

Gender and Sexual Diversity and Suicide on Australian Screens: Culture, Representation, and Health Pedagogies

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DESPITE AN OFTEN-REPEATED CLICHÉ THAT GENDER AND SEXUALLY diverse characters are relatively absent from film and television, Australian screen production has a very rich history of representing sexual and gender diversity: greater than nineteen wide-release films since 1993, including internationally recognized films such as *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Sum of Us* (1994), *Head On* (1998), and *The Monkey's Mask* (2000), portray gender and sexual diversity. Nine Australian films with LGBTQ, gender, and sexually diverse themes were released between 2013 and 2018, indicating an entrenchment of LGBTQ representation on Australian screens. Characters in major Australian television dramas and soap operas, such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, have increased in regularity and complexity over the past two decades. Sexual stories, including narratives of minority sexual lives, have never, of course, been repressed or invisible, but according to Ken Plummer, they have long been central to contemporary Western culture (4). Stories representing gender and sexually diverse subjects depicting identity struggles and articulating minority health outcomes are a major and ongoing part of Australian creative production. What is significant in cultural analysis is *not* questions of visibility or invisibility but how the continuities and disruptions of depictions of gender and sexual minorities play a significant, pedagogical role in social participation, social harmony, acceptance, individual health and wellbeing, and community belonging (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide; Emergent Identities*).

Recent international, Anglophone screen representations of LGBTQ diverse characters and themes have broadly depicted both “struggle” and “happy endings,” such as *God’s Own Country* (UK, 2017), *Alex Strangelove* (US, 2018), *Call Me by Your Name* (US-Italy, 2017), and *Love Simon* (US, 2018). Collectively, these present a popular cultural depiction of nonheterosexual liveability, resilience, domestic happiness, and self-assurance in stable, liveable minority identities. However, recent Australian films with gender and sexually diverse themes and stories have not followed a similar “queer-positive” approach to narrative and characterization; six productions have depicted suicide as a significant element of nonheteronormative experience, with five of those six depicting either suicide attempts or completed suicides. This article discusses the over representation of suicidality in Australian popular culture, analyzing six recent texts to demonstrate that, while there are significant differences in how suicide causality is depicted, the consistency of a connection between sexually diverse young men and suicidality reinforces a cultural logic of suicide as a solution to adversity. Four films, *Monster Pies* (2013), *Boys in the Trees* (2016), *Drown* (2015), and one miniseries, *The Slap* (2015), present young gay men either attempting or completing suicide in the context of homophobic, discriminatory, or intolerant societies—arguably drawing on older discourses of both suicide risk and social belonging in mainstream contemporary Australian society. One film, *Cut Snake*, presents an altruistic suicide of a sexually diverse character, further reinforcing a connection between sexual diversity and unliveability. Conversely, the Australian miniseries *Deep Water* (2016) turns the “myth” of queer suicidality on its head by presenting a narrative in which both historical and recent deaths of gay men in Sydney that were declared suicides were in fact the work of a fictional serial killer driven by homophobia and propelled by Sydney’s (actual) experience of significant gay bashing in the 1990s.

There are, thus, two important aspects of the role of popular culture in communicating discourses of queer liveability and suicidality: One which reinforces the connection between young gay men and suicide as an “expected” outcome, typically by drawing on discourses that were current in the 1980s and 1990s but are less representable in contemporary Western culture both in Australia and internationally; and another which has used the popular form of the television miniseries to engage critically with the repetition of that cliché and

the stereotype of gay suicidal men, relocating queer death within broader questions of sociality. What these together indicate about gender and sexually diverse subjectivity and suicidality has implications for minority audience mental health and wellbeing. While this is not to suggest in any respect that media depiction of suicidality is directly causal of suicide attempts or ideation, it is to account for the way in which popular culture plays a role in sustaining a social logic that has implications for the wider discourses through which minority identity and belonging are performed and articulated. This article begins by contextualizing the analysis within a discussion of suicide depiction in (fictional) screen media, drawing on recent work in critical suicidology to demonstrate the significance of popular culture's role in sustaining suicidality in relation to minorities as a social logic. In six short analyses of the Australian films and series outlined above, I demonstrate some of the ways in which different perspectives on suicidality are communicated, with the final analysis on *Deep Water* arguing for its significance in disrupting the suicidal norms. The article ends with a conclusion discussing some of the continuities in relation to the depiction of hope and hopelessness in these texts and how the role of hopelessness has been perceived in broader theorization of queer suicidality.

