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## How Setting Impacts the Progression of Male Queer Protagonists in Proxy and Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe

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## Abstract

Alex London's novel *Proxy* explores the life of a male queer teenager named Sydney Carton, who resides in a Science Fiction dystopia, and is forced to evade punishment for crimes he did not commit. Benjamin Alire Saénz' novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* explores the life of a male queer protagonist Ari Mendoza, who lives in an idealistic version of the 1980s, and struggles with coming to terms with his sexuality. In this essay, I assert that each male queer protagonist is shaped by their respective settings due to the nature of their constantly changing environments. Each character's ability to navigate their initial setting, along with their growth through a change in setting, allows them to undergo a transformation throughout their stories. This transformation not only applies to their view of the world, but how they view the most important people of their lives. Each novel explores these characters' sexuality, as well as the relationships with their father figures through their evolving views of the world that they reside in and the environments they encounter.

Keywords: setting, father figures, queer, change, identity, isolation

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

How Setting Impacts the Progression of Male Queer Protagonists in *Proxy*  
and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

By

Cesar Negrone

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

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Department of English

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Montclair, NJ

2024

**Contents:**

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. How Setting is Understood and Deployed.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3. Initial Setting Developments.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>4. How Baram and Jaime Are Shaped by Setting.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5. How a Change of Setting Affects Syd.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>6. How a Change of Setting Affects Ari.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>8. Works Cited.....</b>	<b>37</b>

## Introduction

One of the defining aspects of young adult literature is its diversity in its use of several genres and how those genres affect the storytelling and character development. There is oftentimes a formula that is followed where protagonists are put in a more idealistic or alternatively, a more dire setting. This is done so that the focus can be more on the world around them and the relationships that the protagonists build within that world. Through witnessing the growth of these relationships, readers develop an understanding of who they are and who they will become. This also gives the story the chance to not just develop one character but to develop multiple characters through their connections to the protagonist. Additionally, in the last ten years, there has been an increase in the use of a male queer protagonist in Young Adult Literature (YAL). As a result, many authors of Young Adult fiction have found new ways to explore the idea of how setting impacts these protagonists' relationships with those around them.

In this thesis, I explore two Young Adult novels to examine the impact that their respective settings have on their queer protagonists. These novels are *Proxy* by Alex London and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saénz. This essay explores how each of these novels' settings impact the growth of Sydney Carton, the protagonist of *Proxy* and Aristotle Mendoza, protagonist of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The thesis also explores how each protagonists' setting affects the relationships they develop during the course of their novels. By doing so, I address the following questions:

**First:** How does the setting affect the growth of each of the queer, male protagonists in these novels?

**Second:** How do Syd and Ari grow closer to those around them as a result of their respective settings?

While each novel features a male queer protagonist, the worlds of these novels are extremely different from one another. The world of *Proxy* is a science fiction dystopian future on Earth where technology is advanced to a point where every service can be bought digitally and where many medical conditions can be cured utilizing patches or pills. The world of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (to be referred to as *Ari and Dante*) is set in the recent past in El Paso, Texas, in a version of the 1980s where the AIDS epidemic seems to be less of an epidemic than it was by keeping the topic out of the narrative. These respective settings become the basis for the relationships formed within them. While Sydney (aka Syd) Carton and Knox Brindle are initially separate because of the rules of their world in *Proxy*, Aristotle (Ari) Mendoza and Dante Quintana are brought together by the grounded and supportive community that exists in their world.

The relationship between Syd and Knox in *Proxy* begins as a series of obstacles created by their respective social classes. This separation is created by their economic settings in that Knox lives in the rich Upper City and Syd lives in the destitute Lower City. The cities are in a geography that relates to both their name as well as the status of their citizens, with Upper City citizens living in a city above the clouds and receiving higher forms of privilege, while the Lower City citizens live in a deep and desolate valley city called Mountain City. Through his life in Upper City, Knox is allowed to live a life of privilege and wealth where in most cases, he does not have to pay for the consequences of his actions. In the case of Syd, he is unable to have this kind of privilege because he is from the Lower City, where he struggles to survive and must serve as the proxy to Knox. The duties of being Knox's proxy include enduring punishments for

Knox's crimes and providing medical donations (when and if it is needed) for Knox. Syd's lack of privilege is reflected when the narrator states:

Nothing smelled worse than 3000 sweating teenagers trapped in a concrete bunker of a building made for half that number. The valve was at the lowest point in the Mountain City, where the wet heat lingered, unmoved by the breezes that kept the peaks of the Upper City comfortable. Breezes were for people who could afford them. All the lower city kids got was that of nature's indifference. (London 10)

This quote highlights the economic struggles of everyone who lives in the Lower City. It conveys that they must focus on survival and cannot rely on others the way that those in the Upper City are able to do. As the novel progresses, Syd reflects on his status as a proxy, as well as on his patron, who he does not know yet. In one instance, he is required to give blood at the school aid station. At this moment, the narrator reflects Syd's thoughts when stating, "This wasn't about his health. This was about his patron. What had the brat done this time?" (London 17). With this statement, the narrator indicates that Syd not only dislikes his patron, but that he also has no idea who Knox even is due to the structure of the patron/proxy system, which is designed to have patrons and proxies be anonymous to one another. Despite this (albeit understandable) anger he seems to share towards Knox, he knows that he must perform his duty as a proxy, or he will be subjected to an even more harsh physical penalty. This causes him to have animosity more towards the society around him for its capitalist structures more so than at a singular figure.

Syd is also punished for his responsibilities, as when he returns to the class, he is asked by his teacher, Mr. Thompson, "So we are all to be punished for your obligations?" (London 19). With this question, it is indicated that despite fulfilling his obligations as a proxy, he must not



allow his role to interfere with his studies as well as those of his classmates, thus creating a balancing act he must perform to both his patron in the Upper City, as well as his “superiors” in the Lower City. This balancing act causes Syd’s initial setting to serve as an obstacle unto itself, where Syd struggles with maintaining any kind of freedom within the Lower City, as not only is he beholden to his patron in the Upper City, but he must also be beholden to his elders in the Lower City.

