

**Identity and Life Are Made by Us**

by

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Submitted to the Board of Anthropology  
School of Natural and Social Sciences  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May, 2024

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## INTRODUCTION: My Story

The moment I fell in love with the discipline of Anthropology, I knew this project would be inevitable. After all, the study of human culture is endless. Theoretically, by the time I finish writing this paper, a cultural shift could occur. Thus my perception of everything I'm writing about now or in the future could be radically altered (although I highly doubt that'll happen for a while, unless you're here from the future, then hi.) However, rest assured, this project is not some broad study of the types of cultures that may be found in countries around the world, or even about the concepts that may come with such a topic. Trust me, I know those can be a lot to write about, let alone ask you to read fully. Rather it is a microscopic lens of an area that is particularly important to me, one that I know will shine a light on a place that I've never seen taken time to reflect on in my life, and maybe an area you may not have thought about. Sit down, get comfortable, and prepare yourself. This is a *long* journey of self-discovery for myself and other people close to me.

Television and film are a cornerstone of culture in the United States. I have no doubt if you grew up here, you could understand their significance. I recall from the moment I gained consciousness that I was surrounded by motion pictures. My childhood was spent watching television and film as my family wanted to grow closer with three new children. It's been such a large part of my life, that I feel nostalgic just experiencing the event of watching these pieces of art. Most importantly though, at a young age, I was told something about my life that would fundamentally shape the entire world around me.

At the age of three, I had developed enough to be aware of my mortality and the others around me. It was at this point that the adults in my life made note of my odd behaviors when compared to other children. As such, my parents had me screened for various cognitive disorders as a means to understand why their child was acting this way. After days of testing, they determined I had autism. That would go on to explain years of social difficulties and perceptible challenges. At the beginning of this realization, someone around this time, while I do not remember explained to me a concept that would set me on the path that defined my whole early life.

“Everett, going forward your life will be a little different compared to everyone else. The world isn't going to make a lot of sense to you. Think of life like a show on your television, and the people you interact with are like characters from those shows you like.”

I am sure whoever said those words meant them in good faith. I'm also sure they had no idea just how greatly that would impact the perception of my life, the world around me, and the people who lived in it.

Just as my mind began to perceive a window was placed in front of my eyes. For every interaction I had, I never processed that it was real. Every person I saw wasn't aware like me. They didn't think or perceive, all they did was exist in space. They were acting, they had personalities assigned to them and they played their roles as the world needed them. As soon as I left the room I found them in, they ceased to be. In the event someone acted out of a character I placed upon them, I couldn't deal with it and separated myself both psychically and mentally.

It's astonishing that given these circumstances, I had developed friends and meaningful memories throughout my childhood. Looking back, I don't understand how that happened, I was never present in the intimate moments I shared with some of these people who are still my best friends to this day. That is because, while I was living amongst the delusions built up for me as a small child, there was no larger lie I enveloped in than the ones I told myself.

While I was convinced everyone I knew had niches for the sake of making my life interesting, I doubled down on the idea of the niche I thought I was assigned. I was a figure who needed to play a social jack of all trades, depending on what circumstances were presented. All because of the window I was shown. Unconsciously I had that place I was always looking through, and what came with that was an inferiority complex. I knew that I was different. I knew no one else saw the world the same way I did. I knew that if people could see the world the way I saw it, I would be treated differently. I saw it happen all the time with my teachers and other students. I had already been put into separate learning spaces because my teachers knew I wasn't like other kids. I couldn't let my friends find out, I didn't want them to treat me in the same demeaning manner the adults had been. The only saving grace I had at this time, was learning what people around me did respond well to. Characters and stories from the movies, shows, plays, and games they all liked.

This newfound understanding spilled into my own identity. I saw characters that represented what men and women were supposed to be like. Men are strong, brave, stoic, and don't show any emotional weakness so they can overcome any obstacle and get the girl. Women were soft, kind, naive, and needed to be the voice of reason for those crazy men who wanted them. Every single piece of media I watched reinforced that idea. Coupled with the incredibly heteronormative life I had in upstate New York at a young age, in the late 2000s and early 2010s nonetheless, these thoughts were never to be questioned. Rebecca Feasey notes as such in her book *Masculinity in Popular Television*:

“Even though these activities encourage men to spend time in male company, they do not encourage men to let down their ‘emotional barriers’ and express their ‘innermost thoughts and feelings...” (Feasey 2008, 22-23)

I didn't see myself that way though, I didn't see myself like any of these characters or people. I was struggling for so long because I couldn't talk to others about how I felt. I wanted to be just like the rest of my friends, and they were just as cool to me as those characters. So, I acted the way all boys should, I became the characters they all liked, a real boy just like them. I was a boy, and I had to be a boy like everyone else.

Things began to change as I got older. I saw people being comfortable with their non-normative personalities and presentations. And, to be painfully honest, I hated them for that. I wanted to feel that comfort, I wanted to be able to feel how I felt and have my friends like me. I was angry at the world for asserting that I would never act that way. I was terrified as well. I had already made connections formed on the lies about every aspect of my, well, character. I grew bitter and pushed down any thought of self-expression even further. I wasn't like these people who were comfortable with their gender, I couldn't be like them and I made sure of it. Because if I was, that meant my social life fell apart. My closest friends would bully me and leave. I was a boy because that meant I fit in with my friends. I told myself that every single day. I told myself

that even though I didn't think or feel normally, I had no choice but to accept that. This will be my life, forever.

I didn't know anything about people or society, but one thing that did make sense to me was how much I enjoyed watching my television. It had to be obvious, why else would *that* person give me the window to look through? I lived in the largest self-perpetuating cycle that I may ever experience in my lifetime. It lasted for the better part of a decade until I was around sixteen years old. And, with all lies ever told, it came crashing down. Now, I am here, who I really am. I'm able to reflect on what that period of my life was like. I'm not a man, at least not by what the world expects when that label is thrown around. I'm not normally minded, I care way too much about media and let it affect my perception for far too long. I'm okay with those being true. I am who I am. I want to express my thoughts and idea, they're important to me and made this paper possible in the first place. Sometimes I'm not brave and stoic. I care too much about people and memories to just drink beer all day and not interact with complex feelings. One day, I hope these things become more expected of men. That way, little me, little Everett who needed to be told this, could feel like he was never different and alone. All he needed to do, was accept himself.

That concludes the extremely condensed life story of, me. I needed to write that out so you could get an idea of the significance gender and digital media had in my life. These things are intertwined, despite initially having little to do with each other. My perception of the self was reliant on the way I understood the media growing up. If media I watched growing up had that much of an effect on me and the world I saw, that must mean my friends have their own stories about media and perception.

That is the nature of my senior project. The intertwining of media, gender, and light elements of sexuality. This is not a statement of culture within The United States. It is a story of life. These life histories are all being shared to show how people also grow up having media as an influencer. In this paper, I will be going into the stories of three close friends I made during the journey of life. I will be the storyteller, writing about how they understand their identities. I will also serve as the bridge between the media they grew up with, and how it supported or reinforced identity. More importantly, I will be trying to understand what gender means to us, and how that can turn into a larger message for anyone who struggles with their own identity.

I first needed to determine how exactly these interviews and conversations would go. Whereas traditionally, participant observation or field participation is the standard in Anthropological studies, coupled with interviews and standard observations, in my study, I wanted to create an intimate scenario between myself and my friends who fortunately agreed to be in my work. I can't jump into the past I'm studying; I wasn't there for everyone's personal life events. And as good as interviewing is, that can't recreate the experience of engaging with media and the live influence that has on someone's mind.

