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'It started with a kiss' *EastEnders* and subversion from within: Domestic 'queer' star persona and British social realism

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Abstract

This paper explores the performativity of the domestic queer star persona in soap opera, foregrounding the historical presence of Michael Cashman, the LGBTQ+ rights activist, who appeared as the first queer character in *EastEnders*, in 1986. Cashman's later cameo roles in 2016 and 2022 are also explored, alongside evaluating the appearance of other openly gay actors taking on queer roles in *EastEnders*, demonstrating the potential for 'subversion from within' to produce social realism and consciousness raising. *EastEnders*' wider development of LGBTQ+ rights narratives is also explored, considering stories of coming out, hate crimes and same sex marriage. At the same time, the foundation of queer social realist film and the cultural setting of London is considered, while theorising changing models of public service as influencing TV soap opera form.

Keywords

Queer star persona, social realism, consciousness raising, LGBTQ+ activism, public service

Introduction

In 1986, *EastEnders* (1985-) introduced their first gay character, Colin Russell, who would be played by openly gay actor and LGBTQ+ activist Michael Cashman. This

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appeared to be a collaborative venture with series producer Julia Smith who had worked with Cashman before, was aware of his unashamed openly gay identity and had already scripted queer characters in the TV series *Angels* (1976-82) (see below). Cashman stated 'I felt safe working with [Julia Smith] and felt proud of the work we were doing' (2020: 233).

Such a political union however was controversial. Numerous complaints were made to the BBC, when in 1987, Colin briefly kissed his on-screen boyfriend Barry, simply on the forehead and, in 1989, when Colin then kissed his new boyfriend Guido this time full on the lips (discussed further below). While much later in 2022 when Colin briefly returned to *EastEnder*s while reuniting with Barry, this time kissing him passionately on the lips, there would be celebrations in the press (Metro, 2024), the spectre of dissent, controversy and unashamed visibility would surround Cashman's appearance in the series, reflecting a political vision, if not a union, between Cashman and the series producers.

EastEnders potentially laid the foundations for later queer domestic representations in UK television serial drama. This might include *Queer as Folk* (1999-2000), *Metrosexuality* (2001), *Cucumber* (2015), and *Heartstopper* (2022-), which predominantly feature all queer casts, that would change the narrative universe for queer representation; *Queer as Folk* indeed would become a soap opera of the same name in the United States (2000-05). Added to this, it should be noted that while *EastEnders* has largely focussed on gay and lesbian identities, it has represented a relative diversity of LGBTQ+ characters, including the longstanding character of Sonia Fowler who is bisexual and Kyle Slater who is transgender.

However, Cashman's initial performative visibility in *EastEnders* was subversive, in challenging the heteronormativity of mainstream soap opera. As Marvin Carlson tells us:

> Unable to move outside the operations of performance (or representation), and thus inevitably involved in the codes and reception assumptions, the contemporary performer seeking to resist, challenge, or even subvert these codes and assumptions must find some way of doing this 'from within'. (1996: 172)

Cashman did this, collaborating with Julia Smith and screenwriter Tony Holland, influencing the queer narratives of the soap opera, that would develop over successive eras and stimulating the soap to address stories of coming out, isolation, integration, vulnerability, internalised homophobia, and hate crimes (EastEnders Wiki, 2024). At the same time, his appearance has mapped the progression of queer visibility, the apparent advance of equality legislation in the UK, and changing public opinion, that may support, or alternatively push back, such advances. Notably at the time of writing, we are entering a new era for LGBTQ+ activism, where civil rights are being rolled back (CNN, 2024), and there are new priorities for television producers and scriptwriters concerned for the representation of transgender citizens who are subject to erasure.

