Daring to Define Televisual Defiance

Investigating Queerness, Trauma, and Identity on The CW post-2016

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In 2016, the CW network series *The 100* came under fire for the on-screen death of a lesbian series regular, immediately following a queer sexual encounter. In the aftermath, fans, trade press, and even network insiders themselves made statements seeking an alternate mode of engaging queerness on television, ever more distant from the "Bury Your Gays" trope of queer death. In this dissertation, the question is: what, if anything, has changed?

This queer- and trauma-theory-focused critical analysis of three separate case studies, including five different superhero and speculative fiction CW series for whom all or the majority of their episodes aired post-spring 2016, investigates the ways in which queer identity and trauma are interwoven in the development of queer characters and queer storytelling. Often subject to similar modes of investigation and necessary confession as a facet of characterization as sexuality and the ever-present coming out narrative, trauma and recovery form key identity categories for TV characters—and, this dissertation asserts, queer characters especially. The act of claiming these identities is key to the character-focused style of primetime drama, connecting the confession of trauma with the confession of sexuality and the experience of trauma with the possibility of queer identity. Despite the otherworldly and occasionally universe-altering content of these speculative fiction series, existing tropes of queer representation, queer trauma, and queerphobic violence are utilized alongside more open, nuanced queer identity markers in a way that both reinforces and suggests routes of possibility outside longstanding industrial

queercoding, queerphobia, and queer death for queer characters and queer storylines on television. However, even in constructing these new forms of meaning making, additional intersecting pressures of racial stereotyping, classism, and sexism enact restrictions on the possibilities of constructing new articulations of identity, self, and family.

This dissertation posits that the spaces between these historical industrial norms and new horizons for queer storytelling are a result of integrative, nearly defiant representative strategies, which provide for the pushing of boundaries while largely retaining existing norms. The lack of profitability that the CW has apparently experienced, however, suggests that this integrative representation as an industrial strategy is not a sustainable one. Nevertheless, continuing to link queerness, trauma, and speculative fiction demonstrates an unfortunate baseline of queerphobic violence and queer trauma as "to be expected" or otherwise key to forming a queer identity. While the spaces for defiance have been opened, this dissertation contends that there is still considerable work to be done, largely in refiguring and reimagining what slow-changing, conservative industrial structures concede to producing.

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Engaging in what became an occasionally conflicted labor of love in finishing this dissertation would not have been possible without the village that supported me. The network of SOJC colleagues, GTFF comrades, and family members born and chosen that made not only grad school but also self-discovery possible are in so many ways unofficial co-authors of this work. Couldn't possibly list you all in a way that would do you justice, but know that each and every one of you has a place in my heart and at my table any time.

While this work focuses on and limits itself to conclusions about television, cultural storytelling, and works of fiction, I am also very conscious of the fact that my project deals with queer trauma at a time when violence against queer and trans people, both physical and institutional, is on the rise. I engage in this work in acknowledgement of the strength and perseverance of our shared community in the face of tragedy and pain, and in the hopes that we can imagine and build together a bright future that stands proudly on the shoulders and the stories of those made it possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE QUEER ON THE CW?

Queer characters—queer bodies and queer consciousnesses—on television, while no longer consistently meeting with punitive death or corrective injury, seem often to come equipped with a traumatic character backstory. If true, this is not without its basis in the 'reality' that dramatic television often seeks to represent: LGTBQ+-identified youth experience elevated rates of homelessness, sexual assault, physical and sexual abuse, and complications from mental illness.[1] These statistics describe an unfortunate set of facts of life for queer populations, and are accompanied in representations by proliferations of afterschool-special storylines and tragedy narrative frameworks à la *Brokeback Mountain*. Television (and other) narratives make a specific choice when they encode these 'facts of life' in their development of queer characters. If we consistently connect queer identity to experiences of trauma, rejection, and violence, the repetition of traumatic experience in the construction of queer characters may cement representational strategies that incorporate this assumption, strategies that punish, traumatize, and discipline queer bodies and subjectivities. Here, perhaps, lies a mold that may make queerness an apparent consequence or cause of trauma, and that may also indicate a reliance of queer identity-making (as premised on TV) on presumptive experiences and ideas of trauma. While television is neither an arbiter of reality nor a pure reflection of it, the storytelling therein has a complex, interwoven relationship with lived social reality, and thus critiques of televisual

[1] Gwen Avilez, "Democratic Senators Introduce Bill to Protect LGBTQ Youth from Abuse," *NBC News*, April 10, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/democratic-senators-introduce-bill-protect-lgbtq-youth-abuse-n993111; Daiana Griffith, "LGBTQ Youth Are at Greater Risk of Homelessness and Incarceration," *Prison Policy Initiative*, January 22, 2019, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/01/22/lgbtq_youth/; Melissa Jenco, "Studies: LGBTQ Youths Have Higher Rates of Mental Health Issues, Abuse," *American Academy of Pediatrics News*, April 16, 2018, https://www.aappublications.org/news/2018/04/16/lgbtq041618.

storytelling, its modes, and its stylistics can potentially provide insight into the partial, negotiated structuration of perspective[2] that may ensue for viewers.

This dissertation presents a contextualized close reading of post-2016 speculative fiction CW television series, including both the series themselves and press discourses about the series, in order to investigate and articulate the ways in which links between queerness, trauma, and tragedy form part of CW narrative convention. These narratives, I contend, are thus made a part of broader societal expectations for and constraints on queer-identifying subjects, whether predicated on their queer identity or on intersecting identity categories, as well as continuing to reproduce social understandings of the consequences and continual marginalization, perceived or otherwise, of queer individuals and communities. This project exploring the roots of queer trauma on the CW seeks to understand whether (and even gesture at why) the nature of queer identity and subjectivity in this popular-artistic space is premised or contingent upon experiences of trauma, and how that interacts with past formulations of screened queer identity.

Context

Bury Your Gays, 2015-16 TV, and The Lexa Pledge

This dissertation takes the period from May/June 2016 through early 2023 as its primary timeframe of investigation due to a public outcry and ensuing response regarding queer storytelling on TV in the spring of 2016, emerging in particular from the CW. The 2016 TV slate, including free-to-air broadcast and premium cable shows, demonstrated a perceived increase in instances of the "Bury Your Gays" trope in storytelling, particularly its sub-trope,

[2] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38.

"Dead Lesbian Syndrome."[3] Both tropes refer to LGBTQ+ characters' rate of mortality, specifically that they are more likely to die than straight characters, and often for reasons that advance a straight character's storyline or provide them with character development at the expense of the queer character.[4] "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" directly addresses the propensity for this to happen to queer women characters on television. Over a quarter of all appearing lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer women characters died during 2015-16's broadcast season, leading to 9% of all TV deaths being LBPQ women, while they represented only 2% of all TV characters.[5] Gay, bisexual, pansexual, and queer men represented 3% of deaths and 2% of characters[6]—closer to parity, but in combination still indicative of a pattern. Only 3 transgender characters appeared on cable primetime scripted series (and none on broadcast), one of whom died (a rather dismal ratio).[7]

The "Bury Your Gays" trope is hardly a new one; it is considered a vestige of punitive storytelling about queer behaviors and identities stemming from moral panics and the Hollywood Hays Code, which draw themselves from legal, cultural, and religious codes about sex, sodomy, and gender presentation.[8] In the wake of 2016's season, particularly after the death of Alycia Debnam-Carey's Lexa on Jason Rothenberg-helmed CW sci-fi series *The 100*, queer TV fans and historians amplified the trajectory of the trope in queer publication spaces, trade

[3] Riese, "All 215 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters On TV, And How They Died," Autostraddle, 2016, https://www.autostraddle.com/all-65-dead-lesbian-and-bisexual-characters-on-tv-and-how-they-died-312315/.
[4] Elizabeth Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess,'" *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 115–32, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.6.2.115_1.
[5] Caroline Framke, Javier Zarracina, and Sarah Frostenson, "All the TV Character Deaths of 2015-'16, in One Chart," *Vox*, June 2016, https://www.vox.com/a/tv-deaths-lgbt-diversity.
[6] Framke, Zarracina, and Frostenson.
[7] GLAAD, "Where We Are on TV 2015 - 2016," 2015, 27, https://www.glaad.org/files/GLAAD-2015-WWAT.pdf.
[8] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess'"; Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995); Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993).

publications, and online forums, and called for change.[9] The similarity between Lexa's death and a well-known TV queer female death—Tara Maclay's 2002 shooting death on Joss Whedon's WB series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*—invigorated the connection to queer TV history and understandings of damaging narrative tropes.[10] Research into this movement and the moment to which it responded has addressed the role that audience pushback has in change, as well as the formulations of social media and alternate publication work that make these efforts possible.[11] One resulting online fan activist group, LGBT Fans Deserve Better, crafted the "Lexa Pledge" in honor of *The 100*'s precipitating character death, calling on showrunners, writers, and general creative teams to a) write significant storylines with meaningful arcs for LGBTQ+ characters, b) consult with sources within the LGBTQ community, c) recognize that underrepresentation leads to greater ramifications of LGBTQ TV deaths, d) refuse to kill a queer character to further plot of straight character, e) acknowledge "Bury Your Gays" as harmful trope, and f) promise not to queer-bait.[12] While LGBT Fans Deserve Better has since closed down its website, the language of the pledge and its reinvigoration of understandings about historical queer storytelling reverberate in conversations about representation.

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[9] Heather Hogan, "Autostraddle's Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV," *Autostraddle*, 2016, 2–5, https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/; Molly Horan, "Why TV's 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' Needs to Stop," *Refinery29*, March 2016, https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddlesultimateinfographicguidetodeadlesbiantvcharacters332920/; April Ferricks, "Dead Lesbian Syndrome: How Tragic Tropes Continue to Misrepresent Queer Women," Medium, 2016, https://medium.com/@aferricks/dead-lesbian-syndrome-how-tragic-tropes-continue-to-misrepresent-queer-women-9f0a1ead9b2c; Karen Frost, "Hollywood Still Doesn't Get Its Dead Lesbian Issue," *AfterEllen*, June 16, 2016, http://www.afterellen.com/tv/491943-hollywood-still-doesnt-get-dead-lesbian-issue; Dorothy Snarker, "Bury Your Gays: Why 'The 100', 'Walking Dead' Deaths Are Problematic (Guest Column)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 21, 2016, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/bury-your-gays-why-100-877176.

[10] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess,'" 124.

[11] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess'"; Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions," *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3–4 (2018): 85–100, https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.70.3-4.0085.

[12] Carolyn Cox, "#TheLexaPledge Could Change the Future of Lesbian and Bisexual Representation on TV," *The Mary Sue*, April 2016, https://www.themarysue.com/the-lexa-pledge/.

This dissertation examines the nature of queer storytelling on television in the wake of the Lexa Pledge, the backlash against CW series *The 100*, and the sophomore-season ABC import *Supergirl* for perceived anti-queer narratives and staff[13] and cultural narratives and assumptions about queer identity. As Elizabeth Bridges notes in studying the 2016 backlash against *The 100* and other series like *The Walking Dead*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Orange Is the New Black*, series episodes airing in 2016 would likely have been written in 2015, in the wake of the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage in the US.[14] Potentially reactionary aspects of sociocultural storytelling industries like television merit further investigation. While it seems reasonably possible that there has been generally less queer death since 2016's call to action, this dissertation considers queer storytelling on a more longitudinal level, investigating both the general shape of series' queer representation as well as linkages made in post-2016 television series between queerness and trauma for those queer characters who do live and whose stories continue to be told by TV content producers. In addition, this investigation does not seek or provide a singular, definitive answer; rather, in the vein of the queer scholarship I cite, the queer approach I take here is to live in the contradictions and to explore those liminal spaces as a place where possibility and restriction collide and potentially combine to form something new.

A note on terms

I use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for nonnormative gender and sexuality, which, as a word that has been used as a slur in the past, is not always comfortable for readers. As a self-

[13] Navar-Gill and Stanfill, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions."
[14] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess,'" 121.

identified queer nonbinary person, I find that term useful both in analytics and in self-definition, which is the reason for its use here, drawing from its capacious and counter-hegemonic theoretical as well as activist usage.[15] Where specific labels (generally gay, lesbian, and pan- or bisexual, in the context of this analysis) are appropriate and correct, I will use those labels instead.

Within this dissertation, the term "trauma" is broadly construed as a form of social, communal, and mental rupture, including but not limited to abuse, assault, sexual assault and harassment, and loss of a loved one,[16] as well as slower institutional forms of violence and degradation, including consistent micro-aggressive or legally, religiously, or morally predicated attacks on identity and individuals.[17] The goal of this dissertation is to mobilize this definition of trauma to uncover the connections between queer identity on television and possible structures of repetition of certain forms or origins of traumatic experience as expressed narratively and addressed publicly by TV content producers (particularly writers, producers, and showrunners).

Within this framework, I also tend to use the term 'survivor' rather than 'victim' when referring to characters who have experienced trauma. While this may reflect a particular ontology of survivor subjectivity constructed by our particular moment and rooted deeply in ideas of identification and confession,[18] I find this conception useful for my work. It has also been adopted in many spaces for survivors of sexual assault, abuse, and forms of institutional trauma as a discourse both of empowerment and continuity of life. It is that conceptualization, particularly in conversation with an articulation of survivor status as identity, that I find the most

[15] Karen Tongson, "Queer," in *Keywords for Media Studies*, ed. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: NYU Press, 2017), https://keywords.nyupress.org/media-studies/essay/queer/.
[16] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2015).
[17] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[18] Shani Orgad, "The Survivor in Contemporary Culture and Public Discourse: A Genealogy," *The Communication Review* 12, no. 2 (2009): 132–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420902921168.

interesting to push and examine within these contexts. Perhaps within this formulation and potentiality of survivorship, there is a route to the intense possibility and openness that is somewhat contained in queer theory and its own notions of evading binaries, definitions, and circumscription for queer(ed) subjects.

Not-quite-quality dramatic TV: teen TV and The CW

Since 2015, the CW's public-facing marketing has used some variation of the phrase "Dare to Defy," all formulated to emphasize the network's alleged cutting-edge work on representation.[19] While neither entirely predating nor thoroughly addressing the 2016 representation controversy discussed above, "Dare to Defy" as network identity opens a line of critique into CW-broadcast content. The network's public position claims to push the boundaries of social inclusivity and representational equity, also stated in their #OpenToAll campaign launched in 2018,[20] warranting the line of critique I pursue in this dissertation and an investigation of the nature of the defiance and openness that occurs within the network's content and its production structures.

The CW's primetime schedule generally and consistently presents as seeking a teen and/or young adult demographic despite recent news showing that the network's broadcast component

[19] "Watch the CW's New Promo 'Dare to Defy,'" *Beautiful Ballad*, May 2015, http://www.beautifulballad.org/2015/05/14/watch-the-cws-new-promo-dare-to-defy/; Sophia Galluccio, "The CW: Dare to Defy (Tropes) and The 100," *FEM*, May 2016, https://femmagazine.com/the-cw-dare-to-defy-tropes-and-the-100/; Dan Wickline, "The CW Releases Their Mid-Season 'Dare to Defy' Trailer," *Bleeding Cool*, March 2018, https://bleedingcool.com/tv/cw-mid-season-dare-defy-trailer/; Michael Malone, "The CW Explains How It Dares to Defy," *NextTV Broadcasting + Cable*, May 2019, https://www.nexttv.com/news/the-cw-explains-how-it-dares-to-defy.

[20] Rick Porter, "CW Launches 'Open to All' Campaign Highlighting Commitment to Inclusiveness," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/cw-launches-open-all-campaign-highlighting-inclusiveness-1152196/; Danielle Turchiano, "The CW Launches #CWOpenToAll Campaign to Promote Inclusion," *Variety*, October 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/cw-open-to-all-campaign-launch-video-1202979608/.

most commonly reaches middle-aged viewers.[21] This perceived audience is perhaps itself connected to the language of defiance and cultural expectations of teen rebelliousness. The network has leveraged its position as a broadcast channel alongside its streaming and next-day-app airing profile, using its direct CW brand and its streaming affiliate CW Seed, where reruns of (frequently) short-run series originally broadcast by the CW's other networks. Much of the CW's content straddles Millennial and Gen Z demarcations of TV eras and expected audiences, often due to lengthy renewal cycles, franchising, and rebooting.

The CW's reboot- and adaptation-heavy slate during the time frame examined here (including all series examined in this dissertation) bring paratextual and pretextual baggage to many of the network's series, which both help market the series and complicate the general context of their production, distribution, and reception.[22] The network's recycling and re-exploration of content also opens the door for analysis of changes made to source material, moves to update older content, and the nature of (in some cases) cross-cultural adaptation. Exploring these questions involves destabilizing the boundaries between new and original content while keeping in frame their different conditions of production, something that inspires the media-industries-meets-narrative-critique that this dissertation undertakes and undergirds my interest in potential changes and continuities in representational strategies.

[21] Selome Hailu and Jennifer Maas, "Yes, the CW's Average Viewer Is Actually 57 -- Here's How the Rest of Broadcast Stacks Up," *Variety*, August 17, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/the-cw-age-average-viewer-broadcast-1235342962/.
[22] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2010).

Literature Review

Critical media industries studies

Production and distribution norms and strategies, both industry-wide and network-specific, form the conditions of possibility for a TV property[23] and thus color the possible engagements with that text that both audiences and researchers can have. Series come embedded with multimedia and multiplatform paratexts—texts like "tie-in" products and media journalism,[24] as well as social media accounts and fan or alternate publications that come to form part of television's presence in the media marketplace.[25] Social media makes this kind of paratextual engagement more prevalent and nuanced in its visibility and reach[26] but also more cherry-picked by the industry in what it seeks to propagate and what it seeks to respond to.[27] TV consumers and producers are ever-increasingly aware of and active in the multimodality of a social-media-managed industry landscape during- and post-Trump-presidency and, recently, a pandemic-virtualized US context.

Critical media industries studies aim to decode both the institutional structure that governs production and the potential for change in its multiplicity of producers—and then try to trace it through produced texts.[28] Within this vein, this dissertation considers contemporary forms of

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[23] Nick Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 3 (June 5, 1984): 174–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208409361210.
[24] Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*.
[25] Annemarie Navar-Gill, "From Strategic Retweets to Group Hangs: Writers' Room Twitter Accounts and the Productive Ecosystem of TV Social Media Fans," *Television and New Media* 19, no. 5 (2018): 415–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417728376; Annemarie Navar-Gill, "The Fan/Creator Alliance: Social Media, Audience Mandates, and the Rebalancing of Power in Studio-Showrunner Disputes," *Media Industries Journal* 5, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0005.202.
[26] Dayna Chatman, "Black Twitter and the Politics of Viewing Scandal," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington, and Cornel Sandvoss, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017), 299–314.
[27] Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (NYU Press, 2019), chap. 4, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479838608.003.0003.
[28] Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x.

queer narrative production as heritors of a restricted, conservative tradition, proceeding from but not always directly reproducing stories and expectations that date from the era of the Hays Code in early cinematic Hollywood and the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters earlier in TV history. External cultural and legal pressures still exist that draw from these bodies' concern with obscenity, decency, and forms of restricting cultural expression within 'reason;' the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board and the Federal Communications Commission are among the most influential of these bodies external to the industry itself. Producers and writers can often provide insight via more immediate experiences of the structures and power relations that constrain and produce their positionalities and work.[29]

Texts that display and interrogate producers' positionality include the public-facing television text and public discourses by and about showrunners and writers' rooms, both in trade publication and on social media.[30] The nature of these texts also shows the instability of some boundaries placed between producer and consumer as well as the continuing institutional demands of risk-averse, conservative hierarchical production. Within this dissertation, I examine the potential of these slippages while also acknowledging—or potentially revealing—the ways in which the structure of TV production as an industry reproduces and re-invites existing social viewpoints and social meaning-makers to the table, specifically (in this context) when it comes to queer storytelling.

[29] Felicia D. Henderson, "The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 145–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0008; Kristen J. Warner, *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (Routledge, 2015).
[30] Navar-Gill, "From Strategic Retweets to Group Hangs: Writers' Room Twitter Accounts and the Productive Ecosystem of TV Social Media Fans"; Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, chap. 4.

Queer studies of television

Approaches to queer media studies often draw on the demarcation of connotative and denotative forms of representation borrowed from Stuart Hall.[31] Within this rather binary mode of addressing representation, either a text is queered via historically specific cultural readings and interpretations of narratives and characters, often by queer consumers (connotative), or a text represents queerness in and of itself, if queer people are the subject of the text (denotative). Within the connotative framework, queerness in texts will remain "essentially unsubstantial" and effectively deniable. This can be complicated by the introduction of queer production influence (producers are queer-identified) or the adoption of queer reception positions[32] by other consumers.[33] This mode of analysis, while binary on its surface, often calls attention to the inextricability of the connotative and the denotative in cases where the denotative is present—and moreover, interpretation (decoding) is so embedded in the process of meaning creation that a connotative meaning may gain very denotative reality for some viewers, leading to the complex topic of queerbaiting[34] and its sidelong address to queer reception positions while avoiding the sociopolitical complexities of directly representing queer identity.

There is potential, according to Doty, to use these same existing conventions of storytelling, representation, et cetera, as an entry point for queer expression,[35] something we may be able to see in moves toward more denotatively queer texts in Hollywood. In developing the critique throughout this dissertation, the nature of recurrent interest in queer studies of screen cultures in

[31] Doty, in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, explains this in detail, but the concept borrows heavily from Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38.
[32] Doty's—and other queer theorists'—frequent use of sexually charged terminology bring another dimension of queer theory into play, which is its embrace of the erotic and of erotic affect.
[33] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.
[34] Joseph Brennan, "Queerbaiting: The 'Playful' Possibilities of Homoeroticism," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916631050; Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess.'"
[35] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.

examining existing texts, both those within and outside the mainstream of popular culture, coincides with the television industry's indebtedness to adaptation and rebooting to provide further routes into queer revaluation and critique. This critique is frequently narrative but also has a deep investment in the aesthetic and the unspoken, alongside an abiding interest in the ways that communities take up these narratives and representations. However, the expectation of these existing conventions carries certain consequences for the expression of queerness—namely, in the purview of this dissertation, the consequential nature of queerness as traumatized.

These complexities have also formed the backbone of some forms of queer television critique, especially in examining the fallout of denotative approaches to representation. The television series' tendency toward investigative narratives of "unmasking" queerness and of showcasing such investigation within the console of the television itself for the investigating viewer creates a structuring closet[36] of televisual queer possibility,[37] one compounded in its undertaking by continuing emphasis on heterosexual leads, their driving perspectives, and their likeability.[38] This structuring closet exerts power over production decisions as well as narrative structures, typically relegating these stories to particular writers who may not always form part of a regular writers' room, which then minimizes the length of time queer characters written by queer writers appear on-screen. Understanding TV's longtime construction of sexuality via suspicion, closeting, and revelation may also connect to traumas of violence, rejection, et cetera that are often also played out on-screen, especially within detecting and disclosing storylines and structures.

[36] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).
[37] Lynne Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham, *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics* 27, no. 3 (2009): 15–47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344216.
[38] Alfred L. Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 648–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414560443.

Strategies of representation and narrativization of identity are thus a key factor in textual analysis approaches to queer TV studies, and these strategies often implicate stereotypes in their naming. While, as Hanson notes, these recurrent tropes may reflect the communities they represent, they also serve to restrict possibility and attempt to exoticize queer attraction while prioritizing heterosexual attraction, especially in TV's representation of bisexuality.[39] These analyses often toe the line between Russo's more normative politics of representation[40] and Hanson's attention to the reductive nature of normative critique,[41] noting that the producers package a particular form of tropified representation that is negotiated both in the pre-production content and its reception by an audience.[42] The general consensus in these critiques is that there is a need for more representation, rather than one particular form or moral posture, to decenter questions of "good" and recenter questions of "authentic."

In the context of African-American media representations, Philip Brian Harper posits a new "abstractionist aesthetics" that dispenses with the urgent need for realism in the representation of marginalized cultures through characters.[43] The distance created from 'reality' by the fact of representation is the abstraction that allows for disruption between reality and the representation, opening the space of the representation up to "active and potentially salutary revision."[44] While there is value in the use of what Harper terms "mimetic realism"—that is, the reflection of social reality, probing for change engages the tension between mimetic realism and "simulacral realism," which seeks to elevate consciousness by changing the represented social realities.[45] It

[39] Maria San Filippo, "Bisexuality on the Boob Tube," in *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 203–25.
[40] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*.
[41] Hanson, Introduction in *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*.
[42] San Filippo, "Bisexuality on the Boob Tube."
[43] Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
[44] Harper, 3.
[45] Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men : Masculine Anxiety And The Problem of African American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

is this tension itself, I think, that animates the underpinnings of the interpretive work to be done in this dissertation. In some ways, the mimetic representation of reality is perceived to form a bedrock for television viewers. Thus, the nature of queer representation, questions of trauma narratives, and the social conditions for the reproduction of trauma invite exploration in TV of how simulacral realism becomes key to the collective imagination and conditions of possibility available to a marginalized community and its identified subjects within the broader public sphere. Of interest to this dissertation are particularly those representations of characters multiply marginalized by sexuality, race, gender, class, ability, and citizenship status, and the use of mimetic and/or simulacral realism to engage questions of possibility and represent stories that resonate.

Trauma: Experiences, survivors, articulations

Trauma, its pathology, and treatment rest heavily—especially in the present (or recent present) moment—in the conventional framework of therapy and of articulating feelings, identity, and experience to others, particularly regarding the fractures in memory that accompany traumatic experience.[46] The complexities of this speaking and unspeaking of trauma, both in its experience and in efforts to treat and recover from it, are often understood through the disruption of apparently logical or typical mental patterns and the consequences of such disruptions.[47] Recovery efforts are lifelong and result in a new norm of behaviors and perspectives—namely, new constructions of self and, thus, of identity.[48] Shani Orgad's, as well as Linda Alcoff's and Laura Gray's work on trauma and sexual assault survivorship, note that identity categories

[46] Nigel C. Hunt, "Approaches to Understanding Trauma," in *Memory, War and Trauma*, ed. Nigel C. Hunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61–80.
[47] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.
[48] Herman.

surrounding trauma—i.e., survivor and victim—are predicated on expectations of confession and of performative statements.

Articulating trauma has itself consistently been a focus of trauma theory, especially the nature of the inarticulable, often predicated on victimization and a sense of absolute rupture. [49] However, other explorations of institutional trauma have also described the stifling effects of comparative trauma monitoring and institutional forms of silencing voices speaking about trauma.[50] By nature, these formulations of trauma theory and trauma response are typically individualized and, in many cases, alienate the individual experiencing it from others within a community.

This contrasts—or perhaps more correctly, persists in tension with—Karol L Kumpfer's resilience model, a mode of understanding responses to and recovery from trauma and stress. This model sets up a process by which stressors and traumas are responded to by environmental and interactional factors (like community and family) and processes (creating self-support structures like community and family) in conjunction with internal resiliency factors related to personality (spirituality, problem-solving, et cetera) and learning (coping mechanisms learned through past experiences), with the end goal of "resilient reintegration."[51] This model sets up a particular expectation of trauma recovery that (once again) largely hinges on the traumatized subjects themselves, with little effort to address causes directly, whether they be cultural or interpersonal, and demands a particular kind of self-confession that results in a restructured self-

[49] Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience : Trauma and the Possibility of History," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 181–92; Marianne Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–27.
[50] Michael Rothberg, "Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda," in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), xi–xviii; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (Bergahn Books, 2013); Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1–2 (2008): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.0.0008.
[51] Kumpfer, "Factors and Processes Contributing to Resilience: The Resilience Framework," p. 184.

identity with the ability to process more trauma more directly. However, it seems embedded in this expectation of resilience a further expectation of the internalization of trauma—here, less as an identity than as a preparedness tool predicated on individual responsibility and individual solutions to often systemic problems.[52]

Drawing from existing understandings of trauma as shared and as a reorganizing principle, my work problematizes the resilience model as an expectation because of its perpetuation of and reliance on existing systems of social organization.[53] Much as queer studies attempt to explode traditional notions of gender and sexuality and their modes of reproduction, critical trauma studies engage both the experience of trauma and the systems which provide for its continuing or recurrent effect on subjects. The intersecting rupture of trauma provides for its use as an analytical category "necessary but not sufficient"[54] to describing and theorizing human, social experiences of trauma, particularly the slow violence of institutional neglect, marginalization, and discrimination against queer people and people of color, including those whose experience occurs at the intersections of institutional marginalization and whose representation form a key part of this dissertation's work. Articulating these forms of trauma, particularly with an eye to changing them, can be incommensurable with participation in social norms[55], contributing to expectations about those subjects who can form part of dominant cultural communities and who must, by definition, be excluded or marked as Other.

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[52] Kumpfer; Anneliese Singh, *The Queer & Transgender Resilience Workbook* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2018); Lisa Bowleg et al., "Triple Jeopardy and beyond: Multiple Minority Stress and Resilience among Black Lesbians," in *Trauma, Stress, and Resilience among Sexual Minority Women: Rising like the Phoenix*, ed. Kimberly F Balsam (Binghampton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003), 87–108.
[53] Michael Traynor, "Guest Editorial: What's Wrong with Resilience," *Journal of Research in Nursing* 23, no. 1 (2018): 5–8, https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987117751458.
[54] Rothberg, "Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda," xiv.
[55] Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, "Introduction," in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 1–8.

Confessional expectations for TV's queer and traumatized

The closet, its investigation, and its opening are guiding features of many queer-character-led storylines—characters must be revealed in their queerness before the story can move forward with them, either in terms of romantic relationships or in open, honest friendships (often the model by which confessional queerness is encouraged). Martin details the structure of this expectation of confession in more detail in his analysis of black gayness on television and in the writers' room, still predicated on that expectation of uncovering and of confession.[56]

Coming out itself is an identificatory process that creates or confirms identity via speaking it, drawing from Searle's articulation of performative speech acts in the vein of Butler's performative gender—which also tends to draw on visual and action-based performativity.[57] Reframing this performativity to depict a form of sexuality translates Butler's theory of a more visible marker to one that is less directly connected with visible identity performatives, but still deeply concerned with the language that confirms or informs a particular identity.

Indeed, it is the particularity and definability that become so necessary in many settings of coming out, often excluding less discretely binaristic identities like bisexuality and pansexuality. Angelides discusses the complications of queer embodiment and claiming queer identity—especially when situating queer outside binaries, which seems to become inarticulable—perhaps desirably so for subjects, but often not for controlling discourses and images.[58] Thus, identity must be discretely articulated in some way, i.e., coming out in the frame of a specific and

[56] Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."
[57] John R. Searle, "How Performatives Work," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12, no. 5 (1989): 525–58, jstor.org/stable/25001359; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).
[58] Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2001).

concrete identity category (preferably gay or lesbian). This reiterates the importance of denotative queerness for localizing and subjecting to a particular system of representation the queerness of a televisual text.[59]

The confessions of trauma survivorship or victimhood suggested by Orgad[60] and Alcoff and Gray,[61] while reliant on forms of performative self-identification, do not necessarily entail the same adoption of Othered status nor the same hermeneutics of suspicion as queer comings out. However, there is an attendant expectation of self-identification and a resultant differentiation from untraumatized individuals—that is, those who do *not* identify as survivors or victims. While this dissertation does not seek to fully articulate the investigative hermeneutics that also accompanies specifically sexual trauma narratives on television, sexual assault and recovery often serve as a form of character-enriching traumatic backstory or dramatic character development.[62] Often subject to similar modes of investigation and necessary confession as a facet of characterization as is sexuality, sexual trauma and recovery form key identity categories for TV characters and come premised upon a sense of Otherness that, while not explicitly abjected and excluded from society,[63] still makes the subject appear wounded and unwhole by virtue of their traumatized state. Claiming these identities becomes key to the character-focused

[59] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.
[60] Orgad, "The Survivor in Contemporary Culture and Public Discourse: A Genealogy."
[61] Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1993): 260–90, https://doi.org/10.1086/494793.
[62] Lisa M. Cuklanz, *Rape on Primetime Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape : Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Molly Ann Magestro, *Assault on the Small Screen* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015).
[63] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*.

style of primetime drama, placing the confession of trauma in interesting conversation with the confession of sexuality, a link I have been exploring across contemporary drama TV.[64]

Gomillion and Giuliano discuss the role of media in presenting role models for gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) youth, with interviewed subjects identifying these role models as formative and inspiring.[65] If this is indeed the case, such role models may carry some weight in determining what sorts of identities people claim and in what ways they find themselves compelled to confess or claim them. Moreover, because accepted narratives of queerness—and thus potentially of queer consciousness proceeding from trauma and tragedy—become codified on television through repetition,[66] such expectations may be made a part of broader societal expectations for and constraints on queer-identifying subjects, whether predicated on their queer identity or on intersecting identity categories.

The Very Special nature of queerness, trauma, and social change on television

Unlike cable (and especially premium cable), broadcast television has been more prone to approaching queerness, trauma, and occasionally other topics like race, social class, and school violence through narratives that use the "very special" structure to emphasize learning abilities. The roots of this discourse, perhaps, come from a long-standing history in media studies of television specifically that have examined its role as a cultural teacher (usually centered around concerns about violence),[67] but the realities of this form were especially solidified by made-for-

[64] Teresa Caprioglio, "Does 'Queer Narrative' Mean 'Trauma Narrative' on TV? Exploring Television's Traumatized Queer Identity," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 22, no. 4 (2021): 452–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2021.1925865.
[65] Sarah C Gomillion and Traci A Giuliano, "The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 3 (2011): 330–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.546729.
[66] Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."
[67] Shearon A. Lowery and Melvin L. De Fleur, "The Payne Fund Studies," in *Milestones in Mass Communications Research*, 3rd ed. (Pearson, 1995), 32–54; George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," *Mass Communication and Society* 1, no. 3/4 (1998): 175–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/1040834nu08542741.

