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Nonbinary on screen (on stolen Land): reading television representations for the colonial project of gender

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ABSTRACT

Trans-nonbinary, genderfluid, agender, and otherwise gender divergent folks are increasingly present on contemporary television screens and streaming platforms. Characters such as Sabi Mehboob (*Sort Of*), Cal Bowman (*Sex Education*), and Darren Rivers (*Heartbreak High*), as well as Casey (*All My Friends Are Racist*) and Willie Jack (*Reservation Dogs*), variously explore facets of gender fluidity and nonbinary gender expressions and experiences. This paper undertakes a situated analysis of these stories, characters, identities, and relationships in the place and context of their making – predominantly in settler-colonies upon stolen Indigenous Land (such as the Lands claimed by Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States). On stolen Land, Indigeneity is the ontology to which race, ethnicity, and nationality must define themselves in relation (or opposition). By reading for 'the colonial project of gender (and everything else)' in television narratives, we explore nonbinary and gender expansive representations in situated relationality. In what ways do trans-nonbinary representations in popular media attend to relationality? Is resisting the gender binary presented as a challenge to colonial logics? Is the future of nonbinary an anti-colonial future?

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> *And what if , rather than because it has a place for straightness, queer Indigeneity was centered as an analytic because it called into critical relation straightness in all its iterations? —Byrd (2020, 118)*

To be trans-nonbinary, genderfluid, agender, or otherwise gender divergent[1] is to find a home in the complexity of being neither/nor – outside the bounds of gender/sex legibility as defined by a binary that has its roots in colonial racial supremacy and cultural control (Reardon-Smith and O'Sullivan 2025). A self-identification that resists these strictures carries the potential of relief and joy, even as it gestures towards instability, sometimes slipperiness, sometimes mixture, and often misunderstanding (O'Sullivan and Reardon-Smith 2025). Viewed from the perspective of the naturalization of the gender/sex dyad, it may appear that those of us who are nonbinary have chosen the category of alien, abject, illegible other, for ourselves. But what is truly monstrous here is the harm done by attempts to fit us into the containers and enclosures of the colonial gender/sex binary (Levitt et al. 2024; O'Sullivan 2021). We who are outside of it understand that the

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rigid application of the gender/sex binary also does harm to all of us – even to those who might not experience the force and friction of ill fit of their binary gender assignation. Being nonbinary is at once a refusal and an affirmation; a way of being that resists the rules and logics that govern inclusion in the settler colony.

European colonialism's understanding of the gender binary was one of the first tools used to regard Indigenous peoples as outside the realms of what they deemed 'civilised' (Domínguez Ruvalcaba 2016; Gill-Peterson 2024). Although the predominating public view today imagines this binary emerging from the 'facts' of sex biology, sex biologists themselves increasingly recognize the classifying of human sex and gender into binary categories as harmfully reductive, obscuring a biocultural reality that is multifactoral and deeply complex (Fausto-Sterling 2025; Fuentes 2025). Accordingly, we use the term 'gender/sex' in recognition of the biocultural entanglement of sex and gender identity, and specifically to challenge the colonial binary notion that collapses individual identity and sociocultural possibilities into a reductive understanding of reproductive function. As identified by Black asexual self-described gender anarchist essayist Brown (2022), the gender/sex binary was modelled on idealized and hierarchical, bourgeois, patriarchal, white supremacist models of 'man' and 'woman,' as 'an invention of whiteness, defined against the "savagery" of other races . . . categories that only white people have full access to' (p. 97). Many scholars have explored how this is a key part of the dehumanization of Indigenous, Black, and racialized peoples (Jackson 2020; Markowitz 2024; Oyěwùmí 1997; Snorton 2017). As Brown states, even as racialized peoples 'are barred from full entry into white colonial conceptions of gender and sexuality, we are still expected to abide by the social contracts associated with these categories' (2022, 98–99). Likewise O'Sullivan has previously written that 'the capacity to be controlled while, ironically, being expelled from equal participation in society is the carceral fundamental on which our colonial state is based' (O'Sullivan 2022a, 146), noting that the colonial project of gender has consisted not only of defining the terms of the gender/sex binary, but also of persistently deploying it 'as a sharpened tool of cultural decimation' (138).