Queer Youth Suicide as Screen Pedagogy

Suicide rates for young LGBTQ people are only marginally higher than for their heterosexual peers (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*), and while suicide attempt statistics are uncertain and incomplete, there is current scholarly disavowal of some of the more alarming statistics that have circulated in popular media since the mid-1990s, such as the claim that young gay men are three times more likely than their peers to suicide (Waidzunus). Nevertheless, there is a marginally greater likelihood that gender and sexually diverse youth are more at risk of suicide, and—from a critical suicidology perspective—that is at least partly due to a “suicide logic” circulating in contemporary culture, whereby suicide is popularly depicted as the logical approach to dealing with life stresses and adversities for vulnerable persons (Kral, “Suicide as Social Logic”). That logic is, arguably, strengthened by the repeated contemporary *association* of

suicide and gender/sexual nonnormativity in screen media and popular culture. Recent work in critical suicide studies, which takes to task the more dominant medico-psychiatric approaches that individualize and pathologize suicidality, often without recourse to language, culture, media, or lived experience (White et al.), points to the need to return to social, cultural, and discursive settings as the milieu of cultural knowledge on suicidality. Michael Kral's recent work, for example, theorizes suicide not as an individual outcome of mental disorder but as conditioned by two factors: being perturbed or upset by some kind of adversity or distress that appears inescapable and, secondly, adopting the logic that suicide or self-lethality is the means by which to resolve that upset, adversity, or distress (Kral, *Idea of Suicide*). For Kral and other suicidologists who incorporate a cultural and critical approach to suicide causality (e.g., Niederkrotenthaler and Stack; Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*, etc.), popular media can be an unwitting site presenting, circulating, and reinforcing the logic that suicide is the appropriate or best means to resolve psychological, social, or emotional pain. Arguably, in the case of gender and sexual minorities, the connection between suicide and minority identity depicted repetitively in popular media plays a potential role for some subjects, just as the popular media depiction of stories of resilience, overcoming adversity, pride, and normative belonging present a counter-logic to suicidality. Such an assertion is not, of course, to argue that popular cultural representation is *causal* of suicide as is sometimes implied in media effects theories or arguments about media-related suicide contagion (Blood and Pirkis), nor is it to ignore the fact that audiences have diverse ways of reading texts that depict suicide and self-harm. Rather, many audience members read critically, radically, and in ways which actively reject an overemphasis on the precarity of minority lives. Media effects models of screen impact, such as the hypodermic needle motif and behaviorist approaches, have long been discredited (Gauntlett). Such models assume an authoritative reading of popular culture and an individualized audience member in a linear framework of impact, incorporation, behavior, and outcome. Nevertheless, models that celebrate all engagement with popular culture as radically subversive also miss the opportunity to consider the role of popular screen entertainment in *reinforcing* a social logic of suicide for some subjects who may be more vulnerable than others. Indeed, Jane Pirkis

and Warwick Blood's extensive analysis of a media causality belief revealed that fictional media portrayal of suicide does *not* have a linear causal relationship with actual suicide attempts or completions and is likely to have less of a causal relationship than media reporting of suicides of real-life persons and celebrities, but it nevertheless warrants caution when the idea is persistently repeated.

The depiction of suicide in entertainment media is, then, significant for its pedagogical role in naturalizing the "idea" of suicidality among minorities through reinforcement and repetition. This is particularly the case for younger persons, given that such media are used as a resource by young people in the construction and performance of minority sexual and gender identities and in developing practices for coherent and intelligible social belonging (McKinnon). Media accounts dealing with minority sexualities and genders may indeed be more significant than other more formal resources, such as formal sex education in schools (Rasmussen et al.) or peer education in online settings (Clarke et al.; Clarke). Catherine Ashcraft has pointed out that popular culture is a site of struggle in which adolescent sexual identities can either be reinscribed or transformed (Ashcraft 38), and certainly the reinforcement of suicide as a logic for young people experiencing adversity is one possibility; while—as we see in the analysis of *Deep Water*—popular screen media also has the potential to subvert and critique embedded discourses and social logics. The "matrix" of media discourses available to a nonnormative subject may therefore be highly empowering for *some* young people and vulnerabilizing for others, depending in part on how the discourse is read and how those discourses are incorporated into the everyday sense of selfhood of the subject (Gill).

