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## The (in)visible woman: A performative autoethnographic exploration of queer femme-ininity and queer isolation

Bri Ozalas

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The (In)Visible Woman:

A performative autoethnographic exploration of queer femme-ininity and queer isolation

Bri Ozalas

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Communication and Advocacy

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“I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice;  
measure the emptiness by its small sound.”

Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (p. 5)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a performative autoethnographic exploration of my experiences existing betwixt-and-between the intersection of queer femme-ininity and isolation. Through a creative, affective rendition of my experiences, I detail and connect the nuances of queerness, femme-ininity, and queer isolation to provide a closer look at understanding queer identity with an absence of connection to the queer community. First, I provide an overview of the main theoretical and methodological approaches, and main concepts I utilize throughout my project. I then provide the intricacies of queer theory, queer intersectionality, and affect theory to provide theoretical explanations of my approach to queer isolation. After I explain the process of queer performative autoethnography, I weave my vignettes and narratives within existing research and scholarship regarding queer femme-ininity and social exclusion and isolation to create connections between embodied knowledge and scholarly literature. This project was ultimately a means through which I was able to creatively reflect on my experiences with queer isolation while also beginning the effect to bridge the gaps in knowledge that exist between concepts such as social isolation, communication, and queer femme identities.

## CHAPTER 1

### Overview

*queer femme, the invisible woman*

misunderstood by many, her (in)visibility is a mythic fable.

she's behind you in line at the coffee shop, she's next to you in class,

unassuming, quietly rule-breaking. she wears the mask.

she's (in)visible, takes pen to paper, writes herself into existence.

you've never seen her, you say?

well. that's what you think.

-----

A project constructed from a lackluster social life and cobwebs of queer connections, I set out to tackle some difficult questions. What does it mean to be “queer?” What does it mean to feel “isolated?” How do you know where you belong and who belongs with you? I began this project with a *feeling*, no, something more than that - existing at the intersection of queerness and isolation. More than just a feeling, but equally as intangible.

Social exclusion is traditionally understood from a societal perspective, such as structural inequalities of a certain group that is excluded from the dominant narrative, however, social exclusion can also be understood through a social-psychological or sociological lens, in which the focus is “who is excluded, in what domain, and in what way” (Krishnan, 2015, p. 157). Little to no existing research regards social exclusion in

queer contexts and a glaring lack of research surrounding social exclusion and queer isolation in college-aged adults. Much like the connection between queer identities and social isolation, this lack of research continues to further isolate and distance those with these identities and experiences from current and future communication studies scholarship.

This project is one step in the direction of bridging the gaps in knowledge that exist between concepts such as social isolation, communication, and queer femme identities. Considering that queer identities are constructed by and so reliant on the existence of community, how do queer folks make sense of their queer identities when a physical relational community is not present? Through my own experiences, I detail and connect the nuances of this phenomenon to provide a closer look at understanding queer identity with an absence of connection to the queer community. I attempt to create an affective experience in order to better understand living betwixt-and-between queerness and isolation. Hoping, wishing, that my affects move, bend, flex, shift from the page.

-----

I sit in a local coffee shop as I write this and I glance up from my laptop screen to take in the oncoming storm clouds through the shop's floor to ceiling windows. *I think there are two queers here on a date*, I text my partner. After I hit 'send,' I realize what I'm doing and what is going on here. I'm presuming the androgyny, slight femininity, and short hair of one of these individuals is an indicator of queerness. The other, I'm sure, black framed glasses, shoulder-length blonde hair, and athletic clothing would be written off as just another young, straight, college-aged woman. They both sip their coffees as I type out my frustrations. They shift closer in their separate grey armchairs.

Much of my queer adult life has been fueled with this type of uncertainty – do I look queer enough? *Who* do others see or *what* do they think when they see me? How is my body perceived as I navigate through the world around me? I’ve always attempted to find a balance between my queerness and my femininity. I’ve found myself feeling the need to justify my queerness, compensate in some way, by dressing less traditionally feminine – once upon a time I was an avid short-dress-and-tights kind of gal. Though I now prioritize comfort over tights and heels, I still find empowerment by embracing my femininity. A true queer femme.

-----

### ***Queer intersectionality***

Throughout this piece, I use “queer” as an umbrella term to refer to LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) folks. I entered this endeavor and continue to understand queer isolation from a perspective of a white, cisgender, able-bodied, university-educated, queer femme, bisexual woman. Certain facets of my intersectional identity communicate privileges over other marginalized aspects of my identity. Acknowledging these facets of my identity, how they shape my experiences, and how these details of my identity affect the reciprocal relationship between myself and the social world around me is essential to this project. I acknowledge both the privileges I have and the marginalizations I have faced through a queer intersectional perspective (Johnson, 2013; Rosenblum, 1994; LeMaster, 2016).

Intersectional theory provides a distinctive theoretical framework through which I examine my experiences as a queer-identifying individual with experiences of queer isolation. Intersectional theory contends that social phenomena are often best understood

by examining the overlap of institutional power structures such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000; Meyer, 2012). Much of this theoretical approach critiques one-system views of oppression, such as race-only or gender-only frameworks, “which may ameliorate the effects of one system of oppression, while simultaneously reinforcing other power structures” (Meyer, 2012, p. 851). In opposition to the one-system views of oppression, feminist scholars of color have emphasized that intersectional analysis is integral to understanding the ways in which identity is navigated and how oppression manifests interpersonally and within institutional structures, such as education, healthcare, economic, and religious institutions (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1990; Johnson, 2013). Considering the experiences of individuals who are oppressed along multiple axes of inequality allows a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Individuals’ positionalities influence their perceptions of themselves and the world around them (D’Silva, et al., 2018; Moernaut, et al., 2018). Taking into account, at the forefront and throughout this project, my different identity constructions and cultural backgrounds and acknowledging institutionalized power structures and multiple axes of oppression provide a gateway into reflective inquiry about positionality and queer isolation, how the two may be related, and how my positionality influences not only my experiences themselves but also how I interpret my experiences.

Further, I utilize both ‘bisexual’ and ‘queer’ interchangeably to identify myself in both this project and my day-to-day life. Bisexuality, though typically acknowledged as non-existent and overall highly critiqued (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Garelick, Filip-Crawford, Varley, Nagoshi, Nagoshi, & Evans, 2017; Spalding & Peplau, 1997), is more

easily understood in our common vernacular. I primarily use the label of ‘bisexual’ as a means of combating antibisexual prejudice and resisting stigma, as individuals who identify as bisexual frequently “experience a unique form of stigma and discrimination” due to the stigmas and negative connotations that are attached to the label of their identity (Todd, Oravecz, & Vejar, 2016, p. 147). My understanding of bisexuality encompasses the possibility that I could be attracted to someone “regardless of how they identify – male, female, non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, all of the above or none at all – these identities are all included” (Ozalas, 2020, p. 9).

Addressing my bisexual identity is pertinent to this work, as it is a factor of my intersectional identity and frames the ways in which I approach this study and understand my experiences. Also, the ways in which I identify myself impact and influence the ways in which others perceive and interact with me in our social world. In relation to social exclusion and isolation, bisexuality is essential to include as the identity comes with a unique discrimination. Anti-bisexual prejudice “can be levied from heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men” (Galupo, 2006, p. 40). Many gay and lesbian individuals find the LGBT community as a place of solace, comfort, and support. Despite this, those who identify as bisexual not only may experience amplified inequity and discrimination from the heterosexual community but also from within the LGBT community, thus continuing the cycle of ostracization (Randazzo, Farmer, & Lamb, 2015; Todd, et al., 2016).

-----

while sometimes covert queerness feels like an inside joke, the true gag of the century is the fact that i'm writing this now. right now.

in 2020.

in trump's america.

uncertainty is a constant sour taste in my mouth. my partner fears that her identity will prevent her from professional success. sometimes, most times, i'm afraid of walking alone. even in broad daylight.

in the midst of a global pandemic.

the world pauses, and mother nature catches her breath. provisions scarce, households bunkered down. social distancing. six feet away. quarantine. society embraces isolation.

i barely made changes to my daily routine.

-----

### ***Social exclusion and queer isolation***

I conceptualize what I refer to as “queer isolation” through the phenomenon of social exclusion. Social exclusion is defined as “structural, institutional, or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction” (Krishnan, 2015). Terms such as *marginalization*, *discrimination*, and *social isolation* are often used in connection with social exclusion (Barry, 1998; Krishnan, 2015). The phenomenon of social exclusion can be understood

through both socio-psychological and sociological lenses: “who is excluded, in what domain, and in what way,” (Krishnan, 2015, p. 157). Social exclusion is more of a concept than an objective state or reality - social exclusion is “a way of looking at society” (de Haan, 2001, p. 28, cited in Krishnan, 2015). As described by both Krishnan (2015) and Kabeer (2006), exclusion involves the cultural devaluation of people based on who they are, and more commonly, who they are perceived to be. These two sectors – who people are and who they are perceived to be – feed into the phenomenon’s less visible element of ‘othering’ and ‘otherness,’ as there may be inconsistencies between an individual’s identity, who they are, versus how others perceive them. This stems from an implicit perception of those who are ‘different’ from ‘others,’ ultimately implying a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion,’ of which the excluded ‘them’ is the ‘other’ (Maximiano, 2014; Krishnan, 2015; Kumar, 2014).

