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**THE WAYS I'M A FRAUD: ESSAYS ON IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN
IDENTITY**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR DRAKE
PROFESSOR SIMSHAW**

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Abstract

In this day and age, great progress is being made in acceptance of all kinds of "alternative identities." With growing numbers of identities, imposter syndrome about identity rises with people feeling as though they don't fully belong to an identity group. What does it even mean to be a member of an identity group, and why do I, and many others, feel like an imposter in them? I offer two essays discussing the matter. The first covers alcoholism and how not committing fully to sobriety feels like it excludes my using the identity of alcoholic or addict. The other on being LGBTQIA+ tackles feeling like the '+' in that group and what it means to be uncertain about queerness, resulting in feeling like an imposter. Through essays that, at times, feel more like rants, I journey to understand my own imposter syndrome while simultaneously delving into larger discussions of identity and labels and their place in the modern world.

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Preface

In 2023, identity and labels are piquing discussions across generational and political divides. It's impossible to avoid seeing these discussions. For instance, "woman" was dictionary.com's 2022 word of the year¹ after "controversial"² discussions about trans-inclusionary language. This "debate" involved (and continues to involve) Ron Desantis, Ru Paul, Caitlyn Jenner, JK Rowling and thousands on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and beyond.

Searches on dictionary.com for 'woman' peaked as Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was asked, "can you provide a definition for the word woman?" by Senator Marsha Blackburn during Justice Brown Jackson's confirmation hearing proceedings in March of 2022. Clearly a few people on the internet wanted to find out what the dictionary thought the definition would be. Dictionary.com weighed in on the "issue" in their publication announcing the word of the year:

"But the dictionary is not the last word on what defines a woman. The word belongs to each and every woman—however they define themselves."³

It's a surprisingly heartfelt sentiment for an online dictionary website. The choice for this to be word of the year, and the explanation given by the website that chose it, also harps on an intrinsic aspect of identity: self-definition and, in some cases, the lack thereof. As many, including dictionary.com, agree, what makes someone a woman is their own identification as such. Extending this beyond just womanhood implies that self-definition is the ultimate deciding

¹ "The 2022 'Word of the Year' According to Different Dictionaries." *World Economic Forum*, 20 Dec. 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/12/words-of-the-year-2022/>.

² To call it controversy is frankly bullshit. TERFs whined that's all.

³ Kelly, John. "Dictionary.com's 2022 Word of the Year Is..." *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, 13 Dec. 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-of-the-year/>.

factor in many different aspects of identity. However, as progress is made towards allowing space for self-definition, pushback continues to exist.

In 2022 7.1% of U.S. adults identified as LGBTQ+—a doubling since 2012.⁴ This doesn't mean gay people are spawning at a higher rate, just that more people are comfortable coming out and openly identifying. To say this isn't overwhelmingly positive is hateful, ignorant, and unjustified. Self-definition being centered and people having the language to categorize themselves allows people to find the groups to which they belong, allowing them further to be who they are. However, the complexity also begins there.

As identity has taken center-stage, an important debate has emerged: who gets to participate when it comes to spaces of identity and self-identifying? In principle, this could be an easy question to answer: whoever wants to participate, should. It's not that simple. If you look into it, you'll find that it's a complex discussion without a clear answer. You'll see people in spaces from TikTok to Reddit to college dorm rooms to the Thanksgiving table debating the spaces of identity that people can or cannot occupy. The dialogue is especially prevalent as it relates to transgender and gender non-conforming people whose ability to exist openly is in danger due to anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation and increased bigotry across the world. However, identity and spaces within identity groups goes beyond recent LGBTQIA+ discrimination. The ongoing identity discussion has lent the space for individuals in a wide array of backgrounds to question their own place in a wide array of identities, to wonder where they "belong" and to weigh the various voices telling them where that may be.

⁴ Jones, Jeffrey M. "LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks up to 7.1%." *Gallup.com*, Gallup, 10 June 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx>.

Take race as an example. Race and ethnicity are constantly being simplified and categorized in government documents as well as job and college applications. Applicants are often asked to check one box that "best describes their race/ethnicity." However, as found by Farley and Humes (2010) and quoted in *Multiple Identities in Social Perception and Interaction: Challenges and Opportunities*: "the recent surge in the population of multiracial individuals in the United States highlights the importance of conceptualizing and studying social understandings of race in more complex ways. Over the past ten years, the overall population of multiracial individuals has grown by over 30%, with projections predicting that 20% of all Americans will identify as multiracial by 2050."⁵ How is this growing population expected to identify? In many cases, the pre-set options presented in applications and forms force people with complex identities to oversimplify them for a system they had no part in designing, such as choosing one racial identity to represent them.⁶

When it comes to gender, on these same forms, there's an "othering" of people who identify as non-binary. Oftentimes, the choices for gender are listed as, "male", "female" and "other/gender non-conforming." It's problematic in and of itself when "male" and "female" are used in asking about gender identity, considering those are not genders and are instead labels for sex. On top of that, people who are non-binary or gender non-conforming are forced into an arbitrary third option, checking a box that doesn't recognize their identity as a part of a spectrum. Some may still identify with one or multiple of the identities, including "man" and "woman," and yet, in only being able to choose one, they're placed into an "other" category, without space for

⁵ Kang, Sonia K., and Galen V. Bodenhausen. "Multiple Identities in Social Perception and Interaction: Challenges and Opportunities." *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2015, pp. 547–574., <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-015025>.

⁶ Townsend, Sarah S., et al. "My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 65, no. 1, Mar. 2009, pp. 185–204., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.01594.x>.

nuance. When this third option is described as “other,” it forces people to *literally* other themselves by checking that box.

Non-binary itself is an umbrella term, not an appropriate categorization, as every person who may use the category of non-binary will have different identification and their own experience with gender.⁷ In general, identity is rarely a simplified concept and yet societal expectations to be able to check boxes forces those with complex or non-traditional identities to confine themselves. My "ideal world" solution would be to be rid of these boxes, but in reality small changes can be made to further inclusivity without altering the entire system. It can be as easy as turning questions about gender from multiple choice to short-answer. Allowing people to put their own explanations for gender identity and expression, using their own words and definitions, will allow them to express their complexity.

Social media has provided the opportunity for people to be exposed to various identities and, at the same time, has exacerbated the over-simplification of identity. On the more positive side, people feel seen by social media, especially by TikTok, whose algorithm is incredibly precise—and perhaps invasive⁸—in order to best keep you engaged and swiping. Social media has the ability to connect those who may not see their identity represented in the off-line world. Going to social media can show someone from an evangelical farm town in Idaho that being queer is, in fact, totally normal, that they might be gay or trans, or that they don't conform to traditional gender and sexuality.

In Multiple Identities in Social Perception and Interaction: Challenges and Opportunities

Sonia K Kang and Galen V Bodenhausen found: "At no time in human history have the opportunities for self-definition been so vast. Thanks to the internet, the spread of popular media,

⁷ Monro, Surya. “Non-Binary and Genderqueer: An Overview of the Field.” *International Journal of Transgenderism*, vol. 20, no. 2-3, 2019, pp. 126–131., <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1538841>.

⁸ Congress is debating this very thing as I write

and relative increases in the accessibility of travel for more and more people, the perception and experience of complex social identities is a reality that complicates and enriches our lives on a regular basis." This is good. Exposure to various identities, and the opportunity to build community, is a strongly positive aspect of our modern world.

During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, this community—accessible at your fingertips—is especially important. For those struggling with addiction, a group that only grew when people were isolated, having the ability to connect over social media not only saved lives, but it allowed for new sober identities to be built. "Sober-tok's"⁹ popularity skyrocketed, with the hashtag *#sober* leading over 1.8 billion people¹⁰ towards videos about the road to sobriety, and the ongoing battle that exists when you identify as an addict. In many ways, social media allowed those alone in their rooms to find themselves within an identity and a community, in some cases saving lives.

Social media can also be misleading to people when it comes to identity. In one famous example, a TikTok video titled "4 signs you might be bisexual" listed the signs as: 1. Always hungry 2. Loyal asf¹¹ 3. Adventurous 4. But always gets lost. The video,¹² which has over 6.7 million views and countless response videos, was a parody that went over many people's heads. Most of the 200k+ comments were trolling the creator for giving broad generalizations unrelated to bisexuality. That was the point. The video satirized the many serious social media videos talking about specific habits that are supposed to be markers of one's identity. On a secondary level, the video made light of the fact that sexuality is a spectrum and played with the idea that

⁹ Crossley, Alice. "TikToks about Being Sober." *i-D*, Vice, 22 Oct. 2021, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/qjbdep/tiktoks-about-being-sober>.

