

SEX, CONSENT & IDENTITY

Intersectional Representation in

'I May Destroy You'

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Figure 1, 08:59, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, (From left to right) Theo, Arabella and Terry

Summary

The following thesis utilises the concept of intersectionality as both a theoretical framework and methodology for analysing the intersectional representations between matters concerning sex, consent, and identity explored through characters of the BBC & HBO series *I May Destroy You* by Micaela Coel. This case study was selected specifically as it is set in a contemporary and diverse setting (modern day London) and features a range of identities that face similar issues but are each presented and explored in a nuanced manner, calling for an introspective analysis. This case study is fitting for an intersectional approach due to the representation of the characters as multifaceted as opposed to one dimensional. Characters do not maintain fixed positions of good and bad in the narrative. The moral compass of each character is challenged to an extent.

Findings of this analysis will demonstrate how matters of sex and consent intersect with specifics of gender, sexuality, and identity overall in a contemporary context. This is carried out through use of a narrative analysis that explores how the key characters face these issues through its use of specific narrative structure and devices. This thesis concludes that an intersectional approach calls for understanding how specific aspects of identity (such as gender, race, and sexuality) result in unique and distinctive life experiences as well as how they are met with varying degrees of judgement from sectors within society. The nuanced manner in which these issues are explored reveal the unexpected breadth of a complex spectrum of rape and consent. Additionally, it transcends dichotomies of good and bad by nuancing morality through the development of key characters. There are mentions of specific forms of rape and sexual assault throughout. Word count: 282

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Introduction

Contemporary issues around identity are widely discussed and explored in the arts, politics, and media, presenting themselves in an increasingly more complex and nuanced manner. White supremacy and racial inequality remain ingrained in all sectors of society resulting in the unequal treatment, and lack of opportunity for Black people and non-black people of colour. This makes the task of equal and just representation challenging to carry out. Particularly where the film and television industry are concerned, underrepresented groups have routinely been erased in popular franchises, predominantly through false stereotypes and one-dimensional narratives.¹

This thesis will focus on how the multidimensional characters in the BBC One and HBO drama *I May Destroy You* written by and starring Micaela Coel demonstrate how an intersectional approach to representation of characters identities leads to more accurate, multi-dimensional depictions of a typically underrepresented group of people.² The central phenomenon and main topic of my research is to examine how the narrative of the TV series constructs intersectional representation through providing nuanced takes on character's identities and experiences with sex and consent. This TV drama was selected specifically as it pertains to modern day issues regarding identity, consent, the broad spectrum of rape culture that exists in society, as well all the while exhibits accurate depictions of the complexities behind human nature and how intersections of our identities interact, impact and shape our lived experiences.

In addition, it is an example of a narrative written by a Black female writer that challenges white hegemony in the industry by decentralizing a white heteronormative, middle class perspective and mode of representation. The characters and narrative of *I May Destroy You* challenge white hegemony and stereotypical narratives by centering a group of Black friends yet avoiding an ostensible focus on critiquing race in an oppressive or disadvantageous context, as well as avoiding the essentialization of issues faced by Black people as a

¹ Early depictions of Black people include caricaturist depictions through minstrel shows in theatre shows. Although more extreme forms of minstrelsy have been his trend continued through the mediums of cinema and television. Consequently, this contributed towards shaping the societal perception towards Black people at the time. This also had lasting effects on stereotypical depictions of Black people which are widely remembered today.

² Micaela Coel based the series on her own real life experience with assault and therefore the series is based on true events.

collective. Lastly, white characters are present but peripheral, which in turn decenters whiteness from the narrative without complete exclusion. The above factors render the show unique, and worthy of analysis, as it directs viewers to experience various layers of identity through diverse characters. More precisely: it challenges the same single-axis framework that Crenshaw similarly argues against due to its limited conceptualization that views aspects of identity such as race and sex as being mutually exclusive of each other.³ Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality challenges this very notion.

My research question is: In what ways does contemporary TV series *I May Destroy You* challenge one dimensional representations of identity through an intersectional approach to representing characters? The sub-question that will guide in structuring the method is: How does the narrative help to construct intersectionality between characters? How are the observed intersections enhanced through narrative structure and devices? These sub-questions will be answered through analyzing and unpacking specific scenes from episodes of the series to provide concrete examples. An additional sub-question is: What do the conclusions drawn about these representations contribute to ongoing discussions concerning representation of underrepresented groups in popular media, if at all?

Theoretical Framework

This section consists of the theoretical framework of this essay. Firstly, it introduces intersectionality as it first emerged. This will provide a historiographical point of view. Secondly, I discuss how intersectionality has been employed with regards to intersectional representation in visual media and culture. This will illustrate how intersectionality has been approached as a method for interpreting and analysing visual media as it is central to analysing the case study of *I May Destroy You*.⁴

³ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989. 140. *HeinOnline*, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/uchclf1989&i=143>.

⁴ *I May Destroy You*. Created by Micaela Coel. Produced by Simon Maloney and Simon Meyers. Production companies Various Artists Limited and FALKNA Productions. Edited by Christian Sandino-Taylor, Lindsey Woodward, Mike Philips, Guy Bensley, John Dwelly and Amy Hounsell. Single-camera setup. Aired June 2020 on BBC One and HBO.

Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term intersectionality and used it to describe how Black women experience multiple forms of oppression and disadvantage as a result of them being both Black and a woman. She demonstrated this through her writings critiquing feminist theory and antiracist politics for ignoring the intersections between race and sex as well as how the justice system is dismissive of Black women's issues, deeming them incapable of being representative of either all women or all Black people because they hold both positions.⁵ Since intersectionality first emerged in 1989, it has been interpreted and employed both theoretically as well as methodologically across various fields. Intersectionality stems from feminist studies as a notion for understanding that people live multiple issue, as opposed to single-issue lives. Hence, Crenshaw rejects the single-axis framework approach to* This occurs as a result of varying factors that influence their overall experiences and are "crucial in shaping the processes of exclusion and inclusion, social hierarchies, and in determining membership in privileged or marginalized groups."⁶ The relevance of this theory for the purpose of this research is that it suggests people's identities and experiences are shaped by many, various factors that make up their whole specific identity. Such factors may include age, sex, sexuality, religion, class, and education, among others. Therefore, intersectionality has been particularly helpful in being critical of how feminist theory and antiracist politics have a tendency of discussing gender or race as mutually exclusive issues, but rarely discuss the significance of both in a given situation and how they overlap (this is also applicable to gender, race, and other categories of identity).⁷

Although since its emergence intersectionality has been used as an approach in various domains and situations, the theory is rooted in the effort to disclose how Black women are underrepresented and misrepresented because they do not 'fit' into single struggle categories such as sexism, which has long been dominated by white women, nor can their struggles simply be explained away through racism, because its discussions have long centred Black men.

⁵ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." 140.

⁶ Ralska, Aleksandra M. "Intersectionality and Visual Culture: Approaches, Complexities and Teaching Implications". *Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom*, 3, (2009): 55-74. 60

⁷ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." . 149.

Thus, an intersection between race and sex becomes apparent, where it is evident that Black women struggle as a result of both racism and sexism. In this sense, the struggles of Black women cannot be solely explained through racism or sexism alone but rather a combination of both, making it impossible for Black women's struggles to be represented through only racism or sexism.

Crenshaw observes that the effect of this has been that many Black women and women of colour have not been fairly or equally represented as white women have been mainly represented where sexism or gender is concerned and Black men have been more focal than Black women where racism is concerned.⁸ It is important to thoroughly, but succinctly, map intersectionality from its emergence to how it is conceptualised today in order to be able to identify the most interesting and meaningful point of entry to an intersectional approach within the case study at hand.

In a later article 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour' Crenshaw builds on the observations she makes about Black women's employment experiences that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" and takes it several steps further by examining how race and gender "intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of colour."⁹ Crenshaw distinguishes between three kinds of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational to aid in examining the relationship between intersections of 'social divisions' and 'identity markers' structurally, politically, and representationally.¹⁰ As established, intersectionality is a helpful theoretical framework and tool that helps us to draw connections between these factors and how they influence a person's life experiences and perceived identity.

In their article 'Doing Intersectional Analysis' Christensen and Jensen provide a succinct summary of how intersectional analyses gained momentum in various fields, emphasis on the methodological implications for intersectional

⁸ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." 143-145

⁹ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1241.

¹⁰ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1245

analyses rather than mapping the history of the term's uses. They define the goal of an intersectional analysis as, 'The overall aim of intersectional analysis is to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity.'¹¹

Here I will explain two approaches to the use of intersectional representation for interpretation and mode of analysis. In 'The 'Other' Woman in Contemporary Television Drama: Analysing Intersectional Representation on *Bones*' by D. E. Meyer, the main argument is that intersectional representation allows television narratives to expose how generic representation of characters identities are seemingly transparent and done through 'single identity categories'.¹² This argument demonstrates the limitations of the typical portrayal of characters as overly simplistic based on a specific singular trait as their defining characteristic and carries out an intersectional analysis to show how there are many various aspects and factors that make up a whole character. This case also helps to illustrate how TV narratives (as well as the industry of television itself itself) have centred on heteronormative, white, middle-class values and identities. Intersectional representations, however, re-centre that focus to fit a more contemporary conception of identity politics whereby the multifaceted nature of identity is seen.¹³

Secondly, in Glenn and Spieldenner's analysis, 'An Intersectional Analysis of Television Narratives of African American Women with African American Men on 'the Down Low' ' the main argument follows an intersectional analysis of multiple television programme narratives in order to break down how the perception of the concept of being on "the down low" is framed for audiences.¹⁴ This argument provides a concrete example of an intersectional analysis to discuss the influence of a specific narrative on how it is perceived and by doing

¹¹ Christensen, Ann-Dorte, and Sune Qvotrup Jensen. "Doing Intersectional Analysis: Methodological Implications for Qualitative Research." *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): 110.

¹² Meyer, Michaela D.E. "The Other Woman in Contemporary Television Drama: Analyzing Intersectional Representation on *Bones*". *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, (2015) : 901.

¹³ Meyer, Michaela D.E. "The Other Woman in Contemporary Television Drama: Analyzing Intersectional Representation on *Bones*". *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, (2015) : 900-915.

¹⁴ Glenn, Cerise L., and Andrew R. Spieldenner. "An Intersectional Analysis of Television Narratives of African American Women With African American Men On "The Down Low"." *Sexuality & Culture* 17.3 (2013): 401-416.

so simultaneously exposes its framing for viewers. For the main case study of this essay intersectionality will be used to draw observations regarding the complexity of character's identities, their relationships with each other, their positions in society as well as how these elements appear to effect and influence one another.

Methodology

Here I will explain the methodology of intersectionality for the following paper. Intersectionality has been used as a concept and a tool in media studies and visual culture to explore representations. It has been used as a tool to analyse how authentically depictions of various identities and real life issues are explored in popular media texts by unpacking the dominant narratives shown.¹⁵ These dominant narratives of underrepresented groups have shaped social understandings of race, sex, gender, class and other factors that inform a person's social and cultural positioning. Intersectionality is a helpful theoretical framework and methodology that helps us to draw connections between these factors and how they influence a person's life experiences and perceived identity.

This thesis employs the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework for examining representations as well as a methodology and as a means of critiquing said representations. In order to do this, a narrative analysis will be carried out that focuses on both narrative structure and its devices that guide the viewers experience of the plot and aid in revealing the intersections at play. This thesis will analyse four key characters experiences within the narrative in depth. I will argue how these moments in the narrative construct intersectionality and reflect on why this is purposeful or relevant to the narrative as a whole.

