

It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's... a Girl?!: Analyzing Representations
of Femininity on The CW's *Supergirl*

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Abstract

Although it takes more than diverse media representation to create positive social change, representation is still an important part of normalizing identities and pushing discussions of social issues. However, representations of certain minority groups, whether on the basis of racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities, are often largely absent in media, and flawed when they do exist. This is true of comic books and the various forms of media that have adapted superhero stories. For instance, superhero tales have long been dominated by depictions of superheroes who are heterosexual cisgender men. Because of this trend spanning from the 1930s into the 21st century, superhero stories have developed a reputation of being a boy's club rife with sexism. Certainly, this issue persists to this day, but this thesis provides a snapshot of how women are fairing in superhero media in the mid-to-late 2010s. By focusing specifically on the case study of the CW's *Supergirl*, I discuss how representations of superwomen have improved greatly compared to popular expectations and no longer entirely reflect a singular and problematic ideal of what being a woman means. In particular, my examination is centered around three of *Supergirl*'s main women: protagonist Kara Danvers/Supergirl, Kara's sister and super spy Alex Danvers, and the heroic Nia Nal/Dreamer. By doing an in-depth analysis of how femininity is represented through these three women, I argue that the show presents complex and nuanced depictions of femininity that are a strong step forward for the genre.

Acknowledgements

Before getting to all of the people who have helped produce this thesis in different ways, I think it is pertinent to make an acknowledgment about myself as its author. This thesis is focused primarily on women and femininity, including a transgender woman, and my subject position is that of a cisgender man. This is something I have tried to be conscious of in every aspect of my work, but I feel it is still important to acknowledge up front that I do not have the same lived experiences as any woman, cis or trans, and hope for this work to open up further discussion of superheroes and gender, including work by more women as well as trans and non-binary folks.

In terms of who I would like to thank, first and foremost, this thesis would not have been possible (or anywhere near the same level of quality) without the important guidance of my supervisor Rena Bivens. From day one Rena has been instrumental in helping me really find what I wanted to accomplish with a project of this size and where to look for a lot of the foundational work on gender that provided much of theoretical backbone of my analysis. Thanks to courteous, thoughtful, and timely feedback, Rena also pushed my work to be the best it could be. With our many discussions and her written feedback, this project went about as smooth as a master's thesis could, and I cannot imagine having done it with another supervisor. I think it is fair to say that had I not taken classes with her during my fourth year of undergrad, my grad school career would not have played out the way it has. Likewise, the support of committee member and second reader Benjamin Woo was invaluable. Early on, Ben provided helpful insight in how I could narrow down the methodological approach I wanted to take with my work as well as scaling the project appropriately. Throughout the process, Ben was also suggested numerous pieces of valuable literature on comic books and superheroes, as well as providing pointed suggestions on revisions once I had a full draft for him to read through. I would also be remiss to not thank Laura Horak,

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Moving on for the sake of brevity, I would like to specifically acknowledge specifically my sister, Gina, as well as she was instrumental in providing support and advice throughout my entire university career, including applying to this graduate program. In fact, given that I stayed at her apartment the weekend I met *Supergirl* cast member Nicole Maines (detailed briefly in my introduction), one might argue that this thesis direction may not have happened without her – thanks, Gina. And of course, Nicole Maines herself has been something of a personal hero for the last couple of years, and served as direct inspiration for this project, so in some ways, it is dedicated

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Stories That Matter: Project Inspirations

This thesis started with a very simple belief: stories, and what they represent, matter. Beyond a life-long interest in superheroes and a growing concern with social justice issues throughout my academic career I chose Supergirl's stories because of the involvement of actress Nicole Maines. I became interested in Maines' background and career as a transgender activist after she joined *Supergirl* in season four and quickly became a favourite of mine. Later, as I read initial literature to narrow my focus, I also had the pleasure of attending the premiere of *Bit*, a 2019 vampire film with a feminist conscience, headlined by Maines. Taking questions after the screening, Nicole discussed the importance of playing trans women who are not defined purely by their gender in projects like *Bit* and *Supergirl*. I jumped on the chance to meet and talk to Maines, which prompted me to read Amy Ellis Nutt's biography *Becoming Nicole* (2015).

Becoming Nicole focuses on Maines' struggle to be recognized and accepted for who she is, rather than what she was labelled at birth. Given that representations of transgender people have been few and far between, cisgender, working class people such as Nicole's mother Kelly had no idea what being transgender means, or that gender was not the simple binary we are often taught. Kelly would learn from firsthand experience however, as a young Nicole expressed frustration at not being accepted as a girl or being allowed to do the things girls do. Kelly was sympathetic, but ultimately unsure if going along with Nicole's wishes was the right thing to do, until she saw a successful transgender author interviewed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Kelly realized that other people like her daughter existed and decided that helping Nicole was just (Nutt, 2015, p. 47). Nicole herself would find some comfort and vindication from a later episode of *20/20* about a young trans girl, relieved to see she was not alone in the world (Nutt, 2015, p. 81). After a years-

long legal battle against a Maine school for prohibiting her access to the girls' washroom, Nicole decided to go public with her identity as the anonymous plaintiff, explaining "stories move the walls that need to be moved" (Nutt, 2015, p. 259). Nicole argues that by telling stories including diverse people, these diverse identities become recognized and accepted in society. This ethos fit perfectly with what I wanted to write about in my own thesis, so given Maines' involvement, I settled on investigating *Supergirl*.

1.2 "Why? Because I'm a Girl?": *Supergirl* and This Project

This project is a snapshot of women's position in superhero media in the mid to late 2010s, explored through a case study of the first four seasons (87 episodes) of the television show *Supergirl* (2015-present). I focus primarily on the protagonist character Supergirl/Kara Danvers, Kara's adoptive sister Alex Danvers, and sidekick/fellow superhero Dreamer/Nia Nal. Focusing on them allows me to examine three diverse representations of femininity: a cisgender heterosexual woman (Kara), a transgender heterosexual woman (Nia), and a cisgender lesbian woman (Alex). The two cis characters are portrayed by cis actresses Melissa Benoist and Chyler Leigh respectively, and Nia is portrayed by trans actress/activist Nicole Maines. All three women are white, but their versions of femininity differ: Alex becomes increasingly androgynous throughout the show, Nia is outwardly "girly," and Kara's expression falls between them on the gender spectrum.

Supergirl follows the adventures of Kara Danvers, Kryptonian refugee and cousin of Superman. Beginning as a meek assistant at CatCo Worldwide Media, Kara grows to become a crusader for truth and justice both as the titular hero and as a CatCo Magazine reporter. As Supergirl, Kara works with her sister Alex, an agent for the Department of Extranormal Operations (DEO), to keep their home National City safe. Alex's journey sees her discover she is a lesbian,

and Nia Nal joins the cast in season four as a new reporter for Kara to mentor. As they bond, Kara learns Nia is half-alien and inherited her mother's supernatural abilities, allowing Kara to also nurture her skills as a crimefighter. While tackling supervillains and science-fiction threats, they and their allies also combat down-to-earth social justice issues such as sexism, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and immigration hysteria. After the show's first season on CBS in 2015-2016, it moved to the CW network, joining other DC Comics superhero shows such as *The Flash* and *Arrow*. This shift was explained by the networks (partly co-owned by the same parent company) agreeing the show was a better fit for the younger demographics of the CW, especially after a crossover appearance by the Flash boosted ratings (Wagmeister, 2016).

By being based on established DC Comics properties, the show brings with it the baggage of their comics histories and fans' expectations/preconceived notions of who these characters are, how they should be portrayed, and what should happen. In some ways, this constrains the changes that can be made for the sake of adapting these characters to a different medium, while any changes must be approved by DC in the first place. That being said, *Supergirl* and its sister shows have taken certain liberties with comics lore while leaving other, potentially problematic elements intact, as I will discuss primarily in the chapters on Kara and Nia.

1.3 Why Study Superhero Media?

As a genre, superhero stories borrow heavily from two old literary traditions: the adventure story and the epic hero. As a formula, the adventure story dates back to the earliest human myths and sees a hero persevering through a series of harsh trials in pursuit of a morally just victory over their foe, often paired with the hero finding romance on their quest (Cawelti, 2013, p. 78-79). Superheroes themselves follow the mold of the epic hero, an archetype typified in the epic poems of Edmund Spenser and John Milton in the 16th and 17th centuries. These heroes are the

embodiment of moral good and their fights against injustice are meant to be cathartic for audiences by showing that evil can be defeated and to affirm the social values of their era, “encourage[ing] our conformity to [them]” (Rollin, 2013, p. 87). These heroes routinely rely on violence as the solution to problems and risk personal harm in seeking justice for their communities (Rollin, 2013, p. 93-94). Following that mold, Nama notes that “superheroes symbolize societal attitudes regarding good and evil, right and wrong, altruism and greed, justice and fair play” (2013, p. 252).

As the genre matured, many stories have come to involve more complex morality than this black-and-white view, however, such as Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. As discussed by Klock (2013), *The Dark Knight Returns* reflects a maturation in superhero storytelling, as Miller’s reflexive interpretation of Batman’s long mythos involved engaging with then-current Reagan-era politics and questions of vigilantism and fascism that seem inherent to superheroes. This connection was not a new idea, as other scholars such as Walter Ong (2013) had criticized the genre’s seemingly implicit endorsement of fascism. Ong argued that figures like Superman and Captain America act as uncomfortable models of what an ideal citizen should be – namely through their hypermasculine physiques and attitudes and willingness to risk their lives for the state. While not *all* superhero stories can be read as endorsements of these ideals, it does serve as a starting point for understanding that these stories do inherently convey political ideologies. Sometimes these ideologies are more blatant than others, and some follow more radical social beliefs, seen in works such as Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams’ *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow*, which dealt with issues of race and class (Nama, 2013) and the 1990s Black superhero imprint Milestone Comics, which presented a multiplicity of Black masculinities to challenge the status-quo of white male heroes (Brown, 2013).

Despite the fact that superwomen *have* been present for about as long as supermen have – the first real superwoman, The Woman in Red, debuted in 1940, two years after Superman, and the much more successful Wonder Woman debuted in 1941 (Robbins, 2013, p. 53-54) – the genre and the very idea of a superhero hold a masculine connotation (Cocca, 2016, p. 6-7). The term superhero is traditionally associated with fantastic superpowers, but also includes characters who possess no superhuman abilities, yet still do amazing things. Jennifer K. Stuller argues that those who operate as “a spy, a secret agent, an assassin, a detective, a witch, [and] a reporter” (2010, p. 5) can all be seen as *superwomen*, generally with “a uniquely identifiable skill *or* power” (p. 6, emphasis added). I would extend this definition beyond “superwomen” to inform how I use the general term superhero. For instance, given her similarity to *Alias*’ Sydney Bristow, whom Stuller singles out as a superwoman, many see Marvel’s Black Widow as a superhero, despite lacking superpowers and operating as a spy/assassin. Some may disagree with this view, yet Batman’s status as a superhero is rarely questioned, despite his own lack of powers.

For the purposes of this thesis, being a superhero is less about abilities/origins than it is about actions and intentions, such as a commitment to a mission “that benefits the greater good,” distinguishing them from villains (Stuller, 2010, p. 7). Robinson (2004), meanwhile, argues that a woman becomes a superhero “because she is powerful in ways that women are not traditionally supposed to be” (p. ix) and often presents a “challenge to the masculinist world of superhero adventures” (p. 7). These explanations are useful given that I would position Alex Danvers as a superhero herself, despite being a regular human and government agent, unlike Kara and Nia. Alex’s more masculine gender identity also stands to challenge the status quo of superhero stories without being undercut by her sexual identity, as I touch upon in chapter 3.

Although superheroes have occupied our screens for decades, adaptations have multiplied exponentially in the last twenty years. For instance, between 2002 and 2012, about 50 superhero films were released theatrically, earning over fifteen billion dollars (Hassler-Forest, 2012, p. 3-4). This has not slowed down since 2012, as *Avengers: Endgame* recently became the highest grossing film of all time (Rubin, 2019). Because of the political nature of their source material, scholars such as Dan Hassler-Forest, Richard J. Gray II, Betty Kaklamanidou and many others have explored the ideologies espoused by superhero adaptations at length. For instance, in *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, Hassler-Forest (2012) connects the surge in their popularity to post-9/11 neoliberalism¹, as they often reflect ideologies similar to George W. Bush's administration. Hassler-Forest cites examples of how these films are both produced by *and* perpetuate this worldview to expose messages he fears may be harmful to passive audiences. Following the cue of scholars such as these, I examine how *Supergirl* navigates the genre's flawed relationship with gender. It is important to remember that while this representation of gender is similar to other genres', gender is still contextual, and I am focused specifically on how it is represented within superhero stories.

1.4 Gender: Enforced Norms

This project is underpinned by an understanding of gender as a social construct, which I explore through Kara, Alex, and Nia. However, as a preliminary step, it is important to establish some foundational ideas. First, hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity offer a point of comparison for how these characters perform femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is a dominant form of masculinity that not only subjugates and stratifies men, but also privileges them over

¹ Neoliberalism refers to a political ideology that rejects strong government control in favour of less regulation, increased privatization, and an emphasis on individualism. It sees the capitalist economy as the best method of solving social issues (Vincent, 2009, p. 337).

women (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This form of masculinity is not natural: it is reified through repetition by powerful figures and institutions, including media (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832-833, 846). It inspires or *demands* a specific, singular performance of *unattainable* heterosexual masculinity (Connell, 1987, pp. 184-186), embodied by icons such as The Rock or Jason Statham, whose characters are stoic and violent, among other *expected* traits (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). These “ideals” of masculinity are contextual, changing over time.

Emphasized femininity, meanwhile, is inextricably linked to hegemonic masculinity, likewise existing to maintain men’s dominance (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005). It is an unhealthy ideal of femininity, emphasized by society as the singular, acceptable femininity in order to control women by pushing them into supportive and nurturing roles, such as mothers, girlfriends, and wives (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848), having them find value in their identity through their appeal to men (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 236), and engage in passive behaviour. A specific appearance is also dictated by emphasized femininity, including makeup trends and “girly” clothes such as skirts, dresses, and high heels (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 230). This is not to say that these fashion decisions are inherently harmful to women. Rather, it is an issue of emphasized femininity when one dresses and acts in certain ways *only to impress men*. Other forms of feminine expression, such as skater girls, reflect what has been called “alternative girlhood” because their identities are seen as deviant for they do not cater to what is conventionally attractive and include masculinities, thus “challenging” men’s dominance (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 230). On *Supergirl*, Alex echoes this challenge to hegemonic masculinity with her alternative *womanhood* (i.e., her androgynous identity).

These concepts are important when looking at performances of gender because they offer a point of comparison. Representations become problematic when they align strictly with innocent, unchallenging, and stereotypical depictions of men and women. This does not mean a character is harmful or sexist because their identity includes the presence of something falling under emphasized femininity – wearing high heels does not make a gender traitor. Instead, examining *all* parts of a character is necessary to see if those elements are part of a complex identity and how other characters are represented similar and differently. In the next section I explain good representation is not about ticking off boxes – instead, it means presenting complex and multiple versions of identities so that one is not privileged above others or presented as the *only* option.

When analyzing depictions of gender, it is also important to discuss sexuality. Gender and sex *are* two distinct categories, yet one's sexuality can shape their gender. For instance, the double standard present regarding acceptable sexuality for men and women is only intensified against queer women. An action that is publicly permissible between a woman and a man (such as holding hands) is often met with hostility and violence when performed by two queer women. Because of this, queer women may be more secretive and guarded with their personal lives in fear of judgement, changing how they express their true selves. This can manifest itself visually, causing queer women to downplay nonnormative femininities (e.g. being butch). Heterosexual butch women, meanwhile, may feel more comfortable expressing a similar femininity because their sexuality means they are less likely to face violence as a result – their gender transgression is more acceptable because of their sexuality. For these reasons, discussions of gender that do not include sexuality fail to provide a complete picture. This observation is not unique, as others such as Susan Stryker (2004) have critiqued queer studies for limiting their focus so strictly to sexuality that transgender studies emerged, in part, to create space for discussing *gender*. The two should not be

mutually exclusive. Likewise, other identity categories (race, ability, etc.) provide a more comprehensive picture of gender – though this analysis is limited in these regards, partly due to the invisibility of whiteness as a distinct race.

Just as gender should not be divorced from sexuality, discussions of femininity and women should consider masculinity and men as well. Partly, this is because (as I will discuss in the next chapter), traits that we understand to be feminine are not exclusive to women, nor is the opposite true. Likewise, as I will touch upon with Judith Butler's work, femininity is not a static category – it is situational. This means not only that the category evolves over time, but also that we should move away from our tendency to think of them as strict binaries. Consider, for instance, the existence of non-binary and genderqueer people, who exhibit elements of masculinity and femininity, but may not be neatly summed up as one or the other. Each analysis chapter works under these beliefs, focusing on different facets of gender representations including visuals, sexuality, relationships with other characters, and characters' actions.

1.5 Representation: Important, to a Point

Why is representation something worth studying? What *is* representation? In this case, I use representation to refer to the presence of people of different social identities (e.g. race, sexuality, gender) in media so that it accurately reflects the diversity of audiences. However, media is *not* always representative of reality – those who are not white, heterosexual, cisgender men are continually underrepresented (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019). Fair and equal representation is important for both marginalized groups themselves and dominant social groups. For individuals that are part of a marginalized group, seeing themselves better represented in media can provide a boost to their self-esteem, confidence, and ability to reach for higher goals in life (Cocca, 2016, p. 3) – just as it provided Nicole Maines with the understanding that she was not alone.

Women are commonly portrayed through stereotypes that paint them as weaker and more emotionally volatile than men, while women who are queer and/or non-white face other stereotypes, assuming them to be more aggressive. For instance, only 40 of the top 100 grossing films of 2018 featured women in leading or co-leading roles and only 28 of those were women of colour (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2019). But even this number can be misleading, as simply being present does not guarantee a meaningful representation. This number is based purely on the presence of women in these films, not their screen time or the amount of dialogue they have, let alone if their role plays into stereotypes. Representations have also been lacking in superhero stories in various media as well, often as a result of ignorance and scapegoating on the production side. For instance, in the spring of 2017, Marvel Comics' vice president of sales, David Gabriel, blamed the poor sales of books starring women and minority characters on audiences, saying "what we heard was that people didn't want any more diversity. They didn't want female characters out there" (Kopin, 2018, p. 439-440). This statement fails to take responsibility for the sales or to consider issues such as marketing and whether the writers and artists on these books are recognizable names to the general audience. While it is true that a group's poor (or absent) representation may affect their ability to dream beyond their circumstances, and stereotypical representations can negatively shape how they are viewed by society (Cocca, 2016, p. 3-6), this is not to say that representation alone is enough to enact social change. Positive spaces and community groups are important as well.

When representations focus too much on the mere presence of diverse people on screen, it ignores a common problem: often, an actor of colour and/or a queer actor is cast as a character whom the writers and producers never intended to be something other than cis, heterosexual, and white. This means that any changes to reflect the character's new identity are done last minute and

are surface level, at best (Warner, 2017, p. 32-33, 36). Warner refers to this level of diversity as “plastic representation” because it is carefully crafted to make the media look progressive, but under the surface it is hollow and collapses under scrutiny (2017, p. 35). For instance, Warner cites Jay-Z’s meta-music video *Moonlight*, which problematizes the filming of an all-Black version of *Friends*, because it changes nothing about the characters except for the colour of their skin. For representation to be meaningful, diversity is needed on the production side, which means combating systemic issues, so characters can reflect “the histories and experiences of the culture that the character’s body inhabits” (Warner, 2017, p. 36-37). For *Supergirl*, this has been fought for in part by executive producer Greg Berlanti and casting director David Rapaport, both of whom are out gay men using their positions to open the doors to more inclusive representation by hiring actors and staff of diverse racial, sexual, and gender identities (Artavia, 2019; Boucher, 2019; Lawrence, 2017). Berlanti himself has been one of those responsible for arguing the case of changing a character’s background when adapting them to the small screen in order to better match the makeup of reality (Boucher, 2019).

It is important to note that while I am expressing a desire to see better representation, there is no simple end goal or moment when *perfect* representation would be achieved. Instead, representation will always be an ongoing process meant to prompt conversations about things people may not otherwise be aware of. By presenting diverse people and issues in a familiar setting, media can help to normalize them and work towards ending stigma. It is important to *keep* presenting these people and issues to the general public. Representation *fails* when diversity slides backward and these identities/issues are no longer remembered or cared about (or when it makes a community more vulnerable to violence). For instance, in the 1990s, independent filmmakers made great headway in raising public awareness about the AIDS crisis, leading to more pressure

on the US government to take action. However, once public attention turned to the issue, some filmmakers felt their work was done and moved onto other projects, causing a relapse in public interest (Feder & Juhasz, 2016, n.p.). This demonstrates that while great progress with representations can be achieved in a short amount of time, social norms push back on it constantly, meaning that representation will revert to limited inclusion if it is not fought to be maintained. Now that I have established my interest in examining media representation, what exactly am I looking to answer about representation in this thesis?

1.6 Methodology

A few key research questions have guided my research throughout this project. How does *Supergirl's* portrayal of women compare to trope-ridden, stereotypical representations of femininity present in other superhero media? What do the different portrayals of cis and trans women tell us about evolving representations of gender? When the show touches upon “political” topics such as feminism and xenophobia (through gay and alien characters), how does it treat them – with mere lip service or serious confrontation? How does *Supergirl's* portrayal of a trans superhero stack up to common representations of transgender individuals (both within superhero media and otherwise)?

For this project, I am using qualitative content/close textual analysis, with specific concepts and ideas borrowed from film studies. Before getting into the specifics of each method, it is important to explain why I have chosen to borrow from both. As I am examining a live-action television show, utilizing tools from film studies offers me some specific guidance and terminology to address, analyze, and interpret the representations of femininity and political issues present on *Supergirl*. Likewise, textual analysis offers a broader guideline on how to approach a “text.” However, this is a project conducted in communication and media studies, rather than

sociology or English. Because of that, utilizing film studies' concepts in tandem with textual analysis and thinking about issues of production and development discussing in communication studies allows me to look at *Supergirl* not just as an isolated television programme/text, but as one part of the long history of the superhero genre, including numerous versions of Supergirl herself. This means that I will also be discussing *Supergirl* in relation to some of the characters' comic book histories, promotional materials for the show, and other media featuring Supergirl. For instance, I will discuss the origins of the name "Supergirl" and how the show attempts to deal with it, divorced from the context of 1950s superhero comics. Likewise, it is important to keep in mind how this medium differs from comic books (with the use of physical human bodies, audio, moving images, etc.) and how the format of the show (on a network aimed primarily at teens and young adults) offers different constraints and freedoms that shape the material differently.

My reading of the show will be influenced by a variety of superwomen tropes gathered as part of the literature review process that have given me an understanding of where both women and a broader sense of femininity stand in relation to superhero media. This means my analysis is not just about how femininity is represented on the show itself, but also how these representations compare to other texts.

In terms of actual methods, what I am borrowing from film studies specifically are a variety of its terminology and concepts that provide tools to back up claims about a particular film. These concepts include a variety of techniques and processes through which films are constructed. A few specific concepts, beyond general terms such as the type of shot (i.e. classification for an image or sequence of images) and lighting that are of note for this project are cinematography/cinematographer, diegesis/diegetic, nondiegetic, iconography, and mise en scène. A cinematographer is the person involved with lighting and filming scenes, including what lenses

to use on the camera. They are also known as the director of photography, as they often operate a camera and do actual film recording. As such, cinematography allows you to discuss the framing of a scene, the shots involved in it, and the lightning/colouring (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 410). Diegesis refers to “the fictional world presented in a film and its properties,” while nondiegetic refers to objects that are *not* present within the world of the film” (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 411, 415). In the context of sound, diegetic refers to audio the characters can actually hear, generated from within their world, such as if a character is listening to the radio, whereas elements such as a film’s soundtrack and score are nondiegetic because only the audience hears them (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 411, 415).

Iconography, meanwhile, is “the use of a well-known cultural symbol or complex of symbols” as visual/auditory shorthand for conveying meaning to the audience without explicitly stating it (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 413). Finally, *mise-en-scène* refers to everything that is present in the frame of shots, including how the stage/set is arranged, how characters are dressed, and how action is carried out across the frame (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 415). As *Supergirl* is filmed through much of the same processes as films, utilizing these concepts allows me to discuss how the show uses the techniques and conventions of film to represent its versions of femininity and deal with topics such as xenophobia and racism.