¹⁰ Crossley, Alice. 22 Oct. 2021

¹¹ "As fuck" in text language

¹² Clay, Millie M. "4 Signs You Might Be Bisexual | Tiktok Search." *TikTok*, TikTok, 4 Oct. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/4-signs-you-might-be-bisexual>.

everyone is a little bit bisexual.¹³ By giving such broad generalizations that could apply to everyone, they implied that bisexuality could also apply to everyone.

Some non-satirical posts genuinely do tell people signs they may be bisexual, or trans, or queer, or a host of other identifications. In her article for the online publication *Mashable*, Jess Joho describes TikTok knowing that she was bisexual before she identified as such:

"Serendipitously posted during Pride Month, [the video shows a girl shaking her head at the caption above her head](#), calling out confused and/or closeted queers who say shit like, 'I think everyone is a LITTLE bisexual,' to the tune of "Closer" by The Chainsmokers. When the lyrics land on the word "you," she points straight at the screen—at me—her finger and inquisitive look piercing my hopelessly bisexual soul like Cupid's goddamn arrow. Oh no, the voice inside my head said, I have just been mercilessly perceived."¹⁴

What Joho touches on is something that many people have reported about their social media algorithms. Thoughts and actions are used as indicators of a larger identity. In her case, it led to accurate perception of an identity. In other cases, it isn't as accurate.

One of these other cases is a huge subsection of TikTok, neurodivergent TikTok. The underlying theme is, once again, largely positive. Amplifying neurodivergent voices enables exposure and understanding for people with ADHD, on the autism spectrum, struggling with depression, and other neurodivergence. On the flip side, (mis)perception is rampant. My friend Ella, who says she gets these Tik Toks all over her "For You" page, reported a video showing someone rubbing their feet together, with a caption "I should've known I was autistic." The comments were flooded with people wondering, "I do this, does this mean I'm autistic?" Though

¹³ Which I think is true

¹⁴ Joho, Jess. "TikTok's Algorithms Knew I Was Bi before I Did. I'm Not the Only One." *Mashable*, Mashable, 18 Sept. 2022, <https://mashable.com/article/bisexuality-queer-tiktok>.

not always accurately, autism and other neurodivergence are diagnosed disorders. TikTok is not the vehicle for telling people what diagnoses they may or may not have. Doctors and other medical professionals are the ones who have a say on neurodivergence beyond the individual. Sure, knowing the signs of potential neurodivergence like autism or ADHD is helpful. Perhaps it even gives people the inspiration to talk to a medical professional. However, when social media creators with no expertise are given a platform where they can post a video to millions talking about how rubbing your feet, or something similarly trivial, can be a sign of autism, over-categorization takes over and verges on being disrespectful or trivializing something that is real and intense for many people. TikTokers go so far in their identity diagnoses as to attempt to label something that needs to be diagnosed by a doctor.

This labeling can be dangerous, as many aspects of social media are, when uninformed voices act as experts. However, there are some elements of this that bring people confidence in knowing they belong in a group. Where does that leave us? In short, it leaves our favorite concept for categorization: in-group and out-group. The traditional in-groups and out-groups may not always stand, depending on circles, but the concept remains prevalent. In niche circles, to be queer means to be a part of the in-group while to conform to heteronormative gender and sexuality is the out-group.¹⁵ In the specifics of a social media algorithm, you can easily be categorized and communicate with others sharing similar thoughts, similar identities, similar feelings.

On the negative side, people weaponize their own identity for the sake of "proving" their belonging to the in-group, creating a competitive atmosphere around identity politics. "I'm queer so I can speak on this, I'm neurodivergent so I can talk about this" are paired with implications

¹⁵ I want to recognize how incredibly small this population is, in most of the world and the US being straight and cis is still the in-group, and it is still widely dangerous to be queer.

that "I'm more belonging to this group than you are." This applies to a wide range of identities. "I'm more of an addict than you, so I can talk about addiction. I'm more disabled than you are, I'm the right person to speak on disability rights." Paradoxically, the more people included into a group, the more a hierarchy is formed within it, thus re-creating exclusivity. In this exclusivity, imposter syndrome about identity takes hold of people. They may feel less worthy than others, they may have even been told that they are less belonging in an identity group. When competition leads to exclusion in identity, imposter syndrome is the natural next step for those feeling excluded.

This is counter-intuitive to the openness of identity groups by providing more prerequisites for labeling rather than fewer. The one thing boomers are right about is that everything is so categorized and labeled it's hard to keep track. With all of these "new" categories that boomers speak of there's more room for people to feel like imposters. Many people, especially those who are white or male or from another privileged group, write about this from the lens of feeling left out of modern conversations. They feel that, as "allies," their space is being shrunken to welcome others into the "in-group." To an extent, this has brought on people like Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) who feel as though their marginalization as women is being pushed out to include transgender and gender non-conforming voices in the discussion. People have a right to feel excluded. The problem is that people in privileged positions feel like the inclusion of underrepresented groups means exclusion for them, leading to hateful idiots like TERFs.

What we don't need is to return to these people's idealized "simpler times" that made things easier for cisgendered, heterosexual people and just labeled everyone else as outsiders. What we need to move towards is a world where it's important to consider positionality and

individualized perspectives within identity. Ideally this means getting rid of labels completely and simply seeing each human being as their own person. In the real world, some labeling will always be used, and having a label that others share can help people feel like they're not alone. The key to having these labels retain benefits is to consider people as complex and allow them space to shift, question, or be more than just their identity.

Not everyone will know what their identities are. I, for one, struggle with aspects of my identity every single day, as do many of my young-adult peers. Especially at this age, people need the space to figure out who they are, something that will forever be tied to the societal influences around them.

I aim, throughout these essays, to connect with the feeling of not fully knowing my own identity. There's an irony to these. I'm extremely self-conscious and I attempt to be self-aware as a writer. I desire to step out of the limelight. However, I'm centering myself in these essays, I'm putting the spotlight on me.

In a larger context, I'm inspired by many works of writing that take on discussions of identity. I'm inspired by identity works such as Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* and similar memoirs. I hope in some small way to match their humorous, self-aware, tone while discussing difficult topics. I hope to combine storytelling with a deeper understanding of humanity, much like these pieces do. Because of this desire to combine storytelling and larger themes my genre falls between memoir and essay. I hope that essays allow, in a Montaigne-esque way, to combine the personal and the worldly into a cohesive piece of writing. I recognize, however, that I diverge from Montaigne in that I don't litter my chapters with digressions and classical allusions in a display of learning.¹⁶ I do hope these chapters have some larger expansions of themes that remind of an essay, with the storytelling of a memoir. I

¹⁶ Thanks Simshaw!

want these essays to serve as larger understandings of identity and categorization, using personal experience as a guidepost.

In a personal sense, beyond not understanding my identity, the use of categorizations and labels leads me to feel unworthy of using certain labels for my identity. This results in deeply rooted imposter syndrome, mostly self-inflicted, but stemming from ongoing conversations about taking up space within certain identity groups. In grappling with my own imposter syndrome related to identity through personal essays, I hope to connect to the larger conversations around the topic to expand on the generations of writers exploring identity or in-group and out-group to provide a modernized, complex perspective.

Chapter 1: Intro To My Imposter Syndrome

To be honest, I don't even feel worthy of writing this. I even feel like a liar when I even refer to myself as a writer. Shit, I used a dictionary.com quote in the intro, that's so cliché and non-writer of me. Isn't it ironic? I'm choosing to write about imposter syndrome and identity and I have imposter syndrome about my identity as a writer.

The question I keep coming back to is why? Why am I the right person for this specific topic? Why should I write about myself and try to connect to others? Why should people even listen to me at all?

It's important that I'm asking this question. I'm a white, male-presenting, mostly male identifying—more on this in my queerness chapter—privileged 21-year-old kid from New York City about to graduate¹⁷ from an overpriced private college in the foothills of Southern California. To be frank, I believe more people who look like me should feel like imposters.

For a long time, imposter syndrome has been specifically associated with underprivileged groups breaking into traditional positions of power. As Leslie Jamison explains in *Why Everyone Feels like They're Faking it*, "the experience [of imposter syndrome] is primarily associated with women, and the word 'imposter' has been granted special feminized forms - 'impostrix,' 'impostress'- since the sixteen hundreds."¹⁸ Many of the efforts to reduce imposter syndrome are aimed at these groups of people, especially women, in attempts to empower them and emphasize their belonging.

