son. The unravelling in their relationship happens when it is his father who notices and bring Aristotle's awareness of his feelings for Dante. However, strangely enough, when Aristotle becomes what he hates, a silent person who represses his emotions but rages on the outside and never confronts his own feelings for Dante, it is his dad who becomes aware of it and forces him to confront it. It is at this moment that Aristotle feels for the first time that he has a pure moment of understanding with his father when he remarks, "he understood me" (p. 349). This understanding goes beyond just accepting his son's sexuality but also marks his observation and awareness of his son, an attention that Aristotle has always craved but thought he never had.

Anger and Machismo

Anger and its expression through aggression is an authorised way in which a man can display emotion, with these particular emotions being associated with masculinity itself (Jakupcak et al. 2005). Anger and aggression are seen hegemonically as masculine traits while softness, fragility and kindness are seen as womanly. Anger and aggression are a result of the practice of gender norms. Conventional masculine ideology also leads to extremely aggressive reactions to emotions that seem to be violating masculine norms in any way. Aggression in the form of violence and anger is not seen as emasculating because not only it is culturally accepted but also promoted, especially in social spaces of school and sports.

While Aristotle must constantly practice heterosexuality to not invite violent responses against his body, he defaults to violence itself when anybody questions it. At the start of the novel, it is Aristotle who asserts his masculinity against boys of his neighbourhood when he gestures

rudely at them, inviting aggressive responses that he almost seems to revel in, the anger and the resultant aggression familiar to him. His self-perception is that of an adequately "tough" boy and that his performance of masculinity must be appropriate because he claims how nobody in the neighbourhood, or the school wants to fight with him. His perception of himself is that of somebody who is reasonably strong and tough, as boys are supposed to be, especially Mexican boys and the machismo associated with it in his opinion.

Raewyn Connell in "Arms and the Man: Using the New Research on Masculinity to Understand Violence and Promote Peace in the Contemporary World" (2000) argues against the "natural" belief that it is okay for men to be violent and aggressive as embodied in the popular statement of "boys will be boys" (p. 22). She further argues how the traditional understanding of biology and its appeal to naturalised gender roles is problematic. She problematises biological essentialism and rejects it in the process, claiming that violence does not have anything to do with the male body but everything to do with socio-cultural meanings of gender. Theodore Kemper in "Social Structure and Testosterone" (1990) sees dominance and aggression as a result of social relations and not testosterone. Kemper noted several studies done on men in different fields of work and came to similar conclusions about the effect of testosterone on men. He concluded that the levels of testosterone were dependent not so much on sex but on the experiences and social position of the people under scrutiny. Furthermore, he hypothesised that biology can be and does end up dramatically transformed based on our social experiences.

Sudden emotional outbursts are a result of repression due to the cultural hegemonic understanding of how men are supposed to avoid expressing anything vaguely vulnerable and emotional. Aristotle confesses how emotionally driven conversations are hard for him and comments on it when he confesses, "that's what I did with everything. Kept it inside" (p. 126). It is unacceptable emotions that are transformed into the emotion of anger, something considered legitimate within hegemonic masculinity discourse that Aristotle gives into. What he often feels in regard to his love for Dante and his desire to bridge the gap between his family and his invisible brother, he manifests it through anger and the comfort and physical relief it seems to bring him thereby legitimising of it.

Aristotle's desire to know about his older brother is overpowering but he continues to repress it just like his parents refuse to break the silence on it. He even remarks on it when he tells his mom after coming back from the hospital, "you think you and Dad are the only ones who can keep things on the inside? Dad keeps a whole war inside of him. I can keep things on the inside too" (p. 134). It all ends in a particularly emotional outburst where Aristotle's feelings for Dante and his parents' silence on the topic of his brother ends up being jumbled together and exploding in an exhaustive manner through crying.

Aristotle's repression also leads to feelings of hostility and aggression against Dante when Aristotle is not able to make peace with his feelings for him after the accident in which he was trying to protect Dante and one that renders him temporarily immobile and confined to bed. As Aristotle struggles with his anger towards Dante after the accident, he finds himself withdrawing from him because of his inability to reconcile his anger with what his action meant. At one point, he even says, "And all I wanted to do was put my fist through his jaw. I couldn't stand my own cruelty" (p. 144). His anger is not just directed inwards but also outwards through his unclear attitude towards Dante's confession. When Dante confesses to Ari that he loves him, the latter gets angry: "I knew what he was saying and I wished to God he was someone else, someone who didn't have to say things out loud" (p. 151). When things are

confessed out loud, they cannot remain repressed or ignored and for Aristotle that threatens his buried emotions and forces him to confront.