Existing research on social exclusion in queer contexts typically centers on location-specific instances and cultures, and social exclusion of queer youth. For example, Moussawi (2018) details the ways in which exclusions “take the form of limiting access to many spaces, including gay-friendly spaces” in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon (p. 185). In this context, Moussawi (2018) found that gender, class, and religiosity shaped the participants’ experiences in queer and non-queer spaces. Moreover, another facet of existing social exclusion research surrounds queer youth’s experiences with bullying in school as a response to their identity. Higa, et al. (2014) found that “youth reported negative factors that reflected feelings of social isolation and negative internalized feelings related to being gay” (p. 675). The young participants of this study were the only gay (or queer)

students, to their knowledge, in their schools, so they felt that they didn't have anyone to whom they could relate or share experiences with.

Though both of these sectors of social exclusion research are significant and relative in their own unique ways, there is little existing research regarding social exclusion in queer contexts and a glaring lack of research surrounding social exclusion and queer isolation in college-aged adults. Incorporating my own lived experience as a bisexual queer femme woman and graduate student and making connections with existing scholarship and theoretical approaches, I add my voice and broaden the communication discourse surrounding queer isolation.

### ***Performative autoethnography***

Over the last year and a half, I've been writing and journaling about my own experiences with queer isolation and, in doing so, I've utilized Spry's (2011) performative autoethnography approach as a form of inquiry. Reflecting on my writing and experiences allowed me to further understand them and relate my individual perspective to the greater narrative surrounding queer isolation.

Traditionally, autoethnography is the "intersection of *autobiography* and *ethnography*," according to Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017, p. 2). A typical ethnography focuses on situated communicative conduct that is particularistic to place and social positioning, relating to not only an individual but a communal context (Witteborn, Milburn, & Ho, 2013, p. 188). This perspective ultimately allows researchers "to move between contextualized communicative practices and conceptualizing ways of being, acting, and relating" to a communicative theory about social life (Witteborn, et. al, 2013, p. 188).

Ethnography allows the researcher to fully submerge themselves into the situated context of a specific instance to analyze communicative phenomenon.

Autoethnography, however, is defined as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. [It] is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes,” (Spry, 2001, p. 710; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ultimately, the goal of an autoethnography is to use the combination of aspects from autobiographies and ethnographies in order to depict a narrative that is, as Spry (2001) describes, “a discourse from the margins of dominant culture” (p. 710)

Due to the nature of performative autoethnography, I started this project without indication as to what I’d find in relation to my experiences. It was only after writing and reflecting did I find connections to hegemonic institutions and systems, intersectional axes of oppression, and social phenomena such as social exclusion and queer isolation. This process allowed me to discover the connections between my experiences, theoretical knowledge, and the overall discourse surrounding queer isolation and its intricacies. Ultimately, this project is simply one significant step in the direction of bridging the gaps in knowledge that currently exist between the concepts of social isolation, communication, and queer identities. By using my own lived experience, I detail and connect the nuances of this phenomenon to provide a closer look at understanding queer identity with an absence of connection to the queer community and ultimately broaden the conversation surrounding queer isolation.

-----

In the following chapters I detail the theoretical and methodological approaches that I took when embarking on the process of this project. In chapter 2, I provide the intricacies of queer theory, queer intersectionality, and affect theory to provide theoretical explanations of my approach to queer isolation. In chapter 3, I explain the process of performative autoethnography, while also problematizing and ‘queering’ the traditional approach, utilizing queer performative autoethnography. Considering the two major aspects of queer isolation, one being queer identity, and the other social exclusion and isolation, I divided chapters 4 and 5 as such. Throughout chapter 4, I explore my own experiences of sexuality, queerness, biphobia, and queer femme (in)visibility. Chapter 5 encapsulates social exclusion and isolation, applying queer and affect theory to the concept of isolation. Finally, chapter 6, the concluding chapter, addresses implications and limitations, while also discussing potential future research as well as directions for advocacy and activism within the queer community.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theoretical Approaches

*(in)visible woman*

body screaming ocean waves, her words muffled by the ebb and flow,  
different lovers garner different voices crashing against the shoreline.

she's used to her body speaking for her.

-----

My experiences as a bisexual queer femme graduate student negotiating queer isolation calls for the utilization of methodology and theoretical approaches that encompass and accurately represent embodied knowledge and lived experience. This thesis is my attempt to better understand an experience that I can't quite put my finger on – queer identity, isolation, and existing at the intersection of the two. The queer experience is prelinguistic – sure, we know what queer identities are, but what does being 'queer' really mean? What does existing as this identity in our social world feel like? Isolation is also prelinguistic – what does belonging feel like? What does connection with others look like? In order to attempt to unearth some answers to these questions and add my perspective to the discourse surrounding queer identity, isolation, and communication throughout this thesis, I will first discuss my theoretical approaches.

***Queer theory***

The ways in which “queer” will be utilized here is twofold: ‘queer’ as an identity and ‘queer’ as a theoretical framework (Ozalas, 2020). “Queer” was once used as a pejorative term to identify those who did not adhere to heteronormative standards of gender and sexuality, however, the term has been appropriated and reclaimed to name a “radical form of social discourse and performance that disrupts heteronormative institutions,” (Manning, 2015, p. 100; Ozalas, 2020). While this term is embraced by some and eschewed by others, ‘queer’ is currently often used positively as an identifying label to signify fluidity of sexual expression while also used to destabilize heteronormative identity conceptualizations (Jagose, 1996; Jones & Adams, 2016; Joslin-Roher & Wheeler, 2009; Meyer, 1994; Ozalas, 2020).

The choice to reclaim ‘queer’ “indicates a willingness to expose and celebrate cultural differences” between the homosexual and heterosexual binary (Fox, 2007, p. 37), as ‘queer’ refers more to “self-identification rather than to empirical observations of other people’s characteristics” (Jagose, 1996, p. 97; Ozalas, 2020). A concise and specific definition of the queer identity doesn’t necessarily exist. Due to the past efforts of denaturalization and strides away from essentialist perspectives, queer identity doesn’t have a prototype or definitive conceptualization, as the queer subject is always ambiguous and always relational (Jagose, 1996). Identifying as queer isn’t as simple as checking off boxes or fitting into a specific stereotype or representation. This identity is relational - it is influenced by the world around us and the people we interact with - and this can change over time. Queer isn’t static and isn’t a phenomenon that can be coded and translated into

empirical data as everyone identifies, expresses, experiences, and perceives their own queer identity and experiences differently throughout their lives and throughout history

Much like the ways in which queer identities embrace fluidity, the theory itself is a category “in the process of formation” as its “definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity is one of its constituent characteristics” (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). Queer theory arose within the academy in the United States alongside the LGBT activist movements in the 1990s, using democratic counter politics to bring attention to dominant discourses of sexuality at the time (Berlant & Freeman, 1997; Chevrette, 2013; Jagose, 1996; Ozalas, 2020). The ways in which this theory transcends categorization and is constantly reforming, adapting and changing allows the theory freedom from being diluted to essentialist conceptualizations.

Jagose (1996) further explains, “By refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes as the normal” (p. 99). This resistance is the core of queer’s reclamation as a mode of disrupting heteronormative institutions (Manning, 2015) by reacting against normalized hierarchies of gender and sexuality and “conducting research outside the boundaries of predefined gay or lesbian communities” (Dhaenens, Bauwel, & Biltreyst, 2008, p. 337; Ozalas, 2020). Queer theory emphasizes the socially constructed, performative aspects of sexuality (Butler, 1990; Chevrette, 2013; Foucault, 1978; Ozalas, 2020; Warner, 1993), emphasizing that “human nature cannot be captured holistically by simple binaries” (Few-Demo, Humble, Curran, & Lloyd, 2016, p. 75). Though there are contestations regarding queer theory’s operational definition and purpose, challenging heteronormativity, or “the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence” (Jackson, 2006, p. 108), continues to reign as the central

focus of queer theoretical analysis (Chevrette, 2013; Jagose, 1996; Ozalas, 2020). With the concept of resistance at its core, queer theory utilizes the conscious refusal of labels and emphasizes a retreat from binaristic thinking.

### *Queer intersectionality*

Focusing on the embodied knowledge of my experiences encompasses positionality and intersectionality, as my own positionalities and intersectional identities influence the ways in which I understand my own experiences and my experiences with others. I interact with the world around me as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, university-educated, bisexual queer femme woman. Each aspect of my identity encompasses their own privileges and marginalities, all of which I acknowledge throughout this work through a queer intersectional perspective (Johnson, 2013; LeMaster, 2016; Rosenblum, 1994).

Intersectional theory “contends that social phenomena are often best understood by examining the overlap of institutional power structures such as race, class, gender, and sexuality,” (Meyer, 2012, p. 850; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000), ultimately providing a distinctive theoretical framework to the discussion of the phenomenon of queer isolation. This theoretical approach critiques one-system conceptualizations of oppression, such as race-only, or gender-only frameworks, “which may ameliorate the effects of one system of oppression, while simultaneously reinforcing other power structures” (Meyer, 2012, p. 851). In opposition to the one-system views of oppression, feminist scholars of color have emphasized that intersectional analysis is integral to understanding the ways in which identity is navigated and how oppression manifests interpersonally and within institutional structures (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins,

1990; Johnson, 2013). Considering the experiences of individuals who are oppressed along multiple axes of inequality allows a deeper understanding of their experiences and overall enhances analysis of culture, identity, and difference (Chavez, 2010; Chavez & Griffin, 2012; Houston, 1992, 2012; Johnson, 2001; Johnson, 2013; Jones & Calafell, 2012; Lee, 2003; Moreman & McIntosh, 2010).