In 'Intersectionality and Visual Culture: Approaches, Complexities and Teaching Implications' Ralska points out Leslie McCall's three distinguishable approaches to intersectionality with respect to 'complexities of categories.'¹⁷ These are described as anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategory complexities. I will employ the second intersectional complexity of

¹⁵ Glenn & Spielfelder, "An Intersectional Analysis of Television Narratives", 401-416; Meyer, Michaela D.E. "The Other Woman in Contemporary Television Drama: Analyzing Intersectional Representation on *Bones*". *Sexuality & Culture*, 19, (2015): 900-915.

¹⁷ 'Complexities of categories' refers to the way in which one would categorise the different factors that make up and influence a person's identity in order to analyse them,

intracategorical complexity to focus on in relation to the case material.¹⁸ As Ralska describes, the intracategorical complexity is situated between the anticategorical and intercategorical approach. This complexity places emphasis on “differences within rather than between groups” and in doing so “challenges the assumptions about the homogeneity and sameness of these groups.”¹⁹ The reasoning behind selecting this particular complexity for the following analyses is that the intercategorical complexity acknowledges and/or identifies categories without allowing them to limit and restrict the possibility to analyse them using intersectionality. As well as that, I argue it is appropriate for my case material specifically due to how this complexity focuses on a certain group, for which Arabella, the main character in *I May Destroy You* and her close friend group are very fitting.²⁰ Furthermore, it will focus on analysing the intersectionality *within* a group that is predominantly Black, which contributes towards normalising diverse representations of Black people and people of colour of in other visual culture instead of perpetuating false stereotypes and essentialisms.

Narrative Analysis

I will conduct a two part analysis of key moments in the narrative of *I May Destroy You*. The first part of this analysis focuses on the central characters experiences surrounding sex and consent. This will allow for a reflection on the intersections present between characters, for which the intracategorical complexity of categories will be attributed.²¹ Following this approach, this part of the analysis will reflect on differences within the same group, namely, Arabella’s closest friend group, and how the intersections between them exhibit both unity and difference in their experiences with consent. A synopsis of the

¹⁸ Ralska, Aleksandra M. “Intersectionality and Visual Culture: Approaches, Complexities and Teaching Implications”. *Teaching Visual Culture in an Interdisciplinary Classroom*, 3, (2009): 55-74.

¹⁹ Ralska, “Intersectionality and Visual Culture”, 62.

²⁰ This way of approaching the complexities of categories is also symbolically relevant to the TV show because in it the main character Arabella herself tries to strictly arrange and categorise the people in her life in an effort to remain in ‘control’ of who she is around and monitor what kinds of relationships and situations she tolerates and/or does not tolerate. She herself eventually is made aware of the dangers of categorising and explaining away people one dimensionally by her therapist.

²¹ The intracategorical approach is explained in further detail in the methodology section.

story can be found in Appendix 1. An overview of key characters can be found in Appendix 2.

As will be demonstrated in the analysis, gender, race, sexuality, and other factors of identity will be considered as intersections: points of difference and/or similarity with regard to how these intersections result in different experiences and outcomes with sexual partners, treatment of being a sexual violence victim/abuser or reporting assaults to law enforcement. In other words, the analysis of scenes will demonstrate how specifics of gender and sexuality intersecting with issues such as sexual assault create different outcomes.

The first part of the analysis consists of four selected scenes and will be analysed in the following order: Theo's story of consent, Terry's threesome in Italy, and Kwame's report of sexual assault.²² The second part of the analysis focuses on Arabella's three fulfilment fantasies presented to the viewer through a highly subjective narration in the final episode of the series. This will demonstrate how the narrative provides a nuanced take on both a sexual violence victim's mentality as well as an abusers'. Lastly, the show is first and foremost a drama however there is a recurring edge of dark humour that is notable throughout the series.²³

Narrative Structure & Devices

Here I will provide a brief overview of the series narrative structure and devices following Bordwell and Thompson's principles from 'Film Art: An Introduction'.²⁴ Starting from their definition of narrative as 'a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space', the very beginning of Episode 1 in the series provides exposition and introduces the viewer to Arabella's present life situation having returned to London from her visit to Italy where she partied with

²³ It may have been inserted as a tool for 'cushioning the blow' of the otherwise serious subject matter of the show so that it may allow viewers to keep an open mind to the nuances of the specific scenarios that pan out which demonstrate the complexity of consent. More specifically, of understanding where the boundaries of consent lie, as Arabella and her friends each go through their own experiences of what it means to give consent, or have it taken from you.

²⁴ Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 8th ed., New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2008. 74-93.

her love interest. She faces an impending writing deadline for her latest book deal.

The major conflict in the narrative is Arabella's rape and the aftermath. Rising action within the plot occurs in Episode 12 when Arabella's memory of her assault returns and she recognises her abuser in the same bar she was assaulted in. The climax of the narrative occurs when the viewer is taken through Arabella's fulfilment fantasies of her confronting her abuser (see Page 21). The final fulfilment fantasy as well as the end of the series overall has an extremely ambiguous ending in that it is for the viewer to interpret for themselves if the third and final fulfilment fantasy blends into reality or is in fact simply a figment of Arabella's thought process and imagination.

The narrative devices aid in pushing forward the narrative itself. These devices are namely flashbacks, fulfilment fantasies, and the narration itself. I will discuss them in more detail in this order. The use of flashbacks provide context and information about Arabella's specific life experiences. These experiences include family, school life, and time spent with friends during her upbringing. Flashbacks are also a device to fill in gaps in her memory from the night that resulted in her assault. The use of flashbacks as a device through which fragments of Arabella's memory from the night are pieced together provide hints to the viewer of what may be to come and simultaneously set the tone for something sinister with the aid of sound and shots that enhance Arabella's lack of memory and moments of intensity during flashbacks.

The employment of fulfilment fantasies at the very end of the season in Episode 12 provide the viewer with a highly subjective unreliable narration. This is significant in that it allows the viewer to experience the confusion and trauma after Arabella's memory of her abuser rushes back to her. These fulfilment fantasies then provide multiple hypothetical situations whereby shifting power relations become apparent through the scenes between Arabella and her abuser. These narrative devices construct intersectionality in that it allows the viewer to see Arabella's abuser as more than just her abuser.

