

# HOW *I MAY DESTROY YOU* REINVENTS RAPE TELEVISION

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British and American television shows frequently deploy rape and sexual assault to juice up characters' backstories or titillate viewers, but they rarely focus on how one assault impacts multiple people's lives or how intersectional oppression further traumatizes assault survivors. That may change in the wake of Michaela Coel's incendiary series *I May Destroy You* (BBC One and HBO, 2020). Over summer 2020, this formally and narratively provocative show rocked Anglophone television culture as it explored how three Black British millennials help each other cope with rape—and the racism, misogyny, homophobia, and classism that compound their distress.

With each new episode, the chorus of voices championing Coel's work expanded. Some critics praised how *I May Destroy You* foregrounds Black women's experiences of sexual assault; others commended its loving depiction of Black British culture.<sup>1</sup> A few applauded the series' wide-ranging soundtrack, which offers incisive commentary on the characters' perception of their world; a few more noted the industrial hurdles that Coel had to overcome to make her show on her terms.<sup>2</sup> Their collective enthusiasm suggests that *I May Destroy You* has answered a need for more artistically ambitious television about black life and for feminist-of-color critiques of rape culture on television.

Coel's show deserves to be understood, though, as more than just one of the most politically salient television series of 2020, because it is also a watershed in television as a narrative art form. To appreciate the series as an achievement in complex storytelling, critics must attend to its formal innovations as well as its generic and political interventions. These include its structural critiques of rape television as a genre and its thoughtful orchestration of narrative and broadcast time, especially

as these intersect with its fundamental queerness, which includes but is not limited to its exploration of sexual assault among Black gay men. Taken together, these devices confirm that *I May Destroy You* elevates its genre, and television more broadly, by contesting their prior shortcomings.

Because *I May Destroy You* reveals how bad most television shows about sexual assault are at addressing intersectional oppression, trauma, healing, and even the nature of their own genre, Coel's show may well destroy the viewer's enjoyment of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (HBO, 2020) and other ostensibly innovative series about sexual assault, from *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019) to *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015–19). Like most television series about rape, these shows privilege white victims, perpetrators, and investigators.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, *I May Destroy You* focuses on the healing bonds of three working-class Black British survivors of sexual assault: Arabella (Coel), Terry (Weruche Opia), and Kwame (Paapa Essiedu). Coel wrote *I May Destroy You* as a way to process her own assault, which she announced during her MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 2018. Rewriting her story and reinterpreting it within a fictional community of fellow Black survivors allowed Coel to “actively twist a narrative of pain into one of hope, and even humour. And to be able to share it with you, as part of a fictional drama on television, because I think transparency helps.”<sup>4</sup>

Race and personal reflection are not the only elements that distinguish *I May Destroy You* from prior series about sexual assault, however. Indeed, Coel's show systematically breaks down many of the genre's most ironclad conventions. Outside investigators never deliver justice in *I May Destroy You*, for example. They can't, because of either insufficient evidence (in Arabella's case) or homophobia (in Kwame's case). Consequently, the series doesn't tie narrative closure to catching the perpetrator—but rather, to restoring survivors' self-esteem. Survivors are never defined by their assaults, moreover, which means that they aren't depicted just as someone's victims. Instead, they are



Kwame (Paapa Essiedu), Arabella (Michaela Coel), and Terry (Weruche Opia), in *I May Destroy You*. Natalie Seery/HBO.

dynamic, complex people enmeshed in a loving community of Black Britons.

This characterological priority is established in the very first episode of the series, which follows Arabella's return to London from a writing retreat in Italy. She has one night to finish her book manuscript, but she can't focus and decides to get a drink with friends. After abruptly blacking out at the bar, Bella finds herself back in the office the next morning, writing away, unsure what happened to her. The only clues that something did happen are a cut on her forehead, a smashed cell phone, and a mental image of a man standing above her in a red bathroom stall.

That flashback is important, but so is the whole day leading up to it. Episode 1 lets viewers get to know Arabella as a person—a young Black writer with a deadline to meet, a social-media celebrity who's also a bit of a mess—before she is drugged and assaulted by a stranger. Viewers see both her insecurity (saying good-bye to her Italian lover) and her confidence (standing up to her white literary agents). Because Arabella does not enter the narrative as

a victim, her assault does not determine who she is to the audience. That's revolutionary: most British and American television uses assault scenes to pigeonhole victims before they get to be anything else.