Both cities are vital elements to the novel as they create the class structure, which causes Syd and Knox to become polar opposites of one another, while simultaneously tying them together through the proxy system. Each character is both a victim and a beneficiary of their respective cities, with Syd’s balancing act in the Lower City acting as a counterpart to Knox’s lifestyle, where Knox lives a life of privilege which coincides with the lack of love he feels from his father, with the narrator reflecting these thoughts, “Why was his father so disgusted with him” (London 48). They have learned how to navigate the systems in their settings and have been often forced to succumb to the rules of these same systems, causing them to not enjoy the lives they have.

While Alex London creates a setting driven by the upper class maintaining a dictatorship over the lower class, Benjamin Alire Saénz creates an idealistic version of the 1980s with his novel *Aristotle and Dante*. Set in El Paso, Texas, the world that Saénz creates is one where the AIDS epidemic and homophobia are kept out of the narrative to enable the reader to focus on the growing relationship between Ari Mendoza and Dante Quintana. Through the removal of these elements, Saénz crafts a more idealistic version of this time, one where both Ari’s and Dante’s parents are accepting of their relationship without the fear of them dying from AIDS (though still fearing intolerance and violence). Within the Romantic nature of the world he builds, Saénz

creates a relationship between Ari and Dante that allows the reader to envision a potential future between them, without the questions that would normally plague queer couples in the 1980s. Through crafting this relationship, Saézn breaks certain stereotypes that might be expected from a queer relationship in a Young Adult novel (or even an adult novel) set during this time.

*Aristotle and Dante* centers around the growth of the boys' relationship with the setting of the novel being an environment that shapes the interests of both Ari and Dante. A primary use of setting that Saézn utilizes is the concept of a historical setting. A historical setting refers to the time period in which a literary work is set, including specific events, social conditions, and cultural norms of that time. While he leaves out certain elements of the 1980s to focus on his characters, Saézn utilizes the concept of a historical setting through various forms of literature. These literary forms are used to not only display the personalities and interests of the various characters, but also to bind these characters together.

For instance, Dante prefers to read old *Superman* and *Archie and Veronica* comics, which are both very optimistic and romance-oriented stories, reflecting how Ari views him. Ari reads *Batman*, *Spiderman*, and *The Incredible Hulk*, which are all, in several ways, tragic and violent stories. These choices of comics showcase each of their personalities, with Dante being a little more light-hearted and fun, and Ari exclaiming, "I hated that shit" (Saézn 19). Ari's choices express that there is an edge to him, despite his inner goodness. Saézn grows the relationship between the boys by utilizing stories that were popular in the 1980s to reflect their individual personalities. The comic books serve as an example of the historical setting that is deployed in the novel, as they are stories that were ubiquitous during the time in which the novel is set. They are featured to reflect not just the personalities of Ari and Dante, but also to reflect how each individual visualizes their world and settings. In the case of Ari, the comics

reflect the feelings he shares towards his father Jaime, where he feels lonely and isolated due to what he views as a lack of connection.

Saézn even utilizes canonical literature in a manner that is integral to the setting to bring Ari closer to those around him. This includes the use of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Ari decides to read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because he knows it is one of Dante's favorite books. He initially tries to find elements of the book he does not enjoy because he loves having literary debates with Dante. He acknowledges his enjoyment of the book when he states, "I lied to him. I loved the book. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd have ever read. When my father noticed what I was reading, he told me it was one of his favorite books. I wanted to ask him if he had read it before or after he had fought in Vietnam. It was no good to ask my father questions. He never answered them" (Saézn 20). With this moment, Ari observes more about Dante and the kind of novels he likes to read from an intellectual standpoint, whereas he finally learns just a small detail about his own father. Learning that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is one of Jaime's favorite novels is one of the first instances where Ari feels as if he learns something about his own father, whose mysterious wartime past has caused a rift to form in their relationship. This distance shapes the initial setting of the novel as it establishes a crucial element that defines Ari and makes his relationship with Dante even more unique. Dante is someone he allows himself to open up to. It is also a moment where two generations that occupy the novel (fathers/sons) can find common ground with one another. Oftentimes, it seems as if Ari views his relationship with Dante to be a way for him to avoid thinking about his relationship with his own father. By reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ari is able to connect the two most important parts of his world, his relationship with Dante, and his relationship with his father, opening the possibility of developing both

relationships and allowing them to coincide and coexist.

Literary works are a key component to the historical setting of the novel, as SaéNZ utilizes it as a form of connective tissue between Ari and the various characters around him. By utilizing multiple forms of literature (comics, poems, and novels), SaéNZ exposes the reader to multiple aspects of each character's personality, as well as elements that allow for future growth in these relationships.

Multiple moments from both *Proxy* and *Aristotle and Dante* utilize their settings to emphasize the growth of the relationships between Syd/Knox, and Aristotle/Dante. The dynamics of these respective duos, as well as how the setting impacts the relationships that the protagonists have with their respective father figures, are shaped by multiple elements of their respective settings. This is done to further emphasize the importance of each novel's setting as it relates to the growth of these respective relationships.

### **How Setting Is Understood and Deployed**

Setting is often defined as the place, time, and tone within which a story is being told. Many readers mistakenly view a setting simply as the location in which the story takes place without considering the effect that the location has on its characters. While setting serves as the location, it also serves as the foundation for which a character struggles and achieves growth over time. Characters are either *defined* by their setting, or defined by their desire to move *past* it. In a video titled "What is a Setting," Professor Robert Malewitz states:

Setting is much more than a mere backdrop for human action. Just as we are shaped by the city, region, and country that surrounds us, characters in fiction are shaped by their own geographical circumstances. And just as we are molded by the strange 21st century

time in which we live, characters in fiction are molded by their own strange historical moments, which influence what they think, how they speak, and how they act. Paying attention to setting—what it is and how it is described--can therefore bring us closer to the central themes, ideas, and conflicts of the stories we love. (Malewitz 0:45-1:20)

Malewitz's statement brings forth the idea of humans constantly being shaped by their own surroundings, and that characters in fiction are no different. Characters' beliefs and viewpoints are shaped by their own individual circumstances, whether they be geographical, or other moments that change the way they view the world. These circumstances/moments cause characters to obtain their own point of views, and possibly even change those views as well, with how they may react being a result of constant change.