Hence, this paper offers a historical context in framing the ongoing and constantly changing struggles to support LGBTQ+ identity within mainstream media representations. In doing this, I deploy a cultural studies approach in theorising the 'social realist' and 'consciousness raising' potential of the domestic 'queer' star persona who may offer a

role model for a community or a cause, rather than a film studies spectator-based approach that might assess the psychological elements of queerness within a star which could deconstruct identity forms. However, as Brett Farmer states,

> To engage gay identity is to engage a complex psychosocial web of discourses, knowledges, desires, and practises that have competing effects - oppressive and subversive, hegemonic and resistant, disabling and enabling. (2000: 39)

Hence, this paper negotiates the complex nature of gay/queer identity in framing a social realist potential (Parker, 1998) which may be contested as there is no agreed political consensus within queer community, vacillating between identity politics/affirmation and queer theory/disruption. At the same time, it largely focuses on gay/queer men (and partly on lesbian identity) and deploys LGBTQ+ identity as a broad all-encompassing term to reflect the wider community of sexual diversity.

LGBTQ+ activism and documentary-like identity

Cashman advises us of his political intentions in 1987, while attempting to stop the progression of Clause 28, a legislation that would prohibit the discussion of homosexuality in schools: 'I knew deep in my heart that as a gay man, especially playing a gay role on TV, [that] I would never be able to live with myself if I sat back and did nothing. I needed to be at [the Clause 28] protest March' (2020: 240). Cashman frames the moment of his call to action, leading him to become a founding member of the LGBTQ+ political rights and public lobby body, Stonewall. Later he would be elected as a member of the European Union parliament (1999-2014) and then was made a life peer in the House of Lords (2014), thus establishing his public identity.

Cashman alluded to the danger he experienced in taking part in *EastEnders*, particularly evident in a *News of the World* double page article entitled 'Secret Love of AIDS Scare EastEnder', which references a fictional AIDS storyline connected to Colin. The paper 'outed' his boyfriend Paul, at the same time publishing Cashman's home address where, as a result, a brick was thrown through the couple's window. Added to this, when Colin kissed boyfriend Guido Smith (Nicholas Donovan), *The Sun* published the headline 'Scrap Eastbenders; BBC Soap showed two gay men kissing full on the lips'; Piers Morgan reported: 'The homosexual love scene between yuppy poofs Colin and Guido, was screened in the early evening, when millions of children were watching' (1989: 5), framing Cashman as a provocative gay rights campaigner.

Despite this, Colin's representation offered a domestic vision of gay/queer men. Colin's coupling with Barry, initially aged below 21, also keyed into the inequality of the age of sexual consent for gay men in the UK at that time (Parliament, 2024). Also, with the rise of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s, *EastEnders*'s decision to depict the heterosexual Mark Fowler (rather than Colin) as its long-term HIV positive character was profoundly significant in evoking the progressive ethos of the producers in supporting diversity, and particularly sexual minorities.

The need to represent a documentary-like identity was apparent in the collaborative union between Cashman and Smith, and their development of the character of Colin. Soap operas had historically included documentary-like features, as *Coronation Street* (1960-) did from the outset, for its representation of post war British community in deprived areas (Dyer, 1981). Such a dynamic evoked the shift from naturalism and the move towards realism in 1960s television, where drama and documentary forms were melded together (Caughie, 2000), in landmark single dramas such as *Up the Junction* (1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (1966). Cashman, as an actor born in the deprived area of Tower Hamlets in East London, offers not only a personal connection to the setting of *EastEnders*, but also his provocative identity as a queer man playing a queer character potentially stimulated a sense of authenticity. A sense of conflation was also apparent when the news reporting on the personal life and the political activism of Cashman appeared alongside the storylines created for Colin, where documentary and drama forms were seemingly interconnected in representing LGBTQ+ activism.

