Teaching Coming Out Stories through Young Adult Literature in Upper Secondary School

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

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Abstract

The Young Adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* portrays the coming out stories of two queer Mexican American boys who struggle with their ethnicity and sexuality, which leads to internal conflicts. The focus of the analysis in the essay is to investigate how the novel can be taught in Upper Secondary classrooms through queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive approaches focusing on silenced discourse. When teachers allow their students to work with the coming out story in the novel within this framework, teachers can engage their students in exploring and finding meaning in the silences that the protagonists Aristotle and Dante speak through. The anti-oppressive practice of reading for silences allows students to look beyond what is being represented in the novel in regard to Aristotle’s and Dante’s sexuality and ethnicity and thereby find meaning in what is unsaid.
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1. Introduction

The reality of living in a heteronormative society for many queer people means the need to come out. However, being queer can signify being a norm breaker and therefore the coming out process can cause people to face several conflicts and challenges which can depend on factors such as culture and ethnicity.

Young Adult literature started to explode in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and in the middle of this explosion, this genre started to include queer sexualities (Lin 44). Queer Young Adult literature provides a platform that connects the lives of youth to the struggles of growing up discovering their sexuality (Boyd and Zecena 61). Teaching queer Young Adult literature concerning youth that belong to certain ethnic groups can provide students with an understanding regarding the ways in which ethnicity can complicate and challenge certain coming out stories (Boyd and Zecena 65). This is relevant for Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s Young Adult novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, published in 2012, which will be analyzed in this essay.

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a queer Young Adult novel about two Mexican American teenage boys set in El Paso, Texas in 1987. The narrator of the novel is Aristotle and will be referred to as Ari in the analysis. He can be described as a quiet and lonely boy, at least until he meets Dante, who in many ways is the opposite of him. Unlike Aristotle, Dante is expressive of his thoughts and feelings. However, they share similar experiences: first, they both belong to the first generation of Mexicans in America; second, they are both queer and, finally, they both struggle with being Mexican American and queer. Going through the similar experiences, they face similar challenges along the way while discovering who they are.
The aim of this essay is to investigate in what ways the coming out story in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* can be taught in Upper Secondary classrooms through a queer pedagogy. This will allow students to explore silences in different passages and interactions in the novel through anti-oppressive approaches in order to find meaning in what Aristotle and Dante leave unsaid. Reading for silences could help students analyze the oppression of being queer beyond what is explicitly represented in the novel, thus cultivating students’ understanding of oppression and privilege.

2. Previous research

This section covers previous research on the use of queer Young Adult literature in the classroom, particularly focusing on the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

In the book *Queer Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the English Language Arts Curriculum*, Ashley S. Boyd and Ruben Zecena provide ways in which Young Adult literature can be used in the classroom in order for teachers to cultivate students’ abilities for examining their worlds (61). Boyd and Zecena argue that Young Adult literature provides a platform which students can connect their own lives to, as it illustrates struggles of growing up, discovering sexuality, and navigating social pressures. Further, the authors claim that when teachers include Young Adult literature in the classroom, they can engage students in a dialogue around societal concerns in order to build the students’ sociocultural awareness and enhance their analytical abilities. When engaging students in this kind of practice, Boyd and Zecena recommend teachers to use the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of*
the Universe, since they claim it provides a creative outlet from which students can make (61) connections to reality and analyze social matters (62).

Boyd and Zecena suggest that teachers connect the notion of coming out to broader social concerns when teaching Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe. The authors assert that an examination of coming out as it applies to Aristotle and Dante’s Latinx background affords students an understanding of the cultural influence on their sexuality. Further, they suggest that teachers provide their students with the short article “Family and Coming Out Issues for Latinas and Latinos” (HRC), which emphasizes the significance of family to any Latinx individual’s identities (Boyd and Zecena 65). There are severe potential consequences for coming out, such as losing familial relationships or degrading the family name, which is generally more likely to happen to immigrant youth. Boyd and Zecena recommend teachers to provide discussion questions about the protagonists’ coming out in relation to their culture. Additionally, the authors claim that allowing students to reflect on how cultural context influences a person’s perspectives reinforces their critical literacy. Finally, the authors argue that when students have dealt with themes such as LGBTQ+ and coming out in the novel and connecting it to reality as they see it, they can recognize the ways they have been socialized to accept and reject certain values. This might lead them to be more open to other possibilities and therefore more willing to accept those who are different from them (66).

In Cammie Kim Lin’s paper “Queer(ing) Literature in the Secondary English Classroom” she argues that aside from teaching social justice and addressing homophobia, including queer literature in the classroom provides teachers ways of engaging students in exploring and making sense of the diversity of the human experience (44-45). Lin suggests a queer-inclusive critical multiculturalism framework when teaching queer literature, which
would present literature as an opportunity to critically explore the complex intersection of power, culture, and identity, particularly in relation to sexuality. The queer-inclusive framework aims to disrupt the hegemonic understanding of this intersection. Lin further argues that this framework urges English language art educators to develop a pedagogy that treats literacy not only as reading and writing, but rather as a critical tool for understanding and transforming oneself and the world (46). Further, Lin asserts that a queer-inclusive critical multiculturalism framework helps teachers create conditions for students to explore their identities and perspectives, and it allows students to become agents of social change. Finally, she states that it is only by recognizing and embracing queerness that teachers can explore the extraordinary diversity of human experience with their students (51).