Malewitz operates through the principle that setting plays a key role in defining character. In many forms of literature, particularly in YAL, setting plays a key role in characterization, as many fictional characters become developed through the circumstances that they are part of in their story. This can range from a geographical sense, or even from a time that the story takes place in. A character's setting always has a drastic impact on who that character is and who that character becomes, with their initial circumstances often being different from their later circumstances, causing a change in their development.

### **Initial Setting Developments**

When examining the use of setting in both novels, one must first determine how these protagonists' journeys through their respective settings shape their development. Each boy must also measure their ability to navigate familiar environments as well as how their ability to navigate new environments ultimately help them grow as characters. These newer environments

often play a major role in bringing characters closer to those around them, thus establishing secondary characters beyond the norms of YAL. In his article titled, “Somewhere Away from the Lights of This City: Unsettling the Normative Frameworks of Urban Space in Queer Young Adult Literature,” Angel Daniel Matos states:

Historically, urban spaces have had quite a hold on the queer YA imagination. Countless YA novels with queer themes and characters are often set in large cities—and even when they are not, urban spaces still serve as imagined spaces that non-urban characters define themselves with or against. Some of the earliest and most groundbreaking queer YA texts were often set in urban geographies, and in many ways, these texts could be approached as a simultaneous exploration of queer desire and as a tour through the cities in which they are set. (Matos 69)

With this statement, Matos argues that the experience of many queer YA texts often relies on the author seeking to establish both the desires of the protagonist while simultaneously exploring the setting that exists around that protagonist. This exploration allows the reader to understand characters’ motivations, their initial thoughts, as well as witness how characters change the more they explore a setting or allow the setting to affect them.

Understanding Matos’ statement is integral to comprehending Ari’s growth and development, as it is through exploring the setting that he can grow closer to and more intimate with Dante. Examining the relationship between Ari and Dante requires not only an examination of the setting of El Paso, Texas, during the 1980s, but it also requires an examination of the individual areas that are explored within El Paso. In the case of Ari and Dante’s relationship, one major geographic region explored is the desert. With this idea in mind, Saéñz uses the desert as

the place (setting) that fosters the growth of the boys' relationship; their first outing together brings them closer to one another.

The scene begins with Dante assembling the telescope to examine the stars above (with Ari and his family). For Dante this is a regular evening as his family has made a tradition of exploring the desert, whereas for Ari, this is his first time exploring the desert and its night sky. With the use of the telescope, Dante can explore an area of familiarity and Ari can discover something new by looking up at the stars through the telescope. Within the telescope, Ari begins to understand the vastness of the universe (that is explained throughout the novel):

Dante began explaining what I was looking at. I didn't hear a word. Something happened inside me as I looked out into the vast universe. Through that telescope, the world was closer and larger than I had ever imagined. And it was also beautiful and overwhelming, and—I don't know—it made me aware that there was something inside of me that mattered. As Dante was watching me search the sky through the lens of a telescope, he whispered, "Someday I'm going to discover all the secrets of the universe." (Saénz 42-43)

Ari's first time exploring the desert provides a necessary building block for his relationship with Dante, as well as his relationship with this family. The desert and the telescope each serve as key parts of Ari's initial setting, as they allow him to see the world through a larger lens and understand that what he seeks is closer than it may seem. It also provides a larger understanding of whether or not he has a place in this world.

He is not alone in this universe but did not understand that concept until his first adventure into the desert with Dante. It is through Dante's telescope that Ari begins to see that while he is a very small part of the universe, he is still someone that exists within it. He begins to

feel as if he is connected to Dante and that this connection is the tether that ties him to both the world and to the people within it. It is his apprehension of the vastness of the desert's landscape that allows him to understand that while he is a small part of the universe, he is still a part of it—and it is a part of him.

While Ari's relationship with Dante grows through his engagement with this new desert environment, the characters in *Proxy* have the opposite responses when introduced to their new environment. This exposure to their new setting is also the desert and comes as a result of Knox's rebellious actions and Syd's responsibilities as his proxy. Throughout his life so far, Syd has constantly received numerous kinds of punishments for Knox's social infractions. Syd received his very first punishment from Knox's violations when he was only four years old. It is during this early-stage moment where Knox witnesses Syd receive what should have been his own punishment. At four years old, Syd is exposed to the unfairness of the patron/proxy system and his role in the scheme of trade, commodity, and debt. The narrator states:

Sydney was pulled right out of his bed in a part of the city Knox had never known existed.... [HE]didn't look anything like the other children Knox knew. Just seeing him made Knox frightened. When he was brought into the room, Knox remembered Sydney, laughing. He stopped laughing when he saw the E-M-D stick. Sydney got five low-power zaps and he obviously didn't understand why, even when the matronly hand of the orphanage explained it to him. He just cried and cried and screamed and cried some more, Knox cried along with him. Then Knox apologized to the holo and to his father.... He vowed to be better, promised he would never be a disappointment again, but that lasted about six weeks. (London 60)



This is the moment where Syd is exposed to the system that will define his initial setting. He learns that he is a proxy, and that he must be punished for all of Knox's wrongdoings. With this first punishment, there comes Syd's initiation into the patron/proxy system. As a result of this moment, however, there is a nascent, initial growth in Knox, where he believes that he should change his ways for the benefit of Syd.

