

**“He doesn’t talk:” Silence, Trauma, and Fathers in
Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe and
*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter***

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Contemporary Latinx children's and YA literature is filled with artist protagonists. Picture books like Diana Cohn and Amy Córdova's *Roses for Isabella* (2011), Eric Velasquez's *Grandma's Gift* (2013), Margarita Engle and Rafael López's *Drum Dream Girl* (2015), Juan Felipe Herrera and Lauren Castillo's *Imagine* (2018), and Ernesto Javier Martínez and Maya Christina Gonzalez's *Cuando Amamos Cantamos/When We Love Someone We Sing to Them* (2018) show young Latinx children as authors, painters, musicians, and poets. Guadalupe Garcia McCall's *Under the Mesquite* (2011), Angela Cervantes's *Gaby, Lost and Found* (2013), Alexandra Diaz's *The Only Road* (2016), Ruth Behar's *Lucky Broken Girl* (2017), Celia C. Pérez's *The First Rule of Punk* (2017), and Rebecca Balcárcel's *The Other Side of Happy* (2019), are examples of middle grade novels that feature creative expression through prose, poetry, drawing, painting, and song. Some Young Adult (YA) novels with artist protagonists include artist Dante in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), muralist Sierra in Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper* (2015), writer Julia in Erika L. Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), and poet Xiomara in Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018). Often, these stories show characters hone their artistic skills, learn to define themselves as artists, and engage art as a means of healing from trauma.

Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez argues that young Latina protagonists' "creativity is born out of trauma and oppression and therefore functions as more than self-expression; instead, [their] creativity forges a path toward healing that impacts them and their communities" (9). Like Rodríguez, Tiffany Ana López, Phillip Serrato, Adrianna M. Santos, Trevor Boffone, and Cristina Herrera have also noted the healing aspects of art in Latinx youth narratives. Artistic expression is a powerful way for these young characters to find their voices and identities within oppressive public and private settings. In her work on trauma, López states that Latinx children's literature can be a space of *critical witnessing* where readers are "so moved or struck by the experience of encountering a text as to embrace a specific course of action avowedly intended to forge a path toward change" (205). Moreover, her analysis describes how Latinx authors can "work from their experience with personal, cultural, and/or historical crisis points to show readers a path toward a horizon of healing" (López 207). According to Serrato, some Latinx children's texts "can be read as attempts to speak to the fact that many Chicana/o childhoods are distinguished by experiences with different forms of hardship" (192). Books that depict the often-harsh realities of Latinx children's lives have the "potential to facilitate the resilience of children living in similar situations" (Serrato 196). Santos states that "writing is a source of identity formation and is healing" (55). In many contemporary Latinx children's and YA literature, art becomes a way for the protagonists to model resilience and healing and encourages them to lift up their voices for themselves and others. The link between creative acts and healing from trauma is evident in many contemporary Latinx children's and YA literature, but two YA novels illustrate the limits of this healing potential: Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and Erika L. Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. In these works, there is a generational divide that determines the borders of healing: the young, armed with the tools of their

various crafts, edge out trauma through the power of their art, but the adults cannot defeat their demons. In other words, hope and healing only belong to the children of trauma. While these Mexican American teenagers have suffered because of their fathers' silence, the indirect nature of their contact with violent trauma and their youth allows them to heal in ways their fathers cannot. These characters, haunted by traumatic experiences that took place before their children were born, struggle to parent them; they are literally silenced and stripped of artistic expression. By bestowing and withholding healing, these two Latinx YA novels can teach Latinx children "to navigate an openly hostile and debilitating world" by offering hope that, like the protagonists, Ari and Julia, they can heal from their painful experiences without diminishing the seriousness of the effects of trauma on marginalized populations as represented by their fathers (López 206).