Kristen Helmer’s article “Reading queer counter-narratives in the high-school literature classroom: possibilities and challenges” further develops the pedagogical framework which guides the implementation of curricula focused on queer topics in Upper Secondary schools (Helmer 902). Helmer claims that teachers should not use an anti-homophobic approach when dealing with queer literature in the classroom, which portrays queer people as victims. She accounts for a counter-heteronormative approach by claiming that teachers should allow students to work with textual representations of diverse and norm-disruptive sexualities to work against normative and oppressive discourses, practices and systems that produce and regulate sexuality and gender (905). Helmer claims that where anti-homophobia work refers to educating for and about the Other based on a discourse of tolerance and affirmation of diversity, counter-heteronormative work refers to a project that challenges, disrupts, and reworks discourses that create heteronormativity with the goal of destabilizing and denaturalizing heterosexuality and normative constructions of gender (904).
Finally, Helmer proposes a multidimensional theoretical framework and pedagogical approach that bridges queer theorizing to critical literacies teaching. In contrast to Lin, Helmer provides a more detailed framework by explaining its dimensions. This *queer literacies* (QL) framework draws in particular on the central tenets of critical literacies, anti-oppressive education, and queer pedagogy and contains six dimensions. The QL framework places readings within contexts that exemplify sexualized and gendered identities and introduces students to a variety of oppressions associated with sexuality and gender. The framework thereby emphasizes the importance of intersectional analysis between sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and religion. A QL approach challenges common sense knowledge about diverse sexualities and genders by interrogating normative frameworks and notions of normalcy. Through this process, students learn to unlearn partial, harmful, and distorted understandings about LGBTQ+ issues that they had before entering the classroom. Using alternative reading processes highlights gendered and heteronormative constructions within a text and deconstructs hegemonic discourses about sexuality and gender (904). Asking critical questions and questioning assumptions deconstructs hegemonic discourses. Queer counter-narratives are examined in detail in order to disrupt, alter, and rework oppressive discourses (905).

This essay contributes to Boyd’s and Zecena’s argument that Young Adult literature allows students to place themselves in the cultural context in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and analyze how it influences the coming out story. However, this essay differs from Boyd’s and Zecena’s claim that the purpose of teaching the novel is to create an acceptance or anti-homophobic values among students. It rather agrees with Lin and Helmer whose take on teaching queer literature is counter-heteronormative by focusing on engaging students in exploring the intersection of experience, culture, identity, and sexuality and aims to disrupt students’ partial knowledge about queer issues and thereby
provides an anti-oppressive education. Although Boyd and Zecena make good points, their suggestions on teaching strategies are about creating acceptance by making the Other a victim, which is limiting since these strategies only garner sympathy among students rather than focusing on the causes of oppression. The reason why this essay focuses more on Lin’s and Helmer’s counter-heteronormative approach which leads to acceptance as well, is that it shifts the focus on the oppression itself.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section will examine specific aspects of queer pedagogy that will be essential for the analysis. One of the concepts that will be used throughout the essay is Kevin K. Kumashiro’s theory of anti-oppressive education, explained in the article “Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education.” Additionally, he accounts for a discourse of silences as an anti-oppressive practice in the classroom in his book *Troubling Education: “Queer” Activism and Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy*. G.D. Shlasko’s adds on to Kumashiro’s discourse of silences by providing ways in which it can be applied in the classroom for students to bring meaning to a text.

In *Troubling Education: “Queer” Activism and Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy*, Kumashiro discusses anti-oppressive practices in English classrooms. He suggests that students can learn to read texts in critical ways, although he claims that it can be problematic to include different literatures merely in order to get to know differences. This by arguing that any given literature will reflect and represent the realities of some people while dismissing those of others. This can result in some stereotypes being challenged, while others being reinforced. Further, Kumashiro accounts for reading for silences which he claims is significant when using texts to examine differences. Reading for silences aims for students to
pay attention to what is precluded from a text since texts have meaning because of what they do not express (61). Consequently, teachers must allow students to investigate what literature leaves unsaid and offer students the possibility to read texts in multiple and anti-oppressive ways. Kumashiro presents questions that could help students explore silences when reading novels, such as: “What is not said in this novel about, say, queer youth, and how do those silences make possible and impossible different ways of thinking about queer youth, about homophobia, about the reader’s own sexual identities, and about change?” (62). Educators can teach that the partiality of texts is in fact what makes texts useful for anti-oppressive education. Students can learn to examine their desire to read in particular ways and their resistance in other ways and they can do so with the understanding that students look for more comforting narratives when reading. For example, they can ask: “What are different ways to read this text, what different knowledges about the Other does each reading give, and - why do we traditionally learn to read about the Other in only certain ways?” (62).