I concluded that I needed a middle ground between the two, a form of study that allows me to go deeper than what happens in an interview (selfishly, this was also an activity that I enjoyed.) I began by asking my informants to give me a list of media they enjoyed throughout their lives. After looking over the lists, I informed them of the eventual interviews we would have to discuss them. First though, because I had close friendships with the participants, we

engaged in watching their liked shows or movies, enjoying stage plays together, or playing the games we love together. I also let them talk as much, or as little as they wanted during the process.

This form of observation allowed me to create a more informal setup than the eventual interviews I would be conducting. In these scenarios, I often had conversations during or after the media was concluded about the significance that work had to my participants. Sometimes those conversations got very specific about the plot, characters, and details that stood out to them. I tried not to bring up gender that much as I knew the conversation we were going to have later on would be more focused on that. I'm happy with how this process went. Not only were these memories bonding moments I cherish, but they allowed me to have a window into the raw moment-to-moment thoughts that occur when consuming these forms of media.

As for my participants in question, I will be referring to them as Caspian, Luis, and Miguel. I engaged in media with Caspian individually, and likewise with the other two. But Miguel and Luis live together, so it meant I watched shows commonly with the two of them. That provided an especially unique opportunity compared to just individually consuming the media discussed with them. Conversations became much more back and forth, reflective, and conflicting with one another, creating a bonding moment not only between friends, but people who live together.

The "formal" interviews followed a structure quite like the one I had set up in this paper for my life history. Much of the first part, especially that of Caspian, was spent on the sequence of events that formed their lives and their understanding of gender and sex. Once the timeline was established in my mind, I decided to follow up with the areas they talked about strongly, and the media they surrounded themselves with. Going forward I will be providing context to the nature of my bonds with the people I talked to. The interviews were never going to be expository, that would completely kill any chemistry or natural feel of the conversation that was already impaired by the recording. This context will also allow for the content to make some sense, as some of the topics aren't elaborated on due to a collective understanding of the connection I shared with them.

### **CASPIAN INTERVIEW: A Link Between Worlds**

I interviewed Caspian first of the three. Caspian is one of the many friends I had formed connections with while at SUNY Purchase, just like all the candidates selected for my interviews. We had met each other about a year after this interview was conducted, and in that time, we had both made significant individual progress on our self-discovery journeys. A large element of our bond is the shared experience of struggling with neurodivergence, sexuality, and gender. It also happens that we both feel strongly about the media we consume in our lives and more importantly the expression of our feelings and experiences through the works we make. This is a theme that formed the context of this conversation.

I began by asking for the life story involving the identity of their gender, from the beginning to the present day.

“Obviously there’s a lot of subconscious stuff going on before conscious stuff, which I’ve only come to realize now because I think there’s a big difference between knowing and subconsciously going through the process. Like when I was in early years of elementary school, girls, because I’m AFAB (assigned female at birth), start developing boobs, right? It’s just part of the process of growing up... I remember feeling disconnected from my body...”

Caspian surprised me at first, in their articulation of his life story. Immediately, they established two separate times of their life and how they understood themselves and their identity. The subconscious and the conscious are framed as the perspectives Caspian had on his gender. For a long time, while not present in their mind due to lack of knowledge of themselves, and understanding gender as a construct, Caspian had some idea that they didn’t feel like the assigned gender they were given. That time is the subconscious as he brought up. The conscious self is the transition to when Caspian began fully understanding how they felt about themselves and their gender. I knew from this point this story was going to be that of two parts, before and after the acceptance of gender. That event fundamentally changed his perspective of the world around him, and himself. This part of Caspian’s life I already knew. What I didn’t know was the journey he’d taken to come to this point.

“I think more of my conscious disconnects started happening when I went to high school. I went to an all-girls catholic school... I had a lot of trouble socializing. I got along with the boys who would come and do musicals and plays there, but I didn’t get to go to school with them. I had to go to school with these girls that I didn’t really identify with. Whether it was because they were rich and snotty, or because they were just (pause) full of feminine energy, that wasn’t something that I was aware of putting out into the world, I guess. I only started toying with gender identity when I was about sixteen years old... after I went through an incident with a girl stalking me. So that’s fun and cool. From there it was sort of a pipeline of jumping around because, the way I phrase this is because, there’s nothing wrong with being trans, there’s nothing wrong with gender identity, for lack of a better term something was wrong with me.”

I previously analyzed and discussed the conscious mind, and he brings it up again to help describe the path of understanding his gender. They mentioned having body disconnects before, and now this is in combination with mental disconnects as well. Caspian’s disconnects not only internalized and created physical struggles, but they also now began to create mental and social troubles as well. There is a reason he drew naturally towards men in social scenarios. A common perception is that those who are assigned female at birth and surround themselves with boys are seen as “tomboys,” a masculine perception of a feminine person. Caspian however found that he related a lot more to men. They felt like they fit in more with the social conventions of men, and even wanted to be seen as “one of the boys.” That last remark is from personal conversations Caspian and I had, where even now they struggle with the idea of not being seen or treated as one of the boys. Caspian does not relate to any traditional feminine conventions in the media we consume and in social circles we’re both included in. This isn’t “being a tomboy,” this was Caspian’s first attempt at conforming themselves to an identity they felt far more attached to.

Caspian did not elect to talk about the time between elementary and high school. In prior and subsequent conversations, I know this because they did not think of these struggles as

prominently as he did throughout high school. From here on Caspian described the many gender identities they gravitated towards throughout their earlier years of gender discovery. Genderfluidity, the experimentation of he and they pronouns, and various other non-binary adjacent identities. He did this because anything that wasn't identifying or associating with femininity made them feel like something wasn't wrong with them. There were trials and many hardships, including having to re-enter the closet due to fear and lack of respect. That event made the struggle amplify to an all-time high of dysphoria. Femininity already made them feel dissociated from himself, and now, Caspian had to deal with others who would treat them the same way their insecurities made them feel. This struggle is the biggest reason why they re-entered the closet. However, he did discover an important element of themselves.

“I had this moment where I realized I didn't want to be perceived as a boy... That fear of perception, being perceived as a boy, I thought that I would be (pause) I don't know, be perceived incorrectly? I remember some harmful things that were said to me when I went back into the closet, like she/her pronouns and my dead-name (former name), but people were just as not as greatly accepting when I came out of the closet in the first place. The thing that made me set that aside though was my asexuality, as I identified as an asexual. I thought that was the definitive missing piece of my identity and I thought, alright I'm ace I don't have to be (pause) fully queer? No big part of my lifestyle had to change if I was asexual.”

Amazingly, Caspian didn't get mental whiplash from the motions of having to enter and leave a mental closet. Still, he fights to not go back into the closet. Caspian have always been terrified of being perceived in a way that goes against their mental image. That's why he left and re-entered the closet so many times, it was always for someone else. After they thought that asexuality was the missing piece, they would also go on to think they were aromantic. However, that's the part he's still struggling with now. When we moved in together a few months ago, I remember watching the journey of them falling in love with his partner and how much that affected his gender and sexual identities. While Caspian says they identify as non-binary, this newfound relationship has made them lean far more toward a masculine perception. And that has been challenging for him, to make others see him the saw way he sees himself. The number of times they had to struggle with themselves and others every time they thought they figured it out created dysphoria so large that it bleeds into more than just gender identity. And it's that core struggle, between identity of the self, and the way others identify him that forms the basis for their written production of a play they wrote *Catharsis*.