TV message movies and by the structure of series like ABC's *After School Specials* (1972-1995), from which the Very Special Episode takes its name.[68] Indeed, the nature of the *After School Special* narrative linked coming-of-age narratives in teen television directly to both heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, a two-fold emphasis on appropriate teen-hood that sets the stage for the sorts of narratives about sexuality, trauma, and recovery that this dissertation examines.[69]

Television's use of "Very Special Episodes" as teaching tools has been documented as a strategy to navigate social change in a more direct and often painfully earnest fashion,[70] with topics addressed ranging from racism to sexual violence to drug use. However, as is noted by the term "Very Special Episodes," these were often limited to a single episode within a series, particularly if that series were comedic. This was particularly common in sitcoms in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing from a history of "directly tackl[ing] social issues" on television through comedy.[71] These episodes are often considered trite, at times condescending, and typically fairly simplistic in articulating issues and consequences, typically closing with no severe harm done to series regulars and a gentle message underscoring the overall theme of the episode.[72] While drama has tended more toward long-form social commentary than sitcoms, the tendency of the

[68] Julie Passanante Elman, "After School Special Education: Rehabilitative Television, Teen Citizenship, and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness," *Television and New Media* 11, no. 4 (2010): 260–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476409357762; David Craig, "Calling Western Union: The Cultural Mission of Television Message Movies," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 42, no. 2 (2014): 60–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2013.805117.
[69] Passanante Elman, "After School Special Education: Rehabilitative Television, Teen Citizenship, and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness."
[70] Jonathan Cohn and Jennifer Porst, eds., *Very Special Episodes: Televising Industrial and Social Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021).
[71] Tyler Moss, "The Evolution of TV's 'Very Special Episode,'" *The Atlantic*, July 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/07/very-special-episode/398432/.
[72] Moss.

Very Special Episode remains—up to including a PSA for outreach at the end of a television episode—though it's become far less common and more commonly used ironically.[73]

"Quality" and subscriber-level film and television have long been the central living space of much denotative queer representation, especially that representation which does not consistently rest on Very-Special-social-education tropes.[74] However, the demarcations of "quality" are often far more dependent on the presumptions of audience and the structures and expenditures of production and marketing than necessarily any specific difference of aesthetic or form.[75] Nonetheless, this difference has made more space for long-term, less 'teachable moment' instances of denotative queer representation, like Kima Griggs (Sonja Sohn) in HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008) or David Fisher (Michael C. Hall) in HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), or even the entirety of *Queer As Folk* (Showtime, 2000-2005) and *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009).

Locating Very Special narratives specifically on programming produced or marketed for teens (which has not historically been premium cable!), as noted above, has been central to its development as a strategy for valorizing, rather than denigrating, teen television viewing.[76] A 2000s teen dramedy staple, *Glee* (FOX, 2009-2015) has been touted as an example of a series that leans into and also lampoons the Very Special Episode tropes and tones;[77] interesting, then, that *Glee* and its creator, Ryan Murphy, are central to twenty-first century queer representation

[73] Moss.
[74] Julia Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 4 (2014): 289–304, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476412474351; Vicki L. Eaklor, "The Kids Are All Right but the Lesbians Aren't: The Illusion of Progress in Popular Film," *Historical Reflections* 38, no. 3 (2012): 153–70, https://doi.org/10.3167/hrrh.2012.380309; Didi Herman, "'I'm Gay': Declarations, Desire, and Coming out on Prime-Time Television," *Sexualities* 8, no. 1 (2005): 7–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460705049572; Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess.'"
[75] Elliott Logan, "'Quality Television' as a Critical Obstacle: Explanation and Aesthetics in Television Studies," *Screen* 57, no. 2 (2016): 144–62, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjw020.
[76] Passanante Elman, "After School Special Education: Rehabilitative Television, Teen Citizenship, and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness."
[77] Moss, "The Evolution of TV's 'Very Special Episode.'"

on television. Indeed, Ryan Murphy and his body of work consistently appear in analyses of queer storytelling,[78] and recent Murphy-created disaster series *9-1-1* (FOX, 2018-2023; ABC, 2024-present) has made use of the VSE post-episode resource screen (and from time to time, the talking-head segment) that re-emphasizes the theme of the episode.[79]

Nonetheless, the Very Special structure has largely fallen out of use because of the perception that it is trite or otherwise insincere.[80] Rather, shows like *Glee* and the series under examination in this dissertation that seek to make social commentary tend toward different structures of meaning. For example, series that draw on allegory to make their points—whether that be via sci-fi tropes like extraterrestrials or fantasy tropes like imaginary species, or a midpoint between the two that may be superpowered human characters—often make similar points through styling, storylines, and scripting, but do not do it with the same forthright and often simplistic tone associated with message movies and after school special episodes. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-2003) has been noted for its use of language, supernatural allegory, and generational divides to address common teen issues like school violence, patriarchal gender roles, and more through techniques that avoid a direct "Very Special" flavor to the critique.[81]

Similarly, we might think of television series that heavily use allegory, especially within a setting that frames that allegory through real-world consequences and experiences, as a new form of "Very Special Series." Within the deployment of allegory is an understanding that the processes and structures of that allegory both directly and indirectly implicate an audience's

[78] Brenda R Weber and David Greven, eds., *Ryan Murphy's Queer America* (London: Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170358.
[79] See *9-1-1*, season 4, episode 14, "Survivors," as an example. Aired May 24, 2021, on FOX.
[80] Moss, "The Evolution of TV's 'Very Special Episode.'"
[81] Rhonda V. Wilcox, "There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' Buffy: Buffy and the Monsters of Teen Life," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 2 (1999): 16–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/01956059909602800.

lived reality and offer distance to invite less fraught critical interpretative possibilities.[82] In unpacking the execution of a longer-form Very Special Series, critics have the space to explore what liminality exists within the structure of allegory and reify the commentary within the narrative—often meaning directly claimed by creators and performers themselves.

As a midpoint between the Very Special Episode and the Very Special Series, perhaps, is the Very Special Character. In this case, we may explore the nature of being a dually impacted character by both allegory and reality, as has been explored in depicting Black superheroes (an allegory often linked to patriotism and/or valorization of the justice system) within a realistic context of US white supremacist capitalism;[83] should a singular character be central to critiques or 'teaching moment' storylines on the series, that character may come to embody just that sort of trite Very Special-ness without the confines of a singular episode. Additionally, we may consider a Very Special Character to be a way of localizing the representation of a particular identity or social positionality within one individual, rather than identifying that character within a larger community that speaks to longitudinal lived reality.[84] Within the analyses that follow, Very Special structures in the context of character, series, and episode—to the extent that these exist in the very modern series under examination here—inform the type and extent of social commentary produced in these primetime broadcast drama series, and the extent to which they defy social norms as well as industry holdover forms like the VSE.

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[82] Despina Kakoudaki, "Unmaking People : The Politics of Negation in Frankenstein and Ex Machina," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018): 289–307, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.2.028.
[83] P L Thomas, "Can Superhero Comics Defeat Racism? Black Superheroes 'Torn between Sci-Fi and Cultural Reality,'" in *Teaching Comics Through Multiple Lenses: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Crag Hill (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 132–46.
[84] Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/FQ.2017.71.2.32.

Research Questions

From these existing fields of research into trauma, television, and queerness emerge the following research questions, which this dissertation attempts to explore through case studies:

RQ1: How do the production systems, including producing companies, showrunners, writing rooms, connections to other networks, and previous series, affect queer representation and narratives in CW-broadcast dramatic series with sci-fi or speculative fiction content after 2016?

RQ2: How are queer identity and queer desire revealed in these series?

RQ3: What similarities or differences exist in the construction of queer characters in these shows, to each other and to previous on-screen queer representation, including the use of tropes, metaphor, and coded behavior?

RQ4: How and when are traumatic experiences and/or recovery represented for queer characters in these series?

RQ4a: What are the similarities between moments of confession, investigation, or identification of trauma and queerness in these series?

RQ4b: What are the differences between moments of confession, investigation, or identification of queerness and trauma for characters in these series?

RQ5: In what ways do strategies of queer representation in these series reflect the concept and style of the "Very Special Episode" or the "afterschool special," and to what end?

Methodological Approach

Grounded critical discourse analysis[85] offers the most effective tools to address, explore, and hopefully explicate the nature of storytelling through television, especially in its multivalent, multivocal presence in our media environment. As the product of a cultural industry with diffuse yet hierarchical structures of organized production, a television series has many cooks in its kitchen that create a multilayered text despite purporting to be, often, a singular and complete narrative object. Thus, the discursive field of television, even if restricted to its formal, industrial context, includes production discourses like showrunner interviews or publicly available casting calls, the TV text itself, and reception discourses in the press, formulating more vertices of the circuit of culture that produces, receives, and reproduces television.[86] To this end, this project incorporates trade press discourses—including formal internet media reviews of television or reports of producer discourse—and close reading of the TV text itself in an analysis grounded in the structure of television production.[87] Moreover, the intertextuality embodied in critical discourse analysis incorporates a Foucauldian sense of productive and recursive discursive power in that texts produce and are produced by the structures that govern their discursive setting.[88] In including discourses surrounding reception, like episode reviews and producers' interviews, I seek to unpack in small part the structures that allow consumers and critics to engage in and question the production of TV textual discourse. These responses, however,

[85] Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003); Teun A van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Schiffren, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E Hamilton (Wiley, 2005), 349–71.
[86] Paul du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studes: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (SAGE Publications, 2013).
[87] Potentially included in this, as well, is the continuing engagement with the text beyond its restrictively industrial context, bridging into social media interactions between producers and consumers that further blur or make negotiable the lines between creator and audience. While this is not within the focus of this project, it provides avenues for continuing research in this area.
[88] Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978).

continually proceed from and respond to the source text, thus demanding detailed, grounded analysis of the choices of the TV narrative itself.

The negotiation, blurring, or otherwise troubling of boundaries like those between producer and consumer and between industry and fan is at the heart of articulating queer methods and approaches, as Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim note, encouraging the "reject[ion of] impermeable categories" and "dualisms" in favor of "embrac[ing] the mess" that is our social world.[89] While modes of bringing together producer and consumer standpoints is hardly limited to queer methodological approaches and appears to great effect in critical media industries studies,[90] the introduction of queer and queered methods here serves a second purpose. I also seek to trouble the boundaries between a text and its context since (as Alan McKee notes while decrying some of the analytical strategies I think explore this phenomenon) one cannot exist without the other.[91] Additionally, in embracing queer methodology I also embrace queer analytical possibility—that is, I do not seek or present one answer, but rather more frequently explore the tension and liminal space between answers.

My work has always been and will continue to be grounded in in-depth critical analysis of the TV series itself, traced through actor performance, script writing, visual mise-en-scène, and sound/music cues. Presenting a by-definition limited reading and a grounded understanding of a particular cultural product is necessary to open a series up to critique. [92] Rather than presenting the only possible iteration, understanding, or explanation for a text-as-phenomenon, I seek to establish its potentiality—particularly its potential discursive weight outside a hermetically sealed narrative context. Since much of production discourse and reception discourse proceeds

[89] Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim, eds., *Imagining Queer Methods* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2019), 11–13.
[90] Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach."
[91] Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*, 2nd ed. (SAGE Publications, 2014).
[92] Logan, "'Quality Television' as a Critical Obstacle: Explanation and Aesthetics in Television Studies."

from the same textual foci, albeit in different ways, drawing connections across modes of engagement and interest is something I have, in the past, found fruitful in separate projects on similar or the same texts. To manage the profusion of data that results from this approach, this analysis proceeds from a set of specifically chosen case studies.[93] The use of a case study framework allows for the in-depth, focalized analysis to choose other markers, rather than a broad population, to define its use and structure, which I think are best served in this context by being time-delimited, genre-delimited, and network/studio-delimited. While this may result in particularities of production or reception that are not generalizable, that (as I will address in more detail later) is hardly the point of the study; rather, the central goal is to enumerate, explicate, and examine the nature of the particularities and what produces them—especially if that be corresponding particularities in a text, and especially if it thrives in the in-between rather than reducing difference to a binary. Thematic analysis born of what Greene calls a "substantive theory stance"[94] will help to organize and trace patterns or moments of departure within the process of production-distribution-reception and its varying modes of interdiscursivity. Greene's characterization of substantive theory approaches privileges the theoretical underpinning of the object of study; analysis, then, is framed by theory.[95]

As noted, my research works closely with historically excluded identity positions and historically under- or misrepresented TV character demographics, though I take Kristen J. Warner's position that my work is not meant to be a reductive prescription of what

[93] Adrijana Biba Starman, "The Case Study as a Type of Qualitative Research," *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, no. 1 (2013): 28–43.
[94] Jennifer C. Greene, *Mixed Methods in Social Inquiry* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 110. Note: Greene speaks here of mixing methods and paradigms, which I contend is part of the ethos of queerly approaching methodology and research generally, though it may appear that my method here is singular and qualitative. I also think the concept of a substantive theory stance is a useful characterization of methodological approach whether or not one mixes methodological paradigms within or alongside one's mental model(s).
[95] Greene, *Mixed Methods in Social Inquiry*.

representation should be but rather an analysis of what produces it in its current iteration.[96] Acknowledging my position as a middle-class white Latine queer researcher doing discursive textual analysis only makes it more key, in my view, to do the work of inviting, valorizing, and making space for others' meaning-making around texts, since so much of their work shapes and has shaped my approach to texts. Citing and considering my positionality is foundational to the legacies of intersectional[97] and trauma-informed[98] critique that this dissertation engages in and is thus indispensable to my work.

A television series is the product of varying levels of institutional structures that, at every level, incorporate the labor of many people, from a multi-person writers' room and ever-changing directorial staff to the supervising/funding producers (also subject to change), to the cast of the production, and the crews in charge of camera, costuming, lighting, and other technological aspects or production. Their product, especially in the network context, is further determined in both pre-and post-production by higher-level industry executives, by the distributor and the producer's expectations, advertising specifications, and more—the nature of the hierarchical collaboration can often see early forms of texts moving from the writers' room up to studio and potentially distributor offices for a sign-off before further work, detouring through copyright issues, consultants, and a number of drafts before a script makes it to actors, though that may not be its final form. With this diffuse a creative field—before any distribution or reception even takes place—a critical analysis that keeps context and multivocal possibilities in mind is better suited to address a particular text's relation to institutional structures and expectations alongside its more granular narrative choices. Within this frame of critical discourse

[96] Warner, *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*.
[97] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2014).
[98] Pascale Bos, "Positionality and Postmemory in Scholarship on the Holocaust," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 19, no. 1 (2003): 50–74, https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.2003.0004.

analysis informed by critical media industries studies, the value of a historiographic approach is worth noting given the technological and industrial situations of television and their frequent changes. While my work is on current and very recent TV series, the time frame delimitation and use of a focalizing event (2016's fan backlash) as a starting point allows me to take a semi-historiographic approach to the production of the series that I analyze.

The case studies in this dissertation appear both in singular and paired comparative form; since many of the properties on the CW are linked by their source material (comic book adaptations, other adaptations, spin-offs, etc.) and also their creative teams, this allows for more in-depth exploration of the role of the creative team in developing narrative and stylistic tropes and shorthand. This analysis examines each series' episodes airing after the end of Spring 2016's TV season but before the end of Spring 2023's TV season and extracts for further analysis scenes involving queer characters, moments of confession, on-screen traumas, and explications of off-screen traumatic experience (see Appendix A for a list of focal episodes). In viewing the episodes and determining which episodes constituted focal episodes, I took detailed notes while viewing to note such moments of confession, experiences or discussions of trauma, and visible indicators of queerness. Often guiding these selections was the centering of denotatively (openly) queer characters, as well as existing tropes of queerness including camp performances, theatricality, and other indicators of Otherness. The analysis, by necessity and by definition of dramatic television and melodrama as a form, includes experiences of trauma by straight characters; part of the project investigates similarities or differences in the use of traumatic experience in narrativizing and developing straight, queer, and sometimes indeterminate characters on-screen.

Within each case study, I also address available trade press discourse, including but not limited to articles in *Variety, Deadline*, and *The Hollywood Reporter,* as well as media critique outlets like *The Mary Sue* and *The AV Club,* in search of commentary by producers, writers, and showrunners particularly relating to queer characters, boundary-pushing, and queer storylines on their series. Determining focuses for these trade press searches also emerged from the viewing notes, including gauging which characters, queer or otherwise, most frequently appeared in scenes and/or episodes of focus, as well as any dramatic shifts in characters, such as extended absences, recasting, or other changes. Trade press discourses are incorporated and addressed based on their language relating to inclusion, character development, and any potential references to death and trauma. In addition, discussions of and quotes related to the positionality and impetus of series producers, writers, and cast members are of particular interest and formed part of the determination about which trade press articles to include.

From these sources, I construct an analytical narrative based on the historicization and contextualization of these series and their production that traces developments from 2016's backlash against queer death through the specific choices made and potentially discussed by series creatives. This analysis, by nature, engages industrial forms of centralization and control, based either on creative personnel or on studio affiliation, as well as potential forms of narrative standardization or of more creative possibility, based on the comparisons within and between (in the conclusion) the case studies at hand.

Defining the CW and its approaches to defiance

I take the CW as a primary center of investigation. As such, this work begins with a historicization and detailed investigation of the CW as a network, including its content, executive

structure, and the structures of its marketing. This analysis will address its development from predecessors, the WB and UPN, and the strategies used by those networks and later adapted by others. As my analysis proceeds, this grounding in the CW's approach to storytelling, to the construction of a network slate, and production teams and their responses to change will anchor the following three case studies in the particular production context that is the CW (or at least, that was the CW preceding its acquisition by Nexstar).

In the first case study, long-running series *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-2022) and *Supergirl* (2015-2021), productions of both of which pre-date Lexa's precipitating death's airing, provide for the examination of cases of sidekick and/or what might be termed incidental queerness. *Legends of Tomorrow* follows a team of misfit outcast superheroes, mostly from other CW DC properties, travelling through time and space to defeat evil, restore timelines, and cause general mayhem; *Supergirl* depicts Superman's all-American cousin Kara's search for her own identity and space as a hero across planets and universes. Both series began before Spring 2016 but persisted after, providing opportunities to locate direct responses to the 2016 backlash, especially as they feature supporting and central ensemble queer characters. Both also represent part of Berlanti Productions' work on the CW, which will form part of the analysis given Greg Berlanti's history with varying forms of the network and the immense growth of the CW's superhero portfolio, as well as other series not under examination within this dissertation. Characters like Alex Danvers and Nia Nal (*Supergirl*) develop sophomore season import *Supergirl*'s approach to queerness, auxiliary to its main title character, and Sara Lance (*Legends*) offers an interesting cross-property import of a queer character (from *Arrow*, 2012-2020). Moreover, implications of race, national (or planetary) origin, and feminine gender presentation provide fertile ground for contextualizing storytelling choices and examining their use as a route

to furthering constructions of denotative queerness that most directly coincide with heterosexual norms, however primarily returning to the primacy and centralization of whiteness on both these series.

In the following comparative case study, presumptive centralized whiteness gets a wake-up call in (again) two series that centralize queer womanhood as their primary sources of queerness but do not utilize the same tropes of white, femme presentation throughout. The case study of *Black Lightning* (2018-2021) and *Batwoman* (2019-2022) works to unpick the complex production histories behind each series, including pre-airing and during-airing casting and network changes that have significant implications for the storytelling and character development on each series. *Black Lightning* centers around a family of Black superheroes, including a lesbian eldest daughter, as they navigate life in a south Georgia town; *Batwoman* depicts the story of Gotham's lesbian caped crusader in two different iterations, particularly regarding family relationships and the development of a superhero identity distinct from cousin Batman. As Berlanti Productions products, they form part of the analysis of Berlanti Productions' quasi-stranglehold on CW productions; however, each series also brings with it a series showrunner and creator with their own history—Salim Akil, for *Black Lightning*, who along with wife Mara Brock Akil has a history with Black-cast series on UPN and a large body of work with BET, and Caroline Dries, for *Batwoman*, who is a prior CW-series-producer in a same-sex relationship that she references as a source of knowledge and inspiration for *Batwoman*.[99] The nature of trauma, the locations and styling of moments of queer love and/or

[99] Nellie Andreeva, "'Black Lightning' DC Drama from Greg Berlanti & 'The Game' Duo Gets the CW Pilot Order," *Deadline*, February 3, 2017, https://deadline.com/2017/02/black-lightning-dc-drama-the-cw-pilot-order-greg-berlanti-mara-brock-akil-salim-1201901901/; David Reddish, "Caroline Dries on Taking on a Trailblazing Heroine and Fighting Toxic Fandom with 'Batwoman,'" *Queerty*, November 24, 2019, https://www.queerty.com/caroline-dries-taking-trailblazing-heroine-fighting-toxic-fandom-batwoman-20191124.

confession, and references to alternate, connotative tropes of queerness for both queer and straight characters and relationships in these two series provide for an engaging look at queerness at points of intersection with other identities, experiences, and storytelling conventions. The analysis contained within engages both the possibilities and subversions ingrained in the series under examination and tendencies to return to familiar heteronormative tropes and familial structures, refracted through multiple lenses of race, class, and (sometimes) allegory.

Allegory becomes a primary and central source of analysis in the third case study of *Roswell, New Mexico* (2019-2022), a realism-based sci-fi series set in present-day New Mexico following three extraterrestrial found-family siblings now in their adult years, who have been living under assumed human identities since being found as children. Engaging questions of immigration, legal status, Otherness, and differing levels of passing privilege, *RNM* leans on a history of science fiction's use of allegory to explore identity structures, including questioning and reimagining the existing structures of social and cultural reality. Thus, this chapter will also take the specific generic structures of sci-fi into account in its analysis of its effects on representations of trauma, queerness, and identity more generally, alongside attention to the role of *RNM*'s inaugural showrunner, Carina Adly Mackenzie, a CW veteran from such properties as *The Originals* (2013-2018) and *The Flash* (2014-2023). This case study (perhaps paradoxically, as it appears last in this dissertation) was part of the impetus for this project overall, as *RNM* shows particularly compelling convergences between trauma, queerness, and confession, reinventing uses of past tropes around queerness while reiterating a link between queer identity, secret-keeping, and experiences of both interpersonal and institutional trauma.

The analyses contained here explore the potential for comparison, continuity, and consistency between these approaches to defiance and exclusion as a queer representational strategy—and

the extent to which defiance is borne out in the choices made at the production, story, and presentation levels of each series. Moreover, this dissertation attempts to make some preliminary conclusions about the current structures of living queer identity on television and cast forward for future potential avenues of research, including audience and fan reception. These aspects of television analysis lie outside the scope of this study but provide fertile ground for the furthering of this text-based research into audience- and fandom-based contexts.

While this dissertation does not seek to definitively prove an indissoluble connection between trauma and queerness on the CW, nor the solidification of a clearly defined new trope, I hope to gesture toward a pattern of representation that exists on television and persists in different forms. I also intend to suggest its potential consequences for television's viewership and the complex web of social structures that both produce and consume it. Moreover, this multilayered case study of CW television storytelling is a vehicle to explore complex linkages between the theorizations of survivor identity, traumatic experience, and queer identity that are mobilized in critical contexts. The linkages that exist between these theoretical approaches show the ways in which these aspects of identity and expectations of resilience are themselves linked conceptually and in practice by the nature of Othering, exclusion, and the necessity of community. There is a reasoning beyond an attention to realism (and the targeted violence long perpetrated on queer bodies and consciousnesses that this realism calls to) that these connections may exist and may be productive of greater understandings of the structures of identification, representation, and survival, as well as potential failures in these forms of representation, that exist in the confluence of queer identity and trauma survivorship.

CHAPTER I

MAKING A MERGER TO MARKET PROGRESS

Developing and redeveloping the CW Network, 2006-2022

The CW's position among broadcast networks has been a bit unconventional since its 2006 inception as a merging of two existing networks. The major networks in the United States have dominated the broadcast airwaves for many years since the TV industry kicked into gear, but they have hardly been the only players on the field of primetime drama. The CW's in-between position as a free-to-air broadcast network specifically geared toward a young audience[1], whose content is financed by the network's parent companies and whose revenue has often come not from broadcast ad revenue, as is customary, but from streaming and international distribution deals[2], has given the network an interesting playbook (and some maneuverability) in developing its identity as a broadcast network. Courting the SLUMPY (socially liberal, urban-minded professional *youth*)[3] audience has led the CW toward particular discourses about inclusion and distribution, as well as conscious communication about the ways the programming they distribute addresses sociocultural categories like race, gender, and sexuality.

This chapter provides a brief history and contextualization of the CW as a television network, as a distributing power with a particular brand that guides its production choices, and as a site of some form of "defiance" of traditional forms of televisual storytelling. The historicization that follows generally takes a chronological approach to the development of the CW, while also

[1] Anna Aupperle, "Teen Queens and Adrenaline Dreams: A History of the CW Television Network" (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018), https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/16378.
[2] Merrill Barr, "The CW Doesn't Care About Live Views Because The CW Doesn't Have Major Stake In Its Programming," *Forbes*, January 11, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/merrillbarr/2016/01/11/the-cw-arrow-flash-legends-of-tomorrow-jane-the-virgin-supernatural/?sh=ddba76a4fe95.
[3] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

attempting to chart developments in network and brand identity both in the moment of their inception and in their expression through future production choices, and against a TV industry history of demographic jockeying. The CW's brand identity, including its key demographics, its distributive choices, and the stops and starts along its path as a network, form an important grounding for understanding the network's programming, as well as its role in and response to the development of queer representation on scripted US drama television as reflected through liberal discourses of diversity and inclusion.

Developing the CW: what makes a merger?

In January of 2006, CBS and WarnerMedia announced the merger of their individual subsidiary networks, UPN and The WB, to form new joint venture The CW, in a surprise announcement kept secret until the moment of its press conference.[4] In what would become a continual question in the CW's presence on the TV scene, part of this secrecy surrounded an uncertain level of affiliate agreement renewals based on less-than-stellar (though not awful) ratings. Also in January 2006, Viacom split into Viacom and CBS, giving Les Moonves sole control of CBS's networks and freeing the corporation to make the merger with WB happen—announcements of the two changes came within weeks of each other.[5] However, the circumstances and the effects of this merger had been brewing in the TV industry and specifically in the industrial context of both The WB and UPN for a while. Beginning with

[4] Meg James and Matea Gold, "CBS, Warner to Shut Down 2 Networks and Form Hybrid," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 2006, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jan-25-cw25-story.html; Cynthia Littleton, "Birth of the CW: UPN-WB Network Merger Deal Rocked TV Biz 10 Years Ago," *Variety*, January 24, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/cw-wb-network-upn-merger-announcement-10-years-ago-1201687040/.
[5] Bloomberg News, "Viacom Completes Split Into 2 Companies," *New York Times*, February 2, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/02/business/media/viacom-completes-split-into-2-companies.html?mtrref=undefined; Littleton, "Birth of the CW: UPN-WB Network Merger Deal Rocked TV Biz 10 Years Ago."

deregulation efforts under the Reagan administration and Mark Fowler's tenure as FCC chairman and extending through the Telecommunications Act of 1996,[6] conditions for particular forms of vertically integrated market control as well as competition-based pushes for niche programming and narrowcast advertising demographics were developing more than a decade before the CW merger was announced, though they would not reach their apex in the network-cable landscape until later.[7]

The logics of the free market, brought into a previously further-regulated telecommunications landscape by neoliberal perspectives, industrial and political, in the 1980s and 1990s, set the stage for particular forms of advertising competition.[8] Since the general landscape of television, cable and network, remained fairly reliant on advertising revenue (with the exception of premium subscriber cable like HBO), the race was on to find the most profitable and most leverageable demographics to get eyeballs on programming, especially once programming could be financed, produced, and syndicated more directly in-house with the repealing of fin-syn rules.[9] Fin-syn rules had previously prohibited networks from profiting both from a series' first-run exhibition and its syndication (re-running) on same-network arms, but these rules and the original-broadcast-restricting Prime Time Access Rule (PTAR) were repealed in the 1990s.[10] While national network giants NBC, CBS, and ABC still claimed the every-audience perspective, fledgling netlets carving out a space in the multichannel landscape did a little more

[6] Bambi Haggins and Julia Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period," in *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018), 111–33, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118646151.ch5.
[7] Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV."
[8] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[9] Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Media Business: Television," *New York Times*, April 12, 1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/12/business/the-media-business-television.html.
[10] Kara Craig, "Syndication Regulation and TV's Big Three: Broadcasting Regulations and 1970s Television," In Custodia Legis: Law Librarians of Congress, 2023, https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2023/01/syndication-regulation-and-tvs-big-three-broadcasting-regulations-and-1970s-television/.

niche maneuvering, building up their programming, local affiliates, and industrial track record any way they could.[11]

FOX, the most successful network arising from these netlets, was manufactured through the political, cultural, and economic maneuvering of CEO Rupert Murdoch and other management staff. FOX executives used a combination of "niche" audience marketing targeting Black audiences with Black-cast sitcoms and other shows linked to an "urban" demographic (known as "Black Block" programming when broadcast in sequence), investments in smaller industry partners in securing affiliates (including minority-owned Black Star Communications), and creative skirting of antitrust laws and broadcast regulations.[12] The resulting strategy, which allowed FOX to build a ratings block, industry connections, and broadcast power under the aegis of minority support and outreach, provided a foundation for FOX's pivot to network. This pivot worked to obscure and move away from the netlet's history of demographic targeting, with FOX gaining rights to football and perceived-universal "Must See TV" in *The X-Files* (1993-2002) while confining Black Block programming to one night a week.[13]

UPN and WB, both launched in 1995, would take careful note of Fox's strategy and put it into practice in their own contexts. UPN followed the same model after failing to make a ratings splash with young white audiences, instituting two nights of Black Block sitcom programming like Brandy-helmed *Moesha* (1996-2001) in 1996.[14] While the network's stated target audience after 1997 was a broader audience (as an "inclusive network," rather than a narrowcast one,

[11] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period"; Eileen R. Meehan and Jackie Byars, "Telefeminism: How Lifetime Got Its Groove, 1984-1997," *Television & New Media* 1, no. 1 (2000): 33–51.
[12] Evan Nicole Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 16, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/upn-black-tv-the-wb-moesha-the-parkers-1235091212/; Alfred L. Martin Jr., *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021); Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[13] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[14] Haggins and Himberg.

according to second CEO Dean Valentine[15]), Black-cast sitcoms would remain a key component of UPN's schedule. The WB, by contrast, set out to utilize narrowcasting strategically using Black-cast sitcoms with the broader youth demographic concurrently in its sights.[16] The success of the WB's efforts to gain at least a foothold in the must-see TV landscape comes a bit earlier, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001, where it was bought out by up-and-coming UPN for the last two years of its run[17]), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Charmed* (1998-2006), and *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007, finishing out on the CW) establishing the WB as the home of teen TV.[18] UPN's last few years showed what *Half & Half* (UPN, 2002-2006) star Rachel True called a bulk importation of "pretty white teenager shows,"[19] including the 2001 acquisition of *BTVS* away from the WB, as an apparent bid to cash in on the "promise" of a broader audience at the expense of its Black-cast series' casts, production staff, and writers, many of whom were themselves systemically and historically excluded from the TV industry.[20] However, UPN never arrived at the same level of brand recognition as the teen TV slate of the WB, and both netlets struggled to maintain their slates of dramatic programming in the face of low ratings and a burgeoning field of cable options.[21] The merger was brewing by the time UPN came to rest solely under CBS's purview in 2005, with the capacity for the market to sustain two broadcast netlets with similar and often competing programming very much in question.

[15] Quoted in Haggins and Himberg, 129.
[16] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[17] Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence."
[18] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[19] Quoted in Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence."
[20] Brown; Greg Hernandez, "WB-UPN Merger a Blow to Minorities," *Los Angeles Daily News*, May 16, 2006, https://www.dailynews.com/2006/05/16/wb-upn-merger-a-blow-to-minorities.
[21] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."

The 2006 merger of these two "niche network(s)"[22] gave rise to hopeful discourses of profit and better market position in the business press,[23] though writers at the time did not directly address the racial implications of their statements that a merger (and presumably a less "niche" audience) would improve market share. The merger intended to more directly target a young adult audience of 18-34-year-olds, particularly to leverage Warner Brothers film studios content.[24] By virtue of merging two netlets with established parent companies as well as their own history in the industry (if one of only 11 years), the CW also bypassed true netlet status, bringing affiliate relationships, legacy programming, and industrial track records from its two parent networks along. This offered the CW a potential leg up in the marketplace, though they would import only a few of both pre-existing networks' Black-cast series.[25] The CW would also cancel all comedy programming in 2008, also resulting in a decrease in Black and brown representation in the network's programming both in front of and behind the camera.[26] The transition to "multicultural" (mostly white) network was complete, although the success of its broad appeal would remain to be seen.