So, over a short period of time, Knox changes his good ways and goes back to his old patterns of causing mischief; he understands that he will never receive punishment because of Syd's existence and his role in the proxy system. Due to Knox's irresponsibility, Syd suffers a life of trauma and penalties as a result of various crimes committed by Knox, with punishments escalating in severity over time. In the present day, these crimes range from, "the crime of larceny . . . the crime of trespassing and destruction of property . . . and for the crime of negligent homicide" (63). Despite never bearing the true guilt for any of Knox's actions or crimes that he committed, Syd serves a sentence that was forced upon him from the moment he was born. The structure of capitalism within the novel has created these circumstances. This indirect connection between the two boys serves as the very first obstacle to the healing of their relationship, as it is many years later that Knox sees Syd again—and not through a video or holo screen.

Consequently, in both novels, the relationships that the protagonists develop change over time as a reflection of how their environments change. With these changes in settings, come not only a change in desire, but also a difference in how each boy views the people in their lives, and their perspective on the societies in which they live. The deeper the boys navigate their changing settings, the further and deeper the protagonists grow and mature.

### How Baram and Jaime Are Shaped by Setting

Another aspect of setting that connects Ari and Syd is how their relationships with their father figures are molded by where and when they are situated. Each novel presents a father figure for its protagonist who has a profound impact on the journeys of both boys (Syd and Ari). The presence of these two father figures breaks the usual YAL trope of absentee parents, described by Zu Vincent as “one of the oldest stories in the world” (Vincent 5)—as each father figure provides a crucial role in the development of their son (or pseudo-son). The respective characters of Baram (the father figure to Syd) and Jaime Mendoza (Ari’s father) present both an *obstacle* to the journeys of both boys (Syd and Ari) as well as the *solutions* for helping the characters discover their true identities. Baram and Jaime each provide insight as to what the final goal for each of these characters becomes.

Baram is not the father of Syd, but he is a mentor and protector, much like many mentors seen in other science fiction texts. Baram runs a shop in the Lower City where Syd goes to fix gadgets in exchange for housing, small favors, and money. Baram is a Jewish man who speaks Yiddish, for example when he refers to the citizens of the Valve as “schnorrer,” which means beggar (London 34). He also undertakes various illegal dealings throughout the Valve using his shop as a front. The narrator describes Baram’s shop:

Mr. Baram’s Shop was the place to go to get junk working again. . . . They’d refurbish, repair and rebuild with no questions asked. They bought and sold parts too, also no questions asked. Syd took care of most of the repairs, while Mr. Baram took care of the buying and selling and not asking questions. Mr. Baram also had a room off to the side where local kids who didn’t go to school gamed on his old holo sets. . . . He didn’t charge the young ones for the hours they spent playing games. He took his payment from them

in other ways. There were feral kids running around all over the valve and no one paid them any attention. That made them useful to Mr. Baram. (London 32-33)

This statement refers to how Baram utilizes the setting around him to elevate himself above other citizens in the Valve. Baram is someone who serves as a mentor to the youth of the Valve, especially with Syd. Mentorship comes at a price, with the children of the Valve performing tasks for Baram such as “to gather information and to run messages, to warn him if any of the private security thugs were coming around” (London 33). These various tasks serve as examples of people (i.e. the children) being seen as commodities within the novel and is the setting within which Baram elevates himself above the children of the Valve and exploits their usefulness, thus demonstrating how he views Syd.

These circumstances also serve as everyday life in the Valve, where Baram utilizes the children to maintain his own survival. This circumstance is shaped by the setting of the Valve, where elders can establish positions of power over the youth. Baram does not represent the ordinary father figure who would normally be found in a sci-fi story, as he does also advise Syd on how he can navigate the system of the Valve with advice such as: “But you should keep your kindness in a harder place. You wear it in your hair and every schnorrer from here to the Upper City can smell it” (London 34). This statement reflects the mindset of not just Baram, but of many citizens of the Valve that in order to survive, one must learn to utilize others and not be used themselves. This mindset shapes the circumstances of the Valve, thus shaping the relationship between Syd and Baram. The foundation of their relationship is shaped in a setting built on utilizing others’ skills for survival.

Baram believes that Syd must elevate himself among the schnorrers (beggars) of the Lower City, which is depicted as a place filled with beggars seeking to elevate themselves at the

expense of the other. This setting is one that is shaped by an economic crisis which ultimately ties these two characters together, where they view each other to be the most useful of their community. While he does provide Syd with multiple forms of wisdom, Baram also has an ulterior motive behind this relationship; he exchanges favors and barter with Syd just as he does for many of the children who are around their part of the Valve. All relationships stem from the system that they are parts of, with Baram using both Syd and the other children of the Valve as a means to increase chances of his own survival and his own economic security.

While *Proxy* provides an alternative use for a parental figure in YAL, so too does Saézn's novel through Jaime Mendoza. Ari's father is a vastly different father figure than Baram due to the domestic setting that Saézn has established. This setting in *Ari and Dante* built on physical elements as well as mental elements, creating an emotional-psychological setting for both Jaime and Ari.

Baram is a salesman, a shop owner who networks with others in the Valve in order to survive. Jaime Mendoza is a quiet, reserved Vietnam War veteran living in El Paso during the 1980s. As a veteran, Ari's father has had horrific experiences in the war that has interfered with his ability to connect to his son—and with others in general. Ari notices this disconnected nature when he states: "Sometimes I think my father has all these scars. On his heart. In his head. All over. It's not such an easy thing to be the son of a man who's been to war. When I was eight, I overheard my mother talking to my Aunt Ophelia over the phone; "I don't think that the war will ever be over for him." Later, I asked my Aunt Ophelia if that was true. "Yes, she said it, it's true" (Saézn 14).

This lack of connection between father and son—despite Ari acknowledging that it is because of the war—causes Jaime to be seen as a father who is selfish and uncaring. As a result

of this viewpoint, Ari emotionally isolates himself from those around him and uses his dad as an example for why he does not need to communicate with anybody to “make it” in the world.

The war shapes the initial setting of the novel (time and tone) as the consequences of Jaime’s past affect the development of his relationship with his son. The war creates an environment filled with nothing but silence and distance between Ari and Jaime. Ari’s question to his Aunt Ophelia does create an understanding that Jaime’s life will forever be consumed by the war, and Ari hopes that understanding his father’s past will prove to be the most crucial part of his identity. Understanding his father’s past setting is the most knowledge Ari has of him. This creates a psychological setting for Ari that is shaped by a lack of connection with his father and the deep yearning he has for overcoming this void.

