

The Illusion of Inclusion: How Actor-Character Misalignment in Mainstream Media Upholds Heteronormativity

As representation for LGBTQ+ people has increased in quantity in mainstream media, the quality of that representation has been called into question. The extent to which LGBTQ+ people are stereotyped, portrayed with a lack of nuance, and treated with respect and dignity in mainstream media has become of primary concern.¹ The benefits of representation cannot come to fruition without portraying authentic and relatable LGBTQ+ experiences.² A more subtle trait of representation that has come along with the critical analysis of representation is that of actor-character alignment. Actor-character alignment describes a situation where the actor in a role aligns with the character's background.³ While actor-character alignment can be attributed to any identity, concerns of misalignment have become common in mainstream media where straight men play gay men. While representation is still present, it is uncertain whether it can be considered "real," or fully accurate, without actor-character alignment.⁴ Using Esme Murdock's analysis of settler governance, it will be shown that the issues of actor-character misalignment go beyond representation and actively work to uphold structures of heteronormativity.

Murdock's analysis of settler governance helps analyze the way actor-character misalignment upholds heteronormativity in two ways. First, it calls out the way that settler

¹ Cover, R. (2023). Straight and cisgender actors playing queer and trans characters: The views of Australian screen stakeholders. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(1), 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221104701>

² McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2017). Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(1), 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1184243>

³ Cover, R. (2023). Straight and cisgender actors playing queer and trans characters: The views of Australian screen stakeholders. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(1), 57–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221104701>

⁴ Compton, J. (2021, January 2). Should straight actors still play gay characters? "It's complicated." *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/should-straight-actors-still-play-gay-characters-it-s-complicated-n1252603>

governance uses its dominant position to act as if it can help alleviate the injustices faced by Indigenous peoples. Settler governance asserts it can “address, fix, or save” injustices that it causes.⁵ Mainstream media represents LGBTQ+ people to claim its commitment to their inclusion. Yet, the prevalence of actor-character misalignment masks its promotion of heteronormativity behind improper representation. Second, Murdock’s argument moves from thinking about injustices as events to thinking about them as ongoing structures and identifies the mechanisms that sustain them. Murdock roots her argument in land relations and explains that settler governance alters and terraforms land to reflect “the will and affirm the expression of settler possession.”⁶ Similarly, the business practices of mainstream media in promotional efforts work to reflect the dominant, ongoing structures of heteronormativity despite increased LGBTQ+ representation.

The dominant position of the heteronormative media industry creates a narrative that it wants to assist LGBTQ+ people in their proper portrayal like how Murdock claims settler governance wants to help Indigenous peoples. However, pre-production practices show that it actively works to reinforce heteronormativity. Mainstream media values actor-character misalignment, as it believes the representation of gay male characters and having straight actors play them are more marketable. The core of mainstream media appeals to a large, mostly heterosexual audience.⁷ As it has grown more aware of a sizable LGBTQ+ market, it has found

⁵ Murdock, E. G. (2022). Indigenous governance now: Settler colonial injustice is not historically past. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 25(3), 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2039543>

⁶ Murdock, E. G. (2022). Indigenous governance now: Settler colonial injustice is not historically past. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 25(3), 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2039543>

⁷ Sender, K. (2011). No Hard Feelings: Reflexivity and Queer Affect in the New Media Landscape. In K. Ross (Ed.), *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media* (1st ed., pp. 205–225). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118114254.ch13>

ways to adopt that audience through the “hetero media gaze,” particularly through dynamics like the “straight girl and the gay guy.”⁸ These tropes keep LGBTQ+ stories palatable for straight audiences and market to LGBTQ+ audiences, allowing for increased representation while keeping true LGBTQ+ stories on the fringes. The motivations behind representation are important, as they do not change the culture within the media industry. More than half of LGBTQ+ people cast for roles that represent them report hearing homophobic comments in the workplace, with many being about how LGBTQ+ actors are harder to market than straight actors.⁹ Thus, the increase in representation for LGBTQ+ people in mainstream media stems from perceptions of marketability and profitability within heteronormative structures.

Murdock’s focus on structures of injustice highlights the mechanisms of injustice against LGBTQ+ people in mainstream media which operate in the post-production impacts of misalignment through a possessive interest in straightness. A possessive interest in straightness is defined by the benefits that straight actors gain in playing gay roles and the cultural support that exists to re-assert heteronormativity.¹⁰ When mainstream media contains actor-character misalignment, it will intentionally be made clear in promotional materials to ensure a possessive interest in straightness is maintained.¹¹ LGBTQ+ people look to mainstream media for role models to help shape their identity.¹² Even if they see proper representation on-screen, the representation must follow through off-screen to allow LGBTQ+ audiences to feel properly

⁸ Pullen, C. (2022). *Straight Girls and Queer Guys: The Hetero Media Gaze in Film and Television*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748694853>

⁹ Ruff, E. (2018). Straight Actors in LGBT Roles: Creative Casting or Employment Discrimination. *Cardozo J. Equal Rts. & Soc. Just.*, 25, 550.