In recent years, nonbinary identities and experiences have increasingly appeared on contemporary television screens and streaming platforms. This uptick in representation comes in the context of more widespread and mainstream inclusion of queerness in popular media (Griffin 2023), and trans-nonbinary characters are most frequently positioned within a cast that features multiple queer identities (O'Sullivan et al. 2024a, 2024b). As we all clamour towards our own meaning and reasoning of what trans, nonbinary, gender fluidity, and gender diversity mean to us, one readily accessible source of representations we look to is television media. On-screen representations offer one way to explore the possibilities of trans-nonbinary identities and experiences. Nonbinary and gender diverse characters can provide examples and practices of navigating challenges regarding pronoun use, self and social affirmation, familial and community acceptance, as well as facing interpersonal aggression or even violence. Furthermore, as shown by Luttrell and Banks (2024), canonically queer and trans on-screen characters and storylines allow queer viewers relief from the laborious process of queer reading – mining content for semiotic resources that allude to, without making explicit, queer narratives and identities; a labour associated with being what Filipinx American writer Elaine Castillo has labelled 'the unexpected reader' (Castillo 2022, 33), anyone other than the most catered-to audience. But to what extent is the (re)presentation of genders that complicate

the colonial binary an exercise in normalization, of inclusion and reinscription into the colonial-settler public imaginary? To what extent is it a radical rupture that destabilizes, revealing limitations, insisting upon an excess, demanding an otherwise? How might the presence of trans-nonbinary bodies and lives on television screens call cis-heteronormativity and the colonial project of gender into question? These questions help shape our interrogation of trans-nonbinary and gender expansive representation on screen in the context of settler colonialism.

This article's authors are two trans-nonbinary scholars and creative practitioners, whose shared academic work is grounded in Indigenous thinking and scholarship and an anti-colonial queer politic (Reardon-Smith and O'Sullivan 2025) to challenge the colonial project of gender, sexuality, and everything else (O'Sullivan 2021). Han Reardon-Smith is a settler early-career researcher, musicker, and radio-maker with Welsh and Turkish/Mediterranean ancestry, writing from the unceded lands of the Jagera, Yuggera Ugarapul and Turrbal Peoples. Sandy O'Sullivan is a senior Wiradjuri (Aboriginal) professor of Critical Indigenous Studies and interdisciplinary artist writing from Dharug Ngurra. We work together on Sandy's multi-year Senior Future Fellowship funded by the Australian Research Council in a programme titled *Saving Lives: Mapping the influence of Indigenous LGBTIQA+ creative artists*. The programme is housed in the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures (CGIF) and the Centre for Critical Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University's Wallumattagal Campus on Dharug Country.

As part of the *Saving Lives* project, we have interrogated the contemporary public imaginary of queerness through a project we have called *Queer As . . . : a deep dive into complex queer representation on television*, in which we sought feedback through a survey of 1411 participants, and audited and analysed as much relevant English-language scripted serialized television as our small team could watch (O'Sullivan et al. 2024a, 2024b). We have been especially interested in what Griffin (2016) has called television's *affective value*, that is, 'its potential to engender identification among audiences' (112). Our explorations have probed the regularly reductive, 'risk averse' representations of queer gender and sexuality in popular screen media and pay close attention to the circumstances that lead to more expansive representations that embody resistance to the colonial enclosures of categorization. This leads us to attend not only to the 'text' of television representation, but also to the machinations of production, casting direction, the writers' room, and distribution; to examine not only what Stuart Hall (in Martin 2020) called the *decoding* of the image, but also the processes of *encoding*.

By conducting a deep dive into representations of queerness in television, the project looks for and explores queer character identities that complicate genders and sexualities beyond cisgender, abled, white gays and lesbians. It centres representations of Indigenous queerness, which helps us to situate stories, characters, identities, and relationships in the place and context of their making – predominantly in settler-colonies upon stolen Indigenous Land (such as the Lands claimed by Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States). On stolen Land, Indigeneity is the ontology to which race, ethnicity, and nationality must define themselves in relation (or opposition) (Byrd 2011, 221). As Murri scholar Day (2024) demonstrates, coloniality is the origin point for all categories of power within settler colonies like Australia, extending to gender, sexuality, and disability (70). This is 'the colonial project of gender (and everything else)' identified by O'Sullivan (2021, 2025). Thus, in this paper, we read for *the colonial project of gender* in

television narratives, exploring trans-nonbinary, genderfluid, and gender divergent representations in situated relationality, asking: In what ways do trans-nonbinary representations in popular media attend to relationality? Is resisting the gender binary presented as a challenge to colonial logics?