¹⁷ *knock on wood*

¹⁸ Jamison, Leslie. "Why Everyone Feels like They're Faking It." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 6 Feb. 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/13/the-dubious-rise-of-impostor-syndrome>.

So, if white men start to feel some imposter syndrome, start to question their belonging, maybe it's the world beginning to right itself? I do think this is the case on a larger scale. On a more individual level, it's an added layer of complications in a difficult subject: identity.

There's a shift in imposter syndrome, both in who is feeling it and about what. It's important to note that a)in general, long-standing societal power structures are still in fact standing, leaving women, people of color, queer folk, etc. to feel like they're outsiders looking in and b)imposter syndrome affects nearly everyone at some point in their lives.

So how does my imposter syndrome present itself? I feel it as someone trying to figure out my identity while making sure I'm not taking away anyone's space. I'm feeling it as someone who would love to join a group, but wants to be 100% sure I belong there before I do. I'm feeling it as someone who has been afforded an incredible amount of privilege.

And then there's the minutia, the details that make me who I am. As Freud might say, if it isn't one thing, it's your mother.¹⁹

To be precise, it starts with both of my parents—I can't singularly blame my mom, as much as sexist psychology would like me to.

I'll start by saying how much I adore my parents. Of course we've had our ups and downs but they've done so much for me and they've always supported me. I have parents who ask at the dinner table how to best support neo-pronouns, what they should wear to pride this year, and then they throw in a discussion about the possible colonization of Mars and the implications of billionaires taking the lead on space travel. My parents are nerds.

Here's where my complaining kicks in.²⁰ My parents are nerds but they're also *extremely* successful nerds who used education for advancement.

¹⁹Freud fucking sucks

²⁰I'm aware of how "first-world problems" this is but that's my whole freaking thesis

When I found out that I'm a semi-finalist for an English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) Fulbright grant in Uruguay (I've since gotten the grant), don't get me wrong, I was really excited.

Normally, even getting to the semi-finalist stage of Fulbright would be a huge accomplishment, but in my case if I fell short of actually getting the grant, I'd have fallen short of something that both of my parents accomplished.

My mom used her Fulbright to research speech-pathology in Buenos Aires, where she also became fully fluent in Spanish. My dad's Fulbright paid for him to get his masters at a little university in England called Oxford. Thank god he had the Fulbright as a back-up option too—my dad only made it to be a finalist for the more selective Rhodes scholarship, failing to actually get it, and settling for a Fulbright grant instead.

I need to interrupt myself for a second here to recognize how silly this is. Oh nooooo, poor me, I have really successful parents who raised me with a shit ton of privilege. I don't expect your sympathy. I barely even have it for myself.

That's the point though. I've never felt worthy of having problems. I've never once thought I had the right to complain. I still don't. I'm having trouble doing it right now. I'm having trouble being completely honest with you while a writing piece in which honesty is the entire freaking point.

Honesty time? My parents are so successful that deep down I know I'll never be as good as them. I started running cross-country in high school because my mom did. She had to drop it because of shin-splints and nagging injuries. I ignored screaming pains in my legs and ran for all four years (without ever cracking the top 5 runners on my team) just so I could be a 4 year athlete. I applied to Vassar, my parents' alma-mater, to see if I could get in, to see if I could "compete" with their educational accomplishments. Of course, when I did get in, I told myself

their nepotism was the only reason for my acceptance, and I had to find a new way to prove my worth.

I really did want to win the Fulbright and I'm overjoyed that I won it. I do want to teach, to have cultural engagement, to have all the things I told the Fulbright committee on my application. But winning it didn't even feel like that big a deal. Instead of a long-shot, I feel like if I *didn't* get the Fulbright I'd have fallen short of expectations.

I haven't been told that this would've been falling short, not by any of my peers and definitely not by my parents. The feeling is entirely internal.

If I couldn't use my educational success to stand out from my parents, I looked for other ways to do so. As it turns out, the way to stand out from my highly successful parents was to be the opposite, to be a fuck-up. I loved them too much and wanted too much to live up to their positive expectations that I couldn't fully be a fuck-up. I still had to do well in school, I still had to be kind to other people (though I sometimes wasn't) and I still had to do my part around the house. I respected—and occasionally feared—my parents too much to fully fuck up. I had to fuck up in small, manageable ways.

I drank, I did drugs, I stayed out late. I snuck out against curfew to my first girlfriends' house, and lied when my Google Maps tracker obviously showed me there. I resisted my parents' rules, I stayed out too late and hoped they'd be asleep when I got home, closing the inevitably squeaky door as slowly as I possibly could.

Part of what my parents constantly did tell me was how lucky I was. This is where I do think I can blame them. I was raised to be incredibly self-aware of how much space I was taking up. While I attended predominantly black and latine²¹ elementary and middle school my mom

²¹ I choose to use Latine rather than Latinx as a gender neutral way to refer 'latino/latina' people out of respect to spanish language grammar

would tell me what it meant to be white in a predominantly non-white space. She reminded me to question myself constantly, to ensure that I was being respectful in a space. In an argument, it's as if my mom couldn't wait to remind me, "don't forget how lucky you are, how much privilege I've given you." Again, objectively good things. More rich white kids could use that kind of reality check. The ripple effect of this, however, is that I overwhelmingly doubt myself in all spaces that I occupy. This is something non-white non-cis people feel in all too many moments but rarely applies to white men. For me, experiencing this doubt constantly results in a minimization of my own problems.

This shows up in my life in small ways and in not so small ways. In my junior year of high school, my third year as a varsity baseball player, I damaged the ligaments in my left hand from the repeated motion of catching 80+ mile-per-hour fastballs. It got to the point where by the end of a game, the place where my index and middle fingers connected to my palm would double in size. "Oh I'm fine, it'll go away" I'd assure my girlfriend at the time, wincing in agony, when she would gently hold my hand.

My minimization of myself has led me to doubt my place in identity. It's led me to believe that, if I don't have a completely clear picture of where I belong in an identity group, maybe I don't belong at all.

This feeling kept me from getting help when I was drinking alone in high school. It's the reason I googled "AA" and read up on it but never went to a meeting, never felt like I could be in that group of people. It led me to try my best to avoid identifying myself, while at an age where I desperately wanted to belong, to fit in, to figure out who I was.

When I "came out" to my parents—not yet knowing what word I wanted to use for my sexuality—I wasn't afraid of their rejection. I'm lucky enough to know they would've been

incredibly supportive no matter what. What I was afraid of was their questions revealing my uncertainty. "They're such logical people," I remember thinking to myself, "if I can't describe it to them, if I can't answer all of their questions, maybe it'll reveal that I don't actually know what I am yet." I thought back to all of our fights, or even our conversations, where they would always push. They'd push me to quote sources if I was making any claims. They'd push me to read more, and to question what I was reading. If I was feeling emotion, they'd ask me to describe it in order to give them some perspective. Sometimes I didn't want to find the logic, I just wanted to fucking wallow. I wanted for things to be left alone—not everything had to be understood. I know they wanted to learn so they could support but I didn't always want to be the one who had to help them to understand, to speak to them in the rational, thought-out manner that would best serve them.

I knew they probably had some suspicions of my queerness as I had alluded to my questioning of gender and sexuality before, and so I came out to my parents as innocuous as possible. The moment for me was when I was fixing a vent in our apartment in early 2020. "It's a little off," my dad instructed, "it's not totally straight." My response: "Yeah neither am I." Then, immediately changing the subject, "How's that, is it better?" I hoped that going back to the vent would avoid their curious and thoughtful questions that would poke a hole in how little I actually knew about my own identity.

I still don't have all the answers. Not that I have to, I know. I'm 21, I'm right at that age where life is supposed to slap me in the face as I search for jobs, for a place to live, for a future life-partner, for happiness, for new friends, for the rest of my life. Yet I feel like an imposter for my uncertainty, especially with social media curatorially showing more and more people my age who seem like they have it all figured out. What can I make of that? Am I the only person in the

world uncertain in this uncertain time, feeling like I can't call myself certain things or identify with certain groups? The short answer is no. I know I'm not the only one. I know that it's hard to put into words. I know that few people before me have put it into words in a way that I've felt is relatable to my imposter syndrome.