There is no exact enumeration of the number of international films with gender and sexually diverse characters, themes, or content that feature suicide, although one available statistic notes that between 1961 and 1976, thirteen of thirty-one English-language international films with major homosexual characters featured suicide—approximately 40 percent (Gross 28). Subsequent films depicting LGBTQ characters from the 1970s to the present are unlikely to be nearly as high, although there is a continued persistence of suicide of gender and sexually diverse characters, and it is rarely a surprise when it is part of the narrative (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*). It is more surprising, however, that the majority of creative screen texts in Australia

over the past decade include depictions of suicide as a major narrative point. Such on-screen representation sometimes has value in drawing political and public attention to the unique stresses experienced by gender/sexual minorities that may lead to experiencing lives that are unliveable (Howes 800). However, it also tends to draw upon and further reinforce older filmic stereotypes of vulnerable, frail, and suicidal young nonheterosexual persons (Dyer), readable as a logic by those who may not necessarily have had access to the resources through which to engage critically with such clichés. Given the capacity of entertainment media to reinforce social stereotypes of minorities for both young minorities and to provide a cultural pedagogy (Giroux) for the broader population of their peers, suicidality of gender and sexually diverse subjects is culturally embedded as a fictive norm, remaining current as it further informs subsequent creative texts that seek “realistic” representation of minorities (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*). It is notable that most of the films discussed here repeat stereotypes from the 1990s and earlier; others, however, may continue a link between suicide and sexual nonnormativity but actively subvert those clichés by presenting alternative frameworks of causality.

This “presence” of suicidality in Australian films contrasts significantly with the representation of gender and sexually diverse subjects in international screen media—most representations of melancholic, unstable, or suicidal young LGBTQ persons are found only rarely in British and North American texts subsequent to the mid-1990s renaissance that reframed LGBTQ screen characters as positive and resilient (Cover, “First Contact”). The next sections address, in turn, how each of six texts actively frame a connection between minority (male) sexual identity, utilizing discourses of homophobia, bullying and hopelessness as causal motifs of queer youth suicide in *Monster Pies*, *Boys in the Trees*, and *The Slap*; of internalized homophobia in *Drown*; and then two texts which address queer suicidality from more critical perspectives: *Cut Snake* and *Deep Water*. Important, here, is to understand that significance not through the individualized textuality of each text (McKinnon 11), but through making sense of the cultural context of the appearance of suicidality in texts about and directed toward gender and sexual minorities.

Monster Pies

Monster Pies (2013, directed and written by Lee Galea) is an Australian feature film about two boys coming to realize their nonnormative (gay) sexualities. Significant here is that the film presents the suicide of a school-aged, gay-identifying young man as the denouement of a narrative focused on two boys realizing their mutual attraction. Suicide is articulated through a causality motif of isolation resulting from discrimination, actively reinforcing a discourse that articulates gay men as radically separated from social belonging among mainstream peers in a way which is no longer as easily represented in contemporary Western or Australian culture. The film's narrative builds upon a number of stereotypes that circulate in mass culture about nonnormative and diverse sexual identities that are part of the broader social or cultural memory (Weeks 1-2). Sets of narratives that circulate through popular texts become part of the milieu of cultural knowledge (Saxey), or what can be described as social logic, about the lives of minorities, bringing together different aspects of commonality (discovering one's sense of identity difference, experiencing sexual or romantic attraction) with less common experiences, attitudes, and events (experiencing family violence, self-harm, suicidality).

In line with older discursive frameworks of suicidality, *Monster Pies* repeats an older representation in which *isolation* causes suicide, particularly among sexually diverse subjects (Gibson). This theme follows a framework Emile Durkheim laid out in the late nineteenth century in which he described suicides caused by excessive individuation and nonintegration into society (221). While Durkheim's framings of suicide are no longer useful in addressing, preventing, or intervening in contemporary suicidality (Jaworski), they provide value for the analysis of cultural understandings and textual representation of suicidality in two ways. Firstly, Durkheim's framework helps identify the social, environmental, and relational aspects in which suicide is both experienced and caused in contrast to dominant medico-psychological approaches that both pathologize and individualize the suicidal subject (White et al.). Secondly, it provides a detailed system of categorization of suicidal causality, one which does not correlate with our more complex, interdisciplinary knowledges of the twenty-first century but is inflected in contemporary stories of

suicidality and the oversimplified articulations of cause that, by necessity, circulate in shorter-form texts such as film and television.

In the story, Mike (Tristan Barr) is alienated in school until a new student, William (Lucas Linehan), arrives. They are partnered for a class assignment, spend time together, and realize their attraction for one another. Dramatic tension centers on William taking longer to accept his nonheterosexuality than Mike. With notable similarities to the 1996 British film *Beautiful Thing* (also depicting two school-aged boys at different stages of discovering their mutual attraction and nonheterosexual identities), William is subjected to violence and emotional abuse from his alcoholic, homophobic father and is burdened by serving as a cook and housekeeper in the absence of his mother who is catatonic and psychiatrically excluded. A mutually supportive relationship develops, although William continues to experience social isolation due to his sense of the social unacceptability of his sexual orientation. After being outed to their respective parents, the two boys avoid adversity by spending a night together in a park beneath a tree. In the morning, Mike finds that Will has hanged himself from one of the tree branches above him. The suicide results in Mike's mother gaining greater sympathy for minority youth and the school's homophobic bullies apologizing to him for their past behavior.