To explore these questions, we read across three trans-nonbinary and gender divergent characters: Sabi Mehboob (*Sort Of* 2021–2023), Cal Bowman (*Sex Education* 2019–2023), and Darren Rivers (*Heartbreak High* 2022–2024). While there are many limitations to this selection – in particular, all are young, portraying characters in their teens to early adulthood, and all are slim and are framed as non-disabled – they do represent a range of racial identities, relational complexities, and cultural contexts. Fat-bodied, middle-aged and older, and disabled queerness are especially underrepresented in television media, particularly in the contexts of trans-nonbinary and non-white racial identities, and these exclusions are linked to the long history of eugenics associated with white supremacy and colonial-settler nation building (BlackDeer 2024; Day 2024; Harrison 2021; Schalk 2022). There are suggestions present in our survey that propose these absences are felt by the general public and that their role as young people represents an opportunity for introduction and explication for an audience. This is seen in other areas of queer representation, for instance with Isaac in *Heartstopper* (2022–2024) season three we see the character describing their asexuality, an opportunity for providing a presence to something that may otherwise be read as an absence of intimate opportunity. There is also a broader public sentiment that nonbinary identities represent a more recent ahistorical presentation. While this is challenged across queer and trans scholarship (Day 2023; O'Sullivan 2022b; Stryker 2017), there remains a rhetoric of newness cast on nonbinary people, as though we appeared a handful of years ago and so must by dint of this appearance be young (Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017), reinforced by popular culture as a trope of queer representation (Blanco-Fernández, Akinmade, and Soto-Sanfiel 2025; Soto-Sanfiel and Sánchez-Soriano 2024). There is a possibility to write in so much complexity, and what television producers have chosen is to have nonbinary gender expressions enclosed within the container of youth.

Our readings of Sabi, Cal, and Darren are informed by the deep dive process of the *Queer As …* project. Our methodology involved a full viewing of the series by at least one of our team members, followed by repeat viewings of key scenes that establish and develop character identities and their associated storylines, and engagement with secondary sources (such as scholarly analysis, media coverage, and published interviews with relevant creators and actors). We considered all aspects of a character's narrative and identity complexity, conducting what we call a *situated analysis*, taking into account the place and context of a television series' setting and making, its colonial histories and enduring Indigenous present, and the relationship the character has to that place. We have also chosen to interrogate characters from a mainstream media landscape, rather than from small-scale, cult, and bespoke examples of queer 'minor cinema' (White 2008, 413). This reflects the findings from the *Queer As …* survey, which invited open-ended responses to questions about character identity and framing, alongside the meaning-making engaged in by viewers. This qualitative survey sought input from a broad selection of screen media viewers, not to arrive at definitive conclusions, but instead to attain an indication of the diversity of perspectives on and relationships to the public imaginary of television. When asked to give examples of series that featured complex queer

identities, the vast majority of respondents drew upon selections from the major international streaming platforms and broadcasting corporations. Cal in *Sex Education* was one of the most frequently cited examples (325 responses), followed by Darren and *Heartbreak High* (251 responses). While Sabi and *Sort Of* were named by fewer respondents (20 responses), they featured repeatedly in comments identifying them as one of the few trans-nonbinary leads in mainstream television.

Following our deep dives into Sabi, Cal, and Darren, we conclude by touching on two Indigenous gender divergent characters – Casey (*All My Friends Are Racist* 2021) and Willie Jack (*Reservation Dogs* 2021–2023) – both of whom point to possibilities and openings of expansive representations beyond the colonial gender/sex binary that are led by First Nations creatives. They suggest that the future of nonbinary is not another project of colonial containment and boundary policing, but rather the relational freedom of no longer needing to be defined against the gender/sex binary.

Sabi Mehboob: Sort Of (2021–2023)

Over the course of its three seasons, *Sort Of* (2021–2023) traces the messiness of life, work, love, family, friendship, and creativity for transfeminine-nonbinary Muslim Pakistani-Canadian Sabi Mehboob, portrayed by the show's co-creator Bilal Baig. The story centres around Toronto-based Sabi taking a job as a nanny for a mixed-race family while in a period of instability and uncertainty around their own gender embodiment, career ambitions, relationships, and sense of life direction. Several sources have billed it as a 'transition' narrative (Burnett Gregory 2024; Himani 2022; Kumar 2021), pointing out that while Sabi is undertaking social (in the first two seasons) and medical (in the third) gender transitions, every major character in the show is navigating a transition of some kind. Baig articulates the intentionality behind this:

> It's about affirming human evolution as a very natural thing. It's been happening forever, it's going to keep happening forever. It's literally unstoppable and there is something so beautiful about that. And evolution is idiosyncratic; it looks different for every single person. Some transitions are major, some transitions are tiny little shifts that are barely noticeable. Some transitions have stigma attached to them, other transitions are less judged or 'more acceptable.' I think we strive to look at all of that through this show. (in Kumar 2021, para. 14)

While Baig shares many of the same identity complexities as the character, *Sort Of* is not autobiographical, exceeding the limitations of a public imaginary that equates artists of minoritised identities with their on-screen persona. '[W]e need to start to really enforce that people who have multiple identities have creative capacity and imagination and that we're not just pulling entirely from our lives', Baig says (in Fernandes 2021, para. 14). Media coverage frequently emphasized that this is the first Canadian primetime show to feature a queer South Asian Muslim lead (for instance: Fernandes 2021; Karounos 2022; Raza-Sheikh 2022) but rarely dwelt on the significance of it being one of the first and only instances of an explicitly trans-nonbinary protagonist in mainstream live-action serialized television.[2] There are challenges to addressing this in the context of quippy media headlines, because while this is a rare example of complex queer identity centred in on-screen storytelling – something for which *Queer As ...* is advocating – the predominant lens through which surrounding commentary engages is that of whiteness and the white

possessive (Moreton-Robinson 2015). The settler colonial nation states of both Canada and Australia enthusiastically proclaim their 'multicultural' inclusiveness, which amounts to little more than a colonial fantasy of cultural fetishism and exhibitionism under white control (Hage 2023, 160–161). Jinghua Qian alludes to this framing in their article on *Sort Of*, casting some side eye on the 'various' of Sabi's straddling of 'various identities' in the show's blurb (Castillo 2022, para. 2). Stories that feature 'diverse' characters like Sabi, their family, and their community are deemed important for building 'empathy' in the expected (white) viewer or reader – as Elaine Castillo describes it: 'instrumentalizing fiction or art as a kind of ethical protein shake, such that reading more and more diversely will somehow build the muscles in us that will help us see other people as human' (Castillo 2022, 17).

The white settler-colonial imaginary furthermore positions Muslim and South Asian identities and cultural contexts as Orientalist 'others' (Said 1978, 2003), which are assumed to be regressive and hostile to queerness and gender expansiveness. As identified by Nisrine Chaer in his work on trans refugees in Lebanon (Chaer 2025) and Fadi Saleh in Syria and Turkey (Saleh 2020), Eurological/Western categories and terminologies of queerness – as well as gendered, racialized, and classed politics of respectability – structure the legibility and legitimacy of asylum claims. Such terminology enclosure both disregards the language and conceptual frameworks that queer and trans peoples have for themselves (Kaabour 2024) and invests in colonial narratives of modernity, homonationalism, and pinkwashing, deeming some nation states 'queer friendly' and others 'homophobic', and accordingly (some) queer bodies worthy of protection from their origin states (Lahiri 2020, 62; Puar 2017, 230). In this context, Sabi's navigation of their own transfeminine-nonbinary identity amidst family and community tensions is an opportunity to dismantle Orientalist and Islamophobic narratives – a challenge that *Sort Of* does take up. Across the many interviews that Baig has given about the show, they demonstrate a deep awareness of their relational responsibilities to both the South Asian Muslim community and to queer and trans communities.

Sort Of is a show committed to nuance. And yet for all its awareness and sensitivity, it still fails to meaningfully address the ground on which it stands and the Indigenous Peoples of that place: Tkaron:to, territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Tkaron:to has a long history of treaty-making that predates European colonization, notably including the Dish with One Spoon Wampum,[3] an agreement of reciprocal responsibility between the Anishinaabek and Haudensaunee Confederacy that structured their mutual commitment to caretaking and life-sustaining of the Great Lakes region (Talking Treaties Collective n.d..). Today, Tkaron:to/Toronto remains home to many First Nations people from across Turtle Island, including two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous community; it is the site of an annual Two-Spirit Powwow, alongside a vibrant programme of activities and resources led by and for queer Indigenous community (n.d.). Indeed, queer Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk scholar Marie Laing opens her study on urban Indigenous youth's perspectives on the term 'two-spirt' by noting that 'In downtown Toronto, on any given day, one can see and hear the term two-spirit being used in a variety of different ways', from posters on telephone poles to poetry readings to discussion groups (Laing 2021, 1). Laing's study emphasizes the complexity and cultural specificity of the term two-spirit, demonstrating the collective