Caspian has been working on *Catharsis* since they first came out to their family. As I glazed over before, Caspian experiences struggles from many people in their life who don't accept them for who he is, and some even fight back. That includes his family.

“My mother expressed that, ever since coming out, I had become a different person. And in a way, I do think that's true, but I had felt like myself more than I ever had before. I felt so trapped in a mold that I didn't belong in. I was a square in a circle peg, however people say that phrase. She told me that if this was the person that I was going to become that she had no interest in being Caspian's mother, and if I was going to be Caspian that I wasn't going to be her child, and that was the first of three instances where my mother had disowned me as a child.”

That argument made a lot of what Caspian had previously said about the way he feels about himself and the disconnect of his gender make sense. This conflict was not only the unconscious feelings he felt about himself, but a person was causing a conscious disconnect between who Caspian used to be and who he is now. A person who was constantly in their life creating a separation within himself, almost causing a divide between two different people. That conflict creates such a large insecurity about the identity that Caspian has. However, it is the final argument that left the largest impact on Caspian, and the catalyst for what eventually created the written work of *Catharsis*.

“Now granted, the third time my mother disowned me is arguably the worst and the catalyst of this situation. At this point, I had started writing a script called *Catharsis*. It started in 2021 and I did it for the reasons of escapism. I needed a way to safely vent and prove that trans people are allowed to be who they are, and change without disregarding past relationships, but if you come at them or mistreat them, you are going to sever the bond, not them. They are who they really are and if you can’t, you don’t have to fully let go of the past, but there are things that you need to just change. So at this point, I already started writing this, and this next part is a scene in the play. It happened around April or May of 2022. My mother and I had gotten into another argument, she picked me up from school and we argued the whole way home, and when we got into the house. I- I remember crying and hyperventilating, these are some of the worst fights I had with my mom. She brings up the fact that the person I am now is disrespectful, I don’t care for her, I’m not appreciative, and that she wants [Mollie] (Caspian’s former name) back. And, I’m trying to explain to her that I’m still the same, but she takes it in the way that me becoming [Caspian] is- what- destroyed our relationship, and that I was trying to sever a bond, a memory, a mother-daughter connection. And while I do have problems with my mom, it goes further back than my gender identity... To this day I don’t fully trust my mother...”

Caspian’s complicated relationship with their gender is perfectly summarized by the connection he has with his mother. There has always been a battle with their perception of self that is influenced far more by those outside of his mind. Their mother is the physical representation of how they feel about themselves, and the way he thinks society views him. Caspian knows he’s not a woman, but there will always be a nagging voice inside them that makes them feel they can never be seen the way they want to be seen. That voice is because of the world placing these expectations and views upon Caspian, creating dysphoria. As they mentioned in the beginning, there are subconscious and conscious disconnects. After these arguments, Caspian came to Purchase where I met them, and we became best friends. On a personal note, it’s genuinely endearing how both of us took our gender struggles and reworked them into pieces both of us would go on to make. For me, it will be this project. For them, it was *Catharsis*.

I wanted to analyze the type of media Caspian attached themselves with, and specifically for him, their production of *Catharsis*. What makes Caspian’s thoughts on media interesting for me is the journey that they had. Truthfully, as much as I wish I didn’t have to admit this, gender representation in media is lacking. I’m not just talking about male and female character balance or their designs, more so the rest of gender. The larger spectrum, and all who fall inside or outside of it. Caspian is non-binary. Sadly, there are very few prominent characters that fit within



this identity. In Mustafa Özkanter's writing *Unchanging Gender Roles in Changing Digital Media Age: An Analysis of the Netflix Series "Lucifer" in terms of Femme Fatale*

"In fact, based on the argument that some digital platforms have the potential to indirectly challenge the toxic male-dominated structure of the past, it is possible to expect gender roles to function more realistically and in harmony with the changing social structure than before, and even to act in favor of women in digital media. However, despite the radical change created by the new media through digital platforms, some issues such as gender roles or stereotypes about women have not changed positively," (Özkanter 2022, 1)

While not discussing the topic of broader gender identity, the rhetoric still applies to the argument. We do have the power in the modern age to tell stories and portray characters that are far better at representing gender. Yet despite this, we find that media, including writing being done on the subject, is still an emergent field of necessary exploration.

First, I asked to look over some of the characters Caspian found themselves bonding with throughout their life history.

"Throughout this process I had been influenced by fictional characters, which is part of my escapism. I often dress up in outfits that remind me of them and feel a lot more gender-affirmed when I'm in them. I'm in one right now! (Allister from *Hazbin Hotel*) It helps and it's not a sense of performance for me; it's a sense of detaching myself from my old self when I can see peeks of that cracking through the new foundation I've built... Gender is performance, which is something I've come to learn over the years, because, in reality, if humanity didn't have these labels, we wouldn't give a fuck!"

Caspian and I experienced the same struggle of acting as someone we weren't. When we began talking about media and the influence it had on Caspian growing up, the topic was very focused on theatre and video games. Theatre was the highlight of most of the conversation. The thought that was followed throughout the beginning of the topic, as Caspian said above, was the idea that Caspian's identity is like playing characters. In some sense, Mollie was a character for Caspian. If gender is a performance, it means that even now their identity is a performance because gender is a social construction. It's a powerful discursive label we give ourselves to conform to societal expectations. Mollie for a long time was a character Caspian played to appeal to others. On the one hand, it's quite tragic that we must confine ourselves to this throughline to rationalize the way people perceive and treat us. On the other hand, that's incredibly poetic given their history and passion for performance. Theatre not only makes up their passions but in some ways, defines his life as well.

There was one character that, while not brought up specifically in conversation, Caspian alluded to when discussing character and life. That being, Allister from *Hazbin Hotel*. Caspian mentions dressing as characters as a form of gender affirmation. They specifically put to bed the idea that it's a performance when they dress up as characters that influence them. Although as they shortly mention after, there is an element of performance in that presentation, they mean this as a form of perception rather than pretend. *Hazbin Hotel* is a show that takes place in hell, where mostly every main character is placed due to questionable rules that were broken sending

them down there. While they're in hell, angels come down and kill many sinners to solve an overpopulation issue. Charlie, the main character, is looking to rehabilitate some of them as a more peaceful solution to the problem. The character Caspian dressed as, Allister, is the assistant to Charlie. A masculine presenting character who appears to be well-meaning and helpful to Charlie, but has ulterior motives driven by narcissism and a passion for pulling pranks on others. While watching the show, I noted that the masculinity element in question was incredibly flamboyant, taking the elements of traditional masculinity and stretching them to their limits. That also lines up with another character Caspian dresses as and talks about often, Astarian from Baldur's Gate 3. Baldur's Gate 3 is a Dungeons and Dragon story, so the narrative matters less than the characters, as the focus is creating your own character-driven story. Astarian is incredibly similar to Allister, a charming and charismatic vampire who assists others in good deeds, but often gets a different pleasure from that assistance. Caspian is drawn to this archetype, as the masculinity that these characters display is what he mentioned wanting to possess and display himself.