Writing about it isn't going to cure imposter syndrome, not for anyone else, and certainly not for me. I can't even delve into all the ways that I feel like an imposter in my identities. That could be a 500 page book (and maybe it will be someday) and would take a lot more time to write. For now, I have two chapters delving into further detail: one on my identity related to alcoholism and one on my identity related to queerness and being LGBTQIA+. These chapters are a part of a larger project. In my first visions of this project, extending beyond the limitations of Scripps College requirements, I was thinking of 5—or even 10—chapters about why I'm an imposter. Examples of identities in which I felt like an imposter included being Jewish, being an athlete, having a complex relationship with food, and being undiagnosed yet feeling like I might have ADHD. I soon realized that to give the proper attention to my chapters that they deserved, I'd only flesh out two themes, the alcoholism and the LGBTQIA+ identities. I expand in these two chapters, in great detail, on the themes I've discussed here, and I attempt to flesh out my imposter syndrome and my identity.

I hope these essays help in some small ways. I hope they help to alleviate some of the tension I feel about every single part of my identity—those for which I have words to describe and even those I do not. I hope that they're relatable, understandable, or helpful to someone else, too. I know that many feel similarly to me in their identity today and I expect my experience to be emblematic of the rapidly changing conversation around identity right now. If nothing else,

this is an insight into one mind adjusting to an ever-changing world and to one person trying to understand themself.

Regardless, it's been cathartic as fuck for me to write this.

Chapter 2: An Alcoholic Walks Into a Bar...

Recently, I went to an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting for the first time. I didn't like it. I won't be going back.

Two friends of mine, whose names I won't share for obvious reasons, brought me to their regular Tuesday meeting, my knee bouncing on the short drive to the church where the local chapter congregates. I was grateful at the opportunity to wear a mask in the space, a chance to keep my breathing regulated and some of my face concealed.

I was inspired by some of the stories shared, by the people who committed themselves to their own betterment and to supporting others. I related to always drinking more than your friends and to being the person with the highest tolerance in the room, no matter what room you're in. I related to drinking to cope with sadness and how drinking starts fun, and then you continue to drink long after the fun has faded.

The thing is, I also felt deeply uncomfortable in that room. There was a lot I could not relate to. I felt like, while I echoed some aspects of the stories shared, I was missing something crucial, and, therefore, was an imposter. I was in a welcoming space, a group that actively wants you to join them, and yet I felt unwelcome. I felt that my life experiences didn't warrant me to be sitting in that meeting.

My story with alcohol starts at the age of 15 and involves, oddly, a gold sequinned jacket.



It looks, as one of my writing workshop peers²² said when they saw the photo for the first time, like a bar mitzvah after-party. But it's no bar mitzvah. I'm 15 and at the time of this photo I'm black-out drunk. I have no memory of it being taken.

It was the weekend of Thanksgiving, sophomore year of high school. By that point I had already smoked weed, I had tried edibles, I had even once taken a sip of lean (the cough syrup, Jolly Rancher and Sprite combination made famous by mumble rappers) but I hadn't really done the drinking thing. I was excited to finally get drunk.

"I'm going to the movies with Kyla, and some friends" I blatantly lied to my parents, trying to contain the tremble in my voice. At 15, I wasn't a very good liar at all, and, frankly, at 21, I still suck at it. I had never really gone out before this though, so they had no reason to believe "the movies" wasn't a real activity.

Kyla's parents were out of town and she decided to give the HSAS (the acronym for my high school: the High School of American Studies at Lehman College) sophomore class a party. Her two-story Upper West Side apartment was the perfect venue, spacious and centrally located to where most of my classmates lived.

My exact memory is hazy but it must've been at least 60 out of the 100 person sophomore class that showed up to Kyla's that night. The dance floor was packed and the fire escape/balcony creaked from the weight of too many people standing on it, passing around a joint.

We used fake IDs, older siblings, generous parents, and, in some cases, stolen liquor to compile quite the stash. Vodka, gin, tequila, whiskey, and a bottle of Hennessy were passed around and mixed at will with Coke, Sprite, juice, and, when we ran out, tap water. We didn't have any supervision, not even any juniors or seniors who could show us how to party or how to safely drink.

²² Shoutout Molly!

So I got drunk. Very drunk. I got belligerently drunk. I unleashed 15 year old hormones and stupidity and freedom and sorrow and joy all into a night that I have mostly forgotten but stories that I'll always remember.

I ended up venturing downstairs and, in a closet, I found the golden sparkly jacket, probably a costume piece from Kyla's dad's job on Broadway. I threw it on over the outfit I had picked for the party that I thought was super cool, and made my way back upstairs. I remember my fellow drunken teens being very excited about the jacket.

The rest of the night comes to me in flashes, my ailing memory aided by stories from less-drunk friends and photos they took of me that have been lost to the ether of cloud storage.



(the only other photo of me from that night that I could track down-my friend wearing the jacket, me flipping someone off)

We left the apartment and stumbled down Broadway and 92nd, occasionally weaving into the street before jumping out of the way of oncoming traffic. At least once we had to stop for someone to vomit. I have no memory of how but I made it back home (I later learned I was aided by my friends Wade and Chillemi) and that's where I woke up.

Some aspects of this story are unique, the jacket among them, but, for the most part, this night is unassuming, at least to those in my circle. Being drunk on the subway, on the street, in whatever store or deli is open late at night, is a right of passage for any New York high schoolers.

Getting drunk in high school is common in the United States. Nearly 1 in 4 Americans have had at least one drink by the time they're 15 years olds.²³ Over 7 million young people 12-20 years old report having had "more than just a sip" of alcohol.²⁴ 4.2 million Americans under the legal drinking age have at some point participated in "binge drinking".²⁵ I get it. Let's be honest for a second here: drinking is fun! Drinking underage, adding an edge of risk and of knowing what you're doing is not allowed, only enhances the experience.

So my story isn't all that unique, and had the rest of my relationship with alcohol been "normal," it would be just a funny story of teenage immaturity. But that night signifies the start of a rocky relationship with alcohol, one that I am still grappling with.

The very first step outlined in the Twelve Steps of AA is "we admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable." Alcoholic or not, who actually believes that their life is manageable? In this day and age? It's hard to imagine. I call bullshit on life "becoming" unmanageable. It is endlessly unmanageable. Alcohol can even help you manage it at times. It's a form of medication. The problem is when you abuse it, like any other medication. AA focuses on the alcohol management part, citing zero tolerance, and ignores that life is never truly something that we can manage.

In high school, my schedule was just too rigorous to be manageable. In the fall of my senior year, for instance, I'd wake up between 4 AM and 5 AM most days and do a morning workout. I'd be out of the house around 6:30 AM where I'd do homework on the subway, chat with friends, and prepare for that day's classes. On Fridays, I'd have to be out of the house by 5:30 AM for morning baseball practice where the commute was much quieter, much lonelier, and

²³ Underage Drinking." *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/underage-drinking>.

²⁴ "Underage Drinking." 2022, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/underage-drinking>.

²⁵ "Underage Drinking." 2022, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/underage-drinking>.

I couldn't sleep on the train for fear of missing my stop, or worse. Whether I had practice in the morning or not, class started promptly at 8 AM. After a full day of school, lunchtime roughhousing included, the bell would ring at 2:58 PM and I'd change into shorts in the only bathroom in the school and be ready by 3:15 PM for cross country practice. Regardless of weather we'd run outside for 2-3 hours. When that was done, without a locker room or showers at our school, I'd hop back into my school clothes, and take the hour-long subway ride home. For most of the fall I'd be leaving my house in the dark and coming back home in the dark every single day. Then it was homework, dinner, college applications, and more homework. It was a stressful and exhausting time, and, as a result, I'd spend my night locked away in my room.

That's where I'd drink alone. I'd rarely get drunk, but I'd have a beer or two, maybe a swig of vodka. On top of that, I'd be mixing my drinks with the Ibuprofen I used to sooth the pain from my grueling sports schedule. On a really bad night, it'd be 4-5 Ibuprofen and 3-4 shots of vodka. I'm estimating on the vodka because I'd always drink straight from the bottle to ensure none of my parents' glassware smelled like alcohol.

Regardless, I was always up the next day, ready to do it again. For me, keeping up the appearances of success, struggling in silence while still getting shit done, was the absolute most important thing.

That remains true. It's been so ingrained in me that there are certain things I need to do above all else. I need to be a good student, I need to exercise and move my body, I need to participate in my community, I need to be a good person. My parents drilled that into me from a very young age, and reinforced it in any possible "teaching moment."

Therefore, despite all of my drinking, despite all that may have been at the root of my drinking, I've always appeared successful. This kept my parents happy, and was at least supposed to keep me happy.