The narration is from Arabella's perspective and is therefore highly subjective and at times unreliable due to the fact that Arabella herself does not have full recollection of the night of her assault. In this way, the viewer is only as aware of the events unfolding as Arabella is herself (see Figures 1-3 below). Furthermore, although Arabella's perspective is dominant, viewers have varying degrees of subjective access to multiple characters such as Kwame, Terry, and

Theo. This occurs in two ways: either through a flashback to Arabella's past memories or a short scene where Arabella is not present that focuses on the experiences of her friends. In this sense there are multiple characters that viewers have subjective access to however as Arabella is the main character of the series her perspective is dominant over the other characters. Lastly, her perspective is presented as objective but is in fact not.



Figure 1, 0:17, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella sees her abuser (David)



Figure 3, 0:21, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, A flashback to David's face



Figure 2, 0:22, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella realises she recognises her *abuser for the first time*

Theo's Story of Consent

This scene takes place in Arabella's flashback to high school from Episode 6 of the series. It demonstrates a complexity surrounding consent by presenting a situation in which the perceived victim (Theo) was in fact falsely accusing the supposed perpetrator (Ryan) of rape. After Ryan tells Theo he has seen pictures of her from his friend's phone (of which she was unaware) he offers Theo money in exchange for her permission to take intimate pictures of her. Theo accepts the offer and takes the money but throws the phone out of the window when Ryan is not looking. She later cuts herself with a knife that she steals from the school kitchen, after which she falsely accuses Ryan of raping her at knifepoint. The intimate pictures of Theo taken by another boy have already been shared amongst other students via mobile phone prior to this interaction.



Figure 4, 11:00, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Theo asks Ryan to delete the pictures from his phone



Figure 5, 18:40, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Ryan is shown in the principal's office



Figure 6, 18:23, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Ryan reacts in shock to the allegations made



Figure 7, 14:37, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Ryan handing Theo her underwear after taking pictures of her in exchange for money

While in the playground at school, Arabella and Terry are shown pictures from the same day of Theo and Ryan having sex. They interpret this as evidence that she is lying about being raped as there is no knife or sign of force in the images. The boy who shows them the pictures states "The shots don't lie. The blood is the lie, do you know what I mean?" after which Arabella and Terry can be heard repeating "The blood is the lie.", meaning that since there was no blood evident in the pictures it proved Theo was lying. Arabella and Terry take it upon themselves to help Ryan get out of trouble by informing the principal and showing him an image of Theo as evidence of her false accusation.



Figure 8, 20:09, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Boy shows Arabella and Terry the pictures of Theo that had been spread around without her knowledge



Figure 9, 22:14, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Arabella and Terry about to enter the principal's office

Arabella and Terry then engage in a conversation where they compare the circumstances of what would happen in a similar situation if they, as Black girls were in her shoes. Arabella states: "And she's white. We could've done the exact same thing, all we'd get is detention", to which Terry adds "White girl tears have high currency". They continue by pointing out that the teacher who sent Theo to the principal's office afforded her with more concern than she would afford them in the same situation. Arabella half-jokingly states "If I cry, all she'll see is weapons of mass destruction leaking out my eyeballs.". The scene ends with Theo seen leaving the school premises while Arabella shouts out "Hope you got plasters!", to which Theo mutters a racial slur under her breath directed at Arabella and her group of friends who are rejoicing that "We just helped our brother escape from Babylon!".



Figure 10, 24:30, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 6, Students celebrating getting Ryan out of trouble

The other students think of the pictures as evidence that Theo is lying when in fact the pictures had been taken without her knowledge or permission as well as forwarded to others in similar non-consensual fashion. The group of Black students can be seen pointing out different lived experiences and forms of treatment based on one's race by putting themselves in their white peer's shoes. It is evident that the Black students felt Theo was immediately listened and attended to due to her being white. Here we can observe an intersection of race wherein in an institutional and/or educational context repercussion due to indiscretions vary depending on the race of the one accused. Additionally, we see Theo's version of the events being discredited, regardless of how true or untrue her version of the events were. It is a common occurrence for victims to be discredited, or 'victim-blamed'. Specific factors such as sexuality, gender, and race may all contribute towards the degree to which a victim's experiences are believed or discredited, as the following three scenes in this analysis will continue to demonstrate.

Terry's Italy Threesome

This scene (although short in comparison to the others in this analysis) demonstrates how the narrative introduces the notion of rape culture as existing on a broad spectrum in that sexual assault exists in subtle ways which may not be immediately recognisable to a victim at the time of the assault or harassment. More specifically, this particular scene demonstrates how the men Terry sleeps with give the impression that it is a chance meeting although Terry's recollection of their collective departure forces her to rethink the experience. In this sense the way the meeting was constructed lead Terry to initially believe she was freely consenting to a threesome with two strangers instead of the reality: that she was meticulously approached by a pair of men who manipulated the situation by performing as if they were strangers to each other.

During one of Arabella's flashbacks in Episode 3, Terry is split up from Arabella on a night out and after visiting a separate bar and dancing and drinking with two men she meets there shortly one after the other she ends up leaving the bar with them and engaging in a threesome. After the fact, the men leave together (see Figures 11 and 12 below).



Figure 11, 24:40, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 3, Terry's one night stands



Figure 12, 24:42, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 3, Terry watches the men she had a threesome with leave together

Many months later Terry boasts of the threesome during a campaign for which she is an actress lunch date. Her date then points out that he thinks the men had pretended to be strangers, having planned it beforehand without her knowledge. This plants a seed of doubt in Terry's mind and she begins to think back to the sexual encounter and particularly how the men had left together (see Figures 13 and 14 below). She realises in hindsight of that detail being a strong indicator that they were acquainted prior to the threesome. This paints an accurate depiction of how a seemingly spontaneous and innocent sexual encounter with a pair of strangers may in hindsight be something more calculated and premeditated and in turn, may lead viewers to witness and reflect on the complexity of consent.