Key structural elements that map this theory are evident when he returns to the series in 2016 to invite Dot Branning (June Brown) to attend his gay marriage (discussed further below) and in 2022 where he attends her funeral and wake, evoking Cashman's and Brown's close relationship in real life. When Colin attends Dot's wake, he reunites with old friends. Jack Branning talks of Dot, discussing her marriage to his father Jim, framing the importance of 'finding your one true love'. This is significant, as this episode frames the narrative of separated couples: Cat and Alfie Moon and Mick and Linda Carter are presented as 'true loves' that should be reunited. However, in framing the 'true love' trope, the producers deploy a heteronormative concept, that potentially subordinates same sex couples, pertinent when, after the death of Colin's husband Eddie, Colin reconnects with his 'true love' Barry (with whom he first coupled in 1987). When Colin and Barry reunite, this seems like an arbitrary simplistic focus in comparison to the potential re-unions of Cat and Alfie Moon and Mick and Linda Carter, who were all long term, fully developed heterosexual characters. Despite this, when Black gay character Felix Baxter (Matthew Morrison) witnesses Colin and Barry kiss each other passionately (as they depart in their car) telling them that they represent 'life goals' for gay men, the audience is presented with a reflective vision of queer community, not a simple focus on hetero-normative coupling.

Consciousness raising and public service as social realism

Such a trajectory, I argue is connected to the notion of consciousness raising as evoking social realism and the reconceptualisation of public service. Firth and Robinson (2016) tell us that consciousness raising 'groups were central to the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, with the first groups emerging in the late 1960s, [and] have been interpreted as a pedagogical tool for social transformation' (346). Richard Dyer reflects on consciousness raising in his examination of gay and lesbian documentaries, considering that in affirmation documentary 'several voices are brought together in ways that both establish lesbian/gay identity and demonstrate the social [and collective] dimension of

personal experience' (1991: 243). Within this, he considers 'the Marxist idea of "false consciousness", the wrong seeing consciousness you had to rise above' (245).

In the UK before the advent of *EastEnders*, meaningful representations of queer characters on television were rare, and largely restricted to landmark art house dramas such as in *Roads to Freedom* (1970), *The Naked Civil Servant* (1975) and BBC's *Play for Today* (1970-84) drama series (see BFI, 2024). At the same time in situation comedy queer life was apparent, as comedic covert representations in *Are You Being Served*? (1976-83) and '*Allo 'Allo!* (1982-92) and as more explicit but stereotypical identities in *Agony* (ITV, 1979-81). Also, the US soap opera *Dynasty* (1981-89) reached large audiences in the UK, framing a key male bisexual character (Geraghty, 1991). Close precursors to *EastEnders* representation of queer life in UK soap opera potentially include *Rock Follies* (1976-77), *The Crezz* (1976), and *Angels* (1976-82). Whilst these mostly focussed on gay men who were partnered, *Angels* also included a strongly implied lesbian relationship between the characters of Sister Easby and Beryl, in Series 1 (Archive Television Musings, 2025). Despite this, the most notable political antecedent to *EastEnders* would be *Brookside* (1982-2003). This Channel 4 soap opera included the depiction of gay male teenager Gordon Collins 'who lived for some time in his [parents] house with his lover' (Howes, 1993: 86), and who had '[come] out while still at school. … [whose stories] tended to centre around his relationship with his lover, Chris' (Geraghty, 1991: 159). Often the narratives were political, such as reporting the 'unfairness of the building society [for] refusing them a mortgage unless they have an HIV test' (ibid).

Significantly, David Buckingham (1987) reports that *EastEnders* co-creators Julia Smith and Tony Holland didn't watch any of the usual soap operas when developing *EastEnders*, except *Brookside*, which evoked the consciousness raising efforts of new modes of public service. *Brookside* was commissioned for the launch of Channel 4 which had been established as one of the outcomes of the Annan Committee Report (1977). The Report reconceived public service broadcasting so that rather than aiming to simply 'inform, educate and entertain' its model British citizen (as defined by John Reith), it was required to reflect the diversity of UK society. Jeremy Isaacs, who became the first chief executive of Channel Four, stated that we need to cater 'for minorities presently neglected, which builds into its actuality programmes a complete spectrum of political attitude and opinion' (cited in Harvey, 2000: 103). Hence, *EastEnders* was founded on new models of public service that were demonstrated in Channel Four's *Brookside*.