The juxtaposition of the recognizable and rare events repeated in film narratives produce a stereotype of expected attributes for persons identifying according to those identity categories. In *Monster Pies*, the recognizable and rare are contrasted in the linearity of its story: two boys learning about their nonnormative sexual attraction, one slightly more experienced than the other, the experience of bullying in schools, parents who do not understand, parents who see it as a phase or the result of the influence of others, and, finally, suicide. In this instance, the rare experience of suicidality becomes *part of the recognized story* of young gay teenagers, not because it is widely experienced but because this aspect of the narrative draws on the 1990s (and earlier) cultural cliché that young gay men kill themselves, which is no longer reflected in young people's experiences of growing up gender and sexually diverse (Cover, *Emergent Identities*).

Indeed, *Monster Pie's* incorporation of suicidality as an expected element of young gay men's growing up results from the history of its creative production. Writer-director Lee Galea has stated publicly

that the script for the film was written originally in the 1990s (Galea). Thus, although the film is set in the period of its release (2013), it retains a number of discursive articulations of the health and social wellbeing of young, school-aged gay men that are more germane to the 1990s, which in the Australian context was a markedly different environment for minority sexual identity (Marshall et al.). The milieu of recognizability of experience for young gender and sexually diverse men has not, however, been updated to reflect prevailing social conditions and norms for contemporary, school-aged diverse sexualities. Instead, it is grounded in the familiarities of 1990s Australian discourses of health and vulnerability for young gay men. For example, stories similar to those depicted in the film were of widespread public currency in the Australian media in the late 1990s, particularly the very public story of fourteen-year-old Christopher Tsakalos, who had taken the NSW Department of School Education to court for failure to protect him against vilification and violence that led to multiple suicide attempts (Cover, "Mediating Suicide"). This is part of the cultural knowledge of "1990s queer Australia" that articulated suicidality as an endemic and expected experience of young gay men who were depicted as vulnerable and without "hope" due to a mythical framing that young gay men always experienced isolation, either geographically from urban centers or emotionally from smaller communities of straight peers and family (Gibson). Although Will's suicide appears in the film's narrative to be an unexplained gesture as part of its "surprise ending"—he kills himself because that's what gay men do—the cultural knowledges that inform the reading of suicide causality are firmly grounded in a Durkheimian approach to suicide as being the result of the experience of excessive isolation and lack of integration.

What the suicide narrative of *Monster Pies* demonstrates, however, is that older conceptualizations that dominated public discourses of gender and sexually diverse persons, past themes and concepts, continue to be repeated, despite the ways in which such ideas are no longer part of the scholarly, pedagogical, health, mental health, or community discourses of diverse liveabilities. By looking, however, to the discursive construction of such texts and the creative practices that have produced them, it becomes possible to identify the kinds of older discourses, stereotypes, and clichés that link nonheteronormativity to suicidality that are repeated and maintained in circulation in

ways which may be interpreted as normative, timeless, and a “social logic” by some viewers.

Boys in the Trees

The 2016 wide-release Australian film *Boys in the Trees* (directed and written by Nicholas Verso) differs from *Monster Pies* in that it may not have been scripted in the 1990s but is indeed set in that decade and thereby similarly draws on 1990s discourses of queer youth suicidality that are no longer representative of contemporary LGBTQ experience (Clarke et al.). Its characters are not ostensibly or openly queer, although the preproduction script won an award at the 2011 New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the film has been shown in LGBT film festivals and its central character is widely interpreted by reviewers as a young gay man (di Rosso), while the relationships between other boys are remarked upon for their combined homosociality and homoeroticism (salty popcorn), together making this text available to be read as part of an Australian queer cinematic canon.

Much like *Monster Pies*, the film represents a causal motivation for queer suicidality: the suicide of Jonah (Gulliver McGrath) is depicted as the outcome of the experience of persistent bullying. Bullying, which is typically defined as a subset of aggressive, unprovoked, and repetitive behavior intended to cause physical and/or psychological pain to the recipient (Kalliotis 50), does have a discursive relationship with self-lethality in suicide literature (Espelage and Swearer 157) from a period since the late 2000s, primarily in relation to the public circulation of high-profile stories about school bullying, young gay school students, and suicidality (Cover, “Conditions of Living”). Although contemporary suicidology literature does not always find direct causal links between bullying and suicide risk (Kim and Leventhal 151), by drawing on 1990s discourses and utilizing a setting that is both Australian (suburban landscape), North American (Halloween), and internationalized (gay identity and antigay discrimination), bullying is represented as an unfortunate yet timeless experience of minority life, positioned as an expected adversity that produces pain significant enough for some to choose suicide as its solution.

