

Queering the Dreaming: Representations of the 'Other' in the Indigenous Australian Speculative Television Series *Cleverman*

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Abstract

This essay analyzes queer representations in the context of Indigenous Australian discourses by looking at the two-season Australian science fiction series *Cleverman* (2016-2017). *Cleverman* aims to combine the conventions of the science fiction and superhero genres with ancient Indigenous stories. *Cleverman*'s compelling introduction of the Hairypeople, an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength inspired by Aboriginal mythology, provides the context to explore queer identities in regards to otherness, marginality, and culturally constructed boundaries between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'. Through the series' engagement with the subjectivity and queering of the monstrous 'other', the binary construct of good versus evil is challenged. The series' representation of boundary creatures highlights the constraints within which racially marked bodies operate, however misses the potential to equally engage with gendered bodies. While the series invites ambivalent readings of the role of community belonging and the nuclear family, the representation of female agency fails to similarly redefine discursively constituted identities and shows less potential to re-write normative codes of sex and sexuality.

Representations of queer identities open a discursive space concerned with difference and diversity, otherness, marginality, and culturally constructed boundaries between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'. By looking at the two-season Australian science fiction series *Cleverman* (2016-2017), this essay discusses queer representations in the context of Indigenous Australian discourses and analyzes how far such a reading engages with contemporary individuals' resistance to limiting cultural tendencies. In line with Judith Butler's reading of queer as "a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, [...] never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes," this essay reads queer not exclusively in regards to a study of gender, sex and sexuality, but also as a site offering productive connections to discourses of *race* and marginalization (Butler, *Bodies* 228). By producing visibly different, unpredictable bodies—within the story world often marked as 'monstrous'—speculative fiction lends itself to "impel us to reflect upon our own understanding of 'the body' and upon the ways in which bodies are viewed and regulated in the social world" (Mitchell n.p.). *Cleverman's* compelling introduction of the Hairypeople, an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength inspired by an ancient Aboriginal mythology of the Gamilaraay and Bundjalung people of northern New South Wales, provides the context to explore queer representations of Indigenous identities. Especially the juxtaposition of this mythological knowledge and power with Western ideas of science foregrounds the "disparate worldviews of colonized, formerly colonized and diasporic people, for many of whom science and spirituality are intertwined and inseparable" (Langer 129). In the interpolation of mythology, spirituality and folktale with the science fiction genre, *Cleverman* presents both Western understandings of science and Aboriginal knowledge as transgressive and permeable. Further, the notion of the 'monstrous' will be discussed as liminal and transformative, thereby overturning the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject. Through the series' engagement with the subjectivity and queering of the monstrous 'other', the binary construct of good versus evil is challenged. While the series invites ambivalent readings of the role of community belonging and the nuclear family, the representations of female agency fail to similarly redefine discursively constituted identities and shows less potential to re-write normative codes of sex and sexuality.

The TV series was collectively produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Screen Australia, Goalpost Pictures, New Zealand's Pukeko Pictures and the US company Sundance TV. In addition to its release in Australia, *Cleverman* found a global audience

through distribution to the USA, UK, China, and Germany. It was the first Australian television series to premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2016 (Ndalianis and Burke n.p.). Significantly, it was the first time in Australian screen history that over 80 percent of a cast and crew were of Indigenous descent, including the showrunner Ryan Griffen, who created the original concept for the series, the directors Wayne Blair and Leah Purcell, the writers, and a majority of the cast. The production followed strict protocols in its writing, “one of the reasons the four-year development process was so long, because it was essential that they consult with communities and gain permission to tell Dreaming stories” (Bizzaca n.p.).¹

