Issues of Race, Aging, Generativity, and Futurity in *Cucumber*

*Cucumber*, is a television drama series that aired in early 2015 as part of a three part production titled *Cucumber, Banana, and Tofu*. *Tofu* focuses on the lives of queer people in Britain and their attitudes towards sex, while the former are scripted television shows. The result was a programme that was simultaneously hilarious but also extremely serious (Lindner 29). As is popular with British television, this series only has one season. Because of this the series packs in as many complex characters, and as many representations of queer people as it can manage. The series manages to offer the audience a primer of queer representations that have been recycled while still managing to offer new ones. For example, the series has closeted characters, and the ‘tragic’ queer figure but still manages to have representations of generativity on screen through the interactions of older and younger queer characters. *Cucumber’s* plot focuses on Henry, an aging gay man who has intimacy issues with his partner, Lance. The series of events that lead to their break-up, and what comes after make up the plot of the show. The characters and their situations are in discourse with issues surrounding futurity, generativity, intersectionality, and the idea of the closet. These discourses will be used to analyze three key relationships in the series. The broken relationship between Henry and Lance, the dangerous one that develops between Lance and Daniel and the strange friendship that develops between Henry, Dean, and Freddie. *Cucumber’s* confrontation with these issues, as well as the series’ ability to
grapple with discourses that were formerly ignored in mainstream media, shows an evolution of queer representation on television. Through the analysis of this television series, I will apply theories that are usually applied to American television, to a British media text.

Henry and Lance’s relationship is central to the plot of the show and has many nuances beyond their problems with intimacy. Their relationship explores ideas of futurity and addresses myths surrounding homophobia in the black community. The fifth episode of the series includes a moment that Lance and Henry have when they first meet. The two men share their experiences with coming out to their families.

Henry: My mum was alright with it, my dad just kind of, harrumphed. Never really mentioned it again, not in a bad way, just, he wasn’t going to talk about his son’s sex life no matter who I was. All a bit normal really.

Lance: But that’s good though, that’s nice.

Henry: Must’ve been worse for you.

Lance: How do you mean?

Henry: Oh, you know, culturally.

Lance: Yeah, I suppose. My dad belongs to this church, more of a fellowship really. They’d have prayer meetings around the house.

Henry: Yeah.

Lance: They’d pray for me, all that stuff. When I was about thirteen they tried to have an exorcism on me.

Henry: No way!

Lance: They didn’t mean any harm, but they got this preacher in. I say preacher, more of
a witch doctor. He did this tribal dance with these bones and it started to rain inside the room.

This dialogue addresses what kind of world that the characters exist in. One where, without taking offence, Lance may joke about cultural difference. While the characters may exist in a post-homophobic society it is definitely not post-racism. Henry, through his dialogue marginalizes the black community. King cites that the black community is represented as homophobic, socially backward, and repressed whereas the white community is viewed as a vehicle towards acceptance and freedom (283). Henry describes his coming out experience as ‘normal,’ while Lance jokingly describes his difficulties coming out and maintaining a relationship with his father. The series makes sure to include Lance’s reconciliation with his father, but not before affirming the myth that homophobia is still alive in Britain’s black communities. Lance’s death also pushes the series’ post-racism narrative. Enck and Morrisey argue that discourses in color blindness and post-racism function powerfully to construct and maintain racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness and marginalize people of color (306). Lance’s death is yet another way for the audience to feel remorse for the circumstances of Henry’s life. Because he is an older, white, male character his feelings are held in higher regard in the series, even more so than Lance’s sister who is a black woman. She has little screen time dedicated to mourning her brother, she functions only as an antagonist to Henry. Despite the show’s efforts to be inclusive it is still inherently flawed in that it uses black bodies to uphold white privilege. Even though Henry benefits from his whiteness, there are still ways in which he finds himself at a disadvantage, his age being one of those attributes.

Why is the study of gay future and aging relevant? The short answer would be that the cultural construction of time and future operate under violent, exclusionary, and
oppressive terms, marking gay male aging as a horrific and repulsive process that ought to be devalued, if not fully avoided (Goltz 4).

The history of aging gay male representation has been bleak. Formerly, representation had been limited to villainous or predatory characters (Goltz 4). Or they were shown in a way that is often very bitter, isolated, and miserable, these representations are not only ageist but homophobic as well (Goltz 6). Unlike their heterosexual counterparts who are viewed as normative and non-sexual, older gay men are often seen as non-normative, due to their sexuality and hypersexual (Yep, Lesure, and Allen, 69). These blatant myths tell queer youth that not only are they going to be unhappy with their sexuality, but also with their age as they become older, predatory figures. Older gay characters are slowly moving away from this particularly harmful portrayal in the media. Now we see the older gay males in mainstream media in comedic roles, like Modern Family. These roles are a softer, more nurturing portrayals in some aspects. Although these representations are not ‘perfect.’ Rarely are these older gay men in direct contact with young people in a way that does not seem overtly sexual or predatory.

Cucumber complicates this discourse through the series’ portrayal of the relationship between Henry, Dean and Freddie. Henry feels stuck in his relationship with Lance and his eye often strays to other men, especially Freddie the main object of almost every character’s sexual desires. Henry and Freddie’s relationship seems as though it will eventually turn into a sexual relationship, but it does not. Even though other characters on the series are quick to assess how strange their living arrangements are, Freddie’s father being one of them he says; “What is a man who is forty-six years old doing living here with boys? Do you have any idea what you look like?” Henry who has decided to live with Dean and Freddie, two very young men is strange to almost every character including Freddie who sets out to make Henry miserable during his stay.
This mirrors Goltz’s theories about how aging gay men are represented in the media. Henry was living in relative happiness when he was paired with Lance. Now that he is separated he becomes isolated from his peers through the loss of his job, and is made to feel bitter and miserable because he is now forced to live alone after leaving the home he had with Lance. As a single, aging gay male he has trouble finding meaningful connections with people who are not his own age. Dean and Henry’s relationship is especially interesting because Dean is Henry’s way of connecting with youth culture. Their relationship could be representative of reverse generativity, instead of Dean learning from Henry, the older man learns from his younger friend. This is demonstrated in the first interaction these characters have on screen.

Henry: He looks really nice, though. Hashtag, get naked!
Dean: Yeah, no one says hashtag out loud, not any more.
Henry: They do. My friends do.
Dean: Well, exactly. Your friends.

Their interaction in this episode is similar Goltz’s ideas about queer generativity, although instead of being mediated this is direct contact, and the older generation is being taught by the younger (141). The next paragraph will explore how two men of the same age group interact and how representation differs in that relationship.

In contrast to Henry, Dean and Freddie’s relationship which ends simply with loose ends, there is Lance and Daniel’s relationship, which ends in tragedy. Daniel is a very interesting character because he is one of two closeted characters that we come across in the series. There is some time before he and Lance engage in any sexual activity, but we do get clues from the dialogue that he engages in with Lance, even during their very first conversation.

Daniel: We should go out for a drink!
Lance: Yeah.

Daniel: With your boyfriend, too, not just you and me, that might freak him out. Though don’t get me wrong, I mean to a *normal* bar, yeah, not your sort of place. Don’t want you leading me to the dark side. Well not on the first night! Yeah, so I’m kind of exploring the city, really, I wouldn’t know where’s good for a drink…

Lance: We could show you.

Daniel: Okay, but not Canal Street, okay? We’ve all heard about Canal Street.

Lance: Well, it’s not what it was, but… Why? What’s wrong with it?

Daniel: Be fair. They’d all buzz around me like insects.

Lance: Yeah…

Daniel: Well...anyway...work to be done. What about Friday night?

Lance: Um...Maybe...I’d have to check.

Daniel: Well, don’t raise my hopes, now. I know men like you.

The way that Daniel speaks to Lance for the first time is strange. He is constantly asserting his heterosexuality and masculinity during this dialogue. There are very strong references to Daniel feeling that he is either different from or superior to Lance. He uses language like “your sort of place,” the “dark side,” and “men like you.” The way he uses his words suggests that since he has just found out that Lance is gay, Lance is now a threat to his masculinity. The way Lance reacts is also strange and uncomfortable. He notices that their rapport has changed since he mentioned that he had a boyfriend. This suggests that *Cucumber* takes place in a post-closet world. The majority of the characters are gay, they are out to their friends and family and suffer no damaging repercussions from their ‘coming out.’ This ties into Becker’s analysis of gay and straight men in the media: “The banal ubiquity of television’s openly gay guys supports the
illusion of a post-closet world where all men who are gay are out, and any man who isn’t out is obviously (and securely) straight- otherwise they’d be out” (127). Daniel, who is a divorced man who cheated on his wife is not securely straight. If he were, he would not have a broken relationship with his ex-wife. He would also not react so adversely to Lance’s admittance of his sexuality. There are other straight characters that are openly asked about their sexuality and admit to being in relationships. Another way that the series ‘proves’ heterosexuality is through children. The gay couples in the television show have no children while Henry’s sister, Cleo, who despite not being in a relationship proves her heterosexuality through the existence of her children and the discussion of their birth. Daniel, who never says explicitly that he is gay, and never falls into another heterosexual romantic relationship, is a closeted character, in a world that is very obviously post-closet.

The closet is also a source of danger in *Cucumber*, characters who stay in the closet are either endangered or perpetrators of violence. Daniel murders Lance after they engage in oral sex. After they have sex Daniel accuses Lance of ‘raping’ him even though the encounter was consensual. Becker argues that, “The closet becomes a violent place constructed by the pathetic and ultimately senseless fear of gay men rather than the fear/hatred of homophobic straight men or by a heteronormative social order”(128). Daniel experiences panic and lashes out violently against Lance. He has no one to fear in his everyday life. Daniel and Lance work at the same company where everyone is aware of Lance’s sexuality. He also does not appear to have any immediate family. Daniel only lashes out in fear because he is afraid of Lance as a gay man either because he has a misplaced fear of corruption or because he is afraid of his desires for him. Daniel is later jailed for his violence against Lance. This is in keeping with Peters’ analysis of closeted characters. For Daniel, the closet is what Peters would define as a ‘vulnerable,
dangerous, and violent space’ (488). Daniel is a perpetrator of violence, he is a danger to another character, and is made vulnerable because he faces repercussions for his actions.

To conclude, *Cucumber* is a television series that follows the events of Henry’s life after his separation with his partner, Lance. Through their dissolved relationship they are free to explore new relationships and forge new bonds. These new relationships, especially those that involve the characters Dean, Freddie, and Daniel are in discourse with key concepts in queer media analysis. The series explores ideas of the closet, race, intersectionality, futurity, and generativity. *Cucumber* uses tropes that have been used in other media texts in the past such as ‘tragic’ gay characters, and the aging gay male. The series uses these tropes to highlight the under-representation of other themes like the representation of homophobia in the black community, and generativity between different generations of queer individuals. Although these tropes are recycled they are refreshed through these new forms of representation. *Cucumber* is a British media text, despite that this paper has applied theories that are usually applied to American media texts. This highlights the fact that despite cultural difference queer representation in Britain and America can be viewed and analysed from the same critical lenses. Through this critique it is possible to discover how international media outlets have decided to go about queer representation, and how these representations may differ or remain the same.
Works Cited