*Catharsis* is the part of Caspian's life where the final conflict with his mother, as discussed earlier, was turned into a piece of fiction. Amid this argument, the main character of the play, Andi, a stand-in for Caspian, escapes into the world of Dungeons and Dragons. The conflict happens simultaneously within the world of DND and real life. As Andi's family life falls apart, so does the reality they made to escape. Unfortunately, in the end, the pain becomes overwhelming and Andi takes his own life.

It's hard for me to view this story objectively for two reasons. Number one, I know the person and the real-life events surrounding the writing of this production. Number two, I play the character of Ben, a stand-in for Caspian's real-life brother. There are a few things of note I interpolate from the script of *Catharsis*. Caspian links the idea of subconscious gender identity to be in some ways fantastical. Dungeons and Dragons is a stand-in for how they coped with their feelings. Caspian had to escape to other places to feel safe and accepted. However, as seen in the play, that has been compromised at some point. Real life not only stands in as, well, their life but also as the way society views Caspian. Andi is never safe in the play, there are no scenes in which they are truly happy as something always bogs down their thoughts. Andi is consistently dead-named, people leave their lives, and the ones that stay never make it easy for them. *Catharsis* is one of the most powerful tools I have seen to express someone's feelings without articulating them in conversation. If I had never known Caspian, this script describes the gender struggle in a way anyone can understand. In fantasy and reality, being queer is hard. Unconscious and conscious gender identities, while they can be separate, are linked and we can never truly avoid those feelings.

That's the main theme of Caspian's gender identity: the two-sided life they live. The unconscious feelings they have and the conscious reality they live with. In every facet this is true, gender identity, their life history, and their characters and stories. There has been and currently is a divide in mentality and reality. Caspian sees themselves for who they are. In his feelings, his clothes, and his art, they are non-binary in every sense of the word. Unconsciously, masculinity is linked to Caspian. The world doesn't always agree with that. Whether it be theatre, his mother, or the works they're a part of, someone is always holding Caspian back. Consciously, there is a wall preventing true masculinity from being felt. In some ways, I relate a lot to what Caspian talked about. It sucks feeling a certain way and having to act another way to

fit in. To be accepted, we both had to act. To be accepted, we lied to ourselves. To live, now we are learning to accept ourselves.

Throughout the coming life histories, not only have I found that the media the person relates to helps them understand the world around them, but the media also influences a lot about their perception. In this case, it was the importance of theatre to Caspian. For Caspian, theatre is a space to explore feelings and desires to social constructions without the limitations imposed by social constructions. It's a place to take raw feelings and effects and materialize and actualize them. It is a space to attune to one's inner self and desires while exploring the performance of identity as a social construct in a safe and playful environment. This type of manifestation also applies to my next participant.

### **LUIS INTERVIEW: Be Greater, Be Yourself**

Luis was the first person I ever met while attending SUNY Purchase. We both bonded over many common elements, one of which being the fact that we were both entering Purchase as transfer students. That wasn't the only experience we shared though, we also both have an incredibly deep love for film and television. We both also came out recently as queer and shared a lifelong struggle of neurodivergence. That's yet another trait I share with all my interviewees.

I opened by first asking Luis's life story of their gender and sexuality discovery and all the feelings and events that came along with it.

"I grew up in a household with five siblings, so usually it was like always noisy and crowded. And it was all being run by a single mom, because at the time my dad had jumped ship when I was around six or seven years old. And, before he left you know, he had always encouraged me to try and play sports, because that's what my three brothers did at the time, they were all athletes, and I didn't want to do that. I always kind of found myself different from my brothers in that sense, because I never really liked sports growing up as a kid. I always wanted to either like draw, paint, write, dance, act, all the artsy stuff you would get into. I also started noticing that I was different from my classmates as well. Where, I didn't like just women, I also liked men as well. I didn't really come to terms that I was pansexual until maybe about, actually last year. I remember like, very much last year. It took me six years to really kind of come out and be like, yeah, this is who I am, and this is who I want to be as far as sexuality-wise. Like, I always knew that I was different from, you know, other kids, my siblings and what my parents kind of wanted at the time. I didn't mean to say kind of! My mom was like, oh you're pansexual? Cool, what does that do?"

Luis opened up by establishing a life where masculinity was not going to appear as it may when compared to other kids growing up around him. From early on, he had been set up to understand being a man as someone who played sports, had a rough and tough exterior, and always strived to be better than others. That is when his father was around. Luis made it clear that the way his brothers and he saw masculinity was driven by his father. However, his father would disassemble the traditional family dynamic in Luis's life. As such, I find it no coincidence that Luis viewed his own life a lot differently after that. The absence of his father directly correlates to his discovery of passion in the arts. He wasn't like other boys, and without his

father around he knew that was true. Not only was that true with his passion for hobbies, but it was also true for his passion for people. Even though it had taken six years for Luis to tell others, he knew from a young age that he didn't just find women attractive, like he had been told to believe growing up. Luckily for him though, his mom supported all these elements in his life.

“At first she thought it was a phase, I will admit that. Like, my mom is the most generous person in the world. At first she did think it was a phase and then she was like, oh, this is not a phase? Cool. So, what are you looking for? Guy? Girl? It made me smile, cause like, oh cool, she's supportive.”

To be honest, for a moment, it's quite heartwarming to see a supportive anecdote after what have been many struggles documented so far. Luis got the relief of at least knowing that someone close and influential would support his identity, thoughts, and questions. However, this kindness sadly did not extend to every part of his life growing up.

“In terms of growing up with that (pansexual identity) it was kind of tough, because I went to a private school as a kid until high school. And a majority of the time they're not really that welcoming of LGBTQ kids when you're in there. What's the funny thing is that, after I got out of like those two separate places, five of my classmates would come out. I'm telling you right now, all boy's or all girls environments, you may remain straight but you'll probably come out gay. At least, in my experience. That's how I realized that my sexuality wasn't straight. It was basically, I want to date anyone, I love everyone equally.”

Luis began describing what his early life was like when he first started realizing sexuality was a lot more fluid than he grew up believing. That struggle with his sexuality began because he was constantly surrounded by boys, despite being told by them and people older than Luis that liking boys was sinful. After all, it was a religious school. I never grew up in this type of environment, and I was too buried in my feelings to even think about showing restraint in queer attraction. I wanted to know his earliest memories of this awakening and what that was like for him.

“I do remember when it happened. (laughs) I was watching a movie called The Maze Runner. There was an actress that I had a big crush on at the time. And then there was this actor named Dillion O'Brian, dude that dude is fucking gorgeous, like holy shit. During the movie, it felt weird as I was going back and forth, like I really like this actress, no I really like this guy. Oh! I really want to date this one, I really want to date that one, oh, I'm not just into women... That was far before I realized it (that he was pansexual) I personally thought, there were just thoughts, they'll go away. When I came to school, it became more apparent that I didn't just like girls, I liked boys as well. I had, like, many different crushes back then, where it's just like, I like this guy, but he'll probably punch me in this face if I tell him that.”

All of this began in 2015, as not only did the movie that Luis described come out a year prior, but he also stated later that he remembers that year being the first time these thoughts began appearing in his life. Luis describes in every interaction that his attraction is in a bounce-like movement, constantly crashing between the idea of heterosexual and homosexual attraction.

The collision with homosexual attraction was far more intense for Luis, as he knew in some subconscious way that it was forbidden. He could like women and that wasn't a problem, but if he displayed attraction to the boys around him, he would be reprimanded verbally or even physically as he alluded to. In that sense, our lives are mirrored with self-identity. It's not that Luis hated the idea of being attracted to women, it was the fear of being outcasted for liking men.