This respect for cultural heritage and Indigenous Australian cultural protocol was relevant for three distinct plotlines drawn from stories, characters, and rituals from the Dreaming: the Cleverman, the Hairypeople, and the Namorrodor monster. To briefly outline the show’s premise: The world of *Cleverman* is centred on an unnamed Australian city in the near future in which an alternative humanoid species with extraordinary strength—the Hairypeople (often called ‘Hairies’ or ‘Subbies’ for Subhumans)—who have lived alongside humans undetected for centuries—are marked as a threat to society and forcibly sectioned off into a compound space known as ‘The Zone’ or put into detention centres. The dystopian narrative, therefore, evolves around contemporary issues such as border protection, refugees and racism and is “couched squarely within Australia’s own divisive asylum-seeker situation—plus a brutal colonial past, ancient Aboriginal mythology and the science fiction genre” (Spencer n.p.). Navigating this tense political climate are the human Aboriginal half-brothers Waruu and Koen. Waruu is the self-appointed leader of the disenfranchised people of the Zone, while his estranged brother Koen in the beginning, exploits this situation to his advantage by selling out Hairies to the government in return for a lucrative reward. Waruu’s anger towards his brother fuels much of the series’ tension once he realizes that their Uncle Jimmy has passed the power of the Cleverman to his ill-suited brother. Following a monomythic hero’s journey, Koen is at first reluctant and dismissive of his new identity as an Aboriginal superhero but eventually rises to the selfless responsibility, which climaxes in the first season in the confrontation of

¹ Among the show’s many culturally sensitive approaches is its engagement with language. The Hairypeople speak Gumbaynggirr, a language, based on the mid north coast of NSW, that had almost died, but has been revived in recent years. Other Aboriginal characters in the series speak the northern NSW language of Bundjalung, another endangered language. Gary Williams, chief executive of the Muurrbay Language and Cultural Co-operative, the organisation that was established to save Gumbaynggirr, worked with the show’s team to translate the scripts and teach the cast correct pronunciation (cf. Keen; Ndalianis and Burke).

Koen with the mythological heart-stealing monster Namorrodor. “Conforming to superhero conventions, the Cleverman wields the nulla nulla, an ancient fighting stick imbued with magical spirits; he also has abilities that include healing, strength, shapeshifting, pre and postcognition and the ability to rupture an individual’s spiritual access to the ancient world” (Lomax n.p.). As creator Griffen explains, the Cleverman “is a conduit between reality and the Dreaming. He is someone who is spiritually connected to both worlds [...] and the major gift of our superhero is he can see things that others can’t” (Griffen quoted in Bizzaca n.p.).² The mythology of the Cleverman is based on the Dreaming figure of the ‘Clever Man’ who appears interchangeably in Indigenous narratives as *Mann’gur* (Medicine Man), *Kgun’diri* (Forecaster), and *Kgai’dai’chi* (Spirit Man) (Ford 27).

Cleverman aims to combine the conventions of the science fiction and superhero genres with ancient Indigenous stories to encourage more diverse representations of Aboriginality. As the series’ showrunner recounts, “the genesis of Cleverman came [...] playing dress-ups with my son. We were playing Ninja Turtles, and in that moment, I suddenly wished we had something cultural—something Aboriginal—that he could cling to with as much excitement as he did with this” (Griffen n.p.). By “blending 60,000 years of culture with the superhero world on a modern platform,” Griffen wanted to create an Aboriginal superhero that his son could connect with, “I wanted a character that would empower him to stand and fight when presented with racism” (ibid.).³

Both, the superhero and the science fiction genre, are genres inextricably linked to the realities of social and political life. Matt Norman acknowledges that “*Cleverman* never tried to hide its political streak,” finding that “its segregated society, persecuted minority, oppressive government and profit-driven media machine offer fertile ground for social commentary” (Norman n.p.).⁴ Ndalianis and Burke further argue that *Cleverman* uses the broadly appealing superhero genre—filtered through the lens of Dreaming—to address contemporary and past horrors and injustices, and therefore reinforce the important social role that the superhero genre plays in delivering powerful personal, social, and political

² The Cleverman’s ability to see across two different worlds is physically manifested in the changing of one eye colour from brown to blue.

³ In the Extras of the DVD Ryan Griffen poignantly refers to the Cleverman and his ability to spiritually connect to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews as “the pope of the Dreamtime”.