It's fascinating to me the lines my parents drew on certain "difficult" topics when raising teenaged Jack. Sex for example, a taboo subject for so many families, was no big deal. I knew in early elementary school that sex between a penis and a vagina could bring babies if you didn't use protection but also that sex took on many other forms and mostly was done because it was fun. My mom bought me a box of condoms when I was 12, leaving them in my bathroom "just in case." At that age, I hadn't even kissed anyone and the thought of using condoms was wildly embarrassing, especially when it was my mom talking to me about it.

Within a few years of the condoms appearing, I think when I was nearing the end of eighth grade, it was time to have the drug and alcohol conversation. While some of my friends with more liberal parents said "we'd rather you drink and do drugs safely at home" my parents felt the opposite.

"We know you're probably going to drink and smoke weed and stuff, Jack. We hope that you are safe when you do it, we hope we've given you the tools to do that, but we want to be clear that you can never do it in the house. You can't drink in the house, you can't have your friends over to drink in the house. We would be responsible for anything that happens, we can't have you or anyone falling off of our balcony, breaking stuff, or hurting themselves. We can't have you stashing illegal substances in a house under our name, so absolutely no drugs or alcohol here, okay?"

To this day, I don't buy the logic of these rules. They understood I would drink and smoke but, rather than allow it to happen with safe supervision, I was encouraged, nay required, to go

outside to the streets of New York city to do it. That's exactly what I did at the start, drinking on the streets, at other people's houses, in the park, wherever wasn't inside my home. That barrier soon broke down too, especially as the months got colder. I thought I could be sneaky, I thought if I knew when my parents got home that my friends and I could hang out and drink and conveniently leave right beforehand. I started to see where I could bend the rules that I vehemently disagreed with.

And, just as I did that, I kept getting in trouble for it. My punishment? Grounding. What did grounding do? It kept me at home. What else did it do? It made me sad. So what did I do? I drank alone. I drank at home. The cycle continued.

In my memory, the cycle effectively ended in the spring of my senior year of high school. I honestly have no clue what ended it. It may have been finishing college admissions, getting into a new relationship, cross country season ending and baseball season beginning, or sheer luck, but the drinking faded and remained an event for parties, just when I wanted to have some fun.

In the two years I was drinking more heavily, I hadn't really gotten hurt, I hadn't really faced severe consequences for my drinking. In the stories of alcoholism and abuse that people tell me about, this is never the case. Usually, it's one or more events of near-death experience and horrific events that lead to sobriety. I didn't have any of those experiences and so I didn't lead myself to sobriety. Instead, I led myself to a healthier, "normal" relationship with alcohol.

What is normal? In the last few months of high school, normal meant drinking once every week to two weeks when there'd be a party or a hangout of some kind. I'd play beer pong, have a couple of shots, maybe a few beers. At this point, my tolerance was pretty high, on top of being fairly big, so I was still drinking a little more than my peers, but I was never the drunkest person at an event—my drinking was fairly in-line with my fellow young adults.

In college, the line for normalcy shifts dramatically. Suddenly free from the constraints of your parents house, drinking becomes more accessible, more rampant. Even then, as my bar for normal shifted, it stayed mostly in line with the rest of my friends, and certainly lower than some students at big universities with frats and where drinking is the only viable activity. As the idea of what is "normal" drinking shifted, I felt like I was doing a good job keeping myself in line.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic sent everyone home, me back to New York, and, once again, my "normal" had to shift. I strongly believe that having a girlfriend who I lived with is the only thing that kept me from unhealthy drinking during the lockdown of 2020. I know of quite a few people who had to get sober either during or after lockdown but luckily I wasn't one of them. Living full-time with another person meant I couldn't drink alone like I had in high school. If I was drinking it was with her, and it wouldn't be cool to get wasted when it was just the two of us. I also admittedly found a new way to cope during the pandemic, one I hadn't used regularly before that: smoking weed.

Then, for the entire year after I returned to school, I found myself too busy to have an unhealthy drinking habit. I was back at school, renewing friendships, maintaining a long-distance relationship, going to social events, participating in clubs, and exercising to keep my body in shape. The expectations of working hard after doing nothing for so long kept me distracted enough to, once again, fall in line with my peers when it came to how much and how often I was drinking. On top of that, I was still 20 for all of my junior year and didn't have a car despite living off-campus. If I needed liquor, I'd have to ask someone or get someone to take me to the store and hope my fake ID would work.

I got broken up with in the Spring of 2022, at the same time that I had Covid. Maybe it was because I didn't have any liquor in the house but, to be perfectly honest, it remains a mystery why I didn't drink away the pain of that time. I have no explanation for that one.

Then, this current semester's problem arose when I no longer had distractions to keep me busy. I'm part-time this semester, taking only one class on top of my thesis. I had tons of time alone, had a car, was over 21, and lived in a house with a fully-stocked bar cart. By the time I finally decided to finally go to the AA meeting, it had been about two weeks where I found myself drinking every night.

Thursday through Saturday made sense, it's the weekend, I'm in college, and why shouldn't I be able to relax and unwind? Sunday night, a glass of wine at dinner, who cares? We're watching an episode of *The Last of Us* so why not crack open a beer or pour myself a little whiskey to help me enjoy the scary show? I don't have class on Monday's anyway, no biggie. That only left Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Soon those nights were for drinking too. I was bored, I wasn't in the best headspace and eventually I'd be in bed alone watching some Netflix and there'd be an old fashioned in my hand. As the week went on, it was whiskey over ice instead, less sugar, and more efficient.

The peak of my "relapse"—a term I also struggle to use—was actually at a social event. We were at my house playing True American, a drinking game from the tv show *New Girl* that is too complex to explain but essentially involves standing on furniture because the floor is lava and taking intermittent sips from a beer. At least that's what it was for everyone else. I stood on a chair not with a beer, but with a glass nearly overflowing with whiskey. The point of any game, drinking games included, is to have fun. I wasn't having that. I took it upon myself to scowl the whole time, to sip from my whiskey, and to spiral further into my interior unhappiness.

I kept drinking alone for a few days after that but, ultimately, I had to check in with myself. I counted up my drinks, the days in which I was drinking, and I reached out to go to AA.

After my "relapse," and the same week I went to AA, I took a week-long break from drinking. Nobody else made me do it, I felt as though I needed to prove to myself that I could take some time off, hoping to return to drinking with a refreshed mind.

I did it.

Though it wasn't easy to be sober at a dinner party where I made a pitcher of a delicious cocktail, though it wasn't easy to go out without having a beer first, though I had to say no to wine at dinner, I spent an entire week sober. And then I returned to drinking for spring break. I was happy the whole weekend and my drinking reflected that. Partially I drank during break because it felt like the thing to do. I wanted to drink because I felt it was going to enhance my experience so I did it. I know this comes with a lot of privilege. I know it makes me unlikable to say "I want to drink sometimes, it makes me enjoy life" and to follow up those words with action. It's just what I'm going to do. I know other people feel like me. I've talked to those who want to regulate their drinking but still want to drink. We all want to feel like we belong, like we have community, like we have support.

I don't see myself back at AA. In a community so vulnerable, so open, so welcoming, I couldn't bring myself to feel welcome.

It's that imposter's syndrome that nags at me now. Was I wrong for going to AA? Was I an alcoholic? Am I an alcoholic? What's the right phrase to use? the right group for me to be a part of? I've just discussed at length the times I haven't been healthy with my drinking but that still doesn't feel like enough. It's the fact that I have been able to stop. It's the fact that, despite appearances, I always felt in control. When I didn't feel fully in control, I was self-aware enough

to seek help. I took a mere 7 days off of drinking to prove to myself that I could and then I was right back to "normal" drinking.

None of that is how it's supposed to be. Sobriety is supposed to be about being sober. Alcoholics aren't supposed to be able to have a little bit of drinking without having a lot more. I can. That's why I don't feel like I can even call myself one.

I recognize that I'm trying to put words to something that is nearly impossible to describe. That's the point of this whole thing after all. It's the inexplicable feeling inside of me that I'm an imposter that I'm trying to hash out.

Every single person at my AA meeting, and AA meetings across the world, have one thing in common. "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking."²⁶ Everything else about a person could be different. Every one of those people also has their own story, their own life, their own perspective. The problem for me is that I have one other thing that makes me different from them: I don't have the desire to stop drinking. I have the desire to be safe in my drinking, to not drink alone, to not drink as a coping mechanism for my emotions, to not drink to excess, and to not get to a point where I can't stop drinking. I want to not be an asshole when I drink. I want to be able to get a buzz on and wake up the next day with my memories intact. I think I'm capable of doing that. AA would disagree.

That's the crux of my imposter syndrome when it comes to AA; I couldn't buy in completely so I don't know if I can buy in at all.