The film begins with a gang of high school skateboarders bullying a fellow student, Jonah, on Halloween. Although Australia has only

a gestural acknowledgment of Halloween, the boys are dressed in elaborate Halloween costumes and ride around the streets terrifying dozens of younger children out trick-or-treating, before settling down to drinking in a cemetery. Jonah, meanwhile, is drinking alone by a pond. Gang member Corey (Toby Wallace) parts from the group when one of the other boys moves in on a girl he is flirting with and returns to the skate park where he finds Jonah. As they wander the streets, it emerges that the two were childhood friends and had grown apart. One became a bully while the other became a victim. They reconnect while telling scary stories, and Corey regains some empathy for Jonah after the latter explains his experiences of being bullied and victimized through homophobic abuse. They are variously chased by the gang, stalked by an Indigenous man in a white suit (Trevor Jamieson), and set-upon by mystical shadow figures.

Although their walk is—oddly—interrupted when Corey leaves Jonah waiting in the street while he has sex with a girl in her bedroom (Mitzi Ruhlmann) before returning to Jonah, there is considerable physical and visual flirting between the two boys and slippage between homosocial and homoerotic touching, a depiction of flirting which is, of course, a communication form that is always marginal, liminal, and transgressive (Bartlett et al.). A struggle with shadow-like monsters is followed by a confused flashback: it is revealed that at a previous Halloween when they were children, two older boys attempted to sexually abuse them; Corey escaped and left Jonah behind. The trauma of this experience is related as the cause of their broken friendship and Corey's later victimization of Jonah. Standing by a pond, Corey regretfully apologizes to Jonah and then Jonah points to his own corpse (having been a ghost all along—Jonah's postsuicide body floating in the pond). The film ends with Corey in New York City telling a friend via Skype that he is about to go out to take photographs for *The Village Voice* of a presumable gay Halloween parade downtown, with a large photograph of Jonah on the wall behind him; he puts on the Halloween mask that was on Jonah's head in the water.

As with other Australian films and series, a connection between suicidality and queerness is articulated as a particular kind of logic resulting from the experience of adversity, pain, or upset (Kral, *The Idea of Suicide*). As a more avant-garde text with a complex narrative and a surprise revelation that Jonah had been a ghost all along,

audiences are more likely to be directed to this reading on the basis of the 1990s knowledge framework that links suicidality with gay young men. Indeed, from a semiotic perspective, as an “open text” in Umberto Eco’s framework, the reader is directed to choose a complex set of linkages in opposition to a more simplified “closed text” in which a reader is more free to interpret meanings otherwise (Eco 3). In articulating suicidality and sexual nonnormativity, a reiteration of the social logic of queer suicide is performed, adding to the corpus of Australian screen material that marks suicide as a logical outcome of the social conditions of sexual diversity. As with *Monster Pies*, this film draws on older discourses of pain and perturbation depicted in popular representations of LGBTQ young people in Australia a generation ago to sustain a public notion of queer youth suicidality as normative.

The Slap

While the first two texts presented suicide causality in relation to social discrimination—one through isolation and the other through bullying, with both presenting 1990s frameworks of discrimination and suicide logic as the markers of sexual diversity—the next draws on suicidality to depict a “cry for help,” inferring the logic by which young gay men are expected to turn to suicidal lethality as the form of responding to adversity, pain, and upset. Based on the 2008 novel by Australian gay writer Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap* is a 2011 Australian television miniseries broadcast in eight parts (also remade as a US miniseries in 2015). It explores character histories, relationships, and the effect of revelations after a man slaps a rowdy and undisciplined child who was not related to him at a barbecue in Australian suburbia, causing friendships and relationships to break down as opinions differ around the justice of this act and various parenting practices. Richie (Blake Davis), a young school student present at the barbecue but unrelated to the other characters, is gay. Richie has a crush on one of the older central characters, Hector (the host of the barbecue, played by Jonathan LaPaglia), and expresses that crush by pivoting between ineffectually stalking him and harassing him, believing erroneously that Hector’s affair with Connie (Sophie Lowe), a much younger woman, involved rape. Richie inappropriately involves himself in the complex adult lives of other characters and, in

a moment of stress, informs several of them that Hector raped Connie. Connie counters this by revealing Richie's crush on Hector, although this too reveals Hector and Connie's affair. Having created a mess, Richie runs to his house, enters the bathroom, and swallows a bottle of pills. He does, however, change his mind and phones his mother, fearful that she would blame herself for his death, and is taken to a hospital in time. The end of the episode (and the series) depicts Richie apologizing to other characters for creating a mess, partying with friends who are more age-appropriate, and beginning an encounter with a fellow male student.

Richie's suicide attempt is related through several coinciding public tropes about youth suicide: firstly, that his suicide attempt is a "cry for help," having made a mess of the other characters' relationships and finding himself inexperienced and unable to put things right; secondly, having been outed when caught surreptitiously photographing a nude Hector in a public swimming pool changing room. The argument that suicide attempts are a "cry for help" is a controversial contemporary belief that suicidal behavior is an elaborate device aimed at drawing attention to an individual's pain or suffering. In this theory, suicidality is "a kind of communication or interpersonal action" (Battin 8), neither the result of mental illness nor depression, nor excessive individuation, nor isolation, but an attempt to change painful circumstances where other options have failed or are unavailable. It draws on a problematic cultural myth that articulates suicide attempts not as serious acts requiring intervention or social change but as acts of attention seeking (Miller and Eckert 159). The narrative structure of much popular film and television, through its creative practices and recognizable genres, actively enhances the cry for help representation of suicide causality, since a suicide attempt can be established as an obstacle or narrative "stumbling block" which heightens the tension experienced by the characters and provides a hurdle for the episode to overcome or a wrong to be righted on the journey toward its happy resolution and closure through restoration (Straayer 50). It is notable that while the "cry for help" model of suicide causality is significantly incompatible with contemporary suicide research and service provision, it circulates in film and television not because such texts *ought* to provide policy-complicit information on suicide but because, as creative texts, they present tropes for the purposes of narrative entertainment.

Nevertheless, they present explanatory frameworks that may be outdated or provide a problematic social logic of suicide. Creative production does not operate for singular reasons such as entertainment, artistic output, or profit; rather, audiences utilize creative texts in diverse ways which include as pedagogies informing cultural knowledges (Giroux 2003).

Drown

Internalized homophobia of a character who expresses masculine heteronormativity but faces difficulty suppressing homoerotic urges is an older cliché of contemporary Western film and has long been associated with a particular filmic representation of suicidality through melancholia (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*; Dyer). The Australian film *Drown* (2015, directed by Dean Francis, written by Stephen Davis and Dean Francis) draws on this older depiction within a contemporary, Australian beach setting, likewise connecting suicide to sexualities that sit outside the ostensible heterosexual norm, although in this case placing the source of suicide-causing pain within the individual perpetrator of violence rather than in the social site of discrimination. *Drown*, which was produced through crowdfunding and widely distributed online, after which it won a number of film festival awards, made significant use of Australia's relationship with beaches, oceans, and lifesaving. It is thus notable for being a rare Australian film that includes sexually diverse characters in a setting typically depicted as overtly heteronormative and hypermasculine. The Australian beach is notable as a site of conflict: on the one hand deemed a space free and not "owned" by any entity, where any person can come and swim without charge, it is also a place of masculine competitiveness (in swimming, surfing, and sunbathing), the site of a particular brand of Australian heroism in the figure of the surf lifesaver, a site marked by liminalities between the pleasure of swimming and the danger of swimming (rips, drownings, sharks)—a significant setting that is part of Australian public culture although one that has not often been depicted as a site of gender and sexual nonnormativity (Evers). *Drown* tells the story of a night out by three surf lifesavers from the same club. Len (Matt Levett), a long-standing competition winner, has been beaten by Phil (Jack Matthews), a younger, gay competitor. With a mutual friend, "Meat" (Harry Cook), they spend

an evening drinking in a range of bars, both straight and gay. They move to the nearby beach, where the heterosexual Len both violently bullies and sexually assaults a drunk and nearly unconscious Phil. Len and Meat bury Phil in the sand, leaving only his head exposed. Meat accuses Len of being attracted to Phil, indeed suggesting that Len has fixated on Phil for some time, been caught staring at him in the showers, and bored others by speaking regularly about him. Len attempts to assert his hetero-masculinity by fighting Meat before the two attempt to swim—leaving Phil at risk of being drowned as the tide comes in and begins to cover his head. Meat returns to rescue him, while Phil continues out to sea in what can be read either as a display of failing hypermasculinity so extensive it results in his death or as a deliberate suicide in the face of his emerging nonnormative sexual feelings. The suicide, of course, also operates as a metaphor for the relegation of an old-school masculinity beset by the need to radically exclude others in order to prevent the slippage of homosociality into homosexuality (Sedgwick) and the move of homophobic masculinity from being a dominant element of culture to a residual one (Cover, *Emergent Identities*). The survivors of this night are the gay man, his boyfriend, and the more accepting straight man, all with clear-cut sexual identities and fluid liminalities and emergence relegated to the ocean's depths.