⁴ Norman, however, challenges the series’ progressive potential and argues that it fails to “transcend the boundaries of the superhero genre” because of its endorsement of violence. In the handing over of the nulla nulla—an Aboriginal weapon—to Koen, Norman reads a validation of violence as justified, common in US superhero stories.

messages disguised as metaphor or mythic typologies (Ndalianis and Burke n.p.). However, *Cleverman* also deviates from superhero genre conventions (especially known in the US-American market), to position the superhero as representative of a particular kind of nationalist pride. “Koen’s position as an Indigenous superhero is a distinct break from the figure of the white Australian that dominates in the media. If the superhero is the symbol of the nation, then Koen, as an Indigenous superhero, reminds us of white Australia’s black history” (Ford 32). To put this integrative potential of the series in the words of Mitch Know: “In the space of 52 minutes, viewers were exposed to more aspects of Indigenous culture than most non-Indigenous Australians received during 12 years of schooling (and arguably beyond)” (Knox n.p.). In his article “Not so fictional Cleverman,” Tyson Yunkaporta comments on the non-fictional reality of *Cleverman*’s dystopian and futuristic outset.

The first season explored segregation and the myths of primitivism and progress through the introduction of the “hairies” of Aboriginal lore, an ancient culture uneasily labelled by the authorities as sub-human, despite their superior strength, cultural complexity and long lifespan. This recalls similarly disingenuous narratives of racial supremacy and primitivism deployed during Australia’s colonisation. The second season boldly introduces the theme of biological genocide, referencing the many historical policies of breeding out the natives—like the Stolen Generations and the Victorian Half-Caste Act—which were the first order of business at Australia’s Federation. These efforts at extermination live today in custom if not in law, with Aboriginal people constantly being asked by settlers, ‘What percentage Aboriginal are you?’ in daily acts of micro-aggression imposing White limits on Black identity. (n.p.)

In integrating the reality of intergenerational traumas from dispossession into a science-fiction scenario, thereby foregrounding that it is not an imagined future but a lived experience of Indigenous communities, Yunkaporta sees an innovative approach to the overworked dystopian genre.⁵

Cleverman’s greatest potential in challenging Eurocentric and paternalistic normative practices unfolds in its renegotiation of (Western) science. Such renegotiations are at the heart of the decolonizing project of what Jessica Langer calls ‘postcolonial science fiction’ because science fiction itself often “is seen as aligned with colonialism and therefore anathema” (Langer 1). The critical and creative potential of postcolonial science fiction, as Jessica Langer has seminally described it, notes “the ways in which Western scientific discourse [...] has interacted

⁵ This is in line with Kyle Whyte who argues similarly on the problematic notion of ‘apocalypse’ that the disruption of life-worlds are “not new” to Indigenous Peoples around the world, suggesting that the idea of impending “apocalypse” reads like a “colonial déjà vu” from an Indigenous perspective (89). As Whyte argues, Western academic and fictional engagements with the idea of impending apocalypse endemically fail to address the issue of “ongoing, cyclical colonialism” (94).

with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples” (9). Therefore, postcolonial responses to science and speculative fiction are powerful interventions which destabilize the imperial grammar of Euro-Western imaginaries of exploration and discovery. As Langer argues, “writers, film-makers and others involved in the production of postcolonial science fiction participate [...] in decolonization” as an ongoing process of reconfiguration: “utilizing the particular strengths and possibilities contained in the science fiction genre to further the project of a world not only politically but (variously) economically, culturally, intellectually and/or creatively decolonized” (8).

Cleverman engages with white, paternalistic, and exploitative attitudes of (Western) science in the shape of Jarrod Slade (played by Iain Glen), a media mogul who also operates a secret genetic laboratory on the side. In his lab, Slade seeks to understand the biological principles underpinning the Hairypeople’s strength and longevity and his experiments eventually result in the creation of two formulas: a serum that can replicate these superhuman abilities in human subjects, and another that turns Hairies into humans. In this take on science, bodies are treated as a resource; “[b]iological research is rendered malign due to the commercialisation and commodification of the body through the actions of large genetics corporations” and is incorporated into a broader narrative about *race*, for the Hairypeople are effectively farmed for what they can offer to humans (Atkinson n.p.). Slade is further interested in the superpower of the Cleverman (he therefore frequently tries to capture Koen to experiment on him but only gets hold of his hunting stick *nulla nulla*). While the Cleverman’s capacities to animate, generate, and preserve the body are, in most cases, represented as a semi-physical force attendant on the body, these capabilities can only be understood fully via transcendental explanations linked to the Dreaming. In traditional science fiction, to argue with Langer, this would be described as a manifestation of binarism, Indigenous methods of knowledge-production versus Western scientific paradigms, “usually expressed through traumatic and destructive hybridity” (Langer 127). Slade, in contrast, treats both knowledge systems as scientifically meaningful and, for his aims, equally important to exploit and weaponize to his benefit. This is shown, for example, in Slade’s kidnapping of the ancient spirit Kora, his genetic examination of the *nulla nulla*, or his biological study of the fluid of a fig tree which carries in it a type of living energy. Slade does not seem to question the powers of these Aboriginal forces and despite him only being interested in these objects and bodies as a resource through which to create technologies that could enhance human life, he nevertheless diversifies and indigenizes his research. He corrupts Uncle Jimmy into sharing some of the stories and secrets and similarly tries to ‘work’