The reason for Aristotle's anger becomes clear only at the end of novel where it is his parents who sit him down and advise him to think about his anger and his resultant inability to understand himself and his sexuality when they remark, "its time you stopped running ... if you keep running, it will kill you" (p. 348). Aristotle, being unable to modulate his feelings, uses the tactic of avoiding them altogether, compensating it through hypermasculine behaviour like lifting weights and remaining physically fit. Steven Krugman highlights in "The Development and Transformation of Shame" (1995), that shame is what makes males "react with avoidance, compensatory behaviours, and primitive fight-flight responses" (p. 100). Aristotle's entire demeanour is one of avoidance and compensating for what he thinks he is not allowed to feel, wallowing in self-misery that is evident in not just his actions but his words too.

Aristotle's internalised homophobia makes it impossible for him to realise what his latent feelings for Dante mean for him and what it means for their friendship. He is unable to identify it because anything that resembles non-normative is rejected by him promptly. At one point he comments, "there was something swimming around inside me that always made me feel bad," which can be interpreted as his internalised homophobia that he does not acknowledge and the misdirection in his feelings that he practices (p. 299). It is his feelings for Dante that are the real cause of his anger, his hatred towards himself and his inability to forgive himself for the feelings he is having. Acceptance of his identity first must come from him and not from anybody else. Aristotle's anger is a consequence of his conflict with his identity that is located within his supposed stable identity as a heterosexual Mexican American boy. It is his latent sexuality that becomes a problem from the first instance that he lays eyes on Dante in the swimming pool. His parents realise his feelings for Dante much before he ever articulates them: "Aristotle, the problem isn't just that Dante is in love with you. The real problem-*for you*, anyway-is that you're in love with him" (p. 348, my emphasis). His identity is at crossroads unless he accepts his sexuality and what that means for his notions about masculinity.

Aristotle's meeting with Daniel (Dante's date) later to find out the names of Dante's attackers also leads to another outlet where he lets his anger get the better of him. Serving justice where he thinks it would not be served legally. He meets Julian and while initially the conversation centres around greeting each other cordially and talking about trucks, it ventures to Aristotle beating Julian up. "I just went to it. His nose was bleeding. That didn't stop me. It didn't take long before he was on the ground. I was saying things to him, cussing at him. Everything was a blur and I just kept going at him" (p. 314). His anger and helplessness at seeing Dante hurt translates to meting out violence to his perpetrators, a reaction he does not wish to look closely. Anger then becomes the only outlet he thinks he possibly has, linking him directly to the anger and the associate violence of his older brother, Bernardo, who at the age of fifteen, picked up a sex worker who turned out to be a transgender later and consequently in a fit of rage he murdered her. Bernardo's machismo felt threatened the moment he realised who he had picked up. Anger then remains the emotion that connects the two brothers, thereby making the parents keep a closer watch on Aristotle's behaviour lest he take after his brother. Within the discourse on anger and its relation to machismo, both the protagonists navigate it through vastly different ways thereby opening possibilities of alternative understanding of it.

Alternate Masculinity

Aristotle's exposure to alternate forms of masculinity comes in the form of Dante and Dante's immediate family. Aristotle's idea of loneliness is directly related to masculinity as how it only increases in its intensity through his transformation from a young boy to an adult. It is at the precipice of adulthood that he realises it's also a transition between being uncomfortable with it and accepting it as a man, as if one was not a man if they were not lonely. Silence is also associated with loneliness and that is something quite evident in the way he talks about his father's relationship to everybody in the family. Silence rules the household with an iron grip because of what it represents; unprocessed trauma. At the same time, Aristotle feels he should adhere to this silence as a man too but finds himself helpless in his inability to accept it. He is standing on the precipice of adulthood when he remarks:

> I knew I wasn't a boy anymore. But there was other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness. And I didn't want to be treated like a boy anymore. I didn't want to live in my parents' world and I didn't have a world of my own. (Sáenz p. 81)

Aristotle's awareness of his loneliness is directly connected with what it represents for him, an indicator of his dwindling childhood and its innocence but also a growing sense of alienation because he is unable to connect to anyone around him except Dante. This sense of isolation is what he is talking about here as children's sense of awareness is not as acute as Aristotle's growing sense of what all of this means for him. However, its also that fragile transition from childhood to adulthood that Aristote is currently stuck in where his ideas of masculinity, his gender identity, his sexuality become very relevant questions for him to analyse and think about. The growing sense of "man loneliness" can directly be connected to a lack of support system for men and their inability to reach out for any support because that is not expected and neither freely given as hegemonic masculinity ensures that anything that is not strictly masculine is repressed, including concerns related to emotional and mental well-being.