While both *Monster Pies* and *Boys in the Trees* depict the egoistic suicide of a gay character isolated from social belonging, *Drown* represents the suicide of a character who is not socially isolated (but the reverse), albeit experiencing instances of a nonnormative sexuality that is both liminal and emergent. This contrasts significantly with the representation in all three earlier films of gay male characters whose identities are articulated as stable, coherent, and essentialist. Here, a secondary contrast is produced: Len's sexuality is liminal while the out gay man he victimizes is depicted as well-adjusted, coupled, successful, athletic, and sophisticated. Durkheim's categorizations of suicides once again inform the narrative of suicidality in an Australian text, in this case representing a character as suicidal resulting from anomy. Unlike other suicides based on overregulation or individuation, Durkheim describes "anomic" suicides as the result of the opening up of a greater range of possibilities and opportunities for increased desires. Suicide, in this framing, results from a lack of regulation of the individual, such as might occur when an individual

gains sudden wealth and no longer has his or her life ordered and organized by a particular economic standard (Durkheim 243). That is, vulnerability to suicidality is constituted in a sudden and unexpected under-regulation or increase in possibilities to explore new desires that produces a breakdown in the attachment to living that is constituted in self-coherence and self-identity. In Len's case, the opening up of the possibility of alternative, broader sexualities and eroticisms not constrained by heteronormativity produces anomy—his exploration of his combined desire toward and envy of Phil, his fleeting experience with another man in the backroom of a gay bar. Rather than a recognition of a “hidden” sexuality, Len experiences an unexpected widening of sexual and erotic possibilities in a way that breaks down his identity intelligibility, leading to suicide as a logical response used to flee the psychic pain such a breakdown entails.

Cut Snake

Cut Snake (written by Blake Ayshford) is a 2014 film directed by acclaimed Australian filmmaker Tony Ayres, who also directed the above episode of *The Slap*, and is the first of two Australian texts that arguably sustain the queer-suicide linkage but *also* enable a critical engagement with the normative or logical representation of queer men as fated toward suicide. *Cut Snake* is set in 1970s Melbourne: Sparra (Alex Russell), a recently released ex-prisoner, is engaged to upper middle-class Paula (Jessica de Gouw). They share a home, and he is steadily employed while planning for an apprenticeship as a carpenter. That is, he is forging an ordinary heteronormative life. His former cellmate Pommie (Sullivan Stapleton), however, is released and comes to stay. His uninvited presence results in Sparra's prison time being revealed to Paula. Pommie, who is charismatic and domineering, encourages Sparra to undertake robberies with him. It is revealed (as a plot surprise) that they were lovers in prison, and Pommie is keen on continuing their relationship now that they are reunited on the outside, while Sparra is reluctant. Attempting to remove Pommie from his life and stabilize his heteronormative future, Sparra sets him up during a robbery by informing the police. In a showdown, it is revealed that Sparra, who was violently victimized in prison, had—in search of comfort—initiated the sexual relationship between the two men. Angry at being spurned in this

different context, Pommie considers revenge and has the opportunity to kill both Paula and Sparra. However, in a showdown with armed police, he sets them free and willingly allows the police to shoot him, taking sole responsibility for the robberies.

Unlike the earlier stories that focus on young sexually diverse boys struggling to belong within Australia sociality, this film interestingly depicts some of the complex but often undiscussed ways in which ex-convicts who have engaged sexually in prison might see their postimprisonment lives and relationships. No sexual identity label is articulated (Pommie has only ever been with Sparra, who initiated the relationship in prison; Sparra is content to end the film leaving the scene with Paula as his future wife). While the source of “damaged masculinity” pivots between the effects of prison and the encounter with an ex-prison lover outside, the film does, however, present another interpretable linkage between nonnormative sexuality and suicide as an outcome or logic. In this case, the suicide is not depicted as being caused by isolation, egoistic individuation, or a cry for help but turns them around by articulating the *possibility of a queer suicide* as an act of altruism. While Pommie might appear to be isolated and an outsider in the 1970s Australian suburban world inhabited by Sparra and Paula, he is simultaneously integrated into a code which demands his suicide to save a “mate”—a prison code, a code of masculine homosociality in which self-sacrifice for another man is the only honorable way to resolve a complex situation.

This text thus serves as a complexification of the suicide discourse and the idea of a social logic attached automatically to nonheteronormative characters. In depicting the slippage between mateship and lovers (or between intense homosociality and homosexuality in the context of prison), this text presents the radical possibility of a different story about the relationship between sexuality and suicidality, differing substantially by the emphasis on youth suicides in other texts. While it does, of course, continue the circulation of a connection between nonheteronormative characters and suicidal outcomes (Cover, *Queer Youth Suicide*), it provides the suicidal character with agency. Rather than being “fated” toward suicide as a result of queerness, he is positioned to make a decision to suicide in order to protect the heteronormative liveability of his mate (and lover).