Continuities and innovations: producers, content, distribution

With the programming that carried over in the merger (six WB shows and six UPN shows debuted on the CW in 2006, as well as two new shows)[27] came not only the reputations

[22] Paul R. La Monica, "Can the CW Make TV a Five Horse Race?," *CNNMoney.Com*, May 18, 2006, https://money.cnn.com/2006/05/18/news/companies/tv_cw/.
[23] Bloomberg News, "Viacom Completes Split Into 2 Companies"; La Monica, "Can the CW Make TV a Five Horse Race?"
[24] Bill Carter, "UPN and WB to Combine, Forming New TV Network," *New York Times*, January 24, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/24/business/media/upn-and-wb-to-combine-forming-new-tv-network.html.
[25] Haggins and Himberg, "The Multi-Channel Transition Period."
[26] Haggins and Himberg; Myles McNutt, "Comedy Returns to The CW, without a Story to Tell," *AV Club*, July 14, 2014, https://www.avclub.com/comedy-returns-to-the-cw-without-a-story-to-tell-1798180927.
[27] La Monica, "Can the CW Make TV a Five Horse Race?"

(variably) of the WB and UPN, but also their producers and forms of distribution, though this would of course change quite rapidly. The merger and channel integration caused layoffs of creative and administrative staff[28] only exacerbated by the 2008 cancelling of comedy programming.[29] Black-cast shows on UPN had given Black creatives career opportunities and the chance to develop a competitive portfolio;[30] however, the Writers Guild of America's 2006 report noted a downturn in women and historically excluded writers on the CW (as compared to the WB and UPN) the year after the merger.[31]

This was not an across-the-board experience, with some key showrunners staying on with their continuing series, particularly *Supernatural* (Eric Kripke), *One Tree Hill* (Mark Schwahn), *Smallville* (Alfred Gough and Miles Millar), *Veronica Mars* (Rob Thomas), *Everybody Hates Chris* (Ali LeRoi), and *Gilmore Girls* (Amy Sherman-Palladino). Of these producers, only Thomas stayed affiliated with the CW past 2012, with new series *iZombie* (2015-2019) marking his contribution wholly broadcast on the CW. Greg Berlanti, a contributing writer and producer on the WB's *Dawson's Creek*, *Young Americans*, *Everwood* (2002-2006) and *Jack & Bobby* (2004-2005), later made a splash on the CW with Berlanti Productions' work on the CW's wide-ranging DC superhero slate (starting in 2011 with *Arrow* and spanning seven titles with Berlanti listed as executive producer) and *Riverdale* (2017-2023)—work for which he has a firm deal with Warner Bros. TV.[32] Julie Plec also has a developed body of work with the CW and a deal with Warner Bros. TV providing for it (including the Vampire Diaries franchise and *Roswell*,

[28] Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence"; Littleton, "Birth of the CW: UPN-WB Network Merger Deal Rocked TV Biz 10 Years Ago."
[29] James Hibberd, "CW Scripts Staff Layoffs," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 4, 2008, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/cw-scripts-staff-layoffs-106095/.
[30] Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence."
[31] Hernandez, "WB-UPN Merger a Blow to Minorities."
[32] AJ Marechal, "Greg Berlanti Lands Major Deal Extension with Warner Bros. TV (Exclusive)," *Variety*, October 8, 2013, https://variety.com/2013/tv/news/greg-berlanti-lands-major-deal-extension-with-warner-bros-tv-exclusive-1200706123/.

New Mexico),[33] but does not have pre-merger connections like Thomas and Berlanti. Worth noting, again, is the fact that central showrunners and executive producers on the CW, particularly those who parlay earlier success on the WB or UPN into continuing distribution of their work via the CW, are white and consistently produce the sorts of multicultural-framed drama series that lead to quotes like Cat Grant's on Berlanti-produced *Supergirl*'s first season (before its season 2 import to the CW[34]): "you look like the attractive, yet non-threatening, racially diverse cast of a CW show."[35]

The CW's primetime schedule generally and consistently presented, starting from and continuing since 2006, as seeking a teen and/or young adult demographic with its almost exclusively dramatic programming. The network leverages its position as a broadcast channel alongside its streaming and next-day-app airing profile, using its direct CW brand as well as its affiliated streaming partner CW Seed, where reruns of (frequently) short-run series originally broadcast by the CW as well as other networks are available, with minimal original content also included.[36] Until 2019, the network had a direct deal with Netflix, where full seasons pushed to Netflix eight days after the conclusion of their broadcast airing.[37]

While UPN and The WB both played host to comedies, the CW's history with scripted comedy has been spotty at best, and generally the network has centralized scripted drama.[38] Both

[33] Nellie Andreeva, "Julie Plec Inks New Overall Deal With Warner Bros TV," Deadline, March 27, 2014.
[34] Nellie Andreeva, "'Supergirl' Moves To The CW, Renewed For Season 2," *Deadline*, May 12, 2016, https://deadline.com/2016/05/supergirl-moves-the-cw-renewed-season-2-melissa-benoist-1201754579/.
[35] *Supergirl*, season 1, episode 18, "World's Finest," directed by Nick Gomez, written by Greg Berlanti, aired March 28, 2016 on CBS (Berlanti Productions, 2016).
[36] Jason Lynch, "The CW's Chief Doesn't Care When or Where Audiences Watch His Shows," *Adweek*, January 10, 2016, https://www.adweek.com/convergent-tv/cw-s-chief-doesn-t-care-when-or-where-audiences-watch-his-shows-168937/.
[37] Natalie Jarvey, "The CW Shows to Find New Streaming Home as Netflix Deal Not Renewed," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 15, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflix-lose-some-cw-shows-streaming-deal-not-renewed-1211021/.
[38] McNutt, "Comedy Returns to The CW, without a Story to Tell."

the WB and CW were (and perhaps still are) known as the network home for teen dramas (of slightly higher quality than ABC Family, now known as Freeform[39]), but the CW has begun to transition with its audience out of schools to adult casts and settings, in some cases following characters out of high school into college and the working world.[40] Much of the CW's content straddles Millennial and Gen Z demarcations of TV eras and expected audiences, often as a result of lengthy renewal cycles, franchising, and rebooting. [41]

Dawson's Creek (1998-2003) and its short-lived spinoff *Young Americans* (2000) are early WB examples of a primarily high-school or college setting, while cross-network WB-to-CW imports *Smallville* (2001-2011), *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), as well later additions *Gossip Girl* (2006-2012) and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) display a growing trend toward longer-running, transitional drama beginning in a high school setting, largely with predominantly white or multicultural casts.[42] While *Roswell, New Mexico* (2019-2022), *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019), *Supernatural* (2005-2021), and the majority of the network's DC superhero slate, do not directly follow this model, similar strategies of storytelling and forms of creating, addressing, and modeling conflict and resolution persist, based in similar ideas of transition as they pertain to different dramatic settings.

Generally, CW series are character-driven dramas with season-long dramatic arcs and a tendency toward relationship- and romance-driven storylines, although some of the more supernatural-, science-fiction- or superhero-focused shows (among them *Supernatural*, *Smallville*, and the DC Arrowverse slate of 2011-2023) also tend toward a case-of-the-week

[39] Jeanine Poggi, "ABC Family to Be Renamed 'Freeform,'" *AdAge*, October 6, 2015, https://adage.com/article/media/abc-family-renamed-freeform/300762.
[40] Jeanine Poggi, "Why the CW Is Happy to Grow Up," *AdAge*, April 2, 2015, https://adage.com/article/media/cw-happy-grow/297888.
[41] Stefania Marghitu, *Teen TV* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).
[42] Brown, "How UPN Ushered in a Golden Decade of Black TV — and Then Was Merged Out of Existence"; Warner, *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*.

episode structure that feeds a season-unifying serial arc. Both overall structures tend to follow developed CW formulas, often ones that cross both network and genre borders but with particular forms of address to inclusion, social belonging, and cultural norms. Series have a tendency toward romantic and familial melodrama and center identity and personal history as a key focus of character and story development.

The 2010s/2020s CW primetime drama slate is heavily populated by reboots (of the WB's/UPN's *Roswell,* the WB's *Charmed,* and ABC's *Dynasty*) and spinoffs or adaptations (more than half the CW's 2010s/2020s-airing series, from Archie Comics reimagining *Riverdale* and book series adaptation *The 100* (2014-2020) to the DC superheroes slate of *Supergirl, Arrow, The Flash, Legends of Tomorrow, Black Lightning,* and *Batwoman*).[43] *Jane the Virgin* is also a cross-linguistic adaptation of 2002 Venezuelan telenovela *Juana la virgen,* whose tone and adaptation status aligns fairly close with *Dynasty* (CW 2017-2022), a modern reboot of the 1980s primetime soap of the same name. The adaptation-heavy slate plus a tendency toward genre TV seems to be a particular focus of the CW post-*Gilmore Girls* and *One Tree Hill*, cross-network imports from the WB at the beginning of the joint-venture network. To round out the tendency toward genre drama and franchises or developed storytelling universes, other headliners at the CW in recent years have been the Vampire Diaries franchise, including *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), *The Originals* (2013-2018), and *Legacies* (2018-2022), which also represent the high-school/transitional drama element key to the CW's originating programming.

[43] Cynthia Littleton, "The CW at 10: How the Network Found Its Footing With Superheroes & Strong Women," *Variety*, September 23, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/the-cw-anniversary-mark-pedowitz-arrow-the-flash-1201865900/.

Boundary-pushing branding: "Dare to Defy" (2015 - 2022) and *The 100* fallout (2016)

Since 2015, much of the CW's public-facing marketing has used some variation of the phrase "Dare to Defy," all formulated to emphasize the network's alleged cutting-edge work on representation.[44] Perhaps capitalizing on its perceived young, progressive audience, perhaps connecting the language of defiance to cultural expectations of teen rebelliousness, the CW's industry stance has been one of envelope-pushing, whether or not that plays out in its content. Typically, this branding is now seen in a visual tagline in promos for a variety of shows as well as verbally and visually in collaged promos at the start of and in the middle of seasons.

"Dare to Defy" began as a project to refresh brand identity in 2015, completed by advertising agency/studio/production company loyalkaspar.[45] In defining its work, loyalkaspar says both that the agency "tr[ies] to make the world a better place" and does not "pollute the world visually […o]r mentally [… or] promote divisive agendas."[46] The company's indication of a neoliberal, inspecific approach to social improvement may help unpack the nature of the Dare to Defy branding's development, as does designer/animator Evan Sexton's characterization of the project as a brand identity refresh primarily intended to "highlight new and existing content."[47] So described, the refresh does not, itself, pretend toward any level of social change, although the nature of the first TV spot to use this branding suggests a more social-change-focused approach for the network.[48] This rebrand seems to have had some success on that front for the CW, given that they retained it into 2022. However, the particular boundary-pushing and trying to make the world a better place of "Dare to Defy" hit its first major roadblock in March 2016, when a queer

[44] "Watch the CW's New Promo 'Dare to Defy'"; Galluccio, "The CW: Dare to Defy (Tropes) and The 100"; Wickline, "The CW Releases Their Mid-Season 'Dare to Defy' Trailer"; Malone, "The CW Explains How It Dares to Defy."
[45] Evan Sexton, "The CW," Portfolio of Evan Sexton, 2015, http://52.71.131.253/portfolio/cw-brand-refresh/.
[46] loyalkaspar, "About - loyalkaspar," 2020.
[47] Sexton, "The CW."
[48] "Watch the CW's New Promo 'Dare to Defy.'"

female recurring character on showrunner Jason Rothenberg's *The 100*, Lexa, played by Alycia Debnam-Carey, was killed.

Lexa's death came after a sexual encounter with another woman (bisexual series protagonist Clarke, played by Eliza Taylor), and was the result of accidental friendly fire, with Lexa taking a bullet to the stomach. The similarity between Lexa's death and a central queer female death in TV—Tara Maclay's 2002 shooting death on *BTVS*—invigorated the connection to queer TV history and understandings of damaging narrative tropes like Bury Your Gays and Dead Lesbian Syndrome.[49] The resulting social media movement called into question, if implicitly, the extent to which the CW's series did, in fact, defy norms and tropes so omnipresent in TV storytelling. While the social media movement engaging questions of queer representation and queer death in media took networks and distributors to task across texts and across network, cable, and streaming providers, the CW's position at the center of the controversy remained visible in the language used to describe their frustrations and demands.

A year later, in summer 2017, tensions reignited over a fan-culture-rooted response to *Supergirl* cast members at Comic-Con, resulting a reinvigoration of the language around hashtag campaign #LGBTFansDeserveBetter in LGBTQ FANS DESERVE RESPECT.[50] At a backstage session with MTV news, *Supergirl* cast members Jeremy Jordan and Melissa Benoist at Comic-Con mocked fan-named ship "Supercorp" (a potential relationship between protagonist Kara Danvers (Benoist) and recurring character Lena Luthor (Katie McGrath)), saying that the two were "only friends" who were "not going to get together" in improvised song, claiming to have

[49] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess,'" 124.
[50] Navar-Gill and Stanfill.

"destroyed Supercorp."[51] The slight perceived to fans who were rooting for the two characters to get together gave rise to a campaign against invalidating the queer readings of series fans. While not directly in line with the previous controversy regarding queer death in film and TV, the connection via the network airing both *The 100* and *Supergirl* as well as the focus on queer femme relationships drew on similarly structured social media discourses.[52]

Part of the *Supergirl* response, on the part of fans and trade press alike, was a sense of betrayal arising from the perception that *Supergirl*'s success is and was largely due to an LGBTQ+ fan base[53] (implied to be watching for in-show women-loving-women relationship "Sanvers" as well as potential ship "Supercorp"). In addition, some expressed a sense that the show (and by extension the network) had been seeking to be "at the forefront" of LGBTQ+ representation.[54] Whether or not this perception is, in fact, the direction the network has been envisioning for its work is not consistently and directly stated, though there is precedent in the US television market for the use of LGBTQ+ representation as a signifier of social liberalism and support for social change, as well as a multicasting tool.[55] In the aftermath of "dismiss[ing]" fans and contributing, in programming, to the perpetuation of harmful tropes in queer representation, the CW leaned into the "Dare to Defy" brand and opted to add a new campaign to the sense of the network's approach to diversity, inclusion, and social change.

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[51] Vivian Kane, "Supergirl Fans Are Angry at Cast's Supercorp Shipping Jokes," *The Mary Sue*, July 24, 2017, https://www.themarysue.com/supercorp-shippers-rise-up/; James Wilson-Taylor, "LGBTQ Fans Are P*ssed At The 'Supergirl' Cast For Making Fun Of This Popular Ship," PopBuzz, July 25, 2017, https://www.popbuzz.com/tv-film/news/supergirl-supercorp-shipping-angry-cast/.
[52] Navar-Gill and Stanfill, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions."
[53] Catherine Horkay, "The Supergirl Cast Just Disrespected Their LGBTQ+ Fans at SDCC," *Affinity Arts + Culture*, July 24, 2017, http://culture.affinitymagazine.us/the-supergirl-cast-just-disrespected-their-lgbtq-fans-at-sdcc/.
[54] Wilson-Taylor, "LGBTQ Fans Are P*ssed At The 'Supergirl' Cast For Making Fun Of This Popular Ship."
[55] Himberg, "Multicasting: Lesbian Programming and the Changing Landscape of Cable TV"; Julia Himberg, *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017); Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."

2018's #OpenToAll and responses to calls for diversity

In publicly sticking to its "Dare to Defy" network identity, the CW continued to claim to push the boundaries of social inclusivity and representational equity, which was further emphasized in its #OpenToAll campaign, launched in 2018.[56] In October 2018, as its fall season was starting, the #OpenToAll campaign stressed the CW's commitment diversity on screen and in production spaces behind the camera. The network's announcement came at a time where the Hollywood Diversity Report, produced annually by researchers at the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA, noted that minorities had been underrepresented by at least two to one in television casts, and between three and seven to one among television staff, though their data came from the 2014-15 season.[57] The Director's Guild of America also released its annual study of diversity among TV episode directors in October 2018, with CBS and Warner Bros. productions having a middling to low showing among peer studios.[58] Coming around the same time as brands like Nike were incorporating inclusion into their marketing campaigns, #OpenToAll seemed designed to set the CW in the foreground of TV industry diversity and inclusion conversations.[59]

Much of the language used in the campaign's announcement touted the CW's existing staff, particularly for the 2018-19 season, with 12 of the 17 series for the year created and/or produced

[56] Porter, "CW Launches 'Open to All' Campaign Highlighting Commitment to Inclusiveness"; Turchiano, "The CW Launches #CWOpenToAll Campaign to Promote Inclusion."
[57] Darnell Hunt et al., "2017 Hollywood Diversity Report : Setting the Record Straight," 2017, https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2017-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2-21-17.pdf.
[58] Michael Schneider, "Women and Minorities Only Slightly More Represented as TV Directors, Says DGA Diversity Study," *IndieWire*, October 10, 2018, https://www.indiewire.com/2018/10/directors-guild-of-america-episode-diversity-study-2017-2018-tv-season-1202011053/.
[59] Michael Schneider, "The CW Puts Diversity at the Center of Its New Fall Marketing Campaign," *IndieWire*, October 14, 2018, https://www.indiewire.com/2018/10/the-cw-open-to-all-campaign-diversity-1202011968/.

by women or people of color.[60] The campaign included a statistics-heavy announcement from network president Mark Pedowitz foregrounding numerical counts of diverse staff and cast members, as well as series of video spots airing during CW primetime programming.[61] Pedowitz specifically cited the campaign as an outreach to fans perceived to be watching for the CW's commitment to representation on-screen and behind the camera.[62] IndieWire reporter Michael Schneider connected this announcement to Nielsen vice president of global communications Andrew McCaskill's blunt observation that a "multicultural strategy" is necessary to a "growth strategy" in marketing to a viewing public increasingly made up of millennials (and subsequent generations) who increasingly identify as a race other than white.[63]

Responses, on the part of trade press and fans alike, were cautiously optimistic but critical of the CW's (largely through Pedowitz) claims to diversity on paper, in writing rooms, and on screen. 2019 saw the pickup of five freshman shows, of which four were created and produced by women, and three-quarters of 2019 series regulars were women and people of color.[64] However, viewers reacted less positively to what they saw as widely differing execution of storylines for queer people and people of color, marketing strategies, and support for historically excluded creators.[65] Part of what this dissertation seeks to examine are the ways in which inclusion efforts like #OpenToAll and the CW's public posture about inclusion have had effects

[60] Turchiano, "The CW Launches #CWOpenToAll Campaign to Promote Inclusion."
[61] Turchiano.
[62] Schneider, "The CW Puts Diversity at the Center of Its New Fall Marketing Campaign."
[63] Sally Jenkins, "Nike Knows the Future Looks Something like Colin Kaepernick," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2018; Schneider, "The CW Puts Diversity at the Center of Its New Fall Marketing Campaign."
[64] Nellie Andreeva, "The CW Boss On Streaming Future, AVOD Success, Diversity & Adding New Night," *Deadline*, January 31, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/01/the-cw-boss-streaming-future-avod-success-diversity-adding-new-night-1202547086/.
[65] Sarah Novack, "The CW Has a Problem with Representation," *TV Fanatic*, July 31, 2020, https://www.tvfanatic.com/2020/07/the-cw-has-a-problem-with-representation/; Princess Weekes, "The CW Has a Lot of Diversity Issues to Answer For," *The Mary Sue*, June 8, 2020, https://www.themarysue.com/the-cw-diversity-issues/.

on or have drawn from the themes and structures of the programming the network distributes. If the CW's commitment to diversity and to its unorthodox forms of distribution have indeed led to forms of what Pedowitz called "unqualified success,"[66] how can the programming on the CW and its approaches to its network identity as queer representation vanguard be reconciled with the ratings and longevity struggles that have continuously plagued the network?

CW for Sale: network TV, streaming, and the identity of the CW

The CW has never been far from rumors of its own demise, with articles appearing decrying its lack of presence in broadcast ratings starting as early as the 2006-07 season (its first year on air).[67] In part perhaps due to a general trend away from broadcast television in more recent years, the CW has been consistently low in the Nielsen ratings and low in revenue, occasionally resulting in advertiser exodus.[68] However, the network has maintained its position that this is largely due to a misunderstanding and miscounting of the way that the CW has operated as a distributor, with much of its content available same-day or next-day for no-cost streaming (with ads) on the network's website and fairly quickly on other streaming services as well, de-prioritizing the live-viewing statistics that broadcast ratings measure.[69] Much of this is due to the CW's use of programming from parent companies Warner Bros. TV and CBS, reducing its licensing fee overhead and prioritizing its ability to sell shows for syndication, future runs, and streaming deals.[70] This strategy has proven successful in engaging an active young fan base for

[66] Quoted in Andreeva, "The CW Boss On Streaming Future, AVOD Success, Diversity & Adding New Night."
[67] "The Final Nielsen Ratings: A Litany of Horrors for the CW," *Vulture*, May 29, 2007, https://www.vulture.com/2007/05/nielsen_ratings_litany.html.
[68] STV, "Network Death Watch Underway as Viewers, Advertisers Flee the CW," *Gawker*, May 16, 2008, https://www.gawker.com/391271/network-death-watch-underway-as-viewers-advertisers-flee-the-cw?tag=defamer.
[69] STV; Barr, "The CW Doesn't Care About Live Views Because The CW Doesn't Have Major Stake In Its Programming."
[70] Barr, "The CW Doesn't Care About Live Views Because The CW Doesn't Have Major Stake In Its Programming."

many of its shows and did result in a long-running deal with Netflix; however, with this deal ending and the network continuing to show low ratings, it's unclear what the future of the CW's streaming arm is.[71]

In early 2022, ViacomCBS and WarnerMedia were reported to be looking into the sale of the network, specifically coming in the aftermath of the Netflix deal ending.[72] With most of the CW's revenue coming from Netflix and international distribution of WarnerMedia series (ViacomCBS contributed only a fraction of the network's programming as of 2022), the loss of that avenue came as a blow to the network's longevity, particularly as ViacomCBS and WarnerMedia invigorated their own streaming subsidiaries in Paramount+ and HBO Max, respectively. By mid-August 2022, the sale was complete—Nexstar Media Group acquired majority stake in the network by accepting the CW's losses from prior parent companies Paramount Global (CBS heritor) and Warner Bros. Discovery.[73]

Since the CW's posture has long prioritized streaming—from the very beginning, according to first CW president Dawn Ostroff[74]—and syndication over broadcast, the transition ahead invites further questions. With Nexstar, a major owner of local TV stations, as one of the potential buyers, it seems that the CW is intended to keep its first-broadcast bona fides, if potentially still prioritizing online and second-run watches.[75] With the news of the potential sale coming shortly before news of some major DC slate cancellations with queer characters and

[71] Jarvey, "The CW Shows to Find New Streaming Home as Netflix Deal Not Renewed"; Lesley Goldberg and Alex Weprin, "ViacomCBS and WarnerMedia Exploring Sale of The CW," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 5, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/the-cw-for-sale-warnermedia-.
[72] Goldberg and Weprin, "ViacomCBS and WarnerMedia Exploring Sale of The CW."
[73] Jennifer Maas, "Nexstar to Acquire 75% Stake in the CW Network from Paramount Global, Warner Bros. Discovery," *Variety*, August 15, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/the-cw-nexstar-acquisition-paramount-warner-bros-discovery-1235150229/.
[74] Littleton, "Birth of the CW: UPN-WB Network Merger Deal Rocked TV Biz 10 Years Ago."
[75] Joe Flint, "WarnerMedia and ViacomCBS Are Exploring Possible Sale of CW Network," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2022.

fanbases,[76] and the sale itself coming just as these series closed, this dissertation seeks to engage the time period between the 2016 *The 100* controversy and the 2022 sale as an era where the CW engaged questions of representation, particularly queer representation, alongside industry pressures and an apparent decline of support for the network on a financial level.

Moreover, Nexstar's acquisition of the CW came with the 'surprise' reveal of the demographic most reached by the CW according to broadcast data. Rather than the teenagers and young adults that presumptively were watching, it was reported that most of the CW's audience was in their late 50s.[77] This has been Nexstar's reported reasoning for a shift in the programming supported on the CW; however, it is possible that this demographic may rather reflect who is watching broadcast television when it is broadcast, rather than the viewership that the CW has actively courted on-demand, via online streaming platforms, and through its deals with Netflix.[78]

The CW's reboot- and adaptation-heavy slate (including all the texts under examination in this dissertation) bring paratextual and pretextual baggage to many of the network's series, which both help market the series and complicate the general context of their production, distribution, and reception.[79] The network's recycling and re-exploration of content also opens the door for analysis of changes made to source material, moves to update older content, and the nature of (in some cases) cross-cultural adaptation. Exploring these questions involves destabilizing the boundaries between new and original content while keeping in frame their different conditions of production, something that inspires media-industries-meets-narrative-critique.

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[76] Chelsea Steiner, "Queer Representation Takes a Hit as the CW Cancels 'Legends of Tomorrow', 'Batwoman,'" *The Mary Sue2*, April 30, 2022, https://www.themarysue.com/queer-representation-takes-a-hit-as-the-cw-cancels-legends-of-tomorrow-batwoman/.
[77] Hailu and Maas, "Yes, the CW's Average Viewer Is Actually 57 -- Here's How the Rest of Broadcast Stacks Up."
[78] Nellie Andreeva, "The CW Boss on End of Network's Output Deal with Netflix," *Deadline*, May 16, 2019, deadline.com/2019/05/the-cw-boss-comment-end-netflix-output-deal-1202616278/; Barr, "The CW Doesn't Care About Live Views Because The CW Doesn't Have Major Stake In Its Programming"; Lynch, "The CW's Chief Doesn't Care When or Where Audiences Watch His Shows."
[79] Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*.

Also inherent in this project is an interest in the responsiveness to moments of breakdown within CW programming. While the network itself does not make individual creative choices with a series' story, characterization, or design, understanding the context in which the series is distributed can offer key insight into the ways that the network's own position shapes the development of its content. The CW's history of continuities, assimilation, and verging on breakdown, as well as its insistence on defiance, inclusion, youth, and forward-looking are built on the programming it distributes, and the case studies that follow work to engage how these programs build the CW as, if not a vanguard of queer representation and its execution on-screen, at least a full-throated participant in its development.

CHAPTER II

REGULARIZING RECURRING RESILIENCE

The CW's Queer Outcasts and Sidekicks in Legends of Tomorrow *and* Supergirl

When bisexual blonde badass Sara Lance (Caity Lotz) took multiple arrows to the chest in the October 2014 third season opener of *Arrow* (CW, 2012-2020), it seemed to be just another in a long and fairly unremarked line of dead guest and/or recurring bisexual and lesbian women, especially as a precursor to the spring 2016 reckoning with Bury Your Gays as a trope that, in part, inspired this research project. This was only more strongly felt because it was the third time Lance's character was presumed dead within the series, and this time seemed more likely to stick.[1] Through the magic of genre television and the primetime soap feel of *Arrow* and its linked properties, her subsequent resurrection helped set the stage for *Arrow's* and *The Flash's* (CW, 2014-2023) spinoff into *Legends of Tomorrow* (CW, 2016-2022) in January of 2016, where Lance would graduate from recurring status on *Arrow* to main cast on *Legends* and would eventually become the team leader.

As *Legends of Tomorrow* was premiering, *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-16; CW, 2016-2021) was amid its freshman season on CBS, though it shared a production company and source material with the CW's then-three-property *Arrowverse* (*Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends*). The CW acquired broadcast rights to *Supergirl* for its second season beginning in fall of 2016,[2] which is also the season that saw its first queer character, Alex Danvers (series regular Chyler Leigh, also known for her run as Lexie Grey on ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*), come out as a lesbian.

[1] Riese, "All 215 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters On TV, And How They Died."
[2] Andreeva, "'Supergirl' Moves To The CW, Renewed For Season 2."

Figure 1: Promotional images for the final season of Supergirl *and the second season of* Legends of Tomorrow.

This chapter will explore the portrayal of queer identity and trauma in *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Supergirl*. Both shows have received critical acclaim for their inclusion of diverse representation, including queer characters, while also occasionally facing backlash for statements made by actors and other figures involved in production. These shows have broken barriers in terms of queer representation on television, providing platforms for discussion and representation for characters who face obstacles related to their sexuality and gender identity. This chapter also examines where these broken barriers reintegrate questions about the production structures that permit this boundary-pushing. Within this context, I will discuss casting choice, writers' room structure, and the influence of a showrunner and executive producer like Greg Berlanti, whose long history with the CW (and its predecessor, The WB) as well as with queer representation on

the big and small screens (including the production of gay teen romcom *Love, Simon* (2018)) deserves a closer examination in the CW's "Dar[ing] to Defy."[3]

This chapter aims to examine how *Arrowverse* characters like Sara Lance, Ava Sharpe, Alex Danvers, Nia Nal, and others work to increase storytelling about queer characters and address societally inflicted forms of trauma, as well as reproduce expectations about queer identity and the traumas queer people face in narrative (as a reflection of the society in which the narratives are produced). Within this analysis, I address how *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Supergirl* portray the different ways the characters' experiences of trauma intersect with their queer identities and their identities as heroes within the series' diegeses.

Legends of Tomorrow and *Supergirl* both represent interesting individual cases in the sedimentation of their inherited production histories: *Legends of Tomorrow* imports many of its originating and later series regulars from *Arrow* and *The Flash*, existing CW properties, and *Supergirl* itself was an import from ABC in its sophomore season, the season that saw the series' first out queer series regular. Moreover, *Arrow* import to *Legends of Tomorrow* Sara Lance, a bisexual white woman who, again, died more than one time on *Arrow*, was herself mentioned in the Bury Your Gays controversy in 2016. Engaging with these series offers an interesting lens into the CW's response post-2016, as well as responses to accusations of *Supergirl*'s queerbaiting.[4] In addition, this paired case study offers a lens into the representation of femme-presenting, white or racially ambiguous LBPQ women, often played by straight or perceived-as-straight actresses, as a strategy in CW producers' attempts to "dare to defy."

[3] Marechal, "Greg Berlanti Lands Major Deal Extension with Warner Bros. TV (Exclusive)."
[4] Navar-Gill and Stanfill, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions."

While there are openly queer and trans characters in the Arrowverse, characters Kara Danvers (Melissa Benoist) and Lena Luthor (Katie McGrath) have also been read by fans as queer, or at least as experiencing desire for each other. This came to a head at 2017's Comic Con, where series stars Benoist and Jeremy Jordan (who plays Winn Schott Jr.) mocked the idea of "Supercorp" (the fan name for Kara and Lena's relationship) during a panel and kickstarted a second wave of fan frustrations linked to 2016's Bury Your Gays controversies by publications like PopBuzz and The Mary Sue.[5] While Benoist and Jordan later apologized, both the reading of these characters as queer and the insistence by creatives that they were not reveal a consistency across superhero identity narratives and queer identity narratives that was echoed in Kara and Lena's characterizations—namely that they were "Othered" and felt separate from family and friends, either by result of adoption and extraterrestrial identity (Kara) or by ostracization (Lena), and that this represented a form of abandonment and/or exclusionary trauma. The linkages between storytelling tropes of superhero trauma and queer trauma were, perhaps, largely subtextual in *Supergirl*'s development of Lena and Kara, but Nia Nal's blurring of those lines by linking questions and trauma experienced as a result of her trans identity directly with those related to her extraterrestrial/superhero identity widens the possibilities of exploring those linkages. Differing forms of trauma and differing aspects of identity-based violence and exclusion show both the consistencies and variations in the formulation of queer identity on television through characters on *Legends* and *Supergirl*.

Moreover, the structure of queer characters' participation in the narrative is an interesting lens through which to refract our understanding of representation. Within this analysis, I will also

[5] Kane, "Supergirl Fans Are Angry at Cast's Supercorp Shipping Jokes"; Horkay, "The Supergirl Cast Just Disrespected Their LGBTQ+ Fans at SDCC"; Wilson-Taylor, "LGBTQ Fans Are P*ssed At The 'Supergirl' Cast For Making Fun Of This Popular Ship."

contend with queer characters' positioning as recurring, supporting, and main characters within these two shows, as well as the construction of "outcast" or "stranger" status for either straight or queer characters in-narrative, especially as it relates to trauma narratives. In the combined analyses of casting, positioning, and framing of queer characters in these series, I contend that these series present a form of plastic representation[6] that, in addition to adding queer and trans characters into primarily straight environments, utilizes alternate forms of othered status to allegorize its queer characters' difference from other characters without routinely contending specifically with homophobia or transphobia, rather than centering them as a point of storytelling à la the Very Special Episode . This relies, then, on the imaginative space of an alternate universe, superhero fantasy, and projects this othered status into narratives that often center trauma and exclusion along manufactured identity lines.