refusal by two-spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous youth to flatten and fix the term into institutionalized taxonomic containment, in particular resisting the narrow understanding of a literal definition that rests on 'the interpolation of colonial binaries into Indigenous social thought' (11–12). By introducing Indigenous two-spirit, trans, or queer characters, *Sort Of* might have had the opportunity to address some of the settler-colonial misuse and abuse of 'two-spirit' and other First Nations queer identities. Sabi and their friends could have attended the Two-Spirit Powwow, learned about the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and LGBTQ2S+ People (2021), and/or otherwise reckoned with the complexities of being settlers who are also racialized. These are not abstract suggestions, but rather track with the reality of what it is to be in queer community on stolen Indigenous Land. But instead, *Sort Of* does not engage with Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Land, or Indigeneity.

Cal Bowman: Sex Education (2019–2023)

The character of Cal Bowman, portrayed by Sudanese American nonbinary musician Dua Saleh, first appears in the third season (2021) of *Sex Education*, in which they navigate integration into a new school in a new country (the UK) as a dark-skinned Black nonbinary student. The show greatly expanded the number of queer characters in its third and fourth (and final) seasons, with a corresponding leap in the complexity of gender and sexuality identities and expressions included.

Across Cal's two seasons, they are presented as being very sure and secure in their own gender identity. Their being nonbinary is portrayed not so much a problem for *them*, but rather their struggles are induced by the various ways in which the social realm denies, invalidates, and presents obstacles to their nonbinary identity and embodiment. Cal experiences difficulties that will be familiar to many trans-nonbinary people: no matter how sure they themself are of their own identity, people around them struggle to truly understand it. As Mununjali Yugambeh writer Ellen van Neerven puts it, 'there is something about people not getting non-binary that feels like non-existence' (van Neerven 2023, 283). Cal's nonbinary gender identity presents a challenge to systems and institutions structured around the enforced gender binary, and the colonial project of gender projects this back onto the individual: Cal exposes a problem and therefore to many of the people around them Cal *is* the problem. Being experienced as a problem is exhausting and demoralizing; it demands 'testifying to our identities as though there is something actually wrong with and incomplete about them' (Watego 2021, 26). It is shattering, and 'Being shattered is not always a place from which we can speak' (Ahmed 2021, 14).

For Cal's season four (2023) storyline, transmasculine and nonbinary performance artist, theatre maker, and writer Krishna Istha was added to the writers' room, and two additional major trans characters joined the cast of *Sex Education*: Abbi (Anthony Lexa) and Roman (Felix Mufti). Like Saleh, actors Lexa and Mufti are themselves trans, and all three contributed to their characters' storylines. Istha has emphasized the importance of having more than one trans character to demonstrate that there is no singular trans experience. 'The hope,' they state:

> is that as much as these characters give comfort for trans and non-binary audiences, that it's also a place where other audiences can learn about my experience from a true and authentic

> place … as opposed to something that they might have heard from people that don't necessarily live our life. (in Wratten 2023, para. 18)

In this season, Cal is navigating their experiences of puberty and body dysmorphia, 6 months into taking testosterone and overwhelmed by some of the side effects, seemingly without sufficient access to medical care or guidance. Even as their school environment has radically transformed into one far more affirming of queer identities, Cal's difficulties are compounded by a challenging relationship with their mother, encounters with microaggressions, and a series of financial and institutional roadblocks. Unlike Cal, Abbi and Roman are the most popular students at their school, and while they too face challenges (Abbi is estranged from her relatives and living with Roman's family), they are surrounded by a community of acceptance and it is implied that Roman comes from a financially well-off background. When Cal asks him about his top surgery, he reveals that his family was both willing and able to pay for his top surgery, allowing him to avoid the UK's notoriously long wait list for gender affirmation clinics (Wright et al. 2021), something that is not an option for Cal. Research has shown the powerfully negative effect that extended waiting and uncertainty around care access has for trans people (Grant et al. 2025). As UK trans writer and advocate Shon Faye (2021) has argued, the problems with trans healthcare are not just a matter of process but of power (64); being made to wait is itself an experience of power relations (Pitts-Taylor 2020). Nonbinary people face a slew of minority stressors that have a profound impact on their health and lives (Alabanza 2023; Rosati et al. 2025; Shuster and Lamont 2020) and are subject to the assumption that they are not as in-need of medical gender affirming care as binary-identifying trans people (Zwickl et al. 2025). Cal's struggles are not evident to those around them, and they withdraw into depression and isolation. It literally takes a (repeated!) divine intervention for fellow queer Black student Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa) to clock that the disappeared Cal is in real danger of self-injury and to offer them support and understanding. While Cal's story does have a happy ending, it was written to honour the life of Mx Shay Lou Patten-Walker, a Black trans-nonbinary advocate in the UK who worked as a consultant on *Sex Education* who died by suicide in 2022 (Crosara 2023). As trans-crip scholar Greenberg (2023) identifies, by focusing unilaterally on Cal's gender dysphoria without attending to other aspects of their mental health and relationality, their story fails to draw upon the potential for trans and disability solidarity in the face of medical injustice.