Further, standpoint theory (Wood, 2009) engages the notion that each individual has a different social position in society, ultimately leading to the creation of a distinct perspective (D'Silva, et al., 2016; Harding & Norberg, 2005; Haraway, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1990; Smith, 1990; Wood, 2005). An individual's "position within the social world influences the way in which [they] see it," (D'Silva, et al., 2016; Temple & Young, 2004, p. 164). An individual's position within society includes identity construction(s) and cultural background(s) and those with distinct backgrounds from others are likely to have divergent understandings of the world (D'Silva, et al., 2016).

My use of queer intersectionality draws from Johnson's (2001) "Quare" theory, which "bridges the discursive and material aspects of sexual identity with the contingency of other identities" so that queer identities can be better understood within communicative context, history, and other intersectional identities (Hobson, 2013, p. 40). Queer identities are intersectional, considering that most queer individuals face multiple axes of oppression and discrimination. Queer individuals aren't simply just queer. As Audre Lorde (1984) said, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138). Intersectionality scholars further emphasize that one-system views of oppression fail to encapsulate the realistic experience of existing as an intersectional individual with multiple marginalized identities. Discussing queer individuals without

specifying other aspects of their intersectional identity or social position, such as race, class, and gender, implies a singular or universal position (Crenshaw, 1989; Rosenblum, 1994). Rosenblum (1994) explains, “The multiplicity of the discrimination that queers face is thus greater than anti-lesbian and anti-gay discrimination” (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 89). Discrimination against queer individuals does not occur simply because of hegemonic homophobia and heteronormativity, but due to a culmination of co-existing systems of oppression. Hobson (2013) writes, “Queer theory from an intersectional perspective requires us to look at how dominant and privileged identities work” in our social world (p. 48). Intersectional identities influence and are influenced by one another and are not mutually exclusive. We cannot separate certain identities from others; I cannot merely analyze my queer femme-ininity and bisexuality separate from my whiteness and my cisgender body.

These divergent understandings of the world form in the margins - the voices of the marginalized uphold a different perspective than that of those in the dominant sphere of our society. Taking into account my different identity constructions and cultural backgrounds and acknowledging institutionalized power structures and multiple axes of oppression provide a gateway into a reflective inquiry about positionality and queer isolation, the ways in which those two concepts are related, and my positionality’s influence not only on my experiences but how I interpret these experiences.

### *Affect theory*

The concluding theoretical facet of this work is that of affect theory. A theory of affect “envisions the contingent foundations of perception as a churning atmosphere that

exerts force on those surrounded by it to provide depth, character, and conditions of life” (Anderson, 2009; Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 151). Embodied knowledge oftentimes encapsulates a feeling, an emotion, an affect. Despite some varied perspectives regarding affect theory, there is undoubtedly a connection between affect, emotion, and feelings (Hobson, 2020). Subtle distinctions exist between the aforementioned concepts, as Shouse (2005) details:

Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal...a feeling is a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labeled...an emotion is the projection/display of a feeling...An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity (para. 2 -5).

Shouse (2005) uses the emotions of an infant to detail the particularities of affect: Parents of the infant would say that their child has feelings and expresses them regularly and in a way that the parents understand, when in fact, the parents are actually bearing witness to the infant’s affect (Shouse, 2005). Infants do not necessarily experience feelings because they lack both the language to describe and biography to situate what they are experiencing and/or expressing. Affect, essentially, is an intense sensation that exists prelinguistically, abstractly, as a preconscious impulse that moves between bodies in liminal spaces (Hobson, 2020; Manning, 2012; Massumi, 2007; Shouse, 2005; Seigworth & Gregg, 2011).

This prelinguistic sensation shifts and changes as we navigate through time and space. These “mood-shifts” are the “communicative force that we may all feel, yet, we cannot quite put our finger on precisely what we are experiencing” (Hobson, 2020, p. 192).

Stewart (2007) characterizes these “mood-shifts” as “ordinary affects.” According to Stewart (2007), ordinary affects are:

Things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, in the publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something* (p. 2).

In this sense, affects are not about “the singularity of the individual,” but about “the public movements of affects between people, or environments, and objects within our environments” (Hobson, 2020, p. 193). Ordinary affects move, bend, and flex with us, as they are relational, contextual, and fluid. We are all pieces of a larger picture with our own moving parts. Stewart (2007) explains that the significance of ordinary affects “lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible” (p. 3). Aspects of everyday life, taken-for-granted facets of our societies and cultures, these are ordinary affects, such as the feeling you get when you’re at a sold-out stadium concert with hundreds of other people. The communal, unspoken unity at a Pride parade. These are affective experiences. “We enter the field; we enter an affective atmosphere” (Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 251). As we navigate our social worlds and interact with others, we are also navigating a world of ordinary affects – buzzing static that drives us, *something* that pulls us together.

-----

As I was writing about and reflecting on my experiences, I found myself drawn to encapsulating how I was feeling in short, disjointed vignettes, as queer isolation is “more of an atmosphere and less a physical-temporal location” (Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 251). Affective experiences call for stories from the margins. Stories from the margins of dominant culture, queer stories, call for queer modes of inquiry. With this project and the theoretical approaches of queer theory, intersectionality, and affect theory, I am beginning to unearth answers, potentialities, to questions I’ve incessantly pondered over the last year and a half. What does queerness really *mean*? What does isolation *feel* like? Now that I have detailed the theories that inform my perspective, I will discuss the method through which I explored my experiences with queer isolation.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Methodology

*the (queer femme) invisible woman*

accustomed to her own silence.

unassuming, quietly rule-breaking. next to you in class,

behind you in line at the coffee shop, she wears the mask.

you've never seen her, you say?

well, you need to listen first.

-----

Over the last year and a half, I utilized a variety of autoethnographic practices such as journaling (Goodall, 2000), emotional memory (Poulos, 2009) and performative writing (Spry, 2011). I draw from my own creative, reflective, and reflexive writing as a means through which I explore queer isolation. Most importantly, I want this to be known: writing about feeling lonely and isolated is absolutely not the easiest of tasks, especially when the experiences and the process of writing and reflecting are happening concurrently. I struggled to write about my experiences. Hell, I'm struggling to write this right now. Does it get easier? Who knows.

Queer isolation is a feeling, an emotion, an affect. Something we can experience but is ultimately intangible. Now that I have detailed the theoretical approaches that inform my research and overall academic perspective of queer isolation, I will not discuss my method of inquiry: performative autoethnography.

***Performative autoethnography***

I specifically utilize the fusion of autoethnography and performance using Spry's (2011) performative autoethnography approach. The process of reflecting on my own writing and experiences allows me to further understand them and relate my subjective experience to the greater narrative surrounding queer isolation.

Traditionally, autoethnography is the “intersection of *autobiography* and *ethnography*,” according to Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017, p. 2). A typical ethnography focuses on situated communicative conduct that is particularistic to place and social positioning, relating to not only an individual but a communal context (Witteborn, Milburn, & Ho, 2013, p. 188). This perspective ultimately allows researchers “to move between contextualized communicative practices and conceptualizing ways of being, acting, and relating” to a communicative theory about social life (Witteborn, et. al, 2013, p. 188). Ethnography allows the researcher to fully submerge themselves into the situated context of a specific instance to fully analyze a communicative phenomenon.

Autoethnography, however, is defined as “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. [It] is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes,” (Spry, 2001, p. 710; Reed-Danahay, 1997). This method of inquiry looks to extract meaning from lived experience rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived - a ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ method (Bochner, 2000; Jones & Adams, 2016; Ozalas, 2020). Autoethnographers situate personal, autobiographical lived experiences in conversation with social and cultural aspects of our world (Ellis, 2004; Jones & Adams, 2016; Ozalas, 2020).

Autoethnography has frequently faced challenges regarding the definitional boundaries of the method. However, overall conjures a variety of methodological approaches and techniques and, ultimately, “those interested in autoethnography have eschewed and, in some cases, warned against settling on a single definition or set of practices” (Jones & Adams, 2016, p. 199; Charmaz, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Due to the nature of autoethnography and the method’s proclivity toward evocative story-telling and connection to dominant social structures, autoethnography is the kind of writing or art, that takes both the writer and reader deeper inside themselves and ultimately out again (Friedwald, 1996; Jones & Adams, 2016; Ozalas, 2020). The combination of aspects from autobiographies and ethnographies ultimately allows writers to depict a narrative that is, as Spry (2001) describes, “discourse from the margins of dominant culture” (p. 710).

Performative writing is the means through which an autoethnographic writer can “speak about the personally political in public” (Spry, 2011, p. 47). Further, Pollock (1998) notes that the process of performative writing is evocative, reflexive, multi-voiced, crisscrosses genres, is always partial and incomplete. This specific mode of autoethnographic inquiry calls for embodied knowledge, embracing “the body not only as the feeling/sensing home of our being...but the vulnerability of how our body must move through space and time” all of which is “for the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of realization and discovery” (Madison, 2009, p. 191). For performative autoethnographers, the body itself is the site of inquiry.

Madison (1993) elaborates, detailing the ways in which the performance aspect of performative autoethnography connects to existing research and theoretical approaches:

Performance helps me build a truth, while theory helps me name it - or maybe it is the other way around. My mind and body are locked together in a nice little divine kind of unity: theory knows and feels, and the performance feels and unlearns (p. 109).