Sáenz's and Sánchez's books feature stories of trauma in Latinx contexts that participate in the important work of engaging readers in conversations about mental health in our communities and that refuse to render Latinx lives as only tragic via hopeful endings; however, this critical engagement must go further. Neither *Aristotle and Dante* nor *Mexican Daughter* point markedly to the societal evils rooted in racial capitalism, white supremacy, and ableism (war, sexual violence, poverty, stigmas surrounding mental health) that scar these fathers in such profound ways. Both novels do explicitly locate the source of Jaime's and Rafael's suffering and trauma in external factors but focus readers' attention on trauma within the individual. A micro examination of trauma, without also probing the macro factors at the level of society, has the potential to locate "the cure for trauma" within an individual's actions (creative acts, talking openly, therapy, or medication). The novels' depiction of the effects of trauma does not openly critique the violence visited on Latinx communities today by the U.S. government strongly enough and by isolating trauma to a person or family both could be inadvertently upholding systemic discrimination against Latinx communities that places the burden of "fixing" trauma on its victims. As "making children's and young adult literature by and about Latinos visible...is in some measure a form of social justice;" these stories' commentary cannot be too subtle or superficial; otherwise, their critiques of the violence Latinx communities endure fall short of radical engagement and can actually distract from the real sources of harm (Aldama 5).

Fathers' Silence: Trauma, Fractured Parenting, and Transmissibility¹

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's award-winning *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) has arguably reached canonical status in contemporary Latinx YA. It is the story of the friendship and love story of two Mexican American 15-year-olds, Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana, in 1987 El Paso, Texas. *Aristotle and Dante* has been celebrated and critiqued for its "utopian dimensions" in depicting a queer coming-of-age narrative, but Angel Daniel Matos persuasively argues that "the novel offers a reparative representation of the past that nonetheless channels the historical resonances of violence and cultural hurt that continue to haunt people today" (49). As Ari comes to terms with his queer identity, Sáenz offers "a queer utopia as an imaginable ideality of the future that reaches beyond the prison of the here and now" (Poole 127). According to Carolina Alonso, Sáenz's novel is important as it demonstrates that "it is possible for young Chicanxs to explore queer desires through friendships while challenging the expectations of heterosexuality as the only possible sexual identity" (176). Through its depiction of depression and a suicide attempt, Erika L. Sánchez's best-selling *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) offers a rare depiction of the mental health of a young Latina. Julia Reyes is an "aspiring writer who struggles to cope with her sister's sudden accidental death" and who "resists every

trope of the ‘perfect Mexican daughter’ with her snarky attitude, everyday acts of rebellion, and dreams of going away to college” (Santos 46). According to Herrera, “Sánchez attempts to not only critically engage in a discussion around stigmas surrounding mental illness but also to openly discuss the unique struggles faced by intellectual, smart ChicaNerds who feel like outsiders even within their own families” (*ChicaNerds* 88). Each of these novels highlights underrepresented themes in YA and presents scholars and readers with the opportunity to discuss how coming-of-age stories develop within a Latinx context.

In “Soy Brown y Nerdy,” Herrera states that “voicing pain through poetry ‘helps heal wounds,’” but there is neither voice nor healing when traumatic experiences rob dos papás Latinos of their art (321). Ari’s father (Jaime) in Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and Julia’s father (Rafael) in Sánchez’s *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* have been silent all of the protagonists’ lives, but the teenage protagonists have lived with their fathers’ painful pasts without knowing much (or anything, in Julia’s case) about what caused them such harm. Although both novels posit that Jaime’s and Rafael’s silence and emotional distance are the product of trauma from the Vietnam War and from a Mexico-U.S. undocumented border-crossing, respectively, these transnational tragedies occupy very little space in the narratives as the focus shifts to fractured, quotidian father-teen exchanges. Jaime Mendoza “was beautiful” before the war left him plagued by nightmares and survivor’s guilt, but Ari wonders “what happened to all that beauty” since he has never seen it (Sáenz 11). Rafael Reyes “was the town artist” when he lived in Mexico, but Julia has never seen him draw (Sánchez 251). Violence ruptured vitally important aspects of their personalities and affected their ability to provide emotional support for their children.