Set in the fictional British town of Moordale, *Sex Education* was shot in the Wye Valley, across both Wales and England. The fictional setting complicates any interrogation into the colonial history of Wales, in part because there is no engagement with the Welsh language (Cymraeg) – the major cultural resistance against British colonialism and imperialism (Griffiths 2021). Nonbinary Welsh speakers have been advocating for linguistic changes and language education that would facilitate gender neutrality (Hoskin 2023). Wales is also home to the first openly nonbinary mayor anywhere in the world, Bangor's Owen Hurcum (who also identifies as queer and agender), elected at age 23 after 5 years serving on the city council (Storer 2021). *Sex Education* frames its setting as a neutral (if unnaturally sunny and summery) Britishness that erases the complexities that exist even within a space annexed into the colonial project.

Darren Rivers: Heartbreak High (2022–2024)

Portrayed by Black nonbinary actor James Majoos, the Australian child of South African immigrants, Darren Rivers is a nonbinary student at a fictional Sydney (Dharug Ngurra) high school, Hartley High. A reboot of the 1990s Australian high school drama of the same name, Netflix's *Heartbreak High* (2022–2024) takes seriously the task of exploring the complexities of each character's identity––whether well-understood, emergent, or barely threatening to break into the conscious awareness of the character themself––without resorting to prescriptive stereotypes. Both a loyal and sensitive friend and a high-energy, drama-loving gossip, Darren has impeccable style and is possibly the first character to wear a durag on Australian television – Majoos' own contribution to character development. For Darren, the durag serves as 'an extension of their Blackness and their queerness as well', says Majoos, noting that 'It doubled as a bit of a weave. I could do some hair twirls and hair flicks with the silk of the durag, which was fun' (in Madden 2023, para. 12). Always ready with a sharp quip, Darren's response to being misgendered by their stepfather is to blast an airhorn retrieved from their bag (in Otto 2022, 27:06) and insist that 'change only comes by breaking the rules and I'm allowed to change at any moment' (27:33–27:40).

Identity in *Heartbreak High* is explored relationally, and many of the narrative crises and disruptions take the form of relationship ruptures rooted in more complex navigations of identity. Darren's best-friendship with white queer autistic character Quinni (Chloé Hayden) is a rare demonstration of care and consideration in the first season (2022), serving as a stark contrast to the teenage self-absorption expressed by many of their peers. In the second season (2024), however, amongst the dramas of their expanded friend group and Darren's romantic relationship with white asexual eshay Ca$h (Will McDonald), Darren loses patience with Quinni when she feels socially isolated and panicky after falling behind on her usual coping strategies because she is recovering from a venomous snakebite. This challenges Darren's established role as the 'mum' of the group, even as they continue to play a role offering care to their friends, and they are forced to reckon with the ways in which their behaviour can be hurtful.

Heartbreak High's main cast features two Aboriginal characters: Malakai (Thomas Weatherall, Kamilaroi) and Missy (Sherry-Lee Watson, Arrernte), both of whom are cisgender and bisexual (or 'bloody bisexual icons!' as Missy says, in Sharma 2024, 22:06), and introduces a third Aboriginal character in season two, Zoe (Kartanya Maynard, Trawlwoolway). Malakai and Missy first connect when he joins his friends at the Mardi Gras 'Slay Ball' (likely modelled on the Sissy Ball: see Gay and Mardi Gras 2019), at which scenes feature cameos from real-life ballroom dancers such as Aboriginal drag queen Jojo Zaho and Filipina Australian artist Benji Ra (Sharma 2022). Brutally assaulted by a police officer as he leaves the event, Malakai is left reeling and understandably destabilized when his non-Indigenous peers fail to recognize the significance of police violence against an Aboriginal man. In a desperate attempt to get his friends to see his pain, Malakai threatens a stunt that flimsily masks attempted self-harm, but is stopped by Missy and her older brother Jai (Kobie Dee, Gomeroi). Jai takes him out on Country, knowing that this is what it will take for him to heal (Ruben 2022). In a similar moment of recognizing the importance of lived experience for shared understanding, Malakai turns to Darren for counsel when grappling with embracing his sexuality in season two, who

responds with gushing enthusiasm that softens into care and compassion as they see their friend's vulnerability.