together with Koen: “I need access to the Dreaming,” he explains, to which Koen responds: “It’s not yours to have” (S1E6 00:37:05). This consistent portrayal of Aboriginal Dreaming alongside genre-conventional representations of labs and scientific experiments, destabilizes the boundaries of colonial scientific discourses and challenges the essentialist view of Indigenous knowledge as ‘magic,’ ‘ancient,’ and ‘primitive’. Against the colonial claim that Indigenous, colonized knowledge systems exist in the past and have no place in the future, this postcolonial science fiction series utilizes generic conventions in a radically different way: to explore the ways in which Western scientific discourse, both in terms of technology and in terms of culture, interacts with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples (Langer 9).

About the representation of superhuman bodies (embodied by the Cleverman and the Hairies), Paul Atkinson states that the “series knowingly reflects on race and the politics of discrimination, but owing to this superhuman premise, it also introduces arguments on how physical differences can, or indeed should, be conceptualised socially, politically and scientifically” (n.p.). He argues that *Cleverman*, in contrast to other superhero texts that celebrate the augmentation of the human body through different kinds of technologies, valorizes the natural body (represented by the energy of the Cleverman and the vital bodies of Hairypeople) over the body enhanced by technological, scientific interference (as represented, particularly, by Slade’s genetic experiments on the ‘Hairies’). While this is a convincing argument in the representation of the assimilationist Inclusion Initiative (Season 2) which will change Hairypeople into humans, I rather argue that the series associates *all* hybrid bodies (those taking knowledge from human and Hairy, human and Aboriginal etc) with strength and adaptability.

Moreover, this positive reading of fluidity and heterogeneity is further emphasized by non-linear temporalities. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the common Western scientific understanding of the past is based upon a linear view of time, one which is closely linked to ‘progress,’ while Indigenous peoples’ cosmology is understood to be ‘pre-historic’ or ‘outside of time’ (Smith 55). By deviating from a linear conception of time, colonial modes of thinking have argued that Indigenous peoples are deprived of the possibility to ‘develop’ or ‘progress’. The notion of time traveling or temporal fluidity, popular in speculative fiction, in *Cleverman*, therefore, gains an additional layer of political significance. Whereas many speculative texts tend to operate with “untranslatable temporal otherness,” “multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness” and instead exist as “discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform

chronological present” (Lim 12), the parallel existence of past and present stories and realities of the Cleverman and the Hairies disrupt such colonial temporalities. The Dreaming is something that perpetually exists and is just always there. “[B]y collapsing real and imagined worlds, [the Cleverman’s abilities] present a contemporary Australia still haunted by a history of genocide, government control and systemic abuse of Indigenous communities. Here, the fantastic offers a subversive space in which to engage with Indigenous narratives and challenge the dominance of a white Australian history” (Ford 34).⁶

Cleverman Koen is depicted as estranged from his family and community, a fact that never gets entirely resolved throughout the series. Uncle Jimmy hands over the *nulla nulla* to Koen with the words “Time you decide which tribe you belong to,” to which Koen remains ambivalent as he immediately responds, “I’m not planning on joining any tribe” (S1E1 00:22:48). Jimmy’s “I’ll be watching,” however, suggests that positioning himself to kin past and present, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will be impossible for Koen to avoid entirely. Herein lies a decisive shift in the effort to indigenize the superhero genre, as Cavan Gallagher argues, but also presents in Koen’s resentment and alienation from family relations a non-normative approach to concepts of family. Cavan Gallagher argues that Koen’s fate as the superhero Cleverman is intrinsically bound to the community: “Traditionally, superheroes have operated in isolation from society at large, be they cloistered groups like The Avengers or active self-exile like Batman” (40). This classic narrative, Gallagher continues, is a necessity for superheroes, “since their abilities are generally misunderstood by the public and can attract unwelcome (generally villainous) attention to their loved ones” (40). While this trope might be meaningful for individualistic Western societies, he argues, Indigenous kinship relations, in contrast, “place a strong emphasis on universal responsibility, with many communities intricately structured in ways that determine who will care for the sick and old, or orphaned children, and who can marry whom” (40). *Cleverman* does not present such unified

