

Queer As...: A Deep Dive Into Complex Queer Television

Sandy O'Sullivan¹, Han Reardon-Smith¹, Alana Blakers¹, Teyah Miller²

¹ Critical Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, ² Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language, and Literature, Macquarie University

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As a team working on the 'Queer As...' database and audit, we have approached the issue of queer Indigenous representation by pondering the role of all queer representation. The audit focuses first on Indigenous representation, radiating out to include the complexity of identity at large. In doing so, we have discovered systemic similarities, but as is often the case with the colony, we have also discovered ways in which Indigeneity cannot either incorporate or parse queerness. This article ponders this through the lens of queer screen tropes of representation.

How it started...

As a Critical Indigenous Studies team developing the *Queer As...* audit of complex queer television characters, we spent 2022 developing a list of Indigenous queer characters onscreen to form a simple database of representation. The project is part of a broader Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellowship program titled *Saving Lives: mapping the impact of LGBTIQ+ Indigenous Artists*. The overall program explores the transformative power of creative representation and visibility by, and for, Indigenous queer people. Taking the lead from education theorist, Marion Wright Edelman's idea that '...you can't be what you can't see' (Young, 2018), the aim of this part of the program is to understand how queer Indigenous characters on TV may provide public-facing visibility for queer Mob, and what impact this representation may have.

In the initial audit we saw diversity in representations of queer Mob across so-called Australia, in particular when Indigenous people were in the writing and directing teams. From Steven Oliver's turn in *Black Comedy* (Martin & Riley, 2014–2020), to the cast and premise of the Meanjin-located *All My Friends Are Racist* (Bedford et al., 2021), to more recent shows including the reboot of *Heartbreak High* (Heaton et al., 2022). We considered the specifically queer-focused episode of *Redfern Now* (Wills, 2013), and Nakkiah Lui's character in *Preppers* (Bell et al., 2021). All shows that not only had Indigenous characters, but where the series creators worked to show complexity across their queer representations, characters ranged from morally grey to holding purpose with a focus on relationality, not simply the positionality of being queer. In our original audit we also considered international Indigenous representations of queerness, in *Reservation Dogs*

(Basch et al., 2021–2023), *Our Flag Means Death* (Basch et al., 2022–), *The Wilds* (Clark et al., 2020–2022), *American Gods* (Berk et al., 2017–2021), and *The New Mutants* (Imperato & Lee, 2020), as well as some problematic representations, like the character of Yahima in *Lovecraft Country* where the lack of Indigenous involvement in the character development and production team resulted in racist and queerphobic missteps (Harrison, 2021; O’Sullivan et al., 2024; Wren, 2020). We also discovered across our initial audit that, in spite of substantial work by Indigenous creatives across the screen industry, there is still a dearth of complexity in queer Indigenous representation.

In our work, as both Indigenous and settler scholars, we are interested in the expansive potential of Critical Indigenous Studies as a discipline that gathers and transforms all disciplines held within it (Day, 2020; O’Sullivan, 2023; Sullivan & Day, 2021). In the context of this audit, these transformations include the way that queer representation in the public imaginary of television creates opportunities for truth-telling, high visibility, and explorations of our complex identities uncorralled by colonial impositions of gender and sexuality that can reflect the multifarious experiences of queer Indigenous lives (O’Sullivan et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2023). By taking a Critical Indigenous Studies lens to the existing representations, we wanted to understand not only what was made manifest, but what representation of complex identities matter to audiences. To make this meaningful, we had to hear from these audiences, and so our next steps became survey.

Before we began the survey, we completed our baseline of explicitly Indigenous and queer characters, an audit that explored inclusion, utility and resistances, and represented queerness and visibility. We knew the survey, in addition to telling us what audiences wanted, would bolster these numbers and better complete our audit as we asked for respondents to list any shows they had seen. While the survey was formed to crowd-sourced opinion and effect, we also hoped it would reveal a far greater list of characters that we were yet to come across. By setting a mostly free-text response to questions, we hoped to understand the impact of queer Indigenous characters on a broader audience. Rather than just a substantially larger list and individual response, the survey has revealed a shift beyond the presence or absence of queer Indigeneity on the small screen, and has provided insights into some reasons why and how the dearth of complex representation persists.