Heartbreak High is full of flawed characters and exaggerated high school drama. While failing to properly recognize the Dharug Peoples or Nation on which it is set, it has featured Aboriginal actors, characters, and storylines in ways that are rare to see in the context of a multicultural cast in a settler-colonial nation state. It integrates queerness into First Nations' characters and lives and creates the circumstances for complexity and growth that importantly centre Indigenous knowledges and healing. This is testament to the work of First Nations creatives behind the scenes, as well as in front of the camera, in particular writer Meyne Wyatt (Wongutha-Yamatji). 'Diversity should be bare minimum, industry wide', Wyatt has said. 'It's demanded. From top to bottom. Casting isn't enough. It starts from the inception of the idea. You can't just flip things without doing the work and including our voices' (in Riga 2022, para. 34–35). *Heartbreak High* demonstrates that, as a 'bare minimum', the diversity of a cast that includes queer Aboriginal characters and storylines enriches narrative television and challenges colonial-settler hegemonies.

The characters of Sabi and Cal are situated in colonial fantasy worlds, which include the challenges of racial, ethnic/cultural, and gender/sex differences and oppressions, but do not attend to Indigeneity or place-based relationalities. Darren's relational landscape is more grounded on Aboriginal Land, without an explicitly anti-colonial orientation. As shown by our final two examples, Indigenous perspectives, creativity, and leadership not only situate television storytelling in Place-based relationality, but can also further disrupt the binary-gendered expectations of colonial relationalities. We conclude this paper with two gender divergent Indigenous characters frequently nominated by *Queer As ...* respondents, both of whom are surrounded by First Nations community and relationality.

Conclusion: First Nations-led gender expansiveness

We have previously written about two representations of gender expansiveness in First Nations-led shows (O'Sullivan et al. 2024a, 2024b): Casey of *All My Friends Are Racist* (2021), portrayed by Bidjara, Wakka Wakka, & Gubbi Gubbi queer man Davey Thompson, and Willie Jack of *Reservation Dogs* (2021–2023), played by Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation actor Paulina Alexis. Neither characters are explicitly trans-nonbinary, but both have gender expressions that refuse the containers of colonial expectations.

Casey is explicitly queer and, while using binary gendered pronouns, engages in gender fuckery throughout *All My Friends Are Racist*, such as donning a bikini top to sip a cocktail in New Farm Park (Magan-djin/Brisbane, Jagera and Turrbal Country). The show was created by queer nonbinary Indigenous creative Enoch Mailangi (Bgwcolman people of Palm Island) and is uproariously funny, tearing any semblance of decolonization as a metaphor to absolute shreds (Lancaster 2021). While Alexis has not spoken publicly about a queer identity of either her or her character Willie Jack (originally scripted as a boy), it is worth noting that there are several queer Native folks involved in *Reservation Dog*'s writing, direction, and production – including trans Navajo filmmaker Sydney Freeland, and Kumeyaay queer writer and producer Tommy Pico, as well as actors Devery Jacobs (Kahnawà:ke/Mohawk), who plays Elora Danan, and Elva Guerra (Mexican and Ponca Nation), who plays Jackie. Importantly, it is sometimes in the effect of characters that we see meaningful representation. Willie Jack is questioned on their queerness

within the show by the Aunties, who move seamlessly from asking the character if they had a boyfriend to asking if they had a girlfriend – in both cases, the answer was no (O'Sullivan et al. 2024b). The interaction shows something important that many survey participants discussed as an ideal: the need for understated and naturalized representation. The concept of revelation to other characters for the benefit of an audience could have hijacked the scene, but similarly as a character who is framed around their stoic resistance to inquiry, it would have been an odd space for disclosure. The disclosure we receive in that scene is one that frames a casual interaction around the question and any possible answer. It provides a sense of nearness, of being in kinship, as well of resistance to the colonial project of gender's insistence on labelling – naming and laying claim.