“At first they were terrifying. (the thoughts of liking men) I genuinely thought something was wrong with me. Later on, I figured out that, there's nothing wrong with me of course. During those periods of middle and high school, what they don't tell you about private school, especially Catholic private school is that some of them are not exactly welcoming. It kind of made it a lot worse. I couldn't come out to any of my friends. I could come out to my mom's side of the family, but I couldn't with my dad's side of the family. My dad's side of the family is this crazy religious type of thing, where they believe in God above all. It scared me to death, because I thought I would lose friends because of that. It still makes me look back at it and realize, I probably should've embraced it earlier. Hiding it was a pain and a half in my ass. I remember in high school, there was this kid who was openly bi(sexual) and he was heavily bullied for it. I remember watching that happen and, holy shit, if I come out as pansexual in this place, I will be ostracized for all four years in this high school. I didn't, I hid it. That's how terrified I was of it. When you're in that all-boys environment for four years, you get to know everyone, and eventually, you develop crushes on your best. I had a crush on my best friend at the time. That was so terrifying, I knew for a fact I couldn't tell him, or else he would tell the entire school that I am the gay people slur. It's heartbreaking, to say the least, you wonder if they thought like this growing up, or if the school taught them to be like this.”

Throughout all the histories documented thus far, all three of us have noted at some point in time that we felt something was wrong with us. That shared element sticks out to me. Despite Caspian, Luis, and myself having nothing to do with each other until we met, despite us sharing entirely different backgrounds of ethnicity, environment, and even distinct interests, we all shared that our identities caused discomfort in knowing that we were out of place. That's a complicated idea to grasp. Ironically, it comforts me to know that we all struggled with the same thoughts. In Luis's case, these thoughts were manifested in the way he could express his sexuality. He knew that he felt attraction to more than just women while he was in school. He knew he had a far larger struggle than he would've if he had gone to a traditional public school. He couldn't display it, not even a little, because all the boys would figure out he was sinful and he would be outcasted. And when men constantly surround you, that attraction is not only challenging to hide, but it proves to be painful when you develop crushes on those close to you knowing they can't reciprocate the feelings. Not only that, in the process of being an outcast he would experience a danger he knew he couldn't hide from. This meant that Luis at a younger age had to accept the reality that repressing his feelings was the only way he could survive and be safe. Whether it be because his father wanted him to be like the other boys, or because he couldn't show interest in those around him, Luis has never had it easy with self-identity expression.

Luis never got around to telling me about his experience post-high school with sexual identity in this interview. In many conversations we have day-to-day, due to the close nature of

our friendship, I have seen his journey of being more expressive in his sexuality before my own eyes. He has permitted me to write about it here, so I will describe the last few years to give an idea of where Luis is now. Luis, knowing he was pansexual for many years, didn't come out to me and the friends we surround ourselves with every day until 2023. When coming out, he made it clear that the reason he never came out was not due to the uncomfortable his friends or I may have made him feel. It was the opposite, we were all so open about our sexuality and gender expressions, that it eventually worked up enough confidence in him to tell us. When he came out, he was scared. Not because we wouldn't accept him, but because it now meant confronting all the feelings he had to suppress until that point. Luis knows now that it is okay to be gay. The issue was working past the mental barriers set by his father, religion, and society. Now though, he's never felt better about who he is. We talk about our experiences quite frequently crushing on people that aren't just women. It's heartwarming to see him come around on his identity. Although not everyone in his life knows, he continues to work up confidence in himself and accept that who he is, isn't anyone's burden.

Luis's life history involving sexuality is a story of coming to accept who you are in the face of adversity. Sounds like all the stories so far, no? What separates Luis though, is not the struggle to accept the feelings, but rather, having the world around him accept them as well. Luis did not mention a self-struggle with who he was as much as the struggle he had with being accepted by others. Sure, he felt like because of his pansexuality something was wrong with him, but it was only because his peers would feel that way. Whether that be his father, his religion, his school, or his friends, it was all about being one of them. When I wanted to tackle the idea of media influence in his life, it became apparent that it wasn't just about the way he viewed media, but also how media affected his friends and their views of him.

This meant we had to first discuss the idea of masculinity, what he thought it meant for others, and what the concept meant to him. I will not be making claims to the larger idea of masculinity here, just specifically how Luis feels about it. Tackling the root of his thoughts on the concept meant we could then apply that to all the media, and characters, and more importantly, recontextualize his life story with new knowledge and how he understands all the previous subjects and the people in Luis's life.

"I think, as far as masculinity wise growing up, I always kind of felt like, the black sheep, in like, my family. I look at my brothers and they're playing basketball, baseball, and I'm over here drawing on the floor and staring at like a teen magazine of like a dude shirtless. So, there was a clearly separate thing between me and my brothers growing up, where, my dad was so interested in getting us all into sports, and he has this one little stick, that doesn't want to get into sports. From what I've seen growing up, masculinity, in some cases, is toxic. It sometimes can be very, very toxic if it's done in the wrong way. In the all-boys environment I grew up in, it was very toxic kind of masculinity. You had to be straight, you had to play sports, you had to workout and be buff to fit in. That's not always the case. Sometimes with masculinity it's all just being who you want to be. And, the terrifying part of going to that toxic all-boys environment, with that kind of masculinity, is just- it scares you. It scares you, because you can't be who you truly want to be, because it's all about baseball, women, beer, this fucking, it sounds like the movies! It's not, movies greatly overexaggerate this, in reality its fucking awful if you're hiding a secret, and that secret is your sexuality. You want to come out, you're banging

on that door, like please please, but in that kind of environment you can't. You're too afraid of being isolated from everyone else. There's this giant wall separating you and your friends, they made jokes about LGBTQ people and it made me afraid to come out. It's toxic masculinity, that's truly terrifying.

Luis in this explanation acknowledges that the identification of masculinity is a large umbrella, where many different types of expression can fit based on who you want to be. Although, that sort of ideal mindset is undercut by his own experiences with the idea of toxic masculinity. The difference between masculinity, and toxic masculinity to Luis is that when others are forcing you to behave and present yourself in certain ways. That is the divide between ideal masculinity and toxic masculinity. Luis acknowledges the barrier that divides this difference in mentality between him and his friends. Unlike from his perspective, where he felt he was okay to express who he was, the other perspectives presented a far more close-minded approach. To cross over that barrier and be with his friends though, he had to change who he was to fit in. Luis has always seen himself as a different type of man, he knew this from his childhood when he appreciated art more than sports. However, would his friends and family accept him as a man if they knew this? This mental barrier he sees is the reason why he didn't come out for many years. It's the reason he feels conformity to who he is, and the struggle of true expression.

Masculinity in Luis's life now has the groundwork for which I wanted to walk around in the building known as his life. Luis loves film more than anything, and he spent a lot of his childhood watching movies and shows because of a dream to make them one day. This meant he ran into characters and stories that influenced his young mind. I wanted to peer into that more, to see if the stories and characters he loved reinforced or challenged his perception of himself, his peers, and his perception of masculinity and sexuality.