Kumashiro’s account of the discourse on silence can be connected to G.D. Shlasko’s idea of reading queerly, which aims to become aware of reading as an “interpretive performance.” An interpretive performance means being self-reflective about our reading practices and considering the act of reading as being about what we do with the text, more than it is about the text itself. Since interpretive performance is about what we do with the text, teachers can choose to focus on specific ways to read the text that allow disruption of comforting narratives, which can be done by focusing on the silences rather than the text itself (Shlasko 129).

The anti-oppressive practice of reading silences in the literature presented in the section above can be implemented in Upper Secondary schools through three of Kumashiro’s anti-oppressive approaches, which are relevant to the analysis. Before presenting the anti-
oppressive approaches, it should be noted that different approaches achieve different goals. Every approach comes with advantages however they lack in some elements in relation to the aim of this essay and therefore it is significant to combine the approaches in an attempt to achieve a satisfactory result that agrees with the aim. The approaches “Education About the Other”, “Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering”, and “Education that Changes Students and Society”, allow researchers, and educators to attempt to work against oppression which they seem to agree is a situation or dynamic in which certain identities are privileged in society while others are marginalized. The approaches address how different forms of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism play out in school and ways to work against it (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 25). The term oppression will be used throughout the analysis of this essay in relation to the novel Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe and refers to the oppression of heterosexism which marginalizes queer people.

Educators who attempt to work against oppression through “Education About the Other” focus on what both privileged and marginalized students know and ought to know about the Other. Two kinds of knowledge that researchers have pointed out as harmful towards the Other are central to this approach. The first kind builds on society’s definition of “normal,” and what is normative. In this type of knowledge, Otherness is usually known in contrast to the norm which becomes partial knowledge and then results in misconceptions (31). The second kind of knowledge is about the Other in relation to stereotypes and myths that the Other can be associated with. Students usually acquire this kind of knowledge outside of school, such as in the media. However, they learn little that challenges these stereotypes and misrepresentations in school. For example, students see few portrayals of queers in health books, and many of these only concern sexual diseases. Researchers claim that educators can work against these forms of knowledge by including specific units on the Other in the
curriculum and integrating Otherness through the curriculum (32). By this approach, it is crucial to, aside from educating the Other, educate the privileged in an effort to normalize differences and Otherness. The approach calls on educators to bring visibility to differences to cultivate their students' understanding of different ways of being. However, using this approach could present a dominant narrative of the Other’s experiences, such as “the queer experience,” where Otherness becomes essentialized, and in this way the norm is reproduced. Another pitfall could be that teaching about the Other often positions the Other (33) as the expert, which could result in queer or Latinx students being asked to explain their perspective, which reinforces the division between the norm and the Other. The goal of teaching about the Other is to work against students’ partial knowledge and achieve having full knowledge. However, it is impossible to teach adequately about every culture and identity, especially given the multiplicity of experiences within any cultural community. Learning about and hearing the Other should be done not to fill a gap in knowledge, but to disrupt the knowledge that is already there, since the harmful and partial knowledges that students might have, is what needs to change. Students need to learn that what is being learned can never tell the whole story, that there is always more to be sought out, and, that there is always diversity in a group, and that one story, lesson, or voice can never be representative of all (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 34). Kumashiro explains that lessons about the Other should not aim to tell students the truth about the Other. A problem that could occur when teaching a novel is that the students believe that after “understanding” the novel, they will “understand” the identities represented in the novel. However, every novel has silences, and every novel gives authority to certain ideologies over others: every novel provides only a partial perspective. Therefore, using novels to learn the truth about Others is problematic (34). Thus, the value of lessons about the Other comes not in the truth it gives us about the Other, but in the pedagogical uses to which the disrupting knowledge can be put (35).
Kumashiro does not specify whether oppressive types of knowledge are true to all geographic and historical contexts. However, for the sake of clarification the relevance of the previous section will be discussed in relation to the Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary school. The school has the responsibility to pass on values to students and impart knowledge that is based on the democratic values that characterize society. Students should be able to adapt to a complex reality that is influenced by external streams of information. Thus, students should be given the opportunity to develop their capacity to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and embrace different alternatives (Skolverket 5). In this way, the Swedish curriculum allows teachers to engage students to work against the oppressive and partial knowledge that outer influences such as media contribute to.

It is crucial to pay attention to the position of the privileged when addressing oppression with the approach of “Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering” (35). Based on researchers’ arguments that schools privilege certain groups and identities in a society that marginalizes others, researchers claim that schools have the responsibility to work against oppression. Schools can do this not only by critiquing structural and ideological forces, but also by involving a movement against their own complicity with oppression. What is essential to strive for using this approach is a critique and transformation of hegemonic structures and ideologies (36). To empower students’ comprehension of the oppression of queer students, this approach requires moving beyond homophobia and rather considering heteronormativity critically and “how the production of deviancy is intimately tied to the very possibility of normalcy” (Britzman qtd. In Kumashiro 36). Kumashiro emphasizes this point by stating that heterosexuality often is privileged as normalcy and thinking critically would then involve acknowledging this masking of privilege and teaching critically would involve unmasking and making the privilege of certain identities visible. With this approach, it is significant for students to reflect upon the fact that some of their identities and experiences
are privileged, which in turn requires them to understand that they unconsciously might contribute to forms of oppression when they participate in the privileging of certain identities. Thus, teachers and students must engage in recognizing and critiquing how one is positioned and how one positions others in social structures. This emphasis on knowledge and resistance towards oppression is characteristic of queer pedagogy (37). The pitfall of this approach is, however, that it implies that because oppression is structural it has the same general effect on people. Since all individuals have multiple identities, all members of the same marginalized group do not necessarily have the same or even similar experiences with oppression. A structural explanation cannot account for the intersections of identities due to the complexity of multiple identities (38).