While stereotypical cultural assumptions about them as Mexican working-class men could ascribe their silent and disengaged parenting to gendered distributions of caregiving labor, the novels refuse to ascribe the root of their silence to traditional masculinity and instead tell readers the family dysfunction comes from traumatic events in the past. In order to analyze the complexities of paternal trauma in *Aristotle and Dante* and *Mexican Daughter*, I had to sideline a very important consideration: the fathers’ recourse to silence and emotional distance leave Lilly Mendoza and Amparo Montenegro Reyes with almost sole responsibility for parental caregiving. It could be argued that from a mental health perspective this detail is unremarkable as it would make sense that the spouse with the most emotional bandwidth would shoulder the majority of the caring responsibilities. Moreover, in showing the mothers as the “strong” parents and the fathers as the “fragile” ones needing to be protected, these narratives could disrupt some gender conventions; however, this argument is only valid if the mothers are free from trauma themselves, but both Lilly and Amparo have endured traumatic experiences too. In Amparo’s case, she suffered the physical violence of the traumatic event that Rafael witnessed and led to his silence. Ari and Julia have two-parent households with dual incomes where both parents are grappling with emotional baggage, but the mothers are the ones shouldering all the day-to-day parental duties. In situating the source of this traditionally gendered distribution of childcare in trauma, *Aristotle and Dante* and *Mexican Daughter* introduce a variable that does not allow for an easy dismissal of the arrangement as a symptom of patriarchal family structures and gives space for a nuanced evaluation of how a stereotypical configuration might be due to an unexpected set of circumstances; however, neither novel comments on the uneven distribution of caregiving responsibilities. In failing to do so, both narratives miss an opportunity to challenge the idea that parenting is the mother’s domain.

Scholarship on trauma in children's literature to date often concerns the Holocaust, war, and memory; therefore, the work of Latinx scholars in the field is vitally important in contextualizing the intersectional effects of trauma on marginalized populations today.² According to Lydia Kokkola, children's literature where trauma is central to the plot "tends to focus on mental anguish" (190) and typically "represents the end of childhood and the onset of adulthood" (191). In Trauma Studies, the concept of trauma "is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world" (Balaev 360). Cathy Caruth writes that "the wound of the mind...is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (*Unclaimed* 4). In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry centers the indescribability of pain and points to the inadequacy of linguistic expression. Trauma, like pain, often defies expression, and silence becomes a defining feature as survivors grapple with unspeakable emotions that haunt their present and their future. The temporality and aftereffects of trauma in stories for young people frequently involve narratives of healing with adolescent characters "expected to work through their grief at a demanding pace" (Kokkola 191) and "talking through the traumatic experience... [is] presented as a demand" (Kokkola 192). In *Aristotle and Dante* and *Mexican Daughter*, this tension between healing and silence plays out as the parents and teens negotiate fraught relationships.

Trauma as "a condition of broken bodies and shattered minds" features prominently in Latinx children's and YA literature, but existing scholarship in the field emphasizes the avenues for healing presented in the texts (Casper and Wertheimer 3). As Serrato argues, stories for young Latinx audiences must navigate "conflicting inclinations" to depict "the different forms of hardship" they face in today's society and also to "help contemporary youth negotiate the facts of their lives" with some measure of hope (192). Raymond Williams's description of realism as "facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be" (184) reflects Latinx authors' desire to make visible the various forms of violence that plague Latinx youth without sugarcoating it while also providing imaginative avenues that provide an escape. Kokkola separates trauma literature into "individual trauma literature" and "national trauma" literature, but this distinction collapses when discussing contemporary Latinx YA like *Aristotle and Dante* and *Mexican Daughter*. Sáenz and Sánchez embody the two types of trauma across generations in the teen protagonists and their fathers. Individual trauma can be healed, but communal trauma is entrenched so these Latinx authors are able to honor the unhealable pain our community has endured and simultaneously offer healing. It is remarkable that Sáenz and Sánchez achieve this balance so effectively, but in relegating the transnational forces that wounded the fathers to the background with so little engagement, they privilege individual trauma and use national trauma merely as a plot device for their narratives of youth healing.

While Ari and Julia begin to thrive, the fathers' invisible wounds continue to fester with little relief. I am not interested in diagnosing Jaime and Rafael (and the novels do not offer this or any other diagnosis), but the label of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is useful in describing the symptoms these two Mexican fathers display in the novels and the repercussions of their trauma. Jaime, a Vietnam War veteran, displays many of the symptoms. For most of *Mexican Daughter*, Julia and the reader are unaware of Rafael's trauma, but the extent of his passivity seems to point to an unknown underlying cause. These two Latinx YA novels make it abundantly clear that Ari and Julia inherit paternal trauma, manifested as silence, due to violence that irrevocably fragmented their fathers' lives and personalities. Unable to voice their pain, Jaime's and Rafael's "wounds of the mind" transform them into absent presences in their children's lives and conform

to the tendency in children's literature to situate trauma primarily in "psychological wounds" (Kokkola 190).