“There were a couple of movies where there was like a final guy, you know this big brawly dude with muscles and a shotgun, and kissing the girl at the end. That kind of made me think, do I have to be this way? You're looking at this masculine figure and this is in the early 80's and 90's of horror films, where its like this big giant dude saving the day! Which by the way, super outdated cliché, as of today, because later on it turned out to be pretty bad. I didn't like that cliché growing up, because that wasn't me. I didn't feel like I wanted to be like the big dude with the shotgun and girl, killing all the zombies, that is the wrong way to portray masculinity. Back then, if you paid attention, for most people growing up with film, there were movies around about these kind of guys saving the day. You have things like Predator, Terminator, Ash vs. The Evil Dead. You're watching these and its always the men who are the heroes. That's what sucks about it, most of the time, men don't look like that. There's a lot of different body types with men. Growing up watching all of this, I realized, this isn't right.”

I knew that I needed a key moment where Luis realized that he wasn't like the men in the films he watched. And once I locked down that key moment, I felt I would understand his true feelings on the public perception of masculinity.

“I remember it was from one of my favorite horror movies, Horror of Darkness. It's about a guy that gets transported back to the medieval ages, and has to fight medieval

zombies, skeletons, and stuff. He's portrayed as this muscular dude, which by the way, was part of the pansexual awakening. I'm looking at this, I'm enjoying the movie, the fights, and his journey across the story. But, I can't relate to the character. I can't relate to him saying all of these badass one liners or these giant muscles, because I don't have that. It kind of made me sad, because, should I be relating to this character? I don't know. Growing up, my dad was always telling us to work out, get fit, go to sports, go find a girlfriend, all of this didn't sit right with me."

A couple of things became apparent after this conversation with Luis. He recognizes a perception of masculinity that he can't identify with. And more importantly, his father is the foundation and shape of his perception of masculinity. The values and views his father instilled within Luis at a young age not only created a disconnect that never sat right with him, it was continually reinforced in the media Luis watched. Not only could he not relate to these men, and he didn't want to be like them, he had to struggle knowing he still found them desirable. So he conformed to the idea of what his father, film, and his school told him he had to be.

I'll be honest, I am not familiar with the horror genre of film. I know of some of the tropes that many speak of, you know, where people of color and women go first, and as Luis mentions, the buff white guy who always saves the day! I wanted to find an analysis to see if both the assumptions I have, and the notes Luis has, are prevalent in the films he mentioned, and other horror films. I read up on Tison Pugh's thesis *Queering the Medieval Dead: History, Horror, and Masculinity in Sam Raimi's Evil Dead Trilogy*. In his abstract he mentions

"Within the historical trajectory of the trilogy, Raimi posits the Middle Ages as a historic utopia (albeit one with a menacing army of skeletons) in which social promotion through chivalric heroism allows the worthy to literally become kings—in contrast to the film's depiction of modern-day America, where Ash toils for a parodic version of Wal-Mart. In this revisioned medieval past, Ash realizes the masculinity denied him in his role as a horror film protagonist." (Pugh 2007, 123)

He goes into more detail by adding this.

"In the modern America depicted in *Evil Dead*, Ash is forced to fight his possessed friends, but his masculinity hardly reaches the heroic levels later attained in the medieval settings of *Army of Darkness*. From his very position as the protagonist of a horror film, Ash's character is effeminized. The macho bravado encapsulated in his nickname Ash cloaks the effeminizing truth of his full name Ashley, an appellation culturally applicable to either sex. Ash is male in body, but he must nonetheless function as a female character," (Pugh, 124)

In this analysis of the *Evil Dead* series, one that Luis mentioned in the interview I had with him, Ash is dissected as the non-traditional horror protagonist. I thought this point was interesting for a couple of reasons. It helped me understand the portrayal of traditional (meaning historically in this context,) masculinity in horror films, and subsequently how Ash's character is the opposite of that trope. Luis mentioned multiple times in his life history that he struggled to empathize with male characters in his favorite movies because they were seen as the embodiment



of all things macho. Luis didn't see himself that way. However, he was drawn to Ash for a reason.

Ash in *Evil Dead* is not a traditional horror protagonist. Beyond the fact that Ash is a name short for Ashley, a traditionally feminine name, Ash also experiences a rapidly changing body that does not fit with who he is as a person. This is used as a comedic tool to break down the idea of what male protagonists must look like in this genre. That is unique in a genre that is historically hypermasculine, and there is a reason both Luis and many others have high regard for this film and its portrayal of Ash. Luis holds this character close to him, and that is because it may have been one of the only times he ever saw that there can be different types of men in the world than just the ones society expects him to be.

Luis's story is about the struggle of coming to understand masculinity. Not because he fails to understand his gender or what it means to him, but because he struggles with masculinity being an expectation set upon not only himself, the pressure to and from his family, and his friends. This fight is perpetuated by the people in his life, whether that is his dad or his closest friends. It is also pushed by the media he holds close to his heart, and how the male characters are shown in them. Luis knowing all of this, has viewed his idea of masculinity as normal, no matter how hard those factors pushed against it. Now more so than ever, he understands that he is a man. I find that message empowering for me, given how we both share a struggle for acceptance from others. While I do not completely mirror Luis's story myself, his struggles have made me reflect on how important other people's perceptions of me were throughout my life. I'm proud of Luis as a friend for being so comfortable with who he is, especially knowing how easy it can be to be insecure about that identity.

Film has a large influence on people, and that fact is incredibly true in The United States. Both Luis and I share the experience of viewing ourselves through the lens of fiction we grew up with. Luis's story is a sign that the portrayal of gender in film matters. It influenced him, even at an early age when people didn't think it affected others. It affected Luis for a long time growing up, he compared himself to the characters he saw. It happened to me as well, which means it happens to countless others around the world. It's important to break down gender in these pieces of art to better understand how they can affect any people, and how we can portray them better.

Luis's life history represents the portrayal of masculinity in the larger sense. How people view and understand it. How men view themselves and treat others. Luis gave me an insight I wasn't expecting, a person who knew they were a man, even though others and his favorite pieces of media didn't agree. Caspian's life history experienced the trials of struggling with self-identity and the narratives others wanted to push on them. The way they compared themselves to others was a product of the people in their lives and the media they watched. So, I was fascinated to see how my final participant's story would play out.

### **MIGUEL INTERVIEW: Undefeatable**

Miguel, much like Luis, has been a personal and close friend of mine from very early on when I began attending school with them both. Miguel was one of the many I met when I joined my friend group at SUNY Purchase. What makes him stand out to me, especially for the sake of

writing this collection, is that Miguel never failed to make me feel included and welcomed. He also has one of the strongest personalities in a person that I've ever met. I wanted to understand what makes him that way and what he grew up with. That curiosity was especially nagging as we bonded over our shared love of video games. And of course, how this all affected his perception of his identity.

As is par for the course for this paper now, I began with a question for Miguel. The same question I asked Caspian and Luis, I asked him to give me an overview of the story of Miguel, and how much detail he wanted to divulge about his upbringing and what it meant for his identity.

“It’s been school, struggles, summer, get work done, make money, repeat school and struggle, and just playing video games in between all that stuff. I never really had any crazy thoughts about my gender and sexuality as a whole, I’ve always known that I’m just your average straight male. I haven’t really had any thoughts about, you know, converting if you will. Aside from that, everything in my life is the cycle I mentioned earlier. As I get older, I have more responsibilities, and I get to know new people, get to know how much different they are than me, and I’m always a person that is willing to accept any type of differences, or most type of differences I guess, I don’t know. It’s mostly like, growing up I never really cared what people are like, as long as they aren’t rude and disrespectful for no reason. I know I present myself as a very cocky human being, I’ve always thought of it like, every time I go into something with a cocky attitude I tend to do way better at it, as opposed to being nervous about it, because being nervous about it will hold you back. That’s always something I’ve said to people. As long as you’re like, some sort of positive attitude, whether it be toxic, or just with a humble personality, which I can’t even find in myself as of late. I tend to be cocky in the sense where I know that I’m better, not so much as to put other people down though, it’s just, the attitude I’ve had for so long. As I’ve gotten older, it has been a lot better, I’m not trying to prove my superiority, more so being the best I can be at that time.”