Superheroes' imaginative heroism: drawing on (queer?) trauma

As a genre, superhero media has often presented idealized figures, both in terms of strength and morality. As such, queer identity has often been sidelined, restricted to the work of "textual poachers"[7] creating queer readings and queer alternative texts, reading against the grain both of the text itself and of the social norms embedded therein.[8] The places where superhero media, including comics, movies, and television, incorporates queer or queer-coded[9] hero characters predominantly as sidekicks who are typically male, support to the central hero that emphasizes

[6] Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation."
[7] Henry Jenkins, "'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers, Nomads," in Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992), 9–49.
[8] Gareth Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes," *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 1, no. 1 (June 10, 2010): 17–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/21504851003798405.
[9] As discussed in the introduction, queer coding refers to a subset of modes of representation that edge around openly depicting queerness. For more information, refer to Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and ' The 100 Mess.'"

their belonging to the normative, dominant discourses of society, despite the frequency of backstories and origin stories for superheroic characters that cast them as outsiders.[10] The outsider status of heroes (like extraterrestrial Superman, demigoddess Wonder Woman, and others), typically tied to their abilities and powers, plays against their attachment to and protection of the people, values, and morals of the "insider" group to which they concurrently belong. The queer-coded sidekick, then, provides a route to addressing the superhero's separation from the norm while also emphasizing the hero's perceived closeness (above and beyond the sidekick's) to the norm, in addition to potentially providing ways to emphasize the hero's romantic or other storylines, often at the expense of their own.[11]

While components of the homosociality and bright, revealing costuming of superhero narratives have evoked queer anxieties since the explosion of the superhero scene during the Golden and Silver Ages of comics (1930s-1970s),[12] superhero narratives have also made moves to incorporate "out" queer characters in recent years that trade on and expand previous iterations of queer coding, character development, and more.[13] The shift from implied to actual queerness changes some, but not all, of the landscape surrounding queerness in superhero media as it does in other popular media,[14] and as this case study exemplifies. While some instances of queer superhero storytelling, in comics and in movies, show some moves toward inclusivity, there is also a trend toward sidelining and "castrating" queer characters by deemphasizing their desire, relying on stereotypes and tropes of queer identity, and similar strategies.[15]

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[10] Neil Shyminsky, "'Gay' Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero," Men and Masculinities 14, no. 3 (2011): 288–308, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X10368787.
[11] Shyminsky.
[12] Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes"; Shyminsky, "'Gay' Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero."
[13] Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes."
[14] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.
[15] Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes."

As indicated by the work noted in this chapter, the connections between superhero identity and queer identity as perceived within common narrative structures are many, and in some cases rise, themselves, to an allegorical status—i.e., superhero identity, particularly when based on superpowers (rather than obscene wealth and/or intelligence), stands in for explicit narrative queerness. This is perhaps nowhere more widely and openly held as a textual reading than in Marvel's *X-men* comics, whose mutant rights storylines echo, at least in part, gay rights and queer liberation movements of the 20th century.[16] In addition, the construction of superhero identity, imaginative heroism and vigilantism itself, and trauma have a long history implicated in the structures of superhero storytelling today. Because of this genre connection to trauma, the tangled webs this case study attempts to unweave are a little trickier.

Whether or not the experience of trauma or the experience of its aftermath, for characters on television, is written to include bodily consequences that have been discussed in both injury and forms of body reclamation,[17] a critical lens that examines trauma as performed and experienced through the body during and after a traumatic event can provide insight into television actors' performance of scripts produced about traumatized characters. These experiences are often centralized for superhero characters and in some cases represent the genesis of their superpowers, their drive toward vigilantism, or both. This integration of trauma is reflected in some psychological perspectives on superheroes as well as their use in therapy, discussing both the storytelling of traumatic experience and recovery as well as readers' and players' association

[16] Melanie E.S. Kohnen, *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203152706; Sarah Mirk, "Reading 'The X-Men' As a Queer Text," *BitchMedia*, June 16, 2016, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/reading-x-men-queer-text; Patrick Roesle, "The X-Men as LGBT Champions: From Outcasts to Elites," *Rabbit Hole*, January 18, 2022, https://rabbitholemag.com/the-x-men-as-lgbt-champions-from-outcasts-to-elites/; Andrew Wheeler, "Freak Like Me: Understanding the Queerness of the X-Men," *Comics Alliance*, June 2014, https://comicsalliance.com/mutant-proud-xmen-lgbt-rights-identity-queerness-transformation/.

[17] Victoria L Pitts, "'Reclaiming' the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance and the Grotesque," Body and Society 4, no. 3 (1998): 67–84, https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X98004003004.

of sidekicks with marginalization and separation.[18] Vigilantism as a trauma coping mechanism connects also to questions of physical experiences of trauma in narrative, especially engaging with the human or superhuman nature of superheroes. Understanding, then, the perceived dichotomy and the linkages between physical and emotional trauma as experiences becomes key to both crafting and unpacking narratives of superheroism, vigilantism, and associated inclusion and exclusion.

The construction of superhero trauma often toes the line between what Sami Schalk terms the "supercrip" trope, wherein disability is rewritten, nullified, or alleviated in some way by a disabled character's superpowers,[19] and a tendency to 'write off' heroes' trauma into a landscape built on resilience.[20] The body/mind disability of trauma, particularly conceptions and experiences of disjointed traumatic memory, have been used as storytelling tools within a superhero character's story, but this experience of trauma is often cast as a stepping stone to healing through or around vigilantism, a source and driver of posttraumatic growth.[21] H. Rakes explores the nature of community and collaboration—the needing of support, community, and growth—within a crip feminist trauma reading of *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019); however, as they note, this orientation toward trauma is not altogether common of superhero media, and in fact converses with existing concepts of trauma and queerness as inescapable forms of failure or spaces of blame.[22] Within the differing contexts of production (Netflix's streaming, adult

[18] Michael Brody, "Holy Franchise ! Batman and Trauma," in *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin (New York: Springer, 2007), 105–20.
[19] Sami Schalk, "Reevaluating the Supercrip," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016): 71–86, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2016.5.
[20] Christine E. Agaibi and John P. Wilson, "Trauma, PTSD, and Resilience: A Review of the Literature," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 6, no. 3 (2005): 195–216, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838005277438.
[21] Melinda M. Moore, "Posttraumatic Growth, Superheroes, and the Bereaved," in *Superhero Grief: The Transformative Power of Loss* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
[22] H. Rakes, "Crip Feminist Trauma Studies in Jessica Jones and Beyond," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 75–91, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2019.5.

audience focus vs. the CW's family broadcast space), critiquing the use of trauma and of post-traumatic stress and disability within *Legends* and *Supergirl* is a space to understand whether the series draw from existing individualist tendencies in trauma storytelling, or from community-based crip feminist approaches.

Binary-breaking sex/gender and sexuality spectrums (on TV)

Bisexuality and transgender identity both represent potential moves away from strict binary identification of sexuality and gender towards a more open concept of the sex/gender spectrum, one that provides a compelling sense of liminality and existence outside cisheteronormative binaries.[23] Bisexuality appears to disappear in queer theories of identity, sexuality, and gender relations, largely because of this tension that exists between 'coming out' identificatory pressures and bisexuality's troubling of identity's oppositional construction (i.e. defining oneself by virtue of what one is not).[24] Bisexuality has been theorized as fundamentally irreconcilable with a stable, unshifting identity category, as its challenge to the monosexist and heteronormative ideologies of society cannot be integrated with a singular identity-position as suggested by the term 'bisexuality.'[25] In recent years, similar attention to the boundary-bending nature of trans identity, trans sensibilities, and trans theorizing has provided more context for the potential openness and inherent conflict with binarism represented by bisexual and trans forms of

[23] Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*; Kay Siebler, "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health* 16, no. 1 (2012): 74–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2012.632751.
[24] Angelides, A History of Bisexuality; Amber Ault, "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women," Sociological Quarterly 37, no. 3 (1996): 449–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1996.tb00748.x; Carol Berenson, "What's in a Name?: Bisexual Women Define Their Terms," Journal of Bisexuality 2, no. 2/3 (2002): 9–21.
[25] Brian Loftus, "Biopia: Bisexuality and the Crisis of Visibility in a Queer Symbolic," in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, ed. Donald E Hall and Maria Pramaggiore, Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire (NYU Press, 1996), 207–33, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg5f9.15.

queerness.[26] However, it is exactly contending with the inextricable nature of this 'both at once' status from the ubiquitous cultural gender/sex binary that structures much of TV's approach to bisexuality and trans identity.

This liminality cuts both ways, as bisexuality is also deeply stigmatized as hypersexual, transitional in its liminality, and fundamentally disingenuous—a polarization that clearly, especially given the political climate of the early 2020s, is reflected in trans panic legislation and hate crimes today. "Bisexual" has been labeled a term "so overburdened with cultural meaning"[27] that it prescribes ways of moving in the world, but also occludes the formation of a community, which they label "problematic" for avowed bisexuals, who often lean on the label 'queer' instead to promote community. Many narratives about bisexuality—including internalized narratives—center around three key social concepts of bisexuality: bisexuality as indecision, bisexuality as a transitional phase eventually leading to heterosexuality or homosexuality (typically the latter), and bisexuality as a way for closeted gays and lesbians to retain heterosexual (passing) privilege.[28] Because this stigmatizes bisexual identity both within the queer community and in broader (heteronormative) society, bisexual identity is often not claimed because to "claim a reviled sexual identity can be a radical act" and one that invites scrutiny or even violence.[29] Bisexual people can, then, emphasize or deny different aspects of one of their sexual identity, so as not to find oneself in accordance with a "deviant bi other"

[26] Alexis Lothian, "Doing Boys like They're Girls, and Other (Trans)Gendered Subjects: The Queer Subcultural Politics of 'Genderfuck' Fan Fiction," in LA Queer Studies Conference (Los Angeles, 2008), http://www.queergeektheory.org/2008/10/doing-boys-like-they're-girls-and-other-transgendered-subjects-the-queer-subcultural-politics-of-'genderfuck'-fan-fiction/; Siebler, "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age."
[27] Jo Bower, Maria Gurevich, and Cynthia Mathieson, "(Con)Tested Identities: Bisexual Women Reorient Sexuality," *Bisexual Women in the Twenty-First Century*, 2013, 23–52.
[28] Bower, Gurevich, and Mathieson.
[29] Sue George, "Extracts from Women and Bisexuality," in Bisexuality: A Critical Reader, ed. Merl Storr (London: Routledge, 1999), 103.

stereotype,[30] largely descriptive of a negatively coded, promiscuous bisexual individual—a common iteration on television.[31] Within these frameworks, the accepted bisexual or trans individual must squarely situate themselves within dominant discourses in order to be legitimated—something that becomes key in TV representations of sexuality and gender and connects to the question of legitimation and structural protection so embedded in superhero contexts.

Franchise TV: Berlanti Productions' Arrowverse

This chapter and the chapter that follows it deal with superhero TV properties that belong to the so-called *Arrowverse*, a collection of DC superhero shows on the CW (referenced above) that are all linked and are also all produced by the same production company, Berlanti Productions. Spearheaded by longtime TV writer and producer Greg Berlanti, this company has been producing DC Comics television since 2012, with the launch of *Arrow*, alongside other broadcast drama series for FOX, CBS, NBC, and ABC and streaming series for Netflix and HBO Max. Some of Berlanti Productions' DC slate airs exclusively on HBO Max as of 2022, but the majority of the *Arrowverse* airs and has aired as broadcast, primetime drama on the CW, and Greg Berlanti is himself listed as a producer and often a writer on many episodes of *Arrowverse* properties, pursuant to his multi-year, multi-property deal with Warner Brothers.[32] This consistency of producer and often writers across properties and across networks (especially in *Supergirl*'s freshman season on CBS) has contributed to a level of franchising and interwovenness between the different properties that is somewhat unique to the *Arrowverse*,

[30] Ault, "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women."
[31] San Filippo, "Bisexuality on the Boob Tube."
[32] Marechal, "Greg Berlanti Lands Major Deal Extension with Warner Bros. TV (Exclusive)."

including its frequent (typically annual, since *The Flash*'s premiere in 2014) crossover events, where a storyline expands across multiple properties during one or two weeks of the season. This also happens occasionally on a smaller scale, between two properties.

While the production company is centralized, the individual shows have separate writers' rooms and settings; however (obviously), there is some complexity involved in the intertwining of narratives, as it implicates multiple casts and writing staffs and, occasionally, tonal and universe shifts. Having a central producer helps to build the credibility of these disparate and often unwieldy projects. Moreover, Berlanti's reputation regarding queer representation—starting from his work on *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003), where he fought for an on-screen gay kiss after taking over as showrunner[33]—provides industry cachet for the creative choices made by teams writing queer characters on Berlanti Productions shows. The question whether that cachet leads, in fact, to a repetition of longstanding tropes of queer representation.

Supergirl's network transition complicates the question. There is a great deal of continuity despite the change: Berlanti Productions and Berlanti himself remained as executive producer; moreover, *Supergirl* had also already crossed over with DC Arrowverse property *The Flash* during its first season.[34] While the series tone remained fairly consistent as the show moved from CBS to the CW, the shift did also involve the coming-out of the series' first regular queer character. The network shift tied *Supergirl* much more closely to the tightly woven fabric of the early Arrowverse and would lead to future multi-property crossovers that involved musical

[33] Christopher Rudolph, "Greg Berlanti, 'Dawson's Creek' and 'Brothers & Sisters' Executive Producer, Talks TV Gay Characters," *Huffington Post*, October 15, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/greg-berlanti-gay-characters-television_n_4066243.

[34] Grant Gustin's Barry Allen and Melissa Benoist's Kara Danvers (the series' respective protagonists) reunited on the small screen after having previously been regulars on Ryan Murphy's (another well-known queer TV producer) FOX dramedy *Glee* earlier in their careers.

numbers, as well as overarching comic-book narratives crafted by separate but overlapping writers' rooms.

Supergirl and *Legends of Tomorrow* boast the longest runs of the four Arrowverse shows analyzed in this dissertation, and furthermore Arrowverse shows not discussed here (*Arrow* and *The Flash*) ran for even longer. While I will address this difference in more detail later, this longevity of properties that centralize white queer characters or white cisheterosexual characters vis-à-vis properties that centralize Black, Jewish, and queer superheroes (despite a shared production company and thus proven record of audience delivery) indicates, at least in part, the priorities of the network and the production company. Moreover, the longer-lived properties have greater crossover and more frequent crossover with each other, even in their early seasons, which serves, likely, to increase their potential audience share and thus their attractiveness to network execs and advertisers.

Casting "realistic" queer superheroes

Discussions of TV representation in the 2010s and 2020s almost always begin with the question of casting, whether engaged in a difference-blind or identity-conscious framework. The logics of plastic representation, as coined by Kristen Warner, center a form of difference-blind (in Warner's work, centrally colorblind/race-blind) representation that depicts a diverse cast, but frequently depicts marginalized communities in abstraction from their actual community relations (i.e., one Black queer character within an ensemble cast of mostly white, mostly straight characters with little interface with other members of Black and queer communities).[35] This structure de-emphasizes cultural difference in favor of flattened diversity, often resulting in

[35] Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation"; Warner, *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*.

storylines that are 'universal', which typically, as in most industries, refers to white, cis-heterosexual, middle-class experiences.[36] Identity-conscious casting, on the other hand, goes hand in hand with writing choices and embeds identity's effect on casting choices within a concomitant effect on scriptwriting; i.e., that an actor's identity affects their character's identity which in turn affects the narratives in which they appear.[37] Because queer and trans identity are often less explicitly written on the body than perceived racial identity, questions of who 'plays queer' or 'plays trans' are often uniquely complex, particularly since they often demand that actors come out in order to prove their bona fides.[38]

While the complexity of demanding coming out reiterates the suspicion paradigm Joyrich established as a key component of classic TV queer storylines into the casting process,[39] it is worth noting that there are consequences, both in audience and in critical response, to the casting of actors that either match or that deviate from the identities crafted on screen. Some of these identity "mismatches," per se, like Caity Lotz (who identifies as straight) playing Sara Lance (the bisexual blonde girl-power heroine) or Chyler Leigh (also straight and a key heterosexual romantic lead on *Grey's Anatomy*) playing Alex Danvers (the tomboyish lesbian secret agent), run the risk of reiterating the trope of the titillating lesbian/bisexual girl whose sexuality is performed for the presumptive heterosexual male viewer.[40] Moreover, all these characters present more femme than butch, with almost exclusively (except for Alex Danvers) long hair, flattering makeup, and an overall (though not exclusive) tendency toward feminine clothing, even when time traveling. The overall trend creates the picture of a heteronormative queer

[36] Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*.
[37] Khadija Mbowe, "Color-Blind vs. Identity-Conscious Casting and Examining Hamilton and Malcolm & Marie" (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYTN6BnK_KI.
[38] Herman, "'I'm Gay': Declarations, Desire, and Coming out on Prime-Time Television."
[39] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console."
[40] Tricia Jenkins, "'Potential Lesbians at Two o'clock': The Heterosexualization of Lesbianism in the Recent Teen Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 3 (2005): 491–504, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.2005.00125.x.

sexuality—one that does not threaten existing norms or engage the more nonnormative cultural and gender expressions related to queerness—showing little to no change from the representations noted by Ciasullo in the 1990s.[41] *Supergirl*'s casting of Floriana Lima as Latina police detective Maggie Sanchez, on the other hand, replicated a different Hollywood pattern—the whitewashing and/or "ethical ambiguity" played on for Latine characters. Lima, who is a white Italian woman, represented the most recent in a revolving door of women whose Italian, Latine, Indigenous, and/or Arabic heritage have been elided to a general ambiguous non- (but possible-) whiteness, whether or not this reflects the individual's or the character's own identity.

Figure 2: Images of queer women in Legends of Tomorrow *and* Supergirl*: Sara Lance, in* Legends *season 1 episode 16; Ava Sharpe in* Legends *season 5 episode 9; Alex Danvers in* Supergirl *season 2 episode 12; Maggie Sawyer in* Supergirl *season 2, episode 19.*

Supergirl made a well-documented move toward an identity-conscious casting approach in crafting Nia Nal's character, portrayed by transgender actress Nicole Maines. Developing, perhaps from past and continuing discussions around Arrowverse's casting, Nal's character and

[41] Ann M. Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 577–608, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178806.

casting represent a departure from a more traditional CW (and broader screen culture) tendency to cast recognizable and/or attractive presumptively cisgender and straight heartthrobs in all roles. It is, of course, important to note that Nal's introduction comes in season four, after *Supergirl* was an established and generally reliable component of the Arrowverse slate (and indeed would continue for two further seasons beyond that, with Maines as a series regular). Maines also joins the cast (in season 4, episode 1, "American Alien") in a series of feminine, floral sundresses, with her long hair neatly curled and her makeup subtle but flattering—not only passing for cisgender, but also presenting as a very normative woman. (Interestingly, at this point Alex Danvers' appearance, especially in her formal work wear, includes a short haircut with shaved sides and a black leather catsuit, toeing some queered lines of butchness, but not without the softening impact of jewelry and soft makeup.)

Figure 3: Nia Nal (Nicole Maines) in her introductory episode, Supergirl *season 4, episode 1.*

Figure 4: Alex Danvers' season 5 appearance, increasingly butch as compared to earlier presentations (see Figure 2).

The norms centered around these queer superheroes and sidekicks—Sara Lance, her later wife Ava Sharpe (Jes Macallan), Alex Danvers, and Nia Nal—also reflect a focus on femme-presenting bodies; even Alex, who edges the closest to butchness as a bit of a tomboy, presents femme. This helps, even when introducing a transgender superhero character as *Supergirl* does, to avoid challenging the gender binary directly either in casting or in the visual coherence[42] of each series, across properties, and within the broader narrative universe. Especially within properties that align themselves with girl-power narratives like *Supergirl* (and *Legends*, though to a lesser extent), the visibility of femininity is a key component to these characters' inclusion and representation in the narrative.

[42] Warner, Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting.

Centralizing femme-ness, and particularly white femme-ness, in both shows—beginning in *Supergirl*, from its pilot on CBS and Kara Danvers's blonde All-American presentation, and emerging, in *Legends*, with Sara's centralization as leader and key character—has particular visual consequences for the series' makeup. While both series, of course, include characters of color, and even queer characters of color, these characters are often supporting, as in the case of Nia Nal, and sometimes written out entirely, as in the case of Nyssa al Ghul (Katrina Law), Sara Lance's love interest on *Arrow*. While "Avalance," as the central *Legends* couple came to be called, were provided central billing and came as a pair, including a full-series regular in Sara Lance, integration of characters like Nia Nal, Nyssa al Ghul, and *Supergirl's* Maggie Sanchez (Floriana Lima), Kelly Olsen (Azie Tesfai), and Yvette Turner (Roxy Wood) is less consistent and more dependent on their continuing and effective relationship to white queerness and its rapprochement to conventional white heterosexuality. This connection to dominant discourses of belonging serves to make the visual and diegetic inclusion of queerness more palatable to the TV form and to its presumptive audience, particularly insofar as it reiterates queerness into existing relational paradigms, as with Ava and Sara's season 6 wedding.[43]

These norms of presentation and visibility direct who can be cast and with whom they can be cast, particularly as that casting transitions into long-term recurrence or main-cast status on a series. In direct conversation with this process throughout is the writing process, wherein narratives are constructed that are "realistic"—as, again, we're playing in the realm of science fiction and fantasy here, with superheroes!—to the characters that have been cast and the experiences with which the narrative, as well as audience expectations, can endow them.

[43] Melanie E.S. Kohnen, "Kevin and Scotty Get Married (and Hardly Anyone Is Watching): Queer Visibility, Privacy, and the Boundaries of Everyday Life on Television," in *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 162–76.

Writing "realistic" queer superheroes

The choice of a near-future/near-present alternate universe setting for the Arrowverse builds neatly into the CW's general tendency toward adolescent and/or young adult school, workplace, and family melodrama; however, it also brings with it a certain expectation of contemporary 'realism'. This realism, emerging from offering the audience the presumption of shared cultural/historical knowledge, results in a reincorporation of existing social and historical expectations in the construction of and responses to characterization. The attention to 'realism' as conceived by television also tends to rely on existing tropes and familiar markers for social relationships; while much of what we see in the modern-day Earth-based diegesis on *Legends* and on *Supergirl* tends toward a rosy, post-racial and post-homophobic picture of a largely idealized liberal Western society,[44] the series' use of shared historical context and in some cases time travel and/or universe travel often rely on trope-based and progress-based narratives and depictions of identities that do not align with dominant cisheterosexual Western whiteness.

Legends' narrative representational strategies around sexuality and gender presentation are, of course, refracted by the futuristic, world-bending genre of the show, its adherence to superhero themes and structures, and the concomitant construction of social reality within the center of the series and reliance on the presumptive "real" construction of society—here, for most of the CW's originating viewers, US/North American middle-class society and its norms. While the use of unreal, hyperreal, or supernatural storytelling to engage questions of possibility as well as represent stories that resonate both within and beyond cultural norms is a well-

[44] Stephanie L. Gomez and Megan D. McFarlane, "'It's (Not) Handled': Race, Gender, and Refraction in Scandal," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 3 (2017): 362–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1218352.

documented strategy,[45] *Legends of Tomorrow*'s time-travel-of-the-week structure has generally lent itself more to a workplace dramedy format that engages some iterations of possibility but avoids making any general incisive comments on gender or sexuality. The exception, of course, is making a point to reference historical homophobia and racism (emphasizing their historicization) when the characters find themselves in a recognizable location in time and history.

This use of time travel results in a general sense that xenophobia, homophobia, and other examples of systemic discrimination are more in evidence by their absence, perceived or real, from the originating diegesis of both series. Typically, with respect to queerness, this crops up for Sara (and Ava) in *Legends* based on the sexual mores (as written on the show) of the time periods and locations they visit, as contrasted with their own experiences of their identities. This allows *Legends* to work not-quite-allegorically and not-quite-realistically to call out existing social forms of exclusion without breaking the unspoken fourth wall of the Arrowverse, where discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality are not often openly discussed, at least in the predominating American setting. Early in season 1, for example, Sara assumes an identity as a nurse at a local hospital/medical research facility and engages in a flirtation with another nurse (Lindsay Carlisle, played by Ali Liebert), another femme, white woman (episode 8, "Night of the Hawk").

[45] Anne Cranny-Francis, "Is Data a Toaster? Gender, Sex, Sexuality and Robots," *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.72; Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*; Owen R Horton, "Origin Stories: Rebooting Masculinity in Superhero Films After 9/11.," *Human: Journal of Literature & Culture*, no. 6 (2016): 72; Kakoudaki, "Unmaking People : The Politics of Negation in Frankenstein and Ex Machina"; Menaka Philips, "Violence in the American Imaginary: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Superheroes," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 2 (2022): 470–83, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000952; Mark R. Wicclair, "Robots as Imagined in the Television Series Humans," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 27, no. 3 (2018): 497–510, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180117000901.

Figure 5: Sara and Lindsay sit in the empty staff room, discussing lesbian desire and persecution in low light. ("Night of the Hawk," Legends *season 1 episode 8)*

The women sneak around the hospital and kiss in empty rooms and shadowed corners, and while Sara is open and frank about her attraction, both make consistent references to keeping secrets. Sara's teammate Martin Stein (played by openly gay actor Victor Garber) calls her out in their own solo tete-a-tete, saying that her liberatory rhetoric doesn't take into account that Lindsay will remain in the 1950s Oregon setting of the episode and its more restrictive morals. Nonetheless, the flirtation continues, ending of course in Sara's departure to the next *Legends* mission-of-the-week and (apparently) Lindsay's acceptance of her own queer identity through Sara's intercession.

This does also serve as a marker, particularly frequent in *Legends*' revolving door of Sara's one-night stands for seasons 1 and 2, that queer desire is not a thing of the modern world—perhaps the point that *Legends* nearly slides into Very Special rhetoric making, but sidesteps frequently via comedy. These encounters include Sara's affair with Louis XIII's queen in "Out of Time" (season 2, episode 1) and her extended flirtation with a warrior queen, Guinevere, in "Camelot/3000" (season 2, episode 12). However, instances of queer representational strategies

wherein character trauma is embedded are nonetheless not absent from the narrative in *Legends*. Each of Sara's connections mentioned above is preceded by Sara's confession of her own loss—that of her sister, Laurel; her inability to bring her sister back despite her ability to time travel is a consistent point of conflict.

In season 3's "Daddy Dahrkest" (episode 10), Sara, John Constantine (bisexual cross-property import, played by Matt Ryan), and an alternate version of Leonard Snart (Wentworth Miller as a short-term guest star after a previous season 1 regular run in typical superhero series magic) are stranded in an asylum in the 1960s by a time demon known as Mallus, who taunts them and eventually possesses Sara. This occurs in a series of poorly-lit and dream-sequence spaces wherein Sara is taunted about her death and her work as an assassin, reiterating her Otherness and explicitly connecting it to demonic activity. While not explicitly related to these three characters' sexuality, the fact that the three openly queer characters (who, in the course of an earlier team meeting, flirt with each other—Constantine and Snart—and with a character (Ava) over video-conference—Sara) are trapped in a mental asylum during a period where queerness was, in fact, frequently cause for institutionalization or incarceration is a choice that reiterates some familiar patterns.

*Figure 6: Queer characters (Sara, John Constantine, and Leonard Snart) in the haunted asylum in "Daddy Dahrkest" (*Legends *season 3 episode 10).*

Supergirl's narrative uses a more direct form of allegory, in most cases displacing existing 'real' forms of difference onto fantasy/science-fiction forms of difference and then following the structure of a Very Special Episode complete (usually) with a teachable moment. When Alex comes out to her sister in season 2, episode 6 (pointedly titled "Changing"), Kara's original response echoes some familiar questions and comments to queer coming out (in media and life)—like "have you ever been with a girl?" and "I know you haven't been dating much lately." As the two talk it out on a park bench near the river, Alex describes remembering close relationships and desire for other girls in her earlier life without having the words for it, before walking away suddenly. When the two meet up again at Kara's sunlit apartment, Kara responds to Alex feeling rejected by describing her own experiences of exclusion and otherness as a Kryptonian and as a superhero and the ways that they talked about her experiences of secrecy during childhood. She continues connecting these disparate identities by the ideal of separation if not directly discrimination against either aliens or queer people.

*Figure 7: Alex and Kara discuss her coming out and Kara's response in a sunny apartment (*Supergirl *season 2, episode 6).*

In Nia's season 4 introduction arc, wherein she reveals first that she is transgender (season 4, episode 2, "Fallout") and then that she is part-extraterrestrial (season 4, episode 8, "Bunker Hill"), the delineations of difference become far more intermingled. However, the use of the combined experiences of exclusion and otherness echoes Kara and Alex's earlier conversations about queerness. Nia comes out to James Olsen (Mehcad Brooks) as transgender in a face-to-face chat on comfortable chairs, and she tells Kara she is part-extraterrestrial on her apartment couch—echoing almost directly the way that Kara and Alex discuss Alex's coming out.

*Figure 8: Nia and Kara discuss Nia's extraterrestrial identity in a sunny apartment (*Supergirl *season 4, episode 8).*

Given, however, that the series' focus at this point continues to center around xenophobia, and specifically xenophobia against extraterrestrials, Nia's identity as a trans woman becomes at first a real-world referent by which she "hold[s] a mirror" to discrimination (Nia's own statement in "Fallout"). Later, when her extraterrestrial identity is revealed, Nia's transness becomes a touchpoint for the audience to connect the liminal nature of her dual extraterrestrial-human identity to existing forms of difference and discrimination. While the series later deals more directly with violence against trans women and focuses that violence on Nia Nal's Dreamer superhero identity ("Reality Bytes," season 5, episode 15), first refracting Nia's gender difference through extraterrestrial, science-fiction difference develops the allegorical, diegetic displacement of some real-world forms of exclusion and discrimination. As she contends with actual transphobic violence in "Reality Bytes," Nia recaps all of her losses and the trauma of an attack on her community as a source of overwhelm, which Kara reinscribes into a vigilante/superhero lens to make it a source of strength, reiterating posttraumatic growth.[46] Nia's

[46] Moore, "Posttraumatic Growth, Superheroes, and the Bereaved."

high-femme passing and her ability to pass as human also provides another example in the *Legends* and *Supergirl* continuum where the challenge to existing norms comes without immediate visual signifiers of difference, which results in these layered coming out episode narratives as well as the possibilities of allegorical approaches to storytelling.

Normative constructions of both queer and cisheterosexual identity reassert themselves in the narrative construction of both series, from Alex's stilted and fearful coming out in season 2 of *Supergirl* to Ava and Sara's white wedding in *Legends'* season 6, episode 15 ("The Fungus Amongus," though the white wedding is interrupted by interdimensional monsters). Alex would later have her own white wedding in *Supergirl*'s final episode ("Kara," season 6, episode 20), to late-series add Kelly (Azie Tesfai). These typical primetime soap features—up to and including the white wedding of two women[47]—are familiar touchpoints for WB/CW viewers. Planning for the Avalance wedding, including searching for dresses and a wedding venue, is a consistent subplot throughout *Legends'* season 6.[48] The ad hoc wedding that eventually happens still involves two femme-presenting women in white formalwear (though Sara's is a jumpsuit to Ava's gown), and one of the two women is escorted down the aisle by a male found-family member.

[47] Consider, as an early example, the 2011 wedding between Callie and Arizona on *Grey's Anatomy* in season 7.
[48] In fact, Ava and Sara proceed down the aisle to a diegetic cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird", which had previously been sung by Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) to her lover Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris), themselves central queer women of 2010s television, in *Glee's* season 2, episode 19, "Rumors."

Figure 9: Ava and Sara's wedding in Legends season 6, episode 15; Alex and Kelly's wedding in Supergirl season 6, episode 20.

These normative structures fit into the overall tendency of Berlanti productions, including far more than the CW Arrowverse properties, toward a reiteration of "just like us" politics, wherein the queer characters, while often experiencing real-world pressures, exclusion and discrimination, are written into familiar coming-of-age, romance, and marriage plots, and often embody traditional heteronormative appearance values. This reiterates the consumable-lesbian

that Ciasullo described as a hallmark of 1990s media.[49] The stability, overall, projected by these choices is key to the capacity of a multi-property universe: the sense that a familiar narrative can be followed across properties and that relations between and character archetypes within properties can be picked up quickly based on existing referents are, in many ways, necessary to the existence of the Arrowverse. However, the flattening of the very defiant difference that the CW touts so fiercely feels like a necessary casualty.

Centering the queer sidekick // making the queer hero

The characterizations of especially Sara Lance in *Legends* and Nia Nal in *Supergirl* serve as exemplars of the ways traumas of violence, rejection, et cetera are often also played out on-screen for queer characters, especially within detecting and disclosing storylines and structures as well as in narratives around promiscuity. These connections, which also frequently appear in allegory, even within openly queer characters' narratives but often (pointedly) as part of a straight character's narrative to expose or otherwise address a queer character's presence, emphasize othering and distance while attempting to bridge dichotomies of belonging as discussed earlier in the duality of in-group/out-group hero status.[50] Contextualizing that within the superhero frame itself also brings up a secondary dynamic of in-group/out-group status, or at least central/support status, that is particular to the hero genre: sidekicks as supporting characters. As all queer characters thus far mentioned in this chapter begin their stories as 'sidekicks' to a central character, it's worth exploring how that positioning affects outcast framing, and the use of trauma as an interest story or backstory builder.

[49] Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s."
[50] Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes"; Shyminsky, "'Gay' Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero."