Moving forward, qualitative content/textual analysis is a very straightforward process to explain. In general, qualitative content analysis involves a close reading of a specific text that is “seeking to uncover deeper meanings in the materials” (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012, p. 291) and “search[es] for underlying themes” (Bryman et al., 2012, p. 297). McKee (2003) uses “text” as an umbrella term that encompasses nearly any object of study (p. 10), including “films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, [and] graffiti” (p. 8). This is a general

framework with multiple variations intending “to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them” (McKee, 2003, p. 8). Specifically, these interpretations require looking at “the content contained within it and the ideologies espoused by it,” and these “meanings [can be] both blatantly and subtly expressed” (Stoltzfus, 2014, p. 40).

Beyond just paying attention to standard features of film and television (such as cinematography, set dressing, dialogue, camera shots, wardrobe, etc.), my close watching of *Supergirl* focused on five main categories or tropes that reappear often within media depicting superwomen. While these will be touched upon as they come up in my analysis chapters, they are as follows: (post-)feminism and overtly political issues (such as xenophobia); the presence and roles of supporting casts; sexualization and romance; issues of sidelining women characters; and the involvement of parents and mentors. While parents/mentors are themselves part of the supporting cast, specifically discussing their roles as teachers is important because of how these interactions differ from other characters’. For the fourth season, which introduces Nia Nal, I also took notes on how the show deals with recurrent trends amongst transgender representations more specifically, as well as thinking about how a new transgender character is constructed in relation to the host of cisgender characters already present.

In general, my process for doing a close reading of the show was as follows: creating charts to keep my notes organized for each episode (see Appendix 1 for an example), including the five subsections mentioned above, and space for other important female characters beyond the protagonist, such as Alex Danvers, Cat Grant, Lena Luthor, and Nia Nal. These notes were kept in separate document files for each season as a way of keeping them manageable. While the chart is not organized around specific concepts borrowed from film studies approach, whenever something such as diegetic music stuck out, I would write that down in the appropriate character’s section

(e.g., noting that *Bloodstream* by the band Transviolet plays during a pivotal romantic moment in season one).

After watching the 87 episodes of *Supergirl* and 11 crossover episodes with the other super shows, I decided to revisit certain episodes on a case-by-case basis for my analysis. This allowed me to revisit particular episodes (or moments) that stood out as important for one of the character analyses, and focus on specific elements such as film techniques, a character's actions, or simply dialogue. For instance, when writing the Nia Nal chapter, I revisited the episodes "Blood Memory" and "American Dreamer" as they are Nia-centric and have specific sequences that warranted a more detailed discussion than her broader arcs. During this process, I also gathered some additional material surrounding the show, such as a photo from Melissa Benoist's Instagram account (@melissabenoist) displaying Supergirl's new costume for the fifth season.

Some of the work informing my analysis of the show, especially when it comes to Nia Nal, comes from popular/non-academic sources, including news sites focused on comic books and fan-run blogs. This comes about because of a gap in knowledge in this genre of academia surrounding heroes who are not household names like Wonder Woman, or those who are transgender, as they seldomly came up in academic work I searched through. Most of these sources come from news websites that pay employees and are run as professional office jobs to differing degrees. I am using these sources as documentation of certain characters' existences, which are easily verifiable by going to the comic book source material mentioned within the articles. However, some of the sources are undoubtedly less professional, and although I am using them for the same purposes, it is worth discussing the usefulness of fan sources for a moment. While Fan Studies has worked extensively on exploring fandoms and what it means to be a fan, this work has tended to create a singular idea of what a fan is (Hills, 2002, p. 37-39) and treat them purely as objects of study rather

than contributors to literature about them (Booth, 2013, p. 120-123). Instead, Booth argues that there is a lot in common between academics and fans, so it would benefit academia to rely somewhat more on fan's understandings and self-reflections, treating them as worthy of more than observation at least, if not something closer to an expert (Booth, 2013). I am not intending to argue this, but I do think the justifications given by Hills and Booth help to support the fact that lists created by fans to catalogue and celebrate transgender characters are reliable for this work.

1.7 Road Map

Having established the background of this project as well as the methodological process through which I conducted my research, the following chapters explore *Supergirl* and my research questions in more depth. Forgoing the traditional literature review chapter, the analysis sections of this thesis are interspersed with information pulled from that review process as it becomes necessary – for instance, work on transgender representation in superhero media is discussed in the chapter on Nia Nal. Thus, the remainder of this thesis is as follows: three analysis chapters, each focused on one specific character and their version of femininity. Chapter 2 is focused on Kara Danvers, Chapter 3 is focused on Alex Danvers, and Chapter 4 is focused on Nia Nal. In Chapter 5 I break down the findings from these chapters to pose answers to my research questions and ultimately argue that *Supergirl* is a big step forward for the representations of superwomen in superhero media, imperfect as it is.

Chapter 2: Kara Danvers

Given that Kara Danvers is the protagonist and titular hero of *Supergirl*, it seems pertinent to begin my analysis with her. While being pretty, blonde, and in a skirt a lot of the time, these factors do not mean that she is a stereotypical representation of a woman, checking off acceptable boxes of femininity while not challenging a binary status quo. Nor does being a cisgender heterosexual woman mean it is less important to discuss her compared to Alex and Nia. In order to explore her representation of femininity, I will focus on a few different aspects of her role on the show: her performance of femininity (behaviour, wardrobe, etc.); romantic and sexual agency; and Kara's supporting cast (friends, family, and mentors). But before that, it is important to establish some fundamental ideas about gender that will inform this analysis.

2.1 Gender Framework

Gender has long been understood as a binary of men and women, related to one's biological sex (delineated as male and female, respectively), on which all humans were said to fall along one side of. However, many people have rejected these notions of biological essentialism, especially given that transgender and nonbinary individuals have existed for much longer than our current understandings of gender, across cultures (Butler, 1990, p. 151; Kimmel & Holler, 2017, p. 85-87, 95-96, 387, 408). Judith Butler provided a foundational conceptualization of gender as an alternative explanation to the binary: the notion of performativity. First discussed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) argues that gender is a social construct meant to perpetuate both the binary notion of gender and men's dominance over women. She explains that it is *performative* because it is a continual practice of actions/expressions done every day on micro and macro levels, involving things as simple as a hairstyle or clothing to more complicated expressions like body language and social interactions. Because there is no biological

basis for gender, there is no reason for it to be restricted to be “male” and “female” (though, I will explain this is this is also true for the category of sex). Those who identify outside of that binary use terms like gender nonconforming or non-binary, while those who identify as a gender they were not assigned at birth are known as transgender (Heyes, 2013, p. 201-212) and those that still identify as their assigned gender are called cisgender (Finn Enke, 2013, p. 234-247).

Differences in social responsibility (and even what one is allowed to do because of their gender) have changed over time but were normalized by the idea of “sex roles,” later known as “gender roles.” These roles posited that some actions and behaviours were just natural to a specific sex: women are meek and nurturing, men are strong and violent (Connell, 1987; Connell, 2005). This notion of sex roles reified the idea that femininity is exclusive to women, and masculinity to men, as Connell (1987) relates, “often it is assumed that there is only one set of traits that characterizes men in general and thus defines masculinity [and] there is one set of traits for women, which defines femininity” (p. 167). Attributes that have become understood as “masculine” include assertiveness (Halberstam, 1998, p. 3-4), physical strength (p.15), competence with firearms (p. 181) and athleticism/ sports enthusiasm (p. 267), while “passivity[,] inactivity” and “unhealthy body manipulations” are understood to be “feminine.”

After Judith Butler introduced performativity, she drew criticism by those who argued that it seemed to downplay the physical realities and lived experiences of gender. In response, Butler (1993) developed it further in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* to elaborate how gender has been assigned to bodies based on physical criteria in such a way that privileges some over others: namely, men are on top, women are below them, and anyone who is trans or intersex (having elements of both male and female anatomy) are treated as dangerous outsiders. Furthermore, Butler argued that while gender is performative because of its socially defined nature,

which also means it is situational and contextual, individuals do not hold proper agency. Gender is not simply something a single person decides on in the morning, but what is imprinted on them at birth and continually redefined throughout their life. This includes almost every facet of their life and identity: their appearance, their way of carrying themselves, the way they talk, the actions they make, and the attitudes they express.

Butler's work also discusses the concept of the heterosexual matrix and its impact on our perceptions of gender and sexuality. Through ritual repetition, the heterosexual matrix perpetuates the idea that gender is a fixed, stable concept comprised of masculine men and feminine women who are *expected* to be heterosexual (Butler, 1990, p. 151). These perpetuations are done partly through institutions such as schools, media, and government, such that other forms of sexuality (be it asexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.) are typically not recognized, discussed, or thought about, resulting in the marginalization and stigmatization of them. This leads to further discrimination, harassment, and homophobia.

While gender and its expression is a spectrum encompassing much more than what we conceptualize as masculine and feminine, given that there are many different ideas of what it means to be a woman or man, as well as non-binary and fluid gender identities that cannot neatly be summed up as one or the other, the idea of sex/gender roles has reified certain behaviours and attitudes as masculine or feminine. While I do not agree with this notion, I lack the proper vocabulary to fully discuss Kara, Alex, and Nia outside of a comparison to what is commonly understood to be one or the other. As such, in using these terms, I am following the work of Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* (1998) – as I discuss in Alex's chapter – to discuss how in different ways, the three women are in some ways typical of what we understand to be feminine, and in other ways, typical of what we understand to be masculine.

2.2 Visual Representations: Cinematography and Kara's Outfits

As I discussed earlier, gender is much more than sex and the physical body: a lot of gender is performative, that is, enacted through how one presents themselves (for instance, how they dress and act). For the purposes of this section, Kara's performance of femininity will be discussed as visual representations and actions. For visual representations of Kara's femininity, I will focus largely on her wardrobe, but also on how her body is filmed. Beyond looking at Kara's work attire, casual clothes, and Supergirl costumes, I will also discuss other aspects of her visual representation, such as her hairstyles, behaviour, and movement before moving onto actions.

Kara's Supergirl outfit makes its first appearance in the first episode, "Pilot", during a costume montage with Winn Schott after she decides to use her powers to help people. The initial outfit Winn provides is comprised of a red headband holding her hair back, a blue long-sleeve crop-top that leaves her entire stomach visible, and red boxer-briefs, adorned with a yellow waistband, that stop just below her pelvis, and nothing on her legs or feet. The first shot in this sequence pans from a closeup of Kara's kitchen table to a wide shot of her living room as Winn walks around. Kara's kitchen table is littered with pieces of blue and red fabric, sheets of paper with costume designs drawn on, yarn, thread, and a sewing machine. When the camera focuses on the living room, Kara comes out from her bedroom on the right of the frame and walks across the rug as the camera zooms in and pans to follow her. Kara's entire body is visible head to toe in the frame as she awkwardly walks across the room. When she stops, the camera settles with her, framing her in a medium shot from just above the knees. As Kara's eyes awkwardly dart around the room and she wraps her forearms around her midriff to cover it up, she says "I'm not flying around saving people in this thing. I wouldn't even wear it to the beach. Where's my cape?" (Adler & Winter, 2015). The set is lit very softly so that Kara is visible but not lit to draw extreme attention

to her body. Throughout the sequence, even when the camera cuts to Winn for his reply, Kara is not filmed from behind at any angle which would emphasize her buttocks in the tight boxer briefs. After Winn's reply, the camera pans behind Kara's back in shadow, transitioning to the next shot, where Kara is more dressed up.

Her initial overly sexual and revealing outfit is not without precedent, both in past Supergirl stories, and in the broader category of superwomen. Superhero comics tend to present hyper-idealized bodies: men are drawn in ways that emphasize their godlike muscles, placing them in a position of enviable power, while women's *curves* are emphasized, showing they are to be ogled (Cocca, 2016, p. 12). Given that every single panel of a comic book is meticulously drawn and worked on by multiple different artists, these representations of men and women are purposely done for one reason or another. This helps to further construct and define notions of what men and women "are," given that in reality, all men are *not* big and physical, just as all women are *not* small yet curvy. These curves are so exaggerated that they are unattainable for most women, pushing combinations of large breasts, tiny waists, and thick thighs, and their costumes reflect this. For instance, while Carol Danvers is now better known as the sensibly dressed Captain Marvel, her original outfit as Ms. Marvel was very sexualized, with her stomach, thighs, and lower back exposed. The suit would shortly be updated into a swimsuit with thigh-high boots and gloves up to her elbows (Cocca, 2016, p. 184-191), yet it would not be until 2012 that Carol would have her exposed thighs and arms covered (Cocca, 2016, p. 200-206). In the case of Wonder Woman, her original outfit comprised of a red strapless top adorned with a golden eagle across her chest, and a blue skirt. Although her muscles were not well defined, she was still fit, and had average proportions for an able-bodied woman (Robinson, 2004, p. 62-63). This would not last long, and

quickly the skirt would become swim trunks that shrunk with each passing year, and the golden eagle became cups for her increasingly large bust (Cocca, 2016, p. 30).

Hypersexualized female superheroes (and villains) reached their peak in the 1990s, in what became known as the “bad girl” style – skimpy outfits that are essentially lingerie, massive breasts, thick thighs, and extremely long hair (Robinson, 2004, p. 127). This style is exemplified by Madelyne Pryor and Emma Frost of the *X-Men* comics (Cocca, 2016, p. 135-136, 144-148). Madelyne Pryor’s hypersexualized depiction only appears during her descent into villainy, similar to Jean Grey’s sexualized appearance as the evil Dark Phoenix, equating women’s open sexuality with a lack of morality (Fawaz, 2016, p. 203; Darowski, 2014, p. 94-95), while male heroes-turned-villains such as Onslaught are “almost entirely covered in armor” (Darowski, 2014, p. 103).

When it comes to Supergirl, her prototype costume reads like a direct reference to, and critique of, Supergirl’s costume on the Superman adaptation *Smallville* (2001-2011). Appearing in season 10, the suit is comprised of a blue long sleeve crop top that stops at her naval, a short red skirt that covers about one third of her thighs, and yellow-highlighted red boots that do not reach her knees. Likewise, she does not have the red S emblem typically worn by both Kara and Superman, nor a cape. In this costume, most of her legs are bare, just as her stomach and the top of her pelvis are exposed. *Smallville* was not unique in having Supergirl wear a crop top as part of her costume, however, as Kara wore similarly scant uniforms at different points in her comic career. The most egregious example of this comes from Supergirl’s so-called “cheerleading” costume, adopted in 2000 (see Image 1 in Appendix 2): a white crop-top tee shirt, black headband, tiny blue skirt, white gloves, and laced-up red boots that extended halfway to her knees (Robinson, 2004, p. 129-130). This outfit, worn by a teenage Supergirl, replaced a blue, red, and yellow costume very similar to Benoist’s that she had been wearing throughout that series, but with a

shorter skirt and boots, and bare thighs. Canonically why Supergirl chose to wear this skimpier and overtly sexualized outfit is unclear, but the credited creators on the issue are predominantly male, so ultimately men decided Supergirl needed a new, “sexy” outfit, regardless of its (lack of) practicality (David & Kirk, 2000).

Having Winn design Kara’s prototype suit is a deliberate decision in order to represent the poor quality of superwomen’s suits when designed solely by men, as they often focus on appealing to straight men. Kara’s comment points out how uncomfortable and impractical suits like those are when worn by actual adult women. As a result, the costume montage continues, with more costume added incrementally – first a full shirt, skirt, and cape, and then the red boots and pantyhose to replace the shoes and bare legs. The final touch comes from Winn giving Kara a more durable cape and adding the S emblem to the shirt. This remains Kara’s standard costume for the first four seasons of the show (see Image 2 in Appendix 2). Although the inclusion of the skirt clearly marks Supergirl as feminine, its length, as well as the pantyhose and boots, make it a far cry from other iterations of a skirted-Supergirl. Likewise, the design is shown to be practical through the range of physical actions taken by Benoist and her stunt doubles, such as the very physical confrontations between Supergirl and villains Reign, Pestilence, and Purity in season 3. In these conflicts, the skirt does not restrict Supergirl’s movement, as she is still capable of a lot, such as high kicks.

A variety of factors, such as alternate costumes Supergirl and her doppelgangers wear throughout the show, and the production shift from Los Angeles to Vancouver for season 2 and beyond – which means colder weather, especially during the many night shoots – Supergirl’s costume was updated for the fifth season (Venable, 2019). First shown via an Instagram post by star Melissa Benoist (Benoist, 2019), this new outfit loses the skirt entirely, instead granting Kara

a new blue bodysuit, complete with pants, that also affixes the cape to the suit near her collar bone and adds a bit more material to the shoulders of the uniform. The blue bodysuit is broken up by a gold belt, similar to what was affixed to the top of the skirt of her original suit, and the red thigh-high boots remain (Swift, 2019). While these boots tend to be associated with sex work, they are still practical for an action character since they have regular soles rather than high heels, so the connection may be incidental depending on if women were involved in this part of the design. These changes bring Supergirl's costume more in-line with the show's version of Superman, with no clearly gendered design changes between the two suits.

While Halberstam argues that personal fashion does not directly correlate to one's overall level of masculinity or femininity, nor is fashion the only aspect of how one expresses their gender (1998, p. 217), it is still one of the many ways that someone *does* express their gender identity. Outside of her Supergirl costume, Kara typically wears a lot of bright coloured clothing – a variety of dresses, skirts, blouses, formal pants, jeans, plaid shirts, formal shirts, and sweaters. Her style is a mix of masculine and feminine, evolving as Kara matures during the course of the show. As such, the show walks a fine line in showing Kara's fashion mature without demonizing feminine clothing as *immature*. For instance, while she does tend to wear more button-up shirts with pants as a reporter, beginning in the second season, she does continue to wear dresses and pastel colours, including when she is acting as Nia's mentor in the fourth season, avoiding equating "girly" fashion with inexperience or "manly" clothing with knowledge and ability.

Kara, in one form or another, wears four alternate costumes throughout the show's first four seasons. The first occurs in episode 16, *Falling*, where Kara is exposed to red Kryptonite, which lowers her inhibitions, altering her personality from thoughtful, compassionate, and kind, to brash, aggressive, and selfish. Beyond her personality, this also manifests itself visually. Rather

than the professional-yet-comfortable and modest outfits she tends to wear, Kara puts stronger emphasis on being fashionable and standing out in a crowd. At the CatCo offices, Kara puts her hair into a tight bun, wears a black, sleeveless top, and a tight grey skirt. These colours are much more muted than her traditional style, visually signaling her more aggressive and hostile disposition. They are also tighter than usual, putting more emphasis on her body. As a result, while the filming style does not change, this emphasis on her body still calls more attention to her breasts and buttocks than normal. This is especially noticeable in a closeup shot panning down from her face to a laptop screen as she works, where her breasts stand out more than any other sequence in the show. The other outfit worn during the red Kryptonite's influence is a simple, tight black dress that is partially backless with no sleeves. Kara wears her hair down similarly to how she does as Supergirl with it.

Kara is at her most sexualized in these two outfits, as they are tighter and more revealing than her normal style – suggesting to the audience that regular Kara (i.e. unaffected by red Kryptonite) is naturally modest, and her self-expressed femininity does not rely on sexuality or highlighting elements of her body that are typically associated with women (ex. breasts). Her expression of femininity is for herself, not to be validated through the attention of men. Kara also makes a temporary change to her Supergirl attire in this episode. Kara adopts a one-piece black bodysuit with sleeves to her wrists, full pant legs, and black combat boots – marking this look as much less sexualized than the prior two. The only splotch of colour on this uniform is the red Kryptonian S logo, which is off center, and pin sized. This outfit is equivalent to what her Kryptonian aunt Astra and uncle Non (the primary antagonists of season one) are both wearing on Earth, and represents Kara's darker, no-nonsense self that is displayed in this episode.

The shift in Kara's personality and wardrobe caused by red Kryptonite also changes Kara's performance of femininity in subtler ways. For instance, while her usual gait involves good posture, her shoulders resting naturally, and a moderate pace, Kara begins to arch her back and swing her hips as she walks, turning her typical, plain walking into a strut that calls attention to her and further emphasizes her curves. Likewise, Kara, who is usually timid at work – but will stand up for what she thinks is right and defend that – becomes catty, sardonic, and rude, putting herself in the center of attention. Nearly everyone in CatCo and the DEO notice these changes in Kara, emphasizing how her normal performance of femininity tends to privilege not drawing attention to herself or letting her emotions guide her actions but on caring for others.

Kara's bizarre and erratic behaviour comes to a head in a club scene with James and Winn later in the episode. Kara's off-screen arrival is signaled by Winn and James' stunned reactions, framed in a closeup. We then see a medium shot of Kara strutting over, passing through the dance floor crowd to reach them at the bar, prompting heads to turn and watch her. Unlike the clubgoers, the medium shot stays put, panning to follow her from the front. For the duration of the scene, Demi Lovato's *Confident* plays diegetically at the club, mirroring Kara's desire to finally *take* what she wants: James. Once Kara reaches the bar, she leans to the side, one hand on the countertop, and puffs her chest out a bit, essentially presenting herself to James. Winn is dumbfounded by Kara's confident flaunting, complimenting her with a "wow!" to which she replies "yeah, that's what I was going for" (Rovner, Queller, & Teng, 2016).

Kara quickly pulls James away to dance, shown in closeup of her yanking on his arm, and they disappear from frame into the crowd without Kara's backside being shown. Most of the dancing is shot very close up, only having their faces in frame, with some medium shots to show their movement, as Kara is bathed in warm red, purple, and pink lights, contrasted against the blues

of the scene. Kara keeps herself close to James, putting her arms around him at various points, making him uncomfortable. This eventually prompts him to say they should go share a drink with Winn for a moment. Kara snarkily replies, “why would I get a drink when I’m finally getting what I want?” (Rovner, Queller, & Teng, 2016). James asks Kara why she is behaving like this and tries to leave, only to be painfully grabbed again. Kara starts taking her glasses off, risking being recognized as Supergirl with her current hairstyle, but she laughs playfully as James grabs them and puts them back on, before getting a call from Cat. Kara quickly follows him, before it cuts to a closeup of James’ shocked expression when Kara exclaims, “just tell her to get back in her litter box and leave us alone” (Rovner, Queller, & Teng, 2016). After this, Kara disappears from the frame and club, as James and Winn discover once he gets off the phone.

The brazenness displayed by Kara in these sequences not only provides a stark contrast to her usual timid and compassionate version of femininity, it also highlights how Kara typically deals with her more serious emotions in a masculine way. That is, Kara often tries to push her feelings aside and ignore them rather than being open with or controlled by them as all women are *perceived* to. Alex comments on this afterward, accepting Kara’s apology for her harsh comments but also acknowledging that they have not been communicating well and need to work through their feelings rather than just ignore them. Kara herself struggles with this fact in an early episode in season one, when she sets up a controlled environment where her and James can let their aggression out. James initially questions its purpose since Superman seems to be able to express anger, to which Kara says “cause he’s a man. Girls are taught to smile and keep it on the inside” (Grassi, Shukert, & Warn, 2015), signaling that her internalization of emotions is different from men’s. As they punch their targets, they both call out what is bothering them. Kara’s grievances start out very surface level – frustration with General Lane’s presence at the DEO and Cat’s

attitude. However, as she loses herself in the punching in a series of closeups, she destroys her pseudo punching bag (a car), sending debris flying across the garage, shouting “and I hate how I’m never going to have a normal life!” (Grassi, Shukert, & Warn, 2015). James, framed in closeup, immediately stops and tries to reassure Kara, but she elaborates:

I thought I was mad seeing you... Seeing you and Lucy makes me think that I am never gonna have what you two have. Someone who knows everything about me. My perfect partner at a game night. ... Growing up on Earth, I never felt normal. And I always thought that if I started to use my powers, my life would make sense. But I’m realizing that... Being myself doesn’t make me feel more normal. And it never will. Because my normal life ended the second my parents put me on that ship. And that makes me so mad. (Grassi, Shukert, & Warn, 2015)

Initially, Kara turns her back to James, clearly uncomfortable expressing these sentiments, but as she continues, she returns his eye contact in a series of shot-reverse-shot closeups. This continues until the end of her rant, where she covers her mouth in in shock at her own revelation.

Despite Kara’s accurate statement that feminine performance commonly involves suppressing anger, women are still seen to be freer with their emotions than men, who are ironically only comfortable expressing anger. By calling attention to this and eventually dealing with her repressed feelings maturely, she avoids neatly being sidelined into “overly emotional woman” or “masculine, and therefore does not have feelings beyond anger” territory. Even after this realization, Kara still tries to suppress feelings later, including romantic ones (discussed in said section) and sadness. During the season 2 finale Kara has to send Mon-El away from Earth for his own safety. Not knowing his fate, Kara becomes withdrawn and cold, refusing to talk about it and spending more time as Supergirl than as Kara Danvers. After Kara temporarily quits CatCo, Alex confronts her, saying she is done letting Kara self-destruct. Kara tries explaining, stating “Kara Danvers sucks right now! Supergirl is great. Supergirl saved the world. So, if I could choose to be her, why would I ever choose to be the sad girl whose boyfriend is gone?” (Rovner, Parrish, & Warn, 2017). Alex retorts that Kara “bottling it up inside” (Rovner, Parrish, & Warn, 2017) is only

leading to bad decisions, but their argument ends unresolved. However, by the episode's conclusion, Alex's insistence that Kara is more important to her than Supergirl prompts Kara to rethink her choices, rejoin CatCo, and try to process her grief. This takes several episodes to bring some levity back to Kara's attitude, but her acceptance that it is okay to lean on her chosen family for support allows her to persevere, rather than continuing to bottle it up until a worse breakdown.

Moving on, Kara's second alternate costume comes about as the result of Kryptonite being dispersed into the air in season four, which means she needs to be in a sealed environment, prompting Lena Luthor to encase her in a suit of mechanical armor. The suit is comprised of a navy-blue bodysuit, a yellow belt, red thigh-high leather boots, red elbow-length leather gloves, and a navy-blue helmet with a black opaque visor covering the entirety of her face. The suit also has broad shoulder plates, and a back-lit chest emblem. While the narrative explanation for the costume requires Kara to be completely protected from the elements, the production reason for the suit is not much different. In the off-time between seasons 3 and 4, Benoist was performing on Broadway, which cut into the first few weeks of season 4's filming schedule (Drum, 2018), meaning they needed a suit that her stunt double could wear throughout the episode to give the appearance that Kara was still present. This illusion is supported by inserted closeup shots of Benoist in the helmet's heads up display (HUD). This also results in Kara being somewhat sidelined for the third and fourth episodes of the season.

Although they are not literally the regular Kara, Overgirl (from a parallel universe) and Red Daughter (a black Kryptonite-created double) are both off-shoot versions of Kara played by Melissa Benoist, and bear mentioning in a discussion of Supergirl's costumes. Overgirl's costume consists of a black leather body suit with red inseam highlights, long sleeves that culminate in gloves, and pants. Overgirl wears thigh-high boots similar to the normal outfit, but they are black,

and similarly only the inside of the cape is red, while the outside (visible from behind) is black. The logo retains its red diamond shape, but the S is replaced by two S.S. bolts, bringing in some visual iconography to associate Overgirl with the Nazi regime of her Earth. A black belt hangs across her waist, and in certain instances (such as fight scenes), a black mechanical facemask extends up to her hairline, with red opaque lenses. Red Daughter, meanwhile, is adorned in a similar costume given to her near the end of season 4 and worn in three episodes. This costume retains pants but is grey and black with red highlights. This suit's belt is black, silver, and red, and black leather gloves extend to her elbow. The suit's logo has a raised metallic texture to it and is silver. Instead of the S logo, it is a mallet within a circle in the diamond emblem, visually referencing the iconography of the hammer and sickle from the Soviet flag, as Red Daughter was trained in a fictional former-Soviet state. Differing from prior suits, Red Daughter's also has a black collar with one red star on each side. These alternative costumes all share one feature that the regular Supergirl outfit does not – pants. This could be interpreted as associating gender nonconformity with morally questionable characters, if not for two things: the aforementioned context that Melissa Benoist had been pushing for Kara's costume to include pants, which is likely a large factor in why newer costumes would avoid the skirt, and the inclusion of pants in the fifth season's new costume.

Overall, the costumes worn by Benoist avoid typical superwomen trends of impractical and hypersexualized outfits, as none of them place a large emphasis on her breasts, buttocks, thighs, or stomach – and in fact leave very little skin visible to viewers. The main super suit worn by Kara expresses her comfortability with a feminine identity through the use of the skirt and leggings, which mark her appearance and silhouette as different from her male counterparts, as skirts are generally only socially acceptable when worn by women (unless it is a kilt). With the exception of

Kara under the influence of red kryptonite, her outfits likewise express a somewhat typical version of femininity, with a lot of dresses and skirts, and clothes that are in general in shades of brighter colours, such as pink, yellow, and orange. However, her style is not limited to those very typically “girly” outfits, as Kara also wears a host of outfits that incorporate blues and are more typically associated with masculinity, such as blazers, dress shirts, and a variety of pants – from formal to jeans. She also wears a fair share of clothing that is more gender neutral, such as sweatpants, cardigans, and other casual wear. These outfits tend to look more tailored than the average person’s, given that this is a television production, but are not uncomfortably tight in order to emphasize her body, nor is she given plunging necklines outside of a few dresses. She wears a variety of shoes, from slip-on flats to running shoes to high heels, although the latter are typically only worn for formal events and the occasional interview as part of her job as a reporter. Beyond earrings and her mother’s necklace, Kara does not tend to wear jewellery, opting instead for the occasional watch. Kara’s visual representation of femininity is sometimes very much in line with emphasized femininity (although, without sexualization), and other times moves more into masculine-coded outfits, meaning that her appearance fluctuates between explicitly feminine, and somewhat masculine – even if her long hair often allows her to retain a feminine touch.

2.3 Romantic and Sexual Agency

While romance on its own does not define one’s gender expression, gender does affect what one is expected or socially allowed to do in romance, which can be reinforced or subverted in media representations. For instance, a salient aspect of romance across superhero media is the well-worn trope of the love triangle – which often means the story revolves entirely around the woman’s romantic choices and defines their character entirely. This is not unique to stories of superwomen, but it has often occurred there, perhaps most famously via Sue Storm of the Fantastic

Four. Throughout thirty issues of the original *Fantastic Four* series, Sue is stuck unable to choose between teammate/boyfriend Reed Richards, and undersea Atlantean Prince Namor, one of the FF's foes. Sue is the one to eventually choose Reed by accepting his proposal of marriage, but her storyline's emphasis on romance and confusion between two suitors is much more dominant than romance in the lives of her male teammates (Fawaz, 2015, p. 90-91). This trend is also seen in *X-Men*, through the love triangle between Iceman, Polaris, and Havok (Darowski, 2014, p. 29) and in the 1990s cartoon and Fox film series through a love triangle between Wolverine, Jean Grey, and Cyclops, which was not present in the comics up to that point (Cocca, 2016, p. 140, 145).

Outside of love triangles, many media romances generally reinforce the idea of men being the dominant decision makers in romantic situations, while women are passive recipients to be won over. For instance, *Spider-Man* (Ziskin & Raimi, 2002) and *Spider-Man 2* (Ziskin & Raimi, 2004) feature Peter Parker's quiet and uncomfortable persistence in pursuing his love for Mary Jane. Throughout the course of the first film, she dates two different men, and during each relationship Peter continues to take all opportunities that he can to "run into her" and catch up, with Mary Jane ultimately "realizing" she is in love with him. In the sequel, Peter struggles to bury his feelings for her, only to confront her with the truth as she becomes engaged, acting as though her admittance of feelings in the prior film entitles him to a shot with her now.

Similarly, Wolverine pursues Jean Grey throughout the first three *X-Men* films, despite her existing relationship with Cyclops. Cyclops's death early in the third film leaves the Wolverine/Jean romance space to grow, and Wolverine's tearful "I love you" (Schuler Donner & Ratner, 2006) as he kills her to save the world seems to suggest their love was more true than her and Cyclops'. Elsewhere in the superhero genre, Dave, the titular hero of *Kick-Ass* (Pitt & Vaughn, 2010) lies to his crush Katie about being gay in order to become closer to her before eventually

confessing his true feelings to her. Rather than being understandably creeped out and angry, Katie responds that she feels the same way and they begin a romantic relationship. The success of these contrived circumstances that minimize the woman's agency is noticeably absent from *Batman Begins* (Roven & Nolan, 2005) and *The Dark Knight* (Thomas & Nolan, 2008), however. Bruce Wayne's pursuit of childhood friend Rachel Dawes ends with her rejection of Bruce in favour of Harvey Dent before her death.

In *Supergirl*, Kara finds herself in the middle of three love triangles: two separate, but related triangles in the first season, and another in season three. In season one, Kara is romantically interested in James Olsen, who is in a relationship with Lucy Lane, while Winn Schott harbors feelings for Kara. From the pilot episode, the audience learns about Winn's unrequited crush, based on three key instances: Winn expressing dissatisfaction at Kara having a date; Winn assuming that Kara is coming out as a lesbian to him, thus explaining why she is not interested; and when he sees her without her glasses for the first time he remarks, "Kara, you look really pretty with your glasses off" (Adler & Winter, 2015). This crush becomes more explicit as the season continues. In episode 5, after being interrupted at Thanksgiving dinner before telling Kara about his feelings for her, the episode ends with Winn saying he is glad to have Kara in his life, and he kisses her. Kara's expression and the silence of the scene clearly indicate her surprise and concern.

That kiss remains unreciprocated and undiscussed for several episodes, until the return of Winn's serial killer father and associated trauma. Winn tells Kara, "I am in love with you. I have been in love with you for a long time. Since before you were Supergirl" (Musky-Goldwyn, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016). Kara is firm in her rejection, stating her feelings for Winn are purely platonic and that she does not want things to change between them. Despite this, Winn replies that he cannot just bottle up his emotions anymore, as he worries that would send him down a path to

violence like his father. Their friendship remains stilted for the next three episodes, until Kara is in a near-death state, and Winn panics that he will never have the chance to make things right between them. Once Kara does awaken from her coma, Winn reaffirms their friendship, which remains intact and platonic until Winn's departure from the show in the season 3 finale. By having Kara stand firm and not come to realize that she is in love with Winn or having Winn badger Kara into accepting his advances, the show does not take away Kara's agency or uncomfortably suggest that women can be *convinced* to love men if enough effort is put into it.

At the other end of the love triangle, Kara's interest in James is also established in the pilot. On orders from Cat Grant, Kara goes to the newly hired James's office to collect his work for *CatCo Magazine's* new issue. Initially in the scene, the camera follows only Kara, shown in medium and closeup shots, as James talks off screen, with his back to Kara as he digs through boxes, unpacking. When he finally turns around, both Kara and the audience are given their first look at him in a closeup, where his mouth is slightly agape as he takes in Kara's appearance, followed by a closeup of Kara matching his gaze, before it cuts back to James as he regains his composure and stands up to greet her. During this meet-cute,² shown through a series of closeup and medium shots, Kara continues to fumble for words, stammer, and awkwardly giggle at herself. After introducing themselves and talking about Superman, as James is his close friend, Kara turns to leave until James reminds her to pick up the work she was sent to grab. In a medium shot, Kara shyly avoids his eye contact for a moment while giggling about the situation before grabbing the layout sheets. As she leaves, the scene cuts to outside James' door with a closeup on Kara stopping

² A meet-cute, common in romantic comedies, is "a cute, charming, or amusing first encounter between romantic partners" (Meriam-Webster, n.d.).

for a moment, looking excited and nervous, before exclaiming “pow-pow!” (Adler & Winter, 2015) and walking away.

In that early interaction we see Kara giddy, awkward, and enthralled by James, acting typically “girly” over her newfound crush – but it does not play out in a stereotypical way. This includes not being catty or rude to Lucy Lane when she returns to James’ life and they (temporarily) renew their relationship. Kara only displays some sense of bitterness and resentment of Lucy while under the influence of red Kryptonite, telling the recently dumped James that she wants “what the poor man’s Lois Lane was too idiotic to keep” (Rovner, Queller, & Teng, 2016). Despite the Kryptonite affecting Kara’s personality, she still feels guilty about it, later clarifying that “I don’t hate Lucy. I was jealous of her. I would be jealous of anyone you loved” (Rovner, Queller, & Teng, 2016). Beyond that episode, Kara is supportive of their relationship despite her own feelings, telling James that if she had the potential to repair a relationship like James and Lucy’s, “I think I’d fight for it” (Chang, Sullivan, & Freudenthal, 2015). Likewise, when Lucy asks Kara if James has moved on from her, Kara tells her the truth rather than lying to benefit her own chances, and shows genuine compassion for Lucy when she tells her she is sorry how things ended between her and James. These interactions highlight how despite her own romantic interest, Kara remains faithful to her beliefs in honesty and compassion, avoiding a stereotypical catfight where her and Lucy would cross all boundaries in their competition for James. Instead, the only rift between them comes about from Lucy’s military position under her father, who detests the Supers, which is resolved when Supergirl earns Lucy’s trust by revealing her identity.

Kara and James do eventually get together for a short-lived relationship after Lucy accepts that her and James are not a good match. Kara is still uncharacteristically unconfident when it comes to dealing with feelings and romance when compared to the strength of belief in other

aspects of her life she displays as Supergirl, and this manifests itself through further interactions with James. Despite the breakup, Kara does not tell James she has feelings for him until after the red Kryptonite debacle, when he seems to be jealous of Kara's new friendship with guest star Barry Allen/the Flash. Displaying her usually awkward ticks of fiddling with her hands, pacing, and breaking eye contact, Kara tries to explain a metaphor about parallel universes that makes her think James and her could work, ending with Kara telling him in soft-lit closeup "no more saying. I'm so much better at doing" (Kreisberg, Grassi, & Gomez, 2016) and kissing him. Throughout the scene, the nondiegetic track *Bloodstream* by Transviolet plays, mirroring Kara's decision to finally let go of her concerns and take a chance on passion and love. This instance involves Kara taking charge both romantically and physically, allowing their relationship to avoid typical gender conventions in the heterosexual matrix, where women are supposed to be passive and receptive while the men are expected to guide things forward. In this case, then, Kara is in the masculine position, while James, though still agentic, is in the feminine position as the object of affection.

Taking place moments after the season one finale, season two opens with Kara being excited to finally go on a date with James. However, their first attempt at it is interrupted by a space shuttle malfunction, which Kara goes to rescue as Supergirl. They reschedule, but Kara cancels again because of a series of attacks on Lena Luthor and L-Corp that has her team up with Superman. Later, in an awkward conversation, Kara admits that she *wanted* to be with James but does not know what she wants now. By the end of the episode, Kara figures out what is wrong, explaining:

The last year was all about figuring out how to be Supergirl, and now...Now it's time I figure out how to be Kara. You were right, James. Something has changed for me. You and me together, that's all I wanted. But now, when I listen to my heart, I just, I know that we are best as friends. (Kreisberg, Queller, & Winter, 2016)

James accepts her decision, affirming that he will always be her friend. From there on, the romantic interest between James and Kara is gone. Although this relationship is short lived, it is also ended on Kara's terms, rather than her being callously dumped. Similarly, it is important to note that while romance often plays a big part in Kara's life in seasons 1-3, she is never purely defined by her romantic life. Outside of romance, Kara also works to figure out who she is as a woman, both as a superhero trying to step out from under Superman's shadow, and an employee of CatCo, where she is figuring out where she wants her career to go. Her interest in James is not at the forefront of what she does, and she often makes decisions that put their relationship behind her duty as a hero.

Initially, I assumed the chasteness of this relationship may have been as a result of its short time, with only a handful of hugs and kisses expressed between them, rather than any sex occurring. If that were the case, it may suggest that Kara's more agentic version of femininity is fine, as long as it is not very sexual. However, two things heavily detract from this reading. First, Kara is not sexless in her next relationship. Second, and more importantly, during this project, actress Melissa Benoist came out as a survivor of intimate partner violence (IPV), hoping that sharing her story would help destigmatize these conversations. As part of her video, she mentions that the unnamed abusive partner did not like her filming romantic scenes with other people (Benoist, 2019; Raphael, 2019). Given the injuries she suffered and the timeline of the IPV, this was still occurring into *Supergirl's* first season, heavily suggesting that *this* is why Kara and James were so chaste.

Kara's romantic life continues in seasons two and three with Mon-El, another superhero from the comics. Briefly summed up, their romance plays out as a "will they/won't they" scenario during season two, as they seem to be interested in each other at different points and are interrupted by many events. After they do get together, Mon-El's parents, assumed dead, appear on Earth and

reveal that Mon-El is really the prince of Krypton's neighbour planet Daxam, rather than a servant. This strains their relationship, but they make up and work together to defeat his tyrannical mother, although doing so makes the Earth's atmosphere lethal to the Daxamites, and forces Kara to send him off-planet. He returns in the third season, revealed to have traveled through a wormhole 1,000 years into the future, where he co-founded a team known as the Legion of Superheroes and married one of its members. A faction of the team goes back in time in order to combat a villain from Kara's era known as Pestilence who causes plagues and extinction in the future. During this time Mon-El and Kara seem to rekindle their romance, but the absence of Pestilence in the future allows for the emergence of a new threat, and Mon-El returns to the 31st century to help his team fight against it. By avoiding conventional gender norms, Kara and Mon-El's relationship further highlights masculine elements of Kara's gender identity, while reflecting them through feminine parts of Mon-El's, crossing gendered boundaries.

The first instance of Kara and Mon-El's relationship not conforming to heterosexual gender norms comes about due to Mon-El being inflicted with a near-fatal illness in the second season's midseason finale. As he lays in the DEO infirmary, Kara expresses guilt and remorse at the part her family played in Mon-El's illness, as the device that caused it was originally built by her biological father as a defensive weapon for Krypton. Trying to console her, a delirious Mon-El says "you know, you look beautiful, with the weight of all these worlds on your shoulder. ... Absolutely beautiful" (Queller, Simon, Pleszczynski, 2016) before kissing her and passing out again. This scene is notable for its small amount of cuts, as the majority of their conversation is filmed in a single, panning closeup, conveying a sense of intimacy and urgency not present in their relationship before. While this can still be classified as Mon-El making the first move, he expresses a vulnerability and romantic sincerity here that may be more associated with femininity than

masculinity. Kara downplays this interaction later, when a self-conscious and newly cured Mon-El pretends not to remember anything, and Kara quickly drops the subject, hiding her own feelings.

A few episodes later, Kara pushes Mon-El on if he is training as a superhero with her because he has feelings for her or just genuinely wants to do good. In response, Mon-El confesses his feelings for Kara, assuming that they are not reciprocated, and displays a vulnerability that is not usually associated with macho, masculine men. He tells Kara that “it was okay that I was gonna die, because I’d gotten to kiss you” (Parrish, Rogers, & Johnson, 2017). Kara, meanwhile, remains fairly stoic and quiet during this exchange, reassuring Mon-El that she does care about him, but not clarifying after he says, “not in the same way” (Parrish, Rogers, & Johnson, 2017). This again reflects an element of masculinity in Kara, by being quiet and more reserved in an emotional moment while Mon-El opens up. Their next interaction occurs in Al’s Dive Bar while Mon-El is bartending, framed with the bar counter between them to highlight the awkwardness of the situation, as Kara tries to clear the air between them. Mon-El jokingly acknowledges that he transgressed gender norms, stating that people have since told him “apparently Earth males are only supposed to express their feelings about sports, and occasionally monster trucks” (Llanas, Musky-Goldwyn, & McWhirter, 2017). Eventually, Kara does confess her own feelings to Mon-El, prefacing it with “I can be strong, and stand my ground when I’m protecting someone else, but when that someone is me, it’s a lot harder. Cause I don’t like being vulnerable” (Rovner, Lichtman, & McKiernan, 2017). While Kara does not specifically state that these anxieties are more masculine in nature like Mon-El addressed how his actions were atypical of men, because men are expected to be either emotionless or angry, Kara’s statement still demonstrates that her version of femininity includes masculine elements as well. This is emphasized further in the scene as Kara takes charge with bringing Mon-El into a kiss rather than waiting for him to make a move.

However, while Kara takes charge in this initial kiss attempt (as they are interrupted), and their actual first kiss later on, Supergirl again avoids just flipping the dynamic entirely and treating Mon-El, in the feminine role, without agency, they present the couple with a good give-and-take. Crossing typical boundaries of expected gender behaviour continues into their actual relationship as well. After they begin kissing in a closeup, they move toward the couch, out of frame, before transitioning to a medium shot of Kara beckoning Mon-El to climb on top of her before the camera racks focus to two roses laying on one another in the foreground. The subsequent episode begins with a panning closeup across the bedroom, showing their clothes strewn about the *mise-en-scène* and Mon-El's bare foot poking out from under Kara's duvet, before settling on him waking up shirtless. It then cuts to a wide shot of the room from above as he calls for her, indicating that between episodes the couple had sex, but Kara is nowhere to be found now. Given the chasteness of Kara's relationship with James, the sexual activity present here, without future judgement/slut-shaming from other characters or Kara expressing regret, emphasizes that women engaging in sex for their own benefit is okay. In particular, it suggests that for *heterosexual* women, given that Alex and her partner Maggie are already implied to have been sexual by this point, and same sex female couples are often depicted as more sexual than hetero women, as I discuss in the next chapter.

Beyond helping in a small way to normalize female sexuality, this scene, through the combination of Kara's initial absence and Mon-El's questioning of "was it that bad? Was it that good?" (Parrish, Simon, & Teng, 2017) humorously suggests a reversal of a typical heterosexual one-night stand situation. Rather than having the man leave before the woman wakes up, the woman has left before the man wakes up. However, as Mon-El gets up and begins to put his clothes on, a closeup of the television reveals that the morning has been filled with Supergirl's vigilance,

and Kara promptly returns, giving Mon-El flowers and chuckling as he says “oh. What a gentleman. Thank you” (Parrish, Simon, & Teng, 2017). Although this is not played completely serious, its presence – without being questioned by Mon-El – does suggest that the show is promoting it as a genuine and acceptable display of romance, even when done from a woman to a man, rather than vice versa as is typically the case. Through their relationship in instances like this, we see that while Mon-El is a man, looks somewhat typically like a man, and has many masculine traits, he also expresses some male femininity, while on the flip side, Kara, a woman who looks feminine and has many feminine traits, also expresses a lot of female masculinity.

Kara’s relationship with Mon-El not only highlights parts of her gender expression, but also leads to the presence of a third love triangle in season three, between Mon-El, Kara, and his wife, Imra Ardeen. Throughout the season, Kara buries her feelings and is nothing but kind to Imra, while Mon-El struggles with his own unresolved feelings and secrets that Imra has kept from him. As a result of this and her telepathic abilities, Imra picks up on his feelings, and tells him to stay in 2018 to figure things out, and that either way, there will be no hard feelings. During the final episodes, as Mon-El spends his time crimefighting alongside Kara again, they eventually confess their feelings for each other, and Imra returns to help them in the finale, bearing no ill will for either of them. Despite Mon-El and Kara having a clean slate to restart their relationship, Mon-El still decides to return to the future to lead that generation of superheroes, choosing duty over his personal feelings. He departs after a goodbye to Kara and is not seen during the fourth season.

2.4 Supergirl, Not Superwoman: Naming a Heroine

Partly as a result of her original incarnation being a teenager, Kara has always been called *Supergirl* rather than *Superwoman* (Link, 2013, p. 1177) – despite Clark Kent being *Superman*. Although similarly named characters such as Invisible Girl (Sue Storm), Ms. Marvel (Carol

Danvers), and Marvel Girl (Jean Grey) would be given name changes to reflect changing socially acceptable behaviour and reflect their status as adult women (in the form of Invisible *Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, and Phoenix, respectively) (Cronin, 2018; Cocca, 2016, 200-206; Darowski, 2014, p. 51), Kara has always remained Supergirl. This is reflected in the show, where the question of whether this nomenclature is sexist is tackled head on in the first episode. Seizing the opportunity to name Kara's alter ego before she had publicly announced herself, Cat Grant dubs her Supergirl in the pages of CatCo Magazine. Upon seeing this, a frustrated Kara asks why Cat did not settle on Superwoman and feels that labeling her with the girl suffix is demeaning to someone who is supposed to be a hero. Cat replies "what do you think is so bad about 'Girl'? Huh? I'm a girl. And your boss, and powerful, and rich, and hot and smart. So, if you perceive 'Supergirl' as anything less than excellent, isn't the real problem you?" (Adler & Winter, 2015).

Certainly, defending this naming convention was done in the pilot to pre-empt any criticism the show would receive for using "girl" rather than "woman," but the specific logic for why they decided to do this can be read in two ways. On the one hand, somewhat cynically, one could argue that Cat was deliberately chosen to name Supergirl because she is a woman, and therefore allegations of sexism should fall flat. Basically, how could it be sexist (or misogynistic) if it was done by another woman? This argument is obviously flawed and assumes both that women cannot internalize sexism/misogyny, and that the audience would not see through this transparent attempt to avoid criticism. If this is the case, it may be done as a result of the brand recognition of Supergirl, who has maintained that codename for nearly sixty years, and thus the executives continuing to use that branding in comic books and other media may not have given the producers leeway to change her name.

On the other hand, one could interpret the writers' insertion of Cat Grant's explanation as a manifestation of one of the principles of Third Wave Feminism, which sought to reclaim certain aspects of femininity that the Second Wave had rejected, such as "girliness," emphasized through the idea of "Girl Power" (Cocca, 2016, p. 159; Stuller, 2010, p. 67). This view, known in some cases as "Girl Culture," was popularized in the 1990s through magazines like *BUST*, and typically included adult women aged from their mid-twenties to late thirties, who wanted to remove the stigma from what is seen as "girly" or somehow inherently "feminine" (Stuller, 2010, p. 67). In that view, Cat Grant is seeking to normalize the acceptance of stereotypically feminine behaviour rather than rejecting it outright, as though women who perform that femininity are gender traitors. On a metatextual level, the writers and producers of *Supergirl* could be trying to do the same thing by allowing a strong, dependable, and morally good hero to embody girl culture and show girls/young women that so-called typical feminine behaviour and interests are not bad things.

I am inclined to believe the truth lies somewhere in the middle: surely, pushback on the part of DC Comics and Warner Brothers played a part in the decision to continue using the name Supergirl, as this is an adaptation of their source material, and they would have final say over matters such as this. However, that does not negate the possibility of the writers choosing to include this scene in the hopes that they could contribute positively to the reclamation of "girl culture" and do something good with the hand they have been dealt.

2.5 Friends, Family, and Team-Ups: Kara's Supporting Cast

When it comes to rounding out the cast of a superwoman's story, there are a few important things to take note of. Is she the *only* representation of femininity in the text, or do other women play an important role? Who supports her? Who is she mentored by? Answering these helps us to see how the show does with gender overall, as well as offering further insight into Kara. To do so,

I am going to examine Kara's supporting cast, including some specific discussion of her relationship with Alex. Before this, however, it is important to get a sense of where superwomen are generally situated in these areas.

"Smurfette Syndrome" refers to when an ensemble cast of a television show, a team, or some other group of characters has only one token female, who is then burdened with having to represent all women – which is impossible. Instead, her presentation and shortcomings are read as problems residing with every woman (Pollitt, 1991). The earliest comic book super team, DC's Justice Society of America from the 1940s, had Wonder Woman as the sole woman against their eight-man roster of the Flash, Green Lantern, Hour-Man, the Spectre, Doctor Fate, the Sandman, Atom, and Hawkman (Darowski, 2014, p. 11). At the end of the 1950s, DC created a new team, the Justice League (called the Super Friends in initial cartoon appearances), where again Wonder Woman was the only female member for years (Cocca, 2016, p. 34; Fawaz, 2016, p. 41). This is echoed with Marvel's superhero teams of the 1960s, shown with Sue Storm (*Fantastic Four*), Wasp (*Avengers*), and Jean Grey (*X-Men*) (Stuller, 2010, p. 33), who are also weaker than the men and prone to fainting (Cocca, 2016, p. 122; Darowski, 2014, p. 21). Much of this can be attributed to the fact that these books were almost always written by and for men. For instance, it took until 1972 that Marvel Comics published a solo superwoman book written by a woman (Peppard, 2017).

The downplaying of Wonder Woman in a team setting is particularly odd given that her early solo adventures feature plenty of women in her supporting cast: her Amazon sisters, best friend Etta Candy, and the Holliday College girls, who are all as capable and confident as Wonder Woman in their fight against fascism (Cocca, 2016, p. 27-28). Likewise, while Steve Trevor is Wonder Woman's love interest, he does not overshadow the presence of sisterhood (Cooga, 2018, p. 571), nor is Wonder Woman weaker than him. Wonder Woman, Etta, and the Holliday girls

share a healthy and trusting relationship, rather than one that is competitive over men or their own recognition, allowing them to operate as a team (Robinson, 2004, p. 36-42). Similarly, while the *X-Men* started off lacking strong representation, a 1970s relaunch increased the gender parity and portrayal of women, including (at various times) combinations of Storm, Jean Grey, Kitty Pryde, Rogue, and Rachel Grey. During this time, Storm transitions into a masculine punk-rock figure, complete with mohawk, (Cocca, 2016, p. 130-135), and establishes her physical prowess in hand-to-hand combat against a rival band of mutants (Darowski, 2014, p. 85). Unfortunately, just as Wonder Woman's strong female supporting cast would die out under new creative teams in the 1950s (Stuller, 2010, p. 24), and not return until the 1980s (Cocca, 2016, p. 38-39), X-Men faltered during the 1990s and early 2000s: teams often had only a single woman, and the strong themes of family disappeared (Cocca, 2016, p.136-140; Darowski, 2014, p. 112).

Luckily, superwomen have been consistently utilized better elsewhere. In the 1990s, Barbara Gordon (the original Batgirl) co-founded the Birds of Prey, an all-women team comprising herself, Black Canary, Huntress, and other recurring superwomen (Cocca, 2016, p. 65-73). They grew to become a family unit, with emphasis on sisterhood, much like the early days of Storm leading the X-Men (Stuller, 2010, p. 146-149). Collaboration and chosen families are also prominent in two 1990s television shows led by superwomen: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. The core cast of *Buffy* comprises her chosen family, the "Scoobies" (Cocca, 2016, p. 163-166), made up of women (Willow, Cordelia, Tara, Faith, as well as Dawn and Joyce Summers) and men. Together, they show that a group is more than the sum of its parts (Stuller, 2010, p. 92) and prove the validity of chosen families (p. 95). On *Xena*, meanwhile, the core of the show is built around the queer-coded friendship of Xena and Gabrielle, who have been described as a "complex and meaningful female friendship and as participant[s] in female communities"

(Stuller, 2010, p. 92-93). These texts help to highlight how superwomen tend to accept help and cooperation that male heroes reject. For instance, while Barbara Gordon relies on the Birds of Prey and other superheroes, Batman typically operates on his own despite his “family” of Robin(s), Batgirl(s), and Nightwing, often only begrudgingly working with the Justice League.

On *Supergirl*, Kara’s supporting cast is made up of numerous men and women throughout the show, but consistently features her sister Alex Danvers, friends James Olsen, Winn Schott Jr., and Lena Luthor, J’onn J’onzz/the Martian Manhunter, Mon-El (seasons 2-3), Querl Dox aka Brainiac-5/Brainy, and finally Nia Nal/Dreamer. Beyond those main characters, Lucy Lane, Superman, Cat Grant, and Maggie Sawyer also offer Kara important support and help. With Alex, Lena, Cat, Lucy, Nia, Maggie and other supporting women such as Imra Ardeen/Saturn Girl, Eve Tessmacher, and villains like Astra, Reign, Livewire, and Mercy Graves, Kara never has to stand as a representation of *all* women. As such, while Kara’s agency and complicated gender performance does not fall into Connell’s conception of emphasized femininity, more mainstream elements of her femininity, including her long hair and fashion sense, are still contrasted with others, none of which are constructed as singularly correct.

Beyond Alex and Nia (discussed in subsequent chapters) the different representations of femininity are especially prevalent with Cat and Lena, who are very different women than Kara, and in some ways both more and less transgressive in their deviances from emphasized femininity. For instance, Cat plays into some feminine stereotypes, being (fittingly) catty, and very into fashion, but is also very assertive, in charge, and blunt. However, like Lena, she is a CEO and concerned with profits, making their gender transgressions more acceptable as they fit a mold of liberal feminism, asserting women can do anything men can, including morally questionable activities such as military and economic leadership, as they tend to favour personal progress over

systemic barriers (Tong, 1989). Lena shares Cat's blunt and ruthless tendencies but transgresses against gender norms more with her outward display of female masculinity, including a penchant for three-piece suits and a consistently dark wardrobe.

From the very first episode, Kara follows in the trend of other superwomen by working with her supporting cast to both battle as Supergirl and deal with issues in her personal life and, importantly, includes the influence of women on Kara's development. Winn helps Kara look for trouble and provide excuses for her disappearances from work while Alex and J'onn provide combat support and training via the DEO. J'onn and Alex provide mentorship in Kara's development as a hero while Cat Grant and an artificial intelligence representing her Kryptonian mother help Kara with broader professional and personal life advice. In doing this, *Supergirl* avoids problematic territory amongst superwomen where fathers (real or surrogate) are the driving force behind their training and growth, and maternal figures are kept in the dark about their double lives. Popular examples include the shows *Alias* and *Veronica Mars* (Stuller, 2010, p. 105-114), Supergirl's original comic incarnation where Superman trained her and *authorized* her to be a hero (Link, 2013), Batgirl being inspired only by Batman and her father (Stuller, 2010, p. 106; Cocca, 2016, p. 59), and a period of time in the late 1960s/early 1970s where Wonder Woman was mentored only by a martial arts master named I-Ching (Cocca, 2016, p. 32; Stuller, 2010, p. 38).

As the show progresses, James joins Kara in the field as masked hero Guardian, while Mon-El and Nia Nal train under Kara to become superheroes themselves. Having been introduced alongside the return of Mon-El in season three, Brainy becomes a permanent staple of the team in season four. Kara's reliance on this crew to help fight for justice is emblematic of how superwomen are depicted compared to supermen: they do not operate solo to fulfill "lone wolf" fantasies but cultivate a chosen family to lean on for support. Beyond that, their interactions also highlight some

important parts of her femininity: her selflessness, compassion, ability to push aside her feelings when necessary for the greater good, and her ability to motivate.

Despite frustrations with J'onn not trusting her judgement in early episodes and Kara expressing that "I think I know why my cousin prefers to work alone" (Kreisberg, Adler, & Winter, 2015), Kara acknowledges that she feels the importance of having others to rely on and to help in turn early on. Ignoring protest from the DEO, Kara tells James that Supergirl *will* let Cat Grant interview her, saying she does not want to "be a hero like [Superman]. My cousin, he's so used to going it alone, he doesn't know any other way. But I do. I see it now. You, Winn, my sister, Ms. Grant even, you've all showed me that" (Kreisberg, Adler, & Winter, 2015). She elaborates that the Kryptonian "S" logo she and Superman wear is not just their family crest, "but... our family motto. 'El mayarah.' It means, 'stronger together'" (Kreisberg, Adler, & Winter, 2015). Despite occasional clashes, Kara accepts that working together is the best way to accomplish things and that flying solo only makes it harder. When James is concerned his career has only flourished because of his relationship with Superman and wonders if he can make it without him, Kara says "part of being your own man is knowing when to accept help" (Kreisberg, Adler, & Winter, 2015). In this case, while femininity is linked with a sense of community and a willingness to ask for help, Kara is telling James *everyone* has the responsibility to reach out, regardless of gender.

This sentiment is echoed in a later episode. After Winn's serial killer father breaks out of prison, Winn begins pushing his friends away, fearing that he might become just like his dad. Kara does not let him disengage, and instead reminds him of all the good that they have done *together*. The scene begins with a high angle wide shot of Kara and Winn on the docks, with a lot of negative space used to emphasize the emotional distance Winn is trying to create between them. However, as the scene progresses, the shots become increasingly closeup while still featuring both in frame,

indicating that Kara is bridging the gap. Despite Winn's protests that this is his issue alone (like solo male heroes often do), Kara emphasizes that friends help each other with their struggles, and he has done that for her: "think about everything you've done for me the last few months, becoming Supergirl, I wouldn't have been able to survive without you" (Musky-Goldwyn, DeWille, & Babbitt, 2016). Winn insists that she would have, but Kara vehemently denies it. Here, Kara recognizes that regardless of her powers, Winn's emotional support has helped her feel at home on Earth despite the trauma of her past, and that she *wants* to do the same for him now.

Meanwhile, after J'onn takes the blame for Astra's death, Kara loses trust in him, saying she cannot work with him or the DEO anymore. This scene is contrasted with most of their prior interactions, where, even when Kara is frustrated or angry at him, the scenes are still constructed through shots and staging that emphasize the growing bond between them. In this case, however, J'onn approaches Kara when she is alone in a sparse room at the DEO. It begins with wide shots of Kara and a hologram, with nothing else present in the room until J'onn slips in. At this point the scene cuts between many closeup shots of them, but the movement of the scene features Kara increasing the physical distance between them while avoiding his gaze, meaning that the closeups only feature them one at a time, isolating them.

Their make up in the next episode starts out very similarly, as Kara, in closeup, crosses her arms and puts her head down before speaking to J'onn, pragmatically telling him "the world almost ended 'cause we weren't a team" (Musky-Goldwyn, DeWille, & Downs, 2016). Kara pouts before it cuts to a wide shot of the room, where she slowly approaches J'onn, continuing "we need each other. So, personal feelings aside, I'm back" (Musky-Goldwyn, DeWille, & Downs, 2016). As J'onn accepts Kara's decision, a closeup on her racks focus to shift the viewer's attention to Alex in the background, who feels immense guilt. Closeup shots continue to focus on only one of them,

while the use of medium and wide shots show the separation of the three figures as Alex paces and confesses it was her that killed Astra, not J'onn. Initially the camera follows Kara's lone movement to the door, but it cuts to a closeup of her as she pauses there, pulling Alex into a hug. J'onn heads to the door, but Kara grabs his hand in a closeup emphasizing his surprise, beckoning him to stay with them as Alex sobs. Kara was willing to ignore her personal grievances to continue to work with the DEO, showing her commitment to the mission, recognizing that she needs help, but her compassion is what shines through as she forgives Alex without hesitation and pulls J'onn in to let him know that he is part of their family too.

Kara's sentiment of "stronger together," an embodiment of superwomen's ideal of teamwork, is reiterated numerous times, but in a very notable instance during season four, she is on the receiving end of it. Despite her frustrations with the current anti-alien sentiment brewing across the country, Brainy reminds her that their strongest asset to fight it is *each other*. Brainy, having recently lost his Legionnaire ring (which gives him flight and a personal protection shield), tells Kara that he was wrong to think it was what made him a hero. Instead, "it was fighting alongside all of you, helping to make Earth a better place. ... El mayarah. Stronger together" (Wright, Kardos, & Armaganian, 2019). These words inspire Kara to march in a protest against the government's recent activities as Kara Zor-El, "citizen of Earth" (Wright, Kardos, & Armaganian, 2019) rather than patrol from above as Supergirl. As she joins the march, closeups emphasize the sense of community in the protest by showing Kara, J'onn, Brainy, and Nia join hands and walk together. Likewise, shots of them approaching the political rally are intercut with the rally itself, featuring Lockwood leading chants alone on the stage, and crowd shots of the individuals with noticeable space between them. Here, Kara's compassion inspired Brainy to

organize the march, and his words changed her mind, in turn allowing the group to show that empathy and community are right, not hatred and fragmentation.

Of her relationships with the Superfriends (her chosen family), Kara's bond with Alex is of paramount importance. This relationship is important to Kara's femininity because not only does it reflect Kara's compassion, selflessness, and ability to rely on others, it also stands out as a strong example of female friendship and comradery, which is often missing from stories of superwomen. The importance of Kara and Alex's bond is established in the pilot episode, as Kara's first public use of powers is prompted by Alex's flight nearly crashing into National City. While the first four seasons of the show are full of instances that reflect the strong sisterhood between Kara and Alex, two stand out above the others. The first comes from season one, when Kara is attacked and trapped in a dreamworld by a paralytic plant creature called the Black Mercy. In order to escape, Kara must reject the fantasy, which in her case, is her life on Krypton if the planet had never exploded. J'onn uses his telepathic powers to insert Alex into this dreamworld. It is their bond and the recognition of her sister that snaps Kara back to reality and allows her to escape the Black Mercy. As the dreamworld crumbles through earthquakes, we see a closeup of Alex and Kara reaching out to grab each others' hand, before it fades out to them waking up at the DEO.

Kara and Alex's bond is shown to be pivotal again in season four, after a new Colonel is sent to the DEO to provide Presidential oversight to Alex after she had disobeyed orders. Part of the Colonel's role involves using a Truth Seeker creature to discover the true identity of Supergirl from any of the DEO agents who know it. With their consent, Kara asks J'onn to erase the agents' memories of her identity so that the Truth Seeker will not expose her, and Alex insists that it must include her too or Kara will not be safe. Shot in closeup, Kara and Alex share a tearful goodbye of sorts, with Kara sobbing "but who am I without you? The whole reason I became Supergirl was...It

was to save you” (Maggenti, Llanas, & Talalay, 2019). Alex replies “now let me save you this time” before hugging her in a closeup as Kara sobs into her shoulder (Maggenti, Llanas, & Talalay, 2019). As J’onn conducts the memory erasures, the song *Really Gone* by Chvrches plays, which is about not knowing how to move on after losing someone you love/cherish, mirroring how Kara feels, as she turns and leaves, crying, just before J’onn erases Alex’s memories last. Foregrounding Kara and Alex’s relationship not only allows Kara to consistently be trained and informed by another woman, but it also allows the show to explore a strong sisterhood bond – something uncommon in superhero stories outside of *Wonder Woman* and *X-Men*.

2.6 Conclusion: Kara as a Nuanced Superhero

Kara may be a conventionally attractive blonde woman in a costume that arguably resembles a cheerleader, but her character is still a strong representation of the complex masculinities and femininities that can coexist within a heterosexual cis woman. Kara’s commitment to justice and her willingness to put aside her personal desires for the greater good are foregrounded numerous times throughout the show. Likewise, Kara’s characterization avoids many pitfalls that have plagued superwomen through the history of superhero stories, while still allowing her to be someone who struggles and has flaws. Kara is allowed to have romantic relationships and be sexual without compromising her agency or letting these relationships become *the* focus of the show. The supporting cast of *Supergirl* helps Kara to learn and grow as time goes on, allowing her to be more than a singular messiah figure and highlighting how so much more can be accomplished when people work together. This is most evident in the show’s strong emphasis on the bond between Kara and Alex, who is the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter 3: Alex Danvers

Alex Danvers is an agent (and later leader) of the Department of Extranormal Operations (DEO), working alongside Kara as a superwoman, albeit without superpowers. She is also Kara's adoptive sister, as her parents took Kara in upon her arrival to Earth. Alex is a white, cis, lesbian woman, and her more androgynous identity contrasts with Kara's mostly traditional feminine appearance and persona. Alex's androgynous femininity, or female masculinity as Halberstam (1998) calls it, is represented strongly throughout *Supergirl's* first four seasons in many ways. In order to dissect this characterization, I have split the discussion into three key sections that help to explore different aspects of her femininity: visual representations, sexuality, and protective leader/nurturer.

3.1 Visual Representations of Alex's Femininity

The importance in discussing physical appearance as an aspect of gender expression rings true for Alex, as her style evolves in tandem with Alex's changing gender expression from a tomboy to someone more androgynous. One of the most immediate indicators of this comes from the evolution of Alex's haircuts. In the first season, Alex has a straight bob style haircut that's tinged red over actress Chyler Leigh's natural brown and hangs down the sides in front of her ears. This haircut serves a practical purpose as it keeps it out of Alex's face during her physically demanding work and does not lend itself to being grabbed by a foe. But beyond this, it also fits with her more masculine personality, including not just her physical prowess, but also her decisiveness, commanding presence, and no-nonsense approach to her work.

Contrasting this look, season one episode "Manhunter" includes flashbacks to a very different Alex three years prior – one with long brown hair running midway down her torso. This sequence involves Alex dancing with men and drinking at a club before being arrested for trying

to drive under the influence of alcohol. Alex is very different from her established character, acting like a party girl rather than a reserved and protective DEO agent. The oddness of seeing this Alex is emphasized with the use of oblique camera angles, which are titled to odd angles (Giannetti & Leach, 2011, p. 415) and out of focus shots that present Alex and the club as blurry (p. 412), while the lights of the club are blinding because the camera is overexposed (letting too much light in) (p. 416). Generally, these distorting techniques are used for a specific purpose – in this case to mirror Alex's intoxication. More importantly, the scene is meant to highlight how Alex was floundering in life. This is explicitly stated following her arrest, as J'onn J'onzz visits her in police custody, mentioning her falling grades and wasted potential. This scene is framed with the cell bars always between Alex and J'onn, showing them as strangers in this part of the narrative, adding to the unusualness of the flashbacks.

With the second season, Alex's bob becomes messier, curlier, and redder, while still hanging down the sides in front of her ears. This mirrors Alex's personal journey of exploring her sexuality as a lesbian, coming out, and having her first girlfriend, as it pushes her away from looking like a heteronormative woman, as some "deviant" hairstyles (shorter, dyed, and less kempt) tend to be associated more with the LGBT community than heterosexual cis people, even if queer hairstyles as a broad as anyone else's. Alex keeps her hair in a middle part and lets it hang naturally down the sides of her head, both in and out of uniform. This hair length and colour remain in season three as well, but Alex begins to style it differently: she parts it further on the right side of her head, brushing the hair back around her right ear while letting the left side hang down in front of her face more. In her DEO uniform, Alex retains the right part, but slicks both sides back around her ears to keep it out of her face and prevent it from affecting visibility. Both style

alterations increase how androgynous she looks, with the slicked style making it appear as though her hair is very short and almost boyish, while the hanging look is almost punk rock.

Alex keeps a similar parted hairstyle in her casual looks in season four but has shorter sides while retaining the longer bob-length hair on top, which hangs down to keep the uneven parted look from season three. Because of the undercut, the length difference between the brushed back right side and the hanging left side is much greater. While in DEO uniform this season, Alex keeps the longer top hair brushed up and slicked back, creating the most masculine hairstyle she has had thus far, with the undercut fully visible while slicking back the rest gives it the appearance of being very short and almost like a military flattop style. Alex usually pairs this hairstyle with several earrings, retaining a touch of femininity against the masculine cut.

At this point it is worth discussing Alex's DEO uniforms. Season one establishes three variants, two of which Alex routinely uses throughout the first three seasons of the show, while season three grants a permanent new one. Alex's first DEO uniform appears in episode one: a short-sleeve black polo shirt with one button undone, black military belt and cargo pants, a thigh holster for her gun, and black combat boots. This look is often interchanged with the first variation, which swaps the button-equipped short-sleeve polo shirt with a long sleeve zip-up polo of the same colour, and the addition of a second thigh holster. This would become Alex's dominant DEO uniform for the first three seasons (see image 3 in appendix 2). The second variant adds a bullet-proof vest, extra storage pouches, a combat knife, knee pads, and a combat helmet to the long sleeve uniform. These outfits match Alex's male DEO cohorts, including J'onn, putting them all in gender-neutral uniforms that mark them as a group of equally skilled covert agents, rather than deadly male agents and sexy femme fatales. This may be common for the military in reality, but is still worth noting in the space of fictional superwomen. Although present from the first episode,

Alex gradually shifts to only using the long sleeve version by season two without direct attention being called to it. In general, other than when Winn crafts Alex's new suit, the DEO uniforms are not discussed directly in any capacity, treating their unisex nature as natural and not in need of justification.

In season three episode 17, Winn gives Alex a newly designed suit. Alex wears this upgraded DEO suit for the remainder of season three, and all of season four. It is comprised of a black leather and spandex-esque jacket with shoulder padding, a collar, and a removeable fold over vest piece, leather fingerless gloves, black spandex pants with thigh holsters, and black combat boots. Occasionally, usually inside the DEO, Alex wears the suit without the gloves or removeable vest portion, which exposes a zipper running the duration of her torso up to the collar. This suit is fittingly unique compared to the other DEO agents' wardrobe, as it visually places Alex on top of the DEO hierarchy, paired with her promotion to its official leader at the end of season three.

In line with her androgynous identity, Alex seldom wears dresses, except in four episodes. In different ways, three of these instances involve Alex performing gender in a way that is atypical of her – she wears the dresses to meet an expectation, not as a genuine form of self-expression. The first instance arises when Alex intends to keep Maxwell Lord distracted while J'onn J'onzz investigates his offices, looking for evidence of illegal activity. To do this, Alex plays up Max's already-stated romantic interest in her, but the show makes it clear that this interest is not returned. When calling Max, Alex is filmed in a series of closeups as she skulks around the DEO, meant to suggest to the audience that her assertion to Max of meeting him “off-the-record” without J'onn's knowledge is genuine. Alex remains forceful in her invitation, telling him to “shut up and listen” before she explains the situation, to which Max replies that it “sounds like a date” (Musky-

Goldwin, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016). However, after Alex hangs up, the camera pans to show that J'onn has been observing the whole conversation, indicating that this *is* a ruse.

When Alex arrives at the date, the camera mirrors what we assume is Max's gaze, taking her in from the bottom up in a panning closeup, revealing her outfit slowly rather than all at once. As the camera pans, we see Alex in black high heels, pantyhose, a sleeveless tight black dress that stops just above the knee and has an open V-neck, and gold earrings, with her hair styled in a slight curl. Afterwards it stops in a closeup as Alex says "you're staring" (Musky-Goldwin, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016). As they sit down at a table, a wide shot establishes that only they are present, with the staff having vacated prior to Alex's arrival.

The mise-en-scène includes flowers on the table, completing the image of an intended date, which Alex mostly plays into, with the exception of telling Max that "I can feed myself" (Musky-Goldwin, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016) when he tries to romantically serve her a piece of food. As they eat, Alex pushes him for information and diegetic music plays in the form of *Crush* by Quadron over the speakers. Although gender flipped, the song seems to mirror Max's interest in Alex, an unrequited love where one wonders if it is worth the effort, again reinforcing that this is all a performance for Alex – Alex would not be wearing this for a *real* date. Throughout dinner, a lot of closeups are used, but usually with only one of them in frame, preserving the emotional distance between the two, unlike when she is with Maggie or Kelly in the future. After Max explains what he knows, Alex looks dismayed, and checks the time on her phone before the scene transitions to J'onn. When they reconvene, Alex expresses her frustration at the performance, carrying her high heels, sighing that "wearing these is just as painful as being punched by a Kryptonian" (Musky-Goldwin, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016) and prodding J'onn to tell her that he found something to make it worthwhile.

Alex next wears a dress in order to go undercover with Maggie Sawyer, as they infiltrate an exclusive fight club attended by society's elite, meaning that they need to look their best (i.e. richest) to blend in. Maggie alerts Alex to dress sharp when meeting up with her, so Alex opts for a tight, sleeveless navy-blue dress with black stitching around the neck and bust line. Due to the anonymity of the club, Maggie gives Alex a gold and brown masquerade ball mask. Although Alex enjoys Maggie's compliments about her on cleaning up well, Alex quickly ditches the dress in favour of her DEO gear when Supergirl arrives at the club and needs her help. Again, Alex is more comfortable in combat gear than in traditionally feminine garb.

Maggie is also the impetus for the third instance of Alex in a dress, as she presents it to her with a Valentine's Card/dinner invitation that reads "put this on" (Queller, Gates, & Pleszczynski, 2017). When Alex shows up to the empty ballroom, she enters in a wide shot that shows off the entire room, adorned with red balloons strung up from the ceiling, bouquets of red and white flowers, and Maggie as the lone figure near a red and white table in the center of the room. As Alex approaches, we see her in a red sleeveless, backless dress, and the scene cuts to a medium shot behind her, putting them both in frame. The camera does a typical series of closeup shot/reverse shots while Maggie apologizes to Alex for having shut down her Valentine's desires earlier, always being careful to keep them in frame together to visually represent the repairing of their relationship. Afterwards, Maggie leads Alex into a dance, while wearing a black blazer, white top, and black formal pants with heels, visually reinforcing Maggie's position as the more experienced lesbian offering a guiding hand to Alex, the new-to-it queer. In this instance, while Alex is agentic in choosing to wear the dress, it is still prompted by Maggie. Alex is performing for the date that Maggie had set up *and* for the dynamic of Maggie as the more experienced lover.

Lastly, the fourth occasion features Alex wearing two different dresses. As part of the crossover *Crisis on Earth-X*, Alex joins Kara for Barry Allen/the Flash and Iris West's wedding. She attends the rehearsal dinner early in the episode and wears a different dress to the wedding itself. This second dress ends up being torn down the side of Alex's thigh in order for her to kick properly when the venue is attacked, perhaps subtly commenting on the impracticality of superwomen's outfits when they place emphasis on looking sexually pleasing rather than on mobility. In these two instances, while Alex is not presented as uncomfortable in the outfits like she was with Max, she is still performing an expectation of femininity. This expectation comes from social etiquette tending to dictate that women wear dresses to formal events like a wedding, rather than a suit like the men do. In the case of these two instances, the other women all wear dresses as well, except the bisexual Sara Lance, who will come up again later as part of Alex's sexuality.

Outside of these circumstances, Alex is always dressed in separate pants and tops, whether it is in a suit while posing as an FBI agent, a sweater and jeans in casual settings, or a leather jacket and jeans when incognito on a DEO mission. Important and formal events held by Alex and members of her family never see her wearing a dress, as she typically opts for dark sweaters with a pair of blue or black jeans. This includes Thanksgiving dinners at Kara's, and, of particular note, her and Maggie's wedding shower in season three. Because Alex is hosting this event, she is not under social pressure to conform, and dresses in her natural style. Likewise, when Alex asks J'onn to walk her down the aisle at the wedding, he questions if he is expected to wear a tuxedo. Alex responds, "I'm wearing Kevlar and boots, so" (Rovner, Parrish, & Warn, 2017). Although this wedding does not occur, the comment is genuine, as it reflects how Alex is more comfortable dressed for a fight than in something fancy.

None of Alex's outfits end up being very revealing or sexualized, even when they are casual or more "intimate" outfits like sleepwear, which is typically shown as a tank top or tee-shirt and boxers. The reveal shot of Alex in the dress for her "date" with Max seems to represent his gaze at her but is not shot in an objectifying and uncomfortable closeup. Similarly, Alex's sexual experiences with Maggie and a one-night stand with Sara Lance rarely linger for longer than the initial kisses, often cutting to show the aftermath of them in bed – with no visible nudity. Scenes involving Alex and Maggie in bed cut away while they are still dressed and cut back in the morning when they are under the covers and wearing tops. Somewhat atypically, Alex's encounters with women are largely treated the same way as heterosexual encounters shared by other characters, such as Kara and Mon-El, as the show avoids sex scenes in general, using transitions and set dressing to *imply* intercourse. Meanwhile, a scene of Alex waking up in bed next to Sara after their drunken hookup is comedic, playing up how uncomfortable Alex is with having had sex with someone she barely knows. Sara remains asleep and under covers the whole time, and when Alex falls out of bed trying to leave, she falls out of frame, only to remerge with another blanket wrapped around her, so the sequence avoids being leery. By not lingering or presenting actual sex scenes, Alex's visual representation avoids a general problem of hypersexualizing lesbians and queer women – as I will discuss next.

3.2 Sexuality and Alex Danvers: Coming Out Later in Life

Although Alex is ostensibly romantically paired with Maxwell Lord in the first season, this does not lead anywhere. Instead, the second season follows Alex as she comes to realize she is a lesbian. This takes her down dramatic new paths that allow the show to touch upon issues of heteronormativity and homophobia. Alex's relationship with Maggie Sawyer, her first partner on the show, helps to develop the character further and deepen her androgynous nature, while

Maggie's departure allows the show to explore other facets of this "new" Alex before she finds another partner in Kelly Olsen. Because Alex's queer sexuality is such a big part of her character, I will explore her romantic interactions and related personal moments (such as coming out and trying to balance romantic desires with her close relationship with Kara) to better analyse Alex's femininity.

First, however, it is worth noting that in various ways, the superhero genre is almost inherently imbued with queer sensibilities, regardless of the characters' actual sexuality. In her discussion of the CW's *Batwoman* show, Anna Peppard (2020) notes that "the genre's defining themes of transformation, disguise, and duality are ready-made to evoke LGBTQ folks' experiences of hiding in plain sight as well as the liberation – and consequences – of coming out" and often these characters "exist within a general atmosphere of queerness: many superhero stories feature intense homosocial bonding and, of course, lots of flamboyant outfits" (n.p.). In terms of specific engagement with queer sexualities, Scott and Fawaz's introduction to a special issue of *American Literature* entitled "Queer About Comics" touches upon how the early years of *Wonder Woman* "visually celebrated S&M practices and same-sex bonding between women, metaphorized through the image of the chained, shackled, or bound submissive" (2018, p. 198) and how *X-Men* represented the HIV/AIDS crisis through the "legacy virus," which specifically harmed the mutant population similar to how HIV/AIDS affected queer communities (p. 198).

Following Scott and Fawaz's reference to *X-Men*, D'Agostino's work in said issue discusses how the mutant Rogue's ability to absorb the abilities and memories of other people through "flesh-to-flesh" contact is queer in how it "allows her to cross-identify and empathize with others in ways that go beyond normativity or non-normativity" (2018, p. 255-256). This is especially true of her initial appearances, where Rogue had taken on the abilities and some

personality traits of Carol Danvers through prolonged physical contact (D'Agostino, 2018). All of this is to say that positioning Alex as gay and following her as she processes this realization and comes out fits perfectly within a genre of stories that often mimic queer experience through their emphasis on dual identities. Having superwomen such as Alex literally be queer allows her to serve as a stronger point of identification for queer audience members.

Although Alex is not marked as gay from the beginning, starting a discussion of her sexuality with her coming out is important. When Alex tells Maggie that she is starting to come to terms with the realization that she *is* gay, she explains she is also coming to understand why she has lacked any interest in dating before:

I just never really liked it. ... I mean, I tried. You know, I got asked out. I just... I never liked... being intimate. I just... I don't know. I just thought maybe that's not the way I was built. You know, it's just not my thing. I never thought that it was because of... the other. (Llanas, Musky-Goldwyn, & Winter, 2016)

Even though no one says the term, this is a very straightforward presentation of heteronormativity. Under heteronormative conditions, straight is seen to be the “default” sexuality, so queer identities are swept aside and seen as odd/non-normative (Rich, 2003). This can become internalized to the point that people brush off potential romantic and/or sexual situations because homosexuality (or bisexuality, pansexuality, etc.) is simply not thought about so they do not know how to process or recognize those feelings. Alex's late realization that she is gay rather than asexual or “dysfunctional” causes her to reflect on earlier moments in her life where she batted homosexual feelings aside. Alex fiddles with her jacket and sits down next to Kara, framed in closeup, as she tells Kara that the real reason she and her high school best friend Vicki had a bad falling out was because Alex started to have feelings for her and did not know how to cope. Instead, Alex's emotions came out as anger, with her snapping at Vicki over nothing, and she then buried the

memories rather than confronting what they meant. Alex's anecdotes here are a perfect exemplar of the personal harm that heteronormativity can lead to.

Assumed heterosexuality, as well as Alex's own admittance that she struggles with dating, is explored somewhat through her interactions with Maxwell Lord in the first season. Alex first encounters Max through her work at the DEO because of his vocal opposition to Supergirl and his expertise in technology. When a government android goes rogue and disappears, Alex consults Max to figure out how they can stop it, starting a tense relationship between the two. Ulterior motives drive most of their interactions, though Max seems genuinely interested in Alex. Due to his suspected involvement with planned bombings later, which the audience *knows* he orchestrated, Kara is shocked when Alex tells her that she "let him wine and dine me," but Alex dismisses those concerns, saying he is just a nerd with a god complex, like her college boyfriends (Musky-Goldwin, DeWille, & Babbit, 2016). Despite this dismissal, Alex wastes no time in aggressively taking him into custody after learning that he discovered Supergirl's secret identity.

When Kara later decides his confinement is unjust and persuades the DEO to release him, Alex threatens Max by saying she collected a dossier on all of his suspected crimes and will use it to destroy him if he exposes Kara. As soon as Max poses an actual threat to Kara, Alex drops all pretense, no longer giving him the benefit of the doubt or seeing him as a potential romantic partner. This move indicates not only the importance Alex places on family (biological or otherwise) and her strong sense of justice, but also suggests that moving on from him is easy because she never actually harbored feelings for him. The only other hint of a potential romance between them occurs in the first season finale, when they are shown holding hands in a closeup as a mind control wave is causing the humans of National City pain. Max does not appear in subsequent seasons of the show, and thus this potential romance is dropped entirely. Given that

the finale includes a tease suggesting Lord will continue to pose a threat in the future, it is not clear why he has not returned. It may have been the result of the showrunners changing their mind about pursuing this storyline further, or it could be easily explained by the production's move from Los Angeles to Vancouver, which could have affected the availability of actor Peter Facinelli, and thus Alex's storyline was altered to compensate. Either way, the result is the same.

Beyond that brief tryst with Max and the mention of college boyfriends, *Supergirl* only presents Alex with a boyfriend in a season three flashback episode, after she has come out and dated Maggie in the present-day storyline. Very little attention is put on this boyfriend in the episode, and Alex quickly abandons him when her friend group ostracizes Kara, opting to be a social outcast with her adopted sister rather than keep her friends by being complicit in harassment. This does not necessarily mean she did not care for this boy, as being a generally decent person means she would not tolerate this behaviour, but it does provide another instance of Alex easily dismissing heterosexual romance without much concern.

Alex's difficulty with dating and understanding her own sexuality helps to paint her femininity in a more nuanced light than typical media presentations of lesbian women as uniformly butch. Although queer culture has continued to change since Halberstam's discussion, this stereotype still falsely suggested that they bury their feelings in a masculine way and are the dominant lover in their relationships, not allowing themselves to be wooed or pleased by their partners because of a discomfort with their gender and sexual identities (Halberstam, 1998, p. 118-128). Instead, Alex is open with her feelings, even when it is difficult, as I will explore in relation to her coming out and dating Maggie. Presenting Alex this way subtly contradicts popular associations of gender and sexuality: unlike stereotypes of gay women being wholly masculine

(through characteristics such as emotional stoicism), Alex's gayness does not inherently make her more like a man, nor does it radically/suddenly reshape her gender expression.

Likewise, Alex's romances with Maggie and Kelly do not treat her as an object of heterosexual male desire, which is typical of lesbians more broadly. Alex and Maggie are allowed to be sexual, but the show never presents their sexual activity to the audience, only the indications that it is going to occur, or already has. This is executed through simple film techniques, such as closeup shots of the couple passionately kissing and reaching to remove one another's clothing before cutting away, or only picking up the aftermath through the inclusion of strewn about clothes in the mise-en-scène as it establishes a scene in their apartments. Alex's short-lived fling with Sara Lance remains true to this, to the extent that Alex is even uncomfortable discussing her one-night stand in the aftermath, partly because having one feels like such a "guy thing" to her. When it comes to Kelly, her and Alex begin their journey as friends who, while attracted to each other, platonically share a hotel room in separate beds, and Kelly is also shown asleep on Alex's couch in the next episode. Before their relationship becomes overtly romantic, or vaguely sexual, they bond on an emotional level over shared military service and rough ends to their prior relationships.

These events all help Alex's representation of gay femininity to avoid problematic recurrent trends in the depictions of queer women. Western film and television have often portrayed lesbians (and queer women more generally) through unflattering stereotypes that may suggest they are psychotic and dangerous, keep them pushed to the side as minor characters who are not explicitly queer, or hypersexualize their relationships. The minimization of queer women on screens was a common facet of television in the 1990s and 2000s, where they would "[address] lesbian characters as existing only to engage with 'an issue'," so shows like teen drama *One Tree Hill* and Australian soap opera *Neighbours* (Beirne, 2009, p. 29) could pay lip service to LGBT

issues without actually including the characters in meaningful ways outside of those stories. Depicting queer women as psychotic lesbians dates back to films as early as *Manslaughter* (1922) and *Pandora's Box* (1928) (Stuart, 2008, p. 26, 45) and continued through the 1980s and 1990s. Some of these examples, like *Basic Instinct's* (1992) Catherine Trammel (Sharon Stone), are murderous *and* hypersexual (Galvin, 1994; Stuart, 2008, p. 58).

Until more nuanced representations of queer women began to appear in the 1970s, queer women's sexual activities would only be *shown* in tandem with their portrayal as deranged criminals. Otherwise, these women would be presented as chaste to the point of appearing asexual. Part of this can be attributed to Hollywood's strict Production Code, put in place to pre-empt government censorship, which forbade discussions and portrayals of homosexuality outside of criticizing it, and lasted until 1968 (Stuart, 2008, p. 46, 53). Queer coded films could "only [hint] at [their] lesbian theme[s] without daring to make [them] explicit" (Tasker, 1994, p. 178). Despite the dissolution of the Code, films remained hesitant to portray these relationships, exemplified in films like *Cabaret* (1972) which focuses on a queer love triangle but never has the same-sex pairing kiss on-screen (Benshoff & Giffin, 2006, p. 133). Likewise, the 1985 adaptation of the novel *The Color Purple* excised scenes of lesbian intercourse, replacing them with "chaste kisses" (Benshoff & Giffin, 2006, p. 170). Even films meant to grab attention through depictions of taboo sexuality, such as *Threesome* (1994) and *Three of Hearts* (1993), were much more explicit in their heterosexual sex scenes "than...either homosexual or queer three-way sex" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 228). Television, meanwhile, did not dare to show two women kiss until 1991 in America and 1993 in the United Kingdom (Beirne, 2009, p. 26). Afterwards, the inclusivity of lesbian characters was still detracted from by their lack of sexuality (Beirne, 2009, p. 27).

On the other end of the spectrum, films began to exploit lesbian sexuality for ticket sales as early as the 1930s, with what are referred to as “Classical-Era Exploitation Films.” These films still presented moral judgements about the deviant nature of queer sexuality but featured more explicit nudity than typical Hollywood films (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006, p. 101-105). Between the 1960s and 1990s, the moral judgements on these characters lessened, but they still relied on conventionally attractive actresses and heterosexual male directors to draw in heterosexual men (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006). The aforementioned film *Basic Instinct* was particularly criticized for its hypersexualization of actress Sharon Stone, done “for the (voyeuristic) pleasure of others,” and made clear by Stone’s insistence on having women on set with her so she would feel comfortable filming her first nude scene (Galvin, 1994, p. 226). Recent films have been much better at depicting queer women’s sexuality without coming across as predatory or leery, but some such as *Blue is the Warmest Colour* still present graphic sexuality between women (Soto-Sanfiel & Ibiti, 2016) that is more acceptable than it is between men.

Moving on, as part of not fitting neatly into the stereotypical idea of a butch, Alex wears her feelings on her sleeve, rather than burying them and acting cold or stoic. We see this in a variety of instances, most notably around the beginning and end of her relationship with Maggie, and through some interactions with Kara. After Maggie mentions being recently dumped and “mistakenly” assumes Alex’s interest in her love life is because she is gay, Alex cannot stop thinking about her at work, and makes no attempt to hide this from Winn, even if he is oblivious to its implications. Maggie initially rejects Alex’s suggestion of a date, causing her to break down and skip work. Kara makes a visit to her apartment, and as Alex explains what happened, an alcoholic drink in frame, the camera sits in place as she paces around the room, highlighting her anxiety and fragile state, similar to the fidgeting she did when coming out to Kara. Alex

specifically describes the experience as “so humiliating” as she cries in Kara’s arms (Kreisberg, Parish, & Teng, 2016), shown in closeup to emphasize the comfort Kara provides her. In the next episode, Maggie prods Alex to tell her why she has been distant and short with her. After initially trying to focus on a case, Alex explains her feelings in detail, saying that at first she was overjoyed to really discover herself thanks to Maggie, but that feeling of liberation gave way to pain after her rejection, and she does not know how to be just friends with Maggie. If Alex were neatly fitting a masculine/butch stereotype, she would be denying her feelings, *especially* to the one responsible, but instead she still shows vulnerability by expressing said feelings.

Alongside giving viewers an opportunity to confront/critique the concept of heteronormativity, Alex’s sexuality also allows *Supergirl* to deal with the issue of homophobia and show how a queer person can navigate their personal relationships better outside of a heteronormative framework. Homophobia first comes up in a Valentine’s Day-themed season two episode, when Maggie confesses that she lied about her parents being receptive to her coming out, as she had originally told Alex. Instead, she never told her parents and was outed against her will after giving another girl a Valentine’s card confessing her crush when she was 14. That girl showed her parents, who told Maggie’s, and she was sent to live with an aunt.

Nearly a season later, Alex suggests that Maggie reach out to her parents and see if they would come to their wedding shower. Her father *does* visit, but after Maggie tells Alex that she is the best wedding gift she could ask for, he storms out abruptly. Maggie follows him and asks why he bothered coming if he was just going to freak out all over again, to which he tries to justify his homophobic behaviour. He sternly explains to her that he spent his whole life trying to escape how “in [white people’s] mind[s] we’re all rapists and murderers,” eventually earning the respect of his community through hard work (Queller, Simon, & Downs, 2017). When Maggie was outed as gay,

he says she shamed him because she was the one thing white Americans hate more than Mexicans. This situation alludes to how race can compound upon other identity categories to worsen discrimination, which academics have discussed through the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality explains that individuals belong to multiple different categories of identity (such as sexuality, race, and gender) that make it so people face varying discrimination (or privilege) based on how many parts of their identity are non-normative (e.g. not straight, white, and male). The result is that the racism women of colour face is different than men of colour, because it is also *sexist* racism for them – they are a step further from the norm by not being men in addition to not being white (Crenshaw, 1991). In this case, while Alex and Maggie are both gay women, Maggie is also non-white, meaning that the homophobia she faces is sexist *and* racist, rather than “only” sexist homophobia, as Alex would face. While this event hints at intersectional issues, the show does not dwell here long. After that second rejection, Maggie gives her father back a childhood photo he brought, asserting that she is no longer that sad child waiting for her father’s acceptance. Back home, she tells Alex that she is all the family she needs.

While these instances do confront and condemn homophobia’s dehumanization and othering of the queer community, the fact that they are the only real instances of it being addressed make it questionable as to whether or not *Supergirl* is presenting a realistic or post-feminist view of what being a gay woman in America is like. Briefly summed up, Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that post-feminism can best be understood as a “sensibility” present in media which posits that feminism has achieved its goals, and any issues with equality that we perceive to exist can be dealt with through individual action, normalizing women’s second-tier status to men. Having Maggie’s family be the only openly homophobic characters suggests that homophobia is uncommon, and women’s open romantic affection in public does not result in harassment and assault. Alex never

personally experiences homophobia, even when involved in public displays of affection between herself and Maggie or Kelly. This is not to suggest that those involved in production and filming do not believe homophobia to be a big issue, as they may just be containing its presence on the show in order to keep a light, family friendly tone, but this still downplays the issue. In a sense, this relates back to the concept of plastic representation, as this depiction of queer femininity leaves something wanting in its serious confrontation with an everyday issue, similar to how race-swapped characters fail to really deal with racism. Ultimately, this makes it harder for queer audiences to truly relate to Alex.

Unlike her relationships with men, Alex works hard to balance her relationships with partners and Kara rather than abandoning the partner. This is highlighted a couple of times throughout Alex's relationship with Maggie. In particular, Alex struggles to balance spending time with both while not leaving one feeling ignored, but she sticks with it. In the first instance, shortly after Alex and Maggie have coupled, Kara disappears while investigating a series of missing persons. When Alex notices that Kara is not responding to her texts and calls, the DEO investigates and finds some of her clothes and accessories at her last known location, indicating she changed to her Supergirl costume in a hurry and took off, in this case through a portal to a distant planet. Alex frustratingly tells Maggie that their relationship cannot work because she feels responsible for Kara's disappearance by letting her guard down. However, unlike when she arrested Max or dumped her high school boyfriend in order to help Kara, Alex goes back to apologize to Maggie when Kara is safe. Maggie insists that "bad stuff happens. In our line of work it happens all the time" (Carrasco, Kardos, & Smith, 2017), wondering if Alex will act like this again but ultimately deciding to take Alex back after she promises it is a one-time issue. If the situation had occurred

with one of the men that Alex was with, she likely would have stayed away from them, but now that she knows what she wants and that it can make her happy, she puts the effort in.

Up to this point, Alex has prioritized her relationship with Kara over her romantic endeavours, but the opposite happens a few episodes later. As an annual tradition, Alex and Kara celebrate her “Earth birthday” – a celebration of the anniversary of Kara’s arrival on Earth. Season two’s Earth birthday is a particularly important one to Kara as it is her 13th, and 13 is her “lucky number”. However, Maggie throws a wrench into their plans by surprising Alex with tickets to their favourite band, who neither have seen in years. Kara pretends to be okay with delaying the celebration, but Alex feels guilty about postponing it. Maggie assures her things will be fine, but as luck would have it, a shapeshifter arrives at the DEO, trapping Alex and Kara in a lockdown.

As part of the lockdown, the shapeshifter mimics Alex, using her memories to try and convince Kara she is the real deal. As such, Kara confesses that she was hurt by Alex bailing, and the fake-Alex replies that she understands it was not fair of her, but tells Kara “I don’t want to feel bad for wanting to spend time with Maggie” (Llanas, Anna Musky-Goldwyn, & McWhirter, 2017). Kara explains that she does not want that either, but she is still harboring abandonment issues exacerbated by the anniversary of her arrival and is feeling like Alex will leave her too. Despite this being an imposter Alex, the psychic bond the creature created to access Alex’s memories went both ways, so Alex retained memories of this conversation. She drops by Kara’s loft with a celebratory cupcake when the situation is settled, and they talk things out, with Alex declaring “I’m not ever going anywhere. I promise. Just because I’m with Maggie, doesn’t mean I’m not with you. Always” (Llanas, Anna Musky-Goldwyn, & McWhirter, 2017). Rather than prioritize Kara to the detriment of her relationship with Maggie this time, Alex asserts that she will not be

abandoning Kara for her, but does need to be able to give that relationship her all as well, meaning that Kara has to accept *some* changes, but should never be afraid to express her concerns.

3.3 Protective Nurturer and Leader: Agent, Sister, and Hopeful Mother

Outside of the visual representation of Alex's femininity and how her sexuality is depicted, it is important to examine what Alex actually *does* to analyse what *Supergirl* says a queer woman is capable of. Alex is very dedicated to her career at the DEO and shows strong leadership skills alongside moral convictions regarding her duty to do good. Given this dedication, and her role as equal parts spy, soldier, and crime fighter, Alex easily fits into the mold of superwomen defined by Stuller. Beyond the DEO, Alex is also consistently depicted as a supportive and nurturing figure to her adoptive sister Kara. While her ability to act as a supportive big sister is eventually combined with her interest in becoming a mother, these feminine traits allow her to transgress gender boundaries by being combined with her more masculine characteristics. In order to explore these traits of femininity and masculinity that make up Alex's gendered performance, I am going to discuss her willingness to disobey authority in order to follow her moral compass, her ability to take charge as a leader, her protective role in Kara's life, and her desire for motherhood.

Alex displays a strong desire to fight for fairness and justice throughout the show, which often results in her bending the rules and ignoring orders to do what is right. This is directly stated by Alex herself in season four, when Colonel Haley, the woman put in charge of DEO oversight by the president, tells Alex that she is lucky her actions had good results, otherwise disobeying orders could have cost her. In reply, Alex, framed in a closeup shot, says "I followed my instincts and they were right. And I will continue to do so because that is what makes me a great leader. And if that means you have to court-martial me, then so be it" (Llanas, Beaty, & Negret, 2018). As Alex says this, nondiegetic brass music plays, reminiscent of the American anthem, and the two

operatives salute each other, suggesting that what Alex is doing and believes in is correct, even patriotic. Early on Alex had given a similar version of this statement when explaining her chosen profession to Maxwell Lord, declaring, “I work for the government because I believe there’s no higher calling than helping others” (Chang, Sullivan, & Freudenthal, 2016). Alex’s actions reflect this standpoint numerous times during the show’s first four seasons.

Throughout the first season before J’onn trusts and relies upon Kara, Alex continues to help Kara after J’onn has given her direct orders to not involve Supergirl in DEO matters. Not only does this save National City from villains like Vartox and Reactron, it also helps to strengthen her relationship with Kara, and facilitates a bond of trust between Kara and J’onn. Alex also displays a strong loyalty to and trust in J’onn, whom she, once outed as the Martian Manhunter, defends to Colonel Harper, the man sent to bring J’onn into custody. This poses serious risks to her career and life as a free woman, as she did not disclose J’onn’s true identity when she discovered it. By sticking up for J’onn and refusing to divulge information, Alex is taken into custody with him and willing to spend time in prison – but luckily Kara and Lucy Lane rescue them.

Later, during the second season, Alex ignores orders to save lives in two important instances. In the first, J’onn removes Alex from the investigation surrounding the return of her father, Jeremiah, because she is unable to treat it objectively. These commands fall upon deaf ears. Instead, she tracks Jeremiah down on her own to stop his work with Cadmus: the abduction and forced deportation of National City’s alien population, even risking her life when she boards the ship before launch. Secondly, when the Daxamite invasion occurs and their leader Rhea incapacitates J’onn, the President puts Alex in charge of the DEO. Her first orders to Alex are to retake the DEO base and use the positron canon embedded on the roof to destroy the Daxamite flagship. However, since Mon-El is still on board, Kara pleads with Alex for time to rescue him

and convince Rhea to stand down. Alex agrees, delaying the mission long enough for Kara to board the ship and get to Mon-El, risking the President's wrath for disobeying a direct order.

Alex also pushes back on assigned orders consistently throughout season four as the president tries to enforce a centrist approach between the fascist, alien-hating Children of Liberty and the aliens living in America. After ignoring the new President Baker's order to keep Supergirl at the DEO while the air is laced with a lethal dose of Kryptonite, Baker installs Colonel Lauren Haley to oversee Alex and keep her in line. Despite this, Alex continues to focus on combating the Children of Liberty without Haley's permission, putting her in hot water. However, this pays off as not only does public opinion cause Baker to change his mind and order them to apprehend Agent Liberty (their leader), but once Baker flip flops again, installing Liberty as Secretary of Alien affairs, Alex manages to convince Haley to ignore orders and let Supergirl go free. Without Haley's knowledge, Alex also assists Kara and co. in taking out a government satellite codenamed Project Claymore, built with the intention of shooting down incoming alien space craft, as she feels it supersedes the President's authority and is morally wrong. Likewise, later on Alex warns Kara and Nia that Agent Liberty and his goons are on the way to arrest them at CatCo.

From the pilot episode, Alex is routinely shown as the DEO's field commander in various operations. Beyond being squad leader when the DEO is on the field, Alex is also given more important leadership roles as the series progresses and pushes others to step up to the plate when necessary, ensuring that the DEO is not solely in the command of men. Throughout the first season, J'onn Jones seldomly uses his powers, fearing what will happen if he is outed as the Martian Manhunter. However, Alex pushes him to embrace his true identity, citing response to Kara coming out as an alien, and the necessity of his psychic powers in DEO operations. In two different

instances during seasons three and four, Kara is temporarily out of action and Alex tries to pick up the slack when dealing with the threats plaguing national city.

Similarly, in season two, after Winn has joined the ranks of the DEO and helped James become the vigilante known as Guardian, he faces a near-death situation and starts to lose his nerve. In response, Alex gives him a pep talk, reminding him that they all risk their lives on a daily basis because they believe in their mission, and if he was in need of help the way Kara is now, she would do it for him too. Alex faces her own crisis of faith in season two, during Jeremiah's initial return to their lives (and the DEO), as Mon-El, Winn, and Kara suspect him of being a double agent for the villainous Cadmus organization. Despite her frustration at their behaviour and reluctance to believe her father would cooperate with terrorists, Alex takes the fight to Jeremiah and Cadmus' leader Lillian Luthor. Unfortunately, Lillian draws Kara away by causing a train crash, leaving Alex to face off against Cadmus herself. Jeremiah gives her an ultimatum – if she wants to stop him, she will have to shoot him, and she cannot bring herself to do it.

In addition to just taking charge of situations, Alex increasingly is put into bureaucratically recognized positions of authority. Midway through *Supergirl's* inaugural season, J'onn is taken captive, and Alex's status in the organization means she is the next in line of command. However, the President sends in General Sam Lane to bring J'onn back, and the two do not see eye to eye. After having personally met and seen Alex in action, the President makes Alex the acting head of the DEO when J'onn is out of commission in season two's penultimate episode. As a result of this, Alex is tasked with repelling the Daxamite invaders and given responsibility to make tough calls, such as the positron canon mission. At the end of the next season, J'onn steps down from the DEO to pursue a new path through life and appoints Alex as his successor, citing that there is nobody he trusts more or has better confidence in to do this job. Although this move was also partially to

get her out of field work, she continues to play a very active leadership role throughout season four, right up to the end when she fights Agent Liberty alongside James.

A large part of Alex's nurturing nature comes from her close relationship with Kara, which positions her as a protective older sister tasked with getting her acquainted with Earth and keeping her safe. This stems back to their teenage years, shown in flashbacks throughout season one as well as the episode "Midvale" in season three. During that episode, Alex expresses her frustrations at the ease with which Kara is getting through school because of Krypton's advanced curriculum while Alex struggles, works hard, and simultaneously takes the blame for Kara's rebellion. This is reflected in season one, where a flashback shows Kara and Alex sneaking out of the house to go flying, only for Alex to be chastised for her irresponsible behaviour when they return home. Alex takes some flack from Eliza in the present of that episode for Kara becoming Supergirl. Eliza explains that she always put more responsibility on Alex because Kara had suffered so much already that she did not know how to discipline her, whereas she just wanted to push Alex to be the best she can be. By presenting a double standard and Alex's justifiable frustrations with this role, the show may be critiquing expectations placed upon women to be nurturers in ways that are not equivalent with men.

This emphasis on keeping Kara safe and happy continues into their adult lives, as Alex knows she cannot stop Kara from being Supergirl but can help her do it to the best of her ability through the DEO. For Alex, this also means throwing herself into the fray to assist Kara in the field. For instance, in an attempt to remove Kara from the playing field, Non places a Black Mercy plant in Kara's loft, which attaches itself to a host and puts them into a coma of their greatest fantasy, which they must reject to wake up. In Kara's case, this is being back on a Krypton which was not destroyed all those years ago and growing up with her family. Alex has J'onn psychically

insert her into Kara's dream to try and remind her of the people who love and need her. Alex succeeds in pushing Kara to save herself, and the two combat Non and Astra together. Alex also *literally* rescues Kara in the season finale, where Kara pushes the Fort Rozz prison ship into space where she cannot survive, so Alex picks her up in the Kryptonian pod she originally arrived in.

Alex's protective nature causes frustration when Kara is missing or hurt physically and emotionally. After Kara sends Mon-El off planet to save his life, she becomes despondent and closed off, but Alex continues pushing her to share her pain and rejoin the world, because "Kara Danvers is my favourite person. She's saved me more times than Supergirl ever could. So just think about that while you're trying to get rid of her" (Rovner, Parrish, & Warn, 2017). Likewise, when the villain Psi uses her empathic powers to show Kara her greatest fears, Alex helps her find the strength to push through them. The lengths that Alex will go to protect Kara are emphasised during the *Crisis on Earth-X* crossover, when she pleads with Earth-X's Winn Schott for assistance in getting back to Earth-1 to save Kara from captivity by Kara and Green Arrow's Earth-X doppelgangers. When he initially refuses, Alex says she is willing to fight on her own if need be. Season four presents Alex's biggest sacrifice for Kara when she has J'onn erase Supergirl's secret identity from the minds of everyone at the DEO who knows (Alex included) after Colonel Haley discovers the truth. Alex reassures Kara that it is okay because she sees no other way to keep Kara safe. After a half season without those memories, the trauma of finding Kara bloodied and beaten reawakens them in her mind.

Protecting a sibling is a duty often assigned by parents, whether it is because of birth order, personality, or other circumstances, and this is certainly the case for Alex. Even into adulthood, Alex regularly handles the emotional labour of helping Kara adjust to her new world and the struggles she faces in both her personal life and as Supergirl. This is done in lieu of physically

protecting her from threats, given Kara's abilities and the fact that they are essentially the same age (given that they are in the same class at Midvale High School). While this duty as a sibling is common, it does not mean Alex's emotional labour is not gendered. As famously discussed by Hochschild (2012), emotional labour, the work of managing one's own emotions in order to help others, is work that everyone does, but it is not spread out consistently or equally amongst genders. In Western contexts, women are assumed to be better at nurturing and caretaking (Mesquita & Delvaux, 2012), meaning they help others navigate their own emotions and provide a sort of therapy to them. Despite the cultural assumption that women are naturally good at this, they are often not recognized or rewarded (even socially) for this work (Lively, 2012, p. 224-227). This is partly because the private and personal nature of this work means it is "an unseen effort, which ... does not quite count as labor but is nevertheless crucial to getting other things done" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 113-114).

Related to her protective role in Kara's life, Alex's interest in becoming a mother is first brought up early in season three. Through her work at the DEO, Alex meets Sam Arias and her daughter Ruby, and soon befriends them due to Sam's position as one of Lena Luthor's closest employees. As Alex gets to know Ruby, she begins thinking about having children of her own, which opens a rift between her and Maggie, as Maggie never wants children. Alex initially downplays her hurt feelings, hoping that Maggie will change her mind. She tries to facilitate this by prompting Maggie to reach out to her homophobic parents before the wedding to try and reconnect, hoping that repairing this relationship would make Maggie reconsider. However, Maggie informs Alex that her parents are not the reason why she does not want kids. Alex still tries to accept this, but after attending Ruby's recital at school, she breaks down. Tearfully, Alex tells Kara that she wants to experience the highs, lows, and joys that Eliza went through, even if

she has to do it on her own like Eliza did after Jeremiah's disappearance, so Kara tells her there is only one thing to do. Shortly after that conversation with Kara, Alex breaks up with Maggie. Although she questions the decision, she is reassured by both Kara and Sara Lance that she is doing what is best for her. Alex continues to bond with Ruby throughout the season, looking after her in Sam's absence on different occasions due to Sam's dual personality as the villain Reign.

Alex's experiences with Ruby, who eventually calls her "Aunt Alex," prompt her to start the adoption process. However, while it is mentioned early in season four that Alex has been casually dating and working on her adoption portfolio, the sudden outing of President Marsden combined with the rise of the Children of Liberty and Kara's tumultuous relationship with President Baker results in Alex putting her personal life on hold. Alex only becomes aware of this after having her memory of Supergirl's secret identity erased, causing her to stress out about Kara's safety as she investigates Menagerie. When Kara survives the situation unharmed, Alex confides that her life has been stalling since the Marsden incident, and she needs to learn to trust people to take care of themselves so she can put more time into her own life. Alex uses this realization to push herself to finish up her adoption portfolio, then receiving correspondence that a young mother-to-be is going into labour. With Kara out of the country investigating Lex Luthor, Kelly Olsen accompanies Alex, but the 17-year-old changes her mind and decides to keep the child. This saddens Alex, but she holds onto hope that she will get another chance, bonding with Kelly in the process. Importantly, none of this time or energy spent on pursuing motherhood detracts from Alex's other roles as DEO agent and big sister to Kara. Pursuing motherhood does not mean Alex cannot still be a superwoman, an assertion that could be made due to beliefs that women should not pursue careers in order to focus on child rearing.

3.4 Conclusion: A Lesbian Superwoman

Upon first glance, Alex's lesbian identity in seasons 2-4 may seem a little cliché, but her character is more complicated than a simple stereotype, nor is she defined purely through her sexuality. Starting the show under the assumption that she is straight, Alex offers *Supergirl* a chance to explore the difficulty of discovering one's queer identity in a heteronormative world, coming out to friends and family, and issues of homophobia, even if that discussion is limited. In part through her strong bond with Kara, as well as her connection to mentor/father figure J'onn J'onzz, and her two romantic partners, the show avoids representing Alex's queerness as a stoic, uncaring masculinity. Instead, Alex leans towards masculinity in different ways, including her appearance and role in action, but her strong care for and love of friends, as well as her emotional vulnerability, and protective maternal role with Kara and Ruby Arias mark her as much of a complicated embodiment of femininities and masculinities as Kara is, even if their gender expressions differ greatly. This assertion that there is no singular definition of what it is to be a woman or feminine, as well as the fact that we *all* hold elements of masculinity and femininity is likewise highlighted with Nia Nal, as I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Nia Nal

Unlike Alex and Kara, Nia does not appear on *Supergirl* until the season four premiere. She is introduced as a new cub reporter at CatCo for Kara to mentor, but as the season progresses, it is revealed that Nia's mother is from the distant planet Naltor, where a single woman of each generation inherits the superpower of foresight via dreams. Nia is the latest woman in her family to be gifted with these abilities and uses them to become the superhero Dreamer. Just as Alex represents a different form of femininity than Kara, Nia also stands apart from these women to different degrees based on how her gender is explored and presented during the fourth season, including the fact that she is a heterosexual transgender woman. In order to examine this, I am going to discuss key instances of her characterization in her private, professional, and heroic lives. These instances break down into a few distinct categories: visual representations; romance and sexuality; how Nia's transgender identity is explored; the show's decision to name rename the character *Dreamer* rather than *Dream Girl*; and, Nia's role as Kara's mentee.

4.1 Visual Representations of Nia's Femininity

As is the case with my prior chapters, it is important to examine a few different aspects of how Nia performs her gender, including visual elements. Those analyses have included fashion, hair/makeup, and cinematography. While fashion is *not* an all-encompassing presentation of gender identity, Nia herself explains its importance when justifying her interest in writing about a new fashion district. She tells Kara "what we choose to wear tells a story about who we are. Whether you wear black and leather or pastels and silk, you're creating an inner version of yourself, whether you realize it or not" (Llanas, Mukerji, & Warn, 2018). Nia's fashion sense falls more onto the latter half, as she is typically shown in a variety of light or medium coloured dresses and skirts, as well as similarly coloured blazers and cardigans. While Nia does often wear items

like pink blazers, baby blue turtlenecks, navy sleeveless blouses, orange, white, and floral dresses, she also wears items like purple blazers, black skirts, jeans, denim jackets, grey and brown suede jackets, navy blouses and sweaters, and dark overcoats. Overall, Nia's wardrobe mixes bright, feminine colours and styles with more masculine clothing such as the blazers, and different styles of pants, both on and off the job.

Meanwhile, her long hair, draping down past her shoulders, is typically worn with either a middle part or a ponytail, but is also sometimes braided and worn with a more uneven part. Nia is generally done up with naturalistic makeup – meaning a minimal amount beyond what is typical for screen actors. She seldomly wears lipstick, except for special occasions, and likewise avoids much eye shadow outside of her costume. Her civilian outfits are generally well-tailored and form-fitting, but rarely have deep enough necklines to create an uncomfortable amount of cleavage, and the camera does not spend time ogling her rear or uncomfortably observing her body in the more exposing dresses. One of said dresses is worn during a “meeting” with Brainy that Nia mistakenly assumes is a date. This dress is a tight, sleeveless and shiny light blue dress with subtle black and pink flowers that extends halfway down her thighs, is partially backless, and extends down her chest in a V-neck. Even still, Nia is sitting at a table with Brainy for the duration of the scene, and thus is not filmed from such an angle that places emphasis on her bare thighs or cleavage.

As Dreamer, Nia wears her hair in a middle part, hanging down the sides of her face, mostly covering the sides of her mask. The Dreamer suit itself (see image 4 in appendix 2) is comprised of a large light blue domino mask (worn with matching eyeshadow underneath), a blue and white bodysuit, boots, and gloves. The arms and legs of the bodysuit are baby blue mixed in with a darker shade of blue, while white spreads across most of the chest and onto her inner biceps. A silver belt hangs across Nia's waist, a collar extends up her neck, and she wears fingerless gloves. As a result,

the only skin left exposed on Nia are her fingers and some of her face. While the suit is form fitting and hugs her body snugly, it does not overly emphasize her curves or breasts, and when shot from behind, the camera tends not to linger on her buttocks, but it *is* somewhat more prominent than Supergirl's since her costume lacks a cape to cover it. This costumed appearance stands out heavily against her comics basis (see image 3 in appendix 2), which tends to be a one-piece silver swimsuit that cups her breasts, paired with some form of matching gloves and boots, bare arms and thighs, no mask, and flowing blonde hair (Dandy, Saaverda, & Cecchinl, 2018; Hyde, 2011; Peterson, 2007).

4.2 Romance and Sexuality: Nia's Relationship with Brainy

Unlike Kara and Alex, likely due to only being in one season, Nia is only involved in one romance – with Brainy. This romance resembles Kara and James' in that it develops slowly over the 22 episodes of season four and is very chaste – involving only a single kiss. Also similar to Kara and James' situation, perhaps, this might be for a specific reason – to avoid the hypersexualization that most transgender characters (especially women and those who may appear more femme) are subject to in various media (Beeler, 2019). Often, this occurs through forced genital exposure (FGE), where a character is stripped by another in order to reveal their “real” gender. Beyond this, their romance highlights how, unlike Kara's generally nervous early romantic encounters and Alex's more direct approach, Nia is playful, but also clear, assertive, and often taking charge. This is demonstrated early during Brainy and Nia's first interaction in a meet-cute at a local pizzeria. Nia arrives, looking to order coffee as Brainy is waiting for pizza, only to be targeted for harassment when his image inducer (holographic technology that makes him appear human) fails and the staff realizes he is an alien. Nia aggressively steps in, tells them to back down, pays for Brainy's pizza, and leaves with him. Walking away, they talk about the situation and

Brainy expresses interest in getting to know her. Nia tells him “My name’s Nia Nal. If you truly wanna find me, you will” (Maggenti, Beaty, & Jierjian, 2018), before walking away as the shot lingers on a somewhat confused Brainy.

As things progress, Nia continues to take the initiative to let Brainy know what is on her mind, rather than being a passive observer waiting on him or being too confused about her own feelings to act. After Nia assists him and Supergirl in (temporarily) stopping Agent Liberty and Manchester Black, Brainy invites Nia to dinner, intending to discuss training her as a superhero. Based on their prior interactions, however, Nia interprets this phone call as an invitation to a date and arrives to meet him under that assumption. Early into the rendezvous, an oblivious Brainy refers to it as a “meeting,” prompting Nia to respond, “A meeting? Um, I thought we were on a date” (Maggenti, Llanas, & Talalay, 2019). Brainy replies with a clumsy, self-deprecating comment about how he assumed that Nia could not possibly be into him. Nia clarifies that, while she was willing to see how a date would go, “I’m not sure that I am interested in you” (Maggenti, Llanas, & Talalay, 2019). Regardless of this awkward moment, Nia listens to Brainy’s explanation until he receives a call and leaves abruptly. When Brainy visits her apartment later to follow up, Nia takes charge. As he is leaving, a closeup stops on Nia as she asks if he would like to attend a Valentine’s Day party her roommate is hosting. The corresponding closeup on Brainy pushes in while he fumbles his acceptance, before it cuts back to Nia, who confidently says, “Great. Then it’s a date” (Beaty, Baldwin, & Pleszczynski, 2019) before smiling at him and shutting the door.

Despite Brainy’s well-intentioned appearance at said party, he ends up hiding from the crowd after being hit on by Yvette, Nia’s black trans roommate (in a scene problematically using her for comedic relief as her interest in him is portrayed as aggressive because of her racial identity) until Kara, Alex, and J’onn show up, halting the progression of their relationship. A few episodes

later, James faces a near-death situation that leaves him hospitalized. There, waiting for news on him, Nia finds Brainy angrily interacting with a vending machine. She approaches him in a wide shot, and as their conversation progresses the shots move in to medium and closeups, mirroring the increasing anxiousness and intimacy the two are feeling. Interrupting his frantic ranting about things that have gone wrong lately and his admittance that “this event has forced me to process every difficult thing I have ever experienced” (Simon, Holcomb, & McKiernan, 2019), Nia grabs his cheeks in a closeup, kissing him passionately. As they kiss, soft piano music plays to highlight the romantic moment, but the camera soon pulls out to a medium shot, bringing the hallway lights into frame as they flicker and buzz. Nia stops the kiss and looks up in concern, while Brainy remains still with his eyes closed until Nia looks back down. The two share a worried gaze before the scene cuts away. Later in the episode, Brainy addresses their kiss, earnestly declaring that he does not believe they could maintain a healthy relationship, referencing Keanu Reeve’s dialogue from the film *Speed*. As he walks away, Nia playfully says, “whatever you say, wildcat” (Simon, Holcomb, & McKiernan, 2019), indicating that she is not giving up on him while referencing the film herself. While Brainy is still the more stoic one of the duo in these interactions, his anxiety and frustration over all the emotions he is feeling simultaneously, as well as Nia’s own confidence and self-assertion make it so that neither of them are exhibiting solely masculine or feminine qualities – each have elements of both, indicated throughout their romantic encounters.

Nia and Brainy do not rekindle until the season finale. Nia refuses to give up helping J’onn in a “mathematically impossible” situation, causing Brainy to snap back to normal after the Children of Liberty’s torture rebooted him to a cold and calculating state. Returned to his natural, emotional nature, Brainy pleads with Nia and J’onn not to give up, screaming for them to ignore what he had said, and finally confessing his love for Nia as they succeed in destroying Lex Luthor’s

device. Here, Nia takes an agentic role in the action alongside J'onn, while Brainy essentially stands on the sidelines and offers critique, and later bombastic support for their attempt to do the “impossible.” This highlights Nia’s determination and refusal to give in to adversity, while again changing the gender script by having the superwoman in action while her male partner provides emotional/moral support. Brainy’s announcement of his feelings leads them to couple up off-screen, shown when they pass by Alex and Kelly while holding hands, and share a chair for game night at J’onn’s apartment. Their drawn-out romance offers a place to explore both characters, and highlights that despite Nia’s overtly feminine appearance, she also displays masculinity and is not reduced to a two-dimensional depiction of a woman enamoured by a new man.

4.3 Coming Out: Traversing Nia’s Transgender Identity

Although shows like *Pose*, *Euphoria*, and even *Supergirl* now hire transgender actors to play complex and diverse transgender characters, representations of transgender people still have many transphobic stereotypes to overcome. Julia Serano argues that transgender people are routinely portrayed as acting hyperfeminine and crudely stereotyped into two categories: the “deceptive” or “pathetic” transsexual. The deceptive transsexual is often subjected to FGE late in the film as a plot twist. Usually, this is tied to homophobia, as the trans woman is exposed as having a penis, so male characters who have kissed her, or even found her attractive, react with violent disgust (seen with a cis man playing the trans woman in *The Crying Game*, and exaggerated for “comedy” in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, this time with a cis woman in the role). This exposure is itself typical of another convention of transgender stories, which equates genitalia with their “real” identity and says assaulting them for this “deception” is just. Unlike the deceptive transsexuals’ ability to “trick” audiences, the pathetic transsexual is a character coded as *clearly* not the gender they claim to be, so their attempt to pass is supposed to be laughable. This is

conducted by having a cis actor play another gender, often with a cis man playing a trans woman, seen with John Lithgow in *The World According to Garp*, Terrence Stamp in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and Bill Murray in *Ed Wood* (Serano, 2013, p. 226-233).

As I mentioned, progress has been made through various shows, films, and the growing visibility of trans actors. But Laverne Cox, a Black trans actress, has echoed that there is still much to be done. Cox became the first trans actor nominated for an Emmy after her work on *Orange is the New Black*, and, while proud of the accolade, compared her situation to the scarcity of Black actors winning Oscars. She wonders when other transgender talent will be recognized, so she will not have to face the burden of representation alone. Until then, she will continue to use her spotlight to highlight other trans actors, trying to push for change (Marine, 2019). Similarly, given that Nia is the only *out* transgender character in the fourth season of *Supergirl*³, she carries extra weight by representing transgender people in a more totalizing way than any individual cis woman on the show. Given her very feminine nature, this singular representation might suggest that trans women are *all* overtly feminine, rather than existing on a spectrum of femininity and masculinity the same way cis women do, shown through Kara, Alex, Lena, and various other characters.

Unlike common stories that forcibly out transgender characters through FGE, Nia retains agency in disclosing her transgender identity when she deems it reasonable or necessary. Nia comes out of her own volition three separate times during season four: once to James Olsen, once to Kara, and once to the world as Dreamer. While the show does not *explicitly* comment on the similarity between coming out as trans or queer and as a superhero, this relationship is signaled twice: once in the pilot and once in season four. In the pilot, Winn mistakenly assumes Kara is

³ Although present in season four, Nia's roommate Yvette (portrayed by trans actress Roxy Wood) was not confirmed as trans until the season five episode "Reality Bytes," which aired near the end of this thesis project

coming out as a lesbian when she tries to explain that she is Supergirl. This is played for comedy at his misunderstanding and at Kara's frustration, but it still points toward the fact that hiding one's sexual or gender identity *and* a secret identity as a superhero both involve hiding truths from family and friends about an important part of your life for fear of judgement and safety, to differing degrees. This is echoed later when Kara reveals she is Supergirl to Nia, as Kara does it to express to Nia that she does understand how hard it is to keep a secret from family and not be able to rely on their support, while still acknowledging that their experiences are not exactly *the same*.

In all three instances of Nia's disclosure, it is not presented as a plot twist or moment of heightened drama. The first instance occurs in the second episode of the season, after Nia has been pushing James to write an editorial for CatCo Magazine declaring the company's pro-alien stance during rising xenophobic attacks. Nia emphasizes the importance of media's ability to hold people accountable for discriminatory/hateful acts, saying:

You may not know this about me, but I'm a transgender woman. I know what it's like to be attacked and denied because of who I am. When I saw that alien being attacked, I couldn't let it pass. I... I had to stand up, hold a mirror to that bully's face. And I made a difference. And that was just one person. You are the editor in chief of CatCo Worldwide Media. You can hold a mirror up to the entire city. We have to show people that violence against aliens is not okay. And that the only way we are going to survive, is if we start truly seeing each other. (Maggenti, Beaty, & Jierjian, 2018)

Nia's decision to disclose her identity here is not an arbitrary one, nor is it done to shock the audience. Instead of the scene being filled with dramatic music, it is presented as an intimate and quiet conversation, mostly filmed in closeup on James and Nia. Likewise, this scene occurs after the opening title card, which is typically placed to heighten tension during the opening act, and it does not use the similar tactic of cutting to commercial afterwards. During the quoted dialogue, the camera cuts to show James' reaction – listening intently with compassion on his face, rather than disgust or alarm as is far too often the case. Afterwards, the camera focuses on him again, as

he swallows pensively before replying, “Thank you. For sharing your truth, and your passion” (Maggenti, Beaty, & Jierjian, 2018) and explaining that he still does not think it is the right time (though he later does). The show presents this first instance of Nia coming out as one of intimacy, trust, and acceptance, which it continues throughout its treatment of Nia’s gender identity. Although we *are* given scenes of Nia coming out, the fact that these are mere moments of larger storylines means that it is a step in the right direction, as *Supergirl* does not reduce her storyline to one of coming out, nor does it overexplain her gender identity (Feder & Juhasz, 2016, n.p.).

Nia next comes out to Kara as they drive to her hometown of Parthas. Their car ride is shot tightly through a series of closeups from the hood of the car and from the dashboard. *Kamikaze* by Walk the Moon, a song about ignoring anxieties to do what is important, plays softly over the car radio as a diegetic track, which fades as the conversation gets serious. Nia starts by telling Kara about Parthas and her family, stating she is thankful for how inclusive and open minded both are. Kara questions if she means being open minded about Nia being half-alien and half-human, but Nia says there is more to it as well:

Also because I’m trans. I always knew that I was a girl. My parents were amazing. They affirmed my authentic self, and helped me transition young. I’ve always been able to be open about who I was in Parthas. I’m not saying it was easy. There were definitely people who didn’t understand. But the town’s ethos of inclusion is strong. And I think if I grew up anywhere else, it would’ve been a lot tougher. (Queller, Horgan, & Kohli, 2019)

Kara replies “thank you for sharing that with me” (Queller, Horgan, & Kohli, 2019) and they smile at each other in a series of closeups.

Again, Nia’s self-outing is treated respectfully by both the producers of the show and the characters within it. Nia is given a quiet, personal moment with Kara and her disclosure serves as a strong bonding moment between the two characters, which Kara reciprocates later in the episode when she reveals she is Supergirl to Nia. Like James, Kara does not question her gender identity,

nor does the subject of genitals and their alleged relation to gender come up. By avoiding this, the show demonstrates that it accepts the existence of transgender individuals and rejects notions of the gender binary. Through Nia, it offers an average, heroic, and sometimes flawed individual who trans audience members can look up to, and through whom cisgender viewers may come to empathize with trans people, rather than fear/hate what they do not understand. By not focusing on medical ideas of what it means to be trans, *Supergirl* avoids reducing trans identity to hormones and genitalia.

Nia's metatextual role as a representation of transgender people, intended to assuage xenophobia and hatred, is also a diegetic role. Nia's final moment of coming out in season four occurs in a CatCo interview led by Kara. This interview, broadcast to push back against the growing intolerance in America, involves Nia introducing Dreamer to the world, offering not just her codename and mission, but personal facts as well. With Kara's prompting, Nia explains that:

Growing up wasn't easy. I am also a trans woman. I'm different, Miss Danvers, but so is everybody. And I don't know when that became such a bad thing. The greatest gift we can give each other is our authentic selves. And sharing that, sharing our truth is what will make us strong. So here I am. I am both human and alien. And I am a trans woman...And I am proud of all that I am. (Beaty, Kardos, & Harewood, 2019)

Unlike Nia's prior declarations of identity, which are quiet and personal, this public announcement of her trans identity is displayed as a heroic, triumphant, and happy moment. Her speech is intercut with shots of Brainy, Lena Luthor, the alien patrons of Al's Dive Bar, a whistleblower Kara is pursuing, and Ben Lockwood with some Children of Liberty. Throughout the speech, Lena and Brainy's eyes swell with happy, proud tears, Al's patrons cheer at her vocal support of diversity, and Kara's informant is left on the edge of her seat. Later, she agrees to supply Kara with information related to Lex Luthor, regardless of danger, citing Kara and Nia's bravery in openly opposing the Children of Liberty as the reason for her change of heart. Lockwood and his goons,

meanwhile, are angered by this, filmed in a longshot, contrasted against the closeups used on the others. Lockwood orders one of his soldiers to shut the interview down, and when they are unable to do so, he leads a squad to CatCo to stop them at the source. With this simple act of expressing her authentic self, Nia inspired hope in those living in fear, and prompted the whistleblower to take a stand. Here, the show is stating that not only are trans identities valid and unarmful but displaying the truth of one's self is a powerful act that can help to better the world.

However, this is not to say that *Supergirl* presents an entirely post-feminist reading of what it means to be transgender in 2018-19. Kara, James, and the viewers of the interview react positively and supportively when Nia comes out, but the show does present transphobia during Nia's return to Parthas. Up to this point, Nia has not wanted to embrace her powers because her sister, Maeve, has been preparing her whole life to inherit them. Prior to the trip, Nia had not told Maeve they manifested because she does not want to hurt Maeve's feelings. However, as the result of the Children of Liberty's assault on Parthas' during their mother's funeral, Maeve discovers the truth and becomes upset/enraged. Nia goes to apologize, but Maeve angrily replies "how did you, of all people, get the powers? ... You're not even a real woman" (Queller, Horgan, & Kohli, 2019). Maeve deliberately misgenders Nia, alluding to often used rhetoric that asserts chromosomes, genitals, and other biological elements are conclusive scientific proof of one's gender. This exchange is filmed in a series of tense closeups between Nia and Maeve, with some reaction shots of Kara nearly crying. By doing this, the scene presents the disintegration of the two sisters' intimacy once it cuts to a wider shot of Maeve turning and leaving wordlessly. Soft, somber nondiegetic piano music plays underneath the scene to preserve quietness, allowing the words to hit harder, and emphasize the sadness Nia feels at this betrayal.

Although the show uses Maeve and Nia's relationship to present the harsh truth that not everyone accepts trans people and that they often lose family members after coming out, this is the only real instance of transphobia in these seasons. To a point, this may have been a deliberate decision to keep a somewhat light-hearted and positive tone present in the show, but the subject matter of the season problematizes this. Namely, the fact that Lockwood and his Children of Liberty, direct analogues for Nazis and the American Alt-Right, do not misgender or use transphobic comments against Nia is very bizarre. Instead, Maeve, who is otherwise portrayed as kind-hearted, well-meaning, and progressive, is the only person to question Nia's gender. Given the xenophobia and intolerance that the Children of Liberty stand for, it is awkward that they seemingly accept constructivist theories of gender, perhaps signalling to any transgender audience members that groups like the Alt-Right or other members of the general public will accept and respect their gender identity. In a sense then, Maeve being the only transphobe on the show downplays the seriousness of the issue, as she only uses her words to hurt Nia, rather than the many forms of physical violence trans people face in daily life. However, it is important to note that refraining from focusing too much on Nia's potential traumas does not turn her into a subject of pity for cis viewers as other media often do (Feder & Juhasz, 2016, n.p.) and thus it *is* understandable to limit how much transphobia Nia faces.

4.4 Dreamer, Not Dream Girl: Naming a Superwoman

Unlike Kara Danvers, Nia Nal does not have a direct analogue in the DC comic books the television show uses as source material. Instead, Nia is an adaptation of Nura Nal/Dream Girl, a member of the Legion of Superheroes. While the show stuck to the comic's nomenclature for Kara's heroic alter ego, they decided to change Nia's codename from Dream Girl to Dreamer. This is not without some precedent, however, as the 1990s iteration of Nura Nal went by Dreamer as

well (Dandy et al., 2018; Marilla Thomas, 2018). The reason why the show creators decided to use Dreamer has not been explicitly stated, but the content of the show's fourth season suggests a likely explanation. The season's main plotline deals with anti-alien xenophobia and its support from an increasingly authoritarian government, mirroring real world tensions between (white) Americans and those assumed to be immigrants based on skin colour, regardless of where they were actually born. Earlier in the series, President Olivia Marsden helped pass the Alien Amnesty Act (AAA), which granted aliens the ability to live and work in America with the same protective rights as human citizens. In season four, Marsden is publicly outed as an alien, and resigns from office. Her successor, President Baker, eventually appoints one of the season's primary antagonists, Ben Lockwood/Agent Liberty, an alien-hating terrorist, as the new Secretary of Alien Affairs and works with him to repeal the AAA, stripping these aliens of their rights.

The Alien Amnesty Act, and its ability to grant safety and security to extra-terrestrials, is clearly based on the American Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. DACA, established in 2012 under President Barack Obama, allows for "people brought to the US illegally as children the temporary right to live, study and work in America" for two years, but is renewable (Walters, 2017). Although DACA is imperfect, requiring the person to be a student, have completed high school equivalent education, or served in the military, it came about after congress failed to pass the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, "which would have offered those who had arrived illegally as children the chance of permanent legal residency" (Walters, 2017). Because of this association, the children protected under DACA are referred to as "dreamers." Similar to Baker's attack on the AAA on *Supergirl*, President Donald Trump has taken action to restrict the qualifications needed to be declared a dreamer further, attempting to alienate immigrants of legal rights and force mass deportation (Walters, 2017).

Given the parallel between DACA and the AAA, the show's adoption of the lesser-known codename Dreamer over Dream Girl is likely an intentionally political statement. Nia's own background on the show resembles the real dreamers, as her mother fled her home planet Naltor as an 18-year-old and sought refuge on Earth, marking Nia as the child of a natural-born American and an illegal immigrant. Nia is an ardent opponent of the government's decision to gut the AAA and opposes Ben Lockwood's terrorist actions, vocally standing against them both in public forums, such as marching against Lockwood's rally and speaking about her background in a CatCo interview. The interview enrages Lockwood, who attempts to arrest her for speaking up, as his agents are unable to halt the interview's broadcast. By placing Nia directly into this politically charged storyline and having her oppose the repeal of a DACA analogue, it is very likely that Nia's codename is an allusion to the American children known as dreamers. This is further reinforced by the title of the Nia-centric episode that includes said interview – "American Dreamer".

While it is unclear if the producers of the show wished to change Supergirl's name to Superwoman or something gender neutral (as mentioned in Kara's chapter), the intention of changing Nia's codename to something gender neutral, rather than "Dream Woman" could be met with some trepidation. Dream Girl, while being a play on words due to her powers being related to dreaming, is obviously meant to invoke ideas about one's personal "dream girl" or ideal woman, reinforced by her typical representation as a well-endowed, pretty, and scantily clad blonde woman, in the mold of Western beauty icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Kim Basinger, and Pamela Anderson. By reimagining the character as transgender, and hiring a transgender actress, one might read this change in naming to indicate something negative about transgender women – that they are, essentially, not capable of being the "dream girls" of old. However, given the political association, I would reject this view, and posit that deemphasizing gender from a superwoman's

name is a positive thing, as male heroes more often have the luxury of gender neutral names (such as the Punisher, Daredevil, and Green Lantern) compared to women. This carries over into the redesign of Dreamer's costume, which moves away from the sexualized outfits of the character's past.

4.5 Sidekick and Cub Reporter: Nia's Role as a Mentee

During *Supergirl's* fourth season, Nia works alongside Kara as both her superhero sidekick and as a fellow CatCo reporter. Exploring her role as Kara's protégé in both fields is important to deepen my reading of Nia's representation of femininity. Her depiction as Dreamer is particularly noteworthy in this regard, as she is television's first transgender superhero (Agard, 2019), and one of few transgender superheroes in general. As such, exploring Nia's role on *Supergirl* requires further discussion of transgender characters' broader appearances in superhero media.

A large issue with trans characters in superhero media is that they tend to be absent entirely. Commonly cited trans characters come from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, Marvel Comics' *The Runaways*, and DC Comics' *Batgirl*. The first trans person seen in *Sandman* could barely be called a character, as they are only shown once they have been murdered in issue 14 (Mey, 2015). Later, readers are introduced to Wanda, a nuanced transgender woman portrayed with strengths and flaws, as opposed to an all too common issue where the focal point of trans characters is their trans identity and associated trauma (Feder & Juhasz, 2016, n.p.). While the protagonists accept her as a woman, the mystical nature of the series eventually leads Wanda to an interaction with gods who refuse to assist her because they do not see her as a "real" woman. This drew heavy criticism from trans readers, as they argued binary or static conceptions of gender are very Western/Eurocentric, so having gods espouse these beliefs came across as a transphobic endorsement (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 161-163). Wanda, like many trans characters, suffers an untimely death,

though in this case, it is not a murder motivated by her identity, but the freak outcome of a storm. Her last “appearance” comes from her friend Barbie correcting her tombstone to read Wanda, rather than the deadname⁴ her parents specified when paying for it (Mey, 2015).

Appearing in Marvel’s *The Runaways*, Xavin is part of another recurring theme where shapeshifters are used as stand-ins for transgender people. On an individual basis, this is not necessarily a problem, but as a whole it comes across as unrealistic and less relatable, since gender queer people cannot alter their entire biology at will, or push their body across the entire spectrum of gender within seconds (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 162-163). While this is still the case for Xavin, a member of the fictitious shapeshifting alien race the Skrulls, they note in their first appearance that “for us changing our gender is no different than changing our hair color.” Because of further exploration of their gender fluidity, readers have found Xavin more relatable than other shapeshifting characters. Xavin tells their partner Karolina that they often only appear male to appease their fellow Skrulls, but truly feel like “a blushing bride” and prefer their feminine form. This is later reflected when Xavin unconsciously shifts to feminine form during a heated argument, resulting in the Runaways excitedly realizing that this *is* their natural form (Mey, 2015).

As a human, *Batgirl*’s Alysia Yeoh has received stronger praise as a positive trans character within the world of superheroes, having first appeared during DC’s New 52 relaunch (2011-2016). Alysia’s gender identity is not used as a plot twist, but is naturally unveiled during a moment of reciprocal trust when Barbara Gordon, her friend and roommate, confides in her (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 160, 162; Hudson, 2013; Kane, 2013; Mey, 2015). Later in the series, Alysia proposes to and marries her girlfriend Jo, presenting a happy and trauma-free celebration of trans

⁴ Deadname refers to the name a transgender person was assigned at birth, rather than their current, chosen name (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

identity and queer love (Mey, 2015). However, Alysia's potential was cut short, as author Gail Simone later revealed it was her intention to make Alysia the new Batgirl before editorial interference quashed it (Simone, 2019). After Simone's departure, an unfortunate instance of transphobia occurred when a villain unmasks and Barbara's surprise at their trans identity borders on disgust (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 164; Mey, 2015). Although transphobia can and should be present in some stories, this story does not use it to critique behaviour or bring in an element of realism. These examples also highlight how trans characters are almost always male-to-female (MTF) (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 161), and often in supporting roles.

In the last few years, another Batman-related title and the *Supergirl* comic itself introduced readers to more transgender characters. The 2016 iteration of *Detective Comics* involved Batman relying on a larger support network of superheroes, reformed villains, and civilians, including Dr. Victoria October. Rather than outright saying it like Alysia, Victoria slowly makes Batwoman (and the reader) aware that she is a trans woman. At first, after Batman says he has known Victoria for a long time, Victoria refers to that era of her life as a "pupal stage, before I came into my true self," alluding to the stage various insects pass through before emerging as a fully formed creature (Dyce, 2017). Shortly afterward, Batwoman comments on October being a unique surname, to which Victoria replies that she chose it because it was a better signifier of herself than her deadname, indicating that her reference to a bodily transformation is more literal than figurative (Dyce, 2017). Victoria hints toward that aspect of her identity in offhand comments, allowing her transness to not be *the* defining characteristic of who she is.

In *Supergirl*, Kara befriends a nonbinary character named Lee Sarano in March 2018's issue 19. Here, Kara takes a back seat to Lee as the central focus and offers her support to her newly out teenage classmate. As *Supergirl*, Kara offers emotional support and guidance, and in an

important moment, lets Lee stand up to bullies themselves, rather than fighting their battles for them. This issue was received well by members of the transgender and nonbinary communities, who note that the inclusion of nonbinary co-writer Vita Ayala grants “a level of authenticity here that strips away the element of playing voyeur to another community’s struggles” (Stewart, 2018).

Beyond these characters, other transgender characters have appeared occasionally in comic books since the 1990s, but mostly in the last decade. The character Chalice from *Alters* is an important example, as she is the book’s protagonist, and her narrative of becoming a crime fighter mirrors her gender transition (Hinzmann, 2016; Ramtahal, 2016). Meanwhile, in 1992, DC revamped a cis woman from the *Legion of Superheroes* into a trans woman, revealing that Shvaughn Erin was born *Sean* Erin, and was taking a fictional drug known as “Profem” to transition their body (Mey, 2015; Motes, 2013). However, the explanation for *why* Shvaughn was doing this leads the story into problematic territory, as Shvaughn/Sean was romantically interested in Element Lad, unaware that he was bisexual and already interested. This can be read as an uncomfortable assertion “that trans women are just gay men who want to date straight men” (Mey, 2015). Other trans characters appearing in the last twenty years include the genderqueer Tong from the *Fantastic Four* spin-off *FF*, Alain in *Shutter* (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 163), Image Comics characters Cassandra in *The Wicked + The Divine* and Zhen in *Trees* (Scott & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 163; Mey, 2015), the titular character from Wildstorm’s *Promethea* (Robinson, 2004, p. 125-126), Angela from Marvel Comics, and DC Comics characters Kate Godwin (*Doom Patrol*) and Shining Knight (*Seven Soldiers*) (Mey, 2015). Recently, *Wonder Woman* also introduced a non-binary character to the supporting cast with Atlantiades, progeny of Aphrodite (Hanley, 2019).

Nia’s season-long arc of coming to accept and use her powers to fight for truth and justice, while also earning her stripes as a reporter mirrors Kara’s own journey from the first season. As a

reporter, Nia shows determination and compassion, while her activities as Dreamer show her transition from nervous and unsure of herself to confident, strong, and selfless. Both roles and her tutelage under Kara highlight how Nia's identity as a trans woman is not her defining characteristic, nor does her feminine appearance mean she is stereotypically feminine.

After Nia's klutzy initial encounter with Kara in the CatCo elevator, she shows a spark of passion and empathy when pitching her first CatCo article. Kara is initially dismayed with Nia's decision to write about National City's new fashion district, citing Nia's background in international relations, but Nia persists, explaining that fashion should not be easily dismissed. This explanation is shown through a medium shot as Kara walks around the office doing busy work, until she stops with the realization that Nia is onto something deeper than *just* a fashion story. At this point, shot in closeup, Nia elaborates:

What makes the story so exciting is that the fashion district's setting up shop in the middle of East City. New legislation is allowing designers to live and work in industrial spaces that have been abandoned for decades. An area that's been a hotbed for crime is going to be infused with colour and life. Just think of all the kids growing up in that neighbourhood, all the new job opportunities that'll be created. The fashion district article I wanna write isn't about clothes. It's about community and growth, and hope. (Llanas, Mukerji, & Warn, 2018)

Here, Nia indicates that the story is important to her because of the people involved and the sorely needed optimism these events could bring people. However, despite winning over Kara's cynicism, Nia chokes in the pitch meeting when a more senior reporter explains her take on the story. Nia explains this to a disappointed Kara, but continues to persevere as a reporter, convincing James to write an editorial declaring that CatCo stands with alien refugees, and inspiring Kara to start a column entitled "Aliens of National City" by helping her interview an alien healer, reminding her that journalism should be a tool to help inspire empathy.

The road to becoming Dreamer plays out much slower than Nia's career, as Nia initially hides and ignores her abilities, feeling guilty that she developed them instead of her sister. The reason for Nia's slow path to Dreamer could be a narrative strategy, as she first appears in costume directly after Alex has lost her memories of Kara's double life, thus filling a gap in Kara's life by being able to work side-by-side with her on the field. Otherwise, given that Nia is a character who is neither spun-off from another, more popular one, nor one who has been adapted to live-action before, this could have been a practical decision to allow the show the opportunity to explore her powers and background more *before* she becomes a hero. Kara becomes Supergirl so quickly not only because she is the protagonist, but also because she benefits from audience familiarity by sharing a power set with Superman, who has appeared in numerous films and television shows. Alex, meanwhile, is an agent from the get-go since she serves the role of bridging Kara into the DEO and connecting her to J'onn.

Because Nia is afraid to accept her powers, she routinely takes preventative measures to minimize sleep and prophetic dreams, leading to several instances of falling asleep on the job. After Kara and James witness this on their own, they find her asleep at her desk together. After jolting awake, long closeups between Nia, Kara, and James highlight the uncomfortable nature of this interaction as she bluffs her way through it, lying that "I'm sorry I didn't say anything before, but I have that sleep thing. The one that causes you to fall asleep at random times" (Llanas, Beaty, & Negret, 2018). When a confused James asks if she means Narcolepsy, she jumps on the excuse and agrees. Later, Kara has her mother talk to Nia about finding a doctor to help with her condition. Nia tries to avoid being caught by lying that she already has a doctor, only to be exposed anyway as Kara exclaims that Alex and J'onn were told different stories.

Her nervousness reaches a tipping point when an exhausted Nia sees Agent Liberty on television inside CatCo and freaks out, recognizing him from a dream, but refuses to explain herself. Concerned, Kara and Brainy prompt her for the truth and ask for her help in stopping Liberty. After Nia explains the origin of these powers, Brainy and Kara help her explore a dream to probe for information that could lead them to Liberty before he murders further aliens. Nia's perspective of the dream world is intercut throughout this scene, filmed with a blue sepia filter to mark it as visually distinct from reality. In order to emphasize that Nia is trying to overcome her nerves and finally take control of her powers, this sequence also features quicker camera cuts than is typical of *Supergirl*, and includes horror-esque elements such as distorted vocal tracks and vibrating shadows to evoke the dread and confusion that Nia is feeling. Later dream sequences retain the blue sepia filter but drop the more surreal elements to show growth in Nia's abilities. Once she enters the dreamscape, Nia is bombarded with images, but she pushes through the fear and stress until Agent Liberty appears. This displays Nia's willingness to persist through hard and potentially dangerous events if she feels it will help people. Nia later highlights this herself after her first outing as Dreamer, when Kara asks, "you do realize you could've gotten yourself killed?" and Nia flatly replies "absolutely" (Beaty, Baldwin, & Pleszczynski, 2019). Ultimately, we see Nia's bravery here, combating assumptions about women being weak willed and easily scared.

Although Nia's first uses of her powers are the result of prodding by Kara and Brainy, she quickly shows promising talent. The duo then acts as mentors, imparting wisdom and offering guidance based on their own experiences, rather than being the driving force behind Nia's progress – she grows as a hero in part because of who she *is* rather than solely through the work of others. Likewise, Nia is mentored by both men and women, just like Kara has been. In her initial dream sequence, Nia stops the vibrating shadow, causing Brainy and Kara to turn to each other in surprise,

with Brainy exclaiming “she’s already modulating her dreaming” (Wright, Carrasco, & Smith, 2018). Later in the episode, after they have been detained by the Children of Liberty, Nia sees a vision that one of them is about to execute her, Brainy, and Kara. Nia reacts instinctively and precisely, crouching out of the path of the bullet while throwing her hands up such that the bullet breaks the chain of her handcuffs, freeing her, and ricochets into a pipe full of steam, hampering the captor’s visibility and leveling the playing field. Despite her reticence to use the powers out of fear of hurting her sister’s feelings, Nia does not idly sit by and let Agent Liberty’s goons continue their fear-mongering rampage, nor does she passively sit and hope for rescue (as she is unaware that Kara is Supergirl at this point).

During the Parthas visit, Nia’s mother dies and Maeve discovers that Nia has already inherited her powers, removing the obstacle preventing her from embracing the powers. After a brief period of mourning, when she is not yet ready to begin training, she springs to action in her mother’s old costume to save Kara. Menagerie, a human sharing her body with a parasitic eel, has bound up Kara, leaving her vulnerable to attack. The camera pushes in for a closeup to emphasize her struggle, and then to a low angle shot to show Menagerie menacingly approaching her, only for Nia to appear from out of frame and strike her down with a metal club. This stuns Menagerie long enough for Kara to break free and stop one of the eels from attacking Nia, making it so they have effectively saved each other. Kara breathlessly thanks Nia for her help with a proud smile before Nia runs off to help corral the Children of Liberty that arrived. Due to Kara’s poor standing with both the DEO and Alex at this point, even appearing alongside Kara places Nia in danger, but Nia does so because she recognizes a need to help those in danger – which often ends up being aliens with a foot in two worlds, similar to Nia. Afterward, she tells Kara that taking down Menagerie helped her feel like she was honouring her mother’s wishes. It is important to note that

while Nia does later manage to control “dream energy” enough so that she can use it as various projectiles, this fight relies entirely on her physical prowess. The show allows her to be a capable fighter on her own in a more masculine style rather than having her rely on more passive abilities that do not require strength and muscle, like telepathy or invisibility.

Appearing a few more times as Dreamer after that initial outing, Nia is essentially given a starring role in episode 19, “American Dreamer.” Due to Supergirl’s identical double Red Daughter killing White House officials to frame her, Supergirl is declared America’s most wanted, and Kara decides to lay low, focusing on her role as a reporter for the time being. Nia, understanding but still frustrated, decides to patrol on her own to keep aliens and resistance fighters safe during nationally enacted martial law. Partway through the episode, Nia is given her own bittersweet heroic moment when she follows some suspicious figures into a building, only to realize they are aliens taking refuge in Al’s Dive Bar, the superfriends’ hangout spot. As she enters, the camera stays in a closeup of her and the two figures, in order to keep the location a surprise to the audience, only revealing it when the camera pulls out to a wide shot and Nia looks around, observing the refugee camp-like area with blanketed partitions and makeshift beds.

A little girl asks Nia for help making her bed, but before she does, several government-sanctioned Children of Liberty storm in the front entrance, adorned with Nazi-like armbands, and demand everyone to come with them peacefully or they will take them by force. Nia aggressively approaches them in a medium shot, telling them that “you’re gonna have to go through this reverie first” (Beaty, Kardos, & Harewood, 2019). In closeup, Nia flings dream energy toward the lead COL member, knocking his weapon away, before telling the aliens to flee and hitting the floor in a classic superhero pose to knock the rest of the COL down with a wave of energy. One such goon lands roughly against the jukebox, which starts a diegetic rendition of Lenny Kravitz’s cover of

American Woman as Nia pushes back on the fascist militia, forcing them to flee. This provides her with a theme song of sorts, and the seven lines of lyrics we hear discuss the titular woman's persistence in pursuing Kravitz, perhaps mirroring the persistence Nia will display in dealing with the COL, especially after Al somberly explains that her actions here unfortunately will not have a lasting impact – “we’re aliens. Nowhere is safe” (Beaty, Kardos, & Harewood, 2019).

Beyond Nia's roles as a reporter and crime fighter tying into her personality and expression of femininity, they also avoid falling into the pitfalls of conventional transgender portrayals in superhero media and otherwise. She is not sidelined, forcibly exposed as some kind of “fraud” for drama or killed for shock value. Instead, she is developed over time and becomes a much more complex, compelling, and nuanced identity than the majority of characters mentioned in this chapter. Likewise, Nia is not simply a supporting character there on the sidelines as a cheerleader like Alysia or Dr. October. Instead, she joins the fray and steps into the spotlight, highlighting a well-done trans character in a space that sorely needs it.

4.6 Conclusion: Television's First Transgender Superhero

Although Nia carries undue baggage of being the first live-action transgender superhero, and the only confirmed transgender character in season four, she is still a great step forward in the representation of transgender characters in superhero media, and a well developed superwoman in her own right. Allowing Nia's emergence as a superhero to play out as slow burn allows the show to develop her personality and gender expression before thrusting her into heroic duty, showing her determination, compassion, and strength of character. Likewise, her developing relationship with Brainy avoids a problematic trope of hypersexualized trans characters while also further developing her character beyond being a love interest, as Nia often takes on a more masculine role in their relationship as she is more stoic and in control of her feelings than Brainy. All of this, as

well as Nia's close relationship with Kara, and her fight for justice as Dreamer develop Nia so that she is not simply "the trans one," nor does *Supergirl* display a problematic understanding of trans women by having Nia be solely hyperfeminine – her gender identity is no less complex than her cis peers. Nia also provides the show an opportunity to deal with transphobia, likely limited to one key instance in order to have Nia's story be more than just trauma, as is the case with so many trans characters across all of media. Now that I have explored Nia's depiction, it is time to explore what these three distinct representations of superwomen have to say about femininity more broadly.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Exploring the different versions of femininity represented by Kara Danvers, Alex Danvers, and Nia Nal has provided three specific and lengthy examples of how *Supergirl* represents femininity as a performative identity that is not singular or mutually excluded from masculinity. But before I explain what else a synthesis of these three femininities says, I will briefly summarize my findings for each of these characters. Then, I will take a moment to explore the limitations of this project as a master's thesis, how it fits into literature on related topics, and where more research is needed. Afterwards, I will return to my initial research questions and provide answers as a more thorough way of summarizing my conclusions. Finally, I will end with some larger statements about what all of this representational work *does*, and what it indicates to us about gender in superhero media more broadly.

Looking at Kara Danvers highlights how femininity is not something that can be understood through appearance alone. Her appearance as a conventionally attractive blonde woman, adorned in a costume that arguably resembles a cheerleader's uniform sets a certain expectation of stereotypical femininity. Despite this, Kara embodies many healthy (or at least non-toxic) elements of femininity *and* masculinity that means she is compassionate, empathetic, and a paragon of hope, while also being someone willing and capable of fighting for what she believes in. Beyond these traits, Kara specifically embodies elements of masculinity that are atypical for a woman in media, such as a guarded inner self, and her ability to take the lead in romantic pursuits rather than being a passive object. Alex, meanwhile, comes to represent a complex version of a lesbian, who is masculine in some ways (she is a skilled fighter and often an uncompromising hard-ass) but feminine in others, asserted through her role as a nurturer and interest in becoming a mother. Lastly, Nia helps to subvert representations of trans women that posit they are essentially

men in drag by being just as much of a woman as either Kara or Alex. Likewise, other stereotypes create an expectation that trans women will be very feminine, but Nia's girliness is paired with confidence and capability so that she is not representing an emphasized femininity that helps to subjugate all women, nor is she characterized solely by gender. It *is* important to note here that while this thesis does not spend a lot of time pondering issues of race as these three women are all white, their whiteness likely makes their gender transgressions more acceptable than if they were women of colour. Likewise, whiteness may even protect them from dealing with my bigotry and intolerance in the cases of Alex and Nia, so race does still factor into these portrayals in ways the show does not directly discuss.

5.1 Femininity and Superheroes: Limitations and Future Research

From the beginning, any research project needs to be limited so that it is feasible given the constraints of academic work. This is certainly true of a master's thesis project, as even a focus on femininity in *Supergirl* was too broad. A larger project on this topic would include more discussion of the women of *Supergirl* beyond the three I focused on, namely with Cat Grant and Lena Luthor, whom I only discussed briefly as counterpoints to Kara. Likewise, it would be worth discussing the men of the show as my work here has demonstrated that the women embody elements of masculinity and the men embody elements of femininity as well (such as Mon-El's ease with wearing his heart on his sleeve).

The length of this project also meant that I could not discuss every moment, episode, or even plotline that dealt with femininity in one way or another. Initially I intended to discuss Kara's role in the crossover episodes with fellow DC Comics television shows *Arrow*, *the Flash*, and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, but these represent such a small portion of Kara's story that I decided to focus on more important events. Furthermore, at the time of writing, *Supergirl* is in the process

of airing its fifth season, meaning it was not practical to discuss it as it would still be ongoing once this work was completed. Future work would be wise to examine season five, given that Kara, Alex, and Nia all return in regular roles. Likewise, future work would do well to spend more time discussing the intersection of other identities with gender, such as race, as they do play a part in the show but did not fit into this specific focus.

In terms of limitations and future considerations looking outside of *Supergirl*, there is much work to be done on the crossroads of superhero media and gender, of which this thesis is only a small part. Most existing research on superheroes and femininity tends to focus on *the* most notable and popular superwoman – Wonder Woman. This is certainly important work given her iconic status, but it limits what is examined, nonetheless. More work is necessary to flesh out modern depictions of femininity in superhero media, providing more than the snapshot this work has created. Examining a broader, modern scope of superwomen will update our understanding of how women progressed or regressed as superheroes in the 2010s and offer an opportunity to look at lesser known/newer characters. Similarly, most of the literature I gathered about transgender characters came from non-academic sources, meaning that within the field of gender in superhero media, there is a gap surrounding transgender and gender non-conforming characters. Part of the issue is certainly that their appearances are few and far between, but work focused specifically on cataloguing and discussing the ones that do exist would still be beneficial to future projects.

5.2 A Snapshot of Superheroes and Gender: Answering My Research Questions

Crafting an understanding of how the women I investigated represent femininity has given me a clear sense of what this representational work has to say. To begin, I am going to answer my central research questions, beginning with reiterating them, as follows. (1) How does *Supergirl*'s portrayal of women compare to trope-ridden, stereotypical representations of femininity present

in other superhero media? (2) What do the different portrayals of cis and trans women tell us about evolving representations of gender? (3) When the show touches upon “political” topics such as feminism and xenophobia (through gay and alien characters), how does it treat them – with mere lip service or serious confrontation? (4) How does Supergirl’s portrayal of a trans superhero stack up to common representations of transgender individuals (both within superhero media and otherwise)?

First, superwomen are commonly hypersexualized and scantily clad, cast aside in favour of their male counterparts, and tokenized as the sole representation of femininity in a group of multiple masculinities. Compared to this, the women of *Supergirl* fare remarkably well. The filmmaking conventions employed on *Supergirl* are carefully used to avoid leery gazes at women. It also does not overcompensate by sterilizing their sexuality or condemning women who are willfully sexual. Instead, both Kara and Alex are put in implicitly sexual situations at different points in the show. Doing this strikes a balance between acknowledging women’s sexuality without having to *show it* in such a way that overtly sexualizes them, highlighted in scenes featuring Kara with Mon-El, and Alex with both Maggie Sawyer and Sara Lance at different points. By including a host of women beyond the three I have focused on, *Supergirl* avoids tokenism – outside of having only a single (out) transgender character. In turn this means that no one woman holds the burden of representing *all* femininity – it is complex and multiple. This allows the women to occupy different points on the spectrum of masculinity and femininity. It is also highlighted through their interactions and bonds, which are not always present in superhero stories focused on men.

Moving on to question two, the different portrayals of cis and trans women on *Supergirl* tell us that representations of gender are becoming more nuanced and less narrow. In various ways,

the show implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) shows that trans women are every bit as much of a woman as cis women. Nia's identity as a woman is never questioned by the show itself, or characters whose opinions are painted as correct (i.e. Kara and friends). While the show does have Nia's sister Maeve remark that Nia is "not even a real woman," this is to show misgendering as a harmful, hateful act committed out of malice, not as acceptable behaviour. Likewise, Nia's disclosures of her trans identity to characters such as James and Kara are not met with disgust or confusion, but with acceptance – it does not, in their minds, change the fact that Nia is a woman. In part through Nia's inclusion in the show, *Supergirl* helps highlight that popular culture has become more accepting of the fact that being a woman is *not* about biology (at least not in terms of chromosomes and genes). Biology is never discussed around Nia's identity, nor does it come up in relation to gender identities in earlier seasons. Alex's queerness represents another unconventional version of femininity, and the validity of her gender identity is not questioned either. All of this, as well as the spectrum of femininity highlighted by differing identities and expressions emphasize that there is a multiplicity of answers to the question "what does it mean to be a woman?" and all are acceptable.

Thirdly, when *Supergirl* deals with real world, "political" issues, it is neither perfect nor wholly inadequate with how deep and realistically it does so. As I briefly explored in my introduction, the genre of superhero stories has often involved consideration of political issues such as racism and the legality of vigilantism to varying degrees, so *Supergirl*'s inclusion of these topics is not unfamiliar to the genre. In my analysis, there are five recurring issues that the show deals with: sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and legality versus morality. Sexism and xenophobia are addressed the most, so I will begin with them. On the one hand, the show usually does a good job of using Kara and the other women to show the barriers and resistance

women face trying to make their way in the world, but it does not always fully engage with the issue. Sexism generally comes about in the form of Cat Grant's comments about how difficult it was to build up her own media empire as a woman, or people refusing to give Supergirl the benefit of the doubt because of her gender. Typically, these concerns are shown to be unfounded: Supergirl proves people wrong and Cat's power/authority always wins out.

However, while misogynistic individuals are proven wrong, the show fails to fully critique sexist behaviour by not presenting it on a systemic or administrative level. Alex's promotion to leader of the Department of Extranormal Operations (DEO) is questioned by some agents because of her stance on aliens, but never because she is a woman – despite the harsh realities women face in the military. Likewise, while Kara's early days as a journalist are faced with criticism by Snapper Carr, Kara does learn from him and make him proud in the end. Meanwhile, until her resignation early in the fourth season, the President of this fictional America is a woman who is not shown to face hatred because of that. While positioning these women as powerful leaders creates strong role models for young girls and women, it handles sexism in an unrealistic manner that approaches the border of post-feminist by localizing it on individuals and not systems.

On the other hand, xenophobia is consistently dealt with in a more thoughtful manner. Anti-alien sentiment is ever-present throughout the first four seasons, exemplified most strongly in 2 and 4. In these seasons, the terrorist organizations Cadmus and the Children of Liberty (COL) both have ties to government agencies, including the DEO, and the COL are eventually deputized, with their leader made the Secretary of Alien Affairs. This goes a long way to show that alien hatred (a stand in for various forms of bigotry, namely racism, given the aforementioned Nazi imagery and Trump-like immigration rhetoric) is not an easy problem of bad individuals, but one that is ingrained in the systems of control and governance. This is made explicit with the COL, as they

are *literally* a part of the United States government, and Alex continually disobeys orders from her superiors to deal with them. In some instances where they disobey orders to follow their own sense of justice, Alex, Kara, and J'onn are only opposed by a single person or small group, which means that when they succeed, they are easily proven right. However, with Alex's subterfuge against the DEO, she is continually reprimanded and decides to keep her work with Supergirl under the radar until they have dealt with *all* of the conspirators. This includes not only DEO agents, but also White House staff and the President himself. Xenophobia also provides an opportunity to discuss positionality, as Kara initially feels that recent anti-alien hate crimes are isolated incidents rather than evidence of general social unrest. In response, J'onn says her identity as a human-passing blonde woman shapes her perspective in different ways than those who cannot pass for human. As the story unfolds, J'onn is proven right and Kara acknowledges that the pseudo-racism is more than just some bad eggs.

Homophobia and transphobia, meanwhile, are dealt with in a serious manner, but are isolated incidents which presents them as less pervasive and dangerous than they are, downplaying the struggle that queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people face. For instance, despite Alex coming out as a lesbian, she never directly faces homophobic discrimination in any facet of her life. Instead, she only experiences it second hand through Maggie, who only faces it from her parents, having been abandoned by them when she was outed, and failing to reconcile with her father as an adult. Despite the rawness of this plotline, the fact that homophobia does not come up anywhere else does not let *Supergirl* explore the diverse and pervasive ways that it occurs. However, this may have been a deliberate choice for a character who has been out for years in order to present Alex's story as a more positive instance of coming out for those in their audience who have yet to do so.

Similarly, transphobia does not come up until midway through the fourth season – at first without being too direct about it, as Nia mentions that while growing up in Parthas was generally good, it was not without its struggles (likely referring to experiencing some transphobia as she transitioned, but there is no further elaboration). Transphobia *does* come up directly at the end of the episode, however, when Nia’s sister Maeve refers to her as not a “real” woman, expressing the transphobic belief that transgender women are men, and gravely hurting Nia’s feelings. Transphobia only comes up again once more, when Nia (in costume as Dreamer) discloses her trans identity during a CatCo interview with Kara. During this interaction, she mentions that growing up had its tough moments, but people were always there for her in the end, again perhaps alluding to bullying that occurred because of her gender identity.

Despite her public announcement of being a trans woman, the Nazi-like COL do not misgender her a single time or express any transphobic hatred, despite a family member (who is otherwise shown to be supportive of others) doing it in a moment of rage. While this does still allow the show to touch on how transphobia affects trans people and the fact that families are not always accepting of their members’ gender identities, not having the hateful bad guys act this way is problematic. It implies trans and gender nonconforming people are not often attacked on the basis of this identity category, and it likewise ignores that systemic bigotry also exists. This may be purposefully done for the sake of presenting a good, nuanced trans character that is not just steeped in sadness as so many others are, but perhaps that could have still been accomplished while also dealing with bigger issues more comprehensively, or at least more tactfully. In only presenting one instance of transphobia, pairing it with the bigoted villains rather than her family may have sat better.

Finally, examining the portrayal of Nia Nal makes it clear that *Supergirl*'s representation of a trans woman's femininity stands heads and shoulders above others in superhero media and fits well within the inherent queerness of the superhero genre. While limiting discussion of transphobia to essentially one instance is an issue, it *does* allow for Nia's character to grow outside of her trans identity, *and* it means that she does not face transphobic violence. By offering a point of representation without much of the associated trauma that most trans stories involve, Nia offers viewers hope for a world where they can be seen as an individual, not just their gender. This is helped by the fact that Nia's identity is itself not used as a dramatic reveal or source of narrative tension, since she discloses her identity on her own terms with people she is comfortable trusting, and the show does not treat it as shocking or cause for concern. Most importantly, while Nia is still a supporting character (the show is called *Supergirl*, after all), she is given more prominence and importance than trans characters typically are – including the simple fact that she is a superhero. Nia is not relegated to being only a friend to the hero, someone supporting Supergirl from behind a computer and not accomplishing much on their own. Instead, she becomes the focus of different episodes, and different facets of her identity develop as a result.

5.3 What *Supergirl* Does with Representation

Given that this project is providing a mere snapshot of where gender sits among superhero media in the later 2010s and how these representations have changed from the broader history of superhero media, *Supergirl* highlights the serious progress that has been made. The show does not merely present women in its cast and call it a day – instead it creates spaces for serious explorations of gender identity, gender relations, sexuality, and associated issues. While there is still room for improvement in some aspects (such as including *more* trans characters and a more racially diverse group of women), there will never be a time when representational work is *done*, so it is important

to look at the positives as well as the shortcomings. With that in mind, the diverse and multiple femininities presented through Kara, Alex, and Nia are much more complicated and nuanced than women of this genre have been understood to be. Likewise, their relationships (both amongst themselves and with others, including romantic partners) emphasize the relationality of gender by displaying that masculinity and femininity are not unique to one gender; men, women, and non-binary people often embody *both* to different degrees. Similarly, through my discussions of their romantic and sexual lives, it is clear the show understands something we often forget: sex and gender are separate, but they impact each other by creating certain expectations or limitations because of their assumed connection. For instance, what is socially acceptable for Kara to do as a heterosexual cis woman differs from Alex, as a cis lesbian, and Nia, as a heterosexual trans woman, even if the show comments upon this while simultaneously pushing through these barriers. Because of this, we should not limit discussions of gender such that we do not talk about sexuality or vice versa.

Given the answers I provided to my research questions, one might want to summarize the show's work in a very neutral way. For instance, you might say that *Supergirl's* varied representations of femininity, in both subtle and transgressive ways, work to normalize a broader understanding of what it entails to perform femininity and be a woman, but its commitment to an optimistic and hopeful worldview (in part) limits it from being wholly radical or subversive. However, given all the good it does, I feel this is reductive. Representation does not have an end goal – it should *always* be present and in progress, in tandem with other non-media factors that help underrepresented groups. At this point then, the very act of including Nia as the first live-action transgender superhero *is* an unprecedented act because it has never been done before, and we live in a time where many still oppose recognizing the validity of trans identities. This remains

true, even if the show's engagement with issues like transphobia is imperfect, and even though Nia is the sole (out) trans character in season four. Likewise, while homophobia is sparsely discussed, not every single representation of gay/queer characters *needs* to dwell on painful topics, and homophobia is certainly discussed elsewhere. This is not a failure of the show so much as it is likely a deliberate choice to keep a certain tone, while *presenting* the issue to viewers so that it remains a topic in the mainstream.

As a recent entry in a decades-long saga of gender in superhero media, *Supergirl* presents a strong leap forward in the right direction from what has been observed in the past and provides a benchmark for future media going forward. Even if Nia Nal's inclusion in the show brings with it some issues as she carries extra weight by being the *only* (out) transgender character and *Supergirl*'s discussion of transphobia is limited, Nia's presence is still *groundbreaking*. Nia is not a sidekick, nor is she defined solely by her trans identity. The legitimacy of her gender is never attacked by the show itself, as the one person to question it is clearly portrayed as hurtful and wrong. Trauma has not made Nia who she is – optimism, love, and a belief in doing the right thing have. Much like how that fateful episode of *20/20* gave a young Nicole the peace of mind that other transgender people were out there living happy lives, Nia's ongoing story may “move the walls that need to be moved” as Nicole once said herself (Nutt, 2015, p. 259). By giving trans people an idol to look up to, and cis people a trans character as nuanced and interesting as her cis counterparts, Nia is one part of a shift in media representations that acknowledge and affirm the identities and lives of transgender people across the globe.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample Notetaking Table

	(Post)- Feminism	Supporting Cast	Sidelining	Parents/Mentors	Sexualization/ Romance
Kara Danvers					
Alex Danvers					
Nia Nal					
Other					



Image 1: Supergirl's “cheerleading” outfit (David & Kirk, 2000)



Image 2: Melissa Benoist in costume as Supergirl (Kreisberg, Adler, & Winter, 2015)



Image 3: Chyler as Alex Danvers in her DEO uniform, circa season two (Rovner, Parish, & Winter, 2017)



Image 4: Nura Nal/Dream Girl, the comics' basis for Nia Nal/Dreamer (Giffen & Levitz, 1982)



Image 5: Nicole Maines in costume as Dreamer (Wright, Kardos, & Armaganian, 2019)