

**Degrees of Mexicanness: Challenging Racial Identities in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's
*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

Migrating over the Rio Grande from Juárez to El Paso creates a physical border and a cultural chasm for initial migrants and future generations to come. This essay discusses the possible shortfalls in the complex representation of Mexican-Americans living on the border through the characters' assumption, or denial, of their role in the ecotone they inhabit, defined by Sáenz as, "the terrain where two different ecosystems meet" (237). With this definition in mind, Sáenz implies both Ari and Dante are responsible for their position as subjects of the U.S.-México borderland society as they become privileged by being members of both cultures.

This essay will also explore the social authority they possess in the ecotone, the degree of *Entwicklungsroman* that they achieve by being Mexican-American in the borderland, and the power they wield on their own identities. While working to identify and accept their sexual orientation, Ari and Dante also question the meaning and different degrees of Mexicanness, and debate who is allowed to claim the title of being Mexican. Unlike his parents, second generation immigrants, Dante, fears he lacks the necessary requirements to qualify as a true Mexican—such as language and cultural traditions—and fully coexist within the El Paso-Juárez ecotone while simultaneously favoring the American side of his Mexican-American identity. Ari, on the other hand, acknowledges that neither side of the cultural dichotomy requires to be favored.

As someone who experienced living in the El Paso-Juárez border, my reading of this book provides a unique examination of character and cultural representations which will question whether Sáenz provides opportunities for his characters to disturb the unique universe in which they inhabit.