Sara Lance, while a focal character in *Legends*, began on *Arrow* (and thus depends on character development building from *Arrow*) as a sidekick traumatized by both life and death, brought into the narrative first as Oliver Queen's fridged[51] girlfriend and Laurel Lance's tragically dead sister. Through first *Arrow* and more prominently through *Legends*, she builds and remakes her place as a central hero and as team leader; however, she does not begin *Legends* as team leader. In certain respects, Sara, despite torturous training both on the island of Lian Yu and then with the League of Assassins, must pay her dues to be seen as a team member and as a leader. While the nature of her recurrent loss is not new to the superhero genre, including the way that it is affected by time and universe-bending, Sara's pain is centered as an emblem of her resilience and capacity to endure. This expectation of endurance is often central to queer individuals and women, without the sense that there is the capacity to change those circumstances that create pain and trauma—for example, upon Sara's sister Laurel's death, she is unable to use her capacity as a time-traveling hero to prevent or otherwise ameliorate that loss, but rather is called upon to soldier on and to put her pain aside in order to begin to serve as a leader. Access to the space of leading, then, is predicated on this particular form of resilience, wherein Sara's physical prowess (the result of training so traumatic to the point of altering her memory), ability to withstand trauma, and capacity for emotional distance as a trained assassin is valorized, if placed secondary to her ability to function within a team. As an outcast leader of outcast heroes, Sara Lance is tasked with transforming trauma into resilience for herself and her crew, including her later wife, Ava Sharpe.

Sara's role as leader and trauma mediator is not unique to *Legends* and indeed marks the shape of Nia Nal's season 4 arc on *Supergirl*. However, *Supergirl* sidelines its queer characters

[51] "Stuffed into the Fridge," TV Tropes, 2019, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/StuffedIntoTheFridge.

more completely as sidekicks, secondary (if still series regulars) to the titular team leader and heroine. Alex, as the first out queer character on *Supergirl*, is the most closely linked to Kara, as her sister, but also comes into the revelation of her queerness as a sort of surprise in season 2. The self-discovery and disclosure narrative this prompts is almost entirely prodded along by outside figures in a way that reflects Joyrich's discussion of straight investigations of potential queerness on TV[52] and also serves (as discussed above) as a way for Kara to further articulate her own sense of outsider consciousness as hero and extraterrestrial. Nia Nal's layered forms of coming out (as trans and as extraterrestrial) serve similarly within the narrative as a balm to existing tensions between aliens and humans. The implied levels of race, gender, and sexual positionality and discrimination that make these moments function tend, however, to be swept aside in favor of centralizing the imagined identities of extraterrestrial alienness. Moreover, the tendency on *Supergirl* to work within these allegories further cements the sidekick positioning of both Alex and Nia, whose narrative foiling to Kara and (in Nia's case) to other alien characters, heroes and villains alike, subordinate their stories and identities to the overarching sense of Kara's belonging or exclusion. This is common in stories with a titular character whose development is prioritized. However, it is telling that neither of these series nor the two longer-running Arrowverse series, *Arrow* and *The Flash*, have a singular central or titular character who is queer or not white, unlike the two shorter-lived series discussed in the following chapter.

Determining who is afforded central positioning, as well as what shape that positioning takes, can be, in this case, and many adaptation cases, dependent to a certain degree on existing texts. For instance, Green Arrow, The Flash, and Supergirl all have their own comic book series, whereas brand-new "Dreamer" (Nia Nal) did not, and the Legends of Tomorrow were a team

[52] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console."

created for the Arrowverse TV series. However, adaptation is an opportunity for change—and, perhaps, for defiance. Do longer-lived Berlanti CW properties indeed "dare to defy" when casting, writing, and structuring the series' portrayal of queerness, transness, and other forms of nonnormative existence? The determined use of outcast framing, of sidekick positionality, and yet of allegorical approaches to queer exclusion and queerphobic discrimination suggest that this defiance has defined limits, and that successful series tend to color as close to inside the lines as possible.

CHAPTER III

DEFYING THE ODDS

The CW's Queer Superheroes in Black Lightning *and* Batwoman

Theorists have lingered on the broad possibility engendered by queerness[1] and, more specifically, Black queerness on screen, in film, and other screen media;[2] this is an acknowledgment both of the real-life violence and exclusion experienced by queer and trans people, especially women and especially Black women, but nonetheless embraces the "radical world-making possibilities" of especially Black queer and trans theory as a space for growth.[3] However, this has demonstrably not always (if ever, truly) been the case when it comes to superhero movies and TV. The superhero film *Black Panther* (2018), within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), has been generally considered to disrupt tropes around Black masculinity and femininity, as well as openly critiquing colonialism in its explorations of agency, family, and empowerment.[4] Queer characters, however, are absent (at least openly) from *Black Panther* (2018), among the most well- and collectively-known adaptations of Black-led superhero media, excluding Black queerness from big-screen representation in *Black Panther*'s imaginative Pan-African Wakanda and reiterating queer Othering.[5] *Black Panther*, of course, was only following its home franchise's lead—in fact, the entire MCU saw its "first openly queer

[1] Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*; Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*; Siebler, "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age."
[2] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (Routledge, 1993), 288–302.
[3] Jennifer DeClue, "Theorize for What? Reading Black Queer Film and Popular Culture," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 9, no. 2 (2020): 43–54, https://doi.org/10.1353/pal.2020.0024.
[4] Claudia Bucciferro, "Representations of Gender and Race in Ryan Coogler's Film Black Panther: Disrupting Hollywood Tropes," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 2 (March 15, 2021): 169–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1889012.
[5] Michaela D. E. Meyer, "Black Panther, Queer Erasure, and Intersectional Representation in Popular Culture," *Review of Communication* 20, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 236–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2020.1778068.

character" in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo from director Joe Russo in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).[6] Built on the long tradition of connotative, easily deniable references to potential queerness, superhero media in television, film, and comics has often sidelined or allegorized queerness to incorporate social critique around queer identity, queer acceptance, and related topics.[7]

As networks like the CW shift to more denotative queer representation, queer characters have inched their way out of the background and into series regular and eventually starring roles—including *Batwoman* as the first primetime superhero show to be anchored by a queer female lead character and directed by a queer woman as well.[8] However, the extent to which this move from connotative and symbolic representational strategies to more denotative and open, out narrative has continued to represent the possibility, reinvention, and boundary-crossing so dearly espoused by queer theorists has become a fraught and very necessary question. With this lens in mind, the resulting analysis will address the ways in which *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman* as texts and specifically Anissa Pierce, Ryan Wilder, and Sophie Moore as characters reflect that potentiality of queerness—and the ways in which existing norms of representation and even historical modes of connotative queerness continue to intrude within current narratives.

As the analysis that follows will show, *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman*, while distinct in setting, character development, and relationship focus, both manage to consistently centralize the nuclear family. *Black Lightning* develops the family as a cornerstone of community and (super)strength rooted in Black identity while *Batwoman* undermines it as a vertex of trauma and

[6] David Mack, "'Avengers: Endgame' Features Marvel Studios' First Openly Gay Character in a Small Role," *Buzzfeed News*, April 25, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/avengers-endgame-first-gay-character-joe-russo.
[7] Wheeler, "Freak Like Me: Understanding the Queerness of the X-Men."
[8] Reddish, "Caroline Dries on Taking on a Trailblazing Heroine and Fighting Toxic Fandom with 'Batwoman.'"

instability, largely through loss, abandonment, and estrangement. Queerness, then, is refracted through the family, through race, and through class, emerging as (of course) yet another vertex of trauma and yet one that either exists in a separate plane from these other dimensions of identity, self, and community or as a challenge to their effective functioning. Additionally, *Batwoman*'s centering of its titular queer character provides a further landscape for investigating queerness beyond the denotative, returning instead to old, familiar forms of implied and contextual queerness that instead are applied to what appears, at first, to be straight.

Figure 10: Promotional images for Black Lightning *(season 4) and* Batwoman *(season 1).*

This chapter aims to demonstrate the effects of some returns to queer storytelling traditions linked to censorship and to evading production codes—both played "straight," as it were, in *Black Lightning*, and in reverse, in *Batwoman*. At the same time, I acknowledge both *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman*'s envelope- and boundary-pushing within the industry and the CW itself as series populated and led by characters of color and queer characters, and more

importantly queer characters of color, written and produced by creative teams that echo the characters they write. Neither series quite evades the traumatized-queer structure, nor the iterations of coming out and of identity discovery that have been so common in queer narratives. These series also find themselves digging into, rather than peripherally referencing, the longstanding racism, sexism, and queerphobia in American culture, leading to a storytelling ethos in both cases that embeds Very Special Narrative markers throughout the series, rather than in individual storylines, characters, or episodes; *Black Lightning* does this more seamlessly and consistently than *Batwoman*. This chapter's analysis, rather than determining one way or another whether this is "good" or "authentic," lives in the spaces between, where changes in storytelling and emphases on fluidity begin to develop powerful spaces of possibility for characters and the future of industrial approaches to queer representation.

Producing the Very Special Series: *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman* come to the CW

Black Lightning was originally pitched and picked up in 2016 for a pilot production commitment at Fox, though still under the auspices of Warner Brothers.[9] The concept, the pilot, and the eventual series order were produced by Mara Brock Akil and Salim Akil, previously showrunners on UPN and BET (Black Entertainment Television), with Greg Berlanti as an additional producer.[10] At this point, Fox played host to *Gotham* (2014-2019) and *Lucifer* (2016-2021), two DC universe-based shows that were additionally produced under WBTV's umbrella. By the time *Black Lightning* progressed to its first full series order in 2017, however, it had been acquired as a pilot production commitment and then the series order at the CW, more directly

[9] Nellie Andreeva, "Fox Nabs 'Black Lightning' DC Superhero Drama with Pilot Production Commitment," *Deadline*, September 8, 2016, https://deadline.com/2016/09/black-lightning-fox-dc-superhero-drama-series-greg-berlanti-mara-brock-salim-akil-1201815368/.
[10] Andreeva.

under the wing of WBTV and accompanying a developed slate of CW (Berlanti-produced) properties including *Arrow* (2012-2020), *The Flash* (2014-2023), *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-2022), and *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-2016; CW, 2016-2021).[11]

The production team of the Akils and Berlanti struck a balance between the Akils' bona fides as writers for Black audiences—*Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000-2006; CW, 2007-2008), *The Game* (CW, 2006-2015; BET, 2021-2022), and *Being Mary Jane* (BET, 2013-2019) were successful Akil scripted series.[12] Bringing the "pulpy and satisfying" tone of the Akils' previous work (as noted by Aymar Jean Christian) together with the multi-year, multi-property deal held by Berlanti with WBTV[13] and Berlanti's firm entrenchment in the superhero primetime soap genre after the success of previous Arrowverse properties. In bridging a Black-led and Black-identity-centered superhero drama to the CW's multicultural "#OpenToAll" ethos in 2017-18,[14] Salim Akil carefully characterized the drama as "an American story, not a Black story."[15] While WBTV originally contracted Brock Akil and Akil as a production and writing team, Akil took over as primary showrunner and producer for *Black Lightning,*[16] a series he characterized as the story of "Jefferson Pierce and his family of powerful Black women."[17] Hypersexuality and the hypertrophy of gender were frequent markers of early Black superheroes, something that has remained in art styles and story structure, especially hypermasculinity when considering figures

[11] Andreeva, "'Black Lightning' DC Drama from Greg Berlanti & 'The Game' Duo Gets the CW Pilot Order"; Nellie Andreeva, "'Black Lightning' & Lucy Hale's 'Life Sentence' Picked up to Series by the CW," *Deadline*, May 10, 2017.
[12] Aymar Jean Christian, "The Black TV Crisis and the next Generation," *Flow.TV*, 2013, https://www.flowjournal.org/2018/05/on-discoverability/.
[13] Marechal, "Greg Berlanti Lands Major Deal Extension with Warner Bros. TV (Exclusive)."
[14] Schneider, "The CW Puts Diversity at the Center of Its New Fall Marketing Campaign."
[15] Natalie Abrams, "'Black Lightning' Boss: 'This Is an American Story, This Is Not a Black Story,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, July 12, 2017, https://ew.com/comic-con/2017/07/12/black-lightning-salim-akil-spoilers.
[16] Abrams.
[17] Akil, qtd. in Denise Petski, "Black Lightning to End with Season 4 on the CW," *Deadline*, November 20, 2020, https://deadline.com/2020/11/black-lightning-end-fourth-season-on-the-cw-1234619591/.

like Black Panther and Black Lightning;[18] however, in a reflection of the societal hypersexualization of Black women,[19] Black women superpowered figures are also often cast as "vixen," or other similarly sexualized and animalistic figures.[20] These stereotypes and representational strategies, as well as efforts to break from them and industry standards toward alternate valorizations of power and of Black family life, seem to affect *Black Lightning* executive producer Salim Akil's writing through his own experiences and reference points for superhero narratives, particularly due to his publicly noted fondness for Black-led Milestone Comics,[21] a Black-owned and controlled comics publisher described as depicting heroism with intelligence first and power second.[22] As has been theorized in the construction of Black-led production companies, including Milestone Comics as well as ASPiRE television, companies and networks crewed by Black creators, executives, and producers have great potential as spaces for invention and reinvention that escape the racist histories and representational strategies that dominate existing cultural production houses—however, economic conditions and prevailing media education across demographic lines can often result in the return of familiar tropes and representational as well as narrative strategy.[23] Part of the understanding this dissertation seeks to build by sedimentation is an approach to understanding the ways in which historical

[18] Anna F. Peppard, "'A Cross Burning Darkly, Blackening the Night': Reading Racialized Spectacles of Conflict and Bondage in Marvel's Early Black Panther Comics," *Studies in Comics* 9, no. 1 (June 1, 2018): 59–85, https://doi.org/10.1386/stic.9.1.59_1.
[19] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," 1993.
[20] Jeffrey A. Brown, "Panthers and Vixens: Black Superheroines, Sexuality, and Stereotypes in Contemporary Comic Books," in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, 2013, 133–49.
[21] Kamara Horne, "Salim Akil Talks Black Lightning, Milestone Comics and the Power of Normalizing the Image of the Black Family," *TheBlerdGurl*, 2022, https://theblerdgurl.com/interviews/salim-akil-talks-black-lightning-milestone-comics-and-the-power-of-normalizing-the-image-of-the-black-family/.
[22] Jeffrey A. Brown, "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero," *African American Review* 33, no. 1 (1999): 25, https://doi.org/10.2307/2901299.
[23] Christopher A. Chávez and Sara Stroo, "ASPiRational: Black Cable Television and the Ideology of Uplift," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 2 (2015): 65–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1023328.

representational strategies, as well as "industry logic," serve to restrict any individual creator or industrial agent's capacity to act as a "transformative agent" within the media landscape.[24]

Akil's self-referenced block of 'powerful Black women' and his own attention to *Black Lightning*'s representation of the Black family,[25] as well as the characterization of the cast via their familial relationships that center the Black male lead, sets the tone for much of the coordination of the *Black Lightning* cast and their related narratives, including that of Anissa Pierce (Nafessa Williams), the superpowered lesbian daughter of the titular superhero. Perhaps the most family-centered of the Arrowverse superhero dramas, *Black Lightning* is built on a particular community- and family-focused ethos that will be discussed further in this chapter, particularly as it relates to the structure of queer identity within that frame.

While the specifics of the cast (and even the Akil production team) took a backseat in much of the exploratory press to Berlanti Productions and the novelty of a Black-led superhero drama on primetime, the cast itself included consistent TV presences with a solid body of work. Among these stars are Cress Williams (TV credits including *ER, Nash Bridges, Grey's Anatomy,* and the CW's *Hart of Dixie*) as Jefferson Pierce, and China Anne McClain (a Disney Channel darling also known for Tyler Perry's *House of Payne*) as his younger daughter Jen, superhero name "Lightning". Nafessa Williams, who plays Pierce's elder daughter and the series' most central queer character Anissa (superhero names "Thunder" and "Blackbird"[26]), had a season-long regular run on CBS's medical drama *Code Black* before joining the *Black Lightning* cast.[27] Her

[24] Quoted terms drawn from Chávez and Stroo.
[25] Horne, "Salim Akil Talks Black Lightning, Milestone Comics and the Power of Normalizing the Image of the Black Family."
[26] Remus Noronha, "Anissa's New Blackbird Identity in 'Black Lightning' Season 3 Is a Sign That She's Ready to Step out of Her Father's Shadow," *Meaww*, September 25, 2019, https://meaww.com/black-lightning-season-3-cw-anissa-pierce-nafessa-williams-blackbird-thunder-grace-choi.
[27] Nellie Andreeva, "'Black Lightning': Nafessa Williams & China Anne McClain to Star as Jefferson's Daughters in the CW Pilot," *Deadline*, March 2017.

interviews around Anissa's character and her own portrayal thereof center the unapologetic and fierce energy of her character as well as the power associated with not only the strength of the character but also the visual and embodied presence of the character's super-suit.[28]

Despite premiering and running for four seasons on the same network and concurrently with other Arrowverse properties, *Black Lightning*'s first tie-in/crossover event with the broader Arrowverse did not take place until December 2019, during the Crisis on Infinite Earths arc that saw full-length episodes on every Arrowverse show except for *Black Lightning*. Previously discussed, white-actor- and/or multicultural-cast-led properties *Supergirl* and *Legends of Tomorrow* both saw full-episode crossover events during their first or second seasons (for *Supergirl*, even before it landed on the CW, and indeed *Legends* transplanted many of its originating characters from existing Arrowverse series). The other series examined here, *Batwoman*, was essentially backdoor-piloted by the *Elseworlds* Arrowverse crossover event of 2018, further linked directly into the Arrowverse from the get-go.[29]

[28] Chancellor Agard, "Why 'Black Lightning' Star Nafessa Williams Cried the First Time She Wore Thunder's Suit," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 20, 2018, https://ew.com/tv/2018/03/20/black-lightning-nafessa-williams-cried-thunder-suit/.
[29] Lesley Goldberg, "'Batwoman' TV Series in the Works at the CW," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 17, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/batwoman-tv-series-works-at-cw-1127574/.

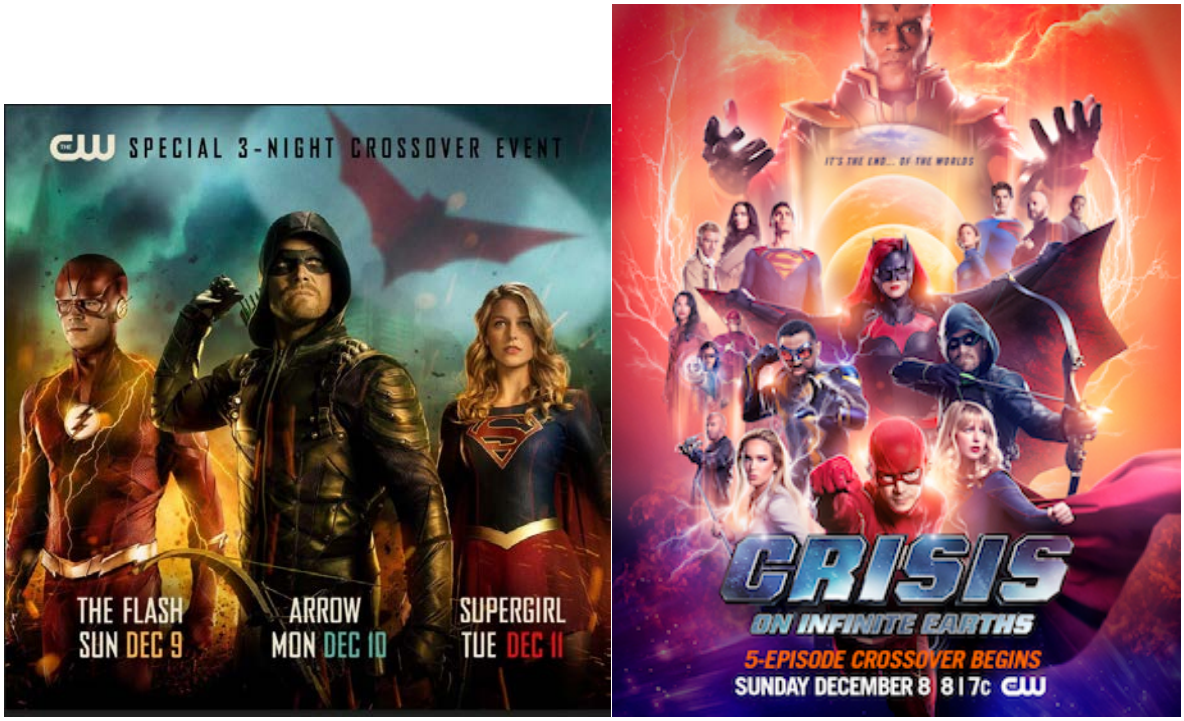

Figure 11: "Elseworlds" promotional image, including the 3 Arrowverse shows hosting crossover episodes. "Crisis on Infinite Earths" promotional image showcasing various heroes included in 5-episode crossover event.

Batwoman also had the advantage of being produced by CW veterans – Berlanti, of course, as well as Caroline Dries (*The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), *Smallville* (2005-2009)) and Sarah Schechter (*Riverdale* (2017-2023) and other Arrowverse properties) – and the series also brought in the character's DC comics co-creator Geoff Johns.[30] These close ties to the source material, to current CW properties, and to a history of CW success gave *Batwoman* the push needed to make it to a series order, one that was underscored by its introduction of the first lesbian to helm an Arrowverse show—Batwoman is famously a lesbian in comic canon. This 2019 contribution, alongside 2018's addition of *Black Lightning* to the DC slate on the CW, further cemented that the CW's #OpenToAll and "Dare to Defy" pushes were intended to bring a plurality and a diversity of stories to the network.

[30] Goldberg.

Ruby Rose, a genderfluid actor known for their work in *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2015-16), a cornerstone of the critically acclaimed streaming television explosion of the 2010s as well as 2010s queer TV, took the titular role starting in the Elseworlds 2018 crossover, and would go on to portray Kate Kane, the first Batwoman, in the pilot and the series' first season.[31] Rose's gender fluidity caused a furor among die-hard fans who felt it precluded their playing a lesbian, alongside a perceived absence of attention to Kate Kane's canonical Jewish identity.[32] The series' first season would go on to refer consistently to the character's Jewish identity; while Rose's casting did not reflect this ethnoreligious identity, the writing was certain to.

However, Rose exited the series after the first season under unclear but apparently amicable circumstances, an appearance which would later explode into controversy on social media and in the press.[33] The controversy, however, occurred significantly after Wallis Day was recast as Kate Kane in early 2021's season 2, with Javicia Leslie's Ryan Wilder taking over as Batwoman, a recasting that Rose publicly celebrated.[34] Leslie, who took over Batwoman's cape as street-smart out Black lesbian Ryan Wilder, would finish out the series' three-season run as Batwoman, whereas Day's return as Kate Kane did not last beyond season 2.[35] The CW and *Batwoman's* production team doubled down upon Rose's exit on casting an out queer actress (the bisexual

[31] Lesley Goldberg, "Ruby Rose to Play Lesbian Superhero Batwoman for The CW," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 7, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/ruby-rose-play-lesbian-superhero-batwoman-cw-1132599/; Lesley Goldberg, "Ruby Rose-Led 'Batwoman' Pilot a Go at CW," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 3, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/ruby-rose-led-batwoman-pilot-a-go-at-cw-1172794/.
[32] Michael Cavna, "Ruby Rose Leaves Twitter after Criticism That She Isn't 'gay Enough' for Batwoman," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2018/08/13/ruby-rose-leaves-twitter-after-criticism-of-her-batwoman-casting/.
[33] Paul Tassi, "Ruby Rose Unloads the Real Reason She Left 'Batwoman,' Nukes Executives, Showrunner," *Forbes*, October 20, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2021/10/20/ruby-rose-unloads-the-real-reasons-she-left-batwoman-nukes-executives-showrunner/?sh=2990e2ea2663.
[34] Matt Grobar, "Former 'Batwoman' Star Ruby Rose Praises Wallis Day's Recasting in Kate Kane Role: 'I'm Stoked for Her,'" *Deadline*, March 2021.
[35] Michael Ausiello, "'Batwoman' Will Not Recast Kate Kane in Wake of Ruby Rose's Exit; New Character Eyed to Lead Series," *TVLine*, June 2020.

Leslie) to play the new Batwoman.[36] However, the team still came under some scrutiny for the new character's perceived uncritical embodiment of stereotypical narratives about Black experiences of criminalization, incarceration, and abandonment—critiques that would be at least partially addressed by the series' consistent, if heavy-handed, attention to intersectional oppression.[37] However, it is worth noting that this form of identity-conscious casting,[38] while attentive to the perceived realism of the portrayal and opportunity afforded an out performer, essentially mandates coming out—a complex position to take vis-à-vis queer identity.

In October 2021, Rose alleged that they left the series as a result of poor treatment, injury, and harassment on the *Batwoman* set, naming showrunner Dries and executive Peter Roth in their allegations as well as fellow cast members Dougray Scott (Jacob Kane, Kate's father) and Camrus Johnson (Luke Fox, Kate's sidekick and the only full series regular Black male character).[39] In the aftermath of Rose's bombshell Instagram story, WBTV and a *Batwoman* production assistant both formally and informally refuted the allegations, claiming that Rose had been a demanding and demeaning presence on set.[40] Scott called claims that he was abusive to women on set "defamatory," and Johnson also refuted allegations that he was an "egomaniac kid" and confirmed his understanding that Rose had been fired despite being the series lead.[41]

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[36] Ausiello.
[37] Jessica Mason, "Batwoman Is Back and Javicia Leslie Shines as Ryan Wilder," *The Mary Sue*, January 2021; Mel Perez, "With Javicia Leslie's Batwoman, My Favorite Character Is Finally Being Played by Someone Who Looks like Me," *Autostraddle*, July 2020; Princess Weekes, "Batwoman Casts Javicia Leslie as New Lead Character Ryan Wilder," *The Mary Sue*, July 2020.
[38] Mbowe, "Color-Blind vs. Identity-Conscious Casting and Examining Hamilton and Malcolm & Marie."
[39] Tassi, "Ruby Rose Unloads the Real Reason She Left 'Batwoman,' Nukes Executives, Showrunner"; Princess Weekes, "Ruby Rose Breaks Silence about Her Batwoman Exit: 'Enough Is Enough,'" *The Mary Sue*, October 20, 2021, https://www.themarysue.com/ruby-rose-breaks-silence-about-batwoman-exit.
[40] Paul Tassi, "'Batwoman' PA Reveals Why Ruby Rose Was Actually Fired, Countering Her Story," *Forbes*, October 24, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2021/10/24/batwoman-pa-reveals-why-ruby-rose-was-actually-fired-countering-her-story/; Tassi, "Ruby Rose Unloads the Real Reason She Left 'Batwoman,' Nukes Executives, Showrunner."
[41] Elliott Griffiths, "Batwoman Star Camrus Johnson Responds To Ruby Rose's Allegations," *ScreenRant*, October 21, 2021, https://screenrant.com/batwoman-show-ruby-rose-allegations-camrus-johnson-response/.

Rose later released emails corroborating her claims and received support from Ray Fisher, who had made similar allegations against Joss Whedon on the set of *Justice League,* another WB DC property, in 2020.[42] The controversy briefly brought attention to the series and Rose in particular, yet did not result in higher viewership for the series' second and third seasons.

Batwoman and *Black Lightning* ended more quickly than their companions in the Arrowverse, *Black Lightning* in 2022 after four seasons and fifty-eight episodes and *Batwoman* in 2023 after three seasons and fifty-one episodes. No other Arrowverse show ran for fewer than 100 episodes. Although the dates of their respective cancellations/endings (*Black Lightning* in 2021[43] and *Batwoman* in 2022[44]) coincide with the closing of other Arrowverse properties, the fact remains that these two series started later and ran for less time, with lower viewership and less direct promotion. It is perhaps rather facile to explain longer-running shows with white characters as a prerequisite to and shorter-running Black-led shows as a consequence of the apparent marketability of Black characters, queer characters, and Black queer characters, and indeed that is not my goal, though it is a frustration. Instead, this analysis will attempt to show not that these shows were underpromoted or canceled too soon (that's outside the scope of my work) but rather that the constructions of identity, family, and sexuality take on very contextualized forms in these series that are nonetheless unable to escape the generalization of queerness as traumatized and traumatizing, and of queer identity as one that more often separates out individuals than joins together communities.

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[42] Rachel Labonte, "Ruby Rose Releases Emails to Back up Her Batwoman Allegations," *ScreenRant*, October 24, 2019, https://screenrant.com/batwoman-ruby-rose-allegations-emails-evidence/; Adam B Vary, "Ray Fisher Accuses Josh Whedon of 'abusive, Unprofessional' Behavior on 'Justice League' Set," *Variety*, July 2020.
[43] Petski, "Black Lightning to End with Season 4 on the CW."
[44] Chelsea Steiner, "Queer Representation Takes a Hit as the CW Cancels 'Legends of Tomorrow', 'Batwoman,'" *The Mary Sue*, April 30, 2022, https://www.themarysue.com/queer-representation-takes-a-hit-as-the-cw-cancels-legends-of-tomorrow-batwoman/.

Superpowers as a family affair: family, race, and heroism over queerness in *Black Lightning*

A superhero deeply connected to and engaged with their community is hardly new, even to the TV Arrowverse on the CW—in fact, *Arrow*'s titular hero's catchphrase throughout the first couple of seasons of the series is "You have failed this city." However, the community and family orientation within *Black Lightning* has particular and consistent dimensions that are specific to this series, and specific particularly to a construction of family and of community responsibility that structures not only the narratives on *Black Lightning* but also, in many ways, its approaches to queerness. From "The Resurrection," *Black Lightning*'s first episode, Jefferson Pierce describes heroism as something paid to the community, and his ex-wife Lynn Stewart expresses her frustration with his heroism as a route to losing his sense of self within his devotion to community and to the people of Freeland. It's also worth noting that, unlike main character heroes of other Arrowverse properties, Pierce as well as his elder daughter Anissa maintain day jobs in education and medicine, respectively, through much of the series, jobs that routinely connect both in a sense of community responsibility and in the relationships that they build with their alter-egos as Black Lightning and Thunder.

In contrast to the 'found family' and adoption storylines around superheroes and their teams in many narratives (including *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Supergirl)*, *Black Lightning*'s narrative centers biological and nuclear family over found family, except in the case of Peter Gambi (James Remar) as the family's unlikely grandfather. This apparent queering of family does not, however, result in denotative queer representation in the person of Peter Gambi (which was in some question until season 4, when Gambi's ex-slash-current lover Lauren Caruso (Elena Varela) is introduced after his three seasons of singlehood). His linkages to the family are themselves

rooted in Jefferson's traumatic loss of his father as well as the secrecy and community violence of the vaccination experiments in season 1, designed to echo the Tuskegee experiments per Akil.[45]

However, aside from Gambi's incorporation into the Pierce family, biological family is continually centralized as a source of and a focus for superheroism. Anissa and Jen's hero identities and powers are presented as the result of Jefferson's genetics and his own response to the vaccination experiments. Heroism is thus linked back not only to the nuclear family but also to being able to trace one's own descent, which is only emphasized when Tyson Sykes/Gravedigger (Wayne Brady) is revealed as the first meta and an ancestor of Jefferson's ("Book of War: Chapter Two: Freedom Ain't Free," season 3, episode 15). This attention to family and heritage presents a potential reclaiming and recentering of the successful Black family, echoing both the success markers of an upper-middle-class family in the Pierces and the symbols of connection to Black culture and the civil rights movement that has been noted as key to the success of *The Cosby Show*[46] as a family show, as well as other similar family-based series (primarily sitcoms) that made moves away from longstanding racist film and television stereotypes used to signify and deride Blackness and Black family life.[47] *Black Lightning*'s approach, of course, is different in shape and execution, but echoes forms of the parenting and valorization of an extended kin family structure indicated by past scholarship about Black family development as distinct from and equal to or better than the presumptive white western "norm" of the single-breadwinner, stay-at-home mother family, including in some part the valorization of being able to track heritage that had been long withheld from Black Americans by enslavers and

[45] Abrams, "'Black Lightning' Boss: 'This Is an American Story, This Is Not a Black Story.'"
[46] Melbourne S. Cummings, "The Changing Image of the Black Family on Television," *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (1988): 75–85.
[47] Marlo Barnett and Joseph E Flynn, "A Century of Celebration," *Black History Bulletin* 77, no. 2 (2014): 28–33.

the lasting impacts of slavery.[48] It is precisely this centralization of the family that provides much of the structure by which queerness is introduced—and the ways in which characters' queer identity is placed a somewhat distant fourth to family, racial, and superhero/superpower identity.

Anissa, as the series' central and primary queer character as well as an evolving superhero in her own right throughout the series run, represents a nexus of community politics, activism, and heroism of particular interest to this analysis. Stephanie Burt has acknowledged that critiques of Black superhero comics have often addressed the accessibility—or more accurately inaccessibility—of Black liberation within the logic of superhero comics so thoroughly based on white supremacy, the sociopolitical logics of whiteness and corresponding incremental views of civil rights progress, and western imperialism.[49] Indeed, the (perceived and socially naturalized) heritability of race versus the often one-off, sometimes externally-induced, and typically directly physicalized narrative of powers as difference often makes it complex to make allegorical points about race through superhero narrative[50]—*Black Lightning*'s writers' response, it seems, is to center the family as a source of powers and to link racial oppression to in-born metahuman repression, to which Anissa (including as Thunder but more directly as less-flashy, more militantly antifascist Blackbird) is the most vocal resistor throughout the series.

[48] Shirley A Hill, "Class, Race, and Gender Dimensions of Child Rearing in African American Families.," *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 4 (2001): 494–508, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2001-14682-007&site=ehost-live&scope=site; Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596.
[49] Stephanie Burt, "How to Write about Superheroes," *American Literary History* 32, no. 3 (2020): 598–608, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajaa018.
[50] Burt.