Madison (1993) describes the pathway to their identified purpose of knowledge, realization, and discovery - emphasizing the notion that there is a reciprocal relationship between the body and theory, flesh, and philosophy. Both are influencing the other constantly, a never-ending cycle. Performative autoethnography builds the connection between real, lived experiences - embodied knowledge - and theoretical, peer-reviewed scholarship. The performative autoethnographer enacts within a space both inside and outside of themselves, where “the activist (the writer, the performer, the scholar) becomes in the moment of acting (the movement of writing, performing, doing scholarship)” (Jones & Adams, 2017, p. 201). Overall, the nature of performative autoethnography provides a means through which I explore the embodied knowledge of queer identity, social isolation, and communication.

-----

rough femme, tough femme, (*am i enough?*) femme

i try to find meaning in the motions - good morning, brush my teeth, drink my coffee. my own makeshift altar: shelves of pigment, brushes capable of artistry. i paint my eyebrows on every morning, dark chocolate brown. i carve warmth under my cheekbones, thicken my eyelashes. accentuate it all with a subtle swipe of blush

and champagne shimmer. lace my lips with mauve. top it all off with combat boots,  
jeans, and a flannel.

i've been trying to write myself onto the page (*be vulnerable be vulnerable*) unaware that  
simply existing as, existing *in*, queer femme-ininity  
renders vulnerability

unavoidable.

-----

### ***Queer [performative] autoethnography***

An intersectional queer experience calls for an intersectional queer methodology, and, as such, I adhere to Jones and Adams' (2016) notion of autoethnography as a queer method. As I have detailed above, as a qualitative method, [performative] autoethnography is connected and tied to the body in material ways and is a method through which we can make sense of our own experiences. "As such, autoethnography provides one of the most productive means for engaging in intersectional queer analysis" (Hobson, 2013, p. 40).

Both autoethnography and queer theory share both conceptual and purposeful affinities, as detailed by Jones and Adams (2016):

Both refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus instead on fluidity, intersubjectivity, and responsiveness to particularities ...Both take up selves, beings, or 'I's, even as both work against a stable sense of self-subjects or experience. Both work to map how self-subjects are accomplished in interaction and how these subjects act upon the world...And both are thoroughly *political*, displaying a clear commitment to refiguring and refashioning; questioning

normative discourses, and acts, and undermining and refiguring how lives (and lives worth living) come into being (p. 197).

Autoethnography itself is a method that goes against the grain in the academy - embracing the messy and nonlinear experiences of everyday life, both past, and present, using these experiences to make sense of ourselves and our social world. Queer theory is built upon the refusal of the 'normative' or what has been deemed socially acceptable, normal, or expected. The method and theory equally encourage decentralizing narratives and refocusing on stories and experiences of those from the margins of the dominant culture (Spry, 2011). Both focus on the nuanced experiences of individuals, considering the ways in which they embody their identities and the ways in which they interact with the social world around them.

Utilizing both autoethnography and queer theory in conjunction is inherently political (Jones & Adams, 2016). Straying from the normative, both within and outside of the academy, is a political act, as autoethnography as a queer research method "works against canonical methodological traditions" as a means through which to satisfy "the call and need to provide a pragmatic, accessible way of representing research," a way of research that is "grounded [in] everyday life" (Jones & Adams, 2016, p. 197; summarizing Seidman, 1993; Plummer, 2003). This political commitment focuses on the ways in which "bodies both constitute and are constituted by systems of power as well as how bodies might serve as sites of social change" (Jones & Adams, 2016, p. 209; summarizing Althusser, 1971; Berlant, 1997; Bornstein, 1994, Butler, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2004; Foucault, 1978; Yep & Elia, 2007; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003).

The combination of autoethnography and queer theory allows the movement from a theoretical perspective to methodological activism as seen in the transformation from noun to a verb: “queer” to “queering” (Nielsen, 2016; Jones & Adams, 2010, 2016). Nielsen (2016) summarizes that scholars are ‘queering’ (and interrogating) current cultural logics and identity categories by “systematically analyzing and documenting perpetual journeys of self-understanding” (p. 121; citing Denzin, 2003; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2001; Jones & Adams, 2010). Autoethnographers, through their own self-understanding journeys and embodied knowledge, criticize (‘queering’) the repressive structures of everyday lives (Nielsen, 2016; Denzin, 2003) by producing evocative, thick descriptions of their personal experiences (Ellis, et al., 2011). As Jones and Adams (2016) explain: “we create *good stories*,” stories that elicit an “emotional response, a change in thinking or behavior, a shift in policy or perception, publication, tenure” (p. 211; Eisenberg, et al., 2005).

Queer autoethnography embraces the fluidity of everyday life, resists the confines of operational definitions and conceptualizations, thus providing a methodology and theoretical framework for the creation of social change. Queer autoethnography pushes for “a differential and oppositional form of consciousness” (Jones & Adams, 2016, p. 211). Queer autoethnography is messy, sometimes confusing; queer autoethnography is visceral, uncomfortable, evocative. I utilize queer autoethnography because a deep companionship exists between queer theories and queer methodologies (Adams & Jones, 2008; Hobson, 2013). I use queer autoethnography because my story is not only that of queer identity, but that of a drive to ‘queer’ our understanding of identity, inclusion, and isolation.

This is a queer story, after all.

-----

Over the last year and a half, I used a variety of autoethnographic practices such as journaling (Goodall, 2000), emotional memory (Poulos, 2009) and performative writing (Spry, 2011). Throughout this project, I utilize queer theory, queer intersectionality, and affect theory in conjunction with performative autoethnography because I am attempting to better understand an experience that I can't quite put my finger on - that of the queer experience, isolation, and existing betwixt-and-between (Young, 2020) the intersection of the two. I draw from my own creative, reflective, and reflexive writing as a means through which I explore queer isolation. I wanted to provide an affective experience through my writing, in order to "move away from an ethnographic text that represents to one that evokes" (Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 252). Sometimes, well, most times, I struggled. I cannot say that writing this was an easy task, as I was attempting to make sense of my own experiences and emotions surrounding loneliness and isolation *as I was experiencing it*.

At times, I found myself with "an urgent need to find narrative coherence in that which felt like spiraling chaos" (Alemán & Helfrich, 2010, p. 10). I attempt to make sense of the chaos. The queer experience is prelinguistic - what does being 'queer' really *mean*? How do we explain the ways in which this identity *feels*? How do we understand the ways in which we navigate our social world with this identity? Isolation, whether or not voluntary or result of social exclusion, is also prelinguistic - what does isolation feel like? What "mood-shifts" exist between individuals in the moment? What happens before the "feeling" of isolation? I utilized queer theory, performative autoethnography, and affect theory as a means through which to better understand my own experiences, my own affects.

## CHAPTER 4

## Queer Femme (in)Visibility

A shift in your seat, a certain glance – what does it mean to be “queer?” How do you know where you belong and who belongs with you? Minority identities themselves are already isolating, as distance from the societal norm pushes us further away. We may smile and laugh at this notion of social exclusion or isolation but this is a phenomenon that exists miles below the surface of our everyday interactions – who we surround ourselves with and why. Or possibly why *not*. All aspects of our intersectional identity constitute and are constituted by our social interactions with those around us. Others’ perceptions of us as individuals are influenced by our intersectional identities as well. As we all exist within this cyclical realm, there is no escape. The only way out is through, and the first step of the journey through is identifying and understanding.

-----

*replies*, re: coming out

mom: “well i’m not surprised”

dad: [silence]

best friend: “yeah and the sky is fuckin’ blue”

grandfather: “but the bible says...”

high school friend: “well everyone thinks we’re dating already anyway”

extended family: [silence]

gay male former co-worker: “i wouldn’t have pictured that for someone like you”

-----

my high school best friend and i share half a name,

i wrote her a poem and thought nothing of it,

*this is what friends do.*

we folded our secrets into fortune cookies,

*my parents don't know i have a girlfriend.*

we whispered into the grass in a language we hoped the other could translate,

*you know me better than my boyfriend.*

a love story equally unspoken and unrequited.

-----

10.12.19

cling to each other / each other's lifeboat / earthquake ocean / in the darkness /  
 bodies against bodies / music vibrating / alcohol buzzing / tongue tied tequila shots  
 / floating at sea / i kiss her / earthquake ocean and crashing bodies / basement bar /  
 she breathes life into me / i kiss her / i feel okay / tipsy chaos / waves crashing /  
 crashing bodies / bodies pushing / pushing / shoving / we get the message / this is  
 not our lifeboat / this is not our basement / we are not welcome here

-----

My identity as a queer bisexual women influences not only myself and my perceptions of the world but also how others perceive and interact with me. Bisexuality itself is a diverse sexual orientation due to the fact that bisexual individuals define and label their identities in a variety of ways. Terms may include “pansexual, queer, fluid” or no

label at all to describe their attraction to more than one gender (Bisexual Resource Center, 2018; Ozalas, 2020). The term “bisexual” may be utilized as an umbrella term as well as a singular identity due to the different ways in which individuals conceptualize their identity (Eisner, 2013; Ozalas, 2020).