Nevertheless, social realism in soap opera can be traced back to earlier soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (discussed above), evoking the moral vision established in the British documentary movement of the 1930s that stimulated a need for social change or cultural improvement. However, as Glenn Creeber reports, in films such as *Housing Problems* (1935) a focus is established that:

> … tends to set up both the filmmaker and the audience as voyeurs, peering into working class life and forcing them to adopt a semi-anthropological perspective. …. The narrative and filmic perspective of the working class was usually positioned from outside, the middle class implicitly looking at the working class from an implied distance. (2009: 425)

This sense of distance in defining the working class as other, vividly apparent in viewing the progressive dramas of the 1960s/1970s mentioned above, appears less evident in the era of Channel 4, *Brookside* and the rise of *EastEnders*. This was a response to the need to reflect social diversity (post the Annan report) but it also reflects the rise of neoliberalism and capitalist realism, suggesting that all citizens were equal in their ability as consumers, producers and competitors to gain access to services. As Katie Beswick reports, 'The authenticity that underpins working-class depictions that operate in the register of "the real" is a central tenant of capitalist realism, which needs to position the working class as a fixed and homogenous entity' (2020: 82). Hence capital realism simplifies the notion of class inequality and diversity. Seen in this way, both Colin in *EastEnders* and Gordon in *Brookside* are framed as middle-class avatars representing the middle-class observers looking in, rather than the lower-class subjects of investigation. Colin evokes the middle-class neoliberal consumer, evident in his vocation as a graphic designer, and in his 'educated' and 'non-regional' accent. Gordon is a student, who hails from a middle-class family. *EastEnders* utilises capitalist realism, to simplify class divisions, reflecting the dynamics of neoliberalism, while framing the spectre of the queer star persona.

Domestic queer star persona, gender and non-western dynamics

While the notion of the 'star persona' is almost exclusively applied to those in the film industry, with the broader term of celebrity being deployed for 'stars' on television, in this essay I am framing the potential of the domestic televisual star. As Bennett and Holmes (2010) advise us, 'Canonical conceptions of television fame [or celebrity] emphasise how the medium's rhetoric of familiarity and intimacy, and the domestic context of its reception, mitigate against the paradoxical and enigmatic construction of the film star. [Such a potential] foster[s] a close identification between persona and role' (66), intimating the everyday. The emergence of *EastEnders* and the character of Colin Russell in the 1980s gave mainstream television audiences a chance to identify with an everyday actor who represented a political ideal, as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and more specifically during the era of HIV/AIDS, when audiences were little informed, and there was a need for understanding.

As Dyer tells us 'Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces' (1986: 5). Through a queer actor taking on a queer role, their work engages with the process of self-representation, in a political, commodified manner, whether they reveal their personal queer identity to the world, or they conceal it. For example, 'queer' social realist films include *Victim* (1961), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *Darling* (1965), and *Zee and Co*. (1972), which, respectively, featured Dirk Bogarde, Murray Melvyn, Roger Curram, and Michael Cashman, who were not necessarily 'out' at the time that these films were released but were later framed as queer icons because of these works (Pullen, 2016). These films placed a focus on the narrative of the private queer individual within the wider community.

However, as Dyer tells us 'The private self is … represented through a set of oppositions that stem from the division of the world into private and public spaces' (1981:

11), revealing that oppositions such as 'private / public', 'individual / society', 'body / brain' often lead audiences to prioritise the emotional knowledge of the star as stemming from the former, thus seeming to offer access to the private life of the star. Hence knowledge that a star 'may' be queer, offers a powerful intrigue to an audience wanting to know more about the personal life of the actor. This is particularly noticeable in Elisabetta Girelli's analysis of queer star Montgomery Clift (2013), and Dyer's work on Rock Hudson (2002), where 'queerness' as much as queer identity plays a significant factor in the consumption of their star persona. Despite this, as Dyer attests, considering the impact of Hollywood stars Judy Garland, Paul Robeson and Marilyn Monroe, stars are often considered 'to be genuine [through revealing] their inner selves, [framing the] genuineness [of] the human body itself' (1981: 13). Cashman's identity as a queer actor playing a queer role, allowing audiences access to his social universe and his political world view, suggests a sense of authenticity or genuineness.