Figure 12: Anissa in her two superhero guises: Thunder (in Black Lightning *season 2, episode 4) and Blackbird (in season 3, episode 10).*

The same familial and heritage-based links are absent on a number of levels when it comes to queerness, however. Anissa's queerness is developed and refracted through the lens of the family – but unlike the unifying Pierce family superpowers, it is primarily a side-narrative that takes her away from her family, resulting in her relationships being side plots rather than central arcs. By contrast, Jen's relationship with Khalil (Jordan Calloway) routinely becomes interwoven with the A plot and the Pierces' storyline throughout, as evidenced by his multi-season regular role,[51] up to and including the attempted backdoor pilot for *Painkiller* in season 4.[52] Anissa's primary romantic relationship throughout the series, with Grace Choi (Chantal Thuy), begins in season

[51] Amanda N'Duka and Erik Pedersen, "'Black Lightning': Jordan Calloway Upped To Series Regular As Painkiller – Watch The Comic-Con Sizzle Reel," *Deadline*, July 21, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/07/black-lightning-jordan-calloway-painkiller-series-regular-season-2-comic-con-1202430769/.
[52] Petski, "Black Lightning to End with Season 4 on the CW."

one, though unlike Calloway, Thuy was not promoted to series regular until season 4.[53] In many ways, this is a reflection of the way "LaWanda: The Book of Burial" (season 1, episode 3) presents Anissa's pre-series coming out—as Anissa says, there was "silence for about a minute, and then hugs." This comment comes during a scene where Lynn, Anissa's mother, is pressing for more information about a secret Anissa is keeping—the secret of her superpowers. Again, the confession being pressed for in the investigatory mode of much of queerness previously on television[54] is instead the confession of something else—here, superpowers.

Figure 13: Anissa and her mother Lynn discuss her past coming out in season 1, episode 3.

Black Lightning actively and directly makes the connection between the two secrets kept through Anissa's own speech. This emphasis on superhero identity as something to be investigated and confessed continues through Grace's season 2 storyline (her transformations

[53] Dino-Ray Ramos, "'Black Lightning' Ups Chantal Thuy To Series Regular; Actress Talks Season 4, Asian And LGBTQ Representation In The Superhero Genre," *Deadline*, November 19, 2020, https://deadline.com/2020/11/black-lightning-chantal-thuy-series-regular-the-cw-season-4-asian-american-superhero-grace-choi-ryan-choi-1234613659/.
[54] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console"; Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."

into her leopard/shape-shifting self are a secret that Anissa must ferret out) as well as in Anissa's discussions with Jen about telling Grace in "Book of the Apocalypse: Chapter One: The Alpha" (season 2, episode 15), where her superpowers must be confessed to bring them together/bring them closer.

Queerness and gender-bending are, at least through most of the first three seasons of *Black Lightning*, a side-narrative space only. When Anissa's powers are first manifesting, and Anissa and Grace's relationship is developing, they are caught in a poorly lit alleyway behind Grace's place of work (a queer-friendly bar) by gaybashing perpetrators, and the scene ends with them still in a liminal space, although now alone ("Black Jesus," season 1, episode 4).

Figure 14: Scene outside the queer-friendly bar where Grace works. Grace and Anissa are menaced by homophobes who then turn violent (season 1, episode 4).

Figure 15: Anissa tends to Grace after the gaybashing, likely though uncertainly inside the bar (season 1, episode 4).

The liminal "third" space of queerness is consistent throughout the series, especially surrounding Grace and Anissa's relationship scenes and narrative, largely because their shared plotlines and romantic scenes, as noted above, are mostly kept separate from the A plot and often B plot diegeses. In fact, Grace is not shown in scenes with Anissa's family (the central characters throughout the series) until season 3. Even when Grace visits Anissa in the hospital in "Book of Secrets: Chapter Two: Prodigal Son" (season 2, episode 11)—an episode wherein the entire Stewart-Pierce family is at the hospital in support of Jen's (debatably ex-) boyfriend Khalil—the two of them are seen entirely separate from the family. Anissa's relationship is a source of emotional support, and Grace's participation is confined largely to that role. At the same time, Khalil's storyline is the central organizing principle and dictates the main setting of the episode.

Figure 16: The Pierce family (Jen in front, Jefferson, Lynn, and Anissa in background) gather at Khalil's bedside with his mother (season 2, episode 11).

Figure 17: Grace meets up with Anissa to bring her food in the waiting room but does not join with the family at any point (season 2, episode 11).

After Grace (shortly thereafter) runs away to hide her burgeoning powers, she does not return to her familiar and apparently "natural" form until "Book of Occupation: Chapter Three: Agent Odell's Pipe Dream" (season 3, episode 3), at which point she and Anissa meet alone, on a bus

bench, in the dark, to reconnect and confess their love to each other. Again, this liminal space seems to be the only space for queerness, however accepted it might be.

Figure 18: Grace and Anissa meet again after estrangement in the dark on a bus bench (season 3, episode 3).

While Anissa's queer identity is referenced as always accepted, her powers are linked to trauma, queerphobia, and activism – her character is described primarily through her rejections of pat liberal ideology and cleaving to revolutionary politics. Her power awakens as the result of gendered violence and as a trauma response in the pilot episode ("Resurrection") after she and Jen are kidnapped from the high school where their father is the principal and threatened with sexual assault; trauma, of course, is not an uncommon narrative impetus for superhero power development even within *Black Lightning*, as Jefferson's own powers develop following the death of his father and his racially motivated alleyway assault by riot police ("Shadow of Death: The Book of War," season 1, episode 13). Nevertheless, the continual link to particularly queerphobic trauma in the genesis of Anissa's hero personality further develops within season 1 as her first semiconscious use of her powers comes during the gaybashing directed at her and Grace ("Black Jesus," season 1, episode 4).

This is only further driven home by the gradual revelation of Grace's shape-shifting superpowers. Queered in their own right—Grace's identity is thus always in flux and frequently dual, including crossing gender boundaries in her transformation into an elderly Asian man—these powers also result in Anissa's deep investigation into Grace's history during her absence in season 2. In a nod to *Black Lightning*'s insistence on the primacy of the nuclear, biological family, Anissa's search for Grace centers around her biological family upon realizing that she was in the foster system. In this uncovering, Anissa and Gambi dictate for the audience—in Grace's absence—that she is also a survivor of child sex trafficking and abuse in the foster system ("Book of Secrets: Chapter Three: Pillar of Fire," season 2, episode 13). This revelation of trauma in her absence, especially for a queer Asian woman, is notable for not only its reification of narratives about sexualized, docile Asian women, but also for the continued connection of queer characters and gender-bending characters to trauma, and to sexual trauma in particular.[55] Perhaps in counterbalance to the connections drawn here, or in a bid to complicate the narrative further, the first time Grace's character is seen again after Anissa reveals her traumatic backstory is in her old-man guise (portrayed by Joseph Stephen Yang), not in her (up to that point) normal appearance as Chantal Thuy. This, along with her leopard form, are the primary apparent reasons that Thuy's Grace does not speak her own context for her running away until season 3.

[55] erin Khuê Ninh, "Without Enhancements: Sexual Violence in the Everyday Lives of Asian American Women," in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, ed. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 67–80.

Figure 19: The many faces of Grace Choi -- as her usual self, as an old man, and as a young child. (Not pictured: Grace as leopard.)

Perhaps the biggest marker that queerness in its traumatized, power-challenging ways must be confined to the exterior of the narrative is the point at which it becomes fully incorporated into the larger narrative. While Grace (through Anissa) becomes further and further part of the central team throughout season 3, including the introduction of her traumatized younger-self to Jefferson in "Book of Occupation: Chapter Four: Lynn's Ouroboros" (season 3, episode 4) and Grace joining the fight in Markovia, this comes with the specific development of Anissa's marriage proposal and their aborted wedding ("Book of War: Chapter Two: Freedom Ain't Free" and "Book of War: Chapter Three: Liberation," season 3, episodes 15-16). The queer narrative handily results in the familiar social trappings of marriage and a more familiar meet-the-family setup in season 4, wherein Thuy was promoted to series regular status[56] and their relationship becomes more fully part of the series, with Grace developing relationships with Jen, Gambi, Lynn, and Jefferson more thoroughly throughout the fourth season.

[56] Ramos, "'Black Lightning' Ups Chantal Thuy To Series Regular; Actress Talks Season 4, Asian And LGBTQ Representation In The Superhero Genre."

Figure 20: Grace and Anissa now together as part of the Pierce family group in the series finale (season 4, episode 13)—in their white wedding gear.

Black Lightning follows the ethos of a number of the series under examination in this dissertation as a sort of Very Special text, using its bona fides as one of the CW's very few Black-led series (both in terms of showrunner and in terms of cast) to give more of a direct commentary on and discussion of civil rights than many other CW series—and definitely more than some other superhero series discussed here. Black superheroes, in comics and on screen, have carried baggage particular to the medium and also that evocative of a larger historical context. Early Marvel's Isaiah Bradley and DC and *Black Lightning*'s Jefferson Pierce share Tuskegee-evoking backstories of medical experimentation, and exhibit a sort of loyalty to a patriotic identity that Rabecca Wanzo calls "melancholic patriotism."[57] This doubling of consciousness—a connection to the values of US citizenship and a frustration and anger with the many broken promises of those values—reflects further understandings of both the stereotypes at

[57] Rebecca Wanzo, "Wearing Hero-Face: Black Citizens and Melancholic Patriotism in Truth: Red, White, and Black," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 2 (2009): 339–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00683.x.

work in constructing patriotic superheroes and the spaces of possibility or of slippage that invites for Black characters despite long-standing tokenizing naming and storyline conventions of the genre.[58] Given its production timeline, coming after the 2014-15 Ferguson uprising and Black Lives Matter protests and sandwiching the 2020-2021 revitalization of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as its thorough grounding in US civil rights history as Jefferson and his students regularly quote civil rights leaders, it is little surprise that the scripts, scenes, and plotlines often call to coinciding communal traumas, events, and movements as experienced and led by Black communities in the US (including the killings of Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain). While drawing from revolutionary and complex texts and ideologies and developing a rich and often multivalent approach to representing race within its narrative, *Black Lightning* ends up reiterating a fairly normative, liberal ethos toward queerness that echoes the series' written focus on the nuclear family as the site of the production, maintenance, and reproduction of superpowers. It does not, in any sense, rise to the level of imitating past assessments of Black queer women's TV representation as "deprecating and offensive,"[59] but it does reflect a potentially harmful re-inscription of queerness within existing heteronormative structures that limit its visibility to the nuclear family and somewhat to the viewer.

Barriers to accessing heroism and queerness: "superpowers", class, and race through *Batwoman*

Batwoman, as the only series led from its outset by a titular lesbian heroine (though that heroine changes over the course of the series), is perhaps the series most directly poised to be a

[58] Marc Singer, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," *African American Review* 36, no. 1 (2002): 107–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/2903369.
[59] Thomas Cruz, "The Stigmatization of Queer Black Women in Television," *Film Matters* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 26, https://doi.org/10.1386/fm.10.1.26_1.

Very Special Series About Queerness, and in many ways the narratives and casting delivers. *Batwoman*'s casting, as mentioned earlier, had specific concerns and criteria throughout its casting and recasting of queer superhero roles, and indeed brought in real-world queer celebrity cred by casting Rachel Maddow as explanatory voice-over tabloid reporter, Vesper Fairchild. Building on this centrality of (queer) womanhood, the soundtrack of the series is nigh-exclusively populated by female vocalists, and straight romantic relationships are few and far between. In its reimagining of a city-focused, family-focused superhero narrative, we get prodigal daughter Kate Kane returning to Gotham to a family fractured, but very much still present—neither fully dead, as is the case with Kate Kane's famed cousin Bruce Wayne's parents, nor fully a part of each other's lives, as was so deftly demonstrated by *Black Lightning.* Still, however, we see family and its corresponding determinant relationships as an organizing principle throughout *Batwoman*—refracted even further than in *Black Lightning* through the lens of trauma and loss.

Relationships between women, particularly in the case of the family sisterhood and motherhood, are central sources of trauma and storytelling in all three seasons of *Batwoman*: the series itself opens with Kate's loss of her mother and (apparently) sister Beth as a reiterated memory. This repetition and re-experiencing, very much in line with Cathy Caruth's image of Tancred and Clorinda re-iterating their own loss,[60] is the source of much of the structure of *Batwoman's* season 1, laced as it is with flashbacks to not only Kate's experience of the car accident that killed her mother and sister, but also her own forced outing at military school, and her fruitless and sometimes dangerous attempts to find her sister. The first episode ("Pilot") reiterates the image of the car accident frequently throughout, culminating in the reveal that Beth

[60] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

survived the accident and is now the villainess Alice; this reveal is made possible through prop connections (the sisters' shared birthstone necklace) and the clear understanding that *Batwoman* wants us to understand Alice's separation trauma.

*Figure 21: Alice (Beth) kidnaps and tortures Kate to taunt their father, accidentally revealing her identity via her birthstone necklace (*Batwoman *season 1, episode 1).*

This reliance on flashback continues throughout the series, bringing in season 2 and 3 Batwoman Ryan Wilder's own traumatic experiences of her mother's death, her abduction by Candy Lady, her near-assault interrupted by Kane's Batwoman—this reiteration and re-inculcation of these traumas into present-day narratives and experiences note *Batwoman's* overall narrative commitment to exploring and depicting trauma, which crosses the boundaries of the series' denotatively queer characters and finds perhaps its clearest home in the depiction and development of Alice/Beth (see later in this chapter for a fuller discussion of how this focus on trauma is part of queering Alice's character overall). *Batwoman*'s consistent attention to the

repercussions and re-experiencing of trauma is echoed perhaps by the overarching season 2 storyline by which *Batwoman* near-literally unburies a dead lesbian in Kate Kane.

Figure 22: The re-cast Kate Kane (Wallis Day), in her new guise as Circe Sionis, promotes Rebirth restorative mascara—a nod to her position as a dead-but-not character ("Kane, Kate," season 2, episode 17).

Flipping the script on dead lesbian syndrome in season 2 is only made possible in the actual production of *Batwoman* by recasting Kate Kane, as Ruby Rose had left the series after season 1, but it also plays on the natures of masking, hero identity, and sexual identity that pervade ther series throughout. Whether depicting the hyperrealistic masks worn by a number of villains throughout the series, contending with the dual lives and dual identities of superheroes and their "support staff," or engaging the question of femininity and queerness through presumptions of Batwoman's heterosexuality, *Batwoman* episodes feed a queer narrative not just through their queer central characters but also through their playful and critical lens on identity.

Nonetheless, there are familiar tropes about queerness on television to be seen here: Kate Kane's central love interest (and later Ryan Wilder's as well), Sophie Moore (Meagan Tandy), is first contrasted with our titular heroine by virtue of her apparent years-long sexuality crises as compared to Kate's long-term 'out-and-proud' identity. From the line in "The Rabbit Hole"

(season 1, episode 2) where Sophie's "label" is brushed aside as "she's married, let's not talk about it" to her confrontation with her mother in "Grinning from Ear to Ear" (season 1, episode 14), much of Sophie's season 1 narrative is about coming to terms with her queerness being visible while Kate's ia about making sure Batwoman's queerness is all the more visible ("How Queer Everything Is Today!" season 1, episode 10). Because of Sophie's positioning as reliant on a scholarship to the military academy that would expel her if she didn't disavow queerness after her schoolgirl relationship with Kate is outed, and because of the traditional heteronormative, religious values espoused by her mother (linked in implication to her own and her mother's Blackness), season 1's storylines offer rich, white, butch Kate Kane far greater access to denotative, open queerness than working-class, Black, femme Sophie Moore, though we see this level of openness and Access for Sophie change over the course of the series.

The language around Kate's eventual coming-out as Batwoman in season 1 episode 10 leans heavily on connections to masks and lies—familiar aspects of superhero secret identity that further underscore that not being out is considered by our leads, in itself, a sort of lie. Dual lives here become a factor of superhero activity, not of queerness—except in Sophie's case. In fact, the episode makes the connection immediately when, in another dark alleyway, Kate-as-Batwoman and Sophie discuss the fact that Sophie's husband, Tyler (Greyston Holt), has left her and accused her of lying to herself (about her sexuality). Kate says "We all wear a mask. Maybe it's time to take yours off," referring to her own knowledge of Sophie's sexuality, to which Sophie quickly rejoins, "You're one to talk."

Figure 23: Sophie and Kate's shadowed conversation (captured in shot-reverse shot style) about wearing and embodying masks (season 1, episode 10).

While Sophie refers to Batwoman's masked uniform, this feeds into Kate's crisis around what Luke Fox calls Batwoman's "major straight vibes." In a show of commitment to uncovering lies and living her truth, Kate comes out first to Parker Torres (Malia Pyles), a queer teen hacker who helps Team Batwoman during the episode and then to the press. While Parker specifically calls out the production ethos behind coming out in her like about "aspiring to be represented by an ancillary character on my favorite TV show," it is the decision to cast Kate-as-Batwoman's coming out first through the lens of confessing to another queer woman and *then* publicly to the heteronormative press/society that surrounds them that marks the clearest departure from an externally investigatory approach to outing and uncovering queer secrets a la Joyrich's epistemology of the console and in line with her precise reevaluation of outness on television specifically through *Batwoman*.[61] The muddied waters of the messaging here –

[61] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console"; Lynne Joyrich, "TV's Ins and Outs, or (Bat) Signals and (Caped) Crusades," *Television Studies in Queer Times*, 2023, 134–47, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003109044-14.

queerness needs to be confessed, but closeting could shield Kate's identity, including the line in her public coming-out that reiterates the value of masking/shielding (and presumptively of closeting) – "we all wear a mask of some kind […] we all need a shield to protect us from the world" – result in a sense that coming out is a personal choice, but nonetheless one that has a certain moral value attached. As viewers encouraged to empathize with our central character, it's Kate's perspective—namely that such masks to disguise queerness are lies and shouldn't be relied upon—that the episode most clearly comes to espouse, a stance of Kate's later emphasized by her desperation to "come out" to her father as Batwoman ("O, Mouse!", season 1, episode 20).

Family and the ability to share secrets with one's family is a consistent theme throughout the series, one that frequently draws on both queer identity and superhero identity through differing characters' plot lines. Sophie's parents, specifically her mother (Jeryl Prescott, in an unnamed role), are depicted as unsupportive when she leaves her husband Tyler (Greyston Holt) and comes out as a lesbian; much of Kate Kane's season 1 relationship with her father centers around her identity as Batwoman, which she feels she can't confess, and the relationship she seeks to build with Alice/Beth is fraught throughout with her superhero secrets, Alice's own trauma during her captivity, and additional sources of conflict based in the villain/crisis-of-the-week model during the series.

Ryan Wilder's secrets, instead, are often based on childhood, her socioeconomic status, and her own relationships with her chosen and blood family. Indeed, much of her character development resides in these relationships and in uncovering and exploring these secrets. In contrast to Kate's centralized romantic conflict, Ryan's romantic entanglements are generally sidelined to side-plot status, especially since her primary love interests in season 2 are not series

regulars and are often minimally present in the narrative. Instead, Ryan's character beats center around childhood trauma, racialized and class-based exclusion, her past incarceration, and her ongoing struggles with housing and with her parole officer. In fact, a meeting with her parole officer is the route by which we discover Ryan's martial arts knowledge ("Whatever Happened to Kate Kane?", season 2, episode 1), rather than it being demonstrated or linked to a family business as was Kate's. As Ryan is introduced in season 2's opener, the episode splices Ryan's origin story together with Kate's own history, drawing out the connections of found family (the Batwoman team and Ryan's adoptive mother Cora), trauma of loss (Ryan's beating and the death of her mother), and the connection to series villain/antihero Alice (Kate's sister, Ryan's mother's murderer). However, it is the clearest departures between these two Batwomen – class and race – that become the stumbling blocks and the source of a respectability-politics-inflected conflict about Ryan's assumption of the Batwoman identity in "Bat Girl Magic!" (season 2, episode 3).

The shift in costume also reflects another piece of Kate's Batwoman's "major straight vibes" colliding with Ryan's Batwoman's desire to make her distinct identity visible. While Batwoman's costume retains a red wig (which had significantly upped the "femme" appearance of Kate's Batwoman to differentiate her from Batman), Ryan's wig is in a more voluminous, curly-coily style that shifts away from Kate's brilliant red. While the style still reiterates a long, femme hair silhouette, it's much closer to Ryan's own hair length. Here, rather than reasserting femininity to differentiate Bruce Wayne's Batman from Kate Kane's Batwoman, Ryan reasserts Blackness to differentiate Batwoman 2.0 from the original edition. Interestingly, without much commentary, Kate's "coming out" in the Batsuit seems to stay presumed despite all other changes.

Figure 24: Kate Kane as Batwoman in season 1, episode 3. Kate dons the red wig to differentiate Batwoman from Batman, and to assert her femininity.

Figure 25: Ryan Wilder as Batwoman in season 2, episode 3. Ryan's wig retains the red motif from Kate's wig, if diminished, but is now more directly used to assert Black femininity.

Ryan Wilder is a new character specifically created in the Arrowverse *Batwoman*, rather than an import from longer-running DC Comics like Kate Kane. While (as a form of transformative work) *Batwoman* does not adhere religiously to comics canon throughout its run, Ryan's blank-

slate character, in contrast, makes the choices in constructing her backstory more open and directed by the production team. It is worth lingering, then, on the resulting development, which produces a Black Batwoman who begins the series unhoused, living in her van, recently released from prison for a crime for which she was framed, abandoned by a wealthy mother, and adopted by a woman who was killed in a vicious attack by a local gang. Ryan's ongoing struggles to establish herself as a heroine to take seriously, as a successor to the suit Kate put on by virtue of (essentially) finding it in her cousin's basement, reiterate racial stereotypes and realities of access that are occasionally challenged by the narrative, but nonetheless structure our perception of Ryan's character throughout her two-season run, even though she remains Batwoman longer than Rose's Kate ever did.

Figure 26: Kate walks into and occupies Wayne Tower (her cousin's building) as her birthright (season 1, episode 2).

Figure 27: Ryan in her van, where she lives during the beginning of her tenure as Batwoman (season 2, episode 2).

Trauma narratives: building queer characters in sexuality and in presentation

As this dissertation primarily deals with the structures and execution of denotative queer representation, it is perhaps counterintuitive to admit that the best example of the linkages of queerness and trauma in both *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman* is, in fact, one of *Batwoman*'s few (presumptively) straight series regular characters – Beth Kane, also known as Alice. While Alice herself is a central figure in one of the few heterosexual relationship dramas in the series, she is also the character most evocative of televisual and film historical strategies for representing connotative queerness.[62] Alice's flamboyant outfits, frequent theatrical plans and performances, and her Alice-in-Wonderland-inflected mode of speaking are used to emphasize her trauma and mental illness (up to and including psychotic breaks/episodes) but also reflect familiar images of high camp. Additionally, the appearance of her grandmotherly abuser Mabel in "Off with Her Head" (season 1 episode 15) leads to invoking referents like "Mommy Dearest" that connect her

[62] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*; Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*.

to queer modes of expression as well as queer film and television history—Joan Crawford's Mommie Dearest can be a common reference point for gay culture's interest in old Hollywood divas.[63]

Figure 28: Young Alice/Beth and her captor's mother (The Queen) in season 1, episode 15.

While Alice herself never espouses a queer identity, she consistently makes reference to "lavender drama" and uses other similar queer slang to refer to interpersonal developments with her lesbian sister Kate, Sophie Moore, and later Ryan Wilder. This coding is particularly interesting because it is Alice's trauma that we see the most on-screen throughout all three seasons, especially in season one's depiction of her captivity and through the appearance of alt-world Beth during "An Un-Birthday Present" (season 1, episode 11). In including alt-Beth, the writers clarify that it is not Beth's personality that we see coming through in Alice—rather, this is a development based (presumably) on the trauma of her kidnapping, captivity, and subsequent experiences.

[63] David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Figure 29: Alice's introduction--clear attention paid to costuming and drama in her self-presentation (season 1, episode 1).

Figure 30: Beth as she could have been – after the "Elseworlds" crossover, a Beth who was never kidnapped briefly enters the narrative (season 1, episode 11).

As it turns out, Alice isn't the only not-definitively queer character in *Batwoman* who draws from familiar tropes about queerness. Tommy Elliott (Gabriel Mann), whose obsession with Bruce Wayne as "Hush" is well-documented in comics canon, has a very psychosexual storyline

during season 1 and early season 2 where he desperately tries to take over Bruce Wayne's entire life while casting himself as his best friend. Mary Kane (Nicole Kang), Kate's stepsister and a fundamental part of the Batwoman team throughout the series, never clearly or specifically states or enacts a sexual orientation (though she's very comfortable at Kate's—later Ryan's—lesbian bar, her closest thing to a romantic encounter is a will-they-won't-they with Luke Fox). However, when she is infected by Poison Ivy (Bridget Regan) in season 3 ("Antifreeze", episode 4), she is 'mentored' by Alice and emerges in a campy Poison Ivy costume with a significantly more drag-like appearance than any of Mary's previous appearances.

Figure 31: Mary in her typical guise (naturally dark hair, muted make-up, professional clothes) in the series pilot; Poison Ivy Mary in her brilliantly green corseted leotard with long red hair (season 3, episode 7).

Given that Poison Ivy is (in *Batwoman* as well as colloquially in comics canon) a vampy lesbian, it seems almost that Mary adopts queerness by association. In many ways, this seems to upset a general sense of what (and who) is queer about *Batwoman*—however, it does reiterate a familiar trope of the queer-coded villain. Instead, the denotative (rather than encoded) queerness we see tends to follow well-trod CW-standard soapy relationship beats and interpersonal drama.

The attention to denotative queerness as primarily a function of romantic object, rather than culture or self-presentation, is only emphasized by the fact that these two series essentially only boast one central queer character who presents as gender non-conforming. While (obviously) not a requirement of queer identity, Kate's butchness in *Batwoman* season 1 is a central reason for her frustration at being presumed straight and a central component of her costuming. She also distances herself from motherhood and caretaking (especially noticeable in "Crisis on Infinite Earths," season 1, episode 9). Notably, neither Ryan nor Sophie present as similarly butch, and it seems possible that this kind of presentation is not available to them as Black women within the context of the series. Indeed, we see Ryan done up in femme clothing and makeup on several occasions to the extent that she flusters Luke, her male team member ("Gore on Canvas," season 2, episode 5), and to build connections with her biological mother ("A Lesson from Professor Pyg," season 3, episode 5).

Figure 32: Ryan's formalwear is femme (season 2, episode 5), while Kate tends more butch (season 1, episode 4), though both wear Bat-signature black.

The level of departure from heteronormativity that would be presented by a butch Black lesbian doesn't seem to be a move that *Batwoman* is willing to make, even if a guest-starring,

white or white-passing nonbinary character (Evan, Kate's high school prom date) articulates their own gender presentation and queerness by saying "I don't like being told what I can or can't do in life" ("Gore on Canvas," season 2, episode 5). Perhaps as an unintentional indicator of the series' approach to that perspective, Evan is injured shortly after uttering this statement, providing an apparent consequence for living outside the norm (in part because they are also part of a drug ring, but nevertheless an interesting development that reintegrates trauma into the conversation).

Joyrich likens *Batwoman*'s play on queerness and in-and-out-ness, including the earlier-remarked work with secrets, as a queering of narrative by virtue of its "multiply inflected" story, where queerness appears and doesn't, where secret identities appear and are revealed, where superheroes are superpowered and just well-trained, and where multiverses are mentioned on the regular.[64] I am not convinced of quite the same openness of possibility. However, the spaces for slippage are compelling as we move into a televisual age where denotative queer representation, especially in young-adult-focused TV, is coming to be considered a typical 'must'.

While *Batwoman*, with its titular queer character, provides the most fruitful ground for examining the contrasts between its denotative and connotative queer representation, *Black Lightning* also has some compelling examples. As a series, *Black Lightning* is more prone to identity play with its supporting characters, like Grace's shapeshifting ability and the layers of sexual trauma, abandonment, and unmoored identity that result in her backstory. See the chapter on *Roswell, New Mexico*, in this dissertation for a further discussion about abandonment trauma and queerness—a trope that Grace fits. However, we also see navigation of dual and competing identities in the character of Khalil/Painkiller (Jordan Calloway), Jen Pierce's consistent love

[64] Joyrich, "TV's Ins and Outs, or (Bat) Signals and (Caped) Crusades."

interest, and a character that swings between villain and ally throughout the series. His dual personalities are a result of trauma, rupture, and exclusion—first, being shot in the back and paralyzed and then being healed and brainwashed by the series' central villain and later the US government—and result in a great deal of dream-state sequences cast in a dingy green filter to uncover the issue.

*Figure 33: Khalil (foreground) and Painkiller (background, behind the window glass) argue during a dream/mindscape sequence (*Black Lightning *season 3, episode 13).*

Within most of the narrative of *Black Lightning*'s seasons 2 and 3, Khalil's drive is to get back to his heterosexual partner (Jen) and her nuclear family; Painkiller's drive is to do the same, but in order to kill them. Here, we get less of the dramatization and campiness of Alice's conflicted identity and more of a devotion to returning to normal and to the comfort of his heterosexual relationship. The complicating factor is that his reintroduction in season 4 ("Painkiller", season 4, episode 7 – the only non-"Book of" episode since season 1) is in communication and collaboration with Grace and Anissa, linking him and his identity drama

further to queerness. The CW passed on the series that was backdoor-piloted by "Painkiller,"[65] but it would likely have been interesting to see how these connections played out for hypermasculine Khalil.

Jen's season 4 storyline skirts the edges of a connotatively queer story as well, in that she comes to inhabit a new body and must navigate the identity concerns and destabilization of her existing relationships that come with that change ("Book of Ruin: Chapter Two: Theseus's Ship," season 4, episode 6). Indeed, the title "Theseus's Ship" refers to a paradox that asks whether something entirely reconstructed over time remains the same object.

Figure 34: Emerging naked and then wrapped in a blanket, JJ's "reconsitution" is like a rebirth, and holds some trans possibilities for dysphoria as well as parental acceptance (season 4, episode 6).

Jen/JJ occupies, within this narrative, a position almost like a transgender child coming out to her family, convincing them that she is the same person, just with a different appearance. However, the queer potential of this narrative backfires when "JJ," as she comes to be known, is

[65] Nellie Andreeva, "'Powerpuff' to Be Repiloted, 'Tom Swift' Remains in Contention; 'Our Ladies of Brooklyn' & 'Painkiller' Not Going Forward -- CW Pilots Update," *Deadline*, May 24, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/05/powerpuff-tom-swift-status-cw-pilot-our-ladies-of-brooklyn-painkiller-picked-up-dead-1234762992/.

revealed to be another being that has assumed Jen's identity ("Book of Resurrection: Chapter Two: Closure," season 4, episode 13) – essentially a refutation of the trans possibility contained in JJ's character and potentially its villainization.

Figure 35: JJ (above) fights Jen (below) for the right to take over her life by force, creating a changeling narrative in the series finale (season 4, episode 13).

In *Black Lightning* and *Batwoman*, we generally see two differing approaches to identity drama and its potential instability, particularly in the ways in which this reiterates queer

theoretical approaches to identity building. *Batwoman*'s dual identities, hidden identities, assumed identities, and even unknown identities (like the revelation of Ryan's parentage) are integrated into storylines about change, fluidity, and the instability of identity as a space of potential – indeed, this is how Kate and Alice build a relationship and the way that Ryan makes a space for herself as Batwoman. However, *Black Lightning*'s identity play, like its semi-normative overall approach to queerness, emerges as purely dramatic, engaged to reinvigorate familial and romantic ties when the rooted truth of identity (as Grace, as Jen, as Khalil) is revealed.

Perhaps a useful way of engaging with this dichotomy is through its connection to the racial politics of superheroing within these two shows (and even more broadly, according to Kayla Wilson)—Black superheroes in these two series, including the Pierces and Ryan Wilder, appear only in the absence of white superheroes.[66] Of course, this is attributed in-series and in-narrative to Kate Kane's presumed death and the specific community setting as well as the focus of *Black Lightning*. Similarly, centering denotative queer identity as well as more generative and long-form identity play is only possible within the context of the vocally and officially marketed queer-woman-helmed series (both in front of and behind the camera[67]), perhaps because of its general de-emphasis of heteronormativity up to and including romantic storylines given screentime. In the context of this dissertation's project revolving around queerness and trauma, however, it is worth noting that whether denotative or connotative, whether central or firmly in B or C plot status, queerness has deep connections with trauma both motivated by that self-same identity or producing its markers even in presumptively straight characters.

[66] Kayla Wilson, "Shadows in Spandex: A Look Into Anti-Black Racism and the Postionality of Sidekicks within the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Comics" (Saint John's University, 2020), https://scholar.stjohns.edu/theses_dissertations/12/.
[67] Reddish, "Caroline Dries on Taking on a Trailblazing Heroine and Fighting Toxic Fandom with 'Batwoman.'"