...how it’s going

As we began to form lists, and planned a survey alongside the audit, we worked through some fundamental issues around our formation of categories. Across the broader *Saving Lives* project, the research leader had developed a set of theories around the colonial project of gender that challenges colonial containers and restrictions of externally imposed gender and sexuality categories (O’Sullivan, 2021). It seemed counterintuitive to then assert these in the form of a list, where the categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual,

non-binary, transgender, pansexuality, and all other iterations of gender and sexuality were tidily contained. This is not to suggest that individuals may use any of these terms to describe themselves, this self-descriptor would be a hallmark of not only respondents to the survey, but to the categories of queer characters themselves. Characters, unlike real people, are often made utility in a story, and it is common for the sexuality and gender of queer characters to have an element of disclosure and naming and a forcing into named category that may seem more didactic than it appears in real life. As we pondered Sherronda J. Brown's work on asexuality and refusal of rigid constructs and enforced sexuality associated with race and coloniality (2022), we considered whether forcing characters into these categories was equally anti-colonial work, or whether it would hold and reflect these same colonial categories. Again, the survey would deliver some answers.

These questions framed the importance of not imposing forced categories in the survey, particularly as we were seeing many of these challenged by a complexity of story across queer Indigenous representation. In *Reservation Dogs*, we observed some clear markers of Indigenous queerness, but they were never sexualised nor made manifest through gender, instead they appeared as a kind of relationality. At an introspective family gathering a member of Willie Jack's family ask whether they have a boyfriend, when there is a blank stare, the family member persists by asking if they have a girlfriend (Goulet, 2022). Neither question is answered, yet the interaction is as powerfully queer as a thousand Mardi Gras floats. It represents a kind of understated intimacy found in small talk and family discussion that persists as an act of ongoing negotiation and relationality of queerness and Indigeneity (Day, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2023).

If this complicated the categories applied within the audit, did we need them at all? Could a list that moved beyond categories and simply framed as 'queer' be as meaningful? Or did the kind of queerness and representation matter to individual people. Would trans people tell us they want to see representation of transness, would gay men want something specific from characters on mainstream TV that it was not yet delivering? The survey sought answers that would be as complex and storied as each individual respondent. For this reason, while we made the decision that if we wanted to understand underrepresented queerness, we would need to ask about this complexity without posing the explicit categories; and by asking the queer and not queer community at large, as well as the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community.

A survey: representation of, or *for*, queer Indigenous people?

While that was how the review part of the audit and the planning of the survey began, feedback was forming that suggested that representation was more than 'like for like'. Queer Indigenous representation clearly matters (Farrell, 2021), but representations of both complex racial identity and

representation across other communities subject to colonisation, combined with queerness that could not be parsed as white, was also important in creating sites of visibility. In late 2022, an Indigenous person from this continent responded at one of our public presentations that they saw representation of themselves in a queer African American character from *A League of Their Own*, a TV show set in the 1940s (Graham et al., 2022). The character, who on optics alone, does not constitute ‘like for like’, nevertheless represented a meaningful connection for that audience member. Complexity of representation is not always about seeing someone exactly like yourself, nor always having an available mirror of that representation. They articulated something we have now heard multiple times across the survey: that racial visibility has slippage, and that someone not subject to a wealth of representation is capable of seeking out and locating representation within allied communities (O’Sullivan, 2023).

Our survey has shown that when it comes to representation, non-Indigenous Black people, and international Indigenous communities often provide a source of connection for Indigenous people on this continent, in shared experiences in colonial oppression and the othering of racialised characters. Although we now have an evidence base to understand this in relation to complex queer representation, there remains only anecdotal evidence of the influence on Indigenous people on this continent of TV shows like the 70s show *Good Times*, a story of a Black family in the racialized housing projects of Chicago (Sewell, 2013), to the most popular series of all time when it was released in 1977: Alex Haley’s *Roots* (Wolper, 1977) that told story of slavery, resistance and colonialism. On this continent, no survey or review has ever been undertaken to explore the impact of this representation on Indigenous audiences, so we are left with anecdote and analysis formed on shared Black resistances from other colonial places, in representing an understanding of incursion and control. In Australia during the same period that these Black-focused shows were mirroring cultural resistances, the representations of Aboriginal people were few and far between, with two iterations – decades apart - of the same Black TV character, *Boney*, being played by a white person in Blackface (Carlson, 2016).