The darkness that exists inside Ari and in his relationship with his parents does not exist in his relationship with Dante’s parents. Ari’s impression of Dante translates over to Dante’s father, Sam. Ari is impressed by the idea of a Mexican American man who is an English professor (a common element in academia’s setting—then and now). However, he laments the fact that his own father is a simple mail man who refuses to share details about his time serving in the Vietnam War and how that setting affected him:

I’d never met a Mexican American man who was an English professor. I didn’t know they existed. And really, he didn’t look like a professor. He was young and handsome and easygoing and it seemed like a part of him was still a boy. He seemed like a man who was in love with being alive. So different from my father, who had always kept his distance from the world. There was a darkness in my father that I didn’t understand. Dante’s father didn’t have any darkness in him. Even his black eyes seemed to be full of light. (SaéNZ 24)

With this opinion of Dante's father, Aristotle views a man that defies the expectations of a Hispanic man in the 1980s because Dante's father has the kind of career that seems impossible to Ari. It is a career that becomes possible for even Ari to have, with Sam's presence alone proving to Ari that anything can be achieved. The setting of the 1980s in America shows a dearth of Mexican American English professors. Ari does not view his father as anything more than a bitter war veteran because he does not know about his father beyond (or behind) what he sees in the setting of 1980s El Paso. In Sam, Dante's father, Ari views someone who is extremely open and intellectual, much like how he views Dante. Observing the family dynamics of Dante and Sam, Ari views two people who are very similar, and with himself and his father, he views two opposites. These are men (and their sons) who are products of vastly different past settings, living in similar current settings. Ari's impressions on Dante's father not only grows, but his impression of his own father lessens.

The distance between Ari and his father begins to close when Ari develops a high fever during the summer, allowing Jaime to show Ari how much he truly loves him. Ari states:

I felt weak and washed out, and when the warm water hit my body, I thought of my dreams. . . .Dante, my dad. And I wondered what my dad looked like when he was my age. . . . My mother had told me he was beautiful. I wonder if he had been as beautiful as Dante. And I wondered why I thought that. When I went back to bed, my mom had changed the sheets again. "Your fever's gone" she said. She gave me another glass of water. I didn't want it but I drank all of it. I didn't know how thirsty I had been, and I asked her for more water. My father was still, there sitting on my rocking chair. We studied each other for a moment as I lay in bed. "You were looking for me," he said. I

looked at him. “In your dream. You were looking for me” I'm always looking for you, I whispered. (SaéNZ 63)

This scene highlights multiple aspects of the relationship between Ari and Jaime. It displays the lack of communication that exists between them and the distance that exists in the relationship. It also establishes Ari's deepest desire to grow closer to his father, a connection that he feels can never exist. The dreams he has of his father also depict the distance that Ari feels exists between them. This scene is also one of the first instances where Ari and Jaime become more closely bound with one another. When Ari wakes, Jaime begins to show concern for his son (who is “looking for him”) and wondering why that was. He realizes that his son feels as if he is constantly distant or absent. This creates a slight shift in Ari's initial setting, as he can now create an initial point of contact with his father. This interaction provides the impetus for each character to learn how to reach one another, with each of their settings changing along with their relationship. It provides a small glimmer of hope for Ari, learning that his father truly does care, but is unable to always show that level of affection.

Syd and Ari each learn how to adapt to their individual environments. Syd's adaptation was to learn how to conform to the proxy system that made him a slave to Knox's actions, and to learn how to navigate the system in place through his work in the Valve with Baram. Ari's experience with the telescope in the desert shows him that he is not alone in the universe, and this causes him to become more open to Dante—and his own family. These adaptations converge upon one another when the protagonists are removed from their initial settings and placed into entirely new environments that change both their relationships with their counterparts as well as their relationships with their father figures.

## How a Change of Setting Affects Syd

While Syd's initial setting in *Proxy* is one that requires him to conform to the patron/proxy system that he is a part of, this also entraps Syd in a vicious cycle of violence that is shaped by the punishments he receives because of Knox's actions. Eventually, to avoid increasingly violent punishments, Syd sought to change not by *conforming* to his setting, but by *changing* his environment altogether by escaping the Lower City.

New and serious charges against Knox and their imposed punishments are brought before him: "For your patron's crimes of larceny of corporate property, you will receive twenty pulses. . . . For the crimes of trespassing and destruction of property, you will receive forty pulses. . . . And for the crime of negligent homicide, your flesh will be branded" (London 63). Through learning these punishments that await him, Syd comes to the realization that he can no longer survive under the current environment, and must find a way to escape it or die.

These new charges create the need for Syd to find a new setting—one that will allow him to continue his journey and to live his life. He must learn how to navigate new environments, but first must navigate his current circumstances by escaping these punishments. Originally, Syd is an individual willing to operate within the constraints of the Valve. He has no ambitions of rebellion or grandeur. He is initially content working with Baram in his shop and dealing with his punishments when contractually required. He wants to be a "normal" everyday kid within the Valve but is now forced to abandon his known environment to seek a new one by changing his setting.

In her article titled, "Is He Still Human? Are You?": Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age, Elaine Ostry argues that the concept of a character's search for identity is one of the defining traits of any character. She argues that many young adult protagonists view



themselves to be different from everyone around them. She argues that many protagonists' suffer from an identity crisis, as these differences cause them to alter the way they interact with others. While they may be different, they are still surrounded by other young adults who are a part of their community, thus creating a crisis that centers on figuring out what makes them different from those around them. This creates the arc for a science fiction protagonist. Oftentimes in the genre, a protagonist must go on a journey that involves either discovering or performing an act that makes them different from others in their community.