Researchers who take the approach “Education that Changes Students and Society”, use poststructuralist theories of discourse to help formulate different conceptualizations of oppression that revolve around notions of discourse and citation (40). The "problem" that anti-oppressive education needs to address is not merely a lack of knowledge, but a resistance to knowledge, and a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what is already known. This approach emphasizes that anti-oppressive education needs to involve overcoming the resistance to change and to learn in order to create a desire to change (42). Students must consequently look beyond the known and investigate places that until now have been precluded (44). This connects to Shlasko’s idea of “interpretive performance”, which allows students to self-reflect and view reading as being about what we do with the text rather than being about the text itself. An interpretive performance aims to explore and find meaning in a text beyond what is being represented in the text. By focusing on reading silences in a text, teachers can cause confusion and shift the focus from answers that can be found in the text to answers that can be found beyond the text, thus allowing students to embrace questions and imagine new possibilities. This in turn connects to Shlasko’s argument
that queer pedagogy, in some sense, wants us to be confused. He claims that by engaging with complexity, queer pedagogy strives to overwhelm our capacity to understand something, to bring us to a point where we are ignorant, having neither knowledge nor resistance to knowledge. This kind of ignorance may represent a profound kind of wisdom. Lacking answers, we can embrace questions, engage with multiple understandings, and imagine new possibilities (127). The act of reading as an interpretive performance contributes to the queer pedagogy’s will to make students confused, since they through this act are forced to engage with complexity by reading silences and trying to make meaning of it.

4. Analysis

4.1 Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

I chose to analyze this queer Young Adult novel since the protagonists are queer and belong to the Mexican American minority, which are intersections portrayed as a struggle in the novel. It is important to note that although Ari and Dante struggle with the hybridity of their Mexican American ethnicity in relation to their sexuality, they use the term Mexican when they speak of unbelonging. I, therefore, use the term Mexican when analyzing this matter. The protagonists’ sexuality and ethnicity result in the protagonists being exposed to homophobia, and the feeling of not being a “real Mexican.” Reading the novel raises the questions of why they cannot be queer AND Mexican American? Do Ari and Dante not feel worthy of their Mexican heritage because they are queer? Lastly, is Ari’s and Dante’s ethnicity the mere reason for their struggles of being queer? In this novel, we are dealing with teenagers of the first-generation immigrants in America, and the factors of ethnicity and sexuality complicate and challenge their coming out processes.
The purpose of teaching Ari’s and Dante’s coming out story as portrayed in the novel to Upper Secondary students is to investigate the embedded meanings in the literature in the way the coming out story unfolds, this by analyzing what the novel is leaving unsaid and how this in turn can challenge the common view on the notion of coming out in Mexican American contexts.

Passages from *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* will be analyzed regarding the protagonists’ coming out processes, where the protagonists’ ethnic and sexual minority status play a crucial part. This is significant to the aim of the essay, which is to examine in what ways the novel can be taught in Upper Secondary classrooms - through anti-oppressive approaches - proceeding from the coming out story in the novel.

4.2 How to teach the coming out story in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in Upper Secondary classrooms

This section of the analysis focuses on what ways teachers can teach the coming out story of the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* in relation to the sexual and ethnic minority that the protagonists Aristotle and Dante belong to, through anti-oppressive approaches by Kumashiro, and the discourse on silence.

Teaching about *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* through the approach of “Education About the Other” does not lead to a full knowledge of queer and Mexican American identities, because of the intersections of identities and multiplicity of experiences that exist within the community. It is impossible to teach adequately about every culture and identity, especially given the multiplicity of experiences within any cultural community. Thus, teaching about this novel should not aim to fill a gap in
knowledge about Mexican American queer youth, rather it is to disrupt the knowledge that is already there, since it is the harmful and partial knowledge that students might have that needs to change (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 27). Kumashiro argues that there is always diversity in a group (Kumashiro, “Troubling Education” 34), therefore what is being learned by the novel can never be the whole story of queer Mexican American identities. By teaching the silences of the novel teachers can avoid the potential problem that could occur when using the approach of “Education About the Other”, which is that students might believe that after “understanding” the novel, they will “understand” the represented identities such as Mexican American and queer. This is a problem since every novel has silences and gives authority to certain ideologies, which leads to the fact that every novel provides only a partial perspective (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 34). This approach is relevant for this investigation which aims to teach *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*; however, it merely focuses on the Other. In order to provide an anti-oppressive education, it is necessary to illuminate the position of the privileged. What is essential to strive for using the approach of “Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering” (Kumashiro “Anti-Oppressive Education” 35) is a critique and transformation of hegemonic structures and ideologies (36). To empower students’ comprehension of the oppression of queerness in the novel, this approach requires moving beyond homophobia and rather considering heteronormativity as it is depicted in the novel, and in what ways it affects Ari and Dante. Kumashiro states that heterosexuality often is privileged as normalcy and thinking critically would then involve acknowledging this masking of privilege and teaching critically would involve unmasking and making the privilege of certain identities visible. This can be done in the classroom through an interpretive performance where the act of reading is about what teachers and students do with the text rather than it is about the text itself (Shlasko 126). When teaching *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, teachers can make
an active choice of directing the reading of the novel toward the purpose of unmasking and making the privilege of heterosexuality in the novel visible. Reading the novel through an interpretive performance, it is significant for students to reflect upon the fact that some of their identities and experiences are privileged. Simultaneously students can analyze the privileged identities in the novel that contribute to heterosexist oppression in relation to Ari and Dante. Thus, teachers and students must engage in recognizing and critiquing how one is positioned and how one positions others in social structures. This emphasis on knowledge and resistance towards oppression is characteristic of queer pedagogy (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 37).