I typically use the term “bisexual” to identify myself primarily because, typically, this term is more easily understood in our common vernacular. Claiming this identity also pushes back against the notion that bisexuality operates within the male-female binary with regards to sexual and/or emotional attraction. My understanding of bisexuality encompasses the possibility that I could be attracted to someone “regardless of how they identify – male, female, non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, all of the above or none at all – these identities are all included” (Ozalas, 2020, p. 9). In true queer nature, I embrace the fluidity of this aspect of my identity. The queerer the better.

-----

*“biphobia”*

it lives in the drunken mumbles of my ex-boyfriend, *that’s so hot,*  
*so fuckin’ hot,*

it lives in the robotic questions of my doctor, *do you use protection?*

*no? what do you mean?*

it lives in the angry threats of my ex-girlfriend, *don’t cheat on me.*  
*don’t. fuckin’. cheat on me.*

it sits back on its haunches, waiting.

-----

Throughout my recent years as an “out” bisexual woman, I’ve faced numerous instances of biphobia, especially from my romantic partners. Existing research identifies biphobia as a “unique form of stigma and discrimination” (Todd, et al., 2016, p. 147). This discrimination is levied from not only heterosexual individuals, but also from others within the queer community. Though biphobia and anti-bisexual prejudice exists within homophobia, there are two distinct factors that differentiate biphobia as its own entity: sexual orientation instability and sexual irresponsibility (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Garelick et al., 2017; Ozalas, 2020; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). “Sexual orientation instability” alludes to the notion that bisexuality exists as a transitional phase between heterosexuality and homosexuality, which feeds into the common belief that bisexuality as an orientation itself does not exist. When I was in a heterosexual relationship with a cisgender man, I was typically categorized as a straight woman, regardless of how I identified myself. Some may see *who* I date or am partnered with as me “choosing” a side – choosing to be straight when I’m with a man or choosing to be gay when I’m with a woman.

Further, the sexual irresponsibility factor implies that individuals who are bisexual are more promiscuous, more likely to cheat on their partner, and more likely to spread sexually transmitted infections to a partner (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Garelick et al., 2017; Ozalas, 2020; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). I have explored the ways in which biphobia in this manner exists within romantic relationships, as a previous partner of mine deemed me as untrustworthy, as she considered the fact that I have the potential to be attracted to any and all genders and identities to represent a higher chance of infidelity in our relationship (Ozalas, 2020).

These misconceptions of bisexuality overall contribute to the bubble of isolation that some queer individuals experience. These levels of uncertainty (What does bisexuality actually *mean*?) and stigma (You'll pick a side eventually, right?) create deep social rivets, dragging queer individuals deeper into the dark underbelly of social isolation.

-----

wear the mask. rub salt in the wound.

“queer exclusion.” a new rebuttal, an inside joke.

*have i created a monster?*

we all laugh and smile but we all have knowing eyes.

*are we the punchline?*

salt in our lungs, salt in the wound. a shift in our seats. smile and laugh.

we wear the mask, ready for curtain call.

-----

*“queer femme”*

i've never fallen for a straight girl but i sure have been mistaken for one

-----

*the “good” bi*

do i look queer enough to you?

should i cut my hair short, chop it to my shoulders? to my ears?

does the length of my curls define who i am?

do i look femme enough to you?

should i take up less space, shrink smaller and smaller?

fold myself in two?

does my queerness confuse you?

are you trying to categorize me? fit me in a certain space?

lipstick lesbian? straight girl?

you see, i'm used to being read like a book - my body enters the room before i even cross the threshold. i'm used to my eyeliner and lipstick speaking louder than i ever will.

i'm used to looking in the mirror and feeling like a first draft.

-----

Though the term “femme” has historically existed as a referential term for “feminine lesbians who are attracted to or in relationships with butch women” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 2), femme has recently blossomed into a reflection of diverse identities and meanings (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Coyote & Sharman, 2011; Kennedy & Davis, 2003; Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, 2003; Hoskin, 2019). Hoskin (2013) defines “femme” as “an identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as femininity that is embodied by those who femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned” (Blair & Hoskin, 2015, p. 232). Further, numerous cultural assumptions exist regarding what queer female identities look like: “white, middle-class, androgynous, short hair, adorned in flannel shirts and cargo pants, wearing sensible shoes” all while “denying all aspects of femininity,” because “that would be associated with patriarchy and oppression” (Hobson, 2015, p. 102).

Femme is not *just* femininity, but its own entity: “[femme is] femininity’s rebellious sibling. Fiercely un-compromising and unapologetically all encompassing” (Hoskin &

Hirschfeld, 2018, p. 85). The ways in which we understand femininity in the first place stems from patriarchal femininity, which Hoskin (2019) identifies as “normative feminine ideals as they cut across dimensions of sex, gender, race, ability, and class” (p. 2; Hoskin, 2017). The term *patriarchal femininity* overall encompasses hegemonic femininity, specifically the “regulatory power and gender policing used to maintain normative femininity” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 2; Hoskin, 2017). Femme scholars use “femme” in contrast to patriarchal femininity, using the term to describe femininity that differs from any one of the patriarchal ideals such as “whiteness, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, the cult of thinness, or sexual appetite” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 2; Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Hoskin, 2017). In this sense, femme exists as a form of resistance.

“Binary Breakers.

Decolonizers.

A threat to the cis-tem.

Femme is a radical invocation of femininity.

And in a masculinist white cis heteropatriarchy,

Femmes *are* the resistance.”

Hoskin & Hirschfeld (2018), *Beyond Aesthetics: A Femme Manifesto*, (p. 86).

I understand “femme” or femme-ininity in a multitude of ways. First, I see the femme identity as a way to embrace some of the facets of patriarchal femininity that have consequently been shamed throughout history – traditional feminine behaviors and social norms like enjoying make-up and fashion, etc. I also see femme as a way to connect with others, utilizing this embrace of femininity as a tool of relationality. Finally, I view femme-ininity as a way to combat and resist heteronormative conceptualizations of gender,

sexuality, and queerness. All of these understandings of “femme” are not mutually exclusive and almost always exist in harmony with one another.

Different facets of intersectional identity are not mutually exclusive either. My positionalities and intersectional identities all come together to influence not only my experiences but how I interpret these experiences. Every different aspect of my intersectional identity encompasses its own privileges and marginalities, and all interact and impact with one another in various ways. [Queer] femme-ininity is an “articulation of femininity that is not singular, but multiple and contingent upon various other identities such as race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and body size,” (Hobson, 2015, p. 102). My femme-ininity and my whiteness are interpreted by others in different ways than the intersection of my femme-ininity and my queerness. My whiteness enacts privilege over my femme-ininity and queerness. My cisgender privilege also reigns over my queerness. Cisgender means that the gender someone was born with, or assigned at birth, is the same as the gender they identify with as an adult. This gives cisgender individuals privilege as someone who is not transgender or read as transgender (Hobson, 2015). “Cisgender privilege is given to persons whose morphology aligns with socially-sanctioned gender categories” (Johnson, 2013, p. 138). My whiteness and cisgender-ness may be what others perceive and interpret about me initially, due to the fact that it is the most ‘visible’ of my intersectional identities and we live in a society in which systemically privileges white individuals.

My femme-ininity, however, renders my queerness nearly invisible.

-----

## Femme Visibility

by Rachel Wiley in *Nothing is Okay* (2017, p. 11)

“My queerness  
is not unlike  
a cat on a leash.  
It’s awkward  
people don’t always understand why it’s happening  
or how it works  
but it’s not hurting anyone  
so it goes mostly unbothered.

The difference  
is that you can see  
a cat  
on a leash.”

-----

You can see a cat on a leash but you cannot see a queer femme woman. The queer femme identity encapsulates a multitude of contradictions. Hobson (2015) writes,

[Queer-femme] is a complicated identity because those who identify as femme often appear invisible, as those who identify as queer-femme have the supposed advantage of sitting into what appears to be normative, stereotypical femininity (p. 102; Hobson, 2013; Ozalas & Hobson, 2020).

Femme-ininity masks queerness. The queer femme reads as straight. Some may refer to this as “passing.” In this context, when a queer femme woman ‘passes,’ it refers to their ability to remain undetected or unidentified as a minority, as this concept stems from racial passing (Ginsberg, 1996; Hoskin, 2019). From a social-psychological perspective, passing involves “visibility and authenticity” which inform in-group membership and insider/outsider social status while also heightening out-group discrimination and inclusion

(Hoskin, 2019). The existence of ‘passing’ is complex. For many, passing is an affirmative validation or method of survival. For others, however, passing is ultimately invalidating.

For queer femme women, passing as straight straddles both privilege and oppression. Hoskin (2019) explains, “Although passing as cisgender or straight can afford [femme individuals] a certain level of safety, passing on the feminine spectrum was also met with exclusion, femmephobia, and sexual harassment” (p. 13). Here, femmephobia refers to the “systematic devaluation of femininity as well as the regulation of patriarchal femininity” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 2). Femmephobia manifests by policing and enforcing the adherence to particular norms, such as white heterosexual able-bodied individuals who are assigned female at birth, which not only “maintains femininity’s subordinated status, but is also a regulatory power used in the maintenance of gender hegemony” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 2). I stand out like a heterosexual thumb at gay bars. Others are always assuming I’m in a relationship with a man. Passing is not a privilege. Johnson (2013) writes,

Passing is a privilege when you pass into a group that has privilege. “Woman” is not an inherently privileged category at all, nor is “feminine.” Femininity, queer and straight alike, is viewed as frivolous and shallow, stupid and excessive. Most importantly, it is taken much less seriously than masculinity.