Figure 13, 21:02, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 11, Terry listens to her date tell her the men were pretending to be strangers



Figure 14, 21:15, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 11, Terry begins to rethink the spontaneity of the threesome

Kwame's Report of Sexual Assault

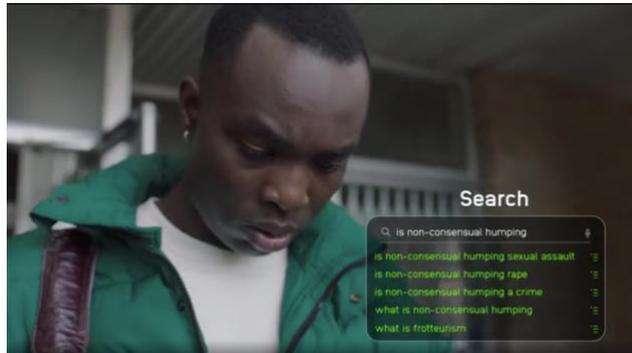


Figure 15, 08:24, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, Kwame googles if what his Grindr hook up did to him was a crime



Figure 16, 17:29, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, Kwame looks nervous as the police officer enters the

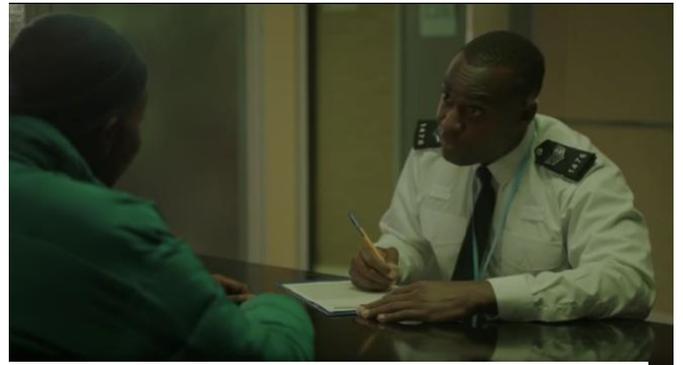


Figure 17, 17:58, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, The police officer asks Kwame



Figure 18, 19:01, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, Kwame watches as the police officer leaves the interview room

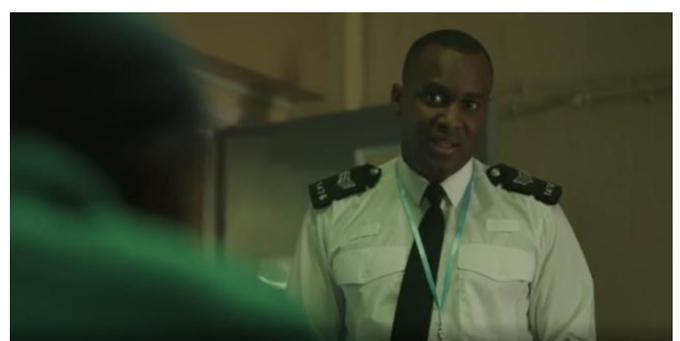


Figure 19, 19:11, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, The police officer asks Kwame to specify whether he is reporting sexual assault or rape before leaving the interview room

In Episode 5, after finding out that there are many different kinds of rape and sexual assault than was thought before (such as secret condom removal and frotteurism)²⁵ Kwame is motivated to report his assault to the police. This particular scene demonstrates a situation in which race cancels out as a unifying intersection due to the intersection of sexuality taking a front seat. This is due to the crime reported constituting as sexual assault. He is interviewed by a Black male police officer. The officer prods Kwame for details of the name and description of the man who assaulted him. The police officer cuts the interview short by saying that he is going to bring a senior officer to interview him instead as he believes it is a "case for a special unit". He then informs Kwame that there were 'other' ways of reporting the assault, referring to machines in the lobby in which he could have written a report out himself without speaking to anyone.

The police officer's reaction indicates that the officer feels the assault is something that should have been dealt with more discretely or privately. This suggests that there was something about the assault that was shameful. The scene ends with a shot that focuses on the open door of the interrogation room, where a sign is plastered stating "The door must be shut at all times you're putting people in danger by having it open". This last close up shot concludes the scene and emphasises the carelessness of the officer having left it open (see Figure 20).



Figure 20, 19:50, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 5, Close up of a sign on the interrogation room door that reads "This door must be shut at all times / You're putting people in danger by having it open"

²⁵ Frotteurism refers to the sexual urge a person may have where they rub themselves non-consensually against an unfamiliar person.

Arabella's Fulfilment Fantasies: Confronting Her Abuser

In the last episode of the series the narrative takes the viewer through three scenarios that begin from a place of desiring revenge and gradually shift into something else- much like Arabella's own shifting thought process toward her abuser in her process of recovery. These scenes are referred to as Arabella's fulfilment fantasies in that they represent Arabella's frustration and anger towards her abuser and allow her to experiment with the idea of taking revenge. The following section of analysis will analyse each fulfilment fantasy in the order in which they appear and provide insight to their deeper underlying meanings.



Figure 21, 00:46, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella in shock after her memory of her assault returns to her

The first fulfilment fantasy functions as a revenge fantasy. This is enhanced through the dramatic violin music that plays while Arabella and her friends' drug, stalk and beat her abuser to near death. The music in the scene provides a note of surrealism to the situation and may lead the viewer to question whether it is indeed reality or a fantasy. The highly subjective narration is also evident here. This revenge fantasy represents the raw emotion which Arabella feels towards her abuser, exhibited through physical force with the help of her friends to take what the abuser took from her in similar fashion: with force and aggression.