The approach “Education that Changes Students and Society” accounts for the fact that the problem anti-oppressive education needs to address is a resistance to knowledge, and a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what is already known. In order to minimize the students’ resistance to learn, teachers should work with the knowledge students already have about for instance, certain stereotypes as to not reinforce them in the classroom. Teachers should help students look beyond the known in order to investigate places that have until now been precluded (Kumashiro, “Anti-Oppressive Education” 43-44). One way of doing that is through the analysis of the silences in the novel, by exploring the way the novel challenges Mexican American stereotypes.

4.3 Exploring silences in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

The analysis of the coming-out theme in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe can be used to explore the silences in the novel. There are passages in the novel that can help students read the silences in the novel and provide them with multiple understandings of how the novel challenges the stereotypes of queer youth that belong to the
Mexican American minority. In addition, it engages students to critique the position of privilege in society. The ways in which teachers and students can engage with silenced discourse in the classroom will be included in the analysis of the passages. There will be questions constructed based on the silences of the novel, which Shlasko claims allow students to imagine new possibilities and engage the students with multiple understandings since these questions lack answers in the novel (Shlasko 127).

4.3.1 Ethnic minority and sexual minority

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Ari and Dante both struggle with their Mexican heritage as they are trying to figure out their sexual identities. Even though they are only teenagers, they feel like they have a responsibility in relation to their culture as well as their parents, which is related to the traditional heteronormative idea of getting married and having children with someone of the opposite sex. The feeling of unbelonging in relation to their ethnicity comes up in several conversations between Ari and Dante, as they struggle with having double identities, that of being Mexican American and queer, which is what is being analyzed in this section of the essay. However, there are underlying subtexts in their conversations that will be analyzed in regard to teaching. The discourse on silences which the theoretical framework of this essay accounts for will be analyzed. The question below focuses on what is not said about the connection between the protagonists’ sexuality and ethnicity, which can be used by teachers when guiding students to read for silences in the classroom:

What is not said in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* about queer youth who are Mexican American?

In the beginning of the novel Dante and Ari have a conversation where Dante is expressing how he is bothered by not being Mexican enough.
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” (Sáenz 72).

In this passage it is clear that Dante is bothered by his ethnicity, although it is not clear why he feels this way. The question above allows students to investigate the reason behind Dante’s struggle with his ethnicity. Other conversations between Ari and Dante that contain silences that can be analyzed with the help of this question are exemplified below.

“You’ve never seen me around my cousins. I feel like a freak.”

I knew what it was like to feel like that. “I know,” I said. “I feel like a freak too.”

“Well at least you’re a real Mexican.”

“What do I know about Mexico, Dante?”

The quiet over the phone was strange. “Do you think it will always be this way?”

“What?”

“I mean, when do we start feeling like the world belongs to us?”
“I wanted to tell him that the world would never belong to us. “I don’t know,” I said. “Tomorrow” (Sáenz 88).

Both Ari and Dante express that they feel like freaks around Mexican people, like they are outcasts in their families. When they start to speak of belonging in the world, it becomes clear that it is rather the feeling of unbelonging that is rooted in them. Dante points out that Ari is a “real Mexican,” which raises the question of what a real Mexican is according to him. “Real Mexican” is a term that is used repeatedly in their conversations. The fact that they both have the feeling that they will always feel like they do not belong, indicates that their feeling is not based on the fact that they do not speak good Spanish, or that they have not been to Mexico. Rather, it is more likely to be about the fact that they are queer. This analysis of the passage could be a conclusion that students could draw with the help of the question. This becomes clearer when including the next passage that clearly draws a connection between their ethnicity and sexuality:

“What should we eat?” I said.

“Menudo,” he said.

“You like menudo.”

“Yeah.”

“I think that makes you a real Mexican.”

“Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?”