The transformation and real exploration in Aristotle's life starts the moment Dante enters his life and slowly makes him question his strongly held beliefs about masculinity, sexual desire and being young and Mexican. Through the friendship that the two boys share due to their love for swimming, Aristotle is offered an alternate way of existing that is different than what he sees in his own dad, his absent brother and in himself. Suppression of emotion is something that Aristotle acknowledges on a subconscious level but is not willing to confront his reasons. However, during the novel, we see him cry, try hard at communication, and make mistakes.

When Aristotle is down with the flu, even in a delirious state he notices his emotional state and denies it outrightly when he observes, "I knew I was crying ... I wasn't the kind of guy who cried" (p. 61). Throughout the novel, at various points, all the main characters end up expressing their emotions through crying. Crying is traditionally associated with the feminine and is seen rendering someone weak and vulnerable, a position that hegemonic standards iterate through the oft-repeated statement "boys don't cry." Aristotle echoes the same sentiment when he begs Dante to not cry after his accident when he tells him, "No more crying. Boys don't cry" (p. 116). Dante never hesitates from showing emotion unlike Aristotle who cries when things are unbearably bleak. Crying becomes a way to ascertain Aristotle's evolution from a boy who represses his emotions to somebody who lets them flow freely when it is required, without the added worry of seeming weak. Aristotle's avoidance of any conversation that threatens to make

him lose control of his emotions is tightly controlled at the start of the novel, but it is Dante who makes him realise his own desire to be listened, "on the inside I was more like Dante. That really scared me" (p. 200). It is Aristotle who ends up crying in the desert while lying in Dante's arms after having an emotionally wrenching conversation with his father over his imprisoned brother near the end of the novel. Aristotle's vulnerable moments are rarely witnessed by his parents, but he often shows that side to Dante, feeling assured in his masculinity that Dante will never hold him to the standards of masculinity that the society expects him to follow. Their brand of masculinity is not afraid of emotional conversations, of crying, of coming off as vulnerable and fragile and being affectionate. Dante slowly influences Aristotle's masculinity and together they represent the alternate forms of masculinity that Benjamin Alire Sáenz, the author, wants young boys to take inspiration from.

Dante fails to perform hegemonic masculinity throughout the novel, and while questioning his position in it; he also threatens it at the same time. He is unlike any of the other Mexican boys in the novel, unafraid to show emotion and unafraid to be labelled gay or kissing boys in public. He cries at the drop of a hat when he witnesses a sparrow being brutally killed. He cries when he baths Aristotle after the latter's accident, and he cries later after being violently beaten. Aristotle recognises this when he remarks, "it didn't do any good to tell him not to cry because he needed to cry. That's the way he was" (p. 54). However, at the same time, Dante also stands true to his principles and beliefs that involve him not running away from his attackers because he does not think his sexuality is anything to be ashamed of, not in the way Aristotle hides it beneath his own false bravado and machismo.

Aristotle's understanding of his identity becomes deeper when Dante complains he does not write often to him and he explains that "I'm not doing it to upset you, okay? This is my problem. I want other people to tell me how they feel. But I'm not so sure that I want to return the favour. I think I'll go sit in my truck and think about that" (p. 194). The very act of taking space and to sit with his thought processes is something that Aristotle has learned over the course of interacting with Dante who remains in touch with his emotions and his assertion of his masculinity through no-hegemonic ways. It is through his connection with Dante that Aristotle is able to witness not just an alternative form of masculinity in practice but also something that adheres closer to the values he wants to uphold in his life.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to deal with masculinity in practice within the spaces of home, school and life through the protagonists, Aristotle and Dante. The paper focused on the very practice of masculinity, thereby, revealing the hollowness of the concept itself. Masculinity was destabilised from its essential core and exposed for the multitudinous meanings that it can have. Furthermore, it went deeper into the meanings entrenched in queer bodies by analysing Aristotle and Dante and for the alternate representation of masculinity that it offered us. Dante is not afraid to show emotions and express them strongly, a series of assertions that Aristotle comes to understand and later emulate to some extent. The father-son relationship that becomes the blueprint for how masculinities are constructed in society was explored and how it influences Aristotle and Dante's sense of identity and machismo.

Dante's masculinity differs from Aristotle's, and Aristotle's masculinity differs from that of his father's or his classmates'. The different kinds of masculinities discussed have the same essential core that they attempt to reach but never embody, hegemonic masculinity. Alternate

interpretations of masculinity allow queer bodies to envision a world where hegemonic masculinity is stripped off its dominant power and exposed for its hollowness and the harm it does to marginalised identities. This paper attempted to find alternatives to hegemonic masculinity and to an extent sees it embodied in the figure of Dante and his father and to a growing extent in Aristotle's softening attitude and constant questioning and refashioning of his own self and the practices that had centred him all his life. Within the coming-of-age narrative, these individuals find kinship and bonding through the very existence of their fringe Mexican American queer identity and through their experiences transform their own ideas of what it means to be a man in El Paso in the 1980s.

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