Two openly gay actors, also playing openly gay characters, have followed Michael Cashman in *EastEnders*. John Partridge played the character of Christian Clarke (2008-16), who became a central focus, when he coupled with Syed Masood (2009-11), who at the time of their initial encounter had a fiancé, Amia Sha. Heather Peace played the character of Eve Unwin (2021-), who is initially introduced as married to the heterosexual character, Stacey Slater, while they were in prison, in a ruse for Stacey to help Eve gain parole. However, the gender dynamics of this queer star persona is problematic; Partridge (as Christian) and Peace (as Eve) are framed as masculine oriented identities, in opposition to others.

Peri Bradley reports on the representation of Christian and his identification with Syed, by considering gay/straight binaries and Keller's conditions for queer romance when straight men are 'converted' to be gay, and 'the heterosexuality that made one partner appealing is destabilized' (2009: 9). She argues that

> Christian is an openly gay male, but instead of being feminised, he is tall, muscular and confident and can be easily identified as the bearer of masculinity and the gay male exotic gaze. In contrast, Syed the 'straight male' is visually coded as feminine with his romantically flowing hair, long sweeping eyelashes, slender frame and openly emotional responses. (Bradley, 2012: 168)

Such a representation others the 'heterosexual' queer male (Syed) as feminised and submissive while the 'homosexual' queer male (Christian) is coded as dominant. Christian hence inhabits the masculine world of privilege, strength and endeavour. He appears as a heroic romantic male character who saves Syed from a doomed marriage to Amia. However, it is problematic to code the white male as superior, as it subordinates the non-white subject as an exotic, in the manner of 'orientalism' (Said, 2003), rendering Syed as an object of examination, fascination, and potential 'disavowal' (see Hall, 1997).

Problematic masculine 'heroism' is also evident in the representation of Eve Unwin, who first appears in the Prince Albert bar and there encounters the local community. Spontaneously, she successively punches two men on discovering their identities, believing both to be Martin Fowler, with whom, she understands, Stacey had an

unsatisfactory relationship, and who may be responsible for sending her to prison. However, such a display of aggressive masculinity is problematic, as lesbians have historically been coded as overly masculine, in the 'dyke' and 'butch' diminutive archetypes. Even though later Eve develops as a more sensitive, sympathetic and earnest character, who (in 2024) proposes to Suki Panesar by getting down on one knee on public display in the Queen Vic pub, her coding as a strong quasi-masculine female endures.

Although Christian and Eve are represented as capable in protecting their non-western partners, respectively, Syed (to Christian) and Suki (to Eve), a sense of cultural complication emerges. While they appear to form an alliance that frames contemporary debates of non-western LGBTQ+ identity, that 'include' the migrant, the refugee and the asylum seeker, elements of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007) may be apparent, coding western identity as superior, objectifying the non-white partner as an exotic other. Central within this is the cultural representational dynamics of place and space.

London as queer – coming out and hate crimes

Queer social realist films reflect a diversity of queer life in London, often mapping its building regeneration after the bombing of the second world war, revealing tensions between working-class and middle-class areas. *Staircase* (1969) and *Villain* (1971) prominently highlight the dissonance of queer lives in London and the East End. Both films star Richard Burton and frame issues of tragic domesticity, violence, criminality and coercion, highlighting isolated figures who are troubled in their own personal worlds. *Victim* focuses on tensions between the working class and the upper class in London, highlighting the covert relationship between Jack 'boy' Barrett (Peter McEnery) who works on a building site, and Melville Farr (Dirk Bogarde) who is a solicitor. Barrett is drawn to Farr, but he is later blackmailed for being queer, which could lead to a prison sentence (Weeks, 1990). Barrett is later arrested by the police and then commits suicide. *Victim* also includes a queer community, mostly represented by a group of queer men, some of whom are blackmailers, who meet in a common public house, not dissimilar to public houses in the East End.

Darling and *Zee and Co* frame the lived space of the queer characters as defined by their work roles, in opposition to female employers or service users (Pullen, 2016). In *Darling*, Malcolm (Roger Curram) works as a fashion photographer and in *Zee and Co*, Gordon (John Standing) is a hairdresser, and Gavin (Michael Cashman) is a seamstress' assistant. In both films, queer men are framed within the social space of London, rather than set within deprived areas; they appear within middle-class suburbs and are coded as subordinate to female characters, who use queer men as confidents or service providers. I argue that *EastEnders* develops this diegetic world, representing young queer men exploring interests in love, wanting to fit into community.