“I don’t think liking boys is an American invention” (Sáenz 273).
By reading the two passages above, students can explore the boys’ idea of what it means to be a real Mexican. Ari and Dante seem to think that there are certain requirements despite having a Mexican heritage that one needs to fulfill to be a real Mexican, which they in these interactions indicate that they do not fulfill. When Ari says that the fact that Dante likes menudo makes him a real Mexican, Dante answers with the question “Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?” The questions that could be asked in order for students to explore the silences in this interaction are: Does Dante not feel worthy of his Mexican heritage due to his sexuality? Will Dante ever be able to feel like a real Mexican because of his queerness? Reading this interaction, it seems like even if he would love every Mexican dish that exists, and even if he would be able to speak Spanish fluently and travel to Mexico every year, he would not feel like a real Mexican because he is queer.

4.3.2 Dante’s and Ari’s coming out story

In this section, the coming out processes of Dante and Ari will be analyzed. The focus of the analysis will be on Ari’s and Dante’s sexualities and the process and effects of their coming out. Topics such as signs of queerness and internalized homophobia, conflicts that occur due to their sexuality, and reactions to their coming out will be analyzed and connected to how this could be taught through silences.

To give students the opportunity to read the silences in the novel in order to understand how the novel is challenging stereotypes of Mexican American queer youth, the following question could be used by teachers: How does the novel challenge the stereotypes of Mexican Americans in relation to queerness in the context of coming out? At one point in the novel, Dante confirms his queer sexuality when he expresses that he hopes that his mother gives birth to a boy and that he “better like girls” and then continues (Sáenz 252):
“I have to tell them, Ari.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to.”

“But what if you fall in love with a girl?”

“That’s not going to happen, Ari” (Sáenz 252).

Due to Dante’s queerness, he is hoping for his mother to give birth to a boy who will turn out straight. When he expresses these thoughts to Ari, he also tells him that he must tell his parents that he is queer. There is an oppression in the silences in the conversation between the boys that can be explored. By allowing students to observe this oppression of being queer, the students can analyze what the oppression is rooted in. Ari and Dante live in a society where being queer means breaking the norm, which Ari illustrates when asking Dante “But what if you fall in love with a girl?” Falling in love with a girl would mean fitting right in a heteronormative society. Heteronormativity can be explored through the silences in this passage, which can further be developed by the question: How can one explain heteronormativity based on how the novel depicts Aristotle’s and Dante’s coming out story? Using this question when exploring the silences of the passage can open multiple understandings of heteronormativity and how it affects queer youth such as Ari and Dante. Students can discuss why Dante must come out because he is queer and whether this situation would occur if he was straight, thus acknowledging the privileged position of heterosexuality as an effect of heteronormativity.

Dante experiences a hate crime when he kisses a boy and gets beat up. Ari does not know about this, so when he goes to Ari’s house he meets Dante’s father, Mr. Quintana,
who tells him that he is in the hospital. Mr. Quintana says that he thought he knew that Dante was queer, even though Dante never told him, and Ari confirms that Dante is queer:

“But why didn’t he tell me, Ari?”

“He didn’t want to disappoint you.”

…

“He was so happy that you were having 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.’”

“I don’t care about grandchildren. I care about Dante” (Sáenz 302-303).

Dante is silent about his sexuality since he does not want his father to be disappointed in him. This can be connected to one interaction between Dante and Ari analyzed in section 4.3.1 above. In the conversation, Dante asks Ari if real Mexicans like to kiss boys. An understanding of Dante’s silence regarding his sexuality can therefore be that it is rooted in the stereotypes he has about Mexicans in relation to queerness. Dante has his own idea of what it means to be Mexican and is therefore silent about his sexuality and does not tell his parents about it. However, Mr. Quintana states that Dante’s sexuality is not something that bothers him, which might challenge common ideas of Mexicans or immigrants being conservative. By reading Mr. Quintana’s statement that he cares about Dante and not about grandchildren, students can analyze Dante’s silence with the help of the question: In what ways does the novel challenge the stereotypes of Mexicans in relation to queerness in the context of coming out? In the two interactions above it is expressed that Dante needs his younger sibling to be a straight boy. Dante’s silence in this expression could be that if his
sibling turns out to be straight Dante’s queerness would not affect his parents as much, and he would not be as much of a disappointment. Does Dante feel like having a straight sibling would allow him to lead a queer life, perhaps without having a bad conscience?

The question that helps explore heteronormativity in the novel can be used in the reading of silences in the next passage as well. After Dante has been abused, Ari is angry and ignores Dante because the guy Dante was kissing when he was abused abandoned him. One day Ari’s parents sit down to talk with him (Sáenz 345). Ari’s father says to him:

“If you keep running, it will kill you.”

“What, dad?”

“You and Dante.”

“Me and Dante?” I looked at my mother. Then looked at my father.

“Dante’s in love with you,” he said. “That’s obvious enough. He doesn’t hide that from himself.

“I can’t help what he feels, Dad.”

…

My father nodded. “Ari, the problem isn’t just that Dante’s in love with you. The real problem—for you, anyway – is that you’re in love with him.”

…

“I think you love him more than you can bear.”

“Dad? Dad, no. No. I can’t. I can’t. Why are you saying these things?”
“Because I can’t stand watching all that loneliness that lives inside you. Because I love you, Ari.”

...

“What am I going to do? I’m so ashamed.”