⁶ Congruent with this reading, showrunner Ryan Griffen has pointed to the different meanings of ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘Dreaming’, stressing that the former is associated with the past whereas the latter suggests something happening now, something still becoming. “By anchoring Indigeneity to the past, non-Indigenous Australia is able to curate a romanticized record of national history that locates the violence and dispossession as quite literally passed, and to repress some of the more uncomfortable realities of present-day race relations. In combining elements of Dreaming stories with supernatural elements of the science fiction and fantasy genres, Griffen repositions Indigenous identity as something fluid and adaptable” (Ford 33).

and structured (rather essentialist) versions of Indigenous communities. Conversely, and here Gallagher agrees, Koen is chosen by Uncle Jimmy precisely because he is largely disliked by his community in the Zone and has no interest (at first) in acting as the integral element of the community. Instead, his older brother Waruu is a much appreciated and prominent advocate in the Zone who speaks up for the Hairies and other disenfranchised community members. Interestingly, the first season ends with an inversion of the brothers' positions. Waruu becomes more and more isolated because his greed and ambition have made him agree to a lucrative deal with Slade, whereas Koen gradually connects to ancestral spirits and is slowly drawn back to family and community members in the Zone. In the final act, after fulfilling his final test by defeating the Namorrodor, Koen wins the respect of the community (of those present visually in the Zone and of those past ancestors audible in whispers in Koen's head) and joins the preparations of barricading the Zone against an expected assault by the Containment Authority (CA).

Waruu's fall and alienation from his family is further dramatized in the second season when he becomes entangled in Slade's experiments and gains more power as a government representative enforcing the assimilation policies against the Hairies. He is, however, not an "equal and binary opposite of the hero" (Gallagher 40), who is triumphantly defeated in the end. This is because, I argue, that the series does not present a spiritual world with such binary poles (as much as it refuses a nature-culture binary in the representation of science, addressed above). In terms of morality, both Clevermen, Jimmy and Koen, as well as Waruu, are shown prone to corruption, Hairies are oftentimes quick-tempered and violent towards humans as well as towards each other, ancestral spirits such as Kora are unpredictable and dubious, many family members commit adultery and criminal acts. The final confrontation between the brothers in the series' very last episode similarly shows no clear and morally entitled winner and ends abruptly with both on the ground. The brothers, in the end, are mostly isolated despite their superpowers (Waruu has gradually turned into a Hairy due to injections), stuck between two worlds and belonging to neither. In this ambivalent ending, one can read an empowering new take on the superhero genre as well as a critique of essentialist ideas about Indigenous belonging. The ending of the first season mentioned above, already suggests a destabilization of binary thinking. During the fight between Koen and the Namorrodor, in several shots, the camera, hence the spectator, takes up the point-of-view of this spiritual monster. This creates suspense, since the spectator is put into the predator's perspective, and confronts the spectator with a transgressive experience, literally exposed to the subjectivity of the 'other'. This creature is part of the Dreaming (and in

fact has been summoned by Uncle Jimmy in the first place), it is decisive for Koen's coming-of-age as a Cleverman, and therefore this experience challenges a reading of Koen as a 'typical' superhero fighting against evil. Many superheroes tend to be portrayed, literally, as white saviours pitted against external (often 'racialized') malevolent forces. In the avoidance of an objectivizing of the 'other', the monster becomes kin.