At first, I was a little confused by his response to the question. I asked the same prompt to all three of my recipients because I figured it would give me a baseline to work with when discussing their identity, and the media that formed said identity. Miguel made it apparent that he did not question his sexuality or gender quickly. Before I was able to ask a follow-up question though, he decided to dissect his own personality and the way he views himself. It was at that point that I realized, that while he did not verbally say that this was related to his masculinity, the language and terminology made it clear to me that this is the way he views himself as a man. Miguel talked about cockiness, a trait that often comes up in the discussion of toxic masculinity. However, he notes that he doesn’t view this element of ego to be bad for others and himself, rather Miguel understands that this is necessary for himself and other people to be more confident in themselves and to perform tasks in their lives better. I must admit, after he wrapped up that thought, I got excited to learn more about his view on men.

“I’m only into females and all that stuff. I’m not really the type of person to be like, oh that guy is super-hot or whatever. That’s really the only way I can answer. It’s not so much to where you can just tell by looking at me, but at same time, if people ask me if I’m not straight, LGBTQ or anything, the answer is no. I’ve never had any second

thoughts or anything, I've always known who I am at a young age, right from the start, and I've always been comfortable with who I am, regardless of what's been going on in my head... I personally hate the answer I'm about to give, but I've always had a toxic masculinity mentality, where like, men don't cry. Even though I've had a lot of friends growing up who's dads were like, oh men don't cry and all that stuff and it would make you look like a bitch if you did. Obviously, crying is good for the soul, everyone knows that, something in me though is telling me, I should never cry unless I'm losing a loved one. If I got punched in the face, I lost a tournament, I got rejected, my anger would overshadow any sadness. And I think that's why I'm not a crier."

Miguel shares a relationship with toxic masculinity with Luis. Both of them have been long affected by the ideas and expectations that come with it. Miguel however, does not fear his identity because of how others believe he should act, rather, he embraces that there are many elements that he possesses from toxic masculinity. That's interesting to me. When the conversation comes up about this, like with Luis, I hear about the desire to distance oneself from acting in the ways Miguel describes. Miguel instead thinks toxic masculinity is necessary to who he is, even though he acknowledges how the answer he provides sounds problematic. Miguel doesn't hate that entirely though, he never questions his sexuality or gender, and as he said with those identities and his personality, he is comfortable ultimately with who he is. I asked Miguel to elaborate further on some of the ways he views his masculinity.

"It's all about the idea of looking vulnerable. I don't want to look vulnerable to anyone, especially in this society that we're living in. Society is telling you that emotions are weakness, obviously, many people disagree with that and tell you that you don't have to be like that. When you're out in the world and you're in your own independent life, you kind of have to abide by those rules. If you're not willing to take the shit around you that people give you, then you should avoid making yourself vulnerable, unless you're like, just talking. If this is going to get really personal, then alright, it's not going to make me go insane in front of you. If I'm not willing to tolerate any of the bullshit that anyone else is giving me, like strangers around me and stuff, then I don't. I play it off like I don't care, and nobody gets hurt."

I was getting close to finding the complete story of how Miguel viewed being a man, and how that affects his perception of other men around him. Miguel kept focusing on the idea of emotions, specifically how they're displayed and what it means to be vulnerable. Miguel believes that society treats those who are vulnerable poorly, and if he were to act that way, others would use that against him. That explains what he meant by not being a crier, he feels those emotions and isn't ashamed of them, he just doesn't want others to weaponize that against him. Miguel is comfortable being a man, he just refuses to let anyone else walk on him. He is confident, he has an ego, and he won't let anyone take that away from him. I asked him what being a man met. Considering we both are considered perceived as men, I wanted to know what the differences were, and if he had a rigid definition of this, or if that was far more fluid for others than himself.

"You know, honestly, I don't really know. It's like, the only differences, and this is based on the people we both know and the people we've met, people obviously know that I'm straight and you're not straight, and that's really the only major difference I see. Even

with our very minute differences, it doesn't matter. People like us for different reasons. That's the beauty of it all... When I think about how men should act, it's not really how I think every single other male on planet Earth should act, it's just what I think is best for me, and only me. If I really were to think this is how other men should act, than that's just a very egotistical problem that I would have."

I followed up by asking where this all started from.

"That's easy, bullying. This is just a wild guess, statistically this might be true, I have most of my mental breakdowns in private. When it comes to crunch time for example, I tend to keep all my breakdowns private. If I show them off, it means I'm anti-social, I don't want to talk to anyone, and I hate everyone around me. There are times when people just can't be around anyone, because their feelings are hurt and they'll take them out on them."

Miguel had been conditioned socially by his peers to be strong or else he would be chewed up. His feelings are a crutch to him because he had them weaponized to be canons shot at him. That influences why he doesn't show emotions or vulnerability around anyone. He can't be a target. His confidence comes from that. It's not toxic that Miguel believes in himself, it's toxic because it's a defensive mechanism beaten into him. He isn't toxic because he's expected to be that way, he's a product of a self-inflicted idea of how masculine he needed to be to survive. The single idea of being strong for his protection makes his previous statements a lot clearer to me. Miguel's life story is about being stronger than those around him because that mental fortitude allowed him to be safe. Although he accepts those traits not selected by him to be his own, a facet of conversation that I truthfully have never heard of when it comes to toxic masculinity. Miguel doesn't dislike who he is, he just hates who he can be sometimes.

Unlike all the life histories I had written about until now, Miguel didn't focus on the events that occurred throughout his life. He only cared about the way he sees himself now and how that influences his future. In a conversation about life history, he wanted to talk more about identity than anything. It was helpful because that's what I wanted to work up towards, yet I found it interesting that he didn't want to elaborate on the history part. That's not who Miguel is, he is not a man who lets his present life be tied down by history. What matters to him now is what he can do in the current time, and how it'll affect the future that he wants to live in. I believe that's an important note to make about his perception of life.

The conversation began to steer then about the types of media Miguel enjoys. I knew I was going to enjoy this conversation a lot for one reason. Miguel and I share a nearly equivocal passion for video games. We spent a lot of time growing up playing them, and our entire friendship was built on the foundation of playing them together. One of our favorite moments we share is beating Spider-Man 2 together, a game where we saw the main protagonists, Peter Parker, and Miles Morales, as reflections of ourselves. There was no process of having to explain how this form of media works or can impact him, we were able to jump straight into the types of games he loved and how they may relate to the way Miguel sees himself. He started by talking about the way games made him feel.

“I don’t know. Could be the online league (SUNY eSports,) it could be a toxic environment, could be from proxy chat or something. Growing up, I don’t know why I was like this, but I was a play-to-win person. Even when we had like Monopoly, Mousetrap or something, I would be that guy who got pissed if he got low rolls and stuff. I’m much less of a sore loser now, but like my mentality still does suck, and I’ve proven that to all of you.”