“Ashamed of what?” my mother said. “Of loving Dante?”

“I’m a guy. He’s a guy. It’s not the way things are supposed to be. Mom—” “I hate myself.”

“Don’t, amor. Te adoro” I’ve already lost a son. I’m not going to lose another. You’re not alone, Ari. I know it feels that way. But you’re not.”

“How can you love me so much?” (Sáenz 348-350, italics in original)

This is essentially the first time it is explicitly depicted in the novel that Ari is queer, which is not expressed by him, but his parents. Even though Ari has not expressed that he is queer, his silence through the novel speaks for itself which makes readers understand that he was queer even before it was explicitly expressed in the novel. Unlike Dante, he has been afraid to show his feelings regarding his sexuality, and instead he has suppressed them. Ari’s coming out process has been quiet and rather expressed through a silence that is interpreted to be caused by heteronormativity. One can find oppression in Ari’s silence that is mainly visible when Ari indicates that his sexuality is something to be ashamed of which in turn can explain why he has not acted on his feelings toward Dante. His parents let him know that he should embrace his sexuality, instead of being ashamed of it.

The question formulated above about heteronormativity can help students analyze what is not said about Ari’s feelings of shame due to his sexuality and further
investigate how heteronormativity positions queer people in the novel. Ari would not have been ashamed if he was in love with a girl, which he expresses when he says: “I’m a guy. He’s a guy. It’s not the way things are supposed to be.” Ari’s parents tell Ari that he should not hide or suppress his sexuality, yet Ari argues that he is not supposed to have these feelings toward a boy. This implies that it is not his parents that has passed on these heteronormative values that he is trying to convince himself and his parents are true. Ari’s internalized homophobia which is clearly depicted in the conversation with his parents is created by the heteronormative values that society is characterized by rather than a consequence of his parents’ values.

Students can further explore the silences of Ari’s and Dante’s sexualities in relation to their parents by analyzing the fact that both of them have open-minded and accepting parents, yet they have a deeply rooted idea of “real Mexicanness” which seems to be conservative. If this idea they have does not come from their own parents, where does it come from? Their parents are surely not the only Mexicans Ari and Dante know or are surrounded by, which is an argument that can be made based on where they live. El Paso is a city where a lot of Mexicans and Mexican Americans live, and it was boys of Mexican heritage that physically abused Dante when he kissed a boy. Perhaps the boys’ idea of “real Mexicanness” comes from Mexicans and Mexican Americans they are surrounded by that have expressed homophobia.

Ari is the narrator of the novel, yet Dante’s thoughts and feelings are more explicit in the novel. The novel is written through Ari’s perspective which mostly consists of his thoughts, and therefore, his coming-out story is mostly read through silences. Reading the novel through silences focusing on Ari, investigating what he does not say can be a way to find what in fact is said about his queerness. Therefore, students can explore Ari’s silences
with the question: What can be read through Ari’s silence regarding his queerness since he does not come out until his Mexican parents push him to? This connects to Kumashiro’s argument that a lack of acknowledgment regarding silences of a text is problematic, since texts have meaning because of what they leave unsaid (Kumashiro, 61). Engaging students in a close reading of different passages that focus on Ari, queer pedagogy as Shlasko states it allows the students to get confused. Thus, when providing students with the opportunity to engage with complexity, it is in an effort to overwhelm the student’s capacity to understand the novel from Ari’s perspective which in turn brings the students to a point where they are ignorant, having neither knowledge nor resistance to knowledge (127). The fact that Ari’s and Dante’s parents are open-minded challenges the boys’ and the common view of immigrants being conservative. Ari and Dante do not understand this as they are fixated on being authentic in relation to their “Mexicanness,” while being queer is about understanding that being “authentic” is not necessary.

Ari’s silence will be analyzed in the passages below:

I knew I wasn’t a boy anymore. But I still felt like a boy. Sort of. But there were other things I was starting to feel. Man things, I guess. Man loneliness was much bigger than boy loneliness. … In a strange way, my friendship with Dante had made me feel even more alone. I always felt that I didn’t belong anywhere. I didn’t even belong in my own body – especially in my own body. I was changing into someone I didn’t know (Sáenz 81, original in italics).

In this passage Ari thinks that he is starting to come of age, developing from a boy to a man, and he is struggling with things he has not struggled with before. The fact that he not only relates this new-found loneliness with his friendship with Dante, but that it reinforces his
loneliness, is something that is not further explained. This silence can in turn be explored by reading into what is left unsaid in this context. Is Ari dealing with unknown and unexplored feelings; perhaps feelings of queerness? If Ari’s loneliness is connected to him being queer, should not Dante who is queer and Mexican American make Ari feel less lonely? Does Ari feel lonely because of his silence?

The swimming pool is a place where Ari and Dante got to know each other, where Dante taught Ari how to swim. Therefore, swimming becomes something they share. In this passage Dante describes his amount of love for Ari with the love he has for swimming:

“I love swimming,” he said again. He was quiet for a little while. And then he said, “I love swimming – and you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Swimming and you, Ari. Those are the things I love the most.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” I said.

“It’s true.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t true. I just said you shouldn’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Dante, I don’t –”

“You don’t have to say anything. I know that we’re different. We’re not the same.”