The first things we learn about Jaime are that Ari does not "think that [looking like him] was such a great thing" (Sáenz 9) and that "he doesn't talk" (Sáenz 10). Immediately, their distant relationship is apparent and his role as a father is defined by his silence. We learn that the "war changed him," left him with scars "On his heart. In his head. All over," and that Ari is "the son of a man who had Vietnam living inside him" (Sáenz 14). Furious at his dad one day, Ari imagines an argument where he tells him "*I don't really care that you can't tell me about Vietnam. Even though I know the war owns you*" and his father replies "*All that silence has saved me, Ari*" (Sáenz 260). Here, the novel explicitly identifies Jaime's silence as a coping mechanism for his experiences in Vietnam.³ According to Casper and Wertheimer, "after trauma, the subject may be voiceless, unable to articulate her experience or who she has become" (11). As the end of the novel reveals, Jaime's remorse over leaving nineteen-year-old Louie behind during a skirmish is a recurring nightmare. The things he did and did not do in Vietnam haunt him and have severely hindered his ability to lead a "normal" life, even years after returning home.

Jaime's responsibilities as a father implicate Ari directly with his unspeakable trauma. Trauma-induced silence carries "a host of meanings and expectations, including perhaps most painfully the imperative to speak and to act, to recover and to heal" (Casper and Wertheimer 11). For Jaime, there is a societal expectation that he must bear his trauma so as not to hurt others, especially his son, but as anti-war psychiatrist Chaim Shatan says, "The so-called Post-Vietnam Syndrome confronts us with the unconsummated grief of soldiers—impacted grief, in which an encapsulated, never-ending past deprives the present of meaning. Their sorrow is unspent, the grief of their wounds is untold, their guilt is unexpiated" (648). The burden of his wartime memories makes Jaime unable to be present in Ari's life as he is constantly plagued by a traumatic past that he cannot move beyond. Jaime becomes acutely aware of Ari's pain and his role in it. Jaime apologizes for being "so far away" (Sáenz 65) and decides to read everything Ari reads while at the hospital as a way of indirectly talking to his son because he cannot yet speak of Vietnam or engage in anything remotely emotional (Sáenz 141). Later in the novel when Ari sarcastically talks "about all those war stories [his dad talks] about," Jaime takes his hand and says he "deserved that one" as he has not talked about the war or about much of anything else with Ari (Sáenz 345). In a way, Jaime now carries the weight of "abandoning" two teenage boys (Louie and Ari), though I do not mean to equate these burdens. The effects of the unspeakable horrors of Vietnam compound as trauma spreads, and the novel makes clear the extent of Jaime's psychological damage and PTSD.

As Caruth states, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (*Trauma* 4-5, original emphasis). Early in the novel, Ari recalls overhearing Lilly (his mother) say she does not think "that the war will ever be over for [her husband]" (Sáenz 14). Jaime's inability to escape the war demonstrates the ruptured temporality of trauma and the fact that he still experiences Vietnam even over fifteen years after his return home. Slowly, Jaime begins to break his silence and makes an effort to connect with Ari by sharing some information about his demons. He exposes his vulnerability and at the end of the novel Ari sees him lean into his own arms and sob. Ari tells us that there was something about the sound of a man in pain that "resembled the sound of a wounded animal...All this time, [Ari] wanted [his] father to tell [him] something about the war and now [he] couldn't stand to see the rawness f

his pain, how new it was after so many years, how that pain was alive and thriving just beneath the surface”(Sáenz 346).