If a queer Indigenous person could see themselves represented through complex racial and ethnic identities and through other resistant complexities and infinite possibilities of being, then we had to ask more about these representations by expanding the terms of both the audit and the survey. Similarly, in asking Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, queer and not-queer people about complex queerness in representation on television, we could glean a better understanding of where representation is sought and found, and how complex identities are made visible. For this reason, we started to talk about *complexity* of queerness.

Does representation matter, and to whom?

Indigenous families are often at the forefront of supporting young people in navigating the complexity of their queerness within their racialised realities (O’Sullivan, 2022), so providing tools of representation for families who may not have the means to support, has been a central part of the work of many community organisations. Television, on the other hand, is available but often fraught with stereotype, the specific utility of characters, and queerness is often parsed in a more reductive way. We did however select the long-form of television for the potential that it represents in spending time with a character, formed over seasons and its communal possibilities for viewers in sharing the experience within a family, friend group or broader community.

The survey was launched in August 2023 and remained open until the end of that year. All questions in the survey could be skipped, with the first part asking expansive information about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, location, if respondents are Indigenous, and if so an option to list their community. They were also asked if they have a disability or chronic illness, and are then encouraged to describe anything else about themselves that they believed told the story of who they are. We have over 1500 respondents who have suggested 630 TV shows with one or more queer characters. The data includes over 500,000 words of response. With no multiple choice or yes/no questions, the survey relied on individual recall, investment and text-based response to questions about how queer representation on TV makes them feel, and why they believe it does or does not matter. The responses have been rich and expansive and have represented a complexity that would have been impossible for us to glean any other way. Respondents have told us how queer representation has made them feel – both good and bad - and they have articulated their perspective on the greater meaning of representation on TV. They have articulated concerns, and the need for, categorical representation. They have told us about the fear of stereotype, tropes and queerbaiting, and have shared their perspective on what is missing. Crucially, they have told us how they believed their lives would have been different if better representation had been available when they were kids.

The respondents come from a range ethnicities and cultures; 10% of our respondents have described themselves as Indigenous, with a large percentage of that group reporting they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from so-called Australia. From all respondents we are able to match up responses to their demographic data, in order to understand response and impact. We have a range of genders - more non-binary than cis or trans –, sexualities, and ages, and we see the impact of age and culture on some of the responses to the question around better, earlier representation, that we have yet to fully report.

Indigenous queer characters on TV are not the litmus test of representation, and this survey is not attempting to use Indigenous people or formed characters in that way. At the end of the survey, however, having already listed shows and characters, we explicitly ask respondents to focus on queer Indigenous TV characters. It was here that we have experienced the survey form of 'crickets'. We learned very little in this section and were surprised that the shows we already listed were the main shows presented, with only a handful of other suggestions. There was, however, a lot of concern that respondents couldn't think of many/any shows, and there was also – separately – a lamenting of the lack of these shows. We also saw an interesting phenomenon, where shows with Indigenous characters were included in the responses, even though they had no explicitly queer characters. We saw a similar phenomenon last year when we put out a call for queer Indigenous artists and TV shows on social media. We had many suggestions, but the responses included a number of Indigenous artists who have never mentioned being queer. We suspect this happened for a range of reasons, parsing complexity of identity can be a journey for some, but here it's reasonable to conclude that at the end of a survey on queer representation, Indigenous queer representation had some people draw a blank, and perhaps an inclusion of something, over nothing, may account for the response.

Does reality TV have 'characters'?

The survey was tacitly focused on scripted television, framed by asking about 'characters', however the responses occasionally included queer people on reality television programs. Multiple iterations of RuPaul's Drag Race were mentioned by respondents, with some articulating that they didn't know if it should be included. Perhaps in a search for better queer Indigenous TV characters, many responses to Indigenous inclusion highlighted reality TV figures. The most mentioned were Brooke Blurton on *The Bachelorette*, Kevin Yow Yeh, Bob Smith, Jared Hutchison, and Mia Strasek-Barker on *Gogglebox*, and Aboriginal participation, or a lack of participation, in *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under*.