With Syd's further explorations into his world, he begins to conform to Ostry's philosophy of a character's search for identity. Ostry states:

The trope that all young adult literature has in common is the search for identity. . . . This search takes a particularly sharp turn when the protagonist realizes that he or she is not conventionally human, that many people would consider him or her to be an aberration. The revelation is often the result of much searching: the protagonist acts as a detective to uncover the mystery of his or her identity. (4)

Ostry's statement applies to Syd throughout the entire novel, but its emphasis is one that particularly applies when Syd decides to escape the Lower City and venture into the desert, thus changing his setting, and in relation, changing his identity. Through this desire to escape, Syd begins to discover more about the system by learning how to operate outside of it. This shift toward another setting continues to hurtle toward (an uncertain) destiny when he physically meets his patron, Knox.

His first meeting with Knox is described when the narrator states, "Amazing after all these years that this boy— his patron— had a name. Knox" (London 106). During this moment, Syd is seeking a fake ID to escape the Valve, and through unintended circumstances meets his

patron, Knox, and thus defies the system of anonymity that has been put in place for their world (i.e. setting). By seeking out the ID to escape, Syd began operating outside of his initial setting that he has been a part of for his entire life, and through this new form of operation, meets the source of all the trauma he has suffered throughout his life because of that same system.

By operating outside of the Valve, Syd ultimately changes his setting. By escaping from the Valve and placing himself in a new setting, Syd begins to discover new possibilities for his future. He can no longer be a proxy and must find a new setting to rebuild his identity. Through meeting Knox, Syd begins to see his patron as just another kid when his initial observation of him was stated in relation to his trauma: “All those brutal punishments he took for a boy named Knox with hazy green eyes and professionally protected skin” (London 106). This observation allows Syd to humanize Knox, and to create a further understanding of the patron/proxy system. By operating outside of this setting, not only does Syd begin to develop agency for himself, but he is able to physically confront the source of his pain and torture. It is a moment that could not have occurred if he remained a proxy and stayed within the setting established at the beginning of the novel.

In meeting Knox, Syd is able to confront the source of his pain, but also to begin piecing together a plan to escape the system. This allows him to evade his initial setting and to pave the way towards a new one. To begin this process, Syd seeks out Baram for help and advice. It is with this new desire for a change of setting that Syd begins to discover his true purpose. Through exchanges with Baram and through changing his perspective on being a proxy, Syd's relationship with Baram evolves from seeing the man as a simple father figure to a guide who must mentor him towards his potential destiny.

Baram warns Syd that the mole on the back of his ear is a virus, and a “combination of code and biology. It’s grown over the years; beneath the skin, invisible, dormant, but I knew it was growing. The only symptom, this mark, was meant to tell me when the virus was mature. That was your father’s little clue” (London 204). When Baram reveals the nature of Syd’s birth father’s legacy, the birthmark alters the dynamic between Syd and Baram. Baram goes from being Syd’s protector/father figure, to becoming someone who did things for an ulterior motive.

While Syd understood their long initial relationship was built on transaction, these new reasons go beyond the constraints of the system. Syd is now someone who was being protected by Baram to fulfill the ultimate goal. That goal is to use Syd as a weapon to break the whole world’s system (setting), by using a virus to usher in a process called Jubilee. This long-awaited event is based on an actual Jewish holiday that centers on the emancipation of enslaved Hebrews, as well as the restoration of the land around them.

This revelation ties back into Ostry’s earlier claim of a protagonist potentially becoming an aberration, as Syd is infected with the virus from the moment of his birth, something he does not have in common with anyone. This new identity creates a further need for Syd to go through yet another change in setting through a change in life. Exploring the world beyond Lower City will allow him to discover his true purpose of this identity, a purpose that would have remained undiscovered if he were to choose to conform to the system that serves as his initial setting as he always has.

Syd’s willingness to abandon his setting allows him to develop a larger understanding of the world that exists beyond the Lower City. His understanding becomes further developed when he enters this world’s version of a desert land, where Syd himself has a moment very similar to

Ari, that brings him closer to the universe around him and helps him understand that the world is a lot bigger than he originally believed:

Far off, Syd saw the stunning display of plateaus and buttes peeling off the desert floor, making purple silhouettes against the horizon. In the Valve, you couldn't see much past the nearest shack or concrete slab of a building. Blast barriers and heaps of trash cut across any line of sight, making their own unnatural landscape. The great towers of the cruciplexes sometimes caught the light and glimmered purple, red, and gold for an instant, but the choking smog that made the Valve sunsets so spectacular burned the eyes and gave a daily reminder of the slow death in which you lived. The lack of life out here made the world seem so much bigger. (London 259)

In this moment similar to Ari's in the desert, Syd's exploration of his setting allows him to develop a new understanding of the world he resides in. Through the images of the landscapes, he comes to understand how big his world is in comparison to the Upper City and the Lower City, expanding his setting into a world previously unknown to him. The narrator describes the newly discovered horizon that Syd is surrounded by and compares it to the lifelessness that Syd had grown accustomed to up until this point of the novel. While Syd sees the world as a much bigger place, he also associates his larger view of the world with the concept of death. While the world around him expands, causing him to view larger possibilities, so too does the death (lack of water, presence of rock and sand, lack of plants) surrounding it. Despite the desiccation, what the desert also does, is bring Syd closer to his patron.

The journey through the desert has an immense effect on Syd's growth as a character through his exposure to new environments. This exploration of the wasteland forces him to become heavily reliant on Knox to survive, a position he could not have obtained in his initial

setting. Knox is also unfamiliar with the environment of the desert, thus placing both the patron and the proxy in an environment that places them as equals. Unlike Dante with Ari, Knox is ill-equipped to teach Syd anything about the outside world, because he, like Syd, is a product of a very strict environment. They are simply brought together by a common goal of wanting to escape their individual societies, despite each having different reasons for wanting to escape.

Knox's desire to escape stems from his belief that: "If I could hurt my father, it would make me feel better" (London 351). This desire to enact revenge upon his father comes from both his father faking the death of a fellow patron to punish him (causing Syd's need to escape), and the fact that Knox blames his father for the death of his mother, "She was kidnapped and he wouldn't negotiate. I saw it happen" (London 351). Knox's original setting, while privileged and a member of high society, is devoid of love and lacking communication.