Deep Water

Finally, the 2016 four-part Australian miniseries *Deep Water* (directed by Shawn Seet, written by Kris Wyld and Kym Goldsworthy) is an important example not because it represents gay male suicidality but because it ostensibly critiques the myth of suicidality that connects self-harm with sexual nonnormativity. It overturns the persistent repetition of the idea that gay men are *likely* to die by suicide and indeed presents a counter argument that risk for gay men is located not in dispositions or adversities that lead to self-harm but in the ever-present possibility of being victims of violent crime or homophobic attack. By narrating a story in which the perpetrators of gay bashings (a genuine reality in Sydney in the 1990s) have returned to continue murdering gay men in ways which are being mistakenly read by police and coroners as suicide, *Deep Water* draws out the residue of past homophobia to show its spectral persistence into the present, among both criminals and police. The story involves police investigating a recent murder and an officer (whose gay brother was believed to have suicided two decades ago) making connections between the crimes now, the crimes then, uncovering a number of sexuality related suicides that were actually murders, and linking them to a homosocial hypermasculine “gay bashing” gang of youths, now adults, many with respectable roles in the community.

Importantly, this is the one Australian screen text depicting suicide in relation to gender and sexual diversity that actively critiques the social logic of a link between nonnormative sexuality and suicidality. Rather than representing suicide as that which *queer people do*, it suggests that death is something that is *done to* gender and sexually diverse Australian subjects. It thus presents a sophisticated (if unnecessarily complicated) framing for rereading suicides both in the narrative as the revisiting of police and coronial closed cases deemed suicide and, at a meta-level, in rereading the expectations that gender and sexual nonnormativity ends of suicide. Death is rewritten here not as a social logic or outcome but as an interruption to queer livability. What this demonstrates is that the universality of a queer-suicide linkage represented through sustained repetition of older motifs in recent Australian films is neither universal nor indicative of a national film and television culture that grounds its stories about minorities in simpler, outdated discourses. Rather, it demonstrates

the important potential of the critical significance of popular culture to provide counter discourses *and* critique the assumptions reinforced by such older texts.

Conclusion: Hope and Hopelessness in Depictions of Non-Normative Liveability

In light of the above analyses, what difference does it make that there is a repetitive representation of queer male suicidality on Australian screens? While five of the six texts depict suicide as an outcome (or fate) of gender and sexual nonnormativity, none of them directly imply that the suicide is *caused* by a gender or sexually diverse identity itself, thus revising the older stereotype of gay men and lesbians as unstable or pathological. Each text disentangles the linkage between nonnormative sexuality and the dominant mediopsychological model of suicide as the anticipated outcome of poor mental health and depression. For three of the texts (*Monster Pies*, *Boys in the Trees*, and *The Slap*), the cause of character suicides can be described as *social* concerns, primarily being positioned to experience “hopelessness” over the potential for ending the perturbation or pain of nonbelonging, lack of social recognition, or an end to the violence of discrimination. Indeed, hopelessness in the lived experience of nonnormative subjects is arguably one of two core tropes of sexual nonnormativity depicted in Australian screen media. By re-deploying the notion that gender and sexually diverse lives are marked by an inability to overcome adversity without recourse to suicide, the texts participate actively in the recirculation of older and unhealthy ideas about the plight of nonnormative subjects in contrast to the greater focus on everyday stories of belonging, resilience, and acceptance that mark many contemporary international film and television series with gender and sexually diverse characters, themes, and stories over the past decade.

The other three films (*Drown*, *Cut Snake*, and *Deep Water*) are, however, more nuanced and varied in their depiction of the relationship between gender and sexual diversity and suicide. Where *Drown* depicts suicidality as the result of the anomy of opening up sexual and erotic horizons through uncertain encounters with gay men, *Cut Snake* turns a “queer vulnerability” narrative on its head to articulate

the story of an altruistic suicide marked by agency within a mate-ship discourse, effectively queering a bond previously deemed heteromascu- line. It is notable that in both films sexuality and sexual identity are rendered complex, fluid, changeable, whereas in the first three they are primarily represented through innate and fixed identity and difference from heterosexuality. *Cut Snake* and *Deep Water*, however, mark the possibility of an alternative pedagogy of queer suicide in Australian screen media—not through the presentation only of alternative frameworks of suicide causality but through a critical rejection of the very repetitiveness of the clichés given in the broader array of texts. Logically, this provides an audience with a facet of “health communication” in contrast to a reinforcement of the idea of suicide marked by the persistence of linking queerness with suicidality.

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