I don't want to explain to anyone in the sobriety group why they saw me at a party, red-solo cup in my hand. I don't want them to ask me about the negroni I'll have with dinner, the cocktails I make and enjoy with friends every weekend. I don't want to explain my yearly

²⁶ "The Twelve Traditions." *The Twelve Traditions*, Alcoholics Anonymous, <https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-traditions>.

participation in Tour de Franzia, a Pitzer College tradition that includes teams drinking two boxes of Franzia wine in between biking the length of campus. I'd feel guilty for taking up space in AA meetings, listening to words about how drinking ruined these people's lives, how they can't have even a drop of alcohol anymore, all while knowing that it hasn't ruined mine, knowing I'll be having some alcohol again.

I extend that thought further. If I can't see myself at AA, then I can't identify as an alcoholic. I exist in a limbo between drinking and not drinking, alcoholic and non-alcoholic, responsible drinker and irresponsible drinker. I struggle to comprehend how both things can exist at the same time. Addiction is largely a mental health issue; it's a combination of genetics, brain chemistry, and individual life experiences that result in someone being an addict.²⁷ What if I have one of those three, the individual life experiences of unhealthy drinking, but not the other two? Perhaps that's what causes me to act like an alcoholic at times, without the long-term aspects of addiction. Perhaps I won the genetic lottery and am simply not hard-wired to be addicted.

Neither of my parents really drink much at all. They'd both have a beer or a glass of wine with dinner from time to time, probably once every other night I'd estimate, but then they'd stop. The only time I really remember seeing either of them tipsy was after my dad finished a fishbowl margarita by himself on vacation. He was a little chattier than usual, a little bit more animated, but that was it. I don't think I've ever seen my mom tipsy or drunk. Maybe they've blessed me. Perhaps their biological lack of addiction has kept me from full addiction all these years. Can I be an alcoholic and not an addict? My identity continues to spin uncontrollably, the imposter syndrome only getting stronger.

²⁷ "What Is the Definition of Addiction?" *Definition of Addiction*, American Society of Addiction Medicine, <https://www.asam.org/quality-care/definition-of-addiction>.

I think again of the stories at AA. People described so much of what I feel: a desire to use alcohol to control the uncontrollable, drinking when they were upset, using alcohol to numb themselves. I diverge, however, in what happens next. Partially that too is related to my luck and privilege. Maybe if something bad truly had happened to me while stumbling home drunk in high school, I'd be telling a different tale.

Is the only thing keeping me from identifying with alcoholism a "rock-bottom moment"? If I continue to avoid rock-bottom but continue to drink, how long can I sustain it? Many people continue to drink healthily, well into their old age. Is that in the cards for me? I'd love for that to be the case. I love the way drinking inspires confidence. I love the community surrounding drinking, I love bartending, I love the unadulterated truth that comes out of people's mouths when they drink, I love leaving my inhibitions behind as I dance the night away. As I do all these things and love all these things, I know where the flip side lies. I know that, for many people, drinking turns dark and I know that, for me, drinking can also mean spiraling further into sadness as I down whiskey alone in my room. I know drinking can make me more combative, more aggressive, angrier, sadder, less self-aware. I also know that I've been able to get out of that spiral.

Just the fact that I pulled myself together, told myself to go to AA, chose on my own to stop drinking for a week (and successfully accomplished that) makes me feel unworthy of the label of alcoholic. In theory, that shouldn't matter, but we don't live in a theoretical world. We live in a world where labels do matter. This label matters to me. It took me a really long time to be honest about drinking alone in high school, it took me a long time to even cross the doorway of a meeting. It took a lot of my courage to, when they asked if there were any new people in the room that day, raise my hand and introduce myself as Jack.²⁸ If I don't label myself as an

²⁸ You give first names only in AA for anonymity's sake

alcoholic, it's like I'm giving myself free reign to do whatever I want, it's like I'm ignoring the 17 year old pouring vodka down their throat as a coping mechanism for stress and for sadness.

Losing the label feels like I'm being dishonest, but keeping the label feels equally wrong.

I know my relationship with alcohol won't always be positive, it hasn't even been positive during this entire semester as I work on this thesis. I've fucked up, I've gotten too drunk, behaved badly, regretted my actions.

Maybe the shock of the "real world" will kick some realization into me. Maybe when my brain is finally fully developed between 25 and 30²⁹ I'll take a look back and see how silly I was for even having this discussion with myself. I'd love to have my brain fully develop and feel like I've done the right thing. I don't know what that right thing is. I want it to be healthy drinking. I want to enjoy a cocktail as social lubricant, champagne in celebratory moments, blended drinks on the beach, wine to unwind, a beer at a sports game, whiskey if a day was hard. I want to be in the group that keeps each other in check, that knows the sours of alcohol but maintains its benefits, too. Alcoholics Anonymous wasn't that group. Alcoholic doesn't feel like the right label for me.

You might be thinking differently when you read this. You might think I'm still in denial, holding back from you, my reader, and protecting myself. You might think I need the label of alcoholic, that someday I'll wake up and realize how silly I've been. Or, maybe I have a really healthy understanding of my alcohol use. Maybe, unlike many of my 21 year old peers, my teenaged struggles with drinking have given me perspective and tools to self-regulate. Maybe

²⁹“The Teen Brain: 7 Things to Know.” *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-7-things-to-know#:~:text=The%20brain%20finishes%20developing%20and,prioritizing%2C%20and%20making%20good%20decisions.>

they've even given me the awareness to write something like this. I'd like to think that it's the latter, of course, but I can only say how I feel. You can label me differently if you'd like.

Chapter 3: The + in LGBTQIA+

He tasted of bitter embers from the cigarettes he chain-smokes, a taste I enjoy when it's coming from a drunken smoke but isn't super nice coming from someone's tongue.

We met up that night at McSorley's pub, the oldest bar in New York City, a relic from the 1800s that has hosted the likes of Abraham Lincoln and Harry Houdini but now serves home-brewed ales to millenials who don't mind sawdust on their shoes and sitting at tables with strangers. We sat at a table with a group celebrating a 25th birthday. "How do you guys know each other?" they asked us. "We're on a date," he responded instantly but, laughing as he said it, indicated some humor behind the sentence. When they pressed us further, we told them how we shared a best friend, how we actually had even lived in the same apartment building briefly, how our worlds intertwined, but this was actually the first time we were hanging out one-on-one. Until he had said it was a date, as a joke, I hadn't thought of the hangout as anything more than casual friendship. I knew he was bisexual. I knew he had described me as hot. I'm not sure if he was aware but I thought he was pretty hot too, admittedly in a rough and tumble grunge, punk-rock kind of way. We stayed at McSorley's well after our new friends left, throwing back ales, chatting about our very different lives, even sharing poetry we had written.³⁰ Once last call had been announced, we put on our jackets to brave the frigid walk that awaited us.

We found ourselves waiting at the 14th street 1-2-3 train platform, above the tracks where diverging stairwells lead you either downtown and into Brooklyn or uptown into the sleepiness of upper Manhattan. The trains we wanted were heading in opposite directions.

As we waited for our diverging subways, I leaned my back against the frigid metal fencing just beyond the turnstiles we had hopped over. The beers swished around my belly,

³⁰ Suuuuper cliche I know

suddenly joined by a fluttering insect. As I often do, I substituted nerves with overt confidence and was blunt: "So when you thinking about kissing me?"

He grabbed my hands, stroking my moisturized fingers with the calluses from whatever manual labor he had been doing to make ends meet. "Let me show you how I normally do this."

My hands moved to his black-jeaned hips complete with leather belt and a wallet-chain that were both intimidating and welcoming. I pulled him in by a belt loop, immediately in the comfort of someone I've known for a long time, but was kissing for the first time.

When his ashtray-mouth met mine, his firm lips softened and contorted, sliding like a puzzle piece until we were enveloped. I slid my hands up his body, stopping on his shrugged shoulders, before moving to his head. I almost instinctively expected to find shoulder-length hair, but instead I reached his buzz cut mohawk. I stroked the spiky mohawk, and then moved to the stubbly side above his ear.

Then I felt scared. Uneasy is a better word for it, and it wasn't a second-hand nicotine rush I was feeling.

I processed the fact that it was 2 AM and we were on a New York City subway platform. I realized my eyes were closed and we were both very obviously male-presenting. I started to open my eyes as we kissed, not something I like to do. I am aware that it's gross and it's weird. I did it because of the footsteps I heard getting closer to us. Suddenly these footsteps echoed in my head louder than the lips smacking against lips that I so desperately wanted to be focused on. Eyes now open, I saw his face inches from mine, in focus, and a nearly-empty train station behind him, slightly blurred.

I pulled away from him, clenching my fists, cramping my forearms all the way up to my shoulders. My fear was ultimately unfounded, the footsteps were simply from another

beleaguered traveler making their way to their train. But, my fear was enough to call it quits on the kissing. We went our separate ways.

Outside of a few games of spin the bottle, a peck here and there in high school, the subway-platform kiss in December of 2022 was the first time I ever kissed a man. For one thing, I spent most of high school and the beginning of college as a serial girlfriend-haver. It was while in a relationship with my third girlfriend, more than a year before my subway kiss, that I finally started to put words to my sexuality, and, soon after, to my gender.

Therein lies the first reason I feel like an LGBTQIA+ imposter. I was, and exclusively have been, in heterosexual relationships. I hadn't experimented with anyone of any other gender, hadn't been in a same-sex relationship, or even shared a real same-sex kiss until the night on the subway. For me, questioning my gender and sexuality came about not due to any experience, but rather through gut feeling. I had a "safety net" so to speak, where I could walk around telling people I was bisexual (which is how I first identified) without having any of the stats to back it up. At the end of the day I could fall back to my heterosexual relationship, having heterosexual sex, being cisgendered.

It's at this point that an important caveat needs to be made. When I talk about being LGBTQIA+ or being "queer," I'm referring to both gender and sexuality. These things are not the same and should not be treated as just one facet of identity. However, they are linked. Gender influences sexuality and vice versa. If gender exists on a spectrum, sexuality too must exist on a spectrum.

It is within that intersectionality that things get more complicated for me. I felt like an imposter when I first started using the term bisexual. That one, to me, was fairly simple. I hadn't kissed anyone of the same sex, I hadn't pursued anyone of the same sex, I was in a committed

opposite-sex relationship. Even now, no longer in a heterosexual relationship, 'bi' feels wrong. My attraction is by no means binary, and certainly is not equal.

I still haven't slept with anyone male-identifying. I haven't had sex with someone with a penis. When I think about my attraction, it certainly leans towards femininity regardless of gender, and, therefore, is generally more towards people who identify as women. In my mind, that makes me an imposter. I feel invalid to state attraction towards multiple genders when there's a clear disparity in my dating history, and also in my dating preferences.

Even in the wording, "bisexuality" implies the concept of "both." It implies a bi-gender attraction. If I've dated 3 people, all of them women, does that negate bisexuality? What if 90% of the people I've hooked up with have been female-presenting? On top of that, bi limits our understanding to just two. My attraction isn't towards two of anything, it's wide-reaching, it includes people who could be of any gender. It isn't equal, it leans towards heterosexuality but its nature is confusing and feels impossible to label.

I feel that way about my own gender, too. Non-binary is presented as a third option, a categorization for those who don't feel represented by 'man' or by 'woman.' That's how so many people understand it. If you don't use traditional 'he' or 'she' well then you must be non-binary.

When I first changed my pronouns on Instagram to "he/they" (I have since reformatted to they/he in an effort to more prominently display my resistance to traditional gender) an old teacher of mine reached out to me via DM. I want to protect his identity so, for this essay's sake, we'll call him John. I know, what a creative fake name. John was always a friendly teacher to whom people would go not just for his inspired lectures but because as a younger (mid to late 30s, I'd guess) teacher—he talked like us, he had a full sleeve tattoo, he was "cool." Multiple students attempted to follow John on Instagram, which he adamantly refused to do until students

graduated. That's how John and I followed each other on Instagram, he accepted my request my freshman year of college and that's how he reached out to me to offer his support.

"Congrats on coming out!" he said, "have people been supportive of you coming out as non-binary?"

Seeing that label being given to me, without me claiming it, made my stomach sink. I had no intention of claiming that space. All I had done was change my pronouns in my bio. I hadn't come out. I hadn't made any kind of announcement of change. On top of that, I still present male. I call myself male. To me, pronouns don't have to be tied with a specific gender identity. I am a man who uses they and he pronouns. 'They' doesn't subtract or negate the 'he' part, it's an addition. As one of my lovely writing companions stated, it's like using they/he pronouns is saying I'm man+.³¹

"I'm not really non-binary, I don't want to take that space from people who are, I'm just questioning my gender and trying out 'he/they' because I don't like being tied to being a man or tied to general ideas of masculinity and manhood" was my initial reply to John.

And then the questions came, as if I were being interrogated for a murder and he wanted to catch me in a lie. It got to the point where doing the 3 hour time-difference calculations from Claremont, California to the Bronx, New York where my high school was, I couldn't help but wonder how John was even on his phone. Shouldn't he be teaching a class right now? There's no way he has two free periods in a row. Perhaps he assigned silent work to his AP US history classes and kept on texting me.

"Have you decided what you are going to put for forms and stuff? For gender?"

"What about the new X option for gender on application forms and paperwork?"

"Have people been supportive of you coming out?"

³¹ Shoutout Kiah!

"What does using he/they look like for you?"

"So how do you feel about your relationship with masculinity?"

The conversation was about me, sure, it was inquisitive and honest but it also wasn't all about me.

John wanted to be taught. He wanted to learn about what made me question the gender binary; he saw the world similarly but hadn't been given the tools to unpack it.

Despite him treating me like an expert, I certainly didn't feel like one. I felt like the wrong person to be answering his questions. "*An actual non-binary person might be better suited for these questions*" I remember thinking.

I recently had a conversation with my close friend Arlo who is trans and who pushes me to think and talk about my gender expression. I do have these conversations with other people, but Arlo knows me well and provides an important non-cis perspective. I confessed my fear to Arlo, laying on his bed, surrounded by the highly personal and emotive art that he makes.

"What if, at the end of all this, when the dust settles and I figure out who I am, at the end of all of this, what if I'm just a straight, cis, man?"

"Do you think that's what you are?"

"No, well, I don't know, I don't think so but what if I am and I'm just lying to myself, and lying to everyone in my life about being anything else? Would you still like me if I was cis-het?"

We chuckled, but a moment of silence permeated that it partially wasn't a joke.

Arlo reassured me that they would still like me if I turned out to be that common combination but also gave me some wise perspective.

"If I'm honest with you, and this is just my perception of you, the fact you're worried about being cis and straight is probably why you're not completely cis and straight."

"I mean who really is, though?"

I stand by this question. I don't think anyone is 100% anything, we've just existed in a world so desperate for labels for such a long time. Even now, as conversations are continuing to arise about various identities, there still is a need for there to be a clear definition. The definitions have gotten more inclusive.

LGB, which came to be as an acronym in the mid 20th century,³² has fairly distinct markers, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Adding a T for Transgender in the late 1990s opened the door to inclusion of gender in an acronym focused on sexuality before that,³³ Now, in 2023, the acronym has been expanded further. The shorter, widely accepted, version includes LGBTQ, with the Q representing Queer or Questioning, depending on who you ask.³⁴ More inclusive rhetoric adds two more letters, I for Intersex, and A for Asexual, and oftentimes a '+' recognizing that letters can't cover every single person's identity. LGBTQIA+ is what I use—the current most inclusive acronym, but I'm aware of its potential to change once again. Inclusivity is important, and this acronym getting more letters added overtime is a step in the right direction. However, all these letters only build on our pre-existing ideas of identity. We, as a larger society, still insist on having labels, on having definitions for people's identities, so we continue to expand our existing acronyms and our system of definitions. It's something we as a society can't get away from, we seem to need it.

John needed a clear definition when he referred to me as non-binary. Arlo needs a clear definition when he refers to me as trans, as he often does, telling me what I am based on the

³²Blakemore, Erin. "From LGBT to LGBTQIA+: The Evolving Recognition of Identity." *History*, National Geographic, 19 Oct. 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/from-lgbt-to-lgbtqia-the-evolving-recognition-of-identity?loggedin=true&rnd=1681673454891>.

³³Blakemore, Erin, 19 Oct. 2021

³⁴Blakemore, Erin, 19 Oct. 2021

confusion I've shared with him. Most of the time I smile and humor him, but, if I'm honest, I'm nowhere near comfortable using the label of 'trans' for myself.

Trans by definition means not cis-gendered, a person who does not share a gender identity with their assigned gender at birth.³⁵ I am not completely prescribed to my assigned gender at birth when I use they/he, therefore technically I am trans, Arlo's right. But trans is a word that carries so much weight, it's impossible for me not to feel like an imposter when it's used for me.

For one thing, being trans comes with an implication of violence. Transgender people, especially trans-women, are among the most likely groups to be victims of a hate-crime.³⁶ As many states across the U.S. pass anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, violence towards trans folk has also been on the rise³⁷ and of trans people, trans-women are 98% of those murdered.³⁸ I know I am not a trans-woman. I appear to the world as a male-presenting person, my face often adorned in a beard. Yes, I would love for a beard to not be a determining factor in gender presentation. I hope for a future where no part of how someone looks determines how they are identified by others. How one is perceived is not the same as how you identify but the two remain entwined. Unless you're the most confident person in the world it's impossible to not be affected by the perception of others. I yearn for a world where the opinion of others doesn't matter, and a world in which others do not identify people based on appearances. In this world, in this time, that's simply not the case. When the result of these perceptions of people can be violence, and yet it is

³⁵“Transgender and Non-Binary People FAQ.” *Transgender and Non-Binary People 101*, Human Rights Campaign , 2023, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender-and-non-binary-faq>.

³⁶Wareham, Jamie. “Murdered, Suffocated and Burned Alive – 350 Transgender People Killed in 2020.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 10 Dec. 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2020/11/11/350-transgender-people-have-been-murdered-in-2020-transgender-day-of-remembrance-list/?sh=983c82565a61>.

³⁷Sosin, Kate. “For Years, Black Trans Women Have Been Told Their Life Expectancy Is 35 Years. That's False.” *Black Trans Women Life Expectancy False* , The 19th News, 17 Aug. 2022, <https://19thnews.org/2022/08/black-trans-women-life-expectancy-false/>.

³⁸Wareham, Jamie, 10 Dec. 2021

something I have never directly experienced, I feel incredibly lucky and simultaneously incredibly fraudulent in my identity.

Of course, violence isn't the only factor in identity; plenty of trans and other LGBTQIA+ people don't face violence. My self-diagnosed imposter syndrome is therefore deeper than just violence, it's related to how I feel about my identity, too. I still identify as a man. I still think that I am a man and am comfortable with people seeing me as one. I just don't want that to be *all* that people see. I worry that that's stupid. I worry that, at the end of the day, I am cisgendered and that this pronouns thing is my way of trying to be different, or, oddly, my way of fitting in.

I get to be queer in a space like the Claremont Colleges. Here, being queer feels like fitting in, rather than in most of the U.S. where to be queer is to stand out. It's being surrounded by this community that helped me to see the wide-range of possibilities when it comes to gender and sexuality. I have people like Arlo who can talk to me from his own life-experience while also sending me the queer theory he reads, enforcing my knowledge of gender and sexuality as complex and expansive. I've been accepted. Everyone here uses he and they pronouns interchangeably, warming my heart when I hear someone like my friend and roommate Demiana³⁹ refer to me using they/them.

Here, again, imposter syndrome seeps in and makes me feel false. When someone uses they/them pronouns to refer to me, it feels like a bonus. It feels like an added thing, a signal that whoever used those pronouns was listening to me as I introduced myself, like they're going the extra mile for me. I don't get mad when someone uses he/him. A majority of the world does use 'he' when referring to me, and I don't say a thing. It doesn't bother me to be seen as a 'he' and it is still a part of my identity.

³⁹ Other people use they/them for me too, these are just two examples that came to mind!

This is the part that's really hard for me to put into words, to describe to someone else who isn't inside of my head. It's a constant struggle for me, the fact that I know I'm more than just a man, but I also feel comfortable with the fact that I am one. It's a swirl of confusion, a combination of crises that leads me to feel invalid in identity. This is my imposter syndrome. I don't feel entirely trans, I don't feel entirely masculine, or feminine. I don't feel entirely anything really.

The same can be said for sexuality. I don't feel entirely gay, or straight, entirely bisexual or pansexual. Sometimes, I don't even feel all that sexual at all. None of this is unique, I know other people feel similarly, but it's an isolating thing nonetheless.

It's isolating because, despite their internal struggle, I see people who do know who they are. One of my best friends and roommates comfortably identifies as a straight man and is simultaneously in-touch with his own femininity, in the way he dresses, the makeup he wears, the "energy" he gives off. Of the two of us, I'm always the one perceived to be more masculine by others, with my sharper features, bearded face, and rougher skin. He too agrees that not everyone is completely straight, yet he still uses the label. He uses the label because, as John pointed out in my conversation with them, labels are still everywhere.

As I apply for jobs in post-college life, checking boxes is a large part of the process. Rightfully so, inclusive hiring practices mean self-identification for a variety of factors: disability, race and heritage, veteran status, gender. When it comes to these other categories, it's a clear-cut answer. For gender, I check the box that says 'man' every time. If given the chance to input my preferred pronouns, that's where they/he goes. By checking man I feel simultaneously like I'm doing the right thing but also like I'm leaving an incomplete story. As a white male-presenting person, a job application isn't the right place for me to delve into nuance. The

point of checking these boxes is exactly so that white men, so often prioritized for jobs and for everything in the world, take a step back and give way to largely disenfranchised groups. That's why it's important for me to identify as a man. I still feel like one, I'm still treated by the world as one, and, for the purposes of identifying, I am one. I get all of the privileges that come with being a man: I walk without fear in the dark, I'm rarely spoken over in a discussion, and my belonging in professional or academic spaces is rarely questioned. You might then wonder why it's then important for me to identify as man, just because that's how I'm seen. So what if I have the privilege, why does that matter? Considering it's still how I feel, and considering how much that privilege benefits me in every-day life, checking that box feels crucial.

The harder question on a form asks if I'm LGBTQIA+. This doesn't happen on job applications, it'd violate anti-discrimination laws for employers, but it comes up in other places. It's asked on grant applications, college applications, and in the US census that was taken in 2020. It's there that the imposter syndrome really takes hold, with that identity. All of what I've thought about, struggled with, boils down to that question, am I LGBTQIA+?

That's what the plus is there for. After all, it's an inclusive label, one that is supposed to incorporate everyone who doesn't conform to the normative, 'straight', label. LGBTQIA+ also squishes gender and sexuality into a singular label. Trans and gay are separated by only one letter. It's once again in the + that opens up space for anything not already covered.

I shouldn't feel excluded from LGBTQIA+. I'm definitely a part of that group. I live in a generation that (for the most part) has been adaptable and kind when it comes to using "non-traditional" pronouns. I'm in a generation that embraces new identities, encourages neo-pronouns, and commits to an understanding of people's identities. Yet this generation, partially motivated by all of the generations before it, still exists in a world with labeling. Queer,

for example, is like the anti-label label. It's supposed to encompass everyone who doesn't fit in previous labels of sex and gender and yet is itself a new label. Michael Warner says that queer, as a label, "represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization."⁴⁰ Warner goes further with his definition of queer. His idea of the word is as resistance to any normative structures, a highly politicized version where if you resist the status-quo then you fall under the umbrella. I understand where he's coming from but, in labeling, queerness is tied to gender and sexuality, and is not generally accepted to be as broad as Warner would like.

Much like queer, fluid is a label you could argue serves in resistance to labels. You might have even thought as you've read this piece, "Jack, you're just fluid! gender fluid and sexually fluid. We've solved your imposter syndrome!" But fluid doesn't feel like it does me justice. It's partially the same issue I have with bisexual and pansexual. Fluid indicates to me that I flow like a river, moving between two (or more) things, naturally (fluidly you might say) between them. I don't feel fluid. I don't feel ever-moving in my gender or in my sexuality. It's more like a constantly dammed river. Sometimes, I feel confident in my gender and sexuality, sometimes I don't. The only thing that I don't feel is ever-changing. I always feel like me. Fluid is non-political. It isn't included in LGBTQIA+ for a reason: it doesn't allow for the same in-group, out-group defining that goes along with being part of the community. That makes things hard. After all, we know this is still a world where identity and labeling matter.

It's okay to not know where my identity lies. Sure, 21 feels a little on the late side to have my first physical homosexual experience on that cold subway platform but there's no time limit on sexuality.

⁴⁰Warner, Michael. "Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory." *Social Text*, vol. 23, no. 6, 1991, pp. 3–17., <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/466295.pdf>.

There's a chance that the bursting of my echo-chamber once I leave college will give me a new perspective. John and I, still very much in touch, recently texted about how much support I've gotten in college for my changing identity and my worries that it won't be the same once I leave. Being older, he knows that other generations lag behind Gen-Z in radical acceptance. Maybe I'll end up facing the discrimination and bigotry for my queer expression that I've stayed away from for so long. I still display my pronouns in my instagram bio, email signature, and zoom screen. I enter the professional world, unsurely checking boxes as I go, and my identity enters with me. Whatever that may mean.

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