The boys' desire is fulfilled when they eventually reach a place called Old Detroit, which turns out to be the hideout of the Rebooters who are considered the rebels in the novel; it is there that they discover that Baram is still alive and with the Rebooters in a different setting than Lower City. With the use of the term "Jubilee," the virus serves as the key to free-the proxies from their patrons. This gives Syd a form of authority, power, and agency he did not previously have. It is through this relocation to Old Detroit that Syd discovers the true nature of the virus that has been implanted in him by his father. Through the discoveries he makes in the desert with the help of Knox, and by reaching this new setting, Syd retrieves the answers to his question he was unable to obtain earlier in the novel.

The exposure to the society of Old Detroit allows Syd to achieve a level of acceptance that is previously unknown to him. This allows him to obtain a strength that he did not have throughout a large portion of the novel, not only because of his status as a proxy, but because of

his status as a Chapter 11(homosexual). In her article titled "Queer Discourse and the Young Adult Novel: Repression and Power in Gay Male Adolescent Literature", Roberta Seelinger Trites states, "Together, pain and pleasure fashion a matrix of power in which each of the gay characters in these novels functions, and the degree of physical pleasure the character experiences is directly related to the contemporary social discourses of homosexuality at work in the character's culture" (144). Trites' statement refers to the awkward dynamics that can coincide with one another when combining both pain and pleasure for a homosexual character. This "matrix of power" that she refers to applies to the agency that a homosexual character can appear to have within their culture. This agency is ultimately determined by whether that character's sexuality is accepted in their society, or by whether they become a part of a society that accepts it as well.

Trites' statement serves as a direct reference to Syd's status within the Lower City. There, he is unable to fully embrace his sexuality in the environment he is a part of because in the Lower City, he would be labelled as a "Chapter 11 punk" (London 23). In the Upper City, he would not receive such ridicule, as he would have the power and the privilege to embrace his sexuality. It is with this matrix of power, that Syd has been condemned for his sexuality, while those in the Upper City are able to express themselves however they wished to do so. Syd says earlier in the novel: "You can be as eleven as you wanna be. No one'll judge the lust of your loins" (London 23). Being a product of the Lower City does not allow Syd the opportunity to explore his sexuality, and it is also what makes the choice of bringing Jubilee difficult; it will ultimately cause his death. By becoming familiar with the environment of Old Detroit as a new setting, Syd is not being judged by his sexuality, but by his "gift" of being the one to bring Jubilee and free the world from capitalistic bondage.

Syd's arrival in Old Detroit allows him to feel a level of acceptance he had never felt during his time in his prior setting, leading to both an element of tension, along with an element of growth in his friendship with Knox. The narrator states, "Syd felt the discomforting gaze of everyone they passed in the halls. . . . Their looks were eager, expectant, loaded with want. Syd didn't like the attention" (London 359). At this moment, Syd is accepted and embraced by those within the community of Old Detroit, which gives him a feeling that he had not previously known. While this moment gives him a feeling of acceptance, he is uncomfortable throughout the scene, as he has never known anything beyond judgment. This is a feeling he would have never received in his initial settings—being the outsider or the Chapter 11 within the Lower City. Being a proxy and being an outsider became second nature to Syd. Within the community of Old Detroit, Syd is viewed as a savior, with absolutely no attention given to his sexuality, thus giving him a sense of power and agency that he could never have felt in the Lower City or the desert.

While the setting of Old Detroit allows Syd to become embraced by those who are unfamiliar to him, the new setting also creates a moment of tension between Syd and Knox, which ultimately shows how their friendship has grown through their various settings. When Syd is told that he must sacrifice himself to initiate Jubilee, Knox states, "Is this what you want? The system's not perfect but this. . . . a lot of innocent people will die" (London 363). That statement provides a culmination of the relationship that has developed between Syd and Knox throughout the novel. It becomes one of the first times where Knox not only worries about Syd, but wants him to make a choice for himself, and wants to present him with that choice.

This scene mirrors the first meeting that they had, where Knox claimed he would change his ways for the betterment of Syd. A final change occurs, where Knox puts Syd's needs above his own, despite the inner conflict he has about whether Jubilee is the correct solution. The only

place that this could have occurred is outside the limits of the Upper City and Lower City and thus is the direct result of a change in Syd's setting. Old Detroit and the desert before it needed to be the setting of this development as they would be the only places where Syd and Knox could go beyond seeing each other as a proxy/patron.

The pair's travels to Old Detroit, their passage through the desert, and Syd's eventual reunion with Baram, cause Syd to grow closer to Knox by spending more time with him and spending less time with Baram. The boys' newfound friendship causes him to question whether the destiny that Baram has for him is a risk worth taking. Through the time he spends with Knox, Syd develops a new understanding of Baram. The fact that Knox begins to worry for Syd's well-being causes a dilemma that occurs at the ending of the novel when Jubilee *is* initiated but not the way Baram sought—using Syd as a tool doomed for death. It is not Syd who dies, but Knox. This sacrifice is achieved through the blood transfusion Knox received earlier in the novel's setting—making him a carrier of the virus and undergoing a massive growth from “spoiled brat” to “sacrificial lamb.”