In this inclusive challenge to read the 'other' as kin, *Cleverman* is queering the monster, regarding the Namorrodor, but also in the treatment of the Hairies. Elaine Showalter sees the monstrous 'other' as offering a third alternative or, more specifically, a place/space outside, or beyond, normativity (cf. Bacon 2). In addressing the role of binary constellations in science fiction, Jessica Langer claims that

a mutual central focus of science fiction and (post)colonialism is that of otherness: how it has been conceptualized, acted upon and subverted. Politically and pragmatically, the distinction between self and other has functioned as a method of control in colonial societies, creating a power hierarchy predicated both on physical and cultural difference and on enforced Foucauldian differentials of knowledge. In science fiction, otherness is often conceptualized corporeally, as a physical difference that either signposts or causes an essential difference, in a constant echo of zero-world racialization. Although this concept of alienness does not always signify a colonial relationship, it often dovetails with the colonial discourse of the Other. (82)

Cleverman uses a number of visual signifiers to set the Hairies apart as "other-than-human": the thick body and facial hair, the sharp fingernails, the fast movement visualized by parkouring, especially when being pursued, and their strikingly blue eyes, a visual metaphor used to show the connection to the Dreaming (Musharbash 139-140). Set in a heavily surveilled urban environment, these body parts are frequently zoomed in on by surveillance cameras to identify them as 'other'.⁷ The authorities view them with paranoid suspicion and "treat them in ways reminiscent not only of Australian frontier and colonial violence but also paralleling current Australian maltreatments of refugees" (Musharbash 138). In a press conference the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Geoff Matthews declares that "these creatures are not human. We do not share the same DNA. We don't exactly know what they are" (S1E1 03:15). The construction of the Hairies as 'monstrous' by the mainstream society results in violence against all those 'othered' by the system, but young and female Hairies in particular. In a telling dialogue between Koen and his Auntie Linda, who is wiping the blood of the corpse of a young

⁷ While some, called 'shavers', remove their hair and learn English to blend into society, there are also the 'non-shavers' who speak traditional language and are covered in hair from head to toe. The second season introduces yet another category with those who accept the authority's anti-serum, which makes them loose all their hair as well as their powers (Musharbash 143).

Hairy who was just attacked and killed by three non-Indigenous men, the construction of the alien 'other' is further exposed: "How can you kick a kid in the face?" Koen asks, to which Linda responds with, "You can if you think he is a monster" (S2E2 00:55). The brutal treatment of non-white and queer lives represented here shows, to argue with Judith Butler, that "certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human, and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level. This level then gives rise to physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization which is already at work in the culture" (Butler, *Undoing* 25).

Paul Atkinson comments on the importance of 'hairiness' in the construction of the monstrous 'other'. "Hairiness reframes debates about racial differences without reference to skin colour and, therefore, without a direct reference to an existing race or culture. The audience is asked to confront the issue rather than the prejudice" (Atkinson n.p.). Hair has the capacity to grow and regenerate and therefore symbolizes the strength and vitality of the Hairypeoples' bodies. In *Cleverman*, "hair is the expression of a life force that resists suppression [and it is] posited as a resource with its own intrinsic power" (ibid.). The association of hairiness with monstrous vitality thereby marks a significant contrast with Eurocentric classical ideals of beauty, particularly Hellenic sculpture and neo-Classical artworks, in which beautiful and strong bodies are shown to be nude and hairless.⁸ In the character of the non-white Hairywoman Araluen, however, there is an overtly sexualized representation of the female Hairy body in addition to the racial bias in which hairiness is linked to monstrosity. Instead of imprisonment in the detention centre, she is sold to sex slavery, forced to entertain human customers who are particularly aroused by what they fear—the Hairywoman's otherness—among them the above-mentioned immigration minister Matthews.

Scholars have frequently emphasized the notion of 'monster' as "almost a queer category" (Halberstam 27). The monster's body as a "cultural body" literally incorporates certain fears, desires, anxieties, and fantasies of a certain cultural moment and thus evades "easy categorization" (Cohen 4; 6). The monster cannot be assigned to a specific classification of animals or people; their physical, psychological, or social characteristics cross the lines of specific categories (Cohen 6-7). Peter Brooks proposes that "[a] monster may also be that which

⁸ This is starkly presented in S1E4, where a topless Caucasian US-American man with a perfectly toned hairless body is injected with Slade's Hairy serum in a laboratory experiment. He is first able to achieve quite remarkable speeds on an exercise bike before he collapses and dies. His hairless human body is unable to accommodate the natural power of the Hairypeople, whose bodies are adapted to their environment rather than sculpted for appearance (cf. Atkinson).

eludes gender definition” (219). In the possibility to be ‘shavers’ and to blend in with human society, the Hairies present an adaptability in line with Cohen’s thesis that “the monster always escapes”: the monster causes anxieties because it “turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else” (4). Constructions of the monstrous are therefore concerned with bodies “that always threaten to shift; invigorated by change and escape” (6). In “not really know[ing] what they are” (S1E1 03:15), albeit knowing that they are different from humans, the Hairies present such boundary creatures and are a “harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 6).