Just a few months after the launch of *EastEnders*, and before the appearance of Cashman, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) was released. With a screenplay produced by Hanif Kureshi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* developed the representation of young queer men in London. It became 'not only one of Channel 4's biggest commercial successes but also a landmark [text] in critical thinking about representation and cultural diversity'

(Geraghty, 2005: 5). Framing a romance between Omar, a member of the Asian community who competes for commercial success, and Johnny, a white youth who is disenfranchised and is connected to a right-wing group of indolent friends, it links white and non-western queer identities. In many ways framing the rise of 'capital realism' (see above), a focus on neoliberalism is made, highlighting the 'Thatcher years' in the context of London. Kureshi went on to write the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), later adapted as a TV series by the BBC in 1992. Kureshi's TV adaptation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is also set in London, focussing on the central bisexual character of Karim, who realises that to achieve success as an actor, he must present himself as an exotic other, while questioning the achievement of authenticity and equality. Kureshi's work inevitably influenced the media representation of London as a queer landscape, where LGBTQ+ individuals might thrive, as entrepreneurs and competitors.

Some 4 years later, *Beautiful Thing* (1996) advanced this social realist narrative setting, this time more squarely focussed on the East End. Set on the Thamesmead estate in Southeast London, it explores a romantic narrative between two young male gay teenagers, who still attend school. Framing the brutalist modern architecture of social housing in the East End, it locates the central romantic characters of Jamie (Glen Berry) and Ste (Scott Neal) as struggling to claim their sexual identities, while demonstrating their love for each other. They find acceptance, represented in a powerful scene on the roof top of Thamesmead, where they romantically dance with each other, supported by the community. Central within this representation, is the dominance and emotional force of Jamie's mother, who appears as part of the East End community and, reflecting the times, is a struggling entrepreneur who wants to advance her career, by running her own public house. The casting of Linda Henry in the role of Jamie's mother is significant, as she later became a cast member in *EastEnders*, as if revising her role as a supporter to queer youth in the East End.

Linda Henry appears in *EastEnders* in 2006 as Shirley Carter, arriving to reconnect with her family. We later discover that she is the grandmother of Johnny Carter (Sam Strike), who appears in *EastEnders* in 2013, along with parents Mick and Linda Carter who are the new managers of the Queen Vic pub, arriving just before Christmas. Johnny, a student at university, is initially represented as concealing his gay identity from his family, except for his sister Nancy, who keeps his secret. However, after an argument with Johnny in front of their parents over new year, Nancy states that Johnny is gay, but then swiftly withdraws this. Johnny denies the allegation, and soon after gets drunk, as he is sexually inexperienced, and wants to conceal his queer identity. Soon after, Danny Pennant (a bisexual character) flirts with Johnny, describing him as a 'good looking barman'. Later, when the couple are alone on a park bench at night, Johnny kisses Danny, not aware that Shirley secretly observes this. Later, Shirley also witnesses Johnny deny that he is gay in the company of his parents. This double framing of Shirley as a witness, constructs Linda Henry as a 'doppelganger' fictional character, referencing her portrayal in *Beautiful Thing*; then as a loving and accepting mother to Jamie, and now as a perceptive and understanding grandmother to Johnny.