CHAPTER IV

QUEER TRAUMA AND (EXTRATERRESTIAL) ALIENATION

Roswell, New Mexico *as Borderland Social Commentary-Allegory Television*

Roswell, New Mexico (hereafter *RNM*) is not new content; the series is a reboot of *Roswell* (The WB, 1999-2002), a drama that aired on The WB and told the story of high schoolers—some of whom were extraterrestrial aliens—in the town of Roswell, New Mexico.[1] *RNM* maintains the setting, as well as the extraterrestrial aliens, as it adapts the original *Roswell*'s characters into a post-high school setting and restructures the focus of the series overall, departing from the original series' focus on Antar's (the planet from which the extraterrestrials come) politics to ground *RNM* more directly in its American context and the terrestrial politics that shape it. The choices at the heart of the series' narrative draw from the rich context of its New Mexican setting, including the folk stories about the alleged UFO crash in Roswell in 1947, and its purposefully diverse cast, emphasized by its showrunner and writers in their scripting and their personal public discourses. *RNM* engages topics ranging from immigration and detention policies to child abuse to medical experimentation in its plotlines focused on both human and extraterrestrial characters, dealing with complex stories from the characters' pasts and present. Direct and indirect references to concurrent real-life events, particularly ones affecting marginalized populations represented in *RNM*'s cast of characters, color the series throughout and set it up as a source of sociocultural commentary ripe for analysis.

[1] While *Roswell* predates the 2006 merger that combined The WB with UPN to form the CW (and resulted in some content transfer), it does represent a continuity between the channel that hosts *Roswell High*-based narratives, which has likely led to some collaborations addressed later. For more on the merger, see the first chapter of this dissertation.

The series presents multiple, intertwined narratives about social issues of marginalization, discrimination, and alienation, framed uniquely through New Mexico's position as a borderland and the site of cultural, scientific, and military confluences, including the large Air Force presence in New Mexico. This attention to the geopolitical space of both the US-Mexico and the allegorical Earth-space borderlands that Roswell inhabits in the series is echoed by a consistent focus on the liminal, borderland-esque experiences of characters with nonnormative sexualities. These experiences continue to be refracted not just by the borderlands of the series, but in fact by the borderlands of genre itself.

Science fiction as a genre has been a potential space of exploration for the structuring of identity and for questioning and reimagining the existing structures of social and cultural reality.[2] This chapter takes the specific generic structures of sci-fi as a central facet of analyzing representations of trauma, queerness, and identity more generally, alongside attention to the role of *RNM*'s inaugural showrunner/creator, Carina Adly Mackenzie. While this chapter lingers at some length on *RNM*'s foundational commitment to telling stories that implicate exclusionary policies, discrimination, and other forms of social, cultural, and legal inequities, in the spirit of the both-and and neither-or of borderland space itself the chapter also addresses the limitations of that possibility. Attention to sociohistorical contexts of its setting grounds the series in a historically, socially, and politically critical, politics of representation, but nevertheless the iterations of televisual tropes in sci-fi allegory and in depicting queerness work to constrain some of the possibilities of institutional questioning, specifically around queer identity, that *RNM* as an industrially produced text is able to accomplish. This chapter will demonstrate that *RNM*'s approach to queer identity places trauma inflicted on queer characters at the center of coming out

[2] Kakoudaki, "Unmaking People : The Politics of Negation in Frankenstein and Ex Machina."

scenes, rather than queerness, and positions the state, the military, and the family as policers of gender and sexual identity for the series' queer characters specifically and to a heightened level, reiterating modes of social control of queerness. Using its New Mexican borderland setting and the dual narratives of extraterrestrial and national alienness, *RNM*'s creators are able to mobilize the queer possibilities of liminal border space (physical and cultural) while also relying on audiences' knowledge of (and in fact, redepicting in sometimes stark ways) the political, legal, and cultural boundaries of 'acceptable,' normative behavior and identity, exerted in particularly violent ways in the militarized border setting of the series.

RNM's industrial approach to re-adaptation: casting, writing, showrunning

The original *Roswell* was itself adapted from the *Roswell High* book series by Melinda Metz, albeit with its lead character whitewashed from the Latina Liz Ortecho to Liz Parker (Shiri Applebaum, who guest stars on the reboot), among some other changes. *Roswell* followed three alien-human hybrids (Max Evans (Jason Behr), Isabel Evans (Katherine Heigl), and Michael Guerin (Brendan Fehr)) through their high school years, with a focus on their identities as partial clones of royalty on their home planet, Antar, and their relationships with human classmates Liz Parker, Alex Whitman (Colin Hanks), and Maria Deluca (Majandra Delfino).

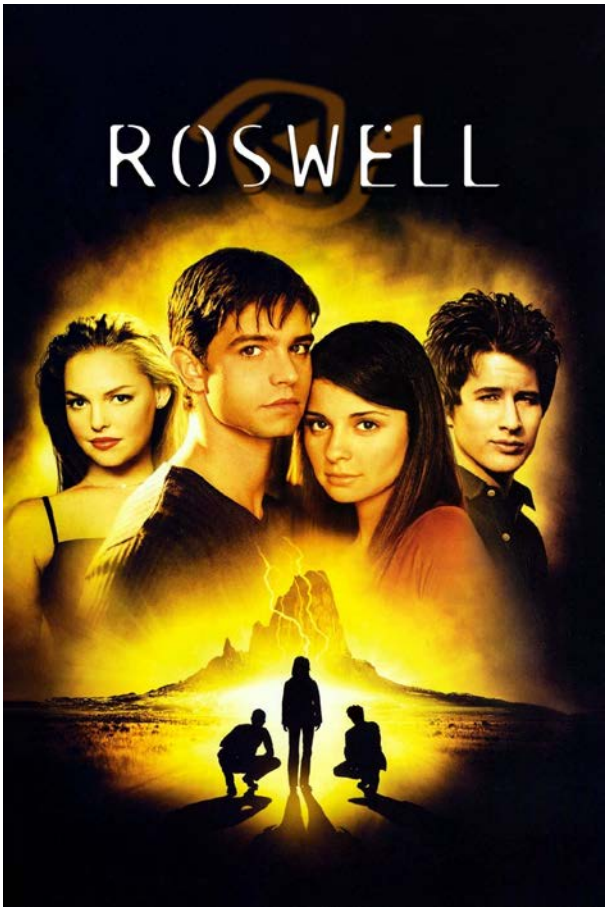

Figure 36: Promotional image for the original Roswell *TV series, airing on the WB. Stars pictured include the 3 aliens (Max, Michael, Isabel) and Liz Parker.*

RNM returns to the original character of Liz Ortecho, also moving away from the original *Roswell*'s high school setting, with the first episode coinciding with the main characters' ten-year high school reunion. The extraterrestrial characters remain the same, Max and Isobel Evans and Michael Guerin, and are accompanied by human characters Alex Manes and Maria Deluca. Additionally, the first-season major plotline deals with the preseries death of Liz's sister Rosa Ortecho and the coverup that Max, Isobel, and Michael crafted to conceal their involvement in her death and the death of two other local girls, of which, as the first-generation Latina with a checkered history, Rosa bore the brunt of town anger and blame even in death. Given this tangled web to unweave, it's interesting that extraterrestrial identity and allegory end up playing such a

significant role here, alongside a visibly diverse cast (a significant departure from *Roswell*) that brings the southwestern setting to life.

Figure 37: Promotional image for Roswell, New Mexico's *premiere, including the three aliens and Liz Ortecho, as well as multiple supporting characters.*

Identity-conscious casting[3] was cited as a foundation of *RNM*'s makeup by inaugural showrunner Carina Adly Mackenzie, who "knew immediately who [she] wanted Liz [Ortecho, series lead] to be," referring to the character's spoken and centralized Latinidad, and plainly said

[3] Mbowe, "Color-Blind vs. Identity-Conscious Casting and Examining Hamilton and Malcolm & Marie."

she didn't "believe in color-blind casting."[4] Color-blind casting has been a tool of plastic representation, presenting characters of color in roles that do not reflect the cultural and social backgrounds from which their identities proceed and in which communities they are supported.[5] Mackenzie's casting decisions impacted the roles filled by actors from traditionally marginalized groups, like Liz (played by Cuban-American actress Jeanine Mason), Maria DeLuca (played by Black actress Heather Hemmens), Kyle Valenti (played by Mexican-American actor Michael Trevino), and Alex Manes (played by out bisexual actor Tyler Blackburn[6]). These decisions also affected roles filled by white actors—namely, the extraterrestrial characters. As noted above, Max Evans (Nathan Dean Parsons), Isobel Evans-Bracken (Lily Cowles), and Michael Guerin (Michael Vlamis) are played by white actors, designed to investigate the layers of privilege and othering that exist for outsiders whose physical presentation allows them to pass as insiders. Mackenzie's stated logic in this casting divide lies in her own experiences as the blue-eyed, blonde daughter of an Egyptian-American Muslim mother in a post-9/11 world, navigating the sometimes-incommensurable differences between physical presentation and lived cultural and social experience.[7]

While casting and setting provide the foundation for characterizing *RNM*'s move toward woke storytelling within its network and social historical context, the series' writing carries the

[4] Carina Adly Mackenzie, "'Roswell, New Mexico' Creator Talks Reversing the White-Washing from the Original Series," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 12, 2019, https://ew.com/tv/2019/02/12/roswell-new-mexico-creator-personal-experiences-show-influence/.
[5] Warner, *Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*; Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation."
[6] This case is more complex when it comes to character Alex's Indigenous heritage, and a point where the US's and Hollywood's long history of whitewashing and of tokenizing ethnicity are not absent from the series. Tyler Blackburn revealed during a 2020 *Pretty Little Wine Moms* podcast appearance that his claims of Cherokee heritage do not include direct cultural connections to Cherokee identity, but rather family stories about his great-great-grandmother, brought into his public persona after an audition rejection for not being "ethnic" enough. The multiple layers of inclusion and exclusion at work within Blackburn's positionality as an actor reflect the complex nature of Indigenous identity and heritage in settler colonial spaces and legal-political structures of race.
[7] Mackenzie, "'Roswell, New Mexico' Creator Talks Reversing the White-Washing from the Original Series."

weight of realizing that potential in the text presented. Its dual adaptation status creates certain expectations about the narrative; however, the nearly two-decade distance between those original texts and the 2019 reboot opens the possibility of restructuring and retelling the story with many differences. As Variety reviewer Caroline Framke noted, the hostility toward extraterrestrial aliens that served as allegorical commentary on immigration in the original *Roswell* is made "overt text" in *RNM*'s address to border policies, creating what Framke sees as "present-day […] relevance [that is] hard to argue."[8] The season 1 framing device of Rosa Ortecho's (played in flashback and post-resurrection by Amber Midthunder) 2008 death, for example, does not come from either of the source texts. However, the conversations about scapegoating, stereotyping of first-generation Mexican-American Rosa and her family, and self-preservation at the expense of others that arise from this storyline provide fertile ground for the show's exploration of ethnoracial politics in Roswell. Writing this dual-level exploration of immigration and refugee politics results in a complex navigation of legacies of colonization and anti-Indigenous violence alongside immigration rhetoric through allegory as well as direct representation.

Mackenzie has repeatedly cited the importance of *RNM*'s diverse writers' room for mitigating tokenizing expectations of particular writers and for collectively telling the stories of the characters cast to represent cultural, ethnic, and racial histories, communities, and individuals.[9] Mackenzie also made it a point to note the makeup of the season 2 writers' room on her personal Twitter account, citing an even divide between men and women, "four Latinx writers (incl[uding a] female co-E[xecutive] P[roducer]), one Black writer (female), one Native writer (male), one

[8] Caroline Framke, "TV Review: 'Roswell, New Mexico,'" *Variety*, January 14, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/reviews/roswell-new-mexico-cw-review-1203105892/.
[9] Mackenzie, "'Roswell, New Mexico' Creator Talks Reversing the White-Washing from the Original Series"; Karen Butler, "Writer-Producer Carina Adly Mackenzie Leaves 'Roswell, New Mexico,'" *UPI*, July 12, 2020, https://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/TV/2020/07/12/Writer-producer-Carina-Adly-Mackenzie-leaves-Roswell-New-Mexico/5351594562684.

Muslim writer (female), and five LGBT writers" as well as "two token straight white dudes named Chris and Steve."[10]

This attention at the writers' room level to the politics of representation comes at some level from the choices made in casting, as indicated above. The acknowledgment of writers' room control and voice has also been made clear by the writers' room Twitter, an official series account that makes regular viewing commentary and has, notably, made political commentary as well. In response to Trump-era policies of family separation, the *RNM* writers' room Twitter posted a group photo calling for an end to these policies during production of the series' first season.[11] This open address to current political issues has been echoed in storylines about immigration status, both directly in the case of the Ortechos and more obliquely via the refugee extraterrestrial children. However, establishing the writers' room as a visible political entity in its own, non-script-creating discourse foregrounds the role that the writers take in crafting *RNM*'s politically conscious brand as a series, a tactic Mackenzie has used frequently.

Also at work in the structure of *RNM*'s narrative is an awareness of the burden of representation, especially in characterizing Maria DeLuca and her family's position as the only visible Black residents of Roswell and in exploring Liz's motivations to leave Roswell and pursue her education. Both Liz and Maria make semifrequent references to expectations and erasure, something that has also been noted at work in writers' rooms and the construction of expectations for writing marginalized characters.[12] Season 2 recurring character Roy Bronson (Gaius Charles) reiterates both the DeLucas' isolation in Roswell as the only Black character

[10] cadlymack (Carina Adly Mackenzie), "'Full Transparency - the RNM Room for Season 2,'" Twitter, 2019, https://twitter.com/cadlymack/status/1141926570501607424.
[11] RoswellNMRoom, "'Challenge Accepted @VidaWriters. We Stand against Family Separation and Nominate @LegaciesW to Join Us in Donating to Https://Tinyurl.Com/Onevida #OneVidaAtATime #KeepFamiliesTogether,'" Twitter, 2018, https://twitter.com/RoswellNMRoom/status/1009975235389546496.
[12] Henderson, "The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room"; Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."

routinely seen in the 1940s flashback sequences in which he stars, and strengthens the series writers' attention to historically contextualizing bigotry alongside establishing the central extraterrestrial story. Most notably, he visits the Atomic Malt Shoppe, the 1940s predecessor to the Ortechos' Crashdown Diner (a common set for the series) and is called "boy" and scolded for using the front door ("The Diner," season 2, episode 9); this further rounds out a character whose earlier purpose is to be a welcoming landing place for 1947 UFO crash refugees. Guest character and faith healer Arizona (Sonya Balmores) and her grandmother address legacies of state anti-Indigenous violence, political and physical, as well as cultural appropriation in their season 1 appearance ("Songs About Texas," episode 9), while their faith-healing act also provides important clues to the murderous alien at the heart of season 1's major plotline. These choices of B- and other narratives reinforce the importance of telling a layered story about the setting in which these characters move and its regional, ethnic, and political particularities, establishing the importance of the borderland in both physicalized and allegorical narrative constructions.

Understanding queer borderlands and liminality

The concept of a borderland, first explored spatially and now understood through both geopolitical and cultural lenses, takes that which is often construed as a line and establishes instead a region of in-betweenness.[13] Within this context, the experience of identity within a borderland, or of an identity that only exists at the edges or margins of what is perceived to be 'normal' or natural, is the experience of a duality of safe- and unsafe-space, of belonging and not-belonging, of claiming and hiding one's very identity by turns. Queer identity is one such

[13] Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Yale University Press, 2006), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=3420304.

borderland identity, whether or not it is intersectionally experienced within the scope of another form of borderland positionality.

Subjects that cross a border, whether physical like the US-Mexico border or less physically present like the border of acceptable sexuality, often find themselves occupying a space between acceptance and exclusion, "between belonging and alienation."[14] Exclusion based on unconstrained or nonconforming sexuality—that is, sexual relations existing outside of a heteronormative marriage between people of the same racial group—has been a central piece of bodily and relationship control within border spaces, and itself implies a border between heterosexuality and queerness that exists not only at geospatial borders, but anywhere compulsory heterosexuality is enforced. Belonging to US American culture, particularly its most centrally held trappings, hinges deeply on perceived adherence to norms of gendered behavior and relationships that conform to the heterosexual nuclear American family dream.[15] Queer desire and nonnormative gender presentations exist outside this sort of adherence, creating a deep experience of liminality that is reinforced by structural considerations.

Moral codes about queerness at the border are enforced not solely by tenets of religion and laws, but also by their violent enforcement via institutional violence and hate crimes. Though these components of queer experience are not limited to the border, expectations of discretion about queer identity and norms around gendered and sexualized behavior can be different because of the differing forms of intersecting identities to navigate, especially in racist,

[14] Alicia R. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2008), 15.
[15] Eithne Luibheid, "'Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity': Contextualizing Queer and Trans Migrant 'Illegalization,' Detention, and Deportation," in *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*, ed. Eithne Luibheid and Karma R. Chávez (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 19–40.

heteronormative colonial spaces that lend themselves to fear of difference.[16] Individuals whose sexual identity and whose sexual relations fall outside of the white, cis-heteropatriarchal social order pose an existential threat to its perseverance as the acceptable law and normative structure of the nation-state's base familial unit, as well as the nuclear family's participation in traditional forms of capitalism. This perceived threat, seen as more potent at the border because of its negotiation of identities and its position as access point to the center, incites a variety of exclusionary and violent policies of interrogation, detention, and deportation that often flout claimed norms of inclusion and the stated logics of paternalist 'protective' national asylum and security practices.[17] Within this framework, queerphobic and transphobic policies and violence become institutionally intermingled.

However, these forms of exclusion and separation predicated on institutional valorization of identity run up against what Alicia Schmidt Camacho calls migrant imaginaries, which combine the "condition of alterity to, or exclusion from, the nation" with "a collective desire for a different order of space and belonging across the boundary."[18] We can understand borderland identity, then, as a space of possibility for alternate forms of belonging, if consistently in conflict with the varying levels of inclusion and exclusion afforded borderland subjects, combining the melancholia of exclusion with its potential for autonomy.[19] Queerness emerges again, here, as a key form of liminal identity, one that is itself linked to the possibilities of futurity and to seeking

[16] Emma Pérez, "Decolonial Border Queers: Case Studies of Chicana/o Lesbians, Gay Men, and Transgender Folks in El Paso/Juárez," in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 192–211.
[17] Luibheid, "'Treated Neither with Respect nor with Dignity': Contextualizing Queer and Trans Migrant 'Illegalization,' Detention, and Deportation"; Eithne Luibheid, "'Looking Like a Lesbian': The Organization of Sexual Monitoring at the United States-Mexican Border," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 3 (1998): 477–506, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704873; Celeste R. Menchaca, "Staging Crossings," *Pacific Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (2020): 16–43, https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2020.89.1.16.
[18] Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 5.
[19] Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.*

different modes of creating community, aesthetic, and self.[20] Queer imaginaries as a function of borderlands, drawing both from the exclusion and contestation of queerness and the potential collectivity of shared borderland identity, are then a space for interrogating institutional norms of exclusion as well as articulating alternate and often contradictory forms of self. The stories that arise from these queer imaginaries, from experiences of displacement from and within cisheteronormative patriarchal society show how narratives of belonging and structures of storytelling are essential to building knowledge and community.[21] This community and sense of shared identity, as Gloria Anzaldúa notes, is necessary for queer border survival as a ballast against the pressures and violences of marginalization.[22]

The stealthy Very Special Series: sci-fi and allegory

RNM's narrative consistently operates at two levels, using denotative narrative meaning to tell a particular story and weaving throughout invitations to compare the allegorical, fantastical elements of its story to real-life experiences, institutions, and structures. Writing this dual-level exploration of immigration and refugee politics results in a complex navigation of legacies of colonization and anti-Indigenous violence alongside immigration rhetoric through allegory as well as direct representation. As a science fiction text—via its representation of extraterrestrials as well as Liz Ortecho's near-impossible science advances throughout the series—*RNM*, like other sci-fi texts, has a role as a "fruitful venue[] for critical analysis" of our own world by virtue of our engagement through its narratives and characters with other, alternate, or potential future

[20] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).
[21] Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.*
[22] Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (London: Persephone Press, 1981).

worlds, "potentially destabilizing dominant conceptions of 'human nature.'"[23] Moreover, it is within these deepening engagements with potentially destabilizing and reconstructing alternatives that science fiction establishes itself as a serious "site of meaning construction and contestation,"[24] with particular emphasis on and consequences for the politics of those representations contained within.

Science fiction has long been a mechanism, through cyborgs, androids, and (of particular interest for this chapter) aliens, for the investigation of modernity's emphasis on subjectivity and human rights and its concomitant use of dehumanization and objectification in processes of self- and state definition through colonization, slavery, and other institutionalized forms of exploitation.[25] This use of allegory and of not-quite-direct commentary, as with all forms of literary and other mediated allegory, resists stabilization and one-to-one interpretation, though it does invite comparisons, implied and direct, with real-world policy and experience.[26] Some explorations of the use of science fiction and allegory relate to the allegorization of nonnormative sexuality and gender presentation, particularly in early iterations of *Star Trek*, in times where open representation of queer identity were more directly censored from television.[27] This extends, however, into an era of more explicitly denotative representation of queerness on

[23] Christina Rowley, "Review Essay: The Politics of Science Fiction," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2005): 321, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740500065253.
[24] Rowley, 326.
[25] Kakoudaki, "Unmaking People : The Politics of Negation in Frankenstein and Ex Machina"; Elaine J. O'Quinn and Heather Atwell, "Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary," *The ALAN Review* 37, no. 3 (May 1, 2010), https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v37i3.a.6; Julianne Q.M. Yang, "Negotiating Privilege and Social Inequality in an Alternative Sweden: Real Humans/Äkta Människor (SVT, 2012–2013)," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2018): 56–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2018.1438730; Christopher Benjamin Menadue and Karen Diane Cheer, "Human Culture and Science Fiction: A Review of the Literature, 1980-2016," *SAGE Open* 7, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 215824401772369, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017723690.
[26] Jutta Weldes, "Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics," in *To Seek Out New Worlds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003), 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982087_1.
[27] David Greven, *Gender and Sexuality in Star Trek* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

television; allegory remains a useful tool for studios to craft series that make social commentary without specifically and didactically addressing current events.

Part of this tendency is related to science fiction's perception as a less-serious, less-high-culture form; whether borne out or not in the tone of the text, much of science fiction's construction lies in a productively playful blending and a postmodernist, less-than-consistently-linear approach to comparisons and allegory that combines direct ethical objectives with storytelling itself.[28] As science fiction's real-world referents are often located on the edges of society, the advances of science, and the underpinnings of capitalism, the social commentary contained within is typically addressing ongoing questions raised by changing societies and social relationships; this makes sci-fi, like television generally, a productive teaching and questioning tool, operating often by re-contextualizing or making strange what is commonplace today.[29] Science fiction has been used as a tool to describe, illustrate, and analyze human culture—in part because it has been structured to do the same as a cultural product itself.[30] Science fiction develops from references to existing advances, and in turn new frontiers and developments in fiction sometimes offer names and contexts to real-life changes, advances, and discoveries.[31] Given the liminal, borderlands setting of *RNM* and its focal issues of identity, immigration, and belonging, the denaturalizing, re-contextualizing tool of extraterrestrials both opens up space for not-quite-real questioning and forces the viewer to look a little longer at instances of familiar, more earth-bound storylines, character beats, and forms and structures of exclusion.

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[28] Pirjo Lyytikainen, "Allegories of Our World: Strange Encounters with Leena Krohn," in *Nodes of Contemporary Finnish Literature*, ed. Leena Kirstina (SKS Finnish Literature Society, 2012), 24–40, https://doi.org/10.21435/sflit.6.
[29] O'Quinn and Atwell, "Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary."
[30] Menadue and Cheer, "Human Culture and Science Fiction: A Review of the Literature, 1980-2016."
[31] Weldes, "Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics."

Coming out as traumatized: queerness and trauma linked through institutional power

RNM's two most visible queer characters are revealed to the viewer in the pilot episode, where Michael Guerin and Alex Manes kiss (in private) at the high school reunion. A departure from the series' source material, Michael and Alex's relationship and its history provide ample ground for understanding what connections *RNM* draws between queer identity, trauma, and institutional violence. In fact, these links boil down, in season one especially, to localizing violence and the trauma it causes within the character of Air Force Master Sgt. Jesse Manes, Alex's father, who is both the source of Alex's childhood trauma and a consistent, watching presence representing the US military in the extraterrestrial crew's lives. This serves a dual purpose: it establishes the trauma connected with Michael and Alex as queerphobic through Jesse Manes's queerphobia and child abuse/assault, and it localizes and makes tangible the trauma experienced due to queerphobic state structures—namely, the nuclear family, foster care, and the military, though high school also figures. Michael and Alex's identities as queer, however, are never in question (after the reveal in the pilot)—trauma, rather than sexual identity, emerges as the thing that needs confession, alongside and within discussions of exclusion and inbetweenness predicated on sexuality.

Neither Alex nor Michael specifically has a storyline linked to their coming out, and yet both directly articulate the phrase "I'm gay" (Alex) / "I'm bisexual" (Michael) in *RNM*'s first season. The construction of each scene centers around not a surprising revelation of sexuality but rather the explanation of a traumatic experience that has been subject to investigation[32]—here repeated with a difference. Neither of these comings out occurs before or immediately following a same-

[32] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console."

sex encounter or moment of realization, nor do they come in the first few episodes of the series, which might otherwise happen for a couple whose relationship in the series opening is secret, and on a series that is deeply concerned with romantic entanglements. All their scenes as a couple during the first season take place one-on-one, typically in isolated or hidden surroundings, and we are shown via their interactions with other characters that no one is aware of their relationship (except Alex's abusive and homophobic father, further tying their relationship to attacks he has perpetrated) until halfway through the first season.

In "Don't Speak" (season 1, episode 5), Alex's coming out is not directly presented, but referenced in a brief line and noted as having happened long before, during the high school years we see only in brief flashbacks later in the series. In a private, enclosed setting, with childhood friend and high school bully Kyle Valenti, the line arrives during a retrospective beat that engages their shared history, with the phrase "I'm gay" serving as an assumed explanation of sorts for Kyle's past aggressive behavior.

Figure 38: Alex and Kyle discuss high school bullying and domestic abuse by Alex's father in Alex's low-lit cabin previously owned by Kyle's father (season 1, episode 5).

This conversation proceeds immediately to refer to Alex's below-the-knee amputation ("I've been through a lot worse than your locker room taunting at this point"). The scene directly mentions Alex's childhood abuse, further tying it to his identity and grounding his trauma and identity as a survivor in his youth. Because the coming-out-as-gay moment has passed, Alex here comes out to Kyle as traumatized, articulating a piece of his hidden history, and connects his childhood trauma (perpetrated by his white, military officer father) to his sexuality and to his

battlefield loss of limb, and the state of difference or of negotiated participation in family, school, and state that it affords him.

Michael's coming out is spoken to his brother, Max Evans, in "Champagne Supernova" (season 1, episode 11). While a little more typical in its direct connection to his relationship to Alex, it remains unusual for a bisexual character, as they are often not afforded a "coming out moment."[33] However, Michael's open claiming of bisexual identity also comes in a scene dominated by his confession of multiple traumas, namely his childhood abandonment and abuse in the foster system as well as the gaybashing perpetrated by Alex's father after their first tryst as high schoolers. Max and Michael are trapped in a bunker established as Michael's private space that he has also kept secret for years, shifting the focus to his relationship with Max and the tensions based on trauma in their interactions (or lack thereof), particularly in the terse, rapid camera movement and cuts that accompany this fight-slash-confessional scene.

Figure 39: Literally trapped in Michael's bunker, Max and Michael argue and Michael confesses that he was attacked and mutilated by Jesse Manes in a homophobic rage (season 1, episode 11). One of the few moments of stationary blocking in a multi-scene sequence—they are incredibly mobile during the confrontation! Michael largely works to evade Max's questioning advances.

[33] San Filippo, "Bisexuality on the Boob Tube."

And indeed Max's dialogue works to redirect this focus, as he essentially claims Michael's trauma as his own during their discussion; however, despite this focus on Max's claims of deep brotherhood, Michael's traumatic experiences seem to remain largely theoretical to Max, whose position of privilege as the adopted son of local upper-class Evanses and later as a sheriff's deputy has insulated him from experiences like Michael's.

Figure 40: Michael and Alex talk outside Michael's Airstream (season 1, episode 10), a mobile home parked in a junkyard where he is most at home during seasons 1-2.

Figure 41: Michael and Alex talk outside the Long farmhouse in a brightly lit prairie setting (season 2, episode 4).

The setting of both of these moments in a quiet, dimly lit enclosed private or home space for the confessing character, while many of Michael and Alex's romantic beats are shot outside in the New Mexico sunlight or at the firepit outside Michael's Airstream trailer, locates trauma confession in private, quasi-therapeutic spaces, but also outside the flow of the plot and the flow of Alex and Michael's lives spatially. While these come alongside both Kyle and Max's investigations into the aliens and into Michael's past, the focus becomes sharing their experiences, with these disparate episodes centralizing the trauma to which the two men have been subjected at the hands of people in positions of institutional heteropatriarchal power. However, because the confessional moments of trauma coincide with open declarations of sexuality, both become intertwined as essential aspects of character description and evolution, deeply tied to childhood experiences of familial abandonment, abuse, and neglect and predicated upon exclusion based on sexuality (and tied to extraterrestrial identity).

Neither character escapes the need to vocalize their identity marker, nor does the show entirely escape the demand for a "sexuality realization" moment (provided to Michael in a flashback to high school wherein he reaches for and recoils from Alex's hopeful outreach) that may reflect the investigative tropes so common to television.[34] *RNM's* queer identity—at least, queer masculine identity—can apparently only be claimed when inextricably linked, in this setting, with formative childhood and adolescent experiences of institutionally and physically violent trauma and to experiences of being called upon to negate one's own identity while simultaneously being instructed to claim it and its punishment within existing social structures.

In "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (season 1, episode 6), we see via flashback sequence the immediate response to Michael and Alex's first sexual encounter (in the shed that Alex uses to

[34] Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console"; Martin Jr., "Scripting Black Gayness: Television Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms."

escape his abusive father and that Michael uses to escape unsafe foster placements). In the sunlit shed, Jesse Manes grabs a hammer and moves toward his son; when Michael steps between them, Jesse brings the hammer down on his hand multiple times, resulting in the scar tissue and lack of mobility we see in present-day Michael's hand (a physical vestige of the emotional trauma experienced). The shed reappears in season 2 as Alex and Michael come back together, culminating in a scene where Michael and Alex tear down the shed together, starting by using the (presumably) same hammer that Jesse used to maim Michael over a decade earlier ("Mr. Jones," season 2, episode 13).

Figure 42: Upon discovering teenage Michael and Alex post-coital in his toolshed, Jesse Manes immediately picks up a hammer (season 1, episode 6). He then uses that hammer to permanently injure Michael's left hand.

Figure 43: In a near-perfect (if mirrored) match of Manes's actions 20 years later, Michael picks up the hammer in the toolshed after Jesse Manes has been killed (season 2, episode 13). Though his hand has been healed, the bandanna wrapped around his hand to protect his secret is clearly visible, reminding the viewer of the previous appearance of this hammer.

In their cathartic destruction, they uncover the bones of Alex's great-uncle, Tripp Manes (Jason Behr, guest-starring throughout season 2 as a nod to his portrayal of Max Evans in the original *Roswell*), who had a secret affair with Michael's birth mother back in the 1940s.

Figure 44: Michael hands a reluctant Alex the hammer and picks up an axe; the two together tear the shed down to studs with Jesse Manes' own tools (season 2, episode 13).

With this complicated turn of events, queerness and specifically queer trauma once again provide access to hidden family secrets, space for investigation, and context for other relationships that blur the boundaries of gender, terrestriality, and citizenship/belonging. *RNM*'s use of trauma and of identity to reclaim space and to uncover history is perhaps a shift in the overall format of the queerness-as-confessional and of queer identity as traumatized, and one that may further inform *RNM*'s approach to queered trauma as an effect or facet of the borderland status of queer identity.

"A real bisexual alien blast": borderland extraterrestrial and bisexual identities

The current of real-world conflict and borderland structures embedded in *RNM*'s attention to immigration in the southwestern US is perhaps most fully developed in the extraterrestrial device that centers the series overall, as the three main extraterrestrials keep their backgrounds and apparent refugee status secret. However, they occupy a very different constellation of

sociocultural positioning: all three extraterrestrials are white and experience a remarked-upon level of social privilege due to their perceived race and, in Max and Isobel's case, class status. Their negotiation of the world of *RNM* continues to implicate borderland-formulated identity as refugees and, for Michael and Isobel, as queer subjects, as they contend with identities that do not fit into the Roswell community's boxes in terms of sexuality, race, or livelihood (in Michael's case). These boundaries are enforced through an arm of the US military that seeks to locate and detain them. Additionally, especially in Michael and Isobel's case, Isobel's husband and mind-rapist Noah Bracken (Karan Oberoi, season 1) and Michael's father and Max's progenitor Jones/the Dictator (Nathan Parsons in a doubled role) provide a patriarchally situated extraterrestrial figure that exerts physical as well as institutional power over their bodies and selves. As Isobel, Michael, and Max move through overarching narratives about a secret extraterrestrial murder (Noah), a military conspiracy to capture and experiment on them, and threats by a government agency to control access to necessary scientific knowledge, their character beats frequently address negotiating conflict between discovering powers afforded them by their extraterrestrial heritage and their near-complete separation from their birth culture and parents.

