Borderland Masculinities in Higher Education

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December 2018

Acknowledgements

These pages reflect of the unwavering love and support of my community of friends, mentors, colleagues, and students who have helped carry me toward the completion of this dissertation. To my closest friends, Yolanda Barnes, Berne Christiansen, Coco Du, Dr. Garrett Hoffman, Dr. Amina Jaafar, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, Monica Rosario, finn schneider, and David Zelaya: Thank for your friendship and constant connection throughout the most challenging stages of my dissertation process.

I reminisce with gratitude for the guidance of many colleagues and mentors who helped pave the way in my PhD journey. To Dr. Chris MacDonald-Dennis, Dr. Keith Edwards, Dr. Robin Hart Ruthenbeck, Dr. James Hoppe, Dr. Lisa Landreman, and Karla Benson Rutten, whether you realize it or not, each of you played a critical role in setting me on the path toward this PhD. I'm especially grateful for the impact of two incredible Latina powerhouses, Dr. Daisy Alfaro and Dr. Aida Martinez-Freeman. Words cannot begin to adequately express how grateful and indebted I feel to both of you for your guidance throughout the various stages of this process.

And to my brother, Pedro Rodriguez III, thank you for being the anchor I have been able to lean on throughout my life and especially over the last five and a half years on this PhD journey. My ability to arrive at this moment is largely a result of your willingness to be the cultural mediator within our family and to open the possibility for multiple ways of being, multiple masculinities, and new realties. I love you.

Dedication

To my mother, Aurora Virginia Rodriguez, brother, Pedro Rodriguez III, sister, Belen Rodriguez, and beautiful niece, Belle Angel Perez, I dedicate this work to you. I love you dearly.

To my ancestors before me who sought to ensure a brighter future for me and the generations to follow, thank you for paving the way and allowing me to lean on your shoulders throughout this journey.

To my late mentor Michael J. Acuna. Your guidance, fearless life, and energy shine through the stories encapsulated in this dissertation.

To my late dear friend, Edward Lopez Jr. You are the impetus for my work. Your struggle, your life, and your death will always be remembered.

To the father I knew. Thank you. I understand your being to a greater extent as a result of this work. I will embody the positive attributes of masculinity you taught me, proudly, and will do everything I can to change the narrative of hypermasculine, sexist, and patriarchal characteristics that ultimately consumed you.

Abstract

The Latino male experience in higher education often assumes a heteronormative masculinity framework without critically considering the experiences of gay Latino men as they negotiate heteronormative and heterosexist spaces within the institutional environment. Internalized masculinity constructs that begin within the familial space, and are shaped by cultural tradition and gender norms, are not complicated in the extant literature to consider the ways masculinity is internalized uniquely in the lives of gay Latino men. This dissertation examines the internalized masculinity constructs of six first-generation Mexican American gay undergraduate men to understand the ways that their internalized masculinity expectations shaped their college experiences. Over the course of two calendar years, participants engaged in a series of in-depth reflective interviews and were asked to consider their upbringings, family lives, social influences, and campus environments to understand the ways they have come to understand and embody masculinity within the campus environment. Utilizing Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness and border theory as the method of theoretical consideration and analysis, the study interrogates the six participant experiences to uncover how they navigated masculinity expectations within the campus setting and how they reconciled their gay identity within heteronormative campus spaces.

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Chapter 1: El Rey

> The male child observes and learns to be the king, how to act as *número uno,* how to act around men and women. In a community that is poor and often oppressed there is much suffering, so he is taught *aguantar*: to grin and bear it. "*Aguántate*," the men around him say. A macho doesn't cry in front of men. A macho doesn't show weakness. Grit your teeth, take the pain, bear it alone. Be tough. (Anaya, 1996, p. 63)

As a first-generation Mexican American gay man who grew up along the United States/Mexico border, my experience within the border context was one filled with choice: Spanish or English, Protestant or Catholic, sneakers or *botas,* and Mexican or American. These border tensions and dichotomies of two cultural contexts shaped and continue to shape how I define my racial and ethnic identity, values, and responsibility to my family as *el hombre* or *el rey*. To become *"el rey,"* as Anaya articulates in the vignette above, is also to live an isolated existence, one that is free of vulnerability, weakness, and emotion; a king must at all costs exhibit strength, bring *orgullo/*pride to the home, and endure through struggle and pain in order to portray that he is *un hombre, fuerte, y macho*. The likening of masculinity to kinghood demonstrates a culturally specific and idealistic narrative that Latino men must learn to embody in order to fulfill cultural roles and expectations. The U.S./Mexico border, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, were key influences on how I came to view my own masculinity and what it means to be a man. It was at this site where I learned the privilege of citizenship, the division of language, and the tension between Mexican and U.S. nationality and culture.

In May 2001, days after graduating high school, I left El Paso to pursue a college degree. Years earlier, as a young middle schooler, I witnessed my parents' disownment of Pedro, my older brother, after they learned he was gay. Following his public outing, my mother made it clear that it was my responsibility to "make up" for the children he would not have. My decision to pursue a college degree, away from home, was primarily driven by fear. At the time, I was keenly aware that I too identified as gay and was certain my parents would reject and disown me as they had done with Pedro; I would not be able to fulfill the expectations attached to my being a man. The pursuit of a college degree, away from home, became an opportunity to avoid what I assumed would be my parents' rejection of me. Our Mexican background, so I thought back then, was incapable of accepting my gay identity. As an undergraduate student, my conceptualizations of masculinity served both to motivate me to succeed and also, paradoxically, hindered my ability to navigate the institution. Machismo, a term that until recently I fully accepted as an inherent cultural trait, was something I have deeply internalized; it was, I thought as an undergraduate student, a characteristic of my culture, a hegemonic ideal of masculine characteristics (Félix-Ortiz, Ankney, Brodie, & Rodinsky, 2012).

While there are privileges to being a man, there is also a price to be paid for the ways that masculinity takes hold of various aspects of men's lives. As an undergraduate student, masculinity hindered my ability to build relationships with faculty and staff, and limited my willingness to ask for support. At the same time, because being gay prevented me from fulfilling gendered cultural expectations, success in college became my strategy to bring pride to my family. This pushed me to become involved on campus and helped me establish niches of support that were critical to my persistence in college.

While a college education began as a strategy to escape rejection, over the years my continued pursuit of success in higher education has evolved into an intentional method of compensation. I pursue success in the academy to give my family proud talking points, and I am often aware that my being gay is minimized among my family while my successes in higher education are praised. As a gay Mexican American there are many cultural expectations I will never fulfill, but "at least" I have a master's degree and at least I am in the midst of pursuing a PhD. These successes make up for the loss of heteronormative expectations of marriage, offspring to carry the family name, and the idealistic expectations of what it means to be *el hombre de la casa; el rey*.

My interest in conceptualizations of masculinity among Mexican and Mexican American gay men stems from a desire to understand the similarities and differences between their experiences and my own. I have become keenly aware that this population's experiences in the higher education literature have been largely invisible under the myth of machismo and are hidden away within an essentialized narrative that assumes the realities for gay Latino men are the same as our heterosexual peers, without paying careful attention to the differences that exist in how we view and assert masculinity. My interest stems from my need to unpack and identify the specific ways that Latino gay men conceptualize masculinity.

Background

The success of men of color has emerged as a critical issue in the field of higher education. Yet Latino men continue to be overlooked when compared to other populations of color (Torres & Fergus, 2012). Of the U.S. Latino population, Mexican Americans are the largest ethnic group (Noguera & Hurtado, 2012), and in 2014 the Pew

Research Center estimated the number of Latinos in border states such as California surpassed the number of White Americans (Lopez, 2014). Recently, this prediction was confirmed and California's Latino population now outnumbers any other ethnic group in the state (Lopez, 2014). This trend is projected to continue, with states such as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Florida continuing to see moderate increases of Latinos (Lopez, 2014). Despite this increase in population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), only 3.4% of over three million Latinos ages 18 to 24 pursued a four-year bachelor's degree. Given this reality, Mexican males are overrepresented among the lowest-paying jobs (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2012; Noguera & Hurtado, 2012; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011). Cultural and social barriers such as classism, racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia may create this situation in which Latino men are underrepresented in higher education and overrepresented in low-paying work. In this study, I assume that masculinity constructs among Mexican males are embedded in the ways men cope with cultural oppressive structures such as racism within a higher education context. Specifically, I aim to interrogate the internalized masculinity constructs of first-generation Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men (MAGUM), and understand how these constructs shaped their college experiences and their motivation to overcome the added barriers of homophobia and heteronormativity and attain a four-year college degree.

Hombres y la Frontera

Extant literature on Latinos neglects the cultural and historical differences among the various Latino subgroups and employs a heteronormative framework that promotes a singular perspective of hypermasculinity and only minimally focuses on understanding

whether the experiences of gay Latinos are different from their heterosexual peers (Torres & Fergus, 2012). In contrast, this dissertation focuses on how self-identified first-generation Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men (MAGUM) ages 18 – 24 who grew up along the U.S./Mexico border construct masculinity. I consider how MAGUM navigate dual cultural values, symbols, and traditions to make meaning of masculinity. I take special interest in how these meanings of masculinity affect the ways these students navigate and experience college.

Within the broader discourse of Latino men in higher education, authors repeatedly note that conceptualizations of masculinity are central to the successful attainment of a college education (Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2008; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2008, 2011; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). Here, I intend to complicate the existing narrative of Mexican masculinity often portrayed through the construct of machismo or the hypermasculine male ideal. I bring to the center of this study the role of gay identity in how masculinity is constructed among Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men. In other words, this study includes gay identity as a central consideration in how gay men navigate expectations of marriage, heteronormative gender roles, homophobia within social spaces, and the gendered expectations within their home and college lives. Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, and Tracey (2011) claim not only that Mexican American gay men accept machismo but also that minimal differences exist between gay and heterosexual men with regard to conceptualizations of masculinity. In contrast, in a study with seven undergraduate Latino gay men who struggled to define machismo in concrete ways, Peña-Talamantes (2013) questions whether machismo is a self-construct or an idealistic narrative imposed on

Latinos. My inquiry focuses on how expectations of physical strength and emotional toughness within the familial unit create the psychological boundaries of masculinity internalized by MAGUM, and how those boundaries then affect how they express their gay identities within the surrounding heteronormative borders or expectations they encounter on campus. I am particularly interested in how MAGUM navigate the institutional systems, spaces[1], and academic-support resources when challenges arise.

Existing literature emphasizes college completion and students' attainment of a college degree. I intentionally move away from this traditional perspective of success within the college setting to encompass more specific narratives and characteristics within my participants' experiences. Included in my purview of success is the creation of strong support networks within the institutional setting and social connections on campus and/or in the surrounding community. I specifically focus on how Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men ages 18 – 30 who attend four-year degree-granting institutions choose to access campus resources, whether they successfully establish connections within their institutions, specifically with faculty and staff, and how they establish social support networks within or outside of these institutional settings. I define success in these ways in an effort to focus intentionally on understanding how MAGUM successfully navigate a heteronormative and homophobic institutional campus climate and establish a relationship with their institution.

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[1] The term "space" is often used in the literature to describe the dynamics of power embedded within the space in relation to racism, homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender norms and expectations (Johnson & Parisi, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016). I use the term "space" in this dissertation to highlight the gender dynamics established by the individuals within each location discussed by the participants in their narratives. Some spaces were more homophobic and heteronormative, whereas others were more open and welcoming. In either scenario, the gender dynamics and expectations shifted in their rigidity and shaped how participants engaged within the various spaces of their experience.

Contrary to some of the established research, which argues that gay Mexican Americans conceptualize masculinity similarly to their heterosexual counterparts (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008), I explore the possibility that MAGUM construct and assert masculinity differently. A study conducted by Ojeda, Rosales, and Good (2008) found that the majority of the 130 Mexican American college men in the study identified with traditional Mexican cultural expectations of masculinity. Thus gay men are marginalized from the traditional heteronormative and hypermasculine affirmations of masculinity within their culture, and may feel added pressure to seek alternative ways of bringing *orgullo* to their families. The assertion of masculinity in traditional/heteronormative ways such as marriage, children to carry on the family name, and hypermasculinity has been examined in relation to socioeconomic status, and contradictory findings have linked both high and low socioeconomic backgrounds to traditional and egalitarian attitudes about gender roles and masculinity (Mirandé, 1997; Ojeda, Rosales, & Good, 2008; Rubin, 1976). To be sure, gay identity may limit the venues in which masculinity can be affirmed because that identity restricts the ability to fulfill heteronormative and gendered cultural expectations. Therefore, Mexican American gay men must assert their masculinity differently than their heterosexual counterparts. Thus, I make the assumption, not included in the broader literature, that success through the completion of a college degree, student leadership roles, and high academic achievement in higher education may be characterized as strategies gay men use to compensate for their inability to meet norms and expectations tied primarily to culture and gender.

In this study I reject the notion of a singular experience or essentialized reality that shapes the constructions of masculinity among Mexican American gay men. Instead, I believe that commonalities and differences in the lived experiences of this group exist. More specifically, this research reveals that cultural similarities and geographic influences, namely the physical site of the U.S./Mexico border, are among the central factors that shape how masculinity is constructed and conceptualized.

Therefore, I foreground my study within a constructivist lens to understand and interpret the stories and experiences of Mexican American gay men in order to collaboratively articulate conceptualizations and meanings of masculinity. Additionally, I rely on collaborative meaning-making processes with participants in order to understand how these men use masculinity constructs to navigate higher-education institutions. Constructivism is primarily concerned with describing and making meaning of individual observations and experiences in collaboration with participants, and prioritizes the importance of culture and the symbolic nature of communication, language, and individual surroundings in meaning-making (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1998). I am particularly interested in how participants navigate cultural norms and expectations from both U.S. and Mexican contexts to construct masculinity. Consequently, I identify the U.S./Mexico border as the site where constructions of masculinity begin, and I rely on participant narratives to understand how these factors coalesce around and inform these constructs. Here, I consider that various factors such as religious beliefs, immigration status, and class may play a role in shaping these conceptualizations.

Constructivists rely on interpretation(s) of observations to form conclusions about particular experiences and dialogues (Crotty, 1998). In my study, constructivism

facilitated a deeper understanding of how men shape and assign meaning to masculinity. Participants conceptualize masculinity constructs as they move to and from distinct contexts such as their homes, campus, and daily social interactions with peers and spaces and in the presence of faculty and staff. Within each of these contexts, gender expectations shift and change. According to Crotty (1998), "All meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). Within this framework, Mexican American gay men may be born into similar cultural contexts, but individually construct their notions of self, culture, and masculinity. My work, then, aims to unpack how MAGUM situate their gay identity within cultural masculinity expectations enforced in their familial units, and how these internalized masculinity expectations manifest within the campus environment as they navigate heteronormative and homophobic dynamics.

Conceptual Framework

Both U.S. and Mexican cultures[2] shaped individual participant experiences and conceptualizations of masculinity, and I reject that an essentialized construct of masculinity exists among Mexican American gay men. With this in mind, I draw from the work of late Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) border theory to understand how participants navigate dual cultural contexts to make meaning of masculinity. For this

[2] My use of the term "culture" reflects both Crotty's (1998) and Geertz's (1973) broader definition of culture as a collection of rules that dictate human behavior. Within this broader definition, Baca Zinn (1995) identifies subcategories that shape these rules and behaviors, including values, religious practices, language, and gender norms shared by individuals within a particular geographic space to create commonalities among their community. This perspective prioritizes the physical lived realities as well as the psychological symbols and messages that influence Mexican Americans' experiences as a result of their proximity to the U.S./Mexico border and competing U.S. and Mexican cultural dynamics.

project, I use the term U.S./Mexico border or "border" interchangeably to refer to the a) geographic sites of their location, b) the subconscious borders of masculinity expectations they have internalized, and c) the heteronormative gender expectations enacted in each environment they moved through at various points in their college experiences.

Historically, physical borders are the result of war, conquest, and dominance in an effort to claim land, to establish sovereignty, and to separate groups of people (Brown, 2010). While physical borders are constructed in an attempt to maintain separation between particular groups (the U.S. and Mexico, for example), subconscious borderlands are the result of social constructs informed by multiple lived experiences and shaped by power structures in the form of dominant and subordinate cultures. Anzaldúa's (1987) border theory, then, relies on the experiences of individuals who negotiate oppressed identities within multiple cultural contexts. These experiences can be conceptualized through Mexican and Mexican American individuals who are not fully accepted into either U.S. or Mexican cultures. In either cultural context, Mexicans and Mexican Americans are seen as not fully American, nor are they fully Mexican; instead, they navigate an in-between existence. Subconscious borderlands conceptualize the discomfort that results from the constant rejection by those in the dominant culture, effectively "othering" these individuals from the dominant group. Anzaldúa (2015) describes the tensions that come with existing in multiple cultural contexts through the Nahuatl term, *nepantla*, or the state of tension that an individual experiences as they perceive "something from two different angles" (p. 28). In this study, the *nepantla* state reflects the constant tension MAGUM experience as they negotiate their gay identity expression within the hypermasculine and heteronormative institutional gender norms.

In line with the U.S. Geographical Survey (2004), I define the physical site of the border as the land stretching throughout California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas separating the U.S. and Mexico. In this dissertation, one of the social dynamics I wish to explore is of growth related to the Mexican consciousness within U.S. cultural norms. Therefore, my consideration of the U.S./Mexico border centers within the U.S. geographic area. My reference to the border is aligned within this specific geographic location and includes cities and towns located 150 miles (north) from the point at which U.S. and Mexican territory meet. This specific radius is determined primarily because of the high concentration of Mexican and Mexican Americans located within this geographic area. Included in this area are cities such as San Diego, CA; Douglas, AZ; Las Cruces, NM; El Paso, TX; Eagle Pass, TX; and Brownsville, TX. In addition to the physical site of the border, I also emphasize the subconscious borders resulting from various experiences among individuals who are members of my population of interest. Both the physical site of the border and subconscious borders play an important role in my study as I aim to understand the role of these border experiences in the lives of MAGUM. These borders, physical and subconscious, shape social interactions in the daily lives of MAGUM, and these social exchanges, cultural symbols of masculinity, and competing cultural values inform constructions of masculinity.

My conceptual framework is centered in border identity development and is informed by Anzaldúa (1987), Barrera (2010), Lugo (2005), and Sáenz (1997). I use this framework, described in further detail in the next chapter, to understand how participant conceptualizations of masculinity are constructed within the site of the U.S./Mexico border, and I examine the specific cultural influences that come together to create a

hybrid construct of masculinity. I pay careful attention to sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, and immigration status to begin to unpack how these multiple aspects of identity shape masculinity constructs.

Immigration status is an important consideration within my framework when considering how participants' border identities were established. The term "first-generation" is used throughout the literature to identify individuals born in another country who then immigrated to the U.S. (Baum & Flores, 2011). Baum and Flores make a distinction between first-generation immigrants and their descendants, first-generation individuals born in the U.S. For the purposes of my study, I use "first-generation" in two ways. First-generation identifies people born in the U.S. to parents who emigrated from Mexico to the U.S., or U.S. college students born in Mexico who are Mexican nationals. I also use the term to refer to first-generation college students, where neither of the student's parents completed a college education. Within a border identity conceptual framework, first-generation status informs the creation of subconscious borders and underscores the cultural messages these individuals receive at home with regard to family and religious values, language, and masculinity (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Bacallao and Smokowski identify several challenges that arise as a result of first-generation status, specifically within the family units and home lives of Mexican families. Among these challenges is the emergence of cultural divisions between parental figures and their children; parents attempt to instill traditional Mexican cultural values in a younger generation shaped by an American cultural context. Specifically, within the Mexican first-generation household, the traditionally close-knit family unit, also referred to as *familismo* and discussed in depth later in this paper, becomes threatened as the younger

generations take on American ideals of independence. Moreover, as immigrant parent(s) enter the U.S. workforce, relationships within the family are strained as they spend more time away from the household in order to meet the financial demands of the family unit. The U.S./Mexico border context, coupled with the in-home experiences of first-generation men, creates a complex array of competing cultural influences and messages that inform how racial/ethnic identity and masculinity are constructed (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003; Martinez & Aguirre, 2003; Vasquez, 2014; Way, Santos, & Cordero, 2012). First-generation status, then, highlights the importance of these experiences in the creation of masculinity constructions for Mexican and Mexican American gay men.

Coupled with first-generation status, gay identity also plays an important role in understanding how Mexican American men conceptualize masculinity and navigate cultural messages about sexuality. In my research, gay identity represents the open acceptance of same-sex attraction. I place importance on participants self-identifying as gay, as this label in and of itself can be understood as an assimilative characteristic in U.S. culture. Many communities of color, including Mexicans, do not conceptualize same-sex attraction in similar ways as it is conceptualized within the U.S. cultural context. For example, González-López (2006) establishes that Mexican men can engage in same-sex sexual behavior without compromising their heterosexuality. Instead, one's sexual role—the penetrator/*activo,* or penetrated/*pasivo*—determines whether masculinity and heterosexuality are compromised. *Activos* are able to engage in same-sex sexual behavior without disrupting masculinity or heterosexuality; *pasivos*, on the other hand, are unable to hold onto masculinity/heterosexuality (González-López, 2006). For Mexican

American men who navigate dual cultural messages about gender and sexuality along the U.S./Mexico border, gay identity encompasses a particular discourse tied directly to U.S. White dominant culture (Han, 2007; Perez, 2005). Importantly, the students who participated in this study self-identified as gay, and I centered their gay identity to glean how participants, given the physical and psychological borders they inhabit, navigated masculinity expectations both on campus and within their homes.

Research Questions

My research focuses on the U.S./Mexico border as a site of contested cultures within which gay Mexican American men construct masculinity. Within this context, I aimed to understand how these constructions shape this group's college experiences and motivations. The questions guiding my study were:

1) How do first-generation self-identified Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men (MAGUM) along the border make meaning of masculinity?

2) How do first-generation self-identified Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men navigate heteronormative and hypermasculine gender expectations within the institutional context?

In the next chapter, I explore the U.S./Mexico border's influence on conceptualizations of masculinity among Mexican American men and the role of masculinity on their college experiences. I focus on three main bodies of literature. First, I examine literature related to masculinity as contextualized by the geographic site of the U.S./Mexico border as well as by the symbolic, conscious, and subconscious border identities that result from competing cultural influences. Specifically, I focus on the border as the physical and psychological space where Mexican American identity is

formed and conceptualizations of masculinity are created. Here, I position constructions of masculinity within White U.S. and Mexican cultural norms to reflect the demographic makeup of the physical site of the border, while recognizing that several cultural understandings of masculinity exist within both U.S. and Mexican cultures. Further, I present historical and contemporary perspectives on the border discourse. The second body of literature discusses Latino men as college students and examines the role of masculinity in their on-campus and home-life experiences. The final body of literature presents Mexican American masculinity within the historical context of machismo and examines competing scholarly debates on masculinity in Latino culture.

Chapter 2: Masculinities

My dissertation research focuses on how first-generation Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men (MAGUM) along the U.S./Mexico border navigate dual cultural contexts to conceptualize masculinity. In this chapter, I first expand on border theory to establish that masculinity is constructed as the result of physical and psychological borders MAGUM must navigate, borders that directly shape their conceptualizations of masculinity and how it is performed. I then discuss *familismo*, *orgullo*, and masculinity tied specifically to cultural gender expectations and how these expectations have been said to impact Latino success in higher education. Finally, I present a historical perspective, in order to demonstrate the changing discourse of Mexican and Mexican American masculinity and to shed light on how masculinity has been influenced by several factors, including changing physical borders, oppression, resistance, and dominance.

La Frontera: The Physical and Psychological Site of Masculinity Construction

Physical borders separate land and people within the boundaries of a distinct geographic location. Psychological borders speak to the values, gender norms, and masculinity expectations established within communities that transcend their geographic location and change over time (Brown, 2010). In this section, I consider the U.S./Mexico border through the physical spaces and psychological tensions MAGUM experience as they embody their gay identities while negotiating the histories and traditions placed on their bodies.

Border theory reiterates the importance of history in shaping constructions of identity and also allows for the possibility of multiple experiences and identities in order

to push against traditionalist and dualistic assumptions that often present Mexican Americans within a binary or U.S./Mexico political debate (Anzaldúa, 1987; Barrera, 2010; Baumle, 2010; Lugo, 2005). Border theory places attention not only on the multiple interpretations and perspectives of history but also on how these histories have shaped the expectations placed on the physical body to embody particular cultural expectations and representations (Barrera, 2010). Border theory also conceptualizes the competing influences that include and exclude people from groups—the "othering" of individuals who are not within the established boundaries. Border theory uses a wide lens to examine the binary-conscious spaces that borders enforce and the in-between identities that are created by the physical and psychological boundaries within a particular place and time. Finally, border theory decenters the Mexican American identity as a monolithic experience to construct a more complex narrative dictated, as Barrera (2010) explains, by history, body, place and time.

I frame the U.S./Mexico border as the geographic site where constructions of masculinity develop, and highlight the experience of "crossing" between the U.S. and Mexico as central for my population of interest. I continue my exploration of border identity theory within a historical framework of the contested border(s) as a way to track competing perspectives shaped by/at the intersection of multiple cultural influences. In this way, I emphasize that masculinity is informed consciously and subconsciously by a hybrid of competing cultural ideals; one prioritizes independence, while the other emphasizes collectivist family-centered values (Anzaldúa, 1987; Baumle, 2010; Elenes, 1997). Therefore, I distinguish the lived experiences of "border Mexican Americans"

from those who do not reside along this geographic site to further articulate the border's influence on how Mexican and Mexican American men construct their identities.

In this dissertation, it is important to recognize the critical influence of the Spanish conquest of the sixteenth century on race dynamics among Mexican people (Velazquez, 2007). The introduction of the European/Spanish phenotype into what later became known as Mexico created a hierarchy of systemic racism that favored light-complected individuals and stratified Natives and Spaniards along racial lines (Goldwert, 1983; Gutiérrez, 1991; Velazquez, 2007). The later and subsequent re-bordering of Mexican territory by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) after the Mexican-American War must also be considered, given its influence on the border as a geographically and psychologically complex site where identities of Mexican Americans are created and influenced by blending European, U.S., and Mexican cultural traditions (Gutiérrez, 1991; Macías-González & Rubenstein, 2012; Velazquez, 2007). Although both the Spanish conquest and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo have been cited as the sources of various deconstructions and reconstructions of the culture (e.g. religious and spiritual practices), I limit my expansion on these historic critical events to their impact on race dynamics and how these dynamics frame constructions of Mexican male psyches as a historical-political effect within the boundaries of race, culture, and gender.

I identify three important concepts in the literature: *mestizo,* Chicano, and *transfronterizo,* among numerous others (e.g., *pocho, chilango, cholo, vato, pachuco, chucos,* etc.) to frame (1) the border-discourse debate within a historical perspective, (2) border perspectives that shed light on the evolving identities of Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the border, and (3) the influence of movement between both cultural

contexts. The *mestizo* concept underscores the importance of historical events such as the Spanish conquest and Mexican-American War in how formations of identity are created as a result of the combining of cultures (Ashbee, Clausen, & Pederson, 2007). The term Chicano describes the contextual identity of individuals of Mexican heritage who live within the U.S. cultural context (Vila, 1998). *Transfronterizo* describes the act of crossing between cultures through the geographic site of the U.S./Mexico border (Relaño Pastor, 2007; Ojeda, 1994).

The term *mestizo* describes the blending of both Spaniard and Indigenous cultural influences, which produced what some scholars argue is now known as Mexican culture (Ashbee et al., 2007). More importantly, the term encompasses the traumatic psychological impact or "*mestizo* consciousness" reflective of war, loss of Indigenous identity, and loss of physical land. Ashbee et al. (2007) conceptualize the term as both a psychological process and an active experience in which multiple cultural influences come together to create one unified identity. Other scholars challenge the ideal of a single unified narrative and frame the term *mestizo* as an attempt to further essentialize Mexican identity without adequate acknowledgement of Indigenous cultural influence, in turn placing European and Western cultural traditions at the top of the racial hierarchy (Benítez, 1992). Although "*mestizo* consciousness" results from distinct historical events, the term *mestizaje* has also been used to describe more contemporary perspectives of cultural hybridity, specifically the coming together of both U.S. and Mexican cultural influences along the U.S./Mexico border.

Conceptualized in the literature as Chicano *mestizaje*, or the process of blending U.S. and Mexican cultural tradition, the term Chicano also attempts to unify the

experience of Mexicans who live in *el otro lado,* or the other side of the border—the U.S. (Sáenz, 1997; Vila, 1999). Chicano as a distinct identity, however, is unique from other attempts to label Mexicans within the U.S. boundary because it emerged, arguably, directly from Mexican people as an attempt to reclaim cultural solidarity and push for political, social, and economic inclusion (Sáenz, 1997). Therefore, the term Chicano is associated with the Chicano movement of the early 1960s, and more recent contemporary scholars argue it has lost its political symbolism (Elenes, 1997; Sáenz, 1997; Vila 1999).

Elenes (1997) complicates *borderlands* discourses within the Chicano community and the border toward a conceptualization that extends beyond a simplified binary U.S./Mexico identity struggle. Instead, she expands the borderland discourse to also include sociocultural tensions individuals with hybrid identities experience tied to historical trauma and competing cultural expectations. Similarly, Anaya (1996) further complicates Chicano identity beyond a nationalistic debate toward one that is reflective of deeper historical markers. He asserts that Chicano identity encompasses ideals of masculinity deeply rooted in the history of Native American ancestry as well as Spanish influence, two cultural and historical markers that cannot be undone and that impact "behavioral legacy" (Anaya, 1996). This conceptualization of Chicano, the border, and border identities challenges the U.S./Mexico binary and resituates the concept as "identity of difference" and "displacement" rather than a simplistic nationalist cultural debate between two competing cultural and country identities.

Chicano identity and the border must then be reframed as "geopolitical" representations of U.S./Mexico identity struggles and "symbolic boundaries" in the experiences of Mexican Americans' sense of "belonging and not-belonging" (Elenes,

1997, p. 363). These identity tensions uncover conflicting political power structures that influence the extent to which Mexican American individuals feel "American" or "Mexican." More specifically, "symbolic boundaries" point to a number of possibilities that shape these structures such as language, class, and gender (Elenes, 1997). Similarly, the late Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa expanded the Chicano/border identity discourse to bring attention to how systems of power can reshape how border identities can be understood. Anzaldúa (1987) and Elenes (1997) situate the *mestiza* identity within the larger discourse of "Mexican/Chicano Culture, patriarchy, homophobia, and Anglo-American domination" as a new reality that acknowledges the history of oppression and present-day struggles (Elenes, 1997, p. 365). These discourses situating the border within and beyond a geospatial context affirm the importance of the geographic site of the border in the "construction of the mestiza consciousness" (p. 367) but also emphasize that the borderlands are also psychological and intertwined into the being of border people who need not be in close proximity to the physical location to experience the tensions of *mestizaje* (Elenes, 1997). I maintain that Mexican American gay undergraduate men internalize traditional Mexican masculinity expectations within *la frontera*/borderlands and learn to negotiate the tensions of embodying their gay identity within heteronormative spaces.

Relaño Pastor (2007) and Ojeda (1994) describe the crossing experiences of individuals living in Mexico who cross into the U.S. but reside in Mexico, and Mexicans who live in the U.S. and cross into Mexico, within the context of *transfronterizo*. *Transfronterizo* does not solely characterize the act of crossing but also contextualizes the various cultural experiences (e.g., language, socioeconomic status, media representations,

food, music, etc.), conscious and subconscious, that Mexicans crossing to and from the U.S. encounter in their daily lives along the border. It also underscores how these factors impact constructions of Mexican and Mexican American identity. Cultural and social influences from both sides of the physical border delineate the perspectives of U.S.-located Mexicans and Mexicans living in Mexico (Relaño Pastor, 2007). More specifically, Mexicans along either side of the border often see themselves as different given their geographic location regardless of the racial, ethnic, and cultural commonalities among both groups (Ojeda, 1994; Relaño Pastor, 2007; Velázquez, 2007). In fact, research shows that Mexicans who live in Mexico often distance themselves from Mexican Americans and view this group as not "true Mexicans" (p. 270). These delineations are based on a variety of factors including language, socioeconomics, and the assumption that U.S.-located Mexicans have acculturated into White dominant U.S. culture and are traitors to their Mexican roots (Relaño Pastor, 2007). On the other hand, Mexican American perceptions of Mexico are influenced by similar factors that position Mexican people within a narrative dictated by poverty, violence, and an assumed preference for American goods (Velázquez, 2007). These contrary perspectives demonstrate the various cultural, political, and social influences the borderland experience encompasses in the construction of Mexican American identities.

These tensions reflect the long-term impact of the racialization of Mexican people, a strategy the U.S. employed in the conquest over Mexico which served to characterize Mexicans as the "other". The racialization of Mexican people effectively segregated Mexican Americans within the U.S. well into the 20th Century (Gutiérrez, 2004; Patiño, 2014). These divisions were seen in the loss of educational opportunity for

Mexican people, exploitation of labor, and the continued efforts to limit immigration into the United States. Yet, over the eight decades that followed, from the 1960's and into the 21st century, the U.S. saw a dramatic spike in the Latino population while simultaneously the U.S./Border became increasingly militarized (Gutiérrez, 2004; Patiño, 2014). During this timeframe, economic shifts that resulted from tensions between U.S./Mexico relations negatively impacted Mexico's economic stability and spurred new waves of immigrants into the U.S. as disillusioned Mexicans searched for a better future in pursuit of the American Dream of economic stability and opportunity. In truth, however, the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and Mexico within this timeframe fueled the continued exploitation of immigrant labor. Additionally, as U.S. Americans also experienced the impact of economic tensions, Mexican immigration and the perceived threat of the "illegal" immigrant further intensified the political and societal divisions among Mexican and Mexican American people along the U.S./Mexico Border (Gutiérrez, 2004; Patiño, 2014).

The geographic site of the border lends itself to a complex identity-politics debate centered on nationality, and creates a particular narrative for Mexicans who reside along this "concrete expression," real or imagined, of the distinct experience on either side of the border (Velazquez, 2007, p. 166). Daniel Mateo (2010) argues that cultural identities are not inherent or passed on through historical or generational trends, but rather are produced (or constructed) locally and within the immediate context of the individual's locale. Therefore, while cultural traditions and historical legacies play a role in how Mexican American men construct masculinity, these conceptualizations of masculine identities are not fixed and, in the case of Mexican men, are subject to the influence of

various factors that encompass both U.S. and Mexican cultural contexts. Specifically, Mateo (2010) and Anaya (1996) identify a variety of factors, including media representations, as key to the construction of cultural identities, reinforced by the daily experiences living within the U.S./Mexico border. Similarly, Vila (1999) emphasizes the geographic location of the border as a critical factor in the construction of a Mexican American identity (and therefore a masculine identity) because the source of their "otherness"—Mexico—"is still there, actually visible" (p. 79).

I distinguish the experiences of Mexican American men located along the geographic site of the border from those who do not live within this context to understand the specific influences they encounter that inform constructions of masculinity. In this way I argue that the physical space of the U.S./Mexico border, which includes social influences from both cultural traditions, plays a significant role in the construction of masculinity in the lives of Mexican American men along the border. Border identities, constructed through physical and subconscious experiences, are critical in understanding how men make meaning of masculinity given the varying messages they receive as a result of having dual-culture experiences (Baumle, 2010; Murphy Erfani, 1998; Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). For gay Mexican American men, sexual orientation complicates how these border identities develop and adds an additional layer of having to navigate homophobia within multiple cultural dynamics.

Latinos, Masculinity, and Higher Education

Several scholars have attributed educational trends and characteristics of Latino males' academic achievement to obstacles associated with gender-specific cultural expectations, socioeconomic status, academic underpreparedness, and a resistance to

access campus resources at critical points in their educational journey (Clark, Flower, Walton, & Oakley 2008; Constantine & Flores, 2006; Fry, 2009; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011; Suro & Fry, 2005). In this section, I define and discuss *familismo* and *orgullo*, concepts extensively examined in extant literature, and outline how the familial unit can perpetuate or disrupt cultural expectations associated with masculinity. These concepts are integral to understanding the cultural components that play a role in how masculinity is affirmed within the household through gendered expectations, and the importance of pride that can be directly linked to masculinity.

Collectively, Latino men drop out of high school at higher rates than any other racial group, choose work over the pursuit of a college education, and are less likely to complete their respective degree program when they choose to pursue post-secondary education (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2008; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Compared to all other Latino subgroups, Mexican Americans are least likely to complete a college education (Baum & Flores, 2011; Ojera, Flores, & Navaro, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In the case of Mexican American men, these obstacles are further complicated because these men are more likely to come from immigrant families, be first-generation Americans, and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003; Martinez & Aguirre, 2003). These descriptive characteristics situate the college experiences of Mexican American men within a multifaceted set of influences that directly shape constructions of cultural masculinity ideals. Unless otherwise stated, the literature I review in this section uses a heteronormative framework and focuses specifically on the various factors that inform

conceptualizations of masculinity and how these conceptualizations may motivate or hinder the college success of Latino men.

Cultural factors: Family, pride, & masculinity.

Although cultural commonalities exist among college-going Latinos, Latinos from lower socioeconomic backgrounds likely experience cultural pressures more saliently than their upper-middle class counterparts because limited financial resources emphasize the responsibility of all family members to maintain the household (Baum & Flores, 2011; Chafetz, 1974; Falicov, 2001). *Familismo,* for example, is noted throughout the literature as one of the most influential culturally specific factors in the experiences of Latino men in college. Defined as commitment to the family, *familismo* is closely connected to Latino cultural tradition and emphasizes specific heteronormative gender norms for men and women (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2012; Chacón, Cohen, Camarena, González, & Strover, 1982; Ginorio, Gutiérrez, Cauce, & Acosta, 1995; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011). On one hand, scholars frame the male role within the context of *familismo*: a man is the provider who must work and contribute to the financial stability of the family unit over the pursuit of a college education. These cultural norms often afford Latinos male privilege within the home and family (Hurtado & Sinha, 2008). Rubin (1976) further asserts that, in the case of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the familial space provides an avenue to exert male privilege in a way that, due to racism and classism, is not allowed in other venues outside of the home. Therefore, the transition into White-normative, upper-middle class spaces—for example, higher-education institutions—decenters this privilege and threatens individual conceptualizations of masculinity (Hurtado, 2003). According to Sáenz et al. (2013), the

decision to fulfill the role of provider and enter the workforce, rather than complete a college degree, in some ways reflects an assertion of masculinity within the context of *familismo*. This expectation, in turn, helps partially explain the reasons some Latino men may feel pressure to overlook the lasting benefits of college completion and instead choose to immediately fulfill their cultural roles as providers (Sáenz et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

Other scholars argue that the pursuit and attainment of a college degree is a source of pride for the family unit and serves as a motivating factor toward completion (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez, & Connor, 2013; Enríquez & Mirandé, 1979; Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000). Regardless, the fulfillment of their culturally expected roles as financial providers offers Latino men another method to obtain familial affirmation while establishing their masculinity within the family unit. This alternative mechanism of affirmation can be understood as an escape from academic and/or on-campus challenges and allows men to maintain a sense of *orgullo* within the context of cultural norms and expectations should they choose to drop out of their college programs (Sáenz et al., 2013). In other words, little of their masculinity or machismo (a term addressed later in this paper) is lost when Latino men choose to drop out of college and fulfill the role of provider. Gender-specific cultural commitments, expectations, and pressures can serve as "quasi-positive" (Sáenz et al., 2013, p. 89) motivating factors toward or obstacles to college success for Mexican American men (Cerezo et al., 2013; Niemann et al., 2000). What remains unknown, however, is whether this same "escape" is afforded to gay Latino men.

Clearly defined heteronormative gender roles and expectations for Latino men, which gay-identified men cannot fulfill in the same way as heterosexual men, may provide additional motivation to complete a college education in order to bring *orgullo* to the family in a different form than their heterosexual peers. Therefore, understanding how Mexican American gay men conceptualize their individual and collective masculinity is critical to effectively understanding their motivations behind the pursuit of a college education while supporting this student population in college. Latino men clearly take pride in fulfilling culturally specific gender norms tied to *familismo,* and the need to fulfill these gendered expectations impacts their college trajectory (Sáenz et al., 2013).

"Pride," associated directly with culturally specific masculinity ideals such as individual power and control, often described in the literature as machismo, results in sentiments of having to face college experiences and challenges alone (Sáenz et al., 2013). Conceptualizations of masculinity are a key factor in Latino men's ability to establish critical connections in their on-campus experiences. The establishment of social support and peer networks through involvement in fraternities, athletics, student organizations, and other on-campus opportunities significantly increases the likelihood of completion (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cerezo et al., 2013; Figueroa, 2002). Sexual orientation may complicate the establishment of these networks for gay Latinos, and involvement in stereotypically heteronormative spaces such as fraternities and sports organizations may not serve this student population in the same way as it does heterosexual Latino men (Hall & La France, 2007). Barajas and Pierce (2001) that found Latino men struggle to establish meaningful connections in their on-campus experiences. Sáenz et al. (2013) found that some Latino men viewed expressions of emotion and

seeking academic support as signs of weakness and femininity, thus hindering their likelihood to seek the support necessary to address academic challenges. In my work, these struggles serve as examples of internalized homophobia tied to constructions of masculinity likely established by dual U.S./Mexican cultural expectations and reinforced by the institutional setting. In other words, as men may be taught to "grin and bear it alone" (Anaya, 1996, p. 63), the idealized college experience of leaving the household to gain independence may reemphasize the messages received in the household (Mulder & Clark, 2002). In contrast, some Latinos leverage their masculinity or machismo ideals as motivating factors to achieve academically (Sáenz et al., 2013). What remains unexplored, however, is how gay Mexican American college men negotiate two competing cultural ideals of masculinity, and how their conceptualizations of masculinity shape their academic motivations in college. The limited literature on the specific constructions of masculinity for gay Latino men assumes this group constructs masculinity in similar ways as straight Latino men (Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, & Tracey, 2011). However, it does not address whether gay Latinos are motivated differently with regard to academic achievement, and therefore may be more willing to seek academic support, establish meaningful mentoring relationships, and become involved across campus.

Higher education as a compensatory strategy.

While heterosexual Latino men may be driven to pursue a college education as a way to secure a strong financial future and bring *orgullo* to the family unit (Sáenz et al., 2013), gay Latinos' motivation may differ given the negative implications their gay identity can have within their specific cultural context. For example, Morales (1989)

considered various heteronormative cultural expectations within Latino culture, which expect men to maintain close ties to the family unit until marriage. Therefore, a heterosexual Latino man is provided multiple ways to assert his masculinity, one of which is to fulfill heteronormative gender expectations by marrying and having children; another may be to pursue higher education. He may also decide to pursue both of these avenues to affirm his masculinity.

Gay identity, however, has been framed throughout the literature as a source of shame for the family unit and directly challenges the ability of gay Latinos to fulfill heteronormative gender norms (Hidalgo & Christensen, 1977; Morales, 1989). As a result, gay Latinos may feel a need to compensate for this incongruence and therefore may view academic achievement in higher education as an alternative way to bring pride to the family. Academic success as a mediator or, as I suggest, a compensatory tool to alleviate cultural shame associated with gay identity, has been noted among other communities of color (Aoki, 1983; Warren, 1980). In Asian American communities, for example, Aoki (1983) articulates that individuals leverage success as an alternative way to meet family expectations. Thus, I argue that the motivations of gay and straight men to achieve academically are differently conceptualized on the basis of sexual orientation, constructions of masculinity, and cultural norms.

Next, I explore constructions of masculinity in the lives of Mexican American men, specifically those along the U.S./Mexico border, and the dual cultural influences of both Mexican cultural ideals of independence and the U.S. individualistic culture that reinforces them (Kuhlman, 2004). These dual cultural influences can help explain why

some Latino men struggle to establish meaningful on-campus connections and resist asking for support.

Competing conceptualizations of masculinity.

The trauma of the Spanish Conquest and subsequent loss of Mexican territory after the U.S./Mexico war are two historical events said to be pivotal in how Mexican masculinity has been conceptualized in the literature and must be considered in order to fully understand Mexican masculinity. These events not only displaced Mexican people from what was once their homeland but also forced Mexican people to erase critical elements of their heritage. As White American cultural influences began to permeate what was once Mexican land after the U.S./Mexico War, the English language became dominant over Spanish cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions from sun gods to Catholicism (Anaya, 1996; Paz, 1961). *Pochos*, Mexicans who were "poached" from their native land, had two choices: assimilate into the practices of the new U.S. territory, or be ostracized for maintaining their cultural traditions.

The tensions of *pocho* identity highlight the dichotomy that exists between U.S. Mexicans and Mexicans within the re-bordered Mexican homeland. The contested identities of Mexican men within the U.S. have been conceptualized in the literature in a variety of ways. Renowned Mexican author Octavio Paz (1961) discusses the *pachuco* as an individual who performs his masculinity through a particular style of dress, a blend of U.S. cultural influences and Mexican traditional attire. In this way, *pachucos* never fully accept or acculturate into U.S. cultural expectations but also do not subscribe to their native gender performance ideals. They are, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) frames it, not fully of either side of the borderlands but rather are situated somewhere in the middle, a

border psyche. Anaya (1996) positions these expressions of masculinity or machismo as learned behaviors based on strict gender roles in which young men learn how to perform the role of *El Rey*, The King. He underscores the impact of socioeconomic class on the saliency of this experience because the aggregate impact of class teaches young men to "*aguantar*, to grin and bear it" (p. 63). Through these messages men learn to endure and internalize their emotions, suppress feelings of anger or sadness, and push through the pain alone, as *machos*. In both Paz's and Anaya's framing of Mexican masculinity, loneliness emerges as a common theme among Mexican American men. This socialization sheds light on how these men might view themselves within the higher education system and why they might resist asking for help even in the most critical moments of their college experience.

Machismo as gender performance is often dichotomized and reframed as a cultural trait that reflects hypermasculinity, cultural respect, and commitment to family (Arciniega et al., 2008; De La Cancela, 1986; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 2007). Arciniega et al.'s (2008) "machismo scale" established a quantitative measure to explain possible experiences and realities Mexican men hold about masculinity and how masculinity is performed within this scale. The continuum placed participants into a range from "traditional" notions of machismo, characterized by chauvinistic attitudes, to more "gentlemanlike" mindsets in which men are family-centered and hold deep cultural respect (p. 20). These scholars challenged the notion of machismo as solely characterized by dominance over women and hypermasculinity to incorporate a range of possible stages of machismo. A Likert-type scale was used in order to collect data of participants' self-selected responses to a series of statements that measured the extent to which they

held “traditional” gender views and attitudes. Responses from the 154 straight male participants were then analyzed to place the men along the machismo continuum. Building on the machismo continuum, Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, and Tracey (2011) replicated the study with a sample group composed solely of 152 gay-identified Mexican American men in order to compare the findings to the heterosexual sample group. The studies found that machismo existed in similar ways between both groups of men, in that gay men “embody masculinity in a fashion structurally similar to their heterosexual counterparts,” specifically along hypermasculinity ideals of dominance (Estrada et al., 2011, p. 362). Both studies also identified age and educational background as significant factors in the extent to which men are likely to hold traditional views about gender along the machismo scale. Applying the scale to gay-identified men provides a different insight to many perspectives of masculinity, but the continuum framework confines these realities within the assumption that machismo is a universal truth for all Latino men. Though it offers fluidity from one end of the spectrum, traditional machismo, to the other, *caballerismo* (more gentlemanlike), and provides the possibility for some participants to score highly in one area while still maintaining attitudes in the other, the scale maintains a rigid and fixed understanding of masculinity that dichotomizes it within a traditional and *caballerismo* binary centered on the assumption that machismo is an inherent cultural trait (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada et al., 2011).

While several scholars claim that Mexican American men share a distinct cultural understanding of masculinity or machismo (Arciniega et al., 2008; Goldwert, 1983; Noguera & Hurtado, 2012; Rodriguez, 2006), these understandings impact gay and straight Latino men differently. Further, Gloria González-López and Matthew Gutmann

(2005) suggest that machismo is a fictional and hegemonic term created by U.S. researchers and challenge the assumption that machismo is a cultural trait that can be explained and measured. González-López and Gutmann (2005) rely on a historical approach that describes perceptions of male dominance in Latino communities to present a counternarrative to machismo as uniquely Latino. They identify machismo as a fictional and hegemonic term that was "discovered by U.S. researchers in a similar fashion as the 'New World' was discovered by Europeans" (González-López & Gutmann, 2005, p. 1328). Over time the term has been repeatedly reproduced, imposed upon Latino communities, and until recent years was used primarily in the U.S. to describe gender dynamics in Latino communities. This insight reframes machismo's roots, shifting them from solely Latino to U.S. or Western interpretations of gender dynamics in Latin American research sites. González-López & Gutmann (2005) assert that "machismo" problematically associates "extreme sexism" with Latino culture in "racist," stereotypical, and deceitful ways. This perspective directly challenges machismo as a "primordial" cultural trait and sheds light on the inherent power dynamics associated within the ongoing debate about machismo and the hegemonic European influence rooted in the construction of the term (p. 1328). However, some accept the term as a cultural trait, a label that simply identifies already-existing gender divisions that were present before the conquest (Gutiérrez, 1991). Regardless of its contested reality, machismo has become synonymous with Mexican and Mexican American masculinity and must be included as part of the discourse in order to fully understand masculinity constructs among Mexican men.

Immigration and masculinity.

More contemporary discourse surrounding machismo and Mexican American masculinity has evolved from a singular narrative of the hypermasculine Mexican American to a more complex perspective of masculinity or masculinities. Vasquez (2014) studied 67 first-generation immigrants from 29 three-generation Mexican families (children of at least one U.S.-born parent and at least one Mexican national grandparent) and highlights the evolving nature of masculinity in the lives of Mexican Americans. These changing attitudes on masculinity are directly associated with the influence of U.S. cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and the changing performativity of gender among later-generation Mexican American men. In fact, Vasquez found that later generations of immigrant families attained upward economic mobility as a result of educational opportunities that propelled them toward upper-middle class income brackets. Within these households, gender divisions were less apparent and attitudes shifted from traditional gender roles to more egalitarian household structures. Interestingly, male participants expressed a desire to shift their gender performance from the more dominant, strict, and authoritative masculinity of their fathers to more nurturing egalitarian performances of masculinity. It is important to note, however, that these changes were directly tied to the attainment of educational success and subsequent increased class status. Men in the study who attained affirmations of masculinity through successful integration into middle-class status likely had other avenues to assert their masculinity. Vasquez's study highlights the importance of various factors in how men construct or make meaning of masculinity, as well as how they perform their masculinity. Specifically, generational status and class status provide two key insights in

understanding how constructions of masculinity are developed as well as how masculinity is performed. The influence of White U.S. culture and competing culturally specific representations of masculinity for Mexican American men cannot be ignored.

Way, Santos, and Cordero (2012) emphasize that U.S. masculinity norms impact how Latino men conceptualize and perform masculinity in relation to their immigration status and numerous other social factors. Results from their study of 48 Latino adolescent immigrants found that "looking American (e.g. wearing baseball cap, untucked shirt, untied athletic shoes) is perceived to be more masculine than looking like an immigrant (e.g., button-up shirts, tucked in shirt, tied shoes)" (p. 276). Driven primarily by a desire to combat stereotypes associated with immigrant status, race, class, and sexual orientation, participants adapted the masculine norms of their new cultural context. Additionally, participants associated "looking American" directly with sexual orientation. Specifically, an "American" look implied a heterosexual expression of masculinity, whereas the stereotypical dress of immigrants became feminized and equated with homosexuality amongst their peers (Way, et al., 2012). This policing of masculinity among peers is often conceptualized in the literature as internalized homophobia (Kimmel, 2004). More specifically, Kimmel (2004) describes homophobia as "more than the irrational fear of gay men" to include a constant anxiety that "other men will emasculate us" (p. 24). This fear, or internalized homophobia, dictates how men engage in romantic relationships, friendships, and social interactions because men are constantly aware of how they perform masculinity in relation to how men around them do (Kimmel, 2004). From this perspective the social construction of gender/masculinity is directly associated with stereotypical gender norms, which is tied directly to how Mexican

American men navigate the U.S.-centric masculinity stereotypes and those associated with their race, immigration status, and class. Further, the performance of masculinity that often dictates how men engage in (or avoid) relationships and social interactions may provide insight into why some Latinos do not establish the relationships critical to success while in the college setting.

The discourse on masculinity, machismo, and gay identity reflects several different influences that shaped how Latino gay men were socialized to be proper men or *machos*. In a recent study examining constructions of masculinity among seven gay Latino college men, several findings indicated the important role of family in how they were taught to perform masculinity (Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Specifically, participants articulated the role of mothers as particularly influential in rewarding stereotypically masculine behaviors while discouraging behavior perceived to be feminine. Interestingly, machismo emerged among participants as a common identifier associated with their own conceptualizations of masculinity tied specifically to their Latino background. Problematically, however, participants in the study associated the term with several negative stereotypes of hypermasculinity, domination of women, and sexist attitudes. They pointed toward actions to articulate their descriptions of machismo but struggled to define the term (Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Further, the term was often contrasted with gayness. In other words, participants conceptualized machismo as a binary in that one acts *macho* or the opposite, *maricón* (faggot). Therefore, for these participants, one could maintain machismo status regardless of being gay so long as the individual acted or performed in a heteronormative, *macho* manner. On the other hand, extremely stereotypical effeminate mannerisms directly conflicted with participants'

conceptualizations of machismo. Participants in Peña-Talamantes' study conceptualized masculinity with a masculine/feminine binary and struggled with their desire to be more openly expressive, directly in conflict with machismo, and identified the disconnection they felt between "the real manly mans and the really gay guys" (2013, p. 171). This awareness of masculinity tied directly to their gender performance provided concrete ways for the individual participants to begin to condition their own gender performance in order to fit within the *macho* side of the binary. Many highlighted the importance of speaking in a deep voice, acting tough, and being assertive. The successful performance of these gendered acts provided a pass toward the *macho* side of the binary. The devaluing of feminine traits among the participants in the study presents a more complex narrative and suggests that constructions of masculinity among gay Latino men may mirror those of their heterosexual counterparts. However, the primary limitation of this study is that it does not explore how these men navigate within the binary, as some participants were aware of their own feminine characteristics. My research builds on these findings to understand how these gay Latinos navigate spaces on their college campuses, build relationships, and stay motivated in the college settings.

Conclusion

Masculinity constructs, machismo, and cultured gender norms are closely tied to the college trajectory and success of Mexican American men. With the U.S./Mexico border as the primary site of migration into the U.S. for this population (Ashbee, Clausen, & Pedersen, 2007), understanding how the border experience shapes constructions of masculinity among Mexican American gay men is critical in order to support these students in the college setting. Masculinity constructs of Mexican American gay men

continue to be mostly unexplored in the existing literature. Historical influences, geographic location, social systems, and psychological factors that shape constructions of masculinity must be considered in order to gain a broader perspective of how Mexican American men conceptualize masculinity and how these conceptualizations impact success in higher education. U.S. and Mexican cultural norms and expectations distinctly shape these conceptualizations of masculinity and how it is performed.

The U.S./Mexico border is central to understanding how competing cultural messages shape masculinity constructions among Mexican and Mexican American gay men. Cultural and heteronormative masculinity norms expect men to prioritize getting married and providing financial support to their families over the pursuit of education; conceptualizations of masculinity associated with machismo can hinder heterosexual men from successfully completing college (Hurtado, Haney, & Hurtado, 2012; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2008). Heterosexual men have various avenues through which to assert their masculinity and bring pride to their families. They may choose to so do in the form of educational attainment, working and providing for their families, marrying and having children, or any combination of these heteronormative expectations. In contrast, gay men may leverage college as one of few opportunities to compensate for their inability to fulfill cultural expectations as a result of their sexual orientation. My dissertation research aims to complicate the primarily heteronormative existing literature and understand how gay men along the U.S./Mexico border conceptualize masculinity in relation to the societal messages they receive given the unique geographic location.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My dissertation research uses a constructivist lens to understand how first-generation, gay, Mexican and Mexican American undergraduate men along the U.S./Mexico border make meaning of their masculinity. Using Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) qualitative portraiture method of inquiry, along with Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory as my conceptual framework, six participants and I identified the experiences, stories, and messages about masculinity they have internalized from daily social exchanges and cultural influences inside and outside their home lives, and how these constructs have impacted their experiences in college. The central questions I sought to answer were:

1) How do first-generation Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men along the border make meaning of masculinity?

2) How do first-generation Mexican and Mexican American gay undergraduate men navigate heteronormative and hypermasculine gender expectations within the institutional context?

Constructivism is primarily concerned with describing and making meaning of individual observations and experiences in collaboration with participants, and prioritizes the importance of culture, the symbolic nature of communication, language, and individual surroundings in meaning-making (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1998). I hypothesized that various factors including religious beliefs, immigration status, and class played a role in shaping the participants' masculinity constructs. Utilizing a constructivist lens, I used portraiture and a border identity development framework to honor both the

common connections among participants and the individual nuances of their experiences to avoid an essentialized construct of masculinity.

Researcher Positionality

The last time I saw Bobby, who was a student during my time as a resident assistant at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), was over ten years ago. Sitting across from him during his brief visit to the Twin Cities was like being in a time warp. We reminisced about our time at UT, his trajectory since graduating back in 2007, and the preparation for my dissertation research. Bobby, who is a Mexican American gay man, smirked as I described my dissertation topic: college success and constructions of masculinity among Mexican and Mexican American gay men. I noted his reaction and asked him to share what *he* remembers about who I was back in our college days at the University of Texas. Unexpectedly, he recalled a moment during our undergraduate years, a moment I do not remember. According to Bobby, there was a point at which he was "in a really bad place" and was unsure if he would finish his degree (B. Cardenas, personal communication, April, 2016). He was in the beginning stages of coming out and was at an emotional low point, questioning whether or not he wanted to continue at the university. Though he did not remember my exact words, he recalled, "You said something like: 'If you don't finish, all you will be is a Mexican faggot,' and that resonated with me. I remember that" (B. Cardenas, personal communication, April 2016).

As I prepared for this research, I reflected on the assumptions I bring into this work that center on my own internalized messages as reflected in Bobby's memory. I experienced this process and attempted to interpret participant narratives while understanding my own deep-seated trauma resulting from years of internalized messages

of inadequacy and shame. These messages, primarily enforced within my home, were reminders of my inability to fulfill cultural expectations that caused me to view success in higher education as compensation for these inadequacies.

My interest in understanding the experiences of MAGUM is directly tied to my own identities and college experiences. Initially, my decision to pursue a college education away from home was driven less by a desire to obtain a degree and more by my intrinsic motivation to escape rejection by my family. Having witnessed my parents reject and disown my older brother when they discovered he is gay, I was sure his experience would become my own narrative. My identity as a gay man slowly became a source of dissonance in my home life and social relationships. The pursuit and attainment of a college degree became a reminiscent symbol of *orgullo* for my family, and my accomplishments in the academy distracted from my family's growing awareness of my gay identity. Therefore, academic success became a legitimate excuse to break down masculinity expectations tied directly to my Mexican background, break with cultural tradition, and leave my home, hometown, and family.

As I reflected on my undergraduate experience in preparation for this study, several poignant narratives came to mind, such as the relationship I developed with my academic adviser, Mike Acuña, an unapologetically gay Latino. Although we shared similar identities, our adviser-advisee relationship did not develop immediately. He was defiantly feminine in his demeanor which, at the time, was a source of discomfort for me. My understanding of masculinity did not include men who wore their hair in a ponytail, as Mike did. My constructs of masculinity did not allow men to walk with too much gusto, as Mike did. Men were not supposed to speak with feminine undertones; they

were not supposed to act in feminized ways. A king is subtle, emotionally controlled, and relies only on himself; Mike was everything to the contrary. He challenged my understandings of masculinity, and over my four years at UT, though I held several leadership positions and had access to numerous faculty and staff, Mike was the only meaningful connection I made and the only resource I accessed regularly. As I reflect on my connection to Mike, I realize that I navigated my own masculinity expectations and Mike's feminized embodiment of masculinity in ways that initially created a barrier in our adviser-advisee relationship. This experience, in part, informs my desire to understand how MAGUM conceptualize masculinity and how these constructs shaped their experiences within the institutional setting, a central theme of my dissertation research.

As I reflect on my time as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas, I have come to a deeper understanding of how my own internalized masculinity constructs shaped how I navigated the institution and established connections with peers, faculty, and staff. I established meaningful friendships primarily with other Mexican American gay men from the U.S./Mexico border and largely avoided my heterosexual Mexican American male peers. Now, I can see that the ways I navigated social spaces and relationships included active avoidance, interaction, or connection with straight Mexican and Mexican American peers. A fear of judgment and rejection by those individuals, who I saw as the "true" holders of authentic Mexican masculinity, likely explains the reasons I avoided these social exchanges. In other words, my constructions of masculinity and knowledge that I did not fit within these constructs created a psychological space of resistance that prevented me from engaging with individuals who I perceived as true

Mexican men. These experiences are directly related to this dissertation, which examines how MAGUM conceptualize their own masculinity and how these constructs impact the ways they navigate their college campuses.

In my research I used these experiences as reference points and continued to reflect on my own college experience to understand similarities between participants' stories and my own. Through these reflections, I acknowledged my close connection to this topic in order to avoid the possibility of inaccuracies, biases, and misinterpretations of participant narratives. I also used my experience to further understand the complex experiences of study participants as they shared and reflected on how their ideas of masculinities informed their collegiate experiences. To help ensure my interpretations of their stories were as representative as possible, I relied on each participant's authority in data analysis and placed their voice at the center of the analysis, even if they contradicted my interpretations of their stories.

Border Theory

Border theory considers the ways individuals navigate multiple social spaces and cultural messages to develop their sense of self and identity (Anzaldúa, 1987). Similarly, my dissertation research considered a number of influences from both U.S. and Mexican cultures to recognize how these nuances shaped participants' experiences and conceptualizations of masculinity. The physical proximity of the U.S./Mexico border is central to my dissertation research because the border location situates the physical space in which MAGUM navigate and embody their masculinity. In the physical space of the border MAGUM learn and internalize the cultural scripts and gender roles they are expected follow. Therefore, masculinity norms and expectations are reinforced within

their homes, and these messages create the psychological boundaries of masculinity within which MAGUM exist.

Anzaldúa's (1987) border theory aims to conceptualize the experiences of individuals who negotiate oppressed identities within multiple cultural contexts. Subconscious borderlands, then, are the result of social constructs informed by multiple lived experiences shaped by power structures in the form of dominant and subordinate cultures. Similarly, my dissertation research focused on how MAGUM, from their close proximity to the physical site of the border, conceptualize masculinity from their exposure to different power and social structures, and how these masculinity constructs shaped their college experience. To be clear, I used a border theory framework to understand how Mexican and Mexican American gay men internalized masculinity expectations situated within Mexican and U.S. cultural gender norms, and how MAGUM reconcile this in-between existence on campus and in their homes (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Subconscious borderlands identify the points of discomfort resulting from constant rejection by those in the dominant culture that effectively "others" these individuals and positions them at a distance from the dominant group (Anzaldúa, 1987). One example of how these dominant and subordinate groups are represented in participants' stories is reflected in how some participants were marginalized within peer spaces as a result of their gay identity, an identity that challenges the heteronormative gender expectations of the dominant heterosexual environment. Through an ongoing process of deconstructing and reconstructing these experiences, border theory uncovers the complexity of participants' identities informed by these social exchanges, cultural messages and symbols, and home life. Therefore, to understand the border, borderlands,

and subconscious borders is to locate the in-between spaces MAGUM occupy within each area of their college lives (Anzaldúa, 1987). Both the physical site of the border and subconscious borders played an important role in my study as I came to understand the role of border experiences in the lives of participants.

Portraiture

Using portraiture as my qualitative method of inquiry, I worked with participants as they engaged in a reflection process related to four major themes in their lives: masculinity, significance of (and experience in) higher education, home life, and gay identity. Given the in-depth and ongoing strategies portraiture requires, data collection involved six self-identified MAGUM and included a series of five conversations, or semi-structured interviews, with each individual over two academic years. These conversations were scaffolded and began first by conversing with participants to find "what is good here?" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). True to portraiture methodology, I was challenged to prioritize the positive experiences on campus as an entry point of the portraitist-subject relationship and slowly broadened my reach to include their struggles, insecurities, and vulnerable insight into their lives. Through our conversations, I worked individually with each participant to produce descriptive narratives, or portraits, that represented their stories and lived realities in higher education and their home life accurately, sensitively, and as authentically as possible (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The relationships I established with each participant were strengthened over the duration of the study and I was able to capture the complexity of their layered identities and experiences as MAGUM. This methodology also challenged me to place my own

assumptions aside and validate the participants as the sole knowers of their own lived experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Together, we engaged in continuous dialogue to co-create descriptive portraits of their lives through words that described how they navigated multiple cultural contexts and placed themselves within the U.S./Mexico border, how these contexts shaped their views on masculinity, and the role of masculinity in their college experience. The construction of the individual portraits, over approximately two calendar years, served as an in-depth iterative process that was critical in familiarizing me with the data. Additionally, my in-person conversations were also opportunities to visit with participants to discuss the direction of each portrait, ask clarifying questions, and present emerging themes they helped expand upon. Writing the individual portraits also pushed me to revisit the text repeatedly as the portraits developed and I sought new interpretations of their narratives as I learned more about each participant.

With each conversation, the participants and I delved further into their lives and systematically approached their stories from multiple perspectives that paid careful attention to their cultural background, familial context, individual experiences understanding masculinity, and their experiences on campus as Mexican American gay undergraduate men. Through a collaborative data-analysis process in which I continuously returned to each individual in order to cross-check my interpretation of their narratives, we constructed written portraits from their stories that were reflective of their individual experiences and voices (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While I served as the writer, participants played an active role in shaping their portraits. The resulting descriptive narratives, presented in their draft versions in the appendices section of this

dissertation, were used as part of the broader analysis process and are reflective of an intimate connection established with each of the six participants. The portraits are uniquely created using their authentic stories, are analyzed through my researcher lens, and will continue to be developed to shape future scholarship.

Context of the Study

This study took place at Borderland University (BU), a large, public, four-year university located in Border City, an urban city on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, with a student population of more than 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students. According to the institution's website, the student demographic includes a Hispanic student population of 80 percent. Of these students, 80 percent come from the local Border City area and about 5 percent of the student body are Mexican nationals. Borderland University's faculty and staff is predominantly of Hispanic heritage with approximately 70 percent being of Latinx background. More specifically, approximately 36 percent of the institution's faculty is Latinx, and, according to the institution's website, is among the highest representation of "minority faculty" among research universities across the nation. Thus, the institution's cultural composition is largely rooted in Mexican cultural tradition while also aspiring to prepare students to achieve ideals of the "American Dream."

In recent years, Ciudad del Sur, geographically located in Mexico and across from Border City, has become one of the most discussed cities in the region because of high crime rates and drug trafficking. Unlike many institutions located along the border, Ciudad del Sur is visible from several locations on BU's campus. In my study, Ciudad del Sur and Border City were symbolic representations and reminders of cultural

domination, conquest, and Mexican and American identity, which were used to discuss cultural symbols, social interaction, and masculinity within the context of both the daily experiences of participants and physiological impact on how they construct masculinity. Interestingly, BU's website boasts the school's geographic location among the city's "binational community" with an emphasis on assisting students to "achieve the American Dream." Participants' proximity to the border played a role in how the MAGUM in this study developed and (re)constructed their identities within the institutional context. These characteristics created an ideal setting to understand how MAGUM negotiate space, create relationships, and navigate social interactions with one another. Throughout the duration of this study, I worked with a faculty member at Borderland University who assisted in facilitating connections with appropriate student affairs administrators for participant recruitment, site visits, and Institutional Review Board approval.

Participants

Participants for my study were self-identified MAGUM pursuing a four-year college degree at BU and ranged from 18 to 30 years of age. Participants also self-identified as Mexican American with either one or both parents of Mexican descent. One participant, Luis Gerardo, was born in El Salvador but identifies with the Mexican cultural tradition since the majority of his upbringing was primarily along the U.S./Mexico border and his stepfather is of Mexican descent. The remaining participants—Teddy, Cristian, Luis N., Danny and Eddie—self-identified as Mexican American, and one or both of their parents immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico. Teddy, Cristian, Luis Gerardo, Luis N., and Eddie are the first in their immediate families to attend college. Danny, on the other hand, has siblings who completed their college

education and one who attained a graduate education. Importantly, none of the parental figures in their lives successfully completed a college degree.

Participants for my study were intentionally recruited through requests to student affairs administrators and through individual communication with faculty within the institution's Chicano Studies department. The outreach and recruitment phase resulted in 15 students who expressed interest in participating in this study. Ultimately, after further explanation and context was provided, six students agreed to the rigor and longitudinal commitment required to successfully complete their participation. The six participants in my dissertation did not gain any monetary compensation but received free coffee, smoothies, and meals during the different points of contact to complete the five in-depth conversations.

Data Collection

Data collection for this portraiture study included a series of five individual semi-structured interviews/conversations over the course of two academic years with each of the six participants. All but one of the conversations were conducted face-to-face during visits to Border City and Borderland University. Because I maintained residence in the state of Minnesota, I offered remote conversations to accommodate participant schedules if we were unable to connect face-to-face during my visits.

Ongoing semi-structured interviews, over the course of two academic years, served as an effective qualitative method to establish meaningful relationships with each participant. All conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. These conversations lasted one to two hours and varied across each of the five interviews. After each conversation, participants were given access to their individual transcripts via

Google Drive, where they were able to see my notations, questions, and comments. In this way, I intentionally stayed connected with participants in between each of my scheduled visits and interviews, and I maintained communication with each participant through ongoing email or text communication, or through their online transcripts. Each participant was encouraged to provide feedback, ask questions, or challenge my analysis at any point throughout the data-collection phase. Participants' engagement with their online transcripts and developing written portraits varied; most of the participants visited their data sparingly, while some read through all of their transcriptions and offered additional insights during our in-person conversations.

Site visits served as the primary point of connection to conduct interviews and explore participants' daily lives as they navigated their institutional setting. Visits also provided an opportunity to explore, from the field, their experiences within their geographic location. Utilizing ongoing semi-structured interviews in combination with site visits provided multiple angles from which to understand the context and setting participants occupied.

During my site visits to the campus, I was able to connect with numerous faculty and staff in order to explore their perspective on the campus' climate for LGBT students. I attended several BU events featuring student-focused programming, including Fall Fest, an event where student organizations market their student groups to the larger BU community. I also joined some of the participants as they walked me through their daily lives on campus. These walks included classroom spaces, research labs, locations where they relaxed during their spare time, and work spaces if they held an on-campus job. Additionally, two participants, Cristian and Teddy, invited me to attend one of their early

morning rehearsals as members of the Borderland University Dance Team. The combination of my intentional efforts to understand their individual lives on campus, my inquiry into the campus setting through faculty and staff connections, and my immersion into the campus setting provided an in-depth understanding of their on-campus lives as well as the broader context of the BU and Border City communities.

Interviews

Primarily grounded in artistic narrative, description, and storytelling, portraiture "combine[s] systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, a blending of art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Within the context of my study, five semi-structured interviews were conducted onsite with each participant over a period of two academic years, and I asked each participant to reflect on their childhood, home life, and on-campus experiences in order to ensure that each of the themes in my proposed research questions were addressed. While semi-structured interviews maintained a level of consistency, they also allowed me room for further expansion in order to delve intentionally into each participant's experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This provided the opportunity for a nuanced conversation that prioritized the critical questions necessary to address my research questions and granted me the flexibility to expand on emerging themes in each conversation that may not have been part of the interview questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Each conversation asked participants to intentionally and systematically reflect on four central themes.

Context interview (see Appendix A).

The context interview took place in October 2016 at the beginning of the fall semester, and asked participants to reflect on their immediate context and experience as college students within their institution. Participants were given the opportunity to select an on-campus location that was important to them, or a nearby coffee shop in close proximity to the campus. The majority of interviews took place in coffee shops and cafes off campus and in proximity to participants' neighborhoods throughout the Border City area. As a result of conflicting schedules, Eddie's first interview was conducted remotely via phone call. The context interview served as an entry point to establish rapport with each participant as we began to establish our relationships as portraitist and subject. The context interview was critical in helping me establish a "reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41). I used this reference point to begin to shape each participants' portrait and to inform the scope of a second interview/conversation focused on participant histories.

History interview (see Appendix B).

The history interview took place over the winter break period, from late December 2016 to early January 2017. Through this conversation the participants and I continued to build on the roadmap established during the context interview. I began each conversation with critical themes from the context interview to clarify any areas of confusion. Participants were asked to select a location convenient for them. Many chose the coffee shop for the first conversation while others selected food venues or coffee shops within their neighborhood in the broader Border City area. In this conversation,

participants were asked to reflect on their journeys into higher education, cultural backgrounds, home lives, and masculinity ideologies that resulted from these particular influences. These themes were used to frame how participants experience their institutional context and establish a framework to understand the possible constructs resulting from these ideologies.

Constructs interview (see Appendix C).

The constructs interview took place in the middle of the spring semester, in April 2017. During this site visit, participants were asked to reflect on how they present themselves throughout the various areas of the institutional and social settings. They were asked to consider how they "show up" in particular spaces, and which aspects of their histories they believe influence how they *should* occupy particular spaces. I asked participants to consider the role of masculinity in their college lives and position themselves within the physical and psychological space of the border. Specifically, I asked participants to describe U.S. and Mexican cultures within the context of masculinity, how they identified within both cultural contexts, how they defined their own masculinity, and the role of these constructs in their on-campus experiences.

Borders interview (see Appendix D).

The borders interview took place in conjunction with the constructs interview and considered the emerging border spaces reflected in each of their narratives. I asked participants to consider tensions they may experience as a result of competing messages and cultural symbols of masculinity that counter their own self-perceptions and individual constructs of masculinity. Specifically, I sought to identify possible tensions between the messages of masculinity enforced in their homes and the ways masculinity is

affirmed on campus. The borders interview served as a culminating conversation with each participant and attempted to merge the tensions that surfaced during our previous discussions and identify final themes needed to complete their portraits. As a result of conflicting schedules, Cristian's constructs and borders interviews were conducted at the end of the following fall semester (December 2017).

Closure conversation (see Appendix E).

The closure conversations took place after the rough drafts of participants' individual portraits were completed. These conversations began in December 2017 and lasted through the following fall. Cristian and Teddy's closure conversations were conducted remotely due to travel schedule conflicts. During their closure conversations I read their individual portraits to each of them and asked them to describe their experiences participating in this study. I asked them to reflect on any potentially significant realizations they came to throughout the process, in order to bring their participation in my study to a close. Finally, each participant was given the opportunity to compose the concluding sentences of their portraits.

Data Analysis

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) emphasize active listening throughout the analysis process in order to reveal multiple voices and perspectives within each participant's narrative. Specifically, the researcher must listen not just to the stories, but also to the stories or voices *not* being told or immediately represented. To be clear, portraiture requires the researcher to identify the subtexts beneath the words to uncover multiple voices central to in-depth descriptive narratives. In this way, the researcher intentionally brings forth multiple voices within each portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot &

Davis, 1997). Data analysis was an ongoing process over the course of approximately two years and included continuous communication, primarily through text and email, with each participant to discuss their individual portraits. These communications took place during the interim period between each interview and focused on participant responses, reactions, and feedback about their developing portraits. Participants were encouraged to provide additional perspectives, validate or contradict the emerging themes, and have final authority over their completed portraits to ensure they accurately reflected their stories.

Concerning in-depth descriptive narratives that aim to uncover multiple voices, spoken and unspoken, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) emphasize intentional listening and observation of each individual's context. So, I documented my initial impressions and surprises with each participant through field notes that I used to complement my interpretations of each of our five interviews. My field notes included my initial impressions, the participant's attire, my perceptions of their demeanor, and my perceptions of their openness or hesitancy toward our conversations. I also noted the affirmations or contradictions within my own masculinity expectations of each participant, based how I experienced their masculine performativity. I studied each interview and accompanying field notes intensely over approximately two years and attempted to hear multiple perspectives in each evaluation of data to identify common themes in each participant's story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

To reveal the multiple voices in each participant's stories, I systematically asked participants to examine specific experiences in their lives, beginning with the context interview. Each subsequent conversation moved participants through a path of discovery

and reflection, and slowly challenged them to consider their experiences in college and along the border from multiple angles related to their personal identities. They were asked to consider how specific contexts of their life (racial and ethnic background, upbringing, and values) came to shape their identities and masculinity constructs as well as the possible impact on their college experiences.

Analysis took three primary forms: transcription, examination, and participant evaluation/feedback, and was an ongoing process throughout the duration of the study. I began by transcribing the first interview and examining each transcript to identify emerging themes. These themes included family expectations, peer influences in the college setting, connections in the surrounding community, and discourses that surrounded gender norms, of which shaped the history interview/conversation. The history interview served as a continuation of data collection as well as an analytical tool that provided continued insight into the stories participants shared during the first context interview.

I began to shape participant portraits after the history interviews were conducted, transcribed, and studied. Both the context and history interviews set the themes for each of the individual portraits by providing the settings and stories for participants' histories. In other words, the history interview grounded the experiences each participant described in their first context conversation. The constructs interview explored how participants navigated the various areas of their home and on-campus lives as gay men who were out to varying degrees. Each participant was given the opportunity to shape the themes that informed their developing portraits. I used our face-to-face conversations to update

participants on the status of their portraits and ask questions to clarify themes and provide direction to each of their narratives.

The borders interview framed their experiences as gay men within heteronormative spaces and applied a border-identity framework to identify how their multiple identities intersected to create in-between spaces and affect how they navigated multiple cultural contexts, institutional settings, and social interactions. This interview was tailored to each participant's stories and included emerging themes from the accompanying portraits in order to connect their stories and identify commonalities between them. More specifically, the borders interview allowed participants to identify tensions expressed in the previous three conversations and to expand on those areas of dissonance.

The closure conversation focused on participants' experiences in my study afforded them an opportunity to share any remaining stories, themes, or insights left unexplored during the study. As with all previous interviews, this conversation also served as an analytical tool in which participants could affirm, challenge, or expand the specific content that shaped their portrait. This process ensured that my analysis and representation of their narratives resembled participants' understanding of their experiences as accurately as possible. During the final conversation, each participant was given the opportunity to write the final sentence of their portrait, symbolically closing their story, concluding their participation in the study, and signifying their validation of their portrait.

Limitations & Ethical Considerations

There are many limitations in my attempt to broaden the discourse of Latinx masculinity in higher education through my presentation of the participants' experiences. My findings reflect the individual stories and perspectives of six self-identified Mexican American gay undergraduate men at Borderland University and are not representative of the experiences of all gay Latinx students on the BU campus. I do not attempt to provide a broad generalization of Latinx masculinity or the concept of machismo through this work; nor do I intend to draw conclusions about the broader campus climate at Borderland University. Instead, this study represents the individual perspectives of six MAGUM, centering gay identity and how it shaped the masculinity constructs that play a role in navigating the institutional setting.

Furthermore, the scope of this work is limited to six self-identified Mexican American gay undergraduate men. None of the six participants claimed Ciudad del Sur as their home and all identified as U.S. American citizens, which limits the "border crossing" narratives in this study to a purely U.S./American perspective. In addition to the limitation of this U.S.-centric perspective, the study is also limited in its scope of student representation; all but one of the participants in the study were recruited directly through student affairs staff and/or Chicano/a Latinx studies faculty at BU's campus. This important consideration is likely reflective of the limited scope of the "type" of student who had access to my dissertation information; that is, all but one participant in the study had already established strong campus connections allowing them access to my study. Thus, the dominant perspective of my study is held by students who were at least minimally connected to BU faculty and staff.

Participants in this dissertation study contributed generously over the course of the data-collection and write-up processes. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable in order to provide deep exploration of their lives as Borderland University students, and to allow glimpses into their upbringings through several personal stories, many of which will shape my future research. My connection to each participant involves great ethical responsibility as I consider this study's continued expansion and contribution to the field of higher education. Therefore, as the researcher, I am committed to maintaining my connection with each participant, so long as they are willing, and creating opportunities for their involvement in the future work that results from this dissertation.

Chapter 4: Queer *Mestizo* Masculinities

Over the course of approximately two years, I remained connected with six Mexican American gay undergraduate men (MAGUM), all at different points in their time at Borderland University, with the intent to capture snapshots of their stories to understand their perspectives on masculinity, gay identity, and their college experiences. I visited the BU campus and immersed myself in the community through staff and faculty connections, student interactions, and observations of different locations on campus. In the subsequent sections of this dissertation, I present the abbreviated portraits developed collaboratively with each participant in my study. Their brief portraits, written in the present tense to honor their ongoing and evolving narratives, highlight the most significant themes of their masculinity constructs, the tensions they experienced as they moved within—and through—heteronormative gender boundaries on campus and in their homes, and their motivations to succeed.

While the portraits were written through my own analysis and interpretation of their experiences, participants were asked to help shape their stories, correct inaccuracies, or provide further insight into their lives. I offer their brief portraits fully aware of the limitations of my interpretations and recognize that these representations are an incomplete picture of the complexity of their lives. The analysis sections that follow are constructed from the perspectives of Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., Danny, Luis Gerardo, and Eddie, and are not representative of the entire Borderland University LGBT community or the broader community in Border City.

Cristian: Hannah Montana

"I think of myself as Hannah Montana … I have to put on this persona … when I'm at school I'm Hannah Montana." At BU, Cristian is one of those recognizable faces known for his involvement as an officer of the student body as well as one of the captains of the University Dance Team. He's the "it" man on campus. Out. Gay. Proud. "When I'm home, I'm like this little boy from Border City, Texas; I'm just average."

At home, Cristian becomes a different person. He keeps to himself, limits his interactions with his father, and reserves extended points of connection primarily for his mother. "I grew up with women most of the time. I think that influenced a lot of the way I act and the way I portray myself," he reflected. "That's how I think my life is, honestly … I live a double life … day and night." Outside of his home, Cristian is able to express his inner Hannah Montana in feminized ways that he is unable to enact within the homonormative gendered borders upheld in his home.

On campus, Cristian's platform of academic success and high-profile status allows him the freedom to embody a femininity that challenges the campus' heteronormative masculinity boundaries while gaining acceptance into spaces with rigid masculinity borders reserved for athletes and other stereotypically hypermasculine campus groups. "I think the platform that I'm put on makes things so much better [for] me than it does for other people that are gay."

But Cristian's platform of success is not without its limitations. At home, he adheres to heteronormative gender boundaries and is forced to mask his gay identity as a measure of respect for the home, specifically for his father. "I feel like I would be disrespecting my dad, mostly," he stated as he reflected on why he has chosen to keep his

gay identity masked while completing his degree at BU. “As long as I’m doing good in school,” he stated, “that’s my form of payment to them.” Concealing his gay identity served as a form of payment to his family and he maintained his masculine performativity within the gender borders enacted within his home. In exchange, Cristian is given financial support and stability and is celebrated for his successes.

Teddy: Gay as Fuck

Teddy grew up in a single-parent household, and given his father’s absence throughout his life, he does not feel compelled to confirm a suspicion held by his father and the rest of the family: “My uncles? Well, I’ve never told them because, first of all, it’s really obvious. I’m not gonna tell them ‘*soy joto*,’ right?” What is already assumed and obvious does not have to be named for the sake of being named.

As for Teddy’s extended family, they too remain silent and ignore the feminine characteristics expressed through his body. “I’m very gay,” he stated in his high-pitched voice, accented with vibrato in order to emphasize the pronunciation of the *r*. “I’m not manly whatsoever,” he asserted. “I dance. I mean, I work at a girls’ clothing store!” Teddy is unapologetically feminine in his mannerisms and pushes against masculine boundaries and expectations for him to personify toughness, physical strength, dominance, and culturally nuanced expressions of masculinity embodied by the familial male figures. Silence shrouds the subject of his sexuality and queer masculinity. “They ask me about work, school, and dance. That’s pretty much it. They really don’t ask about my personal life in detail.”

His experience reflects the tensions and contradictions within the heteronormative borders he navigates in order to claim his queer identity within his family unit and on

campus. In his life, the performative aspects of masculinity are subject to the willingness of the outer heteronormative gaze to acknowledge his femininity, which directly challenges the gender expectations of being a man in his family. He takes pride in his unapologetically feminine gender expression within a stereotypically masculine body, and embraces a "gay as fuck" attitude and aesthetic embodied in his broad solid masculine build. Teddy claims his masculinity by confidently embracing femininity as the outward-facing surface of his persona.

Cristian's and Teddy's portraits demonstrate the nuanced ways participants embody their masculinity in different contexts and use academic success to access spaces enclosed by heteronormative gender borders; in this case, their homes. Cristian's subdued persona in his home is in stark contrast to his "Hannah Montana" persona he portrays on campus, and speaks to his awareness of the boundaries/gender scripts established specifically within his home. Similarly, Teddy does not offer confirmation of his gay identity to his extended family and relies solely on the unspoken assumptions they draw from his feminine expression. By masking their gay identities, both Cristian and Teddy simultaneously maintain and challenge the established heteronormative gender borders within their homes and on campus.

Luis N.: Not Too In-Your-Face

Before having dinner with his boyfriend's parents, Luis N. strategically contemplated his appearance to ensure his aesthetic was not too "fruity," "flamboyant," or "in-your-face" in order to avoid disrupting the traditionalist masculinity borders recognized by his boyfriend's traditional father. Having bleached his hair weeks prior to

the Christmas holiday, he worried this look was unacceptable if he wanted to put his boyfriend's parents at ease during their first sit-down dinner with him.

Luis N. settled on jeans and a "very dull" green shirt: "Not very, you know, [gay]." He and his boyfriend examined the look to ensure the gayness was sufficiently dulled down. Over the course of the evening, he was deliberate with his gestures so as to not be overly animated, and called on the gendered scripts that have been instilled in him from childhood. Throughout the evening, he portrayed a calm, put-together performativity and relied on his traditional cultural rules of engagement that have taught him to tone down the flamboyance, tone down his voice, and maintain a serious, focused, and professional demeanor when interacting with elders.

These cultural gender borders required him to maintain a masculine performativity that remained within the boundaries that contain professionalism within a calm and emotionless persona: "[I]t's not necessarily fair, the fact that we have to hide who we are just because of … [a concern about] what is the business gonna say?" Luis N. reflected on the pressure he feels to personify professionalism in different spaces of his life as well as during the first sit-down dinner with his boyfriend's parents. Openly embodying his gay identity carries the risk of being perceived as immature, unprofessional, and a liability.

As he continued to consider the risks of living an openly gay life, Luis N. pondered, "What are they gonna say about you if you're openly gay?" In his eyes, people fail to see beyond the stereotypes of flamboyance, so he makes it a point to carry himself in "a very professional manner" in all aspects of his life, especially as a student at BU.

Danny: The Professional

"I've always been in big leadership roles growing up and I never really showed my emotion," Danny recalled, as he began telling the story of the big welcome day at Borderland University for the inaugural cohort of Merit Scholars on campus. In that moment, the combination of authentic connection through shared stories and a need to establish his new professional identity at BU came into conflict as Danny contemplated the vulnerability of the story he would share. "I'm really friendly. I'm super happy all the time, but if I'm upset, sad, like, as a professional, I will not show my emotions."

With his future boss seated toward the back center of the room, Danny was keenly aware that anything he would share might be used to construct perceptions of his professional identity on campus: "He was actually sitting in the back writing notes about everyone's story. … I knew they were writing notes … so when it was time to share my story, even though everyone else was crying, I didn't." Danny opted for a more polished and professional, emotionless approach for his moment at the front of the room, and later explained the tension in his mind: "It was kinda like, I was trying to think of what they were thinking of." What would they think if he shared the story of his gay identity or the story of his fractured relationship with his parents? Driven in part by a desire to establish his professional identity within the heteronormative gender boundaries of the environment, he chose to remove his gay identity and emotions from his story.

Luis N. and Danny portrayed "professional" personas through careful attention to the ways they engaged within the boundaries of formal contexts. Danny contemplated his willingness to be vulnerable and share his gay identity in a public setting where his peers and future supervisor were his audience. This parallels the pressure Luis N. felt to tone

down his gay expression and embody a calm, put-together persona. Luis N. and Danny's cultural rules of engagement have taught them the boundaries of masculinity through the norms established within their homes; that is, they must tone down the flamboyance and to maintain a serious, focused, and professional demeanor. Hetero-masculine professional expectations within the borders of the campus and home forced these men to carefully consider how they would expose or hide their gay expressions within each environment, and the possible stigma associated with their gay identities.

Luis Gerardo: Suck it Up

Since early childhood, Luis Gerardo enjoyed helping his mother beautify their home while watching gossip television together. As a high school-aged teenager with a growing awareness of his gay identity, it was time for Luis Gerardo to learn to be a real man.

"You should go outside to help your dad so that you can learn," his mother pressed one day, while his stepfather worked on the family car outside. "No!" Luis Gerardo responded defiantly. Minutes later, his stepfather demanded he come outside: "I don't want you inside of the house anymore. I don't." Real men work outside. Real men clean the yard. "You need to be a man," his stepfather lectured as he reinforced the boundaries of masculinity by emphasizing physical labor, physical strength, and aggression.

Over the course of his life, Luis Gerardo has learned that masculinity is embodied through the physical strength and muscle a man is expected to display, and that he must endure struggle, sadness, and pain, alone. At home, Luis Gerardo embodies these constructs of physical strength and muscle, and is "a man."

"You don't ask for help. You just need to do it. Find a way out. Find a solution. By yourself." Luis Gerardo must portray self-sufficiency and toughness without much attention to his struggles. If a challenge arises, he must fix it, "'cause that's your job." There was no seeking support from his mom and stepdad, even in the frequent moments when he really yearned for their support. He'd been taught to "suck it up and be tough," he explained.

Luis Gerardo learned that masculinity is embodied primarily through physical displays of strength, which has conditioned him to mask his emotions at home and present a facade of composure in moments of stress, sadness, and depression—public displays of emotion are only afforded to the feminine/woman. "I'm like [a woman] but in a man's body." In his eyes, masculinity is embodied in dominance, muscle, and aggressive energy—machismo. "I imagine 'the man' of the house. 'What I say, you have to do it.'"

Luis Gerardo positioned characteristics of dominance and aggression as the outer layer of his performance and identified the sensitive, emotional, and vulnerable aspects of his being as a separate, feminine iteration of himself hidden inside him. He carried this effeminate and vulnerable version of himself within the silence of his body, only releasing it in the safety of his bedroom.

Eddie: Hidden Emotions

Eddie's heart was broken when his relationship ended just before the fall semester began. The campus reminded Eddie of his ex, who was a student at Borderland University during the course of their partnership. "Everywhere I go, everywhere I look, just walking from class to class, being in class trying to focus, he was the only thing that

was always on my mind," Eddie shared candidly, in a moment of unexpected vulnerability. "Everything I ever thought about was him, and that's why it was hard, because everywhere I'd look I'd see his face. I'd see his face."

Eddie moved through the campus' heteronormative gender borders fully guarded by his muscular build, thick trimmed beard, tattooed forearms, and rugged aesthetic; his peers would never guess the pain he held inside as a result of his failed relationship. "People think I'm an asshole," he explained, reflecting on how he believes he is perceived by his peers on campus. As the fall semester progressed, Eddie's broken heart continued to take its toll. Instead of reaching out to his professors and seeking support resources, he decided to drop his classes for the semester as the breakup continued to take its emotional toll. "I lied to myself," he admitted. "I knew that I wasn't doing well in these classes and I knew I wasn't going to take them seriously for those semesters, so I dropped them," he explained. "I never said it was because I spent all day at school thinking about my ex, and thinking about how miserable I was thinking about [him]. I never said that; I was lying to everybody. [My sadness] was more of the truth for me. That's why I dropped the classes, that's why I was doing so bad, it was 'cause I just couldn't focus."

With Eddie's rugged aesthetic also came pressure to maintain the strong-faced persona he embodied and not step outside the heteronormative boundaries his outer performance camouflaged. Therefore, explaining the true source of his struggle would have meant exposing a piece of his identity that would shatter the strong, heteronormative, emotionless aesthetic he embodied. It would have meant having to claim his gay identity and his emotional state of mind in a way that would contradict the

presentation of masculinity that granted him free movement throughout the gender boundaries of the campus. Reaching out for support would have meant having to explain that his heart was broken at the hands of another man, and publicly owning all of the emotions that came along with the pain of the breakup. Instead, Eddie chose to maintain his heteronormative persona and kept his emotional struggles hidden inside.

Eddie and Luis Gerardo's portraits foreground the most common element discussed in each of their stories. Their bodies are sites where repeated expectations of physical strength and labor are placed, and they have learned that they must endure struggle, sadness, and pain alone. They must portray self-sufficiency and toughness, focusing minimal attention on their struggles or their emotions. The internalization of masculinity as an emotionless quality is reflected in all six of the participant portraits, which I expand upon later in this dissertation.

In the following chapter, I establish the *mestizaje* of American and Mexican cultural traditions I experienced on campus and within the Border City community. The *mestizaje* of cultures influenced the psychological gender borders participants internalized over the course of their lives and learned to navigate both on campus and in their homes. I also describe the masculinity borderlands that created the campus' heteronormative climate, the culture of silence that reinforced these borders, and participants' encounters with that culture as they moved through the campus setting. Finally, I begin to unearth some of the strategies they developed to hide or expose their gay identities in order to move back and forth across borders of masculinity upheld by the institution.

Chapter 5: Neither Here nor There

The BU campus sits along the U.S./Mexico border and boasts Spanish-style architecture against a mountainous backdrop and desert landscape that ties the campus and surrounding community together. Periodically, U.S. Border Patrol helicopters cruise the skies to monitor the steel fence structure that separates Mexican soil from the U.S. borderlands. They remind the campus community of its close proximity to a highly contested and politically tense location—the border. Without knowing otherwise, it would be easy to mistake Mexico's range of mountains for part of Border City's skyline, as both flow from either direction without interruption but for the steel structure that separates the nations. On a daily basis, thousands of people flow from the U.S. to Mexico and back, including almost 1,400 BU undergraduate and graduate students who commute from Ciudad del Sur to Border City to pursue a college degree.

Borderland University's close proximity to the U.S./Mexico border situates Spanish and English as the primary languages used within and without the institution's physical boundaries. Language serves as a reminder of the *mestizaje* of Mexican and American cultures, reflected in the effortless intermixing of both Spanish and English as students, staff, and faculty engage with one another throughout the campus. The blended cultures are also heard in the mixed beats the DJ plays during Fall Fest, an event where all student organizations market their student groups on the main lawn. The music includes salsa, mariachi, and merengue mixed with the lyrics of Beyoncé, Chris Brown, and Rihanna. The sound is neither completely hip-hop nor dance music; instead, it becomes braided with Afro-Cuban, rap, and pop beats atop Latinx rhythmic influences. It

is a genre of its own, symbolic of the hybridity of Mexican and American cultural traditions that shape the dominant campus environment.

Although clear cultural symbols of language, food, and music might be distinctly characterized within the U.S/Mexico border dichotomy, Eddie, Teddy, Luis Gerardo, Luis N., Cristian, and Danny all described Border City's cultural context as a separate third world entangled with influences of both cultures. Importantly, given their first generation status, their homes are predominantly shaped by Mexican tradition and expectations. While they exist within a broader hybridity of U.S./Mexico entanglements within their institutional setting, their homes are microcosms where cultural gender norms established within the familial space are strongly rooted within Mexican cultural expectations. In contrast, the entanglements that create the institutional culture are driven by ideals of the achieving the American Dream. However, their proximity to the Mexican homeland and close connection to their family, all but one of the students lived at home over the course of the study, served as constant reinforcement of traditionally heteronormative gender norms and expectations strongly throughout the campus setting and familial spaces.

The evolving first-generation household, as was the case with all six of the student narratives, reflects a growing tension between the traditional gender expectations enacted within the household and new gender ideals these first-generation gay men were tasked to navigate as the tensions of evolving gender norms and understanding of gay identity in their homes was shaped by the tensions of U.S./Mexican hybridity of cultures. As Luis Gerardo described, within the Mexican community, there exists misconceptions of gay identity. "[T]hey imagine a guy dressed as a girl, really effeminate, super

effeminate…. That's what they imagine." He stated as he reflected on stereotypical representations of gay men his family unit had internalized about gay men. Here, he underscores the threat to masculinity, as the family unit understands it, that gay identity presents to the male role within the familial space. Therefore, the familial space is one in which they needed to be more vigilant of their gender performance in order to both maintain the gendered order within the household, while also working to help the family as gender norms and expectations evolve.

As a result, in their home life, in the classroom, and in social settings throughout the campus, gay identity also exists within a spectrum of visibility. Within the institutional setting, the students found themselves in settings where they felt free to openly express their gay identity and in other moments they were pressured to adjust their gender performance to maintain the established gender expectations within a particular space. In the space that was their home, for most students, the rigidity of gender expectations was more firmly rooted in their Mexican cultural tradition and many expressed added pressure to maintain their gender performance within constructs that encouraged strength, stoic, and emotionless men who served as symbols of strength, Kinghood, within the familial space. Thus, Borderland University became a space in which participants were able to embody their gay identity expression to a greater extent than within the masculinity expectations entrenched in Mexican cultural traditions within their home.

Open Secrets

A climate of silence among Mexican American gay undergraduate men existed within the borders of the institution. One staff member described this dynamic through

the metaphor of "open secrets," an unspoken policy of silence between gay men on campus (J. Doe, personal communication, October 2016). The campus was a space in which heterosexist and hypermasculine gender expectations created the normative borders men on campus must follow. In order to fit within these boundaries, gay identity was hidden or only subtly acknowledged through a head nod or brief eye contact; meaningful interactions were reserved for times and spaces outside the institution's borders. Social connections at the local gay bars or communication through mobile dating apps/social media were not acknowledged within the campus' boundaries. Instead, MAGUM became strangers to one another when they enter the campus setting.

Danny, a second-year student at BU, described the open-secrets dynamic through his experience working as an LGBT student-initiatives intern. As he staffed an LGBT resource table draped in the rainbow flag at Fall Fest, he observed that MAGUM were hesitant toward him:

> I could tell they're staring and, like, they would walk past and I could tell they paused and they kinda looked at the table but they were trying not to look. They're like, trying to see, like, if they're like getting information off another table, but I could tell their eyes are more on me. Then they would walk past again. [At] the end [I] realize, like, they're never going to approach the table, and they just walk away.

Danny described a sense of MAGUM "knowing" about their shared gay identities but acknowledged that approaching his table, and moving across the queered border surrounding it, risked the exposure of their gay identities to the surrounding community. Instead, they timidly skirted around Danny's resource table from within their

heteronormative boundaries as they attempted to glance at the information he displayed. Danny, who projects a friendly, open, and inviting personality, perceived that the clearly displayed LGBT symbols on the table prevented his peers from approaching him. Despite his positive personality, this LGBT symbolism drew queered boundaries around the table, which his peers were unwilling to cross in order to access potentially critical resources within the public setting of Fall Fest.

The open-secrets agreement also limited the connections MAGUM were willing to establish on campus. If a gay peer was judged to be too flamboyant, his flamboyance threatened the masculine embodiments of his gay peers. As Luis Gerardo made his way to our first scheduled conversation, he encountered a peer who ignored his attempts to connect and say hello. “I guess it has to go again back to the topic of it being masculine,” he stated. As a first-year student, Luis Gerardo was only beginning to recognize the invisible masculinity borders that limited the expression of gay identity and the open secrets his older peers had already accepted:

> He was masculine. When you’re gay it’s like muscles and, you know, strength and, you know. I have a man voice and yes I’m a man but I sleep with men at night, you know, and I guess [he] looked at me as, how you call it, [a] twink, you know.

Although they both previously connected outside of the institutional setting, Luis Gerardo’s attempts to connect on campus went unacknowledged within the campus’ boundaries. He described himself as a “twink,” which is a commonly used term in the gay community to describe slimmer and stereotypically feminized gay men. According to Luis Gerardo, his twink aesthetic became a barrier to connecting with his peer, who he

described as “muscular,” and to indicate their differing physical embodiments of masculinity. In that moment, Luis Gerardo’s physical aesthetic threatened his peer’s own personified masculinity. Thus, the campus was a space where gay performativities were hidden away, only to be exposed outside the campus’ boundaries. Luis Gerardo reflected on this dynamic:

> It’s that avoiding [being gay on campus]. It’s that [thought of]: Let’s not talk here ‘cause there’s so many people who can see us. So let’s have the *chisme* [gossip] like at the bars. That’s how it is here at BU. Yes, you’re gay, you’re friends, but let’s not really eat together or let me just do my own thing. That’s how they do and then they just meet up, like, afterwards and then they actually have that conversation. Here at BU you can ask, and gays, each gay has his own pathway. There’s nothing of like [saying] “hi” and meeting someone else, like, you wanna eat with us for lunch? No, it’s each one doing their own thing and then they leave the campus and they’re like, let’s get together, and that’s why I am the gay straight [guy on campus].

Here, Luis Gerardo exposed the divisions among MAGUM on campus that resulted, in part, from the heteronormative and homophobic attitudes shaping the masculinity borders on campus. The campus’s masculinity boundaries, in Luis Gerardo’s explanation, reflected how gay peers recreated a climate of open secrets and pressured each other to hide their gay aesthetics within the campus setting. Luis Gerardo’s public embrace of his gay identity risked rejection not only from his heterosexual peers but also from his own MAGUM kin. These divisions were directly attributable to the lack of LGBT representation on campus that Luis Gerardo described, leaving the campus’

heteronormative boundaries upheld and largely unchallenged. The lack of LGBT representation on campus negatively shapes the willingness of LGBT students to be openly gay. Without institutional infrastructure in the form of an LGBT resource center or dedicated full-time staff, the responsibility to lead and develop LGBT student-support initiatives that challenge heteronormative culture often fell to the students. Thus, LGBT representation at the administrative and faculty level was minimal, which further emphasized the importance of hiding gay identity expression while on campus.

Campus Representation

Representation of LGBT identities on campus was limited to the ability and willingness of students to take on the logistical, programmatic, and emotional labor of supporting students grappling with their queerness. While Danny did have a full-time staff member to guide him in his work to support LGBT students, ultimately the responsibility was placed on him to move student-inclusion initiatives forward. LGBT representation on campus was therefore situational and depended on student availability, which varied based on the time of year.

On one of my visits, the LGBT student organization was scheduled to staff a table as part of a larger campus initiative to promote student involvement. I joined Luis N., a senior in his last semester at BU, as he walked me through his day and engaged in a back-and-forth texting exchange with a group of his peers. Unfortunately, no one was available to represent the organization and the table went unstaffed. He explained that this occurrence is not new and is common among LGBT students who wish to do more for their community on campus. Luis N. explained that representation was situational and temporary:

> They did have a Queernival, so it was like a queer carnival last semester. That was nice … of course you see that a lot of people are very, like, "Ah … oh my god": They're, like, surprised and they're blown away because they [hosted it] right here in the [student] union. There's people from all ages and everything ... but it's not … I wouldn't say that there's people that are, like, mean about it, they're just kind of, like, more under the radar. It's okay, like, and if they don't like [stay and] they'll just walk by. I mean there [are] things that you see that are like, oh okay yeah, we have a community but I don't think it's enough because a lot of the gay people here at BU don't even know that there [are] gay organizations here at BU.

Through his reflections, Luis N. described situational events, such as the Queernival, that focused on bringing visibility to the LGBT community. In his description, he portrayed the surrounding community as "surprised" to see the LGBT community front and center during the Queernival held outside the student union, one of the most prominent areas on campus. Luis N. also portrayed the BU community as hesitant to actively participate in the event or join the LGBT student community in the celebration. The LGBT community crossed the heteronormative boundaries established within the space of the student union. This border crossing created tension among the surrounding community, which hesitated to engage with the queer-focused event. Instead, Luis N. perceived that the broader community kept its distance and looked in from the outskirts of the temporarily established boundaries for LGBT students within the student union's broader heteronormative borders. Visibility and acceptance of LGBT students on campus was largely limited to specific moments throughout the year and was also bound by the BU

community's willingness to acknowledge their presence by either engaging or ignoring the LGBT community when it had a prominent stage.

Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., Danny, Luis Gerardo, and Eddie exist in a metaphorical *trenza*, or braided reality, of gender boundaries woven by the masculinity expectations of culture, family, gay identity, and campus heteronormative climate. As they moved through different locations on campus and interacted with peers, faculty, and staff, they were attuned to how their male bodies were expected to perform. They anticipated that each space they entered would uphold heteronormative gender norms and embody masculine performatives within these boundaries. Some of the students felt more pressure to adhere to idealized masculine expectations than others, and some students, because of their social popularity on campus or their hetero aesthetic, experienced less pressure to adhere. All of the students, however, shifted their embodiments of masculinity to some degree in order to embody an authentic sense of self, while also fully aware of the rejection they risked by pushing heteronormative gender boundaries too far within the institutional setting.

Borderland University's campus climate for LGBT individuals was such that queer identity was largely invisible and masculinity was affirmed through the heteronormative and hypermasculine gender performativities of physical aesthetics and emotionless personas. In the following chapter, I expand on the three constructs of masculinity found in participant narratives, constructs reinforced by the campus' established gender boundaries. Masculinity as physical—"the strong-man" construct—speaks to the pressure participants felt to express their masculinity through their outward attire and physical mannerisms. The emotionless-man construct describes participants'

perceptions of emotional expression in relation to their internalized masculinity constructs that emphasize the emotion-free quality of masculinity. Finally, in the professional-man embodiment, which equates masculinity with professionalism, masculine expectations of physical presentation and emotionlessness informed how participants viewed masculinity ideals while establishing their professional identities and moving in and out of various spaces on campus.

Chapter 6: The Boundaries of Masculinities

> When I'm at home, I'm a man with no feeling, no emotions ... Where you need to build something, build and help your dad, that's the person I am at home. [I'm] just a straightforward person, a straight person, you can say, a straight person. I'm a straight person at home. I get to school [and I'm] a straight person who is curious. [Someone] who is like, 'Wait, am I gay?', who is in the process [of exploring their sexuality], that's how I can say it about myself. I still act straight but at the same time I try to be me, who I am, you know, just like, a straight person who is like wondering if they're gay or straight. That's who I am at BU. I still need to be gay but keep it low gay. (Luis Gerardo)

Several factors shaped the participants' conceptualizations of masculinity. To understand how messages from home shaped their embodiment and enactment of masculinity on campus, I focused my attention on how participants' upbringings, family backgrounds, and cultural contexts shaped their masculinity constructs. They learned to negotiate their gay identity expression within the heteronormative gender norms enforced in their homes, and used these lessons to situate their gay identity within the rigid heteronormative masculinity boundaries on campus. These boundaries limit the degree to which they were able to express their gay identities in their relationships with parental figures, siblings, and extended family members.

While BU also upheld rigid heteronormative gender boundaries of acceptable masculinity embodiments, these expectations were less rigid than the masculine ideals enforced in their homes. Within institutional borders, participants were able to explore their masculine and gay identities in more free and nuanced ways than they were in the

presence of parental figures and/or siblings. Participants' perceived rigidity of heteronormative gender boundaries within each environment, such as academic classrooms, campus social/casual spaces, and campus work settings, also informed their willingness to openly embody their queer identity. If they felt a greater risk of rejection from the individuals within a space where they perceived rigid hypermasculine and heteronormative masculinity borders, they often minimized their gay aesthetic, whereas if they felt their identities would be accepted within the masculinity boundaries, they were more likely to present a more authentic version of themselves.

In the vignette above, Luis Gerardo discussed how he negotiated gay identity expression within the situated heteronormative boundaries at home and on campus. The gender boundaries at home promoted hypermasculine expectations of physical strength, while emotional expression was removed from what a man—and in the institutional context, a professional man—should display. Thus, the underlying message Luis Gerardo internalized within his home life was one that erased gay identity and emotional expression from masculine performativity. Instead, masculinity was strongly connected to a physical aesthetic that required the projection of strength through physical build, attire, and removal of any form of emotional expression.

In different settings, Luis Gerardo was able to embody a "curious" representation of his queer identity in order to metaphorically cross the hetero-performative boundaries that surrounded him. The perceived rigidity of masculinity boundaries in a particular space was dependent on the comfort level established by the group of individuals within it. In all of their narratives, participants described gender expectations at home that emphasized masculine physicality and aesthetic, the hiding and silencing of emotional

expression, and the erasure of gay expression in order to maintain a physically strong and level-headed persona.

Borderland University also upheld rigid masculinity boundaries enforced by staff, faculty, and peers in subtle but clear ways. Students engaged with and made meaning of the campus' masculinity boundaries through the established gender borders they learned in their homes. As a result, BU's campus climate and the masculinity ideals enforced in their homes created three interconnected masculinity constructs embodied by participants: 1) Masculinity as physical, 2) Masculinity as emotionless, and 3) Masculinity as professional. The following paragraphs describe each theme using participant narratives. While all participants spoke to each of the themes to some degree, some participants' masculinity ideals were more rooted in one construct than another; for example, Eddie's narrative focused on the physical aesthetic as an embodiment of his masculinity, whereas Danny's emphasized his professional aesthetic. Cristian and Teddy, on the other hand, shifted between physical and emotional masculinity constructs as they establish their professional identities within the boundaries of the campus setting.

Masculinity as Physical

> Yeah, you're gay, but you can't be flamboyant gay ... You still need to watch how you walk, how you interact, how you talk, how you sit; you still need to watch, 'cause people are looking. You know? And people will look and will tear you apart for something that doesn't seem right. (Luis Gerardo)

On campus, gay identities were accepted as long as they did not disrupt established heteronormative strong-man norms of masculinity. The "strong-man" masculinity construct highlights the participants' internalized expectations regarding physical

aesthetics of attire, mannerisms, and muscular build. This construct, in part, was derived from early childhood messages rooted in hypermasculine ideals of physical labor and aggressiveness, and emerged in participants' consideration of their embodiment of gay identity within the boundaries of the campus. Physical aesthetics informed every aspect of how participants expressed their gender and moved through their institutional settings. As a result, participants often experienced tension as they moved between the campus' heteronormative masculine boundaries and among peers who challenged these boundaries through flamboyant gendered expressions. Thus, gay identity expression that challenged the strong-man construct, and was perceived as flamboyant or overly feminine, was marginalized and largely rejected from the heteronormative gender boundaries established by the campus community.

I use the strong-man metaphor to capture the physical expectations of masculinity and to describe the heteronormative and hypermasculine constructs participants internalized as they navigate social circles and establish connections on campus. Luis Gerardo described BU's campus for gay men as one that accepted gay-identified individuals on the condition that their gender performativity fell within the campus' heteronormative boundaries. He stated:

> [Y]es you're gay, good for you, but now be like everybody else. I've seen it in BU, I seen ... flamboyant boys around the campus, you know, they're flamboyant boys around the campus [and] they are always by themselves. I always see them searching to meet new people and then ... I'm eating and I see them, like, I see them ... looking for a spot where they can fit in but it seems like nowhere because they are flamboyant. I see how this individual that I've always seen, he tries to

> talk to people and people avoid him. They see him [and] they take another route. And I see that, you know, and I'm like, yes I can be myself but at the same time I can't.

In this reflection, Luis Gerardo recalled how a male peer, whom he perceived as being gay and overly flamboyant, encountered rejection and avoidance as he attempted to "meet new people" and "fit in" among his peers. His peer refused to uphold the heteronormative masculine boundaries through his flamboyant embodiment of his gay identity and pushed against the borders that surrounded him. As a result, Luis Gerardo perceived that the surrounding community "[took] another route" in order to avoid his peer's repeated attempts to establish peer connections. From these observations, Luis Gerardo internalized the lesson that flamboyant MAGUM who pushed against the campus' boundaries of normalized masculinity faced rejection and marginalization by the student body. Therefore, Luis Gerardo concluded, acceptance into the campus community was achieved only by silencing flamboyant expression. Gay individuals could exist on campus as long as they were "like everybody else" and maintained a masculine performativity that fit within the campus environment's gender borders. Luis Gerardo explained the psychological impact of these observations:

> It makes me feel insecure and uncomfortable, you know, 'cause here now we're in Border City, you know, yes, you might be gay, but you still need to be [and] act like a guy, you know. So when I see him I feel that, I feel that [dis]comfort of, like, me saying I am gay.

Luis Gerardo described a feeling of discomfort and insecurity in response to his peer's flamboyant expression. These tensions reinforced the internalized messages of the

importance of embodying the strong-man persona, which meant that he needed to minimize his own gay identity expression. “[Y]ou still need to … act like a guy,” he emphasized. Luis Gerardo positioned his gay identity in direct conflict with his internalized constructs of what “a guy” should embody. Thus, he used his peer’s flamboyant expression, and the consequence of rejection he experienced, to conceptualize a masculinity boundary on campus that positions his own gay identity as a risk. These boundaries of masculinity communicated that he might be negatively impacted if he were to more openly claim his gay identity. Flamboyant MAGUM risked rejection by their peers for pushing against the boundaries of masculinity constructs within the campus setting and, through his experience with his peer, Luis Gerardo identified the limits of acceptable gay identity expression. Acceptance was limited and afforded only to those who embodied the strong-man masculinity construct to fit into the campus’ heteronormative boundaries.

The Mexican American gay undergraduate men who participated in the study navigate masculinity expectations that required them to consider their physical aesthetic as they moved through their on-campus lives. Some students negotiated these expectations through their attire, how they communicated with peers, faculty and staff, who they associated with, and when and where they chose to publicly claim their gay identities. If participants were perceived to be heterosexual and embodied the strong-man construct, their interactions with queer peers was impacted and they experienced barriers to connecting and establishing social connections with peers. Eddie, a 30-year-old undergraduate student who embodied the strong-man construct through a muscular build,

full beard, tattooed forearms, and limited emotional expression, described his experience of being perceived on-campus as a heterosexual man:

> I'm pretty sure [my peers] don't know that I am [gay] … or it'd be kind of a shock if they found out that I was … because I just don't, like, I just don't come off as somebody who is [gay] … I've never denied it but I've never also confirmed it so they have no idea. I guess I look [unapproachable] … I've never seen him out [referring to a gay classmate] but I know he is [gay] … and then the reason that I say that I think I'm the one that's [being] avoided is because one time I was in the bathroom right after this class and … he like walked right out …I think …that's why ... that one student that left the bathroom when I was in there … like, you can use the bathroom dude, I'm not gonna beat you up in the bathroom or anything. That's very far from it.

Eddie did not need to claim his gay identity within any particular space on campus because he benefitted from the heteronormative assumptions his peers, faculty, and staff projected onto him. Instead, Eddie embraced a physical representation of his masculinity that was perceived as abrasive, void of emotion, and, most importantly, strong. "[I]t'd be kind of a shock if they found out," he acknowledged, referring to his gay identity. Throughout his life, he has internalized masculinity expectations of physical strength and athleticism. "I know my parents had always wanted me to be athletic, like, they've always … wanted for me to play a sport," Eddie recalled, reflecting on the masculinity expectations he learned as a child. Though he may not be an athlete, he has internalized the expectations of rugged physical muscle embodied in his masculinity.

Eddie was fully aware that his body, dress, and gestures created a perception of the strong-man masculinity construct, enabling him to perform within the campus' masculinity boundaries without concern for disrupting heteronormative gender expectations. "I've never denied [being gay]; I've never also confirmed it, so [my peers] have no idea," he stated, when pressed on why he had not publicly claimed his gay identity. Instead, he embraced the heteronormative perception, even though it created barriers to establishing peer connections. "I'm not gonna beat you up," Eddie reiterated, highlighting the threat that his strong-man embodiment of masculinity presented to his gay peer in the bathroom. This dynamic underscored the tensions between the strong-man masculine aesthetic on campus and the borders of the queer masculine performativities embedded throughout every facet of the institution. That is, a student could identify as gay and be accepted so long as he embodies a heteronormative and hypermasculine performativity.

In no other area on campus was this dynamic more apparent than on the University Dance Team (UDT). Both Cristian and Teddy were members of the UDT, and both were openly gay on campus. Cristian was the first male captain of the UDT, whose inclusion of men marked a historical shift for the team. This change, according to Cristian, challenged the surrounding community in Border City, accustomed to seeing "sexy" female dancers, to also accept male bodies into the feminized art of dance. At the same time, this change put pressure on the team and its male dancers to "be the masculine aspect" of the team. The "masculine aspect" of the institution's dance team reflected the institution's heteronormative culture and gendered boundaries, which were clearly defined and communicated to the male members of the team. Teddy recalled his coach

telling the gay men on the team, “Boys, I don’t want you holding hands,” effectively prohibiting public displays of affection with other men.

According to Teddy, the coach “care[d] a lot [about] what people might say about [UDT]” and wanted the men on the team to understand that she expected their most masculine presentation when they represented the institution. “She ... want[s] ‘my boys to dance like boys. I don’t want people telling them [homophobic] stuff.’ She’s very protective, she’s very very protective,” Teddy said, explaining the coach’s rationale for her strict enforcement of masculinity in public performances: to protect the male dancers from homophobic attitudes that might be aggravated by their perceived flamboyance. This “protection” she enacted reflected the homophobic culture perpetuated by rigid gender norms on campus and throughout the broader Border City community.

Cristian explained that, because UDT received much media attention and recognition throughout Border City, “We have to be manly. We can’t be flamboyant”—that is, he added, “unless the dance asks us to. She’ll tell us, for the dance, she’ll be like, ‘butch it up a little more’ [or] she’ll be like, ‘give me a little drag queen here and there.’” This message and instruction, coming from the leader of the University Dance Team, further highlighted the prevailing campus sentiment that gay identity was acceptable so long as one’s performativity did not disrupt the campus’ heteronormative and heterosexist boundaries.

Masculinity as Emotionless

Over the course of the participants’ lives, femininity and emotional expressions of sadness, pain, and fear were often positioned as antithetical to heteronormative expectations and hypermasculine ideals. This theme of masculinity’s absence of emotion

was threaded throughout participants' narratives and reflected in how they negotiate moments of struggle on campus. All of the men in the study internalized this emotionless-male ideal in order to portray a level-headed demeanor, even through difficult moments. Additionally, their gay identities added a layer of complexity through which emotional expression became negatively associated with a gay aesthetic, further reinforcing the pressure they felt to hide their emotions of struggle.

For this group of Mexican American gay undergraduate men, their emotions did not exist in isolation; instead, their emotions were a direct reflection of their gay identities. If they expressed too much emotion through their embodiments of masculinity, they also risked unintentionally exposing their gay identities. Thus, feminine/queer characteristics, masculine ideals, and emotional expression all became intertwined. These entanglements required the participants to constantly readjust under the campus community's close scrutiny and within its rigid heteronormative boundaries.

Luis Gerardo, for example, learned that asking for help in moments of struggle was not a vulnerability a man should demonstrate:

> I'm a man, but I kind of, I guess if you put it in a different perspective, I'm kind of like a woman. Women are sensitive and follow their instincts, well, that's like me, you know? I'm like that but in a man's body. I say it like that 'cause in my house, expressing emotion is not something we know how to do. If you have an issue, you keep it to yourself and you fix it yourself 'cause that's your job, there's no going to, you know, [ask for help].

In this quote, Luis Gerardo clearly made a distinction between masculinity and emotions. From Luis Gerardo's perspective, emotional expression, sensitivity, and intuitiveness are

all reserved for the woman, the female, and not accessible for men to embrace and embody. In fact, Luis Gerardo's meaning-making process of emotional expression and masculinity created walls around his emotions in order to contain moments of emotional expression as something separate from himself. He described his emotions as part of the woman/feminine side he had to keep hidden within the psychological borders he created. These messages were perpetuated by the ideal that men are independent and self-sufficient, and he learned that men are solely responsible for "fixing" situations that need resolution, without assistance. The man was positioned as the sole problem-solver within the home and thus the person primarily responsible because, as a man, "that's your job." In an effort to avoid being seen as weak or incapable of solving their own problems, all participants described moving through difficult moments while carefully considering the heteronormative expectations regarding emotional expression and hiding their emotions, only releasing them within specific physical boundaries such as the safety of their bedrooms, or within the cognitive borders they created to manage their emotions.

Participants often conceptualized the erasure of emotion as a strategy to avoid being perceived as weak. This pressure to be emotionless was heightened by participants' desire to minimize the visibility of their gay identities by not seeming too emotional and overly feminine. Teddy, for example, reflected on his intentional avoidance of crying in public settings: "I usually don't cry. I don't like to cry … I don't like to show weakness." Teddy, who described himself as "gay as fuck" and easily embodied and celebrated a more feminine self, existed within the tension between claiming a feminized embodiment of a gay aesthetic and continuing to uphold the ideal of emotionless masculinity. So, in Teddy's narrative, the tension of navigating heteronormative borders emerged in the

ways he challenged his physical masculinity while holding his emotions inside to avoid exposure.

Danny described his reproduction of the emotionless-male ideal:

> [I] like crying, which is weird ... crying [is] like showing people a side of weakness which I guess I'm afraid for people to, like, use that to hurt me.

Here, Danny shed light on the threat to masculinity presented by public displays of emotion—vulnerability. From Danny's perspective, public emotion rendered masculinity vulnerable because moments of so-called weakness might then be used against him at a later point on BU's campus.

Cristian also described the emotionless-male ideal in terms of crying:

> I can't cry in public. If I cry in public ... To me, everybody sees me as strong and foot-forward. I'm always … [with] my head straight. I never look back. I'm not gonna give people any reason to look at me as weak.

Although Cristian freely embraced a flamboyant embodiment, he also internalized and accepted that crying would render his masculinity vulnerable. So Cristian's embrace of a more feminized aesthetic within the campus' heteronormative masculinity borders, while upholding the emotionless-male ideal, emphasized the limits of gender boundaries that even he could not transcend in an institutional setting. While he was able to embrace his inner Hannah Montana on campus, Cristian still adhered to the emotionless-male ideal learned at home and upheld within the campus' walls. The close associations between emotional expression, femininity, and a gay aesthetic represented an additional risk Cristian was unwilling to take while on campus. Instead, he hid his emotions of struggle and pain, using his Hannah Montana persona to mask his hardships. This positioned

emotional expression as the boundary of masculinity which, were Cristian to cross it, would potentially tarnish the platform of recognition, social popularity, and success he had established that allowed him to challenge the campus' boundaries of masculinity.

To uphold the emotionless-male ideal, participants developed cognitive self-talk and rationales to explain their intentional erasure of emotions. Eddie, for example, reflected on how he guarded his emotions of struggle:

> I keep them [my emotions] pretty close to the chest unless—No, I think I keep my emotions pretty close to the chest regardless ... If I'm not in the mood to be emotional, I'm going to kind of come off like a dick. I'm going to come off that way. I'm just going to come off like a hard ass.

In order to mask moments of emotional expression and vulnerability, Eddie projected distance and a closed personality to discourage peers from asking him too many questions. He could control when and how expressing emotions of struggle is valid, or whether he was "in the mood to be emotional." This cognitive process highlighted messages of control and level-headedness reproduced within masculinity expectations both within and outside his home. Eddie took on the facade of control and minimized his emotions of struggle to hide moments of hardship.

Luis N. spoke extensively of the struggles he faced in the final semester of his senior year. As the end of the semester neared, he fell behind in classes, his grandfather in Mexico fell ill, and tensions arose in his long-term relationship of six years. In the midst of these struggles, he was also preparing to graduate and become the first in his family to complete a college degree:

> It's been tough in an emotional way but in other ways, I feel like it's stupid, so to speak. I feel like I shouldn't be worrying about this stuff. I shouldn't be so emotional. Why am I letting these things bother me? Just move on, get over with it.

Here, Luis N. articulated a key underlying message mirrored in all of the students' narratives: he questioned the validity of his emotions of struggle and why, from his perspective, he had allowed the hardships he faced to derail his progress. In this critical moment, and with his graduation on the line, he prioritized his success over his urge to keep his struggles within the boundaries of silence and invisibility. For the first time at BU, he needed to rely on the flexibility of faculty to grant him extensions on his assignments and projects in order to graduate. Once the semester was over and he had successfully completed his degree, Luis N. effectively minimized his emotional struggles, which he painted as overly "emotional" and "stupid," and instead reverted back to the problem-solver, emotionless-male ideal to "just move on, get over with it."

Similarly, Danny also adopted the narrative of moving past moments of struggle by ignoring or completely erasing difficult situations from his on-campus persona:

> When it comes even at work, like, if something [goes wrong] it's just like "oh, I didn't expect this," you know. Well you know just clean it up, do what you can, fake it till you make it and let's do it. Even like, when I perform, when we mess up it's like no one else knows that I messed up so just perform and do your job. Make sure the audience is still entertained, show a story and then finish.

Danny, a seasoned ballroom dancer, compared his moments of struggle on campus to mistakes he might make during a dance performance. "Just perform and do your job,"

Danny stated, as he reiterated his comparison between dance masculine performativity. As a man, it was important to ensure that those around you were "still entertained," and this responsibility fell on the entertainer, the man, to ensure the outer gaze was satisfied with the performance. In other words, Danny viewed his struggles as an individual issue, about which no one on the outside should know. Instead, he relied only on himself to recover from the mistake, minimize it as much as possible, and move on. "Fake it till you make it," he reiterated, to emphasize the importance of maintaining an outward aesthetic that is calm and collected even in moments of struggle.

For this group of men, emotional expression—specifically emotions associated with struggle, such as depression, sadness, pain, or helplessness—became equated with their willingness to expose their gay identities. All six of the men in the study focused much of their reflections on the struggle to actively hide those emotions they associated with being too feminine. Importantly, the men sometimes used a full range of positive emotions to create a façade of happiness, when in fact, they were experiencing the opposite range of emotions. Luis Gerardo, for example, described masculinity as "doing drag" and "having to put on makeup" in order to pretend "you're happy and you're not." For Luis Gerardo, his embodiment of happiness was at times a strategy to deflect from the pain he was experiencing. Similarly, Danny spoke of happiness less as an emotion and more of a strategy to hide emotions of struggle: "I'm really friendly. I'm super happy all the time. But if I'm upset, sad, like, as a professional, I won't show my emotions." Here, Danny suggests that he embodies happiness, even in moments of difficulty, in order to maintain a particular professional aesthetic, which I expand upon in the next section of this chapter. Therefore, emotions of struggle, or emotions deemed as too feminine and

therefore closely entangled with the exposure of these men's gay identities, were often mitigated through their intentional efforts to project the opposite emotion of happiness.

For Cristian, Luis N., Eddie, & Teddy, positive emotions were often associated with their families or some future state of being. "To see my parents happy made it all worth it," Cristian stated, reflecting on the significance of completing his undergraduate degree. The idea of making their families happy by achieving success within higher education resonated throughout each of their stories but, interestingly, they often portrayed happiness as an emotion that could only truly be embodied with the affirmation of the family unit. Eddie for example, stated that if his mother was "happy" with his pursuit of a college education and long-term career, "that's what I look for, pride within our own family." For both Cristian and Eddie, their happiness was contingent upon their families' approval and validation of their efforts within the academy. Similarly, Luis N.'s happiness was contingent on both his family's acknowledgement of his efforts but also on the satisfaction he derived from his academic success at BU. "I felt so happy," he stated, reflecting on the day of his graduation ceremony. Luis N. received a stole and pins of décor for his graduation gown in acknowledgement of his academic achievements. Not only did his happiness stem from displaying his markers of success during his graduation, but also from the affirmation that came from his family. In Teddy's narrative, true happiness emerged as a future state of being after the completion of his degree: "Then for me, it's just being better, having a better future … being happy forever." While he considered himself a very happy and open person, his true and long-term happiness was not attainable without success in the form of a college degree.

The heteronormative gendered boundaries upheld within BU's campus meant that each participant had to negotiate emotional expression in moments of struggle to avoid exposing their gay identities and/or to avoid self-feminization within the broader campus community. As a result of this association, the "emotional" man construct became feminized and weak. This dynamic directly informed how participants viewed themselves within the college setting as they aspired to establish themselves on campus as professionals and scholars.

Masculinity as Professionalism

The construct of masculine professionalism, or the professional-man construct, describes how participants construct masculinity within formal spaces on campus, and encapsulates how these spaces allowed the participants to either claim or mask their gay identities as they dealt with their fears of being seen as immature, overly feminine, or unprofessional. All of these student narratives highlighted internalized messages of independence and self-sufficiency, coupled with the negative stereotypes associated with gay identity and emotional expression. These dynamics manifested in their college experience as pressure to establish their professional identities within the masculinity borders upheld in the academic classroom, student resource offices, student work spaces, and social areas on campus. The men in the study described strategies they used to navigate masculinity borders and communicate with advisers, faculty, and staff, and how they either minimized or over-performed their gay identities depending on particular spaces and people in any given locale on campus. This crossing of heteronormative borders, explored later in this dissertation, meant that they often had to render their gay

identities invisible or silent in order to embody a hetero-masculine professional aesthetic within the institutional context.

Luis Gerardo spoke openly about how he internalized pressure to mask his gay identity while interacting with peers, faculty, and staff in his attempts to establish a professional identity on campus. He stated:

> I just can't [come out as gay], 'cause I see it as ... I see it as they won't take you serious. That's how I see it. That's how I see it, they won't see the man [I am], you know? They won't see that it's just you being you and you being professional, you know? [W]hen you tell them I'm gay they're like oh well it's like I'm being professional, you know what I mean? 'Cause for example, you put it where you're working with other staff and they're all men, I'm gay. They will approach it as, "well now he's going to act gay in front of our office, now he's gonna act gay so he's gonna make us look bad," that's how I see it. That's why it's really hard for me to set that foundation of, you know, being, "sir yes I'm gay but I'm capable of doing the work" but 'cause you hear the word gay you're gonna be like, "I can't take you serious 'cause you're just probably gonna be fooling around, you know, like an unprofessional person."

Luis Gerardo's reflection demonstrated a salient awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with his gay identity as well as his deeply internalized construct of a professional man. Here, he uncovered an underlying message many of the men in the study also internalized: that gay identity was a direct threat to the professional and academic settings on BU's campus. Luis Gerardo recognized that the societal discourse around gay men characterized them as overly flamboyant and immature, and made men

within the institutional settings the primary enforcers of professional standards. As a result, he was continuously aware of his masculine presentation within different settings in order to portray a strong, level-headed, mature, professional man: “When I do have to approach someone ... I try to act as most professional as [I can].” For Luis Gerardo, professionalism for gay men at BU could only be achieved through the erasure of a gay aesthetic and reinforcement of heteronormative gender norms that valued physical appearance and minimal expression of emotions. “If you’re gay, good, but you need to be masculine,” Luis Gerardo further emphasized.

Similarly, Luis N. spoke extensively about his own experiences negotiating his gay identity within the campus’ professional boundaries:

> I feel like it’s not necessarily fair, the fact that we have to hide who we are just because of … well what is the business gonna say? Well what are these people gonna say? What are they gonna say about you if you’re openly gay and you wanna apply to certain colleges, like, or what are they gonna say … are you … is this … [does] that make you professional? Does that not make you professional? [W]e are more than just, oh we’re gay people, [*exaggerated, flamboyant tone*] we’re gonna get together and have a picnic, we’re gonna get together and be happy rainbows and … NO … like, we are more than just that … we do other things, we’re not just about partying and doing these rainbow flamboyant things, like … and people fail to see those things.

Luis N.’s reflection underscored the negative stereotypes gay men on campus navigated as they established their professional identities. He also identified some of the broader symbols often attached to gay communities that accentuated only the most stereotypical

aspects of the LGBT community, usually observed at gay-pride events; specifically, the rainbow, picnics, and flamboyance were three of the driving stereotypes he felt pressure to navigate within BU's campus. These stereotypes became a threat to MAGUM within the academic and professional settings on campus that replicated and upheld rigid hetero-masculine views of what it means to be a professional man.

Danny also spoke extensively about the strategies he enacted in order to establish and maintain his professional identity on campus. He reflected on one of his first experiences on BU's campus as he prepared to meet the staff and fellow peers who were part of a Merit Scholars program during his first year as a student. As his peers shared openly about their struggles to make it to college, some shared about hardships in their families, while others shared personal aspects of their individual identities. Many students shed tears during these moments of connection with one another and willingly made themselves vulnerable as a way to connect. Danny, however, was fully aware that his peers and professional staff in the room would receive information about his personal story that could impact how his professional identity would be established on campus. He stated:

> But the actual move-in day where individuals shared their story, my current boss, [Mr. Andrade[3]], he's the director of the student engagement leadership center, he was actually sitting in the back writing notes about everyone's story. So, when I went up there it was more like I knew they were writing notes and I've ... always been in big leadership roles growing up and I never really showed my emotion.

[3] Pseudonyms were used for all peripheral characters in participant narratives

> I'm really friendly. I'm super happy all the time. But if I'm upset, sad, like, as a professional I will not show my emotions. I would just be like, "dust it off, no one needs to know that, it's okay," and still be very friendly, so when it was time to share my story I … even though everyone else was crying, I didn't.

During this experience, Danny navigated the tension between wanting to connect with his peers and being fully aware that what he shared might reflect negatively on him and his developing professional identity. As he prepared to share, he opted for a more polished and less personal story to offer his peers. Danny also made an intentional decision and chose not to share within the public space that he identified as a gay man. He drew a boundary between professionalism and emotional expression: "If I'm upset, sad, like, as a professional I will not show my emotions," he stated. Instead, Danny further highlighted the importance of maintaining an outward appearance of level-headed professionalism: "Dust it off, no one needs to know," he stated, to emphasize the importance of masking emotional expression within professional settings and embodying a strong, emotionless, professional embodiment of himself.

Some participants engaged with their professional and gay identities differently depending on how openly gay they were on campus. Neither Teddy nor Cristian, for example, felt the same pressure to minimize their gay aesthetics. On the contrary, so long as they kept their emotions in check and their "strong face" on, as Cristian explained, they could easily navigate the campus, freely claiming their gay identities. Importantly, Cristian also established a strong reputation on campus and was highly regarded throughout the institution in large part because of his role as captain of the University Dance Team. Teddy enjoyed a similar platform: as a member of the University Dance

Team and a close friend to Cristian, he was able to claim his gay identity with minimal fear of negative impact to his professional identity. Here, Cristian and Teddy exposed the double standards upheld on BU's campus; that is, positional power in the form of student leadership roles, social popularity, and campus-wide recognition allowed Cristian to cross into and occupy heteronormative spaces on campus more authentically than his peers who were not similarly revered.

Eddie, on the other hand, had a completely different experience, feeling no pressure to hide any aspect of his identity because, from his perspective, he was perceived as a straight masculine man. His experience was also unique in that he was a returning college student and spent several years working in professional settings prior to his return to school. It is important to note that while Eddie felt no pressure to hide his gay identity, he did not willingly claim his identity among his peers, faculty, or staff. This avoidance or unwillingness to publicly identify as gay might also have been a strategy he employed to avoid disrupting, and continue maintaining, the hetero-masculine aesthetic his peers, faculty and staff attributed to him.

Conclusion

The physical, emotional, and professional masculinity constructs the men in this study embodied on BU's campus were directly derived from messages they received at home during early childhood. All of the men internalized messages of a strong physical aesthetic untainted by overly emotional expressions, especially in moments of struggle. They learned that the man must be the primary problem-solver and, from their experiences, that professionalism was also subject to heteronormative and

hypermasculine expectations. These masculinity constructs emerged as central considerations during their engagement within the BU community.

In the following sections I discuss how constructs of masculinity as physical, emotionless, and professional influenced how these men acclimated and crossed into the heteronormative borders of the campus environment and slowly exposed their gay identities if they felt the individuals within a particular space would accept them. I present the following analysis sections while maintaining the portraiture approach and examining more deeply into how these three masculinity constructs shaped their engagement with the campus community. I also discuss the various tensions participants encountered and the risks they associated with their queer aesthetics, both at home and on campus. I present multiple possibilities within each of the identified themes in order to resist drawing definitive and essentialized conclusions, and instead open up multiple possibilities and discourses to understand participants' individual narratives. Finally, I draw connections between how participants used their success in higher education as a strategy to bring pride to their families, and how some of them used that success to shadow and deflect attention from their gay identities.

Chapter 7: Crossing Heteronormative Borders

> When I'm [with my] engineering [peers], yes, I have to adapt into the culture [of masculinity], but yet, I'm still going to be proud of my identity [even though] I'm adapting. . . . It's not [that] I'm hiding who I am, but also I need to be able to relate to someone for me to show them something new. If all they think is black, then I have to start in with going with maybe a faded black and from there showing them that there's more, but I'm not going to go from black to white. I'm going to go step by step and show them that there's more. (Danny)

Throughout the course of our conversations, some participants described situations in which they were confronted with hypermasculine and heteronormative gender expectations that placed specific emphasis on their physical aesthetics, ability to hide emotions, professional demeanors, and adherence to the physical and emotionless constructs of masculinity at home and on campus. The metaphor of crossing heteronormative borders describes participants' strategic assessment of how much they needed to hide their gay identities and aesthetics, depending on the rigidity of the heteronormative boundaries, who else was present, and where they were located on campus. They developed strategies to conform to these constructs, at least temporarily, in order to ensure they did not immediately disrupt the heteronormative climate; as they established commonality with individuals around them, they strategically determined whether their queerness would be accepted (or rejected) when/if they chose to reveal aspects of their gay identities. These strategies were enacted within both the institutional setting and their home environments.

Danny described his experience in engineering as "male-dominated" and discussed a research project in which he predicted that "60% of LGBT individuals will go back in the closet" upon entering the field of engineering as new professionals due to the inherently heteronormative borders that surround his BU experience. In the vignette above, he recognized that within his engineering life at BU, he has had to "adapt" to the department's heteronormative culture. He was able to do this without compromising his authentic self because he recognized that his initial engagement within the space was an effort to connect with his peers and "relate" to them, without wearing his gay identity in a way that disrupted the dominant masculinity boundaries surrounding him. This strategy established comfort with his peers before slowly beginning to bring his gay aesthetic to the forefront of his embodiment of identity. In other words, "if all they think is black," which Danny used as a metaphor for heterosexuality, then he had to ease them into his queerness with a "faded black" or a version of himself that became incrementally queered as he established rapport within the space. As his comfort with the group grew, he was able to show them more of his authentic self. Danny could not simply go "from black to white" or embody his queer identity immediately upon crossing the heteronormative boundaries of the engineering space. Instead, he slowly introduced his queer identity "step by step" into the heteronormative borders in order to show them there is more than just black and more than just heteronormativity.

Even though Danny's on-campus role was specifically in LGBT student-support initiatives, he still felt pressure to uphold heteronormativity in other areas of his on-campus life. He reflected on a situation in which he was socializing with peers while discussing his position in the Student Engagement Office. As he described his student

leadership position, instead of stating that his role was specifically to lead the Rainbow Initiative or LGBT student support, he opted for the more heteronormative description: "I said I work in inclusion advocacy." In order to establish a connection with his peers and prevent his gay identity, or his position in LGBT student support, from becoming a barrier to crossing into heteronormative spaces and establish potential connections or friendship, Danny omitted his specific title and the queer nature of his work. He continued:

> In a way, I should've just been comfortable and said [that I work with LGBT student support initiatives], but I guess because we're talking to someone that's straight ... and 'cause they're more masculine, naturally that's how I guess culture, society, puts it that way.

Danny's insight into this interaction highlighted the layers he believed were at play in that moment. He recognized the heteronormative and hypermasculine dynamics that played out in this situation. On one hand, he was charged with LGBT student-support initiatives, visibility, and advocacy; on the other, he navigated boundaries of heterosexism, homophobia, and hypermasculinity among his peers. Regardless of his campus leadership roles or his academic success on campus, he was still faced with situations in which he needed to blend into the heteronormative climate as a way to maintain masculinity constructs that upheld his physical, emotionless, and professional identity on campus.

Luis Gerardo also crossed into heteronormative boundaries in different spaces on campus to establish peer connections. He began his first semester at BU with the intent to be fully himself and completely honest about his gay identity, and he made intentional

efforts to become involved on campus. He immediately found himself holding tensions of wanting to be honest and authentic about his gay identity, while realizing that he could not simply "be gay" in every area of his life on campus. This reality was made clear to him as he went through the rush process to join the Latino fraternity on campus. Luis Gerardo reflected on his strategy to maneuver his gay identity within and among the fraternity brothers in the organization:

> I'm straight. I'm straight with [the fraternity guys]. I'm that, "Oh let's go play sports...or let's do men's stuff." That's how I am [with the fraternity guys]. I am trying to show them that yes, I'm gay, but it only means I'm sleeping with dudes, that's it. It doesn't mean that I'm gonna color my nails or that I'm gonna paint my hair. That's the [straight] image that I'm trying to set with them.

With the brothers of the fraternity, Luis Gerardo was "straight," and in order to embody this aesthetic he emphasized his interest in sports and adhered to the physical masculinity constructs he had internalized. Luis Gerardo crossed into the heteronormative borders of the fraternity and realized that he needed to first establish a connection with the brothers of the fraternity and also to combat the stereotypes of flamboyancy associated with gay men. He attempted to show the fraternity brothers a masculine presentation of himself, one that was free from all feminine expressions and one that did not create a threat to their own masculinity. Luis Gerardo felt pressure to reassure his peers that his induction into the fraternity would not queer the heteronormative brand of the fraternity. In the first months of the rush process, Luis Gerardo worked to establish a connection with the brothers of the fraternity by displaying a hypermasculine facade, so that when the time

came for him to reveal his gay identity, they had already developed a perception of his masculinity that fit within the group's masculinity boundaries.

In a different setting, among peers with whom he had already established a strong rapport, Luis Gerardo described an in-betweenness of his identity, one that was neither completely straight nor completely gay. He stated:

> [W]hen I'm with my friends I act [like] who I am. I act straight, but you know, I can be like, well, I guess I can talk gay. As in, "Well that guy's hot," you know. "He's cute." [I] can't do [that] in the fraternity. It's something that I don't see myself doing in the fraternity and being "Oh, that dude's, you know, he's cute let me go talk to him," you know. That's something that you really can't do and that's something that I do with my friends. So, it's like changing. [I'm] someone new every time [I enter] a new setting.

Here, Luis Gerardo described a dual embodiment of his identities, one straight and one questioning. With peers he considered friends, he continued to claim a straight identity but was able to queer his engagement by alluding to a bisexual curiosity. Within this friend group, Luis Gerardo slowly began to claim his queer identity by demonstrating an interest in other men. "I can talk gay," he stated. He still claimed a straight, yet sexually curious identity in order to minimize the disruption to heteronormative borders this group of friends upheld. In that moment, he existed in a state of in-betweenness as he conformed to the boundaries of heteronormativity while also slowly queering his identity in hopes that he would be able to fully claim his gay identity as the relationships with this group of friends continued to develop.

Luis Gerardo, who lived at home and commuted to the BU campus, also felt pressure to embody a hetero persona within his home in order to fit into the gender expectations primarily enforced by his father:

> [A]t home, you need to be straight and not gay. You do whatever you wanna do in bed, but when you're out of your room, you need to be straight. You need to act straight 'cause that's how we are in my family, you know, and that's, honestly, it's uncomfortable, it's really uncomfortable.

Luis Gerardo recognized the physical and psychological boundaries of embodying his gay identity and identified his room as the only space in which he was able to fully be himself. However, outside the boundaries of his room, and to effectively cross into the heteronormative environment within his home, he had to transform his persona into a straight man the moment he left the boundaries of his personal space. As a result, he existed in a constant state of discomfort even within the realm of his home life. In order to minimize his level of discomfort and lessen its impact, Luis Gerardo isolated himself from the other members of the family even when they came together as a collective unit:

> [I] don't eat with them. I really don't. I eat in my own room. Yeah, I call my room the cave because that's where I like to be all the time. That's my room. That's my house. I don't know. In my perspective, it's like my mom wants to have everything perfect, perfect kids, perfect house.

Luis Gerardo utilized the strategy of avoidance and isolation to protect himself from the discomfort he experienced in his home, and also to avoid disrupting the gender norms enforced outside of his "cave." He distinguished his room, or cave, as he described it, as the space he considered "his house" and therefore the only space where he was able to

reveal his authentic self within the boundaries of his home, and where the other members of the family upheld heteronormative expectations. Further highlighting the psychological dissonance he felt, Luis Gerardo stated that his mother "wants to have everything perfect" and in doing so implied that his gay identity would taint the "perfect kids, perfect house" image she strived to uphold. Further, he associated perfection with heterosexuality, emphasizing the pressure he felt not to disrupt the "image" of the perfect heterosexual home, an image his family desired to establish both within and outside the boundaries of the household. So, Luis Gerardo internalized the hypermasculine ideals he learned over the course of his life and came to view his gay identity as something hidden from the other members of the household, not only to avoid disrupting the home's heteronormative environment but also to avoid making an otherwise perfect home imperfect.

Luis N., who was in a relationship with his boyfriend for six years, also described a number of instances when he altered his aesthetic before crossing into spaces that uphold rigid heteronormative boundaries, foremost among them the first time he joined his boyfriend's family for dinner. After years of being together, Luis N. prepared to join his boyfriend's parents for their traditional *tamalada* over the Christmas holiday. The occasion was the first time in their six-year relationship that he spent any extended amount of time in the presence of his boyfriend's father. As he prepared for the occasion, he scrutinized his appearance to ensure he could, at least in his aesthetic, conform to the heteronormative expectations he anticipated the father having. He reflected on the thought process he went through as he prepared for the evening:

> I have to wear something super masc, super masculine, so that [his dad is] not all weirded out ... I started looking for the most non-color [clothing I have]. [S]omething that is very, I guess, so to speak, more rugged. I don't know. I guess just whatever, jeans, something a regular, heterosexual, very not-metro[sexual] guy would wear. Just very plain colors, not too flamboyant, not too in-your-face. Then I look at myself in the mirror and I was like, "Oh, my God, look at my hair ... He's going to freak out with this shit." [I] was like, "I'm going to dye my hair."

Here, Luis N. anticipated that his boyfriend's father might hold homophobic attitudes or stereotypes against gay men and felt responsible for ensuring that his boyfriend's father was "not all weirded out" in his presence. The cause of this potential weirdness, Luis N. identified, spoke to his outward presentation. He sought attire that was "super masculine," which he conceptualized as directly tied to "rugged," or a physically aggressive performativity, and "plain"-colored attire that did not call too much attention to his gay identity. He intentionally avoided a metrosexual aesthetic or a presentation of himself that may have seemed overly manicured, and instead opted for a desired look that was muted, not too "flamboyant" or "too in your face." To further accentuate his heteronormative presentation and effectively operate within the masculinity borders within his boyfriend's household, Luis N. quickly decided to darken his bleached hair in order to fully embody a masculine performativity that would effectively massage the heteronormative expectations within his boyfriend's home.

Cristian, who was known on the BU campus as the captain of the University Dance Team and officer in the student senate, also presented two different versions of himself. One embodiment upheld the gender norms within his home, and another fulfilled

the perception of a highly motivated, successful, and confidently queer individual on campus. Cristian reflected on this dual existence and described it as a "double life." He stated:

> I put up, like, a different front [on campus]. I think of myself as Hannah Montana. I'm like Miley. I have to put on this persona. I'm Hannah Montana when I dance. At school I'm Hannah Montana. When I'm out in public, I'm Hannah Montana. But when I'm home, I'm like this little boy from Border City, Texas. I'm just average and then when I'm out I'm this superstar. That's how I think of myself. That's how I think my life is, honestly. I live a double life day and night.

He compared himself to Hannah Montana, the titular character of a popular American TV show who lived as an average person during the day and became a musical sensation at night, to describe his dual realities within the boundaries of the campus and at home. Cristian recognized that the limits within his home required an embodiment of masculinity that differed from the ways he was able to embrace his gay identity on campus. On BU's campus, he was a "superstar," enjoying social popularity, academic success, and various leadership roles. In each of these areas of his campus life, he was allowed to claim his gay identity in ways inaccessible to his MAGUM peers. Importantly, in choosing to compare his experience to that of a female character, he positioned his identity on campus as a feminized adaptation of his identity.

In contrast, within the boundaries of his home, he presented a masculinized rendition of himself. To do this, he became "a little boy" who was average. This iteration of Cristian was free of feminine mannerisms and was quiet and not gregarious. He maintained a distance from male family members as a way to limit engagement and

minimize the risk of exposing his inner Hannah Montana. Instead, he spent much of his time at home isolated within his room:

> [A]t home, I'm just mostly to myself. I'm always either doing homework or looking up choreography, or watching TV, or playing video games, or talking on the phone. I rarely interact with my family except for my mom. I love my mom and she's probably the one I interact with the most at home, but like my brother and my dad and stuff, like, I don't really interact with them how I do with my mom.

Similar to Luis Gerardo's narrative, when Cristian was at home, he retreated into the boundaries of his room and kept to himself. He connected primarily with his mother, who he described as the person who "shielded" him from his father's hypermasculine expectations throughout his childhood. Therefore, he felt comfortable engaging with his mother on a regular basis. On the other hand, he limited his interactions with his father and brother in order to minimize the contradictions he might embody that went against their heteronormative expectations of him. "I don't know why," he explained, as he reflected on why he distanced himself from the men in the home. This avoidance was likely due to the fact that his brother was "at that stage" where he was expressing interest in other women at his high school. "He's, like, going through that girl-crazy stage," Cristian explained. Their differing orientations, one hidden and one not, created an uncomfortable dynamic for Cristian as he found himself in a position to counsel his younger brother through his heterosexual desires. "He tells me about all that stuff," Cristian reflected, as he tried to explain his intentional avoidance of his father and brother. These exchanges with his brother shed light on the reasons he also avoided his

father. "When are you gonna bring a girlfriend home?" his father asked periodically. With his father being the primary enforcer of hypermasculine ideals within his home throughout his childhood, Cristian limited his engagement in an effort to minimize the possibility that his father might sense the Hannah Montana he kept hidden inside. Cristian's inner Hannah Montana could only be revealed outside the boundaries of his home, and he concealed this version of himself whenever he entered the space of his home in order to adhere to the heteronormative expectations within it.

The theme of massaging heteronormativity manifested in participant narratives in various ways. Cristian and Teddy, both UDT members, described the dance team as a queer-friendly space where many of the men identified as gay. Nonetheless, the gay members of the team were expected to uphold hypermasculine and heteronormative embodiments of masculinity through their dance styles while representing Borderland University at public performances, football games, campus events, and Border City community-engagement opportunities. Teddy recalled his first experiences with his coach after he joined the UDT:

> Cristian [and I] came on the team together my first freshman year. [W]e danced so different. He was very effeminate and I was just different, so she made us match each other in a masculine way. [T]here's two other [gay guys] ... one boyfriend and some other guy. [They both] danced very feminine and since day one in tryouts [our coach] was like, you need to fix the way you dance … you need to match my other boys. I don't know how she sees it but I'm already used to it so I try not to do a lot of feminine stuff.

He described Cristian's dance style as "very effeminate" and his own as "different." Both Cristian and Teddy were directed to "butch up" their dancing and remove any effeminate mannerisms or overly dramatic gestures such as head spins, hand gestures, and caved-in shoulders. Through their dance styles, they learned to embody a masculinized dance technique in order to ensure that the public's masculinity expectations for the coach's "boys" would be met regardless of the fact that the majority of the men on the team identified as gay. Teddy went on to say that the conditioning of their masculine performativity through their dance began from the moment they auditioned for the team. "She never wants the audience to laugh at us." Cristian explained. Rather than risk the University Dance Team's men being ridiculed by the public for being overly feminine in their dance moves, they were asked to uphold heteronormativity, momentarily, in each of their public performances to avoid backlash from, in Cristian's words, "the macho-like … guys that are like, 'America! No gays!'"

Conclusion

Participants anticipated barriers created by heteronormative expectations in their homes and on campus. To maneuver through these tensions and ensure their first interactions within a space were not tainted by homophobic attitudes, they conformed to the heteronormative standards within the spaces they occupied on campus and dulled down their gay presentation in their initial interactions as a way to first "relate" to those in the space. Over time, they slowly made decisions to either continue hiding their gay identities or, if they felt the risk was not too high, they began to show a more queer or "faded black" version of themselves in order to ease their queerness into the heteronormative environment surrounding them.

As they grew more familiar and connected within different spaces on campus and determined the elasticity of the heteronormative borders surrounding them, they considered the risks associated with exposing their gay identity and the extent to which those risks would negatively impact their ability to access predominantly heteronormative spaces. In the following chapter, I present six portraits of the risk described by participants as they reflected on their experiences at BU. These representations include the risk of social isolation from their peers, the risk of their gay identities being exposed to their family, the risk of being perceived as unprofessional, and the risk to the broader institution presented by those participants who held prominent student roles.

Chapter 8: Gay Identity as a Risk

> I think [The Vice President for Student Affairs] is [gay], and it's funny though because I [met] him [when I was in] high school. When I first met him, I did a lot of work in high school and my friend [Juan], he's another Merit Scholar, like, when [the VPSA said] hi to him it was more like "What's up?" and when he said hi to me he gave me a hug. [M]y friends even saw that and they're like, "He gave you a hug but he was [distant] with [Juan]." I'm like, I mean, I don't care, I hug everyone ... but maybe it was like he knew that I knew [he is gay] so it was ... one thing I noticed since high school. I do think that because of the role that he has, if he would actually speak out and be like, "Oh I'm gay" or "I'm openly gay" ... he would make a big impact. I don't think he has done it from what I've seen. (Danny)

Each participant was subjected to heterosexist and heteronormative gender expectations that they were forced to embody within the institutional setting, and professionalism was constructed and represented within the confines of heteronormative masculinity expectations that were upheld by the dominant institutional campus climate. As an example of this, Danny described the added care he perceived in his engagement with the institution's Vice President for Student Affairs, who he suspected also identified as gay. Danny interpreted this added care, and his peer's observations of their exchange, as an acknowledgement of their mutual gayness, which remained an open secret in public settings on campus. The lack of public acknowledgement of gay identity within the campus' boundaries perpetuated the "straightening" of these men's gay aesthetics to maintain heteronormative professional standards and more easily cross heteronormative

borders. Therefore, as they navigated the borders created by classroom settings, peer group spaces, and institutional resource spaces, they always recognized moments of risk to their professional identities, and made decisions about their identity performativity in order to protect and maintain a specific professional self-representation within the campus dynamic.

Risk to Professionalism

Heteronormative professional standards were modeled by the institution's top administrators. In the vignette above, Danny reflected on the role of the Vice President of Student Affairs at the institution, who he perceived as a gay Latino man. In his role as VPSA, this man embodied a heteronormative professional aesthetic to operate within the heteronormative borders of the administration. Similarly, many gay Latino men on campus had to assimilate into a professional aesthetic that accentuated a hetero-masculine standard of professionalism, an embodiment of professional masculinity that the VPSA exemplified on campus while also silencing his gay identity. "[M]aybe it was like he knew that I knew," Danny stated, acknowledging a dynamic with the VPSA in which an open secret was kept between them, a familiarity in their shared gay identity that need not be named but was assumed between both individuals. "[H]e would make a big impact," Danny continued, as he considered the lack of representation of out LGBT individuals among administrators, staff, and faculty. The silence and invisibility of gay-identified staff and faculty highlighted the risk of being openly gay on campus. The role of Vice President for Student Affairs, for example, required the VPSA to uphold heteronormative professional standards or risk being viewed as unprofessional, immature, or

flamboyant—just some of the negative stereotypes often associated with the gay community.

The lack of openly gay staff and faculty resulted in some of the students feeling wary about accessing campus resources. They were discouraged from seeking support when they most needed guidance, for fear their gay identity would be exposed and impact how they were perceived. They strategically distanced themselves from university resources to avoid disclosing information that was too personal or could expose their gay identities to an uncomfortable extent. The more interaction that specific resources required in order to successfully access them, the less likely these students were to seek out their support.

This hesitancy emerged in all six student narratives as they described feeling hyper-aware of the negative stigma of being openly gay on campus. Danny effectively captured this sentiment as he described the social dynamics between his peers while he was promoting programs as an LGBT student-initiatives intern:

> [T]he energy that I got [at Fall Fest was] like, even though [I could tell] they are gay, I still felt like they were afraid of actually being who they are [on campus] even though they might be openly gay. I feel like that's a lot of things, like in Border City, there might be a lot of LGBT individuals, and especially gay men, but some are still afraid to be who they are.

Danny described a vibe of silence and avoidance among the men he perceived to be gay at the resource fair. This shared "knowing" based on individual aesthetic or outside social connections led Danny to believe that even though some of his gay peers at the resource fair may have embodied their gay identity more openly off campus, they were "afraid" to

fully embrace "who they [were]" within the boundaries of the institution. The public setting of the Fall Fest event and high visibility of Danny's LGBT resource table heightened the risk students would incur if they approached the table: it would signify to their surrounding peers that they, too, were gay. Danny drew a parallel between the fear and hesitancy gay men experience at BU and the fear Border City's broader LGBT community experienced by being publicly out of the closet. While Borderland University might have a high population of LGBT individuals, from Danny's perspective most were afraid to claim their queer identities and instead opted to assimilate into the campus environment's heteronormative expectations in a manner modeled by the institution's staff and faculty. They were fully aware of the stigma they might suffer if they were seen accessing information and resources for LGBT programming and support services in such a public setting. Many students, Danny suggested, chose to avoid his table rather than access the information available:

> [A] couple weeks [after Fall Fest] an individual came up to me and said "Hey, I wanna say thanks." I'm like, "Why are you thanking me? I didn't do anything." He's like, "Because you're standing at a table with a big gay flag on you and it's like, you don't know, like, a lot of people wouldn't do that." I didn't realize it; I was just doing it because, I mean, I'm myself and I'm happy [with] who I am, and yes it's like, shoot, like I'm literally putting "gay" on my forehead because I have this gay flag.

According to his peer, Danny's public embrace of his gay identity during the Fall Fest event was an unusual occurrence on BU's campus. His peer recognized the risk in Danny's public proclamation of his gay identity and later approached him to express

gratitude for his willingness to represent LGBT students on campus. “[A] lot of people wouldn’t do that,” his peer acknowledged, implying an awareness of the risks associated with being openly gay on campus. The risks are such that Danny’s peer chose to wait until weeks after Fall Fest ended, when they were safely alone together, to express his gratitude for Danny’s LGBT advocacy. As students navigated their campus lives and exposed or hid their gay identities, they also risked losing critical connections with other gay peers and/or risked not being fully themselves in the peer relationships or staff connections they created.

With few openly gay campus role models, the responsibility challenging the heteronormative campus climate often fell on the shoulders of students. For both Danny and his peers, representation on campus was rare and often left to students who were willing to risk the negative stigma of being open about their gay identities. Danny reflected:

> [I] mean, one, it is my job, but at the same time [it’s] not because I do it because I’m getting paid. If no one else is gonna do it, and I mean no one is, that’s how I feel the culture here in Border City. There used to be, like, a gay fraternity at my school but now there isn’t, like it’s completely gone and vanished, but I feel because, like, there isn’t a big community of … okay, there is a community of gay men, but I don’t feel there’s a specific community of gay men that would want to come together.

Many participants struggled to confidently identify out, gay role models in positions of power throughout the institution. If the staff and faculty faced pressures similar to those felt by students in this study, then the lack of representation likely reflected the stigma

many staff and faculty faced by openly claiming their gay identities. The lack of representation and support from individuals in powerful positions hindered connections within the LGBT campus community. Therefore, much of the work supporting LGBT representation and programming fell to students: "If no one else is gonna do it," Danny said, he would. He recognized that "no one else" was going to do the work necessary to bring awareness to the LGBT student experience at BU and felt pressure to implement institutional initiatives that encouraged members of the community to come together and advocate for visibility on campus. Until then, the campus was a space that required gay men to break through a metaphorical wall, shedding their queer aesthetics, mannerisms, emotions, and flamboyant characteristics before entering the boundaries of the campus.

Risk of Getting Caught

The walls of heteronormative expectations created by the campus' masculinity borders were a metaphorical threshold some participants crossed as they entered the campus environment, requiring them to minimize and hide their gay selves for fear that their true identities might be revealed without their consent. Luis N., for example, reflected on the fear he experienced while publicly displaying affection and intimacy toward his partner and the risks inherent in publicly embracing his relationship. He stated:

> I can't hold [my boyfriend's] hand for more than a minute. [I feel] like I'm being watched. [I] feel like I'm being judged. I feel like any second someone that knows my dad is gonna see me and they're gonna tell my dad, "[Oh] my god I saw your son [holding another man's hand]." [I] feel like it's not necessarily the [campus] … it's more me. Honestly … [when I see other gay couples be affectionate on

> campus it makes] me feel guilty for not being able to be as open [with my own boyfriend]. It is still a little bit scary [to show affection on campus]. I guess it could be an array of things. Maybe it's the fact that there's not enough representation [on campus] and therefore people still feel afraid to [show affection]. That's my take on it.

Luis N. felt that he was being "watched" by the dominant heteronormative gaze of the BU community and feared its negative judgement if he was seen expressing affection toward another man. He linked the judgment of the campus community directly to the exposure of his gay identity. "I can't hold [my boyfriend's] hand," he stated, and explained that any public displays of affection with his partner within the boundaries of the institution might ultimately come back to his father in ways he was unable to control. His identity on campus as a high-performing senior at BU, as well as his ability to hide his gay identity from his father, could be jeopardized if he engaged in public displays of affection confirming that identity. Although his mother and father were aware of Luis N.'s gay identity, this reality largely remained invisible within the home. Luis N.'s concern, particularly about his father hearing about his gay life outside of the home, stemmed from the fact that his father was the primary financial support for his college expenses, and he feared the possibility that he might lose that support.

As Luis N. continued his reflection, he processed two possible conflicting rationalizations. First, he placed the onus of his insecurity on himself. "It's not necessarily the [campus] … it's more me," he stated. Yet he recalled moments at BU when he had witnessed other gay couples be openly affectionate and, as a result, felt "guilt" for not being as openly affectionate with his own partner. While internalized

messages about masculinity being void of affection and vulnerability likely shaped his resistance to public intimacy with his partner, he also placed some responsibility on the institution. “Maybe it’s the fact that there’s not enough representation,” he theorized, as he continued to reflect on his unwillingness to be publicly affectionate.

Luis N. analyzed his reservations and fears from two borderland perspectives. One bordered perspective was informed by the individual expectation he internalized to render his gay identity silent within the familial space. This resulted largely from the pressure to maintain a cordial relationship with his father for his continued financial support. The broader heteronormative borders of the campus climate in which “people still feel afraid” to expose their gay identities further reinforced the boundaries he learned at home, creating a hyperawareness of his fear that “they’re gonna tell my dad” and resulting in his hesitancy to engage in public displays of affection with his partner on campus.

Risk of Social Isolation

Social isolation was a risk many of the students faced as they made decisions about whether or not to expose their gay identities to their peer groups, a dilemma they faced with each new border they encountered. They found themselves caught in a continuous process of coming out and constantly weighing the consequences of doing so within different contexts and groups of individuals. Thus, if their gay identities were accepted in one peer group, they were more likely to expose their gayness in another space, whereas if they were rejected, they learned to conceal their authentic selves in the other areas of their BU experience. As a first-year business student at BU, Luis Gerardo had to continuously consider whether he should come out to his classmates:

> I had to come out all over again. It was Ally Week and they were having a presentation. I went to one of the classes, which is to help with tutoring. When I signed in, three minutes later I'm gonna walk out and they're asking me, "Why are you leaving so early?" I'm like, "I forgot I have a meeting to attend, a conference." [I] didn't take it as personal but they kept asking more questions, you know? "What's the meeting for? Who is it for?" I just told them it's for Ally Week, and they're like, "What's Ally Week?" I panicked. What do I tell them? I just told them "Gay stuff," like literally, like, "gay stuff" and everybody stayed quiet.

In this reflection, Luis Gerardo made the decision to be honest about his plans to attend the LGBT Ally Week initiatives in the first weeks of the fall semester. Initially, he attempted to conceal his true intentions, stating that he had "a meeting to attend, a conference." When he was intentionally vague about the subject of the meeting/conference, his peers pressed him about the meeting's specific purpose. Perhaps his peers suspected that Luis Gerardo might be attending the Ally Week programs, and wanted confirmation of his gay identity by pressing him further, or perhaps they were genuinely curious. Regardless, he "panicked" and blurted out, "gay stuff." In the immediate moment, he did not fully recognize the impact of his words but became aware of the initial shock of his peers in hearing two words, "gay stuff." He continued:

> There was this individual, this girl, who was like "Wait, are you gay?" I'm like, "Yeah I'm gay. You didn't know that?" Her facial expression said something [different] than what her words were saying. Her words were saying, "Well good for you," you know, she said it. "Cool, that's cool I didn't know that." Her facial

> expression said, “What?! I can’t believe it, but why?!” You know, like, her facial expression was asking the questions a parent would ask you when you first come out to them. “Are you sure you’re gay? When did you know you’re gay? When was the first time you slept with a man?” You know? I felt uncomfortable and again I started sweating and I ran out. I ran out and I didn’t look back. So it’s a love and hate relationship ‘cause ... when masculinity also hits the campus [it’s like] yes you’re gay, good for you, but now be like everybody else.

Luis Gerardo interpreted his peers’ responses, specifically his female peer’s, as surprise, curiosity, and disbelief. “You didn’t know that?” he asked, in an attempt to challenge their underlying assumptions of his perceived heterosexuality. Although his peers tried to be affirming, Luis Gerardo interpreted their nonverbal communication as confusion and curiosity about his sexual orientation. “Her facial expression,” he stated, communicated a desire to question him further, of wanting him to be sure that he in fact is gay and to explain “why” to his peers. The dynamic of risk in this exchange highlights the heteronormative personas that gay men are expected to embody on campus. “Yes you’re gay, good for you, but now be like everybody else,” Luis Gerardo said. In naming his gay identity, he risked losing the hetero facade that enabled him to move through the tutoring space as a seemingly heterosexual man. The next day, the full scope of the risk he took was immediately apparent to him:

> [The next day] I was sitting by myself. The point of the class is for you to go and get help by your tutors. When I would walk in before me coming out, they were all like greeting [me and] were like, “Do you need some help?” Now that I came out it’s like, “leave him alone. Don’t talk to him. If he needs help he can ask for

> help. Let's not approach." You know what I mean? And things did change. They did. So that's why I feel like it's something to keep to yourself, 'cause then things will change. It's like, instead of getting a hand. Like instead of getting help, like, they are giving you their back. That's how I see it.

In the quote above, Luis Gerardo discussed the consequences of coming out to his peers: he immediately noticed a difference between how they greeted him before and after he came out. "Now that I came out it's like, 'Leave him alone. Don't talk to him.'" This avoidance and rejection from his peers underscored the risk of social isolation attached to claiming his gay identity within the boundaries of the tutoring space. From this experience and the resulting negative consequences, Luis Gerardo learned that the better option was to keep his gayness to himself rather than risk being rejected by his peers. "Instead of getting a hand … they are giving you their back," he lamented, continuing to grapple with the consequences of his public acknowledgment of his gay identity. As a result of this experience, Luis Gerardo became more resistant to being open about his gay identity in other areas of his on-campus life. He concealed his gay identity from faculty and staff to ensure their view of him was not tainted by preconceived stigmas they may have held against the LGBT community.

Risk to the Strong Man

The stigma associated with the gay community was a risk many participants felt pressure to avoid on campus. Eddie relied on others' assumptions of his heterosexuality to avoid the possible negative consequences that can come with being openly gay on campus. Since he embodied a masculine aesthetic that his surrounding peers, faculty, and staff perceived as heterosexual, he simply opted not to disrupt their assumptions and

instead engaged with them in a way that maintained the heteronormative facade they saw in his presentation. When he fell into an emotional tailspin after a failed relationship with another man, Eddie was unwilling to vulnerably share this struggle with his faculty even though many reached out to express their concern about his faltering academic performance. As he fell further behind over the course of the fall semester, and as the emotional toll of his breakup with his boyfriend continued to weigh on him, he created a false narrative to explain his struggles:

> I lied to myself and I said I wanted to open my availability more so I could work more, but it's not true. I knew that I wasn't doing well in these classes and I knew I wasn't going to take them seriously for those semesters so I dropped them. I knew how to do it already, 'cause I had dropped a class before, but ... Yeah, I just went about it.

As the realization dawned on him that he would ultimately fail the semester, Eddie strategically shifted the narrative of his struggle away from the broken heart he was healing, and instead credited his struggle in the classroom to his part-time off-campus job and a desire to pursue a full-time job for the semester. In reality, Eddie's emotional mindset had taken its toll and he was unwilling to expose his heartbreak to his professors or adviser while asking for academic support and accommodations. Rather than exposing the true source of his struggle to those who could assist him, he chose to decline his professors' outreach and offers for support and instead drop their courses:

> I was lying to everybody else too. People asked me how the semester is going and I'm like, "I just dropped two classes." They'd ask me why, and I said, "Two reasons. I'm not doing well in them and I wanted to open my availability for this

> new job." I never said it was because I spent all day at school thinking about my ex, and thinking about how miserable I was thinking about it. I never said that. I don't wanna have to explain to people that don't already know what's the truth behind me not doing well this semester.

Eddie acknowledged the true source of his struggles during the semester and recognized the emotional burden required to retell the story of his emotional state to his faculty, who would have supported him to get his semester back on track. "I don't wanna have to explain to people that don't already know," he explained. On its surface, this rationale helps explain his resistance to reliving the emotional pain he harbored over the course of the semester; that is, he did not want revisit the emotions that made his semester so difficult. But a deeper interpretation of his reflection is that he was unwilling to expand the number of people "who don't already know" that he identified as a gay man. His resistance to share the truth behind his struggles took on two interconnected meanings. First, because of the pressure he felt to embody the strong, emotionless male, he omitted certain information from explanations to peers, faculty, and staff about the source of his struggles. Second, he intentionally masked the true source of his emotional pain in order to minimize the number of people who knew his gay identity. In this situation, Eddie needed to mask his gay identity to protect his heteronormative presentation and to control who had access to information that could potentially be used against him on campus.

Risk to Social Popularity

Unlike the other students in the study, Teddy and Cristian were not afraid to embody masculine presentations that were flamboyant, expressive, and openly gay. They were confident in their hybrid feminine-masculine performativities. As members of

University Dance Team, both students were visible and recognizable throughout the broader BU community and Border City area, and this popularity minimized the risk of rejection from the community since they were granted a platform to represent the larger BU community.

Cristian, the captain of the University Dance Team, was unapologetic about his flamboyance, and exuded confidence. This openness, however, became a threat to potential intimate and romantic connections with men on campus. At the end of his senior year at BU, Cristian was hopeful that he and a longtime love interest [Ray] would finally "make it official." As they discussed their intentions to publicly formalize their relationship, Ray grew wary of Cristian's openness on campus. Cristian explained:

> I think it's because ... other guys feel threatened by me. I always think it's me. [I] ask Teddy and he even told me, maybe they feel threatened 'cause I'm so young and already successful. [I've] already made a name for myself, like, here in Border City. Yes.

Cristian's recognizability and success on campus also came with the pressure of being under the watchful eyes of the BU and broader Border City communities. His success became a risk to Ray in two different ways. First, Cristian's many accomplishments as a high-performing student, officer in the student body, and captain of the University Dance Team challenged Ray's own sense of accomplishment and left him feeling inadequate in his own success compared to Cristian. Furthermore, Cristian's openly gay identity on campus deterred Ray from formalizing their on-and-off relationship for fear of being stigmatized. Since Ray did not have the same platform of success and popularity Cristian enjoyed, the risk for Ray of being negatively impacted by the relationship was greater:

> That's why he was nervous. This guy was nervous about coming out. He's like, "Everybody knows who you are. I don't want to affect your popularity. I don't want you to lose things just because you have a boyfriend." I'm like, "I don't care." He was using me as an excuse but I don't know if it was just him. But that's just everyone's excuse. "Everybody knows you. Everybody knows who you are. You're always in the eye of the hurricane." I'm like, "I'm really not. Don't exaggerate."

Cristian had never been in an officially labeled boyfriend relationship and hoped Ray would be his first. Therefore, his gay identity was one that the community merely assumed on the basis of his aesthetic and without the ever witnessing him being affectionate with another man. Thus, Cristian was confronted with the reality of his status on campus and the threat his openness carried for other men who lacked his level of success and visibility on campus. According to Cristian, Ray was concerned that a public relationship would harm Cristian's popularity and status. "I don't want you to lose things just because you have a boyfriend," Cristian recalled Ray saying as a rationale for his hesitancy to make the relationship public. The added visibility of a romantic relationship, from Ray's perspective, would be too much of a risk to Cristian's on-campus status. On the other hand, Cristian interpreted Ray's resistance as a measure to protect himself from the possible stigma of being in a publicly recognized relationship with Cristian, who openly embraced a flamboyant gay aesthetic. "He was using me as an excuse," Cristian reflected. Ray's resistance to a romantic relationship with Cristian was likely influenced by his concern for Cristian's status and popularity on campus, but also for his own protection.

Risk to the Institution

As representatives of the University, Cristian and Teddy were uniquely subjected to Border City's heteronormative masculinity borders. At every public performance, Teddy and Cristian were exposed to scrutiny from the heteronormative gaze of the BU community. This required them to erase, as much as possible, their queer aesthetics during public events and any time they wore the BU Dance Team's official uniform. If they challenged the gender boundaries upheld by the community and reinforced by their dance team coach, they faced reprimand by the institution's public-relations leadership and the senior administration. "They know not even to hug each other in uniform," Cristian emphasized, discussing the strict expectations the team's dancers needed to follow.

On one occasion, a fan of the BU Dance Team reportedly observed a physical display of affection between two of the team's male dancers. This exchange was reported via social media as a homophobic critique of the team. Cristian explained:

> About two weeks ago, we had a game and my coach got called in by one of her bosses because they said that two of the [BU Dance Team] boys were making out in uniform. Forget it! My coach, she told us from day one that we can't be doing none of that shit in uniform because she can get in trouble. She can get fired. Her job can be in jeopardy for it. They called her in, she literally ... I don't know if it was true. Teddy says it [wasn't him]. I believe him because he would obviously tell me.

Cristian reflected on the public-relations controversy resulting from the accusation that two of the men on the team were seen publicly kissing in uniform. As representatives of

the institution, the threat of their sexuality as gay men risked the reputation of the team but also had long-term ramifications for the employment of the dance team coach. As they worked to identify the culprits, Teddy denied that he and his boyfriend, who was also a member of the team, were the individuals targeted by the complaint. Teddy later explained that he and his boyfriend may have exchanged a hug but disputed the version reported via a fan's social-media post that described a long, passionate kiss. Cristian continued:

> They said that they were supposedly making out in uniform. My coach tells us we can be ourselves, but to an extent. Don't ... We're part of a bigger picture now and it's not just ... We're not just representing ourselves. We're representing the team but as well as the University. It looks bad for you to be wearing [BU Dance Team] on the uniform and then you're doing inappropriate things that people feel uncomfortable with.

The accusation of a same-sex exchange of physical affection alarmed the institution's public-relations team enough to trigger a brief investigation to identify the culprits, and caused the team to revisit the expectations of their behavior while wearing the BU Dance Team uniform. "We're not just representing ourselves," Cristian reiterated. As representatives of the team and broader university community, Cristian acknowledged that there were limits to how authentic the dancers could be while representing the team. Importantly, for the gay men on the team, the expectations were also embedded with homophobic attitudes. "We can be ourselves, but to an extent," Cristian explained, as he described the ways gay men on the team were expected to limit their behavior.

In order to fit into the hetero-masculine professional construct expected by the institution, the men on the dance team needed to remove their gay aesthetics while they were in uniform regardless of how open they were about their gay identities elsewhere on campus. As a result, the institutional climate of heteronormative, hypermasculine professionalism continued to be perpetuated even in spaces where queerness might be expected, such as the typically feminized art of dance. The continuous removal of queer aesthetics throughout the BU campus perpetuated the silence and invisibility of LGBT identity among the student body, staff, and faculty. While many of the students in the study speculated that some members of the staff and faculty identified as LGBT, few were able to definitively identify openly gay staff and faculty on campus. This lack of LGBT representation among the staff and faculty maintained the silence and invisibility of the campus' LGBT community and perpetuated the pressure to hide one's gay aesthetic in order to achieve the desired masculine professional construct. Luis Gerardo said, "I just can't [tell them I'm gay] ... I see it as, they won't take you serious. That's how I see it," reflecting on the risk that he would not be taken seriously if he were to reveal his gay identity to his adviser and faculty, a risk that caused him to hide his gay identity to keep his professional identity intact.

Conclusion

On campus, the men in the study intentionally masked their gay identities or risked being excluded by the dominant heteronormative borders that surrounded social groups, academic spaces, and individual connections. If they chose to expose their queerness through their aesthetics, mannerisms, or by clearly labeling themselves as gay, they first weighed the risk to their professional identity and tested the rigidity of the

heteronormative boundaries within each space they occupied. If they exposed their gay identities, they also risked being rejected by their peers and/or being seen as unprofessional. This risk directly jeopardized their creation of social connections with peers and relationships with faculty and staff. Moreover, they understood that their long-term opportunities for upward mobility might also suffer the consequences of being negatively stereotyped, and that these consequences were not limited to the boundaries of the institution.

In the next chapter, I discuss ways that participants used their successes on campus to minimize the impact of the risks their gay identities posed. They were driven to pursue success in many forms, including academic performance, social popularity, and leadership positions, and used these accomplishments to access heteronormative spaces. As they moved in and out of heteronormative spaces throughout the campus setting and into familial spaces, they used their successes to mask their gay identities and to challenge negative stereotypes.

Chapter 9: Manifestations of Success

> The night before [graduation] I was getting my stuff together, getting my outfit, making sure I was wearing something colorful because I love wearing colorful clothes. [I thought to myself], "If I'm going to be out there, I have to show my gayness somehow" … I wanted to represent the gay community in some shape or form" … In the morning [as I was] putting all my stuff on, I was just like, "This is so plain. How can I just go like this?"
>
> I looked at my desk and there were these two little [Mexican and Rainbow] flags … I grabbed the gay flag and I was just … "I'm going to take it off and I'm going to put it on my hat." So I did. I got it and then I took it to my mom, and I was like, "Can you put this on [my cap]?" I could tell she was just ... She wasn't upset about it. She was really happy that I was, I guess, trying to show myself, who I was, and being proud of who I was. I could see that she was happy for me but I could also see the fear in her eyes of, like, "This is you and I have to let you be who you are, but I'm scared for your life because you putting this flag on there is labeling yourself and you are a target regardless." If I had any way of being able to show to people that I was gay and that I graduated, and that I was proud, and that we are able to be successful people, I wanted to do it. So I did. (Luis N.)

Luis N. contemplated his attire with dissatisfaction at the dark colors of his official black graduation gown and the dull-colored honors cords and stole he wore to symbolize his academic achievements throughout his time at Borderland University. He wanted his attire to display his "colorful" personality for the momentous occasion of his graduation.

That day, he was given the freedom to publicly claim a part of his identity that he often needed to minimize during his time on campus. Not only did he want to highlight his "colorful" personality; he also felt a responsibility to acknowledge, publicly, that he is a gay man. The successful completion of his degree created a platform on which he was permitted to be fully himself, a first-generation gay Latino college graduate. "If I'm going to be out there, I have to show my gayness somehow," he stated, considering his motivations for openly displaying a gay flag atop his graduation cap.

The celebration of the first college degree in Luis N.'s family took center stage in the midst of his mother's concern for the possible ramifications of his publicly labeling himself as a gay man. "She put [the rainbow flag] on gladly. She was very happy of putting it on there," he reflected, remembering his mother's joy in the midst of her hesitation about his public coming out. In the end, both of his parents were filled with pride to stand with the college graduate as he publicly embraced his gay identity. "Even my dad was the most affectionate he's ever been," Luis N. stated with surprise. The first college degree in the family was accepted as a contribution of *orgullo* in exchange for the affirmation of Luis N.'s masculinity and gay identity.

Up until his graduation, Luis N.'s gay identity was often "one of those things that is not mentioned or that I haven't really talked to them [about]," subject to his family's dynamic of regarding his gay identity. His college graduation, however, validated his position and masculinity within the family unit. It was also an opportunity for him to stretch the heteronormative gender boundaries and affirm his gay identity among his family. This affirmation was reflected through his father's unusual display of affection toward his eldest son. "We've always had that problem ... he's not affectionate enough,"

Luis N. said, about his father. The completion of his degree created space within the heteronormative masculinity boundaries where Luis N. could outwardly embody his gay identity through the rainbow flag atop his graduation cap. His academic achievement and completion of the first college degree in the family was accepted in exchange for visibility, validation, emotional connection, and affirmation of his masculinity.

In participants' narratives, the theme of success emerged in many forms. In Luis N.'s story, success manifested in the completion of his degree which momentarily brought visibility and validation to his gay identity and masculinity. In the following paragraphs, I present the various ways success manifested in participants' narratives and how they were motivated to achieve. Subsequently, I discuss how participants used their successes to maneuver through the rigid heteronormative boundaries they encountered.

Success as a Counternarrative

Many of the participants' narratives made it clear that they were motivated to succeed in order to counter the negative stereotypes that often marginalize the LGBT community. They were also motivated to succeed in order to acquire validation and visibility within heteronormative spaces, both within the boundaries of the campus settings and in their homes. As they worked to acquire success through academic achievement, campus involvement, and social popularity, validation in each of these areas expanded their platforms of success so they could more authentically embody their gay identities within the dominant heteronormative borders of the campus. In other words, the more success they acquired on campus, the more they felt able to disrupt the heteronormative rigidity of social and familial spaces.

Cristian, who was arguably one of the most high-profile students on campus, was driven to achieve multiple successes to obtain acceptance into the heteronormative campus climate and social spaces. On campus, the more success he had in the form of student leadership positions, social popularity, community recognition, and academic achievement, the more he was able to break through rigid heteronormative boundaries:

> I've always been on the dean's list, every semester [since my first year]. Then my sophomore year I ran for the homecoming pageant as a joke and I ended up getting homecoming prince. That was the centennial year so that was a big deal for the [University Dance Team] 'cause one of their boys had never ran and I was the first one to to win. I was the first boy captain of the dance team at my high school and over here I got moved up to captain the end of my freshman year, starting my sophomore year. So everything was happening so fast. Then my junior year I got featured on the, I was on the cover of a magazine at school called the *Modern [Border Boy]*, and um, they did a whole story about my diabetes and how I haven't let it stop me from doing what I like, from my dancing and school. A lot of people don't even know that I'm diabetic because I don't, I hate acting weak, and I hate being sick.

Cristian outlined his successes as he unpacked the platform he held within the campus community. As his accomplishments accumulated, his growing platform of success allowed him to challenge heteronormative gender boundaries through his feminized embodiment of his gay identity. Importantly, Cristian measured his success by the extent to which he felt accepted into heteronormative campus subcultures, and specifically within male athletic circles. He explained:

> You know what, I think it would be so much harder for someone who is not, like, accepted on campus like I am. 'Cause a lot of, like, a lot of the athletes at school, like, I talk to most of them and they accept who I am. They don't feel like uncomfortable with me, whereas I think if like I wasn't, like, "someone" at BU I think it would be so much harder for me.

In Cristian's reflection, he suggests that gay men on campus either needed to hide their gay identity by embodying a heteronormative aesthetic, or they needed to acquire adequate success and recognition within the campus community before challenging heteronormative social spaces to acknowledge their feminized embodiments of masculinity. Through success and social popularity, gay men might be granted social acceptance that would allow them to be authentically queer. Thus, success became a critical factor to social acceptance as well as a metaphorical wall that protected Mexican American gay undergraduate men like Cristian from isolation and the risk of being seen as unprofessional or immature, and gave them the freedom to access resources more openly than their closeted peers. Cristian was aware that his platform of success gave him access to the campus in different ways that many of his MAGUM peers did not enjoy:

> I think because [of my] platform ... other people at school [who] don't have that platform or sometimes feel, like, "Oh my gosh, like, they just accept him because he's this, like, known face, like, he's like the star dancer." Or and, uh, and I think if people wouldn't have given me that platform my life would be completely different.
>
> Sure! I think my success and status has allowed me to be more of who I am ... I hate it when people think less about [you] if you're gay. No, I mean if you

> have achievements, brag about them, throw it in people's faces, that's why, that's why you're busting your ass for; it's so you can brag and wave them in people's faces that told you can't do this, you can't do that. You're proving them wrong. I think in my instance, my success is for my parents. So they can be proud of me. I do it so they can, so they can see that the hard work they put into me has paid off. Sure, so they can brag about their son but, um, this is me repaying them for what they've done for me.

In Cristian's reflection, acceptance or rejection into the larger campus community was primarily reliant on the amount of success MAGUM acquired on campus. These successes also created rifts within the gay community between those who were seen and validated by the dominant heteronormative climate and those who were not. Cristian's ability to embody Hannah Montana on campus, however, was limited to the elasticity of the heteronormative boundaries around him. So he worked to overcome the negative stigma of his gay identity, using it as motivation to "prove them wrong" by transcending that stigma and "wave [his successes] in people's faces." Not only was his success critical for social acceptance, it was also used to counter the negative social stigma placed on MAGUM on campus.

Success as Payment

Cristian used his success on campus to obtain acceptance into the broader campus community, but his success also served as a form of payment to his parents. As he reflected on what drove him to achieve, he recalled the story of his parents' immigration to the United States, initially undocumented, when his mother was pregnant with

Cristian. His parents came to the U.S. with the hope of giving their children the opportunity to achieve "the American Dream."

Heteronormative and hypermasculine gender norms exist within both Mexican and American cultural contexts. Cristian's gay identity fell outside the boundaries created by his parents' narrative of the American dream, which is inherently heteronormative and assumes the achievement of career success, heterosexual partnership, and the creation of a heteronormative household. Similarly, his Mexican background reinforces the idea of the male as the financial provider and head of the family, a heteronormative expectation also embedded in the construct of the American Dream. Cristian was therefore driven to succeed through his degree attainment, academic performance, leadership positions, and recognition throughout the campus and Border City communities. Through these successes, he was given freedom to be a "superstar" and embrace his Hannah Montana persona on campus. He was also motivated to succeed as a way of paying tribute to his parents for their sacrifices, and to sufficiently compensate for the ways he could not uphold the heteronormative assumptions of the American Dream.

Cristian chose to shift between his Hannah Montana persona and the introverted "little boy" from Border City as a way to successfully uphold and meet the heteronormative boundaries within his household. He silenced his gay identity and queer aesthetic within his home in exchange for the stability of his family's support. Cristian's on-campus successes and popularity throughout the broader community were coupled with a version of himself that he muted to maintain the acceptance and financial stability his parents provided while he attended college:

> [I] don't want to tell them [I'm gay] until I'm out of their home. Just a sign of respect of the way they brought me up. I don't want to disrespect their household. Like I said, they still pay for my rent, they pay for my phone, they pay for [everything]. As long as I'm doing good in school, that's my form of payment to them. I never want to let them down. They've sacrificed so much for me. My brother feels the same way. For him it's different 'cause ... he's perfectly straight and loves girls.

In order to navigate his home's heteronormative dynamic and attitudes, Cristian used his many successes on campus as a "form of payment" in exchange for his parents' support and financial stability. Cristian delineated a difference between the pressure he felt to succeed and his younger brother's experience, connecting this distinction to his brother's heterosexuality. His gay identity increased the pressure he felt to succeed in order to be affirmed in his masculinity and gay identity at home. Cristian internalized homophobic messages and felt that if he were to outwardly expose his gay aesthetic at home, he would be "disrespecting" his parents' household. He also unintentionally alluded to the underlying sentiment that his gay identity would be a disappointment: "I never want to let them down. They've sacrificed so much for me," he explained, reflecting on his hesitation to "officially" come out as gay to his parents. He exchanged his successes and proud contributions to the family for support, financial stability, and validation of his accomplishments and positionality as the eldest son in the household.

Success for the Greater Good

Danny positioned gay identity within the context of a heteronormative environment as the motivator or "fire" to achieve success and counter internalized

negative messages about gay individuals. Specifically, he highlighted the messages some gay Latino men internalized within heteronormative environments over the course of their lives, and suggested that some gay men are motivated to succeed to prove those messages false. Further, he recognized the importance of gay role models in positions of power within traditionally heteronormative campus, including his own role as the LGBT student intern on campus:

> I feel like that you should own [your gay identity] too, especially [in straight spaces] ... I'm an engineering major and they're not inclusive or diverse. Instead of letting that discourage me, I let that encourage me. Especially in engineering, there's a type of characteristic of personality and I don't have that. I'm not the typical engineer. For me it's like, I know I'm not the smartest engineer, but I know I have so many other skill sets and qualities I have to offer that I know other engineers won't and because of how my personality is and all the work I've done and learned and stuff like that.

Danny reframed the negative stigma placed on the LGBT community and described his own intent to transform the negativity by recognizing the unique perspective and contributions queer students can make within heteronormative campus spaces. He used his experience in the Engineering Department, which at times brought him "down" as a result of "being in a room full of [straight] men," to emphasize his motivation to prove the heteronormative space "wrong," since he assumed the negative stigma would be projected onto him. Within this departmental setting, he constantly navigated between rigid heteronormative boundaries and the importance of maintaining a successful profile

to model for his peers how the heteronormative boundaries throughout the camps can be challenged:

> It would be kind of selfish for me not to be [openly] gay, if that makes sense, because I had amazing people, wonderful individuals that empowered me to become who I am. It's kind of being like, it's okay to be gay, like whatever, super gay, whatever, because it's like there's other individuals that might be in the same shoes as you are, but they don't know how to handle it. It's kind of selfish of me to not own my own identity because then I'm not being an advocate of myself that might lead to someone else as ... That might help someone else [who is out and gay].

Danny recognized that success and social acceptance were intertwined within the social context of the campus community. As the student who led LGBT initiatives on campus, he felt a responsibility to encourage gay students to fully embrace their gay identities regardless of how flamboyant or "super-gay" their aesthetics where perceived. Danny also articulated the tensions he navigated within his own heteronormative, predominantly male department and the pressure he felt to represent LGBT student initiatives on campus. "It's kind of selfish," he said, of the many occasions when he felt pressure to hide his gay identity in the classroom. He also recognized that his social positionality as an academically successful student, member of the Merit Scholars program, and student leader granted him acceptance into the broader campus community:

> It might be hard. No, it's really hard, yes. Actually, I've heard there are lot of individuals that are closeted and for me, like, I mean, it's strange because, well, you're in BU but at the same time I work ... specifically in a place where it's so

> open. So I would also understand ... say you were just an engineer and you had no idea and you're around that culture, I can understand how that can be very hard to be open about [being gay].

From Danny's point of view, students who did not enjoy the same on-campus recognition and affirmation were likely to have "really hard" experiences. His experience within the Engineering Department demonstrated the rigidly heteronormative campus climate that closeted students must learn to maneuver. He went on to reiterate the negative impact of being closeted on campus, resulting in a lack of awareness of, and connection to, critical support resources that could help LGBT students. Thus, he worked to pay his success forward to LGBT students by serving as the intern for LGBT student initiatives for the Student Engagement Office, leading ally training spaces, queer-themed discussion panels, and promoting LGBT student-dialogue spaces.

Success for Mom, Them, and Me

Teddy's drive for success was largely fueled by his sense of responsibility to support his mother. He grew up in a single-parent household, had a strong connection with his mother, and sought her validation of his position within their family unit. Her lack of recognition of his accomplishments during his first attempt at a college degree impacted his motivation to continue beyond his first semester:

> She didn't care. I'm pretty sure she did care but she didn't show it, like, she wasn't here to show me that … and I blamed her for that … I was like, you were whining about … us not having money, about you taking me to school, 'cause I live in the lower valley and had to be [on campus] super early at four in the morning, so, like, there's no busses and I'm like it's all your fault. You put all this

> pressure on me, not knowing that I was coming to school … I made the freaking [BU Dance] Team, you didn't care, and that … I regret that though that's not her fault … it's all mine, you know? I could have [made] better decisions, I guess.

Here, Teddy reflected on the struggles he faced during his first semester at BU. He described the emotional impact of his mother's lack of support and affirmation, and how this affected his motivation to continue pursuing a college degree. "[S]he wasn't there to show me that," he stated, referring to his mother's lack of acknowledgement of the demanding schedule and hard work he was required to put into his involvement on campus. This lack of support and recognition left Teddy struggling to make it to campus in time for early-morning rehearsals. At the same time, he faced the increasing pressure, as her only son, to complete his degree and fulfill his role as the family's provider. Teddy reflected on the expectation to be a provider for the family and his renewed motivation to complete his degree after returning to BU:

> I'm doing this for me mainly, but yeah, my mom comes into play ... I don't want her to think that I can't finish anything. That's being responsible: you started it, you finish it. Then that way I could support her, but my mom's not going to retire anytime soon. She's a hard-working woman. She's always working.

Teddy reflected on his motivation to return to campus after dropping out of his first semester in pursuit of what he thought would be a promising out-of-state work opportunity. Eventually he realized that he was not on the career path he wanted and missed the excitement of the BU Dance Team. He chose to place his education above the financial stability of a high-paying job. Over the course of his life, he internalized the gendered expectation that the man should be the family's primary financial provider. His

decision to return to BU and pursue a college degree fell outside the gender boundaries established by the family's older male figures. Teddy was motivated to challenge the heteronormative expectations of physically laborious jobs held by older male family members. He stated:

> I guess it's to prove [to my uncles and the older part of my family] that you can be successful by going to school, by not being manly and getting to work [and] putting money first [before] an education. Which, you could do both, but they're more like *ay ya ponte a trabajar, porque estudias, estás perdiendo tiempo, necesitamos dinero.*

Teddy viewed his pursuit of a college education as a counternarrative to his family's expectations that he be their primary financial provider. The messages surrounding him undermined his decision to prioritize his education: "*¿Porque estudias?*" the men around him asked; from their perspective, he was wasting time going to school when he could be working to provide much-needed money for the family. In his narrative, Teddy's pursuit of a college education is feminized within his family's gendered constructs: "You can be successful by going to school and by *not* being manly and getting to work," he explained. This motivation was directly influenced by how his gay identity prevented him from meeting masculine gender expectations of financial contribution through the physically demanding work modeled by male family members:

> I want to show them [my uncles] that after I get my degree I'm gonna get a good job and I'm gonna shut them up. I could get good money without having to leave school, without having to kill myself with those manly jobs. I am the first one going to college, so for my younger generations, it's that there's something better

> for them to prove that they could go to school, to keep in school, and to follow their dreams.

In his reflection, Teddy centered his gay identity within the cultural tensions of his family's gender expectations and his desire to disrupt the internalized heteronormative scripts that have shaped his masculinity constructs. Teddy's gay identity drove him to succeed and embody alternate ways of being masculine, both for himself and for the family's younger generations, and to affirm his masculinity and gay identity within his familial structure. Through his pursuit of a college degree, he countered his family's expectations of physical strength and manual labor and also offered a counternarrative against the negative stereotypes of gay individuals held by the male family figures. He was motivated to "shut them up." Teddy pursued a different path in order to prove them wrong, to prove that he could be successful without accepting the burden of physically laborious work, and to serve as an example for younger generations of the family. Teddy's success granted him the affirmation and validation of his gay identity within familial structures, along with his mother's future financial security. He disrupted the masculinity norms he had learned by prioritizing educational achievement over the immediate financial security of a high-paying job. His conceptualization of success as a tool to disrupt heteronormative and hypermasculine gender expectations emerged as a central motivation to complete his college degree.

Luis Gerardo was motivated to finish college in exchange for upward mobility and validation of his masculinity. He used the metaphor of a "ticket for a luxury vacation" to describe the "new life" that he believed his education would afford him. He completed his college education in order to "get away" to a new reality where he could be

reborn into “that man” who was established in his career and able to financially provide for himself and his family. Success in higher education became a path to prove his masculinity in a different way than embodying a physically aggressive, emotionless, and removed man. From Luis Gerardo’s perspective, his degree, career, and future successes validated his manhood without embodying the emotionless-male construct he often needed to project. Instead, he pursued success in higher education in exchange for his inability to fulfill expectations of marriage and children. “Now you’re officially ready to be that man,” Luis Gerardo stated, reflecting on what motivated him to complete his college degree.

Luis Gerardo pursued academic success and focused on his long-term career because he realized that both of these aspects of his success were critical in validating his masculinity within the family unit and his identity as a gay man. He hoped his achievement in both his academics and career goals would allow him to fully embrace his gay identity within the family unit. Until then, he was positioned on the margins of heterosexist and hypermasculine gender norms and needed to hide his gay identity to protect himself from negative consequences:

> It’s like hiding, it’s like having that spare room where you hide everything that you won’t see. I don’t like this, I don’t like this, whatever, but that’s where they need to be hiding the gay, their gay sons and their lesbian daughters, they hide them. They take out that aspect of being a human being. They brag about their accomplishments and how they’re better than other people.

In the quote above, Luis Gerardo described what he framed as a “spare room” that existed within his household. The spare room is a metaphorical space where the collective family

members “hide” elements of individual members that may bring shame to family. Here, Luis Gerardo named LGBT identities as some of the shameful secrets placed in the spare room. The family actively worked to hide their gay son, but according to Luis Gerardo, his successes uplifted the family’s status among outsiders. As he saw it, the family could uplift itself by bragging about the successes of their gay and lesbian members while simultaneously dehumanizing them by not openly acknowledging their queer identities. Instead, their success was divorced from their gay identities and their accomplishments were celebrated while their gay aesthetics remained invisible. Luis Gerardo internalized messages of inadequacy due to his gay identity and felt pressure to succeed in order to give his family positive things to discuss, otherwise, “what can I talk about?” he asked, rhetorically.

In Eddie’s narrative, success took the form of a high-paying job after from high school. He had initially intended to pursue a college education, but the allure of a stable job and good pay was enough to prevent him from completing his college degree. The promotions within his company eventually pushed him to choose between school or a higher paying position. “I thought, well, here I have this good job and I can’t really, I can’t really just leave it to go to school, so I’ll just stick with this job and retire from here.” Eddie made the decision to prioritize a good job and pay over his educational pursuits in order to successfully fulfill his role as provider for his family. This decision was not unique to Eddie; it was one that confronted many Latino men in Border City as they weighed the expectations to provide for their families by securing a high-paying jobs. At the time, the promotions and increasing salary at his job allowed Eddie to fit within the masculinity boundaries as provider for his family, but when that path

disappeared, his options became limited. Unable to claim his masculinity in heteronormative terms, through a traditional marriage or the prospect of children to continue the family name, Eddie prioritized a four-year college degree as his best chance at success:

> I had been with the company for eight years and I got promoted to being the general manager of my location here so I was pretty high up there … I had a really good job. It was a really good job and I could have definitely retired from it or I could have moved up. Um … when certain things happened that I couldn't stay with the company … I had actually gotten into a relationship, and my partner was a student [at BU] and so while we were seeing each other … I got to see first-hand what the college life was like [at BU] which was something that was completely different for me from when I was at [Border City Community College] because … I was able to see what he was doing … on a daily basis with his college career with his education, so I got to get a little taste of it.

As Eddie considered his options, he revisited his original desire to pursue a college degree and relied on the experiences he shared with his former boyfriend, who was a student at BU during their partnership. Through Eddie's observations of his ex-boyfriend's experience, he felt more confident in his familiarity with the campus, which helped him commit to pursuing his education at BU instead of focusing on the masculinity expectations that prompted him to seek financial security over a college education. Nonetheless, Eddie often envisioned success as a future achievement that he would acquire by contributing financially to his family:

> It [a college degree] would mean that I'd be the first in my nuclear family to have one, even though it took me forever. It would mean that I would pursue a certain kind of job afterward. I knew what my plan was, I wanted to work for [Border Institute of Research], which is a political science [organization] ... that goes back to what my plans were before [I decided to work instead of go to school]. Now it would mean pretty much just being able to complete something that I had pursued since I graduated high school. Like I said, if I had that push before I would have done it sooner, but I didn't. It would be a sense of completion and a sense of accomplishment, definitely. A sense of pride, because I'd be the first in my family to have it. My mom graduated from a technical school, but that's it. My dad only ever graduated from high school.

Here, Eddie connected his educational success to his attainment of a college degree and his ability to secure "a certain kind of job." This connection implies a career with stronger opportunities than the job he initially pursued in lieu of his college education. Importantly, the masculinity expectation of the man as the financial provider continued to emerge as a primary motivator for Eddie's ongoing pursuit of a college education. He went on to cite pride as another motivating factor in his pursuit of a college degree, not only the personal sense of pride he would derive from pursuing his interests, but also the pride he could bring to his family. Still, Eddie navigated a constant tension between work opportunities that offered good pay and continuing his coursework toward completion of his degree. In addition to the emotional burden of the broken heart he was mending, he was forced to decide between the delayed financial benefits of a college degree and the more immediate financial benefits of his demanding part-time job.

Success as an Apology

In his first year at Borderland University, Luis Gerardo experienced pressure to establish his professional campus identity within hetero-masculine professional boundaries. He also attempted, unsuccessfully, to establish social connections with his peers by becoming involved in LGBT initiatives, rushing for a Latino fraternity, and being honest about his gay identity within his peer groups. He repeatedly experienced rejection due to homophobic attitudes, lack of campus representation, and the culture of open secrets among the campus LGBT community. Yet he persisted in his pursuit of a college degree and successful career: "If I don't do it, then it's awful, what can they talk about now if I don't have those two things," he said. He further explained his drive to attain a college education and a successful career:

> It will be like that fulfillment for my parents of ... How can I say it? [My degree is] like [what] I offer my parents for being gay. It's my apology. [It's my] gift to my parents [so they can say], "Oh, you're gay, but wait, you went to college. You're getting paid this much. Congrats." It's an apology. [A] gift. I apologize for being gay but I'll be making this much money at the end of the year. I'll be driving this car. I'll be buying this house. Does that make it up?

Luis Gerardo's pursuit of a college degree was a compensatory strategy to obtain his family's approval. Through his successes, he apologized to them for the different ways he would not uphold their gender expectations as a result of his gay identity. So his gift of success to the family was intended to overshadow his gay identity, allowing his family to focus their attention on his accomplishments while ignoring his gay aesthetic. He explained that his accumulated future success—through his college degree, high-paying

job, car, and house—all served to expand his platform of success in order to obtain acceptance from the family and adequately compensate for the potential shame his gay identity might bring them. “Does that make it up?” he asked, listing the various successes he would obtain in his pursuit of affirmation at home.

Conclusion

These men were uniquely motivated to succeed in different ways during their ongoing struggle to navigate their gay identities within the heteronormative and hypermasculine gender borders of their campus environment. On campus, their accumulated successes were crucial to establishing social connections and increased their likelihood of claiming their gay identities among peers, faculty, and staff. They were motivated to succeed not only to establish a platform of success upon which they could challenge rigid gender norms on campus, but to disrupt negative discourses about the LGBT community. They worked intentionally to acquire success through academic achievement, campus involvement, and social popularity, since validation in each of these areas increased their status and profile on campus. Their statuses on campus afforded them the leverage to challenge heteronormative spaces; the higher the status, the more leverage and freedom they were given to fully embrace their gay identities. Additionally, some were motivated to succeed in exchange for support and financial stability, or as a compensatory strategy to validate their masculinity within their homes.

Their stories demonstrate that they existed within a constant state of tension as they crossed into spaces that upheld heteronormative expectations. They made adjustments to their physical performances in order to, at least aesthetically, fit within the heteronormative borders. They developed strategies that eased their movement into

heteronormative spaces and relied on their intuition to assess the elasticity of the boundaries. They used their successes on campus to challenge traditional gender norms through their intentional feminization of their mannerisms, tone of voice, and attire. These masculinity *mestizajes* reflected their intertwined realities shaped by their gay identities, a heteronormative institutional climate, and cultural expectations, resulting in hybrid masculinity embodiments that shifted and changed in response to their environments. In the following chapter I draw connections between each of the presented themes in order to make greater meaning of the participants' collective experiences.

Chapter 10: Discussion & Implications: *Nepantla* Masculinity Borderlands

In my work, I centered gay identity and the borderland identities of six self-identified Mexican American gay undergraduate men to understand the role their gay identities played in their embodiments of masculinity and how they navigated the Borderland University campus. Much of the established literature examining the experiences of college males of color and Latino men asserts a heteronormative framework that assumes gay Latinos conceptualize and assert masculinity in ways similar to their heterosexual Latino male peers (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Figueroa, Pérez, Vega, 2016; Harris & Harper, 2015; Saenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Saenz & Bukoski, 2014). The stories of Luis Gerardo, Danny, Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., and Eddie further the discourse on masculinity and Latino men in higher education to consider gay identity as a critical factor in understanding the unique experiences, challenges, and motivations of gay Latino college men in contrast to their heterosexual peers. Their portraits illustrate internalized constructs of masculinity, reflected in the literature, that highlight the assertion masculinity through their physical embodiment of strength and muscle, and through their ability to silence their emotions of pain and struggle in order to achieve an ideal performativity that meets the heteronormative professional expectations perpetuated by the institutional dynamic (Abalos, 2002; hooks, 2004; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sánchez, Martinez-Patiño, Blas-Lopez, & Vilain, 2016). While they struggled to navigate within these heteronormative masculinity borders, their portraits also unveiled insights and considerations for gay Latinos in the academy and prospective gay Latino scholars to consider in their pursuit of a higher education. The following discussion and implications sections of this dissertation are intentionally crafted not only to speak to the implications

of this work for the six self-identified Mexican American gay undergraduate men in this study, but also to provide insight into the experiences of borderland masculinities in higher education for current and prospective gay Latino men in pursuit of a college degree.[4]

The *Nepantla* State

Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) border theory describes the tensions that the *mestiza* consciousness experiences through the Aztec term *nepantla,* or state of in-betweenness. The *nepantla* state results from the multiple expectations, histories, and cultural traditions the *mestiza* attempts to embody and reflects shifts in consciousness to navigate multiple borders or boundaries of cultural expectations. Within these tensions exists the *nepantla* state, or "the space between two worlds" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100), which mirrors the constant state of discomfort experienced as border people move through constantly shifting cultural contexts. This experience, as Anzaldúa describes it, is "awkward" and "frustrating" since, as reflected in the six participant portraits, border individuals are pushed to "transform" themselves to meet the norms established within each context they occupy. The six participant portraits contribute a necessarily complex insight into how these masculinity boundaries, reinforced from childhood, created the psychological borders or boundaries of masculine performativities the participants internalized and learned to exist within as they made meaning of their gay identities within the heteronormative borders of the campus.