Passing as straight is exhausting. Viewing femme-ininity as a privilege also “ignores the existence of femmes who are transwomen, androfemmes...and those who may simultaneously be femme and not be able to pass for straight or even pass for feminine” (Johnson, 2013). At the end of the day, for queer femmes, passing as straight simply means a perpetual cycle of coming out of the closet, as “being femme often requires an active commitment to be out and proud” (Ortiz, 2012, p. 91).

You can see a cat on a leash but you cannot see a queer femme woman. Passing may, at times, shield queer femmes from discrimination, however, the balancing act of passing creates tensions both intra- and interpersonally. For queer femme women, “passing as straight and their invisibility as sexual or gender minorities exposed them to homophobia, transphobia, and microaggressions to which they otherwise may not be subjected” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 13). As a queer femme woman, I notice instances of nuanced homophobia that are so socially ingrained and perpetuated, they’re invisible to the heterosexual eye. My hyper-awareness of my femme-ininity leaves me on edge, bracing for impact, waiting for someone to say something borderline homophobic or make heterosexist assumptions because of my outward appearance.

-----

*(are we the punch line?)*

wear the mask, ready for curtain call.

overture ending, the curtain rises - audience silent, lights hot and blinding

skin burning under the glare of a thousand eyes, waiting, expecting

*what have we done?*

the chains around our wrists tug and slice deeper

we beg for denouement.

-----

I find myself striving for validation from the queer community. Sometimes I feel like I’m putting on some sort of performance – too queer, not queer enough, all dependent on who I’m with and my physical location. *(Who am I trying to convince here? What am I*

*trying to prove?*) “The failure to acknowledge [queer femmes’] identities or to be seen as their authentic selves caused many [queer femmes] to feel perpetually pushed back into the closet by both community members and dominant culture” (Hoskin, 2019, p. 14). I don’t want to ‘pass,’ I want a sense of belonging. Sometimes I find myself “wishing people could guess it just by looking” at me (Hoskin, 2019). I want to be queer *and* femme. Femme *and* queer. At times I feel like I have to do all of the leg work to reify my own identity to others. I shouldn’t have to. But I will. And I do. I continue to place significance on the acknowledgement of my queer identity and try to break through the bubble of invisibility. Even when I feel like I’m being pushed back into the closet, I remind myself: “femmes *are* the resistance” (Hoskin & Hirschfeld, 2018, p. 86).

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“...*saying it out loud, giving it a name, makes it real*” (Ozalas, 2020, p. 13).

you try not to remember but sometimes you can’t help it. like an old habit, you move through the motions. like a song you haven’t listened to in years - you still know all the words. you were buried so deep and are still digging yourself back out. sometimes you can’t look in the mirror, your reflection a semblance of who you were. there is nothing in your eyes. “or even worse - nothingness. not the presence of a thing but the presence of a non-thing” (Machado, 2017) and sometimes you still get the sick taste in your mouth, sour bile at the memory of it all.

-----

Utilizing autoethnography and queer theory provides the methodological and theoretical framework to better understand the bisexual queer femme experience in relation

to communication, community, and isolation. Autoethnography “encompasses self-narratives that critique the situatedness of self with others in social contexts,” (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001, p. 710). Self-narratives allow deeper understandings of various intersectional identities, as social phenomena, such as isolation and exclusion, “are often best understood by examining the overlap of institutional power structures such as race, class, gender, and sexuality,” (Meyer, 2012, p. 850; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000). In combination with autoethnography, queer theory centralizes the queer experience – not just that of LGBTQ+ folks but also that which goes against binaries, whichever binaries that may be. The method and theory equally encourage decentralizing narratives and refocusing on stories and experiences of those from the margins of the dominant culture (Spry, 2011). Both focus on the nuanced experiences of individuals, considering the ways in which they embody their identities and the ways in which they interact with the social world around them.

The cocktail of biphobia and femmephobia in a cisnormative heteropatriarchal society concocts a sour combination of invalidation and invisibility, and, thus, isolation. This specific recipe of isolation I have deemed “queer isolation.” I conceptualize this through the phenomenon of social exclusion, which is defined as a “structural, institutional, or agentive processes of repulsion or obstruction” (Krishnan, 2015). Terms such as *marginalization*, *discrimination*, and *social isolation* are often used in conjunction with social exclusion (Barry, 1998; Krishnan, 2015). Though typically understood in a societal perspective, such as structural inequalities in which certain groups are excluded from the larger narrative, social exclusion can also be understood through a social-psychological/sociological lens: “who is excluded, in what domain, and in what way “

(Krishnan, 2015, p. 157). Social exclusion manifests feelings of isolation in individuals who experience it (Krishan, 2015) which could seemingly stem from the phenomenon's less visible element of 'othering' and 'otherness.' This stems from a tacit perception of those who are 'different' from 'others,' ultimately implying a distinction between 'us' and 'them,' 'inclusion' and 'exclusion,' of which the excluded 'them' is the 'other' (Kumar, 2014; Maximiano, 2014; Krishnan, 2015). The nuance here, however, is that the social exclusion and isolation is happening within a group or community of individuals who are already isolated from the dominant culture.

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“A reminder to remember: just because the sharpness of the sadness has faded does not mean that it was not, once, terrible. It means only that time and space, creatures of infinite girth and tenderness, have stepped between the two of you, and they are keeping you safe as they were once unable to.”

(Machado, 2019, p. 235).

you put yourself back together in small increments. time is a kiss from a stranger, short hair and glasses, she grabs your hand, guides you there. in front of the mirror, you realize you've been looking at your reflection upside down this whole time. you begin to recognize the face of the person staring back at you.

you're used to being read like a book but now it's time to complete the final draft.

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## CHAPTER 5

## Queer(ing) Isolation

Sitting in silence, ringing in your ears – what does it mean to feel “isolated?” How do you know where you belong and who belongs with you? Isolation is an individual, lived experience that stems from and generates embodied knowledge. What does it mean to be “isolated?” What does loneliness feel like? What does it look like? How can we feel both connection and isolation synchronously? We understand these words and concepts and can easily discover the dictionary definitions, however, each individual has a different understanding of the true meanings of these words and phrases, especially considering the influence of intersectional identities on our experiences.

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## Isolated and Queer in Graduate School

After Hobson’s (2017) *Isolated and Afraid in a Small Town*

“My heart, on fire, has no company to call its own” (Hobson, 2017, p. 557).

emerging from a history of introversion, i now crave a sense of belonging. hailing from a relatively small biological family, i now crave a sense of connection. i want a queer family. no, not family in the traditional sense. by no means nuclear. by no means biological. “as gay people, we get to choose our family” (RuPaul, 2013). i want a queer family - a brigade of sexual minority folks, i-can’t-tell-if-they’re-a-guy-or-girl folks, femme, butch, non-binary, *flaming* folks. folks who just aren’t

sure yet, and maybe never will be. i want a sense of unity that lies below the surface - so queer you can't see straight.

as a queer, bisexual, white, femme, able-bodied, university-educated, queen-of-resting-bitch-face cisgender woman, making these connections is my albatross. my femininity and whiteness are palatable, not a threat. my cisgender able-body does not cause distress. throw in my queerness and then there's confusion. i'm currently at graduate school over 250 miles from my hometown, my family, and my partner, so people only know i'm queer if my big mouth steers the class conversation gay again. which i sure as hell *will* do.

what's truly funny, in some strange, sadistic, fucked up way, is how some of the most interactive experiences can actually end up being the most isolating. the amount of other queer folks in my graduate program are few and far between. (some of my classmates are no longer classmates - withdrawing from the program. dropping like flies, barely any goodbyes.) the funny part is that we're all in a somewhat similar experience: graduate school. we go through similar motions - writing, reading - occupy the same physical spaces - classrooms, offices - we're physically *together* quite frequently, yet end up feeling so isolated at the end of the day.

where do we go from here? what is this liminal space we occupy? neither here nor there, together but not. a community that is equally divergent and convergent.

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Halfway through my final semester in graduate school, on different occasions, two classmates of mine withdrew from the program and the university. As both implied mental health issues as their main deciding factor to conclude their time here, I remember my initial thoughts were something along the lines of: *Why didn't they reach out? There's about thirty of us in this program who could relate to what they're going through. Or at least I could.* I stopped myself before I thought any further, as I suddenly was aware of what was going on here.

A factor of existing in our cisnormative heteropatriarcal society is the systematic normalization of binaries. Individuals either are or are not. Do or do not. Have or have not. Of course, as a graduate program and academic community, there is a semblance of connection and inclusion. If my former classmates were to reach out, they would without a doubt receive comfort, affirmation, and validation in how they were feeling. However, the reality of it all is that due to all of our own individual experiences, both past and present, we all have different perceptions of similar occurrences, which ultimately influence our decisions. Some may feel like a part of a connected community of struggling graduate students while some may feel isolated and alone, drowning under research projects, assignments, and assistantships. The mistake I made with my initial response to this situation was that of the assumption of binary, black and white thinking in relation to inclusion, exclusion, and social isolation.

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the humidity is begging for the relief of rain.

i sit on the carpet - coarse and flattened from frequent footsteps. they're around me.

buzzing, buzzing, buzzing. the carpet is the color of sand. i think of the ocean. i rescue a beer bottle seconds before it splashes the ground. waves crashing. they're here. buzzing, buzzing, buzzing. saltwater fills my lungs.

i am stranded at sea.

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I cannot say that writing about feeling lonely and isolated is the easiest of tasks. I struggled to write about it creatively, reflectively, and reflexively. I'm even struggling as I write this in a local coffee shop. Describing specific feelings of isolation is complex. At times, I found difficulty in searching for the correct words to describe how I was feeling without sounding like a centuries-old cliché. How do I make myself vulnerable on the page if I can't find the right words? How do you describe social distance? Social isolation? Does this feeling even exist if you can't find the 'right' words to talk about it?

Embodied knowledge and experiences such as queer isolation encapsulate a feeling, an emotion, an affect. While feelings are "personal and biographical, emotions are social" and affects are "prepersonal," as Shouse (2005) details (para. 2 – 5) A feeling is personal and biographical because feelings are "sensations that [have] been checked against previous experiences and labeled," such as fear (Shouse, 2005, para. 2- 5). An emotion is a physical display of that fear, such as facial expressions and body language that can be observed and interpreted by others. An affect, however, is a "non-conscious experience of intensity" (Shouse, 2005, para. 2 – 5). This prelinguistic sensation shifts and

changes as we navigate through time and space. These “mood-shifts” are the “communicative force that we may all feel, yet, we cannot quite put our finger on precisely what we are experiencing” (Hobson, 2020, p. 192). Queer isolation is a mood-shift, a communicative force, that I feel and experience, yet I cannot put my finger on precisely or find the correct words to accurately describe what I am experiencing.

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*dream(s) part one*

i'm driving and the horizon is clear.

the road is a straight shot lined with sand dunes. my hands grip the steering wheel, sweaty palms against pleather. my hands grip my steering wheel but they don't look like my hands, clenching as i realize i missed my turn.

to where? unsure.

i missed my turn i missed my turn i'm lost and i swing my car around and retrace my tracks in the sand-dusted road, veering off the road at my exit.

i'm on a beach and my car flies through the sand.

pumping brakes - useless. escaping - impossible.

my fate is clear as waves crash, crash my car in the ocean, quickly submerged. the tremendous impact sends me backward, jumping,

vision blurry,

salty,

burning,

jolting awake.

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Due to social isolation's nature as a pre-linguistic mood-shift, existing research fails to capture the realities of exclusion and isolation, especially within queer contexts. The scarce amount of existing scholarship regarding this topic typically centers on location-specific instances and cultures and social exclusion of queer youth. For example, Moussawi (2018) details the ways in which exclusions "take the form of limiting access to many spaces, including gay-friendly spaces" in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon (p. 185). In this context, Moussawi (2018) found that gender, class, and religiosity shaped the participants' experiences in queer and non-queer spaces.

Further, other queer isolation studies have focused on queer youth's experiences with bullying in school as a response to their identity. Higa, et al.(2014) found that "youth reported negative factors that reflected feelings of social isolation and negative internalized feelings related to being gay" (p. 675). The young participants of this study were the only gay (or queer) students, to their knowledge, in their schools, so they felt that they didn't have anyone to whom they could relate or share experiences with. Though both of these areas of social exclusion scholarship are equally significant in their own unique ways, the research does not employ the use of embodied knowledges and experiences of these individuals.

I utilize performative autoethnography as a methodological tool in effort to create an affective experience that may provide a better understanding of my individual experiences in order to connect them to a larger narrative of queer isolation, as performative autoethnography is connected to the body in material ways and is a method through which we can make sense of our own experiences. The creative performative autoethnographic

pieces I have included are my attempts to encompass a mood-shift, a sensation that I can't quite put my finger on – an ordinary affect (Stewart, 2007). *Something* is happening and I don't have quite the right words for it.

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a stray cat lives outside my apartment. small, dark brown tortoiseshell fur sprinkled with tufts of orange and honey, she blends in with the shadows. i cannot see the color of her eyes because i've never gotten that close. it's sweltering hot.

does she belong to someone? anyone?

she hides under the cement stairs, burrowed in dirt, shielding herself. i reach out my hand and try to feed her. she backs away deeper into the stairway cave.

sometimes you are the hand and sometimes you are the cat.

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19. 12. 10

we are not welcome here / this is not our basement / this is not our lifeboat / we get the message / shoving / pushing / pushing bodies / bodies crashing / crashing waves / tipsy chaos / i felt okay / i kissed her / she breathed life into me / basement bar / crashing bodies and earthquake ocean / i kissed her / floating at sea / tongue tied tequila shots / alcohol buzzing / music vibrating / bodies against bodies / in the darkness / earthquake ocean / cling to each other

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Social exclusion manifests feelings of isolation in individuals who experience it (Krishan, 2015) which could seemingly stem from the phenomenon's less visible element of 'othering' and 'otherness.' Experiences of social exclusion cannot be accurately represented and reflected in data, numbers, or graphs, as this is an individual *feeling*, an embodied experience. Autoethnography, intersectionality, and both queer and affect theory provide unique methodological and theoretical frameworks for exploring liminal spaces such as isolation and loneliness from a queer intersectional perspective.

Paying attention to the ordinary affects of everyday life, in this case, that of queer isolation, reveals the ways in which "human and nonhuman forces are combined, taken apart, and put together" (Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 259) to create this distinctive experience. At times we may struggle to find the 'right' word to encapsulate, represent, or describe how we are feeling or what we are experiencing, but the struggle does not negate the fact that we are feeling or experiencing these certain things.

I encourage the inclusion of queer theory to social exclusion and social isolation discourse not only to centralize queer/LGBTQ+ experiences, but also to focus on the notion of breaking through socially constructed binaries. Queer theory is built upon the refusal of the 'normative' or what has been deemed socially acceptable, normal, or expected. Much like the ways in which queer identities embrace fluidity, the theory itself is a category "in the process of formation" as its "definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity is one of its constituent characteristics" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). This theoretical approach allows for movement from a theoretical perspective to methodological activism as seen in the transformation from noun to a verb: "queer" to "queering" (Nielsen, 2016; Jones & Adams,

2010, 2016). Nielsen (2016) summarizes that scholars are ‘queering’ (and interrogating) current cultural logics and identity categories by “systematically analyzing and documenting perpetual journeys of self-understanding” (p. 121; citing Denzin, 2003; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2001; Jones & Adams, 2010). With the concept of resistance at its core, queer theory utilizes the conscious refusal of labels and emphasizes a retreat from binaristic thinking.

In relation to queer isolation, I believe utilizing a queer theoretical approach allows us to break through the binary of inclusion and exclusion. In reality, inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive. There is a coexistence of both inclusion and exclusion, a liminal space of interaction and isolation. There are times where I felt connected to others while, synchronously, I felt distance, like I couldn’t relate to others around me. Every individual experience of isolation will be unique due to their differing intersectional positionalities. Queering isolation acknowledges the spectrum of experiences that exist between both inclusion and exclusion and provides a means through which we can discuss isolation with a focus on individual intersectional identities.

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i leave a plate of food outside this time, hiding my helping hand. it’s still sweltering hot.  
the cat doesn’t emerge from the stairway cave. where does she go when she’s not here?  
*buzzingbuzzingbuzz*-i close the door.

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A poem of book reviews

*How to Be Alone: If You Want to, and Even If You Don't* by Lane Moore (2018)

*Don't waste your time or money reading about someone else's life...*

*Your story is likely much better*

*Depressing but comforting*

*I couldn't get through this book. It was painful and I told myself it would get better.*

*Maybe it does but I don't think I'll find out.*

*A lot of reviews I saw include complaints that the book isn't some kind of survival guide on how to be alone, but I disagree. It's not a step-by-step manual, but it is one person's very real experience with loneliness and heartache.*

*Puts the fun in dysfunctional*

*Like a hug, but in book form.*

*this is like sandpaper for your heart  
where it needed to be smoothed out so badly  
because you keep getting splinters from the rough bits  
but god the sanding hurts too.*

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i started watching tv with the subtitles on when i first moved here.

closed captioning detailing dialogue, catching every last syllable.

i read as i watch. i watch as i read.

'cause when you live alone you don't wanna miss a thing.

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you cut yourself open and sew yourself shut.

you don't know how to explain it but you know that you hate it.

glasses clink like a heartbeat, rain pouring like a pulse.

you cannot hear your own scream.

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a stray cat used to live outside my apartment. small, dark brown tortoiseshell fur sprinkled with tufts of orange and honey, she blended in with the shadow of the stairway cave.

i saw the cat for a moment weeks ago, fleeting, emerald eyes glinting in the dim light from a streetlamp. but she's been missing for months.      (*where does she go when she's not*

*here?*)

winter's icy kiss frosts the morning air and i swear i haven't seen the sun in days.

and as i drive i see the cat, a victim of a hit-and-run: roadside, flattened, lifeless, and still.

sometimes you are the hand and sometimes you are the cat.

but sometimes you are the car.

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Social phenomena such as inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive; they do not exist in a vacuum. Minority identities themselves are already isolating, as distance from the societal norm pushes us further away. Isolation itself is a paradox, as sometimes you may feel connected, like you belong, while other times you may feel miles away from civilization. Queer isolation is “more of an atmosphere and less a physical-temporal location” (Broderick & Gleason, 2016, p. 251). An atmosphere that can be better understood when investigated with an approach informed by affect theory. The nuances of social exclusion and isolation in conjunction with minority identities, such as bisexual queer femmes, calls for nuanced approaches, as these experiences cannot be accurately represented and reflected in data, numbers, or graphs. This is all about an individual *feeling*, an embodied experience and the gap in research can be filled with these lived experiences if queer and affect theoretical approaches are applied to these nuanced embodied knowledges.

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*dream(s) part two*

i'm on a boat and the horizon is clear. my family's smiling faces and sun-kissed skin  
grace the boat's deck. my eyes sting from the sun and i can taste the salty ocean. this  
blissful moment takes a turn as a wave rises, awoken from slumber and angry. it slams  
into the boat - i watch as my family members standstill, unaffected, i watch as i slip,  
slide, sail straight over the side.

my hands grip for the deck's side railing but they don't look like my hands, sweaty palms  
and slick ocean splashes - i'm slipping i'm slipping i'm underwater  
my muffled screams - useless. surviving - impossible.  
i'm underwater and i watch as the boat rides the angry wave that sealed my fate. i'm  
screaming  
vision blurry,  
salty,  
burning,  
jolting awake.

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A shift in your seat, a certain glance – what does it mean to be “queer?” Sitting in silence, ringing in your ears – what does it mean to feel “isolated?” How do you know where you belong and who belongs with you? Exploring my experiences of existing betwixt-and-between (Young, 2020) queerness and isolation revealed the ways in which queer isolation manifests as an affective atmosphere influenced by the culmination of co-existing systems of oppression. My performative autoethnographic pieces were created in effort to evoke an affective experience, as I feel this is a more conducive approach to understanding affective, nuanced experiences such as isolation and queer identity. Though feelings, emotions, and affects are technically different, there are some connections and overlapping factors. I tried my hardest to encapsulate the desire for connection, the emptiness of isolation, the frustration of misconceptions about my identity throughout these pieces. Hoping, wishing, that my affects move, bend, flex, shift from the page.

**CHAPTER 6****Conclusion**

*invisible woman, the queer femme*

misunderstood by many, her (in)visibility is a mythic fable.

she takes her pen to paper, writes herself into existence.

behind you in line at the coffee shop, next to you in class,

she's (in)visible, but soon she won't be.

she takes off the mask.

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This thesis stemmed from my own lackluster social life and nonexistent connections to other queer individuals. And, much like the ways in which affects bend, move, and shift with us, this thesis went through quite a lot of changes. As I've identified throughout this project, I struggled to find exactly what I was looking for, exactly what I wanted to write about, seemingly, because the language for it doesn't necessarily exist. All of the questions I've posed thus far, regarding feeling, knowing, understanding queerness and isolation were the same questions that I faced throughout this writing process.

Autoethnography itself begins without a roadmap – I entered this project without any indication as to where I'd end up. The process of writing, reflecting, and researching allowed me to discover the connections between my experiences, theoretical knowledge, and the overall discourse surrounding queer isolation and its intricacies. This method of

inquiry looks to extract meaning from lived experience rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived - a 'show' rather than 'tell' method (Jones & Adams, 2016; Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography isn't simple or easy by any means. This essential lack of trajectory is just the beginning, as the process of writing about sadness, isolation, and traumatic memories can be a roadblock for some as it was for me.

When I began this project and made a case for the use of autoethnography, I was well aware of the ways in which biphobia exists in the world and impacts my life, relationships, and so on. Biphobia is an unfortunate old friend. Femmephobia, however, was newly introduced, and added nuance to the phenomenon of queer isolation, as I wasn't able to articulate the ways in which certain facets of my identity or appearance were so off-putting to those within and outside of the queer community. As I have discussed previously, some queer femmes view 'passing' as straight as a safety net, a shield from harassment and homophobia (Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Ginsberg, 1996; Hoskin, 2017, 2019; Hoskin & Hirschfeld, 2018). The process of writing about my own experiences and researching for this project lead me in this direction.

Further, this project helped me formulate the notion that inclusion and exclusion, and isolation in its many forms and instances, are not mutually exclusive. While I struggled through finding the right words to depict my experiences, I found that I was struggling in the first place *because* of the interconnectedness of inclusion and exclusion. Isolation itself is a liminal space, a space of both connection and disconnection, synchronously. Queer theory provides a means through which to better understand this space, as the theory defies the notion of binaries and allows us to move away from binaristic thought and conceptualizations.

The struggles I faced regarding encapsulating my experiences and how I was feeling lead me to affect theory, and using performative autoethnography to create affective experiences. Performative writing is the means through which an autoethnographic writer can “speak about the personally political in public” (Spry, 2011, p. 47). Further, Pollock (1998) notes that the process of performative writing is evocative, reflexive, multi-voiced, crisscrosses genres, is always partial and incomplete. The nuances of social exclusion and isolation in conjunction with minority identities, such as bisexual queer femmes, calls for nuanced approaches, as these experiences cannot be accurately represented and reflected in data, numbers, or graphs.

### *Implications, limitations, and the future*

My performative autoethnographic thesis contains implications that I will discuss in two parts. First, my thesis reifies the significance of intersectionality and employing intersectional perspectives to communicative phenomena such as isolation. My use of performative writing created an affective experience, showcasing life at the crossroads of (in)visible identities, of isolation as a queer femme individual. Second, the methodology utilized throughout this thesis depicts the ways in which autoethnography, specifically performative autoethnography, can reveal the intimate experiences of individuals at the margins of dominant culture.

Due to my thesis project’s subjective, autoethnographic nature, and centralization of my personal experiences, my intersectional identity is conducive to many limitations, as many of my privileges outweigh the marginalizations I face. Throughout this piece I maintained the existence of the different facets of my identity – I embarked on this thesis

journey as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, university-educated, bisexual queer femme woman. Taking into account my different identity constructions and cultural backgrounds and acknowledging institutionalized power structures and multiple axes of oppression provide a gateway into a reflective inquiry about positionality and queer isolation, the ways in which those two concepts are related, and my positionality's influence not only on my experiences but how I interpret these experiences.

I employed a queer intersectional perspective as a means through which I could discuss my overlapping identities. My whiteness, university education, upper middle-class upbringing, and cisgender able-bodiedness privilege me above folks from other intersectional identities who may also be experiencing queer isolation. For example, an international queer femme student of color would most definitely encounter many different experiences regarding inclusion, exclusion, and isolation. With this project I am by no means attempting to stand as the representative individual experience for any other queer femme-identified individuals. I am, however, using my own experiences in as one step in the direction of bridging the gaps in knowledge that currently exist in communication scholarship regarding concepts such as social isolation and queer identities, especially experiences of queer femme individuals.

As mentioned above, my experiences with queer isolation barely scratch the surface of minority identities and isolation. Existing research on social exclusion in queer contexts typically centers on location-specific experiences within certain cultures and the social exclusion of queer youth in schools. Thus, there is a glaring lack of research surrounding social exclusion and queer isolation in college-aged adults. Much like the connection between queer identities and social isolation, this lack of research continues to further

isolate and distance those with these identities and experiences from current and future communication studies scholarship. I encourage future queer isolation researchers to centralize their work on the experiences of queer femme people of color, as this will add an even more nuanced perspective to the queer isolation discourse. Further, I suggest the use of queer and affect theory as a theoretical approach to discussing social inclusion and exclusion and the phenomena of queer isolation.

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the cast of characters in your thesis advisor's office give hollywood executives a run for their money. surface-level shockingly different, intrapersonally, well, just a bunch of weirdos. roll a dice and you'll most likely meet someone new each time you stop by her office - walls lined with bookshelves, organized in a way that only makes sense in her eyes, students, graduate and undergraduate alike, making nests on the maroon couch and in odd corners of the room.

queer, gay, straight, cisgender, non-binary, questioning, bisexual, transgender, black, white, latinx, international, man, woman, femme, a coalition of bonded weirdos that just happen to occupy the same space every tuesday and thursday afternoon.

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My desire to connect with others, to feel some semblance of community stems from a queer femme-informed relationality. Maybe, this whole time, the issue wasn't a lack of connection, but connection simply existing outside of our preconceived notions of what

connection to others means in the first place. Queer connections exist within a different affective atmosphere, a different realm of kinship than heteronormative connections. In this sense, 'queer' doesn't necessarily always imply LGBTQIA+ identities, but more so differences. Queer isolation can be combatted by queer connection, queer kinship - building communities of imperfection, embracing our differences and coexisting with those differences. These connections may not be perfect, they may be virtual communities, or they may be hidden below the surface, but at the end of the day these connections become our queer families of choice.

The theoretical and methodological approaches I employed throughout the process of reflecting, writing, and researching for this project allowed me to grapple with the tensions and frustrations I was feeling as I was trying to make sense of my own experiences. Though social exclusion and isolation is traditionally understood from a societal perspective (Krishnan, 2015), I think incorporating perspectives from an individual, embodied experience of social isolation will allow for the discourse to become more inclusive and diverse, as well as further the progress of better understanding this phenomenon. This thesis is the exploration of queer femme-ininity and queer isolation based solely on my experiences and my perspectives. My white, cisgender, bisexual queer femme experience is by no means universal. Bridging the gap in knowledge for a future of advocacy and activism begins with amplifying the voices from the margins. Listening to the voices of those pushed to the side by dominant culture. We cannot ignore the ways in which all aspects of our social world are connected, all of our intersectional identities constitute and are constituted by our social interactions with those around us. As we all exist within this cyclical realm, there is no escape. The only way out is through.

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“My tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it to you.”

Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (p. 242).

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