Figure 22, 09:22, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David walking in a catatonic state as Arabella and her friends follow him



Figure 23, 09:39, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David collapses on the ground



Figure 24, 10:47, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella beats up her abuser

After David is lying unconscious on the ground Arabella takes him home with her, drags her into her bedroom and pushes his body under her bed. Next, Arabella is seen writing intently on post it notes and adding it to a row of existing post it notes tracing across her bedroom wall.³⁰ Upon seeing blood on the note that transferred from her hands, Arabella looks at the pool of blood coming from her abuser on the floor. She looks back at the post it and rips it off the wall, throwing it in the bin (See Figures 26-29). It could be said that this moment is symbolic of Arabella's realisation that getting revenge on her abuser did not satisfy her or sit right with her in some way. As she walks out of her bedroom and shuts the door the first fulfilment fantasy comes to an end.³¹



Figure 25, 12:10, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella pushes her unconscious abuser under her bed

³⁰ It may be the story she has been working on writing, the piecing together of her trauma, or both. This is not made abundantly clear to the viewer.

³¹ This is noticeable due to the scene returning to the moment Arabella recognises her abuser in the bar at the start of each fulfilment fantasy.



Figure 26, 12:28, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella adds a bloodied note to her wall

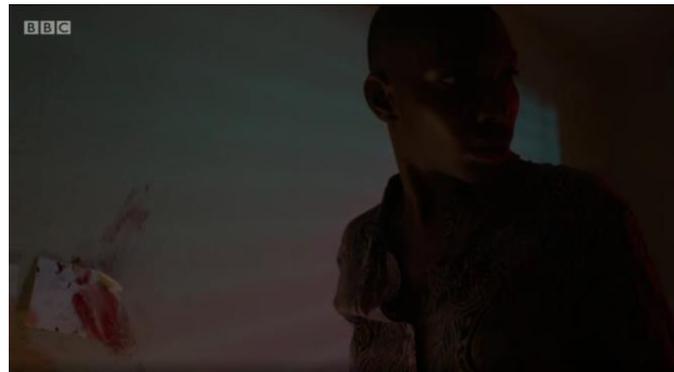


Figure 27, 12:32, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella looks at David



Figure 28, 12:34, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David on Arabella's floor

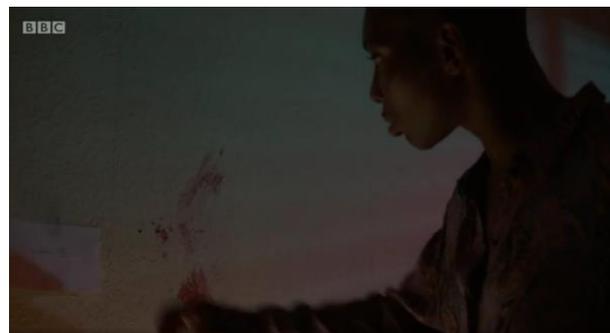


Figure 29, 12:36, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella removes the note



Figure 30, 20:32, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David speaks derogatorily towards himself



Figure 31, 21:00, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David breaks down crying

The events that unfold in the second fulfilment are noteworthy in that the sudden shift from abuser to victim reveals unexpected humanity in a situation that initially seemed black and white. It may be a signifier of Arabella herself seeing her abuser as a human being with his own past and unique path that lead him to his current state of being.³² The fantasy of revenge morphs a place of shifting power relations between Arabella and her abuser as well as provides an opening towards a form of closure for Arabella's ongoing suffering.

In this fulfilment fantasy Arabella allows her abuser to think he has successfully spiked her drink and he takes her to the bathroom stall in which he raped her. She then wakes up suddenly to confront him as she waits for the police to arrive as Terry had planned. At first he corners her to overpower her, however the fulfilment fantasy takes an unexpected turn when to Arabella's

surprise David breaks down crying (see Figures 30-31). He goes through a kind of monologue that reveals his own position of victim and abuser as well as provides insight to the depth of his self-hatred. This display of humanity takes Arabella by surprise and causes her to stop seeking revenge. David can be heard calling himself worthless and speaking derogatorily towards himself in third person, as if he were repeating something that was once said to him, hinting towards his own personal memories from potential abuse.³³

Instead of immediately handing David over to the police, Arabella brings him to her home and into her bedroom. While David and Arabella sit alone together in Arabella's room, David overhears nearing police sirens and says to Arabella: 'I don't want to do anything to you or with you. I just don't want you to leave me.' It is as though David takes on the position of the victim by expressing a deep fear that he seemingly does not know how to live without: 'If I'm not scared I don't know how I'm meant to be'. This kind of statement reflects the state of mind of someone who has grown accustomed to living with deep trauma and how trauma can become seemingly sewn into one's identity, where trauma becomes hard to separate from living an 'ordinary' life.³⁴



Figure 32, 22:46, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David pleads Arabella to stay with him

³³ The specifics of David's potentially abusive past are not further explored. However, we hear of the different kinds of rape that David has been guilty of as he explains that he has had to undergo therapy during his time in prison. This is relevant to note as it is reminiscent of the scenes where new information pointing to the vast possibilities of rape and consent in different conditions and contexts are communicated through dialogue. For example, when Arabella learns of secret condom removal constituting as rape and when Kwame realises his own non-consensual sexual encounter counted as a criminal offense. David lists out the 'different kinds of rape' that he is guilty of committing. These are: date rape, spousal rape, prison rape, payback rape, rape by deception, as well as 'corrective rape'.

³⁴ Arabella experiences this struggle throughout the narrative.



Figure 33, 23:13, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella hugs David before the police take him



Figure 34, 23:17, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, David cries while hugging Arabella



Figure 35, 23:21, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Police enter to arrest David

The third and final fulfilment fantasy stands in stark contrast to the previous two. This is apparent through the shift in the atmosphere of the bar in which it takes place and the shifting power relations between Arabella and her abuser in the scene. Unlike the previous two fulfilment fantasies (which are loud, fast-paced, and packed with adrenaline), this one is calmer, slower, and lighter stylistically while maintaining a highly subjective narration from the innerworkings of Arabella's mind.