Defining victims qua victims is just one of the insidious tropes that dominate rape narratives on television, as Sarah Projansky and Tanya Horeck have so ably shown.<sup>5</sup> Such stories also tend to focus on a single victim (per season, if not per episode) or single perpetrator, conventions that limit creators' ability to think deeply about how sexual violence is interpreted differently when different people—and identity categories—are involved. In contrast, *I May Destroy You* contrasts Arabella's, Terry's, and Kwame's varied experiences of assault, each of which is mediated by their gender, sexuality, and race. Over its twelve episodes, the series explores how their friendship affects their experiences of rape, what their community enables and what it forecloses. Structurally, the show does this by incorporating flashbacks of their assaults and other significant events to show viewers how trauma colors the characters' present behavior. The series also intercuts

private moments in their lives—the moments lived apart from one another—to consider the myriad ways people react to assault, including denial, guilt, anger, and, eventually, acceptance.

Juxtaposition is not only essential for the series' exploration of rape culture but also intrinsic to its aesthetic. Just as the series intercuts scenes to enrich viewers' understanding of the complex intersections of racism, classism, and homophobia in rape culture, it alternates pink and green gels in its lighting design to guide viewers' interpretations of difficult scenes. Coupled with Paul Cross's production design, these gels help viewers identify patterns—including patterns of misinterpretation—within the characters' worlds. The combined effect of these techniques is a bewitching narrative and visual kaleidoscope that exceeds viewers' expectations of what television can do, for they help illustrate how rape victims can become survivors despite the many forces working against them.

Nevertheless, the stories of *I May Destroy You* are tough to take. All of its lead characters are raped over the course of the season. Arabella is raped twice—first by the stranger who spikes her drink at a bar, then by her writing partner, who secretly removes his condom during sex (an illegal practice known as “stealthing”). Terry suffers rape by deception when she consents to three-way intercourse with two men who pretend to be strangers in order to seduce her. Kwame is assaulted by a man with whom he had consensual sex only minutes before. To witness so many separate incidents of sexual violence in one series is shocking, but their inclusion dramatizes rape culture in a way that no depiction of a single assault, survivor, or perpetrator ever could. Placing these incidents within a single community generates an accretive sense of rape culture as a systemic issue. As a result, viewers come to understand that rape may always be personal but is never only personal.

Accordingly, *I May Destroy You* purposefully embeds its characters in Black Britishness and explores how antiblack racism inflects their experience of assault. As Bolu Bobalola observes, Black British “culture [is] rarely seen on screen,” but Coel dramatizes its diasporic *mélange* and allows it to guide viewers' interpretation of her characters.<sup>6</sup> To that end, Ciara Elwis's soundtrack ensures that only Black artists comment on and enrich the series' narrative, while also representing the range of national influences that contribute to Black British music.

The soundtrack reinforces the kinship among Coel's characters, all of whom have different relationships to the black diaspora. This message is reinforced during a key

scene from episode 9 in which a white doctor, reporting on Bella's postassault CT scan, refers to her as being of “Afro-Caribbean origin,” a generalization she immediately denounces. White insensitivity to black life colors the world around Arabella, Kwame, and Terry, strengthening their bond. By attending so closely to the intersections of race and sexuality, *I May Destroy You* distinguishes itself from most other television series about rape and rape culture, particularly police procedurals. Yet the series extends its critique beyond its genre and into the real world, as when Terry drunkenly quips, “Black women don't get raped, except for Bella.” Terry's sardonic comment references British (and American) television's, and society's, ongoing refusal to treat attacks on Black women as seriously as it treats those on white women.

Correspondingly, *I May Destroy You* also explores rape culture's variegated intersections with professional mobility and race. Given the frequent racist microaggressions of her white literary agents, Arabella is thrilled to discover that her publisher, Susy Henny (Franc Ashman), is Black. Unfortunately, Henny uses their connection to encourage Bella to exploit her drug-facilitated sexual assault in her writing. She pushes Arabella to reorganize her manuscript around rape—then refuses to grant her an advance or extension to make that work possible. Clues in Henny's reserved demeanor and carefully curated office garden suggest that she lost her compassion for her authors at some point during her own fight for survival in a white-dominated industry. She may be more than just a victimizer, but she does try to capitalize on Arabella's pain for commercial gain. *I May Destroy You* is thus attuned to the fact that not all conversations about rape or surviving assault are equally beneficial to all victims. Social differences radically influence friends' and society's reactions to sexual violence, very often to the detriment of Black women and men.

One of *I May Destroy You*'s major interventions in its genre is to explore how cultural prejudices determine which victims will be believed and which dismissed, how racism and homophobia hobble the systems set up to help rape victims. After Arabella joins a survivors' support group run by her white friend Theo (Harriet Webb), a flashback shows viewers that, as a teenager, Theo had falsely accused a Black student of raping her in order to get back at him for taking degrading pictures of her during consensual sex. This flashback is one of several throughout the series that complicate viewers' understanding of the characters' relationships to sex and power. By bookending it with Theo's directions to her group—“I made this



Paapa Essiedu conveys Kwame's pain in *I May Destroy You*. Natalie Seery/HBO.

support group because I wanted people who'd been through sexual exploitation of any kind to find each other, to bring well-being, and to empower one another"—Coel shows how white privilege dominates and distorts conversations about sexual violence.

Yet Theo and Arabella are friends, even though Bella was the person who originally exposed Theo's subterfuge. How can that be? As she struggles to make sense of her bond with Theo, Arabella shows viewers how difficult it is to understand oneself or others in the face of intersectional oppression. Bella observes that, as a teenager, she "never noticed being a woman. I was too busy being poor and Black." As an adult, however, she finds that she must reconcile these identities to recover from her assaults.

Coel's embrace of broadcast temporality helps her convey her characters' struggles with intersectional oppression, including Arabella's conflicted relationship to Theo. *I May Destroy You* can now be binged online, but it was originally designed for single-episode consumption. As Coel explained repeatedly in interviews, Netflix offered her \$1 million for *I May Destroy You*, but she chose to work instead with BBC One and HBO in order to retain creative control over the production.<sup>7</sup> This decision led not only to greater artistic freedom and licensing rights but also to an elongated release schedule; BBC One broadcast

two episodes a week between June 8 and July 14, 2020, while HBO aired one episode per week from June 7 through August 24.

This extended timetable enriched the series' kaleidoscopic approach to narrative by giving viewers more time to reflect on how events are connected and conveyed. While "appointment viewers" might have lost track of some of the thematic patterns embedded in the show—such as its ongoing interest in the racial politics of climate change—they were given interludes within which to contemplate each episode, something that binge viewers lack. Julia Havas and Tanya Horeck contend that releasing shows in binge-inducing, full-season drops "opens up new avenues for interrogating rape culture."<sup>8</sup> They further argue that some binge-released series exploit the autoplay features of streaming platforms in order to redirect viewers' sympathies or reorient their perspectives on earlier events. *I May Destroy You* conversely allows its spectator the time to recover between installments. Not only does each episode hit with an intensity that discourages rapid consumption, but many emphasize character growth between episodes that might otherwise be lost on viewers.

Kwame's narrative is particularly salient in this regard, yet many critics have overlooked it in their responses to *I*

*May Destroy You* as they undervalue the show's queerness. Kwame is not the only queer character in *I May Destroy You*—Terry's interest in group sex and trans men clearly positions her outside the heterosexual norm—but Kwame's experience as a Black gay male survivor of sexual assault is crucial to the series' intersectional politics. Moreover, it exemplifies how Coel uses broadcast rhythms to help viewers understand the dynamics of trauma.

Initially, Kwame is very much positioned as the “gay best friend” who is always on Grindr but nonetheless provides emotional support (and aerobics classes) for Arabella and Terry. In episode 4, however, Kwame's story becomes central to the series' critique of heterocentrism in both rape television and survivor advocacy. Kwame arranges a threesome with his shy friend Damon (Fehinti Balogun) and a man he meets on Grindr, Malik (Samson Ajewole). Damon leaves when Malik and Kwame begin having sex, however. When Kwame later tries to leave, Malik stops him and pushes him down on the bed. Malik's subsequent assault on Kwame is unflinchingly portrayed: he pulls Kwame's pants down and thrusts against him until he ejaculates. As Kwame's face remains visible throughout the attack, microchanges in Essiedu's expression convey his character's intense shame, rage, and horror.