In contrast to the Cleverman, whose spiritual powers are associated with the Dreaming and extend beyond an earthly, physical presence, the Hairies’ abilities are strongly grounded in the body and mainly represented in physical vitality (such as fighting, hunting, and running). This alterity, Paul Atkinson criticizes, is not properly examined in the series. “[R]ather than really invoking the other, [...] the audience is presented with a benign, peace loving people who have already been subjugated by the Containment Authority—indeed any minority group could fit the profile—rather than a mythological outcast people with extraordinary powers who are willing to confront their oppressor” (n.p.). The transgressive potential in their monstrous difference is undermined in favour of the series’ social allegories: “The series effaces their distinctiveness by incorporating them into a narrative of discrimination that has obvious parallels with the detention of asylum seekers in Australia and the victimisation of Indigenous Australians in the judicial system” and therefore the series gives not enough attention to their genetic advantages and “to how they could live, think and act differently” (n.p.).

Yasmine Musharbash, in contrast, justifies the representation of the Hairies as “not ‘just’ monsters” with reference to Jack Halberstam, who argues that “monsters are on us and in us” (quoted in Musharbash 141). Musharbash reads the Hairies as powerful “*relatable* others” (ibid., original emphasis). Their relatability is particularly emphasized in the interaction with Aboriginal people: “where Aboriginal people treat Hairies as equal, familiar, and relatable, non-Indigenous people recoil in horror and fail to see what is there” (142). Musharbash suggests that this intersection proposes a decolonization of mainstream television: “It demonstrates Aboriginal identities being created in relation to other Aboriginal identities and not in relation to white people, where in this narrative, Aboriginal people have an identity other than that allowed for in colonialist terms” (142). However, many humans treat the Hairies with distrust and violence. This is in many ways no speculative fantasy, but in fact an extension of how Indigenous people have been treated. Even supposed Hairypeople allies like Waruu dream not of granting them

freedom, but of assimilating and ‘taming’ them. *Cleverman*’s transgressive potential, therefore, lies in the reconceptualization of ‘monstrous’ bodies as relatable, adaptable, and historically connected to other ‘others’. This may also be an argument for their reluctance to confront their oppressors. Injustice is not caused by a handful of supervillains; the systemic racism, violence, prejudice, and genocide is built into society and cannot be solved by one or two superheroes thwarting crimes (cf. Lever).

When it comes to representations of gender, especially the role assigned to women, the series is not as open to transgression and subversion and fails to challenge heteronormative structures. Regarding sexuality, the concept of queerness seeks to unsettle the binaries that position heterosexuality and homosexuality as differing poles. Queer representations resist essentialism by expressing sexuality as an unfixed ‘zone of possibilities’ rather than determining a fixed identity (Treagus 2). *Cleverman*, despite its enormous cast and many side plots, is marked by a striking absence: There is not a single representation of non-heterosexual relationships or desires. Queer theory argues that heteronormativity depends upon the exclusion of certain subjects to shore up its own boundaries, and *Cleverman* certainly depicts the institution of heterosexual marriage as well as the nuclear family as an exclusionary matrix. Even long after Waruu has left his wife and daughter and his family has lost all trust in him, Waruu insists that his family return to his house, giving the explanation to his wife that “we made a vow” (S2E6, 33:15). All the main female characters are introduced via their familial relationship to the main (male) protagonists: Wives, mothers (alive or dead), daughters, and aunts. Most wives and girlfriends are either betrayed by their partners or are adulterous themselves. Moreover, Hairy women are fetishized and raped as forced prostitutes. The problematic strengthening of the heterosexual marriage and heteronormative family values is most strongly explored through the character Slade and his wife, Charlotte. Slade—always in need of new bodies for experiments in the name of scientific progress—uses his wife’s body for another experiment with Hairy genes. Their incapacity to conceive naturally is solved when Slade creates a fake fertility clinic and encourages his wife—she herself being a medical doctor—to seek treatment there. She is then carrying a hairy-human hybrid which grows at an abnormal rate and causes her much pain. Once she finds out, she confronts him, but rather than leaving him, she wants “to learn about everything” and in the end pays him a visit in his lab, still hoping to talk him out of further experiments. As Butler argues, “it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (Butler, *Undoing* 20). Charlotte’s

body carries these normative implications, despite her potentially becoming the mother of a hybrid child (though the series ends before that).