The words “rawness” and “alive and thriving” emphasize the “surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal” (Caruth, *Trauma* 5, original emphasis). More importantly, this passage explicitly shows Ari absolving Jaime of the compulsion to recover. Confronted with his father’s unhealable pain, Ari recognizes these animal sounds as nonverbal articulations that break the silence that has haunted the Mendoza house all his life but also that the burden Jaime carries is so heavy that it defies cure. The experience of witnessing Jaime’s grief leads Ari to understand his father’s silence by telling him he does not have to talk about this anymore; however, Jaime refuses this permission to retreat into silence again. Therefore, the novel posits that speaking the unspeakable becomes the only way to finally “stop the nightmares” (Sáenz 347). While Ari and Jaime’s relationship is not irrevocably damaged by the father’s trauma and “maybe he was changing into someone else” (Sáenz 300), the novel does not offer a miraculous healing. Vietnam left permanent psychological scars on Jaime as he continues to live “between hurting and healing...in that in-between space” (Sáenz 335). Sáenz makes clear that Ari suffers the intergenerational impact of trauma because he is a silent, isolated teenager with frequent nightmares and a violent streak. While *Aristotle and Dante* pointedly implicates the U.S.’s neocolonial incursions into Asia as the source of Jaime’s trauma, the depoliticized commentary within the novel never offers a sharp critique of the war.

In Sánchez’s *Mexican Daughter*, Julia also resents her father’s silence and emotional distance, but unlike Ari she has no knowledge of the extent to which trauma has framed her life, so she simply experiences the decontextualized symptoms and ensuing family dysfunction. While Ari was hurt by his father’s silence, Jaime’s pain was at least legible to him. In contrast, Julia has no idea why her father refuses to speak. His silence is a reaction to what he witnessed in crossing the Mexico-U.S. border so many years ago, but she does not learn about the horrible details until page 274. Julia describes “Apá [as] his usual mute self” (Sánchez 220). All Julia knows is that immediately after Olga’s sudden death, “he hasn’t said much to [her] this whole time, which is not that different from before. Sometimes he barely says hello” (12). Rafael is “a ghost father” (15) who “hasn’t paid attention to [Julia] in years” (155). He is “physically there, but he never says much. He hardly even talks to [her]. It’s as if [she doesn’t] exist” (217). The fact that he “was always kind of distant” bothers Julia a great deal, but silence is all she has ever known from him, so it is his “normal” (217). The novel offers very little insight into Rafael’s pre-trauma consciousness, but his near invisibility or rather the absence of an identifiable personality implicitly sets up a stark contrast to what he was before.

There is a gendered element to the source of both fathers’ trauma, even if they fall on different places along an imagined spectrum of masculinity: Rafael’s arose from ‘not enough’ masculinity as a failed protector whereas Jaime’s came from “too much” as a U.S. Marine.⁴ Rafael’s inability to protect Amparo from rape by the coyote strips away his male pride. Sánchez uses words and silences, dialogue starts and stops, to describe the unspeakable horror of her mother and father’s traumatic border crossing into the U.S.

“Your mother, el coyote... He took her...I can’t say it. I shouldn’t have told you this”... [she is] trying to untangle what she needs to say...Tía can’t get the words out...Tía Fermina covers her mouth with her hand... “They held him down with a

gun. There was nothing he could do...” [When Julia finds out the truth from Tía Fermina, she] pictures [her] mother’s face streaked with tears and dirt, [her] father bowing his head in defeat (274-275).

Sánchez’s choice to let silences tell the story of Amparo’s rape has the dual function of reiterating how such violence defies description and of refusing to make a spectacle of her trauma. While the passage shows Rafael was blameless, it is evident he internalized the atrocity as his fault. The novels’ widely different embodiments of violence (war and sexual assault) are nonetheless linked thematically as manifestations of racial capitalism and empire and the fact that the end result (silent fathers) is the same in both cases points to the structural source of trauma. The machinations of the State leave Rafael and Jaime unable to actively participate in raising Ari and Julia, and their passive presence leads both teen protagonists to struggle with abandonment issues despite the physical presence of their fathers. The traumatic experience “acts like a tumor in consciousness that wounds the self...and irreversibly changes identity” (Balaev 363). Both fathers’ personalities change drastically as a result of their trauma, and silence becomes their most salient paternal characteristic.