### **How A Change of Setting Affects Ari**

Ari's own character development takes a sharp turn when he leaves El Paso and is forced to go on a road trip with his father to attend the funeral of his Aunt Ophelia. This trip causes another shift in Ari's setting—one that ultimately binds him with his father. Aunt Ophelia, while never directly present in Ari's life, plays a major role in terms of bringing him closer to his father. In her book, *Queer Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the English Language Arts Curriculum*, Paula Greathouse states:



In the 1970s, with one exception, it was always the protagonist who was struggling with his or her sexuality. In the 1980s, however, it was as often as not a secondary character who was queer, and often that Character was an adult. The context for the parents coming out was usually an acrimonious divorce that left the always straight teen protagonist caught in the middle. (Greathouse 6)

The character of Aunt Ophelia fits the trope of being that secondary character who is gay, and while it is unknown if it led to a divorce, it led to her being ostracized by other members of Ari's family. This is an example of Saézn's use of historical setting, with him utilizing realistic elements of the 1980s to further strengthen his characters. Saézn follows the original trope set by the time period he is writing about and through. The author uses Ophelia's circumstance (situational setting) as a tool that pushes Ari's journey into embracing his own sexuality. By driving away from his home setting (with his father) and into an unfamiliar environment, Ari grows both physically (going to Arizona) and emotionally (by learning about another side of the family he has minimal interactions with). Understanding more about the past time of Aunt Ophelia brings Ari closer to both of his parents, particularly his father.

The open road provides the perfect outlet for Ari and his father to begin the process of reconciliation. This change in setting provides Ari and Jaime the perfect opportunity to actually have a conversation with one another. They bond over the love they both share for Ari's mother Liliana, and most importantly, they are brought together by the new environment that they are surrounded by. Ari's journey to Tucson helps him to become closer with his father by allowing them both to leave El Paso and to be confined in a car—letting them discuss their issues. This is a pivotal moment in the novel where it is a change in setting which brings out different sides of each character.

With their interactions in the car, Ari compels his father to reveal hidden truths about their family's past, such as the fact that his brother (who he is constantly thinking about) was sent to prison, and the fact that he was sent to live with Ophelia due to his mother suffering a mental breakdown over his brother's incarceration. Ari's father states:

She's so strong, your mother. But, I don't know, life isn't logical, Ari. It was like your brother had died. . . . your mother became a different person. I hardly recognized her. When they sentenced him, she just fell apart. She was inconsolable. You have no idea how much she loved your brother. And I didn't know what to do. . . . sometimes, even now, I look at her and I want to ask, "Is it over?" "Is it?" When she came back to me, Ari, she seemed so fragile. . . . as the weeks and months went by, she became her old self again. She got strong again. . . . (Saénz 283)

Jaime presents himself in a vulnerable manner that shocks Ari. Ari's tone towards his father shifts where he apologizes to his father when he states, "I'm sorry" I whispered. . . . "I didn't know, Dad" (Saénz 283). It is here where Ari learns to grow beyond his initial thoughts that his father was selfish and uncaring toward him. As a result, he comes up with a deeper understanding of his dad, allowing himself to grow in the process. In this scene, the open road operates in a manner similar to how the desert operates earlier in the novel for his relationship with Dante.

The road trip creates a new environment that is open and free, but one that is also isolating and insulated. These elements allow father and son to reconcile their differences. The road trip creates a scenario in which Ari can move past his initial psychological setting by embracing his father, creating a new psychological setting that helps him understand his father. Yes, Jaime may be a flawed man, but is a good one, nonetheless. Saénz crafts Aunt Ophelia as a

character who blends both the real and the fictional natures of the 1980s and establishes a need for the father and son to journey to another setting outside of Texas to honor their relative and to (re)establish the bond between them.

## **Conclusion**

According to James R. Gilligan, “No one truly expects an adolescent to select an identity and maintain it for very long, and various aspects of the culture surrounding the adolescent exert variable degrees of influence on his or her identity development” (47). This statement asserts that no teenager should be expected to remain the same person throughout their life, as their environment will often change various aspects of a character's identity. This is a statement that is relevant to the journeys of both Syd and Ari, as neither character remains the same throughout their entire novels. Both boys go through their own forms of growth—as individuals as well in relationship with those around them. This is also an assertion that relates to the initial questions of this thesis. This analysis has explored how each protagonist can redevelop their own identities and are able to reestablish their relationships with their respective father figures through encounters with their changing settings and situations.

Aristotle's character is initially established as an isolated loner who rarely ever ventures into any sort of social environment. Through his exploration of the desert, he begins to see that the universe is not an unreachable place as he initially perceived, but is something that becomes possible to him in the form of Dante and Jaime. This venture into a previously unknown environment gave Ari the motivation he needed to try to develop a deeper bond with Dante, while simultaneously creating an even deeper connection with his father. These desires are further explored when on the road trip with his father, and learning the story of his Aunt Ophelia.

Ophelia's life, as well as her death cause the isolation that was needed for Ari and his father to reconcile their differences.

Syd's journey, much like Ari's, is one where his change of settings ultimately leads to his change in development. While initially conforming to the patron/proxy system, he develops a father/son dynamic with Baram, one built through transaction as a form of survival. While Syd respects Baram, he understands that their relationship is one built because of their circumstances. Syd's journey progresses when being forced to leave the Valve, a circumstance that is not only caused by Knox, but also led to him meeting Knox, and eventually led to their subsequent friendship. Their initial places within the system and their desire to escape their initial setting creates a new dynamic with Knox. Syd's relationship with Baram also changes, with Baram becoming more emotional towards Syd, next showing that Baram viewed him as more than a transactional partner. Ultimately, Baram reverts to his original purpose of using Syd to serve a greater purpose since the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few—or the one. To Baram, Syd was ultimately a necessary and expendable tool to usher in Jubilee.

Each protagonist is developed by their setting as well as their circumstances. As these settings changed, so did Ari and Syd, as they both become dramatically different characters through exposure to and navigating through their new spaces. Ari's exposure to new environments causes him to change from a character who feels he is away from the universe, while turning into a person who embraces the universe around him. Syd's exposure to new environments causes him to grow from being a proxy conformed to his system, to becoming the key to breaking the system.

Finally, as their settings change, both boys begin to connect with their father figures on a more emotional level. Ari begins his journey believing that his father is selfish and emotionless,

only to embrace him on the side of the road and apologizing for ever having those thoughts of him. Syd begins his journey admiring Baram as a mentor and grows to understand that Baram truly loves him despite initially seeing him as a commodity of sorts. Overall, both protagonists are altered by their initial settings, and grew through exposure to new settings, allowing them to develop their own identities, and to redefine the relationships with the most important people in their lives.

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