Paul Atkinson criticizes the series' adulation of the nuclear family, especially in the representation of the Hairies: "despite their physical exceptionalism and their outcast status in Indigenous mythology, [they] are represented largely in terms of the conservative image of the family," (n.p.) which is especially evident in the disruption of the central family of Araluen, Bondee and their children, who spent most of the two seasons trying to find each other. Atkinson rightly asks: "With the significant differences in physiology, principally the ability to live four times longer than humans, why should the Hairypeople have a similar family life involving disputes between teenagers and adults? If the teenage years are such a small portion of an individual's overall life, it is unlikely that the nuclear family would be the dominant unit of social organisation, and instead Hairy culture could be highly individualistic or even collective" (n.p.).

While this criticism holds true for this Hairy family; I would nevertheless suggest that there is a more ambivalent engagement with family in *Cleverman*. Many of the protagonists live in chosen and found family structures without any blood relationship, e.g. Koen and his friends Blaire and Ash, later also hosting the spirit Kora. Waruu's wife and daughter are joined by the Hairy girl Latani and, in the second season, become a quasi-family with a non-Indigenous CA officer. The community in the Zone similarly consists of Hairies and humans, Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. Ironically, those who have explicit kinship ties, such as Koen and Waruu and his mother, are the strongest adversaries. *Cleverman*'s ambivalent engagement with family discourses opens up a space for discussing queer theory's concerns with regulative and exclusionary ideas of heteronormativity. However, the series still draws attention to the various ways in which the performative language of the family (also in found families) works to re-iterate and promote its own privileged status as the location and foundation of peace and happiness.

Jessica Langer argues that the genre of science fiction opens new dialectic possibilities to acknowledge and foreground the disparate worldviews of colonized, formerly colonized, and diasporic people (129). The role of 'science' is essential in such a discussion to address the conflict between Western scientific methods and discourses of scientific progress versus Indigenous methods of knowledge production and understanding of the world (Langer 9). Science fiction, she further argues, provides the necessary link between science and art, between the concrete and the transcendent, the cognitive and the emotional

(151). Parodying dominant norms is often not enough to displace them if science fiction represents a “reconciliation of hegemonic norms” (Butler, *Bodies* 125). Postcolonial science fiction, therefore, engages with the issue of power in processes of knowledge production. In *Cleverman*, the conflation of Indigenous Dreaming and mythology in the form of the Cleverman with scientific exploration and genetic engineering represented by Slade, assumed boundaries between such epistemologies become obsolete. Like the Cleverman, who is seen as a conduit between the Dreaming and the ‘real’ world, the Hairies’ adaptability is presented as relatable otherness, offering historical connections and social allegories of Australia’s colonial past. In reading the monster as a queer category, representations of the monstrous ‘other’, such as the Hairies and the Namorrodor, offer an alternative space beyond normativity and overcome binary constellations of the objectified ‘other’. As boundary creatures, they highlight the constraints within which racially marked bodies operate, however, their representation misses the potential to equally engage with gendered bodies. Next to the absence of queer bodies regarding sexuality, all the main female characters are introduced via their familial relationship to male protagonists; they are fetishized or victims of sexual violence or presented as bodies for reproduction. Thereby *Cleverman* reinforces the institution of heterosexual marriage as well as the nuclear family as an exclusionary heteronormative standard. By including protagonists who live in chosen and found family structures or those who stay distant to the Indigenous community, the series avoids essentialist ideas about Indigenous belonging and presents an ambivalent engagement with the heteronormative family. Nonetheless, *Cleverman*, with its bold appropriation of science fiction and superhero genre conventions, accurately and devastatingly deconstructs the treatment of Indigenous Australians and other people of colour at the hands of white Australia.

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