If Willie Jack's resistance is found in their response, survey participants were clear that they can see beyond what is disclosed both in relation to Willie Jack and in the many reported genderqueer characters that they regard as undisclosed queers. Across *Saving Lives*, we have insisted on the problem when others exceptionalise Indigenous gender or sexuality and automatically frame them as other. There is a distinct difference when Indigenous peoples themselves are framing those distinctions. In screen-based work, characters like Willie Jack form a resistant act that frames a way that community shapes diversity within it, and the audience – in the form of our survey respondents – understood that. When Blackfeet and Nimíipuus actor Lily Gladstone declared that they use she/they pronouns as part of her own efforts of 'decolonizing gender' for themself reflecting the lack of gendered pronouns in many Native languages (Gladstone, in Andersson 2023, para. 10), they were asserting a space of refusal and resistance. For Willie Jack, their refusal to comply with gender norms was understood well enough for an audience, in the survey response, to code them as genderqueer. This refusal stands in contrast to the instances of 'closeted' queerness and 'queerbaiting' frequently critiqued by queer viewers (Brennan 2019).

These reflections on racially diverse characters that explicitly discuss their nonbinariness, their agenderness, their genderqueerness, are important, but we also see instances where characters are no longer required to articulate their distance from cisgenderness. The *Queer As . . .* survey, and the reflections of many nonbinary actors as they find a journey towards playing these characters that align – at least from a gender perspective – with who they are, provide opportunities for a racially complex, genderqueer audience to see themselves reflected. For Indigenous people outside of the gender binary, we see in Willie Jack and Casey ways in which characters are normalized as a part of a community, who are not required to exceptionalise their experience, but instead attend to what queer Cherokee scholar Joseph Pierce calls 'moments of mutual imbrication . . . an ongoing negotiation of contingencies and coalescings' (Pierce 2025, 8). Nonbinary trans, genderqueer, and gender divergent identities are not another project of colonial containment. As UK-based Black trans-nonbinary creative Travis Alabanza tell us: 'When I say trans, I also mean escape. I mean choice. I mean autonomy. I mean wanting something greater than what you told me. Wanting more possibilities than the one you forced on me' (in Faye 2022, *ix*). They resist these ideas of a forced disclosure that requires the possibilities to be similarly contained in the ways that a broader audience can understand. For these characters, it also demonstrates that characters outside of the binary exist, and are represented, and confound the colonial project of gender. The future of nonbinary is expansive, uncontained by the limits of the colonial imaginary.

This article has explored a reading of the colonial project of gender in serialized television through the situated analysis of three non-white trans-nonbinary characters: Sabi Mehboob (*Sort Of*), Cal Bowman (*Sex Education*), and Darren Rivers (*Heartbreak High*). Especially in this moment of reactionary political backlash to advances in trans and queer rights, which impact the most vulnerable populations of complex trans and queer identities most, attending to complex queer representation and queer survival narratives remains of utmost importance. Where such visibility exists, there is an opportunity to resist the promise of liberal inclusion, which reinscribes characters into normative colonial-settler imaginaries. As we see in the examples of Casey (*All My Friends Are Racist*) and Willie Jack (*Reservation Dogs*), queer Indigenous leadership, storytelling, and creative control can open expansive possibilities that are grounded in Place and relationality. Opportunities for further research include comparative studies that examine these findings in relation to non-mainstream televisual media. While we assert the importance of excavating the limits of the contemporary settler colonial public imaginary, we also recognize the creativity continuing outside of this lens, including independent, low budget productions, web series, art installations, and other modes of queer and trans-led artistic production. Queer creative artists, and especially queer Indigenous artists, continue the work named by Muñoz: engaging queerness as a 'structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present', through which '[w]e must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds' (Muñoz 2009, 1). By further exploring the threads that entangle these works of queer creativity with more mainstream representation, without obscuring the foundational ontology of Indigenous Sovereignty, there is the potential to clarify and expand an anti-colonial queer imaginary beyond the colonial project of gender.

Notes

1. This use of a trans prefix followed by non-gendered terms reflects an emerging convention that to be other than cisgender is to be transgender, providing an expanded view of what is considered included, outside, or exempt of that binary classification (O'Sullivan 2022a).
2. White Canadian trans-nonbinary comedian Mae Martin's semi-autobiographical Netflix series *Feel Good* (2020–2021) is one possibly comparable example, although Mae's gender identity only becomes a point of interrogation for them in the second season.
3. Wampum – a marine shell-beaded belt of symbolic woven designs – is a Haudenosaunee tradition of agreement-making between nations to convey respect and commitment (Katsi'sorókwas Jacobs 2019).

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