Reality TV is not new, nor is it race-neutral. These have ranged from the difficult position when the Aboriginal cast members of *Gogglebox* were required to respond to the death of Queen Elizabeth II, to the presence of Blackface in the 2021 season of *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under* (Boseley, 2021), to the ways in which Blurton's appearance was framed as a lesson in understanding Aboriginality and in which she was subject to racism and misinformation (Vernem, 2021). Yet their presence, according to many of our Indigenous respondents, was welcome and reassuring. Their inclusion and the need for this representation bleeding through into our survey on 'characters' points to both the way story and representation is understood by a viewer, as well as the crafting of reality TV as a curated site of reaction and response.

In 1953, the US broadcaster ABC aired a reality series called *The Comeback Story*. In each episode people who had overcome past difficulties revealed their life story. In one episode, the real-life experience of Blues singer Billie Holiday was recast through interview, description, her creative work, and a highly curated story that told her life from beginning to a battle through addiction and abuse (Holiday, 2019). Framed as a way of understanding the impact and power of living through difficult circumstances, it forms the kernel of reality TV, a need to understand the human condition (Murray & Ouellette, 2004). While it pointed to it, what it failed to do was address the systemic racism and subjugation that was clear across the story. Responses to our survey suggests that reality TV continues to be more interested in reaction than complexity, with many respondents holding deep concern for the negative impact on participants who reveal their vulnerabilities, and then the further effect this could have on queer audiences.

Regardless of these impacts, the inclusion of reality television when mentioned by respondents, constituted relatability, representation and availability where there is a dearth of other representation, and that this exists alongside the risks to the people involved. In the survey, respondents shared that they saw the care and responsibility that real life ‘characters’ on *Gogglebox* took in being representative of a less visible group. Respondents also reflected a desire to hear the lived-experience of real life Aboriginal people, and in particular to hear from Bob Smith and Kevin Yow Yeh, as queer Aboriginal men who are partners in life and co-participants in *Gogglebox*, one respondent referring to the group’s presence as ‘Goggleblax’.

Investments in queer representation

There was one question that we asked beyond the listing of shows, and beyond the specifics of one or another character; it was:

‘If there was one thing you wish you could see more of in representation of queer people on TV what would it be?’

Below we will list some of the responses, it is this list that has provided clear direction for the next stage of analysis as we begin to focus on the forms and meaning of representation, rather than the categories of inclusion. While both are present, few responses were simply listing of categories of queerness.

More trans men. More BIPOC in general shows. More piercings and tattoos. More kink scenes. More fat and disabled characters, especially more bears and fewer twinkies. More body hair, as well...

More diversity and more mundane every day queer life. Less angst stories and tragedies.

More religious queer characters, especially more Jewish and Muslim characters, but also just characters across the board (other than Christians, I don't care about them) where their religion is a part of their queer identity rather than something that stands in the way of it.

Just more and more of it, good, bad and ugly. I'd like to see more lesbians in their 30s and 40s who are past the coming out stage and just living their lives. But love seeing older and younger people too.

Asexuality of course

More nerds, more body types, more joy

Neurodivergence & varied body types. Fictional queers all look the same...

Bisexual men

I would really like to see more trans representation in general, and non-binary identities. I think they lag far behind other forms of queer rep in most shows now.

Deep stories and deep characters that allow us to be more than one aspect of us.

I want to see someone with my hair, Black hair n where they care for their hair because it's not the same.

I want to see someone with my hair

The following forms an example of how responses in the survey are allowing the team to perform a 'deep dive' into the complexities of queerness, in particular as it relates to race. At the end of an episode in the final season of Supergirl - a DC Comics show that ran for six years on the CW Network - the main-cast character of Kelly Olsen holds the screen for 90 seconds without speaking (Ramsay, 2021). As she prepares for bed, she wraps her hair, that act alone taking 63 seconds. This length of screen time without dialogue is highly unusual, in particular in an action focused show. The actor who portrayed Kelly, Azie Tesfai, co-wrote the episode and in doing so framed an understanding of the complexity of Black lives. The online site, Black Girl Nerds (BGN) describe Kelly's superhero alternate, Guardian, as '...a superhero with a heart of gold and representation for those who often are not seen.' (Yvonne, 2021). BGN interviews Tesfai, who explains why the hair wrapping was included:

"We had discussions about whether people were going to understand the significance of someone putting on a scarf at the end of the night. Every time I see on TV where a Black woman

crawls into bed with her hair out I'm like, that is not reality! So I got questions and found myself having to explain textures and oils and silk. I thought, If people watch this and ask those questions, then this is a good thing."