Figure 36, 26:45, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella approaches David seductively while he maintains a shy stance



Figure 37, 27:49, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella and David having sex

Arabella approaches her abuser in the bar, buys him a drink and can be seen kissing him in the bathroom stall where she was raped. The scene then cuts to Arabella making love to her abuser where she lies in a dominant position and he assumes a submissive stance (see Figure 38). Most notable of this particular part of the scene is Arabella maintains the dominant position and her abuser a more submissive, vulnerable position as if the stereotypical roles of prescribed masculinity of men and femininity of women are reversed.³⁵



Figure 38, 29:10, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, Arabella tells David to go



Figure 39, 29:34, *I May Destroy You*, Episode 12, both versions of Arabella's abuser (David) walk out of Arabella's bedroom

³⁵ This emasculating portrayal of the abuser and his accomplice is strengthened by a similar role reversal in a lap dance scene in which the male friend of Arabella's abuser can be seen giving Terry an erotic lap dance in the third fulfilment fantasy. Terry looks him over from a dominant position. This challenges stereotypical notions of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles in society.

As they wake up in bed the next morning Arabella calmly tells David to go (see Figure 38). The beaten up version of David from the first fulfilment fantasy crawls out from under the bed and follows David from the present fulfilment fantasy out of the room (Figure 39).³⁶ In this scene Arabella and her abuser are portrayed as having a dynamic reminiscent of parting lovers than of an abuser and victim, reflecting her state of peace. This moment is cathartic in that Arabella frees herself of the psychological baggage and trauma she literally and figuratively kept buried under her bed.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have firstly explored the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical framework and methodology through Crenshaw as well as how it has been used as a tool for analysing visual culture. Secondly, I applied the concept to representations, using *I May Destroy You* as the main case study through which intersectional representations are explored by carrying out a narrative analysis of the series. My aim has been to answer the research question: In what ways does contemporary TV series *I May Destroy You* challenge one dimensional representations of identity through an intersectional approach to representing characters?

Throughout the series characters are consistently depicted in a nuanced manner whereby no character is decidedly morally superior over another. In other words, it diverges from attributing dichotomies of good and bad to characters. The intersectional representation of characters enhances/brings forth these nuances in that it reveals how various parts of character's identities come into play depending on the situation. Not only is there a justness to the nuanced way in which characters are depicted (which pays homage to the complexity of human character) but perhaps more importantly the intersectional representations function in a way that sheds light on how rape culture (which exists in all sectors of life) intersects with sexuality, gender, and race. It demonstrates how sexual assault encompasses a broader spectrum than people

³⁶ In this shot David can be seen holding a plastic bag. Earlier in Episode 9 this is revealed to be a plastic bag with a pregnancy ultrasound in it. In her past, Arabella had an abortion when she was ten weeks pregnant and had buried this keepsake under bed. This is simultaneously symbolic of Arabella having buried issues instead of facing them. Thus, she is also letting go of this suppressed memory.

may typically expect and furthermore, illustrates how there are less obvious forms of sexual assault. This is done by analysing the central characters varying experiences with consent or lack thereof.³⁷

In terms of the intersections of sexuality, gender, and race where sexual violence victims are concerned, the narrative illustrates how the specificity of these have a direct impact on to what degree a victim is seen, heard, and validated by authorities as well as close ties. Arabella identifies as a cis- Black woman and Kwame identifies as a gay Black man. Although they relate deeply on a personal and cultural level due to their similar cultural backgrounds of sharing both Ghanaian and British nationality and senses of identity, the effects and reactions towards their experiences with sexual partners and assaults differ.

Kwame's experience with sexual assault reflects how male survivors of sexual assault are typically less openly discussed as male assault is represented less in public domains and are less centred in public discourse as compared to the assault of women. The effect of Kwame's gender and sexuality intersecting with his assault can be seen in the discomfort of the officer he reported to, who arguably dismissive of Kwame for these reasons.

Terry and her date relate to each other in that that they are both Black, however Terry becomes visibly awkward and slightly defensive in her demeanour when confronted with the fact that her date is trans. In addition, although Terry is Arabella's closest and most trusted female friend her own morality is called into question due to her partial responsibility in not ensuring Arabella's safety during the night she was assaulted.

Last but not least, the way in which David's position as perpetrator shifts in the second fulfilment fantasy is a nuanced way of exploring a victim's state of mind. Through the second fulfilment fantasy Arabella reconceptualises her abuser from a dehumanised position of a criminal to a vulnerable human with a victim mentality due to his own past traumas.

³⁷ For example, when Terry discovers the strangers she had a threesome with knew each other or when Arabella finds out the colleague she slept with had removed the condom discretely during intercourse without her consent.

Self-reflection

The most challenging part of this thesis was narrowing down the specific way in which I would apply and operationalise intersectionality for my topic. Intersectionality has been applied differently in various fields and contexts and therefore I had to take time to gain an understanding of its breadth and applicability to ensure that I did not misuse it. It may have been interesting to experiment with how intersectionality could have been used differently for analysing the same case study.

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Appendix 1

I May Destroy You Synopsis

I May Destroy You consists of one season. During this season of *I May Destroy You* Arabella must reassemble her life after being drugged and raped by a stranger in Episode 1. Arabella does not remember the assault instantly, but fragments from her assault return gradually through visions and flashbacks until the full memory of her assault returns in Episode 12. Arabella's best friend Terry accompanies her to the police to report her assault. Thereafter, Arabella goes on a journey of recovery. Terry supports Arabella alongside her journey to recovery by ensuring that she supports her emotionally, validates her experiences when they spend quality time. This is also because Terry retains a certain level of guilt that she did not protect Arabella the night she was assaulted. The episodes employ the use of flashbacks as a plot device that deepen our insight into Arabella's past such as her school and family life during childhood. Amidst her recovery, Arabella experiences a second sexual assault whereby a colleague she is having sex with removes the condom without her knowledge. She later discovers this is a form of rape and uses her social media presence to expose her abuser as well as be vocal about issues surrounding consent and actively supporting survivors of sexual assault.