[4] In order to keep the scope of this dissertation within a portraiture- and community-based framework, I intentionally limit this discussion and implications chapter to the participants of the study and gay Latino male community, and not the broader higher-education field. Implications for practitioners in the field of higher education will instead be addressed in future publications stemming from this study.

Their institutional context, from an Anzaldúan theoretical framework, was a *trenza* braided with scripts of the American Dream, deeply held Mexican cultural pride, and familial responsibility. Within these cultural scripts of success, hypermasculinity, and gender norms, the participants were tasked with weaving their gay identities into the heteronormative masculinity boundaries they encountered on BU's campus. In interweaving these norms and expectations, participants embodied hybrid representations of masculinity that changed as they navigated the campus community and spaces entrenched in heteronormative and hypermasculine expectations. Importantly, their institutional setting was reflective of a predominantly Mexican student body with an institutional mission of achieving the American Dream. In contrast, their home and family lives were governed by more traditionally Mexican cultural norms that created rigid gender expectations rooted in heteronormative masculinity expectations. As they navigated the dynamics of their institution and lives outside of their campus setting, they adjusted their dress, voices, mannerisms, and expressions of emotion in order to embody masculine performativities conforming to the borders surrounding them. In some moments, these adjustments were intentional. Luis N., for example, intentionally selected his attire and changed his hair color as he prepared for dinner with his boyfriend's family. In other moments, the changes were part of their daily routine and had become embedded in their ways of being. Cristian, for example, described his ease being "whatever" he wants when he reflected on the differing ways he embodied his masculinity. As a result of these constant adjustments, each participant experienced physical and psychological tension and discomfort, or the *nepantla* state.

As they moved through various spaces within the Borderland University campus, and into shifting heteronormative boundaries—namely academic, professional, and social settings—their individual awareness of masculinity expression through physical aesthetics, mannerisms, and tempered emotions became entangled with the tensions they experienced as they tried to express their gay identities within the heteronormative gender boundaries they learned at home and carried with them into the campus setting. These *nepantla* masculinity borderlands reflected the internal struggles participants experienced as they determined whether or not their peers, staff and faculty would accept their expressions of gay identity within the masculinity borders the campus maintained. Figueroa et al. (2016) found that heterosexual Latino men often measured ways they engaged within their institution to ensure they are not perceived as gay. Similarly, the participant portraits demonstrate they too intentionally moderated their embodiments of masculinity, however, for these students the motivation to moderate their gender expression was, at times, a method of survival and they maintained heteronormative gender norms to avoid being negatively impacted if their true orientations were exposed.

These tensions expand the discourse on masculinity and Latino men in higher education, which often suggests that gay Latino men conceptualize masculinity in ways similar to their heterosexual counterparts (Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, & Tracey, 2011; Sáenz et al., 2013). While the factors that contribute to the creation of individual masculinity constructs may be the same (e.g. family, peers, cultural norms), the six participant narratives demonstrate the complex ways that masculinity among gay Latino men is asserted and affirmed differently than among heterosexual Latino men, due to the limited venues for the achievement of their internalized heteronormative expectations.

Luis Gerardo, Danny, Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., and Eddie considered their gay identities as they navigated psychological spaces of tension and made judgements about the openness of the individuals around them to assess the risk of operating outside of the campus' heteronormative boundaries (classrooms, work settings, or social spaces). In many moments, and in some cases toward each other and their MAGUM peers, they strategically masked their gay aesthetics in order to momentarily conform to these masculinity borders and move more freely through the various facets of the institution.

The Pursuit of Success and Significance of Higher Education

Scholars have asserted that gay males of color experience oppression within the institutional setting as a result of both their racial/ethnic backgrounds and the homophobia and heterosexism they encounter throughout their college experiences (Stevens, 2004; Wall & Washington, 1991). The portraits presented in this dissertation are deep examinations into the role of cultural traditions, reflected in the extant literature, that expect the male body to perform the role of provider, project strong emotional control, and embody hypermasculine characteristics of dominance (Abalos, 2002; hooks, 2004; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sánchez, Martinez-Patiño, Blas-Lopez, & Vilain, 2016; Wilson, Harper, Hidalgo, Jamil, Torres, & Fernandez, 2016). Importantly, their reflections also capture that each participant actively worked to reconcile their gay identity within these heteronormative gender expectations and create new possibilities for their masculine role within their familial unit and cultural tradition. As a result of their gay identities, they were unable to meet all of the traditional masculine expectations within their cultural context. Although the extant literature highlights success in higher education as a strategy for Latino males to bring *orgullo* to the family (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez, &

Connor, 2013; Enríquez & Mirandé, 1979; Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000), I argue that the six gay Latino men in this study were further motivated to succeed in higher education because it was one of the most accessible ways to meet that cultural tradition of bringing pride to the family. Therefore, success in the form of academic achievement, social recognition, and degree attainment were more accessible paths to assert their masculinity than their cultural contexts' more heteronormative expectations of marriage and offspring.

According to Saenz & Ponjuan (2009) a large percentage of Latino men drop out of high school and are motivated to pursue stereotypically hypermasculine pathways such as work in the labor force or service in the military. These pathways provide an accessible opportunity to take on the role of financial providers for the familial unit while also affirming heteronormative masculinity ideals. It is clear from the participant portraits that, for some gay Latino men, they are additionally motivated to pursue a college degree because the heteronormative pathways to assert masculinity (e.g. heteronormative marriage ideals, heteronormative family structure, and hyper masculinized work expectations) are not accessible to them given their identity as gay men. Success in higher education, for many of these students, represented a path toward upward mobility to eventually fulfill the role of financial provider for the family. Moreover, markers of success and academic achievement such as student leadership roles, community recognition, and degree attainment were used to bring pride to the family unit. These achievements were strategically used to mediate between the tensions of being gay within the familial space in hopes that their achievements would ease negative sentiment toward their gay identity. Thus, success in higher education for these six students must be viewed

as a path through which these men were able to bring pride to the familial space in hopes that these accomplishments would allow the family unit to embrace new ways of being men within their Mexican cultural context.

Nepantla as a Constant State of Consciousness

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) characterizes the *mestiza* body and consciousness as a site of political tension and cultural collision. Participants experienced this tension as they existed within multiple contexts at home and within an institutional environment that upheld rigid heteronormative gender expectations. In some of their narratives participants were keenly aware of the borders they crossed and they strategically engaged within the space to conform to the gendered expectations that shaped it. For example, in BU's Engineering Department, Danny first had to adhere to their "black and white" gendered expectations before he could push the surrounding borders to consider the "gray." In the engineering context, he slowly began to include his gay identity expression as he crossed in and out of the rigid heteronormative borders and gradually queered his aesthetic into his embodiment of professionalism. In similar ways, as Luis N. prepared to meet his boyfriend's father, he was acutely aware that the masculinity expectations within his boyfriend's home would be shaped by traditional Mexican gender norms. Luis N. carefully selected attire with "dull" colors, dyed his hair, and closely monitored his physical mannerisms for any flamboyance that would disrupt his crossing of the masculinity borders of his boyfriend's home. In both of these stories, Luis N. and Danny were intentional in their performances of masculinity as they adjusted their physical aesthetics to meet the masculinity expectations within each space. In contrast, Luis Gerardo learned the impact of breaking the campus' masculinity boundaries after he

stated honestly his intention to attend a campus ally training; his peers never treated him the same again.

These experiences reflect the campus' lack of inclusion of LGBT perspectives, which were limited to recognition of gay identity without the inclusion of complex discourses or campus initiatives that pushed against the rigid heteronormative boundaries that shaped the tensions participants experienced on campus. Within these borderland masculinity tensions reside "the third space" (Pérez, 1999, p. 33) or the space where complexities of Latino masculinities exist and that push the literature to move beyond a dual "either/or thinking" (P. Collins, 1991, pp. 376-377) of machismo or marianismo, weak or strong, and masculine or feminine. The participants' narratives largely rejected these dichotomies and instead created hybrid masculinity realities that allowed them to break down the rigid walls of hypermasculine expectations.

Nepantla as a Survival Strategy

In order to navigate across and within the campus' masculinity borders and the shifting expectations within the academic classroom, peer groups, social settings, and professional standards, participants in this study were strategic in their masculinity performances, measuring the rigidity of the heteronormative boundaries that existed within each space they occupied. The narratives of Cristian and Teddy, for example, shed light on the masculine-feminine hybridity, or mascufem embodiments of masculinity that are possible when gay identity is reconciled with traditional masculine gender norms to co-exist within them. That is, they embraced their masculinity and asserted their dominance through their feminized aesthetics, projecting their masculine conditioning of

independence and assertiveness while feminizing these characteristics through their tone, mannerisms, and campus involvement as part of the BU Dance Team.

To that end, their narratives present new opportunities to conceptualize professionalism, masculinity, and cultural expectations, demonstrating that expressions of masculinity within their cultural contexts can take forms beyond the heteronormative and hypermasculine expectations they've internalized throughout their lives. These varied masculinities emerge in their reflections of professionalism, success, and physical embodiments. Danny's portrait, for example, reveals a spectrum of possibilities that appeared as he began to understand the dynamics within his engineering experience. He described an intentional growth into his professional identity among his engineering peers, first masking his gay identity, then slowly growing comfortable enough to bring forth his gay aesthetic and "show them something new." In each of their experiences, participants performed a dance that both upheld and disrupted the heteronormative expectations they learned, while challenging these norms by exposing and embracing their gay identities when they felt most at ease. In the same ways that their existence was situated within a hybridity of Mexican and American cultural traditions, they also created a hybridity of heteronormative and queer embodiments of masculinity and self. These spaces of *nepantla*, tensions, and in-betweenness where "cultural and personal codes clash" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 3), are where the new possibilities of masculinities reside.

To varying degrees, Luis Gerardo, Danny, Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., and Eddie were attuned to the tensions their bodies experienced as they crossed between masculinity borders. Danny, Cristian and Teddy, and Luis N., for example, were confident in the adjustments they made to their aesthetics because they recognized the power their bodies

held to deceive the heteronormative gaze. Luis Gerardo, meanwhile, struggled to effectively cross heteronormative borders and experienced his peers' rejection and isolation throughout campus. Eddie took pride in thwarting the heteronormative borders but was unwilling to disrupt the outer heteronormative perception and refused to reveal the emotional toll of his breakup to his faculty. Instead, Eddie chose to drop his courses rather than retell the story of his heartbreak. If participants were attuned to their strategies for crossing heteronormative borders, they relied on *knowing* that their conformity was situational, an awareness that allowed them to retain their senses of self. Cristian, for example, reflected on his different embodiments of masculinity. "I'm a chameleon," he stated, emphasizing the intentional shifts in his masculine performativity within the campus setting, among peer groups, and within his home. "I'll change colors whenever I have to. I can be masculine, I can be flamboyant," he stated, sternly embracing the multiplicity of his masculinity embodiments throughout various points in his journey at Borderland University.

Finding Self in *Nepantla*

Gay Latino college men inhabit multiple realities shaped by culture, peer groups, professional spaces, and academic standards that require consistent negotiation with their sense of self in relation to the gender borders around them. These multiple realities "[create] a split in awareness," (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 75), which prepares gay child(ren) to exist within multiple spatial contexts. Gay Latino college men, within the collegiate terrain, must understand the ways identities are created as they "interrelate with others and our *alrededores*/surroundings" (p. 75). As Anzaldúa explains, "we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our exchanges" (p.75) and these accommodations are

critical if gay Latino college men are to exist within and challenge spaces that render queer identities and queer masculinities invisible. Therefore, my findings reinforce the idea that gay Latino college men must increase their self- awareness in order to hone their "ability to control perception," to exist both within and outside of their established contexts (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 28). Cristian's portrait, for example, demonstrates his clear understanding of the masculinity ideals he was expected to embody with his parents in their traditional Mexican home. He easily transitioned between his Hannah Montana persona on campus, various social spaces outside of his home, and within his home, where he embodied the "average kid from the border" aesthetic. This speaks to his ability "to move between" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 28) different spaces and adhere to varying expectations while holding the tensions of in-betweenness or *nepantla* state that results from shifts in his gay aesthetic.

The men in this study existed within multiple psychological borders and cultural contexts, and their sense of self was one of constant change and adjustment into varying spaces and gender expectations. In some moments, the adjustments they made were for survival within the institutional setting, whereas in others they conformed to the gender expectations upheld within their homes. Therefore, to effectively navigate the campus' landscape of heteronormative masculinity borderlands, they had to remain attuned to their border consciousness, intuitions, and perceptions of the surrounding borders. They strategically transformed their masculine performativity to fit within the borders of each heteronormative space. They were aware that their adjustments were situational and temporary but, in some moments, were necessarily enacted as methods of protection and

survival, especially within spaces that upheld hypermasculine gender borders that threatened their ability to succeed within the institution.

Fooling the Heteronormative Gaze

As each of the six participant portraits demonstrated, these adjustments were meant to fool the heteronormative gaze, and they maintained their senses of self, knowing that the boundaries and expectations that surrounded them were momentary and would eventually pass. In these moments, their in-between states of consciousness, their *nepantla* states, were invoked. This important insight into the gay Latino consciousness should empower members of the gay Latino community to reframe the tensions they experience, viewing them not solely as oppressive limitations but also as cultural strategies embedded within their beings and inherited from their cultural backgrounds and ancestral knowledge. Gay Latino college men must build their awareness around these moments of tension and connect to the metaphorical split between the adherence to heteronormative masculinity ideals and the introduction of gay identity into heteronormative campus spaces. In these moments of tension or in-betweenness within the heteronormative masculine borderlands, participants embody new expressions of masculinity through the hybrid representations of heteronormative and queer masculinities. These queer *mestizo* masculinity embodiments, or queer masculinity *mestizajes,* offer multiple possibilities for complicating individual masculinity perspectives rooted in the heteronormative and hypermasculine ideals gay Latino men must navigate on campus and within their homes.

Gay Latino Men as Cultural Mediators

> We must push against any boundaries that have outlived their usefulness. Rigid borders hinder communication and prevent us from extending beyond ourselves. While pondering both the necessity and the futility of fences, I paced up and down my side yard looking at my tall new redwood fence. I missed seeing into my neighbor's yard. Though the barrier insures my privacy and lessens noise and intrusions, it limits my visual space. (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 75)

The borders of masculinity uncovered in the participant portraits capture cultural expectations that contain both harmful and nurturing possibilities for embodiments of masculinity. Gay Latino college men must answer the call, as Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) suggests, to "push any boundaries that have outlived their usefulness" (p. 75). In other words, gay Latino college men must know and understand the cultural implications and expectations of masculinity within their border consciousness in order to successfully navigate the heteronormative barriers they will encounter in the institutional settings. Through increased self-awareness, gay Latino college men can identify the masculinity expectations they have internalized and connect them to the cultural traditions, expectations, and decorum that their cultural backgrounds require them to embody. They have learned that a man must maintain his composure through the hardest moments the family unit experiences, and the men in this study carried that expectation into the institutional setting.

While cultural masculine performativities of strength and the aesthetic of the emotionless man are promoted and celebrated within familial structures and Mexican cultural contexts, gay Latino college men must also recognize the limitations of these

masculinity boundaries, especially when they have stopped serving their purpose of uplifting and empowering them through the most difficult moments of their educational journeys. Gay Latino college men must not be limited by rigid heteronormative masculinity internalizations that "hinder communication and prevent us from extending beyond ourselves" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 75). The participant narratives highlight the importance of displaying strength and enduring struggle in order to sustain the family unit through difficult moments. Luis Gerardo, Danny, Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., and Eddie took pride in their ability to maintain their composure and carried these expectations with them into the institutional setting.

Gay Latino college men must leverage the state of *nepantla* to undo emotionless-male gender norms and, as they assess their environments, serve as cultural mediators within their familial units and expand the possibilities of masculinity by introducing new ways of affirming masculinity. The cultural expectation of a Latino man to maintain his composure serves a critical purpose for a familial unit in moments of hardship, but serves no purpose within the institutional setting. The emotionless-male embodiment hinders peer, staff, and faculty connections and limits engagement and interactions to situational and transactional exchanges, limiting gay Latinos' ability to become involved and create the sense of connection with the institution that is so critical to their success in higher education (Fischer, 2007; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Perez II, 2016). Luis N. was able to reach out to his faculty for support as he struggled academically due to his grandfather's ailing health as he approached graduation. In contrast, Eddie's effort to maintain the heteronormative assumptions others placed on him prevented him from establishing meaningful connections, which led to his unwillingness to seek support from his faculty.

Gay Latino college men must be willing to parse their cultural traditions and retain those lessons that expand their conceptualizations of masculinity, while beginning to undo the constructs that prevent masculinity conceptualizations from evolving, and queering the masculinity expectations their culture has embedded within the Latinx community. Gay Latino college men must express their emotional struggles in order to establish meaningful connections with peers, staff and faculty who can serve as supportive figures when challenges arise that might jeopardize their attainment of a college degree.

Gay Latino Men and Evolving Cultural Perspectives

> We must challenge the present concepts, creating frameworks that span the fissures among us and link us in a series of interconnected webs (*telarañas*). (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 75)

Gay identity within a first-generation household must be seen as an opportunity for growth, as the family unit holds the tensions of cultural gender norms while also being pushed to consider new possibilities that can manifest through their gay child(ren) (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). The men in this study existed within these tensions, and their individual understandings of masculinity, gay identity, and cultural expectations evolved to inform their daily embodiments of masculinity within different places and moments during their college experiences. They were keenly attuned to their cultural rules of engagement, institutional dynamics, and peer perceptions of masculinity, and they considered the consequences they faced for challenging these established masculinity norms. When they reached a level of comfort within a particular space, they were empowered to queer their aesthetic and slowly disrupt the surrounding masculinity boundaries.

They were motivated to succeed for their ancestors before them and to fulfill the dreams of immigrant parents that afforded them new and more promising realities within the U.S. borderlands. Their ancestral imaginations, however, did not include their gay identities in the dreams they chased. Regardless, the queer *mestizo* masculinities represented in each of the participant portraits position gay Latino college men to effectively push against the rigidity of masculinity boundaries at home and on campus. Masculinity for each of the men in this study was a braided reality of multiple possibilities and collisions of cultural expectations, individual desires, peer influences, and motivations to succeed. As gay Latino college men who possess the opportunity for growth and understanding, specifically with regard to gender norms and expectation within the Latinx community, these men can access the cultural knowledge and expectations needed to expand our Latinx community's collective understanding of what it means to be a man.

The participants were expected to fulfill the masculinity expectations they learned within their homes and were motivated by their gay identity to achieve success as compensation for cultural expectations their gay identities prevented them from achieving. Danny's gay identity served as the initial "start of the fire" for his motivation to achieve, emphasizing the importance of knowing himself and his culture to carry him through difficult moments. "I know myself and I know I am a hard worker," he stated. Ultimately, gay identity served as a force that challenged each participant to envision, create, and embody masculine performativities that existed outside of the cultural and social heteronormative borders they had come to accept as true.

Gay Identity as a Tool for Expansion

In these ways, gay identity served to expand the cultural understanding of masculinity, queer identity, and gender norms at home and on campus. Participants' gay identities were central to how they accepted and challenged the gender norms in these spaces, and they were keenly aware of the ways that heteronormative and hypermasculine gender expectations prevented them from fully "being" which, at various moments, limited their ability to fully be themselves as a result of the traditions they were expected to uphold. This seemingly deficit-oriented perspective resulted in heightened pressure to achieve.

In the participant portraits, success and achievement were used as compensatory strategies to make up for the ways their gay identities prevented them from meeting the expectations they internalized. Through their successes they sought new masculinity affirmations and, in addition to being motivated to counter external homophobic stereotypes and attitudes, they were internally motivated to succeed in order to actively challenge the negative discourse around the campus' gay community. Not only are these success narratives crucial to uplifting the BU queer community, they are critical for its heterosexual counterparts; the liberation of gay Latino men from homophobic cultural narratives is dependent on the healing of heterosexual Latino peers and the recognition that a multiplicity of masculinities exist.

As they acquired success in the academy, participants were given latitude to challenge the heteronormative masculinity expectations within their homes and within various spaces of the BU campus. They danced. They led. They advocated. They adjusted. Thus, they actively created positive representations for gay Latino peers, their

families, and the outer heteronormative gaze. All the while, they moved through the institutional setting fully aware that on some days they would proudly hold their heads high, while on others, they would retreat into the safety of silence. They were continuously in process … becoming within each space and with each group of new peers. Their portraits reflect "an ongoing story, one that changes with each telling, one we revise at each way station, each stop, in our *viaje de la* vida (life's journey)" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 16).

Concluding Reflections

> Listening to my story, I've been able to see every step that I've taken to where I am now, and I think it's great because now I'm a bigger advocate than I ever was before, and I'm more confident in owning my identity and not just as a gay man but also as a Latino… I'm proud of that. (Danny)

The stories of Luis Gerardo, Danny, Cristian, Teddy, Luis N., and Eddie underscore the tensions and struggles some gay Latino college men experience in their pursuit of a college education. I caution readers against the urge to interpret their portraits' state of tension/*nepantla* from a deficit mindset, without first listening for the song beneath their words and for the good that is embedded throughout their narratives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While their gay identities created an added barrier for them to negotiate, their gay identities also existed within tension, motivating and sometimes hindering their pursuit of academic accomplishment and campus connections. It is true that the participant portraits depict silence and hiding of their gay identities as strategies to fool the heteronormative borders and gain access into various institutional spaces. This was their reality.

As Danny reflects in the vignette above, the "steps" he needed to take to exist within the heteronormative masculinity expectations enacted within the BU campus, have helped him grow "more confident" in his identity as gay Latino man. They made these sacrifices in order to survive within the institutional setting, to be perceived as professional, and to establish connections with their peers. It is simplistic to interpret these strategies from an oppressive point of view without hearing the *orgullo* each participant expressed in being able to, at least momentarily, cross in and out of the rigid masculinity walls within their homes and the Borderland University campus. They especially took pride in being able to fulfill, through their aesthetics, the masculinity expectations within their homes. This contradictory, oppressive, and prideful experience is reminiscent of the border experience. They took pride in passing as heterosexual and as emotionless strong men to maintain their cultural roles within their homes. Their ability to fool the heteronormative borders gave them agency to manipulate the masculine expectations that surrounded them.

Luis Gerardo, Danny, Teddy, Luis N., Cristian, and Eddie existed in the tensions of cultural expectations placed on their bodies while also trying to claim their gay identities, identities that paradoxically silenced and motivated them to succeed, and thus must be highlighted as contradictory motivators and potential hindrances along their trajectories through higher education. This space of the *nepantla* masculinity borderlands is where their bordered identities are located, within the *nepantla* state. First generation Gay Latino men are tasked with not only being "the first" in their family to establish the path toward a higher education, but are also the first within their family push the

boundaries of masculinity and embody different ways of being men and existing within their cultural context while also meeting the expectations that are placed upon them.

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APPENDIX A: Context Interview Protocol

Topic Focus:

- Participant descriptions of their institutional experience, campus climate, how they access campus resources and reflections on being gay on campus, and connections.
- Participant motivations and excitement about beginning a new academic year.
- Hopes and fears participants have about the new academic year.

Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself. What do you want me to know about you right away? What are some key insights into who are you?

2. Why did you decide to pursue a college degree and why here? How did you get here?

3. What excites you about the beginning of this school year? What are you looking forward to?

4. What anxieties do you have about this academic year? Where do you think these anxieties come from?

5. Talk to me a bit about the connections in terms of faculty and staff you've established or are hoping to establish here?
    a. If none have been established: Why do you think you haven't established any connections with faculty or staff across campus? Are these connections important to you? Why or why not? What are some of the barriers in establishing these connections?

6. Describe this institution to me. What is it like to be a student here? What is it like to be a gay student here?

7. Describe your social life on this campus. What organizations are you involved in? How do you establish friendships here? Describe a time that you have utilized an on-campus resource.

8. Think about your experience at this institution so far, is there a story that sticks out in your mind that you wouldn't mind sharing?
    a. Clarification if needed: So, for example, have there been any moments here that have surprised you or that you did not expect to experience?

9. Has your time at this institution been everything you hoped for? Why or why not?

10. What final reflections would you like to share with me about this institution, your experience here, or anything else you want me to know?

APPENDIX B: History Interview Protocol

Topic Focus:

- Participant descriptions of their family history.
- Participant reflections on why they seek a college degree.
- Participant reflections on the messages they have received about masculinity in their home life, from Mexican and U.S. cultures, and their on campus experience.
- Participant reflections on their childhood memories, experiences, and stories they believe impact their views on masculinity.
- Participant definition(s) of masculinity and how they came to these perspectives.

Question Guide:

1. Tell me about your background (parents, siblings, extended family). How were you raised? What values did you upbringing instill in you?

2. Describe this location, the U.S./Mexico border; what is this place like?

3. Describe your home life. What is your neighborhood like? What sounds, smells, tastes, or dynamics would you use to describe your home?

4. What does it mean to be a man in your family? What does it mean to be a gay man in your family?

5. What messages or expectations specifically related to you being a man were/are placed on you throughout your upbringing?

6. How does being gay complicate your ability to fulfill these expectations?

7. What stories can you share with me that relate to you being a young boy, adolescent man, or young man in your family?

8. Define masculinity for me. What is it? How does your gay identity relate to this definition?

9. How does your Mexican background shape your definition of masculinity? How does U.S. American culture shape your definition?

10. What messages do you receive on campus about what it means to be a man?

11. Why is it important for you to be at this institution? What is the significance of attaining a college degree for you? What motivates you?

APPENDIX C: Constructs Interview Protocol

Topic Focus:

- Participant reflections on their developing portrait.
- Participant reflections on who they are and how they show up in specific spaces across campus and outside of their campus lives.
- Participant reflections on the role of masculinity in their on-campus experience.

Question Guide:

1. Since we last spoke you've had the opportunity to read your developing narrative, and I'm wondering what thoughts, feelings, or reactions you have on what we've created?

2. Think about the different spaces you occupy both at this institution but also in your life outside of this place.

    a. Who are you at home and who you are in the classroom setting? How are you different or similar at home than you are on this campus?

    b. How do you engage in the classroom?

    c. Who are you in your social relationships or in social settings? How is that individual similar or different from the one in the classroom? At home?

3. What influences the ways in which you show up in each of these spaces?

4. What role, if any, might your definitions of masculinity play in who you are in each of these areas in your life?

5. Describe a good man within the context of your Mexican/Mexican American background.

6. Describe a bad man within the context of your Mexican/Mexican American background.

7. With regard to masculinity, who are the role models in your life who aspire to be like?

8. Finally, what role, if any, do you believe women in your life play in how you have come to understand what masculinity means to you?

APPENDIX D: Borders Interview Protocol

Topic Focus:

- Draws from the previous three conversations and aims to identify border spaces participants have discussed over the course of the study.
- Interview questions will be developed using the previous conversations and will focus on themes related to cultural values, traditions, and expectations and how participants navigate multiple cultural contexts.
- Perceptions of self and others with regard to Mexican nationals/Mexican Americans.

Possible sample questions:

1. As a Mexican American, what messages have you heard about Mexican nationals coming into the United States?

2. How often do you cross the U.S./Mexico border? Under what circumstances?

    a. If you choose to cross, what are the reasons you cross into the U.S./Mexico country?
    b. If you choose not to cross, what are the reasons you choose not to cross into Mexico?

3. Describe the dynamics between Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans on this campus?

4. Describe the dynamics between Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans in your home city?

5. What informs your descriptions of these dynamics?

APPENDIX E: Closure Interview Protocol

Topic Focus:

- Participant reflections on completed portrait.
- Participant reflections participation in the study (realizations, significance, and impact).

Questions:

1. Since we last spoke you've had the opportunity to review the (mostly) final portrait we've created. What thoughts, reactions, or feelings do you have about your portrait?

2. Describe the experience of participating in this journey.

3. Were there any difficult moments or were there any realizations you came to as a result of being a part of this project?

4. Is there anything that has remained unexplored or unsaid that you want to take the opportunity to discuss/share now?

5. What will you take away from this experience?

6. As we end our time together working on this project, is there anything that you've intentionally not shared with me about your experiences at this institution, home life, social life, or background because you were not comfortable sharing with me?
    a. If so, what has kept you from sharing that particular part of your story?
    b. If so, do you believe the omission of this story as part of your portrait makes a significant difference?
    c. If so, I'd like to give you this opportunity now if you are comfortable to share that story.

7. Finally, I'd like to give you the opportunity to compose the final sentence of your story. Take as long as you need to. (Paper and pencil will be provided to participant).
    a. How would you like your portrait to end? What final words would you like to close your story with?