¹⁰ Martin, A. L., & Battles, K. (2021). The straight labor of playing gay. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 38(2), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1876899>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gomillion, S. C., & Giuliano, T. A. (2011). The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(3), 330–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.546729>

portrayed. In an interview for *Call Me By Your Name*, which stars two straight actors, Timothee Chalamet and Armie Hammer, in gay roles, Chalamet stated that the film “is about desire in a universal sense.”¹³ This language is also found repeated throughout reviews for other films that star straight actors in gay roles, like *Brokeback Mountain*, where critics frame the movie as a universal love story or diminish it to a “gay cowboy movie.”¹⁴ Straight actors and critics take LGBTQ+ stories and universalize them to a heteronormative audience. While this increases appeal, it takes away from the legitimacy of the LGBTQ+ story. The generalized wording limits the experience of those in the community in feeling truly represented and keeps heteronormativity dominant.

Some argue that an inherent issue lies in resolving actor-character misalignment, which must involve knowledge of the background and identity of the actor and whether it does or does not align with the character they portray.¹⁵ For example, if a closeted actor wanted to portray a gay character, the media industry and audience reactions pressure them to identify as either gay or straight. In this case, the actor must either come out early, remain closeted with increased fear of coming out, or forgo taking an LGBTQ+ role altogether.¹⁶ While this presents a concerning situation, its conclusion that anyone should be able to play any role is misled. It obscures the deep-rooted structures of heteronormativity in mainstream media and further shows why they are detrimental. These cases only exist because heteronormativity forces a divide between the

¹³ Kellaway, K. (2017, October 15). *Call Me By Your Name's Oscar-Tipped Double Act on their Summer of Love. The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/15/armie-hammer-timothee-chalamet-call-me-by-your-name-interview>

¹⁴ Cooper, B., & Pease, E. C. (2008). Framing *Brokeback Mountain*: How the Popular Press Corralled the “Gay Cowboy Movie.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25(3), 249–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030802192020>

¹⁵ Blankschaen, K., & Timmerman, T. (2024). Acting Out: Straight Performers Permissibly Portraying Queer Characters. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-21050019>

¹⁶ Ibid

straight in-group and LGBTQ+ out-group, creating pressure that would not exist without the dominant structures. Breaking down heteronormativity would allow actors can take roles without defining their sexuality or feeling pressure to serve dominant structures. Rather than focusing on how to resolve actor-character misalignment, there must be a shift in the motivations and values of the entire media industry to care about accurately portraying LGBTQ+ experiences instead of serving a possessive interest in straightness.

Through Murdock's framing of settler governance, heteronormativity is revealed as a structure that persists beyond specific instances of actor-character misalignment. The issue lies not in specific straight men who play gay men, for example, but in the ways that actor-character misalignment allows for heteronormativity as a structure to reinforce a possessive interest in straightness. The TV network Logo originated as a network meant to highlight LGBTQ+ people and their stories. It underwent a process of "gaystreaming," where it attempted to bring LGBTQ+ stories from its niche network to the mainstream.¹⁷ To do so, the network had to dilute its programs to become palatable to heteronormative audiences. Thus, mainstream media cannot remain authentic to a group that goes against heteronormativity under the current structures.¹⁸ Certain instances of actor-character misalignment may even seem beneficial for underrepresented groups to circumvent the structures, like gay men playing straight men. However, since mainstream media always appeals to a possessive interest in straightness, these cases only occur when it benefits heteronormativity, further maintaining its structure.

¹⁷ Ng, E. (2013). A "Post-Gay" Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration: A "Post-Gay" Era? Media Gaystreaming. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6(2), 258–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12013>

¹⁸ Freitas, A., Chris, C., & Banet-Weiser, S. (Eds.). (2007). *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814739242>

Murdock's arguments highlight the prominence of heteronormative structures in mainstream media. Heteronormativity uses the same methods as settler governance to maintain its dominance. It frames itself as capable of uplifting LGBTQ+ narratives when it merely includes representation for marketability. It also uses industry culture and promotional materials to ensure a continual possessive interest in straightness. Steps must be taken to reform the culture of the media industry to value authentic LGBTQ+ experiences outside of their appeal to heteronormativity. Only then can these structures be sufficiently examined.

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