As Arabella navigates through her life after her assault, the narrative guides the viewer through peripheral instances where matters of sex and consent are a central theme. We see Terry struggle with the realisation that a spontaneous threesome was in fact planned without her knowledge, as well as Kwame who experiences sexual assault during a hook up through a gay dating app called Grindr which leads him to have an uncomfortable experience with reporting the assault to a male police officer as well as points him to experiment with his sexuality through having sex with a girl (who fetishizes him for his Blackness).

The last episode of the series takes the viewer through three fulfilment fantasies of Arabella after she fully recollects the night of her assault after she has spent weeks staying out at the bar where she was assaulted. These fulfilment fantasies have a cathartic effect on Arabella's recovery process. The series ends with Arabella successfully writing and publishing her book independently and rejoicing with her closest friends.

Appendix 2

Character Overview

Arabella

Arabella, (played by Micaela Coel) is the main character of the series. She was born to Ghanaian parents and was born and raised in London. She is a heterosexual Black woman and works as a writer. In the series she is consistently pressured by her agents to complete her latest piece however her assault defers her from these efforts as she struggles to come to terms with her assault. As she works through her trauma she learns of forms of assault and rape that she did not have prior knowledge about. This occurs through experiencing a second assault while still overcoming the trauma from her first and reading as well as hearing about other people's experiences with forms of sexual assault through social media. Arabella's closest friends include Terry and Kwame who are both also of Ghanaian descent.

In Episode 9 Arabella finds herself with a large social media following and gets momentarily caught up in online fame causing her to absorb her followers issues and try to obsessively categorise and separate the good and bad in her life. She finds she has placed herself on a moral high-ground. A therapy session leads her to realise she cannot draw a line between good and bad, criminal and victim, or friend and/or foe. These dichotomies lead to a black and white view of a reality which is more complex than what simple labels of good and bad will lead us to believe. Once Arabella realises this her perspective begins to shift in a direction that calls for a more nuanced interpretation of the world around her. This shift in perspective is what eventually frees her.

In the same episode, Arabella goes home after her therapy session and removes everything from under her bed, symbolic of her burying her issues as a way to avoid facing them. In addition to the bags of evidence that were used in her rape case Arabella also rediscovers an ultrasound from when she was ten weeks pregnant. She remembers she had an abortion but had since buried the memory. Once it comes rushing back she sees another version of herself from outside herself who repeats the same words back to her that she said to Kwame when finding out he lied to a girl about his sexuality: 'When I find out you paint things to make it look like you're a victim and I find out that's not the case it

really makes me question who you are.”. Hearing this statement draws her away from her moral high-ground and back into reality.

Terry

Terry, (played by Weruche Opia) is a heterosexual Black British woman of Ghanaian descent as well as an aspiring actress. She is Arabella’s best friend and they share a sisterhood-like bond. Terry puts in maximum effort to support Arabella through the aftermath of her assault. This is partially because she feels guilty that Arabella had been out with a group of friends Terry initially introduced her to and therefore feels partially responsible for not ensuring Arabella was safe with them on the night she was raped.

Terry initially suspects no foul play when a night out in Italy results in a spontaneous threesome between her and two men she meets at a bar during a flashback in Episode 3. Terry later on boasts about the threesome at an acting audition when they ask her what the most freeing thing she has ever done is as well as on a date. Terry’s internalised prejudices are challenged when she discovers the person she is on a date with is trans man. She eventually overcomes this prejudice as the two get alone and end up dating.

Kwame

Kwame, (played by Paapa Essiedu) is the third member of the friendship trio in addition to Arabella and Terry. He is a Black, gay male and is regularly socialising through a dating app for men through which he experiences multiple hook-ups. During a particular hook up he is sexually assaulted. He struggles to come to terms with it and keeps it to himself for some time. When Kwame tries to report his assault, he is met with an awkward reaction from the officer and the report is swept aside. Arabella and Terry are unsuspecting of the silent battle that he is fighting, reflected in the episode where Arabella locks Kwame and another man at a house party in same room together not long after his assault, causing him to experience severe discomfort and panic.

After his assault, Kwame decides to explore his sexuality more by going on date with a girl who he ends up sleeping with (Episode 8). She fetishizes him for his Blackness. Afterwards, when he tells her that he is gay, she calls him a

liar, becomes very angry and feels betrayed by him as he had not told her he was gay. When Kwame opens up about this sexual encounter to Arabella and Terry, Arabella has a negative reaction as she feels triggered by his lack of transparency to the girl he slept with. Later Arabella apologises to him as she realises her own wrongdoing in locking Kwame in a room with another man during a house party without his consent or knowledge of the trauma he was experiencing.

Theodora (Theo)

Theodora, (played by Harriet Webb) is Arabella's childhood friend from school. She was a white heterosexual female. When in high school, Theo would regularly lie to her parents and find herself in trouble, particularly due to theft. After a sexual encounter with a boy in her year goes sideways when he takes a picture of her during sex without her asking, she falsely accuses him of rape as a way of getting revenge.

In the present time in the narrative Theo leads an anonymous sexual assault support group. In Episode 6 Theo invites Arabella to do some promotional social media work at the same vegan delivery start-up company she works for. Later in Episode 7, upon listening to a conversation about the exploitation of Black people at Terry's birthday party, Theo admits and apologises to Arabella because she admits she had been told that she would be given a recruitment fee and additional pay if she could recruit a Black person or other person of colour by her employers, as it would add to the impression of diversity of the company.

David (Arabella's abuser)

David (played by Lewis Reeves) is the man who drugs and rapes Arabella on a night out at a bar. He is a heterosexual white male of British origin. There are certain statements David makes in Episode 12 that suggest he is a victim of abuse himself, although details of this remain unclear. In the second fulfilment fantasy in Episode 12 David tells Arabella he has served prison time for committing different forms of rape and has had to undergo mandatory therapy sessions during his prison sentence.