I wanted to delve further into the idea Miguel has about losing. He understands there’s a part of him that cares about losing to the point where he will be toxic towards others. The fact he was aware of that indicated to me that he had an idea of why losing hurt him so much. I asked him what the feeling about winning meant to him.

“Because it makes me look good. Obviously, anyone looks good if they’re doing well. In a fighting game, Street Fighter 6, I main Manon, she’s a grappler, and she’s not very good. She’s like, low-mid tier at best as it is. I feel that, me getting better with her will make me look a lot better, because I’m playing a worse character. I’ve always thought that mastering a bad character, meant that it would trick me and other people around me to think I’m the better player. Being the player who can compete with the best players in that environment, means that I won’t always get wiped on the floor. I want to hold my own. I’ve learned over the last few years, especially in my late-teens, that holding my own is more important than actually succeeding. You’re supposed to learn from all your losses. It shows that you can’t be fucked around with.”

That explanation made his perspective of losing make a whole lot more sense. Miguel loves video games more than any other medium in the world. As such, he places a heavy emphasis on being proficient in understanding and performing well in them. They matter to him so much, that his perspective of himself is affected by the way he plays with them. Losing at something Miguel knows he should be winning at is embarrassing for him. To Miguel, respect is about being acknowledged for how good he is. If he wins, it means those around him must acknowledge him for how much time and effort he spends to be better. If he loses, especially in a way that is dishonorable, such as not holding his own, then he views himself as a failure.

It runs deeper than that, however. Miguel also believes in imposing a handicap on himself for these games. As he states, it makes him look a lot better, because he should be given a lot less for playing with a handicap. Winning isn’t just a matter of seeing victory and having his hand raised, it’s about the respect he is given by himself and others. Winning is about being a stronger person. That is what I believe being a man is to Miguel. It’s about being the person who’s acknowledged as strong, throughout all the struggles that one has with getting to that point. He elaborates on his final point with the video game Elden Ring.

“With Elden Ring, I could be saving the planet, setting the world on fire, or becoming a god. I never really cared about those choices. I just wanted to get to the end and see all the things I did in the world, see what happened... Melania, the penultimate boss in the game, she is the hardest boss I’ve ever fought. After beating that boss, she literally says “I think I met my match” and I’m like, you’re damn fucking right. I was always going to think that game was good, but I can’t really think of a prouder moment as a gamer than beating that boss.”

Miguel's relationship with video games is parallel to the way he views himself and lives his life. He always believed in who he was growing up, never questioned who he was or his identity, and even embraced every aspect of himself positive and negative. The struggles he faced were through the way others treated him. Respect and acknowledgment are important to Miguel, as he grinds for all his passions in his life. Whether that be video games, arts, or working out, Miguel stands by all the work and the journeys his life takes him on.

That's what being a man is to Miguel, being prideful and strong. From the days when he was bullied, to even now when he loses dishonorably in video games, or just can't hit a record working out, Miguel has a drive to be seen as a strong man by others. Masculinity to him is about being an equal to others around him. And he will continue to work hard so no one questions that about him.

Video games are special to Miguel because he can be recognized in the universe for all the progress he made. When he beats a game like Elden Ring, all the characters will see him as a strong hero. When Miguel wins a match in Street Fighter, the other player must acknowledge him as the winner, and the better player. This relationship with video games reinforces how he views himself and explains what being a man is to others. I learned from him a very important lesson in the portrayal of men. Miguel shares some of the traits that masculine characters I watched had growing up, but they are far more nuanced than surface-level writing gives them. Miguel taught me that identity is not just about perception, but accepting all parts of yourself and embracing them to create a whole identity. I am honored I got to experience this story with Miguel through the many hours we spent playing together.

## **CONCLUSION: Identity and Life are Made by Us**

Identity is an important trait that Western civilization loves to discuss and display for everyone. If nothing else, that shall be apparent now after four life histories I've been able to write about, all of which feature that as a prominent theme. Identity here is the way we see ourselves and how others see us. For all four of us, Caspian, Luis, Miguel, and I, we all placed importance on self-confidence to confirm and validate our genders. That self-confidence was tested by others in our lives and the media we consumed.

I began this paper discussing my life history, and how gender was a struggle for me. I never grew up believing I was like the people I saw on my screens, or like the other people who identified as men around me. Even until this point now, I still struggle with that feeling. My viewpoints changed as I wrote my senior project here, however. I noticed that, in one way or another, all four of us struggled with our perception of masculinity.

Caspian's story is about escaping the binary society loves to place upon everyone. Luis's story is a journey and learning to be okay with his gender identity. Miguel's story is about accepting what he was raised to be and learning to make those traits his own. All three of them struggled with masculinity, like me, and are learning to overcome barriers and achieve true self-acceptance.

Their favorite pieces of media all reflect these stories perfectly. Theatre is a world where Caspian can wear the clothes metaphorically, and literally, of the people they want to be. On a

stage, no one will deny Caspian who they are, because it's all a performance. Much like how he felt his life was for a long time. Films showed Luis men who had to look and act certain ways. Although he was surrounded by countless different types of men, the most important to him was imposing an idea of masculinity on him. He wanted to love other boys and love himself, even though men couldn't be emotional. Miguel plays video games because in those worlds he gets to control how others treat him. His whole life, he wanted to be strong and in fictional worlds, he can be a hero, or in competitive video games, he's treated as a winner.

These stories all resonate with me very personally. For a long time, I thought I was truly alone in how I saw myself and how I saw the world. The reality is though, everyone struggles with identity. My closest friends, the people whom I thought I never could connect with, all have struggled with who they are. That is reinforced by the media that's precious to me. I never thought I would ever get to see that. And honestly, it's quite nice for me to finally be able to see that.

All three of these people, my friends, taught me an incredible lesson that I will remember for the rest of my life. Identity isn't a set of labels. It's far more complicated than that. Calling myself non-binary, Caspian calling themselves non-binary, Luis calling himself a man, and Miguel calling himself a man, are far too simplistic to describe how all four of us feel about ourselves. Identity is formed by our visions of the world. Those visions are forged by other people, by larger expectations, and by the media we grew up with. But, all of those things, they're not real. Media, at least the ones we all talked about, are fiction. Labels are just words from a language we made. Expectations are formed from emotions and subjective experiences. So, what really is identity?

The lesson I was taught from these life histories is this; identity is what we make with it. Just like our lives, our perception of identity is completely up to how we understand it in our own thoughts and feelings. No two people in this world perceive gender the same, as I demonstrated with the interviews I conducted. Sure, we may share labels, but if I just referred to all four of us by our gender identities, that would be dramatically oversimplifying our histories and thoughts on those labels.

There are two reasons I'm grateful for all the time I spent on this paper. Number one, it allows me to share with you the incredible lives my close friends lived, and how you can maybe relate to them, or at the very least, be engaged with the triumphs and struggles of these people who just want to be happy with themselves. Number two, and far more prominent for me, is I get closure on an area of my life I needed for a long time. If Everett, who grew up feeling isolated, alone, and afraid were to hear this lesson, I don't think he would believe it. I don't think he would understand that identity is what he allows it to be for himself. He wasn't ready at that time. Now though, after listening to these stories countless times, writing about it, and reflecting on this long journey, I get to sit in peace. I'm not a man, I'm not confined to any labels that I call myself or others put on me. I am who I am, and that is and will now always be determined by how I think about, and most importantly of all, feel about myself.

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