Later, the sequence when Johnny comes out to his father Mick (Danny Dyer) is resonant of the coming out sequence in *Beautiful Thing*, when Jamie's mother reassures

him. After arguing with Jamie that he had been seen in a gay pub, she challenges him; he sobs and admits that he is gay. She then embraces him, cradling his head close to hers, rocking back and forth, saying 'Don't cry. Hush, it's alright, hush, hush. I am not going to put you out in the morning like an empty [milk] bottle'. While doing this she strokes the back of his head, as if nursing her beloved child. In *EastEnders* when Johnny finally comes out to his father Mick, a similar representation is constructed. Johnny cries, hesitating to say that he is gay, then states it, crying and rocking back and forth; his father holds Johnny's face affirming, 'I am so proud of you, as I know what you just told me takes a lot of courage'. Johnny is tearful, looking away, while his father lovingly strokes Johnny's tilted face, rubbing his thumb by the side of Johnny's ear, as if wiping away tears. Although there is no open admission that the direction of this scene in *EastEnders* was inspired by *Beautiful Thing*, it's clear that the emotional cues are similar and specially made vivid by the 'doppelganger' appearance of Henry cast as Johnny's grandmother. Johnny's coming out in *EastEnders* frames issues of domesticity and the connection of community and family.

Issues of vulnerability are central in mediating the political narratives of the LGBTQ+ community. Hence the 'hate crime' representation in *EastEnders* of Paul Coker, who in 2016 would be beaten to death for being gay, is significant. Added to this, the representation of Ben Mitchell, who would be raped in 2022, similarly explores issues of abjection and the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ individuals. These tropes of vulnerability, like those of domesticity and community, play a key part in the development of queer social realist drama based in London, following that evident in *Victim* when Jack 'boy' Barrett is driven to suicide after being blackmailed, and likewise in *Darling* and *Zee and Co*, where queer male characters are humiliated, by their female counterparts/employers, for attempting to fit in.

Paul Coker (Johnny Labey) first appears in *EastEnders* in 2015 and makes a connection with Ben Mitchell (Harry Reid), later coupling with him. Paul's family are undertakers, coded as contextual service providers to the community. In contrast, Ben's family, led by his father Phil Mitchell whose family for many years ran the Queen Vic pub and later runs a used car business, is central to *EastEnders*. His mother, Kathy Beale, is the head of her prominent family, coded as hardworking yet acerbic. Ben's coupling with Paul is significant, as Ben (who at the time of writing has been played by six actors) could be considered as the longest enduring gay male character in *EastEnders*. Ben originally struggles to understand his sexuality in 2012, and then comes out after coupling with Paul, who is murdered in 2016. Later in 2019, Ben is coupled with Callum, leading to their marriage, and then in 2022, Ben is the victim of rape. The murder of Paul is significant in 2016, representing the political ideology of LGBTQ+ rights in *EastEnders*, and significantly coincides with the cameo return of Cashman, appearing as Colin, who invites Dot Branning to his gay wedding. Hence the death of Paul and the marriage of Colin are juxtaposed, in a storyline in which Colin also briefly meets Johnny Carter (discussed below), as if counterpointing the LGBTQ+ political issues of hate crime, death, marriage and coming out.

Ben and Paul go to a gay nightclub and Paul's murder takes place while the couple are on their way home. They are confronted by thugs, and both beaten up, but are separated,

and initially Ben is thought to have been murdered. However, the most striking political representation within this narrative is the jury trial of the perpetrators, where the *EastEnders* community, mobilise attending the trial, in support of Ben. They affirm that the murder was a hate crime, evident where all the cast members who support Ben wear T shirts emblazoned with the words 'End Hate Crime'.

However, the focus on LGBTQ+ rights is framed as extending from the character of Colin. Notably, just before Paul's funeral takes place Colin visits Dot Branning, in the hope that he will persuade her to attend his same sex wedding. When he visits Dot, he argues 'We have got equality now. Same sex marriage is legal'. Dot resists the invitation, expressing that her religious beliefs prevent her attending, almost as if understanding that Colin's naïve attestation that legal same sex marriage has led to equality, is a hollow account. After this scene Colin visits the Queen Vic pub, encounters Johnny Carter (Ted Reilly) and enquires as to the identity of Paul; Johnny replies 'He was twenty, beaten to death for holding his boyfriend's hand'. Colin replies:

> I lived here, years ago. It was a different world. But I was lucky, I had someone, younger than me. Mad as a bat, but we had one another. … And we lived through the AIDS crisis, and the hatred and everything else. Of course, the world is changing, changing still. But there are some people who want to hold it back. People who want to hate you because they think that you are different.