In these two novels, the “transmissibility” of trauma figures prominently as one more tragedy these two families must grapple with. Jaime’s and Rafael’s silence, a manifestation of the tumor-like trauma they always carry, can be described via medicalized language because it “infects” their home and family. According to Roger Luckhurst, “Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication...[and] also appears to be worryingly transmissible: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients... between patients and doctors...and between victims and their listeners or viewers” (3). Specifically, Ari and Julia also become silent. Ari “wanted to talk, to say something, to ask questions” but could not as “all the words were stuck in [his] throat” (Sáenz 36). He also explicitly and angrily blames his repression on his parents: “*You know what I’ve learned from you and Mom? I’ve learned not to talk. I’ve learned how to keep everything I feel buried deep inside of me. And I hate you for it*” (Sáenz 260). Julia “can’t get the words out” (Sánchez 275) and does not “know how to talk to [her] father...There is so much [she wants] to say, but can’t” (Sánchez 314). While the silence in their homes is contagious, the teen protagonists eventually find their voices and move towards healing.

Ari and Julia also share in their fathers’ sadness. Ari “hated that [his father] was sad. It made [him] sad too” (Sáenz 14). Jaime “was not big on smiling” (Sáenz 33) and Ari’s “eyes are always sad” (Sáenz 73). Jaime and Ari have terrible nightmares, but as Jaime begins to open up about Vietnam and his demons, Ari begins to feel happiness at home. This in turn helps him realize and admit his love for Dante. Breaking the silence becomes a way for the Mendoza family to face the trauma of war, incarceration, and loneliness. Unfortunately for Julia, there is no healing revelation of secrets for the family to work through together. Her sadness only deepens further and leads to severe depression and her suicide attempt. Their home was not happy before Olga’s death, but the sadness becomes truly oppressive in its aftermath. Sánchez writes that Julia feels “sadness spreading inside [her]. [She] never know[s] what to do when this happens” which tells readers that this feeling is recurrent (144).

Her parents, lacking Julia’s citizenship privileges and living with the trauma of their border crossing, are unable to help her, and in fact this contributes to her depression and anxiety. Their post-traumatic home environment smothers Julia and makes her pin her hopes on escape. In therapy, she tells Dr. Cooke, “I want to move away, go to college. I don’t want to live in Chicago. I don’t feel like I can grow here... I feel so suffocated” (Sánchez 216). Until her visit to Mexico

after her hospitalization, Julia did not know what happened to her parents when they crossed to the U.S. from Mexico: the coyote raped her mother while her father watched at gunpoint (Sánchez 274). We finally know why her mother's "big, round eyes...always look sad and wounded" (Sánchez 4) and why her father abandoned his art and became a silent presence in the house. Amparo and Rafael's parenting is traumatic for Julia in a way that is not recuperable like Jaime and Lilly's parenting. So much of what her parents suffered was externally inflicted, but since she does not know about their traumatic experiences, trauma comes to Julia directly via her parents in a way that makes her desperate to leave home. Unlike in the other novel's clear context of war and PTSD from the first pages, for most of *Mexican Daughter* Julia and the reader are unaware of the violent history of the Reyes family. As Serrato describes, family "can sometimes be unsupportive, insensitive, and inhospitable" (195). Earlier in the novel when she tells us "it's not like my parents are happy, either" (117), Sánchez gives us a fractured family portrait of generational trauma that does not allow for escape, given that the "infectious potential of trauma...means that a cultural group's traumatic experience in the historical past can be part of the psychic landscape of the contemporary individual who belongs to the same cultural group" (Balaev 365). Both Ari and Julia inherit their parents' trauma to a certain extent, but they are able to move forward and begin to shed some of the painful experiences that weighed them down.

No Adults Allowed⁵: No Art or Healing for Adults

While the fathers' silence and trauma are contagious to a certain extent, Ari's and Julia's youth provides an escape from their parents' pasts and opens up the possibility of a brighter future. Since "healing may take time, creating a story, drawing, or other art form suggests ways of acknowledging and containing [trauma]," but the two generations' flipped contexts position art differently (Natov 60). For the fathers, art was part of their pre-trauma life and perhaps functioned as a site of hope. Once they live through their traumatic experience, it blights their joy, hope, and art. For the teens, art brings light into their post-traumatic lives. Here I should clarify that Ari is an art spectator not an art creator like Dante or Julia, but the books he reads help him heal his relationship with Dante and his father. The way art gives voice to strong emotions begins to alleviate the oppressive nature of the silence that fills their homes.