The idea that a TV show can provide corrective information and demonstrations of a moral compass are common across superhero shows. However, in *Supergirl* they often form utility for a demonstration of goodness by the white cis, straight character of Supergirl. In an earlier season, Supergirl is told by a Black alien that her experience of the world is privileged both because of race and as a human-presenting alien (Warn, 2018). At first, she doesn't believe him, but it is followed by clear demonstrations and a space in which to grow through these observations; a tidy lesson in privilege that she immediately understood. We see this in other iterations across the series. When the first transgender superhero, Dreamer, explains to Supergirl what it is to be trans (Kohli, 2018), Kara/Supergirl responds by 'coming out' to her as Supergirl, thus making it about her. This builds on a theme begun in an earlier episode when Supergirl's sister comes out as a lesbian (Teng, 2016), and Supergirl uses the life-changing announcement to focus on her own 'closeting' as a superhero. In each instance Supergirl reacts the way we expect of superheroes, by learning and growing, however she also centres each revelation by refocusing the conversation on her own non-queer worldview.

Responses in the *Queer As...* survey describe this recentering as an uncomfortably common remit of white, cisgender, straight characters who encounter queerness. These queer and racial circumstances form utility to prove the inherent goodness of straight white folks (Nama, 2009). For this reason, the episode choosing to focus on Kelly's hair wrapping reframed the heroic. The character spends most of the episode being ignored by the main characters, including her girlfriend, Alex, the sister of Supergirl, who had come out as a lesbian in the earlier season. None of her superhero colleagues, including Supergirl and Alex, seemed to understand the burden of compounding racism that Kelly felt. Nor did they comprehend the helplessness at the situation she experienced across the episode, as a housing project with mostly Black community members is demolished through the actions of the superhero team. Tesfai, in writing and playing Kelly Olsen, demonstrates racial existence and queer insistence, using an experience that our respondent told us they wished to see, but never had. The episode ends with a frank discussion between Kelly and her fiancé Alex, who promises to 'do the work' to support her. Alex had spent most of the episode failing to understand race and its implications for Kelly, and yet this scene did not redeem her, she did not write over the Black narrative, and there was no quick fix presented and no resolve. This moment within an episode that focuses clearly on a Black experience, then acts as a counterbalance to the cluelessness of people in Kelly's life. A quiet salve, that allows her to reset the

relationship and expectations with her fiancé. For a queer, interracial couple to demonstrate their failure to get each other without it being a crisis point was also powerful.

The show dealt with criticisms across its run that it was preaching, which is the remit of most superhero morality tales, and in particular those that centre women (Goddard & Hogg, 2019). For this episode, however, criticisms were extreme and vitriolic, framing Black representations as ‘wokeness’. On the Internet Movie Database, this episode had a substantially lower user score than every other Supergirl episode, with accompanying commentary that included the headings: ‘Written by ideologues ramming their social and political philosophy down your throat at ever (sic) turn’, ‘A twitter rant became an episode’, ‘Worst woke episode ever’, ‘Political correctness rammed down our throats’ and ‘keep to the superhero show’, with further comment in the review that ‘nobody wants all the political BLM propaganda’ (IMDb.com, 2021). The show was co-written by a Black writer, Tesfai, and directed by a Black director, David Ramsay.

This survey brought us Black hair; what else can it do?

We finish with this sample as a case study on Black hair and queer TV representation, but also as a single gem out of thousands across the survey responses. As a single comment, this response led to the analysis of a queer racialised character, and the solutions that filling a void of representation can deliver for individuals that never see themselves represented in mainstream TV. As a mirror to the vitriole that Black creatives receive when they are perceived to step out of turn, Tesfai received numerous hateful comments, and backlash for their recentering away from white queerness. For some, racialised, queer characters onscreen are confronting because of their very existence, but for others they deliver needed representation. This survey, and the audit project as a whole, digs into the margins, it explores the visibility that individuals see, have never seen, and the expectations that a more inclusive space will also be more expansive, providing story opportunities and representations of the lived, intersecting experiences of race, gender, sexuality/ies, disability, and complexity. For queer, Indigenous characters and other racially complex representations, the survey tells us that there is more work to do, but it also provides glimpses into sites of success and queer Black joy.

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