In offering this monologue to Johnny, who was supported by his family when he came out, it appears as if Colin is representing the political discourse of Cashman, speaking as a queer activist icon. When we later discover that Dot does indeed attend Colin's wedding, and she emotionally discusses the pleasure of witnessing Colin reading his vows, we are not provided with a visual representation. Instead, the visual iconography of gay marriage is coded through representing Paul in his coffin and Ben getting ready for the funeral, both whom have each other's names tattooed on their fourth digit – wedding finger. However, this subtextual representation may signify queer marriage as inadequate in *EastEnders*.

This may also be evident when, later in 2021, Ben (Max Bowden) marries Callum Highway (Tony Clay), a police officer, yet the couple soon become distant, and Ben strays, seeking the company of Lewis Butler (Aidan O'Callaghan), manager of the Prince Albert gay bar. However, Ben is raped by Lewis on the premises, in scenes that audiences understandingly considered as harrowing to watch (Tanatarova, 2024). This representation was provocative, as using the gay bar as the setting where a gay man is raped by another implies that allegedly queer safe places might be places of vulnerability, or dissonant with queer community, rather than sites of liberty and affirmation. Also, *EastEnders* was not the first soap opera to depict gay male rape. Notably *Hollyoaks* (1995-) was foundational in representing gay male rape, depicting an assault on Luke Morgan in 2000 in a special late-night edition of the soap opera entitled: Breaking Boundaries. *Hollyoaks* then depicted the rape of John Paul McQueen in 2015, while later *Coronation Street* represented the sexual assault of David Platt in 2018 (BBC, 2025). Despite this, *EastEnders*' high-profile contribution to this debate stimulated therapeutic potential that reached wide audiences. This included some audience members willing to publicly

discuss their own experiences as victims of male rape, and the cathartic benefit of witnessing nuanced and sensitive representations of their trauma in soap opera (Kelleher, 2022).

Conclusion

The queer social realist star persona is an enduring phenomenon that emerged in films of the 1960s/1970s, that has developed within TV soap opera as a domestic form, since the advent of the Annan Committee Report and the reimagination of public service as reflecting the need to represent social diversity within the UK. *EastEnders* has built upon this foundation and potentially has been influenced by previous representations of queer community in London within films, as discussed above. The representation of coming out stories, hate crime assaults, and dealing with the traumatic story of male rape, frame a narrative universe in *EastEnders* that has utilised queer narratives to speak to a mainstream audience, offering some socio-cultural and educational stances. Cashman's ongoing documentary-like appearance in *EastEnders*, alongside other openly gay actors playing queer roles (as if representing themselves), has been emblematic of the soap opera's apparent support for queer community. *EastEnders* has framed a diversity of queer narratives: coming out stories, the threat of hate crimes, examining internalised homophobia that might lead queer men to conceal their status as a victim of rape, whilst highlighting the potential of queer couples. Also, it has attempted to address relationships between white and non-western queer characters, and the pitfall of objectification and subordination.

However, the narratives that have framed Cashman's later guest appearances in 2016 and 2022, respectively, focussing on marriage equality and 'true love', are problematic, as they appear to highlight heteronormative, and assimilationist concepts. There seems to be little space for revisionist tropes, that might take a lead from queer community, such as framing gender fluidity or 'families we choose' (Weston, 1991), evident in later queer soaps such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* (2004), or more recent progressive texts addressing youth such as *Heartstopper*, where a queer cast lead the storytelling.

Nevertheless, *EastEnders* has offered a place for 'subversion from within' (Carlson, 1996) for queer activists and progressive storytellers, demonstrating that to change the system you must engage with it. Cashman inevitably became part of the system, particularly notable in his institutional political ascendancy, furthering his credibility as a queer icon. Despite this, it's not always possible to find 'a place at the table' (Bawer, 1994), and those within LGBTQ+ identity often appear isolated and disconnected from power, as is particularly evident now trans people are experiencing erasure, since the problematic rise of right-wing politics on a global scale. The stakes have never been higher, and the need to 'subvert from within' remains.

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