Ari and Julia learn that Jaime and Rafael were both artists, and the space silence now occupies in their lives used to be filled with art and beauty. Neither Ari nor Julia had any idea about this facet of their fathers' lives. Ari "learned something new about [his] father. He'd studied art before he joined the Marines" (Sáenz 36). Mama Jacinta, her grandmother, tells Julia that Rafael "was the town artist. He drew everyone, even the mayor...it's a shame [he stopped] because he was famous around here" (Sánchez 251). In Sáenz's more hopeful novel, Jaime partially returns to art through Dante's gift and the books he reads alongside Ari, but Rafael quickly grows frustrated with Julia's insistence on his artistic talent. He tells her he stopped "Because there was no point. What was I going to do? Sell my drawings? It was a waste of time" (Sánchez 315). He ends the conversation by telling her "Julia, sometimes in life you don't get to do what you want to do. Sometimes you have to deal with what's given to you, shut up, and keep working" (Sánchez 315). The "shut up" is particularly important for Rafael, who took his own advice as far as it could go and became, as Julia describes him, "mute." For Jaime, there is a slow return to art; for Rafael, there is further turning away from art.

In discussing the need for both violence and hope in Latinx children's texts, Serrato unpacks the tension between depicting the violent reality of many Latinx youth and offering a

hopeful space that triumphs over oppression. While picture books' "conflicting inclinations" for realism and neat solutions might undermine both purposes, *Aristotle and Dante* and *Mexican Daughter* provide an opportunity to show readers both trauma and healing without removing the lasting effects of the former. The fact that there is no miraculous healing from trauma for Jaime and Rafael does not allow readers to leave these YA novels with a comfortable feeling that everything can be resolved; nevertheless, the audience is left with the reassurance that communication, community, and art can loosen the hold of trauma in a family and grant access to more hopeful possibilities.

Kenneth Kidd provocatively claims that "there seems to be consensus now that children's literature is the *most* rather than the *least* appropriate literary forum for trauma work" (161, original emphasis), but López goes further and claims "Latina/o children's literature is essential to understanding trauma narratives because it powerfully reminds us that violence impacts the lives of children as well as adults" (225). *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* vividly illustrate how "the discrimination the adults experience in public spaces negatively affects their private world" (Rodríguez 18). In this essay, "violence" and "discrimination" are connected as the fathers' painful experiences of trauma are rooted in racial capitalism and overlap to make their parenting traumatic for their children. While it is sad that art is not a reparative process for Jaime's and Rafael's brokenness, the authors' refusal to magically remove the aftershocks of trauma allows these novels to participate fully in the combination of healing and art so prevalent in Latinx YA without misleadingly neutralizing the repercussions of trauma or pretending there is a simple "cure." The important work these novels do in bringing attention to issues of mental health is undeniable, but in choosing to focus on the individual plight of two families they both sidestep radical commentary that their young readers would benefit from.

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¹ In Latinx Studies, see Cristina Herrera's *Contemporary Chicana Literature: (Re)Writing the Maternal Script* for more on mothers. For an analysis of family relations, see Nick Tucker and Nikki Gamble's *Family Fictions*. For more on adults, see Vanessa Joosen's *Adulthood in Children's Literature*. Scholarship focused on parents in children's literature is very limited, but there is research on the *absence* of parents as orphans are ubiquitous in children's literature as the child characters are able to move about more freely without the supervision of parents or guardians.

² See the work of Karen Westman, Lydia Kokkola, Hamida Bosmajian, Eric Tribunella, Anastasia Ulanowicz, Adrienne Kertzer, Kenneth Kidd, and Marek Oziewicz.

³ There is extensive scholarship on PTSD in the context of the Vietnam War in fields such as psychology, psychiatry, memoir, and literature. In children's literature, see Rachel Rickard Rebellino's essay "I'll Write What Needs to Be Remembered" for verse novels related to the Vietnam War.

⁴ For more on gender in children's literature, see Phillip Serrato's "Transforming Boys, Transforming Masculinity, Transforming Culture: Masculinity Anew in Latino and Latina Children's Literature" (2012), John Stephens's *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film* and Tricia Clasen and Holly Hassel's *Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of Gender in Children's and Young Adult Literature*.

⁵ Subtitle plays off Michelle Ann Abate's 2020 book *No Kids Allowed: Children's Literature for Adults*.