“No, we’re not the same.” (Sáenz 150-151, italics in original)
Why does Ari not want Dante to say that he loves him? What does Dante mean when he says that they are not the same? Does it have the same meaning as when Ari says that they are not the same? Do they mean that they are not the same regarding their sexuality or perhaps in how they deal with their sexuality? These questions can help students explore the silences in this interaction.

At the end of the novel, Ari finally kisses Dante after Ari’s parents tell him that he should not be ashamed of loving Dante. After the kiss Ari expresses a feeling of relief, wondering how he could ever be ashamed of loving a boy, of loving Dante Quintana:

“Aristotle Mendoza, a free man. I wasn’t afraid anymore. I thought of that look on my mother’s face when I’d told her I was ashamed. I thought of that look of love and compassion that she wore as she looked at me.

“Ashamed? Of loving Dante?”
I took Dante’s hand and held it.

How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (Sáenz 359)

It is not just Ari who is a free man. It is Aristotle Mendoza, a Mexican American queer man claiming his “Mexicanness” and stating his freedom. Even at the end of the novel there is a silence in Ari’s words which cannot be understood by the text itself, rather multiple understandings can be provided by engaging with the text. Students can discuss the meaning of freedom in this passage through the following questions: Does Ari mean that he is free because he finally accepts himself as being both Mexican American and queer? Does he mean that he is free from his silences regarding his sexuality? The novel ends with this passage, where Dante and Ari finally know what they feel towards each other and express those feelings, not with silence but with words. Teachers and students can explore whether Ari’s
and Dante’s coming out process has come to its end. Does the process of coming out ever end? Will Ari and Dante ever stop coming out or stop dealing with being queer in a heteronormative society? And finally, is queerness ever finished?

5. Conclusion

This essay investigates how the coming out story in the queer Young Adult novel Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe can be taught in Upper Secondary classrooms by using anti-oppressive approaches focusing on silenced discourse. When teachers allow their students to work with the protagonists’ coming out story within this framework, teachers can engage their students in exploring and finding meaning in the silences that Aristotle and Dante speak through.

The anti-oppressive approaches used to investigate the coming out story of the novel are “Education About the Other”, “Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering” and “Education that Changes Students and Society”. When implementing “Education About the Other” in the teaching of the novel, teachers ought to challenge students’ stereotypes and misrepresentations about Mexican American queer people, and work against the partial knowledge that students have. Thus, teaching about the novel should not aim to fill a gap in knowledge about Mexican American queer youth, but rather the aim is to disrupt the knowledge that is already there. Applying “Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering” requires to move beyond oppression itself and focus on the causes of oppression. When teaching the novel this means investigating how heteronormativity and the privilege of heterosexuality position Ari and Dante in relation to their queerness. Additionally, the teaching aims to investigate how queerness positions them in relation to
their “Mexicanness” in a way that makes them question the authenticity of their Mexican ethnicity since in their understanding, being queer and being Mexican American cannot coexist. Finally, the approach of “Education that Changes Students and Society” accounts for the fact that the problem anti-oppressive education needs to address is a resistance of knowledge, and a resistance to any knowledge that disrupts what is already known. When students look beyond what is known in the novel, teachers and students can engage with the silences in the novel.

The analysis proposed by this essay has identified passages from the novel that students can explore through the discourse on silences with the help of several questions that focus on different topics regarding Ari’s and Dante’s sexuality and ethnicity. By allowing students to engage with the novel through reading for silences, teachers provide students the opportunity to find meanings in what is unsaid. When students read interactions between Ari and Dante that are about their struggle of being Mexican American and queer, students can explore what is not said about Mexican American queer youth and what Ari’s and Dante’s struggle is based on. A term that is frequently used by Ari and Dante when they speak about queerness is “real Mexican”, this is a term that can be further explored by the students. What in fact is a “real Mexican” and why does it have a traditional meaning for them, though their parents are not traditional? Do Ari and Dante understand “Mexicanness” in a different way and is their understanding of “Mexicanness” affected by their queerness? Further, students can find oppression in the silences in the conversations between Ari and Dante, as well as conversations between them and their parents. By allowing students to observe the oppression of being queer, students can analyze what the oppression is rooted in. These conversations can relate to both stereotypes of Mexican American queer youth and living in a heteronormative society as a queer person which can be explored by the questions: How does the novel challenge the stereotypes of Mexican Americans in relation to queerness in the context of
coming out? How can one illuminate heteronormativity based on how the novel depicts Aristotle and Dante’s coming out story?

Due to Ari’s silence regarding his queerness in the novel, students have much space to explore the embedded meanings in his silence with the help of the question: What is said in Ari’s silence regarding his queerness? Further, the novel ends with Ari asking: “How could I have ever been ashamed of loving Dante Quintana?” (Saénz 359). This ending allows students to explore whether it is the end of Ari’s and Dante’s coming out story and if it ever will end.

In conclusion, teaching Upper Secondary students the coming out story in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* using queer pedagogy by focusing on silenced discourse allows students to engage with the complexity and confusion which queer pedagogy strives for.
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