Essiedu's face functions as a bellwether for Kwame's subsequent struggle to make sense of others' homophobic reactions to his violation. He has been assaulted, like Arabella, but he will not be accorded the same respect or recognition that she has received. The police take Bella's report seriously and investigate quickly, if ineffectually. Yet they do nothing to help Kwame when he files his complaint. Forced to explain Grindr culture to a straight policeman, Kwame hides his pain behind a helpful tone, but the persistent green cast of the production design in this scene—so different from the vibrant pinks and vivid purples that characterize much of *I May Destroy You*—hints that the exchange will end badly. Indeed, the officer becomes increasingly uncomfortable, avoiding Kwame's eyes, getting up from the table, and finally leaving Kwame alone in the interview room. His case will not be pursued.

Terry does eventually offer Kwame some empathy, but his ongoing isolation as a violated gay man isn't helped by straight friends who understand rape as a women's issue. The light goes out of Essiedu's eyes for the next few episodes as he dials back his charisma to convey Kwame's growing depression.

Kwame's narrative enriches *I May Destroy You* by complicating its politics, showing how feminist antirape

activists can in turn victimize queer survivors. This theme emerges after Kwame begins dating women to compensate for his fear of being alone with men. When a homophobic female partner accuses him of rape by deception because he did not disclose his gay identification before they had sex, Arabella sides with her. Understanding rape as a women's issue prevents Bella from recognizing her friend's pain, even though it is written all over his face. As Kwame tries to reconcile with Bella, Essiedu's posture and features take on a softness, a keening for acceptance, that's painful to watch. His performance dramatically conveys the need for a more intersectional understanding of sexual assault, on television and in the real world.

As Kwame's story line suggests, *I May Destroy You* adds critical nuance to that old adage “Hurt people hurt people.”<sup>9</sup> Before Kwame hurt both himself and his female partner, Arabella hurt him by locking him in a room with another man to incite a flirtation. Arabella in turn was hurt by Terry when Terry encouraged their friend Simon to leave her by herself the night of her drug-facilitated assault. But Terry had been hurt when Arabella abandoned her at a bar three months prior. Coel has acknowledged that accepting responsibility for the transmission of trauma is central to her series. As she explained to *Vulture*, “[L]ooking for my enemies I became surprised to find a mirror, and I saw myself. I realized you can chase people for doing bad things, but while you do that, you have to realize there's probably someone running after you.”<sup>10</sup> Through its incremental approach to seriality and its focus on successive injuries between people who love each other, *I May Destroy You* shows viewers that the trauma of sexual assault always exceeds the event.

To mitigate that dark message, *I May Destroy You* explores healing as much as it does trauma. Its elliptical, associative approach to narrative mimics the alinear process of recovery, while its broadcast schedule allowed viewers to appreciate how victims become survivors. To that end, while Kwame, Terry, and Arabella all learn to live with what happened to them, it is Bella's journey that organizes the series' structure. Not only does *I May Destroy You* follow her circuitous route through the seven stages of grief, but its enigmatic conclusion privileges her self-validation and ability to write her own story.<sup>11</sup> It does so by offering four possible scenarios to resolve Arabella's quest for justice: three that involve her confronting her rapist and bestowing either vengeance or forgiveness, and one that sees a shift in focus from retribution to acceptance. Each scenario unfolds rapidly, with visual

tropes and lines of dialogue mutating and repeating between them.

The result is a kind of emotional whiplash as viewers struggle to adjudicate their own investments in Arabella's anger, compassion, and self-care. During a profound yet surreal moment in the third scenario, for example, Bella's rapist informs her that he'll leave only when she tells him to. She does, and he (finally) departs. What viewers may make of this uncanny exchange depends on what they project onto Arabella's story; its enigmatic depiction of closure can inspire a wide range of reactions. By combining multiple opportunities for catharsis within a single episode, Coel offers such an abundance of closures that viewers can appreciate how ambivalent the concept really is. Every ending precludes others, and none reverses the harm done. But the final option shows that no story of rape is complete unless it includes the moment when the survivor no longer allows it to define them.

*I May Destroy You* is a monumental meditation on race, rape, and their televised combinations that offers searing insights into the culture it critiques. Terrion L. Williams observes that "we are still living at a moment when violence against black women often fails to register as a pressing social issue, particularly when it does not directly involve state actors."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, television series about sexual assault routinely decenter Black women even in stories about their own violation.<sup>13</sup> *I May Destroy You* challenges all such narratives as well as the cultures—and viewers—that support them.

Michaela Coel dramatizes the complicated intersections of race, gender, and sexual violence in order to tell Black survivors' stories within the context of black community, and she does so in a way that advances television as an art form in important ways. *I May Destroy You* points to television's unfulfilled potential to bring viewers into intimate contact with marginalized subjects, and equally, to show what television can look like when those who've previously been excluded get to lead. In Coel's hands, television may yet make the world a better place by destroying what came before.

## Notes

1. See, e.g., Salamishah Tillet, "I May Destroy You' Imagines a Path Back from Sexual Assault," *New York Times*, August 25, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/arts/television/i-may-destroy-you-sexual-assault.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/arts/television/i-may-destroy-you-sexual-assault.html); and Bolu Babalola, "The Innate Black Britishness of *I May Destroy You*,"

*Vulture*, August 3, 2020, [www.vulture.com/article/i-may-destroy-you-black-britishness.html](http://www.vulture.com/article/i-may-destroy-you-black-britishness.html).

2. See, e.g., Mikael Wood, "The Secret Weapon behind 'I May Destroy You's' Greatness? The Coolest Music on TV," *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 2020, [www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-08-17/i-may-destroy-you-music](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-08-17/i-may-destroy-you-music); and E. Alex Jung, "Michaela the Destroyer," *Vulture*, July 6, 2020, [www.vulture.com/article/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you.html](http://www.vulture.com/article/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you.html).
3. I use "victim" advisedly throughout this article to describe disempowering media depictions of characters who have been sexually assaulted, even though many people who've been assaulted prefer the term "survivor." Since most television narratives about sexual assault do not emphasize survival, focusing instead on injury and suffering, I use "survivor" only to describe characters whose healing is the subject of a show. For more guidance on this terminological distinction, see "Key Terms and Phrases" at [www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases](http://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases).
4. Michaela Coel, "MacTaggart Lecture in Full," *Broadcast*, August 23, 2018, [www.broadcastnow.co.uk/broadcasters/michaela-coel-mactaggart-lecture-in-full/5131910.article](http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/broadcasters/michaela-coel-mactaggart-lecture-in-full/5131910.article).
5. Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Post-feminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
6. Babalola, "The Innate Black Britishness of *I May Destroy You*."
7. Jung, "Michaela the Destroyer."
8. Julia Havas and Tanya Horeck, "Netflix Feminism: Binge-Watching Rape Culture in 'Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt' and 'Unbelievable,'" in *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, ed. Marieke Jenner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming), <https://arro.anglia.ac.uk/705125/>.
9. For more on the origin of the phrase, see Matthew Phelan, "The History of 'Hurt People Hurt People,'" *Slate*, September 17, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/09/hurt-people-hurt-people-quote-origin-hustlers-phrase.html>.
10. E. Alex Jung, "Michaela Coel Isn't Going to Tweet This," interview with Michaela Coel, *Vulture*, February 1, 2019, [www.vulture.com/2019/02/michaela-coel-black-earth-rising-chewing-gum-interview.html](http://www.vulture.com/2019/02/michaela-coel-black-earth-rising-chewing-gum-interview.html).
11. Coel makes explicit reference to "the seven stages of grief" in the Jung interview, above.
12. Williamson's cogent observation is especially true for Black trans women and queer folk. Terrion L. Williamson, "'Sellin' Your Own Body': Contextualizing Racialized Gender Violence and Illicit Sexual Practice," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 525.
13. Sarah Projansky, "Persistently Displaced: Black Women in Rape Narratives," chap. 5 in Projansky, *Watching Rape*.