The use of the term "alien" within the series uses its allegorical position to emphasize the linkages between migration and extraterrestrial storylines (and why I am careful to use extraterrestrial to describe otherplanetary origin). However, it is the corresponding implication of alienation that expresses itself most clearly within Michael and Isobel's stories as bisexual aliens. This alienation and separation from the human community, from their home planet, and in some cases also from their claimed extraterrestrial brother, Max, is underscored by their experiences of trauma centered around expressions of sexuality and of mental instability.

Isobel's husband in the first season, Noah Bracken, is revealed to be a predatory mind-controlling extraterrestrial who used Isobel's experience of childhood molestation and subsequent traumatic blackouts to access her mind, using her body to commit multiple murders without her knowledge during her teen years and then subsequently marrying her under false pretenses ("Champagne Supernova," season 1, episode 11). Isobel's modified memory and experiences of gaslighting and manipulation feed directly into her slower, methodical approach to exploring her sexuality ("Sex and Candy," season 2, episode 6), her heritage ("American Woman," season 2, episode 10), and her powers as compared to Michael, as she most directly (of all three central extraterrestrial siblings) conforms to an American-dream husband-and-suburbia model of heteronormative life in season 1. However, this makes for a greater sense of possibility in Isobel's character and her energy as she moves forward in season 2 and beyond.

Figure 45: In the season 1 finale, Isobel explodes this picture of her deceased husband and abuser, Noah Bracken, with telekinesis she is beginning to exercise and develop.

Michael is not adopted with his claimed siblings Max and Isobel because he takes the blame for Max's allegedly "crazy" scribbling on the walls in the group home they are brought to as children, and his subsequent abuse in and escape (via running away) from the foster system sets the stage for his relationship with Alex and the violent, homophobic assault by Jesse Manes.

Michael's compounded experiences of abandonment drive home his sense of exclusion and outside-ness as extraterrestrial, as queer subject, and as trauma survivor within the Roswell community as well as within his chosen extraterrestrial family group.

The boundaries around sexuality and extraterrestriality as identities are less than firm for both characters, as Michael and Isobel cleave alternately to belonging to a normative human Roswell community and to existing entirely outside it. These boundaries are, however, consistently reinforced by individuals and institutions directly or indirectly representing a statist, cisheteropatriarchal (typically white) form of authority, as evidenced by Jesse Manes, Michael's father/Jones (season 3's primary antagonist), and to a certain degree, Noah Bracken, all of whom represent key antagonists and particular threats to Michael and Isobel. While Jesse Manes represents a threat at both an interpersonal and state-military level, all three of the above antagonists are linked to Michael and Isobel through family, either as spouse, as parent, or as parent of partner, indicating that threats to queer subjectivity proceed from the institution of the family[35] and that the family often does reproduce itself through iterative forms of trauma and violence (here, perhaps, even a bit more directly than some lived cases).

These individuals also form some of the most direct threats to the establishment of an extraterrestrial refugee family and/or community between the three protagonist extraterrestrials and later addition to the crew Dallas (Quentin Plair, season 3 & 4), reinforcing that the kinds of found family often associated with queer community[36] and the nonconventional liminality of queer identity are not permitted by extant family and state structures. Indeed, Isobel and Alex Manes both seek to "escape" experiences of exclusion and powerlessness into trappings of state-sanctioned relationship (Isobel's marriage) and state power (Alex's enlistment); however, neither

[35] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
[36] Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

of these moves results in a complete removal from their position of liminality, and in fact each often serves to emphasize the ways in which those in-group identities run counter to their senses of self, with Alex moving further away from the military in later seasons and Isobel exploring a new relationship in season 3 with reporter and singer Anatsa (Sibongile Mlambo).

Much as is perhaps visible in the way that Schmidt Camacho describes migrant imaginaries as holding both the melancholy of exclusion and loss and the possibilities of evasion and self-construction,[37] Michael and Isobel in particular construct their own "bisexual alien blast," to quote Michael ("I Don't Want to Miss a Thing," season 1, episode 10). The two are shown throughout the series to have a very close and rarely contested sibling bond despite their relationship not being legally formalized like Isobel and Max's adopted siblinghood, and they discuss sexuality and alternative family formation (sperm donation, in "American Woman," season 2, episode 10) frankly as queer subjects over the course of the series.

Figure 46: Michael and Isobel discuss her potential bisexuality in the stable-but-liminal space of Michael's trailer (season 1, episode 10). This is the scene where Michael coins the "bisexual alien blast."

[37] Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.*

Figure 47: Isobel expresses her desire to be a mother and Michael volunteers for unconventional fatherhood via sperm donation as they continue to construct their own logics of family in the open New Mexico sun (season 2, episode 10).

The "club" to which Michael welcomes Isobel to when she begins to claim her bisexuality is more than an acknowledgement of her identity; it is an invocation of queer community and a space of connection that is predicated on their shared experience of in-between unknowingness developing into a sense of identity outside of the existing, available structures of (especially) US cisheteronormativity. Though their access to this form of community is based, first, on their exclusion, their ability to explore it hinges both on their ability to navigate their own dually liminal identities and on their perceived human whiteness and capacity to move through Roswell as white subjects.

Perpetual states of exception: Rosa Ortecho as implied queer first-generation subject

Rosa Ortecho's sexual orientation is not a central subject in *RNM*'s diegesis, but from her first flashback-only introductions (given that she is ten years dead when the series begins), she exists in an in-between space. As the only member of the main cast not explicitly in high school during flashback scenes, as the eldest child of undocumented immigrants (and as the product of

her mother's affair), as an opioid addict, Rosa exists on the fringes of the high school narrative but is centralized by her murder at the hands of Noah Bracken through Isobel Evans. Throughout season 1's flashbacks to Rosa's, Noah's, and Isobel's memories, this relationship to Isobel-Noah is constructed in implication, with encounters laced with romantic intent we later learn are linked to Noah's obsession with Rosa but read through the series' framing as queer (and in fact, inspire Isobel's first discussion about bisexuality with Michael when she recalls them). However, it is precisely this undefined, queer-coded friendship that leads to Rosa's murder, ten years before the start of the series, and it is the love Max bears for Liz Ortecho (the central heterosexual romance of the series) that leads to her resurrection at the end of season 1 ("Recovering the Satellites," season 1, episode 13).

Figure 48: Throughout season 1's flashbacks, Rosa and Isobel are shown to be close, perhaps romantic in their encounters (this image from season 1, episode 6); this is revealed to be led by Noah Bracken's stalker attachment to Rosa, but also bleeds into Isobel and Rosa's own relationship and self-images.

Rosa also does not escape other traumatically imposed boundaries on her identity once she rises from the dead, though she continues to exist largely on the fringes of the town and often of the narrative. The lack of complete control she has over her own mind in season 2, as Max's

mind remains linked with hers, presents a particular controlling consequence she disproportionately experiences due to her own murder and resurrection, where she exists as herself-but-not-fully. She also gains, through her resurrection or her ten years trapped in an extraterrestrial stasis pod, some extraterrestrial qualities and even DNA, increasingly placing her in a liminal position that links her to and simultaneously divides her from both her human and extraterrestrial family members. While this does provide her with plot agency when her newfound abilities make her uniquely suited to solve some key mysteries, she is also consistently and unrelentingly sidelined from fully inhabiting or forming community through these identities, with season 3's first four episodes linking her more directly (and in some respects romantically) with the amnesiac Wyatt Long (Dylan McTee), a former high school classmate who has perpetrated racist attacks against her family since her death, most notably shooting Liz in the pilot (though she is healed by Max). While this brief storyline is not explored in detail (a fate of many of Rosa's storylines), it reflects troubling paradigms for the way that Rosa is asked to confront her past while not being fully permitted to inhabit her present.

In part, this results from the season 1 narrative in which the extraterrestrial teens Max, Michael, and Isobel stage a car accident to erase themselves from Rosa's murder and Noah's coinciding murder of two white Roswell teen girls, creating a crime scene in which Rosa is blamed for the accident and the deaths of the other two girls. In a parallel move, Michael (with Max's silent corroboration) tells Isobel, who has no clear memory of the incident because she was possessed by Noah, that he killed the three girls, taking the blame to preserve Isobel's innocence ("Smells Like Teen Spirit"). Within this narrative, it is the "bad kids"—Rosa, as a drug-addicted child of immigrants, and Michael, as the unpredictable and secretive foster child—who take the blame within their communities (human and extraterrestrial). Though both face

exclusion within the narrative after this fact, Rosa is first murdered and then demonized, and upon her resurrection is unable to claim her identity or her truth because of the story perpetrated by the three white teen aliens and the safety that secrecy continues to afford them within the narrative.

Michael's baggage from assuming the blame exists almost exclusively within the confines of his found-extraterrestrial family—though he does use the injury he received at Jesse Manes's hand to sell his lie, thus, again, tying it to queer trauma that he is unable as a teen to confess.

Rosa and Michael then, perhaps, become the centrally queer subjects within the narrative and within understandings of queerness as a borderland identity; both present as relentlessly and consistently in-between, existing in near-perpetual states of exception in their backstory and high school years. Their storylines within the central diegesis, as well as their unmoored dwelling places (Michael's Airstream, Rosa's rotating through the homes of characters who were not dead for ten years), emphasize a lack of rootedness and a searching for place that is perhaps tied to their potential for creating a queer, nonbinary futurity.

Figure 49: After discovering the community's reaction to her death (and framing), Rosa paints "we don't believe in humans" graffiti on a wall and confronts her sister (season 2, episode 2). She must sneak around her hometown to not be seen or revealed.

Figure 50: Michael (here a small figure in a big, empty-but-full space) lives in an Airstream trailer for most of the series and embraces this liminality as a facet of character and history, though it does also stem from his own social exclusion (season 1, episode 3).

Rosa, in particular, sits in an amorphous place because of continued underdevelopment, but also because of her resistance to norms of good and bad behavior, clear-cut definitions of sexuality, and the trappings (besides sisterhood) of a singular form of the American nuclear family. Understanding this construction can help us place *RNM*'s use of Rosa's character on a continuum, one that bypasses some forms of homonormativity with regard to relationship dynamics and goals[38] that the canon queer relationship between Michael and Alex (and to a lesser degree, Isobel's relationship with Anantsa) can fall into.

Roswell's queer potentiality: possibility, but limited access

The sci-fi and New Mexico settings of *RNM* make the series uniquely suited to offer commentary on structures of liminality, of belonging, and of relationships both familial and

[38] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).

romantic. The strategic use of a borderland setting allows the series to frame its non-geopolitical borderlands—particularly those surrounding queerness—within a landscape that addresses and implicates the very condition of liminality, one which is understudied and perhaps underutilized in television's increasing production in the Southwest generally.[39] This mobilization of the US-Mexico border region within an allegorical framework works on multiple levels to invite questioning about institutional structures governing desire, family, and identity, as well as the violent modes through which that governance is maintained. Understanding the particular affordances of US TV settings that do not follow the (generally) typical focus on the Northeast, California, and Midwest can provide insight into the ways that identity is differentially experienced based on place and based on a core-periphery sort of divide, and the American Southwest is a core piece of that discussion.[40]

Of course, consistently embedded throughout this analysis is the role that futurity plays in narratives about science fiction and about queerness—and especially when the two coincide. There is a distinct presence of potentiality within the narrative owed largely to the nature of extraterrestriality and its position as outside humanity, yet existing within human structures. Exploring this potentiality and its negative consequences as *RNM* does allows for the allegory suggested above to ground the series' critique in a fantastical realm while still making direct commentary on existing norms and institutions. Moreover, the series' continued references to "outdated binar[ies]" (Michael in "Champagne Supernova") and the possibilities of difference

[39] Anthony V. Popp and James Peach, "The Film Industry in New Mexico and The Provision of Tax Incentives" (Las Cruces, NM, 2008), https://nmlegis.gov/Entity/LFC/Documents/Money_Matters/NMSU Report on Economic Impact of Film Production Tax Credit - August 2008.pdf; Danielle M Cantrell, "New Mexico as Hollywood's Backlot: An Examination of Film Financing, State Tax Incentives, and Constitutional Limitations," *NML Rev.* 37 (2007): 533.
[40] Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree, eds., *Small Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television* (LSU Press, 2017).

implicit in extraterrestriality invite questioning those binaries within the contemporary US sociocultural and political context, if only for a select few.

The fruits of queer potentiality, in *RNM*, are largely limited to the series' white and white-passing cisgender characters, particularly if this in-between identity is claimed vocally within the series. Rosa, for example, inhabits implied queerness within a framework where she is not fully able to claim many facets of her identity, due to lines drawn around her by others. Anatsa Mufaro, the series' only openly queer Black woman character who is admittedly not much discussed here, is a recurring season 3 and 4 guest character with minimal development, largely existing as a love interest first for Max Evans and then for Isobel. This sidelining and effective silencing of queer women of color, when linked with the foregrounding of queer trauma in white and white-passing queer characters' stories, reifies existing tropes about queerness as a space that can only be explored and fully inhabited by white characters who experience pain and trauma; states of exclusion then abound. If Alex Manes, as a biracial Indigenous gay man, exists as our primary contraindication to this, then we also encounter a specific form of queer potentiality available primarily to cisgender men—and especially one played by a white-passing, if not potentially appropriative, actor. These demarcations and borders of possibility are, perhaps, within the context of the series, fungible, but nevertheless their perpetuation places limitations on the defiance of norms possible within the context of *RNM* and thus within the imaginary of the CW's sci-fi slate, despite *RNM*'s openness to portraying queerness and to avoiding traditional coming-out narratives within the series.

CONCLUSION

DARING TO DEFY HAS ITS (INDUSTRIAL, SOCIAL, CREATIVE) LIMITS

Drama television, especially the melodramatic television that networks like the CW are known for, often engages a (sometimes literal) revolving door of trauma to keep the wheels of its narratives turning. After all, as a sensationalized depiction of the human experience and particularly of human emotion and relationships, melodrama has been built on depicting and generating audience responses to loss, injury, and pain, often to newer and greater heights each time in the interests of escalating the story. In many ways, queer death on screen has been a part of that trajectory, as evidenced by the Lexa Pledge's provisions that a queer character's death not be used solely to further a straight character's development.[1] It has not been my intention, in this analysis, to argue that trauma has no place in a dramatic narrative, nor especially in melodrama—in fact, the deep links between melodramatic form and traumatic content are part of what motivated the project itself. Rather, I sought to discern how the shape and function of trauma within a narrative and within a character arc functioned for queer characters, and whether that seemed markedly different from that of straight characters.

Perhaps by default, this exploration ended up relying far more on developing a clear definition of what constituted queer representation on television—an easy question, presumptively, but one that rested on the history of queer representation as a series of winks and nods and coded signals[2] somewhat unevenly transitioning into direct reference in character identity. In the analyses I conducted in the case studies here, I've tried to examine just that

[1] Cox, "#TheLexaPledge Could Change the Future of Lesbian and Bisexual Representation on TV."
[2] Bridges, "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting: Legal Codes, Production Codes, 'Bury Your Gays' and 'The 100 Mess'"; Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*.

potential unevenness—appearing to differing degrees in each case—and the ways in which formal and industrial norms around production and style reassert themselves even in long-term character development. If representation were to be a be-all, end-all goal, then perhaps this dissertation would show a progression from sidelining and Othering queerness to incorporating it as 'just another fact of life,' life that is not disproportionally subject to death. However, I don't think that's the conclusion that proceeds from the work outlined here.

It's notable, of course, that there is no lasting recurring or regular character queer death to be found in the series under examination (I won't say no death whatsoever—this is speculative fiction, after all!). This is, in many ways, the clearest example of a direct response to the Lexa Pledge, the 2016 Bury Your Gays controversy, and fan pressures. However, embedded in this direct response of life is an additional, less direct set of approaches to 'realism' about queer identity and queer being – whether taking the shape of *Legends*' casual acceptance of femme-presenting queer women except when pushing a historical progress narrative, or whether emphasizing, as *RNM* does, queerphobic structural violence in the nuclear American family and the American military. The competing demands of a liberal, multiculturalist, idealized world of acceptance (a place where teen dramas might instead seek to engage allegory to address social issues) and the trend toward gritty, socially conscious readaptation and rebooting show up throughout these case studies—especially in those series whose main characters appear multiply marginalized either in-narrative or in the society viewers presumptively occupy.

Production structures, of course, additionally contribute to the sedimenting of storytelling structures, while also potentially providing space (in the incredibly large machine that is a television production) for those structures to slip. Four of the five series under examination here are produced by the same production company—Berlanti Productions—whose eponymous

founder has had considerable influence on queer representation on The CW and its predecessor The WB since *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003). Greg Berlanti's productions have had an overwhelming presence on the 2010s and early 2020s CW, including *All-American* (2018-present), *Riverdale* (2017-2023), and all of the DC *Arrowverse* series (spanning 2012-present). This sort of controlling (creative) interest in the CW's primetime schedule, developed over a decade, shows a sort of vertical integration of production and style strategies proceeding from Berlanti's own introduction to executive production on The WB. If Ryan Murphy can be considered to have crafted a sort of queer America or a queer American consciousness[3] in his work across Fox, FX, and Netflix, Berlanti has done much the same with the slate that we see here. Crafting such instances of production-system continuity, up to and including the functional creation of an entirely new multiverse of comic-book hero lore, has proved a particular tool of storytelling on television generally, and specifically of the sedimentation of queer story structures.

Some of the continuity in tropes that accompanies this sedimentation can also be attributed to the use of adapted and rebooted material; as a potential resistance to content that isn't 'tried and true,' industry leanings towards adaptation showcase the risk-averse nature of television and the reiteration of familiar storylines, properties, and even dialogue and staging. However, much of the making-new, remaking, and resignifying work that is done in adaptation, re-adaptation, and reimagining has its own echoes and roots in queer theory and queer media meaning-making.[4] This history may be part of the spaces for new queer possibility within these series, but it's often still lingering in the spaces between, in the states of exception that Michael and Rosa occupy in

[3] Weber and Greven, *Ryan Murphy's Queer America*.
[4] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*; Andre Cavalcante, "Affect, Emotion, and Media Audiences: The Case of Resilient Reception," *Media, Culture and Society* 40, no. 8 (2018): 1186–1201, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718781991.

RNM, in the normative vs. camp character design choices in *Batwoman*, and in the embedded multiple-allegory space of Nia Nal's identity on *Supergirl*.

This likely returns (once again) to the complex problem of the 'diverse writers room' and what it means for those individuals within it. While many of these series show a commitment to inviting representative voices behind the scenes as well as in front of the camera, the rhetoric there espoused[5] does not entirely avoid (nor, in some ways, even seek to refute) Henderson's experience of carrying the weight of being the individual tasked with verifying and/or cosigning representative strategies.[6] Representation behind the camera as well as in front of it appears, still, as a check-the-boxes necessity, but different productions navigate the checking of the box and its repercussions differently, whether in Mackenzie's demographic report-outs,[7] Akil's presence in the trade press to talk about *Black Lightning*'s links to all-American culture,[8] or Dries' deemphasis of her own identity in a show of multicultural melting-in.[9] The slippages that are a bit different from property-to-property show the potential as well as the restrictions of a representative writers' room and/or producer. It's no accident, for example, that the Black-led series (both in producer and in cast) is the series specifically tasked with explaining itself as an American story, nor that the *Roswell* reboot designed to represent Latinidad and immigrant identity more directly made its case through the showrunner's own experiences of inclusion and whitewashing.[10] These expectations of confession and of assimilation—but not too far—into the 'norm' are precisely what guides the limitations of queer television storytelling and the

[5] Navar-Gill, "From Strategic Retweets to Group Hangs: Writers' Room Twitter Accounts and the Productive Ecosystem of TV Social Media Fans"; cadlymack (Carina Adly MacKenzie), "'Full Transparency - the RNM Room for Season 2.'"
[6] Henderson, "The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room."
[7] cadlymack (Carina Adly MacKenzie), "'Full Transparency - the RNM Room for Season 2.'"
[8] Abrams, "'Black Lightning' Boss: 'This Is an American Story, This Is Not a Black Story.'"
[9] Reddish, "Caroline Dries on Taking on a Trailblazing Heroine and Fighting Toxic Fandom with 'Batwoman.'"
[10] Mackenzie, "'Roswell, New Mexico' Creator Talks Reversing the White-Washing from the Original Series."

reiteration of existing TV and broader cultural norms that I found in each case study. And perhaps most telling is that nearly every series (except, interestingly, *Batwoman*) includes and often concludes with a same-sex wedding in a very recognizably normative white-dress/formalwear and black suit combination.

Figure 51: Ava and Sara getting married in white dresses in Legends *season 6, episode 15 (season, though not series finale).*

Figure 52: Alex and Kelly getting married in white (though Alex wears a suit!) in Supergirl *season 6, episode 20 (series finale).*

Figure 53: Anissa and Grace hold a wedding reception (if not the official ceremony) in white formalwear in Black Lightning *season 4, episode 13 (series finale).*

Figure 54: Michael and Alex exchange vows in black suits with boutonnieres in Roswell, New Mexico *season 4, episode 13 (series finale).*

How, then, given their tendency towards a Shakespearean comedy ending-in-a-wedding, do these case studies, when put together, show us the shape of a shared connection between trauma and queer identity? While I would not say that these studies provide an absolute connection here,

it is clear from the depictions of queer relationships, consistent attentions to either coming out or ostracization for queer identity, and the reiteration of queerphobic violence across these properties that an attention to "realism" also contains the vestiges of more specifically censorship-driven tropes about connotative queerness. Also, the consistent return to violence seems to reiterate the industry and censoring and/or rating boards' expectations of 'consequences' for 'deviant' or nonnormative behavior—one of the only ways to depict nonnormative behavior openly under more stringent profanity regulations.[11]

Moreover, in cases where violence is not visited in-narrative on queer characters, the lingering tones of Very Special Episode moralizing or instruction has a tendency to tokenize the experiences of these queer characters. From Kate Kane's wrestling with how to come out as Batwoman in order to not to be 'lying,' to Nia Nal's doubled, allegorical coming out as trans and extraterrestrial to demonstrate belonging, to the anti-bullying tenor of Alex's coming out as queer and as an abuse victim to his former bully, these choices tend to tropify or otherwise simplify and emphasize at the same time the forms of queerphobic and transphobic violence and exclusion that persist in society and on television.

This is perhaps a natural consequence of an emphasis on realism, especially given the continuing experiences of queerphobic and transphobic violence that affect queer and trans communities. As is clear from the construction of both the Dare to Defy and #OpenToAll formulations as marketing and awareness campaigns, The CW during the period under examination espoused a certain social justice lens, if one that followed primarily campaigns about inclusion rather than challenging industry norms.[12] Choosing this approach, as well as the

[11] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley, CA, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
[12] Galluccio, "The CW: Dare to Defy (Tropes) and The 100"; Turchiano, "The CW Launches #CWOpenToAll Campaign to Promote Inclusion."

structures of casting what Cat Grant called in *Supergirl*'s first season (on CBS) "the attractive, yet non-threatening, racially diverse cast of a CW show" ("Worlds Finest," season 1, episode 18), it's little surprise that there may a reliance on existing structures and tropes of plastic representation,[13] resulting in an overemphasis on "goodness" of representation that flattens the frame. As Warner notes in defining plastic representation, the false binary of good and bad that so often preoccupies discussions of representation is neither particularly generative nor intentionally liberatory. As such, that has not been the frame for the case studies, nor for this general conclusion. Rather, the recurrence of that rhetoric in both the trade press and in touching briefly on fan responses shows its prevalence in constructing the production space for these series and the expectations that they bring to bear on the characters within.

In terms of the actual expectations, I find most interesting the question that these case studies raise but cannot quite manage to fully answer: what do we expect characters to confess? Additionally, what do we then expect actors, producers, and writers to confess? As a result of crafting 'representative' writers' rooms[14] and casts that are identity-conscious,[15] we demand a certain confessional space that is not contained either by the narrative of the series nor by the structure of the production. While some sociocultural markers of difference are considered visible (variably, of course, based on their specifically contextualized construction), like normative gender, skin color, and other phenotypic markers associated with social categories of race and ethnicity, queer identity has always been particularly threatening or unknowable in its lack of 'reliable' visible markers—and this has resulted in a sort of mandated "out-ness" to demonstrate one's bona fides as a queer content producer, as a queer actor, or in other ways

[13] Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation."
[14] Henderson, "The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room."
[15] Mbowe, "Color-Blind vs. Identity-Conscious Casting and Examining Hamilton and Malcolm & Marie."

belonging to a community, to avoid accusations of queerbaiting.[16] While the liberatory potential of the coming out speech act, even on television has been vaunted and studied,[17] the centralizing or mandating of such an act moves it beyond the scope of its original existence in a community.

Interesting, then, that most of the series under examination here (with the exception of *Supergirl's* Alex Danvers) elected to avoid centering the coming out story—given that most, if not all, the rest of the queer characters must confess abuse, violent histories, secret extraterrestrial status, and other things during their arcs. Defiance, it seems, is represented first as owning the identity marker of gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer—and then claiming the identities, experiences, and perspectives so often based on trauma within that very familiar confessional paradigm. In so doing, defiance gains limits: we reinscribe the generative potential of living a nonnormative life, developing key resilience markers, building found families, and more, within existing frameworks of discursive and therapeutic confession, which must be done to access acceptance. How much, then, can any series really defy the system? And there's the rub, of course—in order to participate in the entertainment industry, itself a heteronormative institution with a long history of racism and queerphobia, any narrative that seeks to make changes to the system must nonetheless exist inside of it.

So, what does this mean for queer representation generally? Honestly, in many ways, there is no clear and simple answer to be had here, despite the work and the analysis that stands in this dissertation. A series of three case studies of five total series makes for a sample size too small to generalize, if that had been the intention overall. However, as noted, there's not much (or any lasting) queer death to be seen here. That does seem to be a response to BYG controversy and the

[16] Chris Murphy, "Why Heartstopper Star Kit Connor Was 'forced' to Come out as Bisexual," *Vanity Fair*, November 1, 2022, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/11/why-heartstopper-star-kit-connor-was-forced-to-come-out-as-bisexual.
[17] Herman, "'I'm Gay': Declarations, Desire, and Coming out on Prime-Time Television."

Lexa Pledge. In returning to Bridges' points about the potential backlash to Obergefell contained in the 2015-16 season's catastrophic gay deaths, however, we may see a reflection of the contemporary uptick in anti-trans, anti-queer violence and prejudice in the US reflected in the stories that center queer trauma and exclusion. Consider another major CW original, *Supernatural* (2005-2020), and the tongue-in-cheek tweet following its season 15 finale naming the story choice "cars go to heaven and gays go to turbohell […] a deeply American sentiment."[18] (Its final season ended with a queer male love confession that sent the confessing character to a hell dimension while a much beloved Chevy Impala appeared in "heaven" in the finale.) Whether this is indicative of forthcoming narratives on the CW remains to be seen, especially given changes at the network.

What my work seeks to add, rather than a superimposed blueprint for how to engage with queer representation, is a new way forward in describing queer storytelling and the incorporation of queer narrative, style, and structure. Rather than denotative and connotative interpretation, a dichotomy that has informed a great deal of the analysis within this dissertation and, in so doing, shown the instability of that pure-ish dichotomy itself, I would like to posit an "integrative" queer representation (see Appendix B for a diagram of the characterization that follows). As mentioned, the series under examination here show both the combination of trope-based, nod-and-a-wink references to queerness and the inclusion of nuanced, openly queer characters whose stories both orbit and are sometimes separate from their sexuality and experiences of trauma, loss, and more. However, this inclusive, potentially norm-defying storytelling is—also as shown—constrained, as integrative politics often are, by the expectations and realities of an

[18] Nicasio Reed (@nicasioreed), "you know what, 'cars go to heaven and gays go to turbohell' is genuinely a deeply American sentiment, so anyone in the middle of writing their media studies thesis...," *Twitter*, November 19, 2020, https://twitter.com/nicasioreed/status/1329630453477752832.

inequitable, normative social landscape.[19] Television itself has been considered such a cornerstone of cultural education—both in its programming and in its advertising—and as a "low-culture" form, that education has often been considered a key form of social norm reproduction.[20]

However, film and television programming are creative industries, that potential oxymoron that establishes both a productive and open space of creativity and a confined set of profit-focused, economically and technically structured rules. The tension between these pieces of the TV puzzle are perhaps most clearly analogized through the struggles and slippages of this potential "integrative representation" of queer identity: the possibilities inherent in this space may be more openly expressed, perhaps, but still restricted in both familiar and new ways regarding respectability, acceptability, and perceived "goodness" alongside marketability. These potential cudgels of quality, goodness, and respectability, then, are the demanded consequences, reborn from earlier production codes into new formats; marketable forms of defiance that go a bit further but not too far become the new nods-and-winks of an industry desperately seeking market share and social relevance in an ever more streaming-dominated space. These are the envelope edges that the CW has been pushing and potentially the new frameworks its programming has helped to develop—but to what end?

As of the end of 2023, the CW has been bought out, with executives saying it wasn't making and was rather losing money anyway.[21] New executives appear unsure and unconvinced if

[19] Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Queering Home or Domesticating Deviance? Interrogating Gay Domesticity through Lifestyle Television," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 227–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877906064032.
[20] D. W. Smythe, "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work," *Media and Cultural Studies* 2006 (1981): 230–256, http://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2012/04/26/media-and-cultural-studies-1/media-and-cultural-studies.pdf#page=269; Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview"; Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).
[21] Maas, "Nexstar to Acquire 75% Stake in the CW Network from Paramount Global, Warner Bros. Discovery."

anyone in the stated target audience was really watching, standing by the average age number of 57 and a general bent toward reruns.[22] If Nexstar's programming choices are anything to go by, series like independently produced Jesus drama *The Chosen* (2023-present) and the move toward acquired rather than original programming suggest that there may be a different, less defiant direction in the CW's future.[23] And perhaps this will, finally, be the shift that gets the CW to turn a profit, since that seems to be the driving force.

In the explosion (implosion?) of the streaming market, creatives are contending with an industry ever more brash about the fact that executives don't care or support creation unless it turns a profit. Consider as an example the unreleased Batgirl movie, axed after nearly completing filming as part of a Warner Brothers' cost-cutting strategy,[24] which has also led to shows and films disappearing from streaming platforms and the ease of public access that streaming services boasted.[25] With streaming also resulting in a more prominent lack of industry-wide rerun structures to reiterate fin-syn routes to prosperity, creative productions and the narratives therein represented will always also be continually dependent on what can "sell," as they have always been,[26] though now in an industry that seems at a loss to determine how best an actualized, produced creative property can sell. Given the current trajectories where series last one to three seasons before cancellation, TV long-form storytelling is not what it used to be—something seen even in the progression of these 3 case studies (we see a range of start dates from

[22] Hailu and Maas, "Yes, the CW's Average Viewer Is Actually 57 -- Here's How the Rest of Broadcast Stacks Up."
[23] Lesley Goldberg, "Jesus Drama 'The Chosen' Lands at The CW," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 9, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/jesus-drama-the-chosen-the-cw-1235511664/.
[24] Wesley Stenzel, "Batgirl Directors Call Movie's Cancelation 'the Biggest Disappointment of Our Careers,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, September 11, 2023, https://ew.com/movies/batgirl-directors-call-cancelation-biggest-disappointment/.
[25] Brian Welk, "'Batgirl' Was Just the Beginning: Warner Bros. Discovery to Write off $2 Billion in Content in Q3," *IndieWire2*, October 25, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/warner-bros-discovery-content-write-off-batgirl-q3-earnings-1234775731/.
[26] Smythe, "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work."

2015 to 2019, but all end at the same time, around 2022-2023 and the Nexstar buyout). Additionally, all 3 of the later case study series include predominantly shorter seasons, even those that are not specifically summer series as *Legends* originally was. With less time to find one's feet as a production, there's less chance for an established creative team with a sense of job security to start pushing the boundaries and seeking to make the spaces that might indicate a push beyond the limitations of an integrative yet effectively normative form of storytelling and representation.

As always, the answer I find I am really looking for when I talk about representation, about storytelling, and about production industries is only in part an answer based on what the past tells us. What compels continued investigation, what engenders fan productions, what inspires future work is truly what possibilities the future can hold for both the stories we tell ourselves and the way we go about producing them. For all that the industry, especially in broadcast, is not doing much to expand storytelling beyond adaptation, reboots, and re-imaginings, there's a potential for creativity that continually extends beyond the console, embedded even directly within the concept of adapting existing content, or integrating past forms of storytelling and allegory.

As a medium so historically and currently tied to cultural education, norms, and modes of engagement with those similar and different to ourselves, television is a potent carrier of current perspectives, stabilizer of past perspectives, and shaper of potential future perspectives on community, identity, and self. This dissertation hovers in the spaces carved by the CW's nebulous position as broadcast and online provider, as dramatic television and soap opera, as teen TV central and as a "defiant," socially conscious brand, taking seriously the narrative, cultural, and industrial contributions of this network to the broader televisual and social project of representing queer identity, and what, at the end of the day, that comes to mean for its viewers.

The end reception point and the communities to which these representations most speak are the part of the circuit of culture[27] most clearly missing here, and while I contend that critical narrative and aesthetic analysis builds a foundation for understanding what may be received from a text, there is more to be gleaned about trauma, queer identity, and television from the voices and experiences of those consuming and engaging with the series at hand here.[28] While that is not within the scope of this dissertation, the understanding these case studies build about strategies of televisual and creative representation, storytelling, and industry trope perseverance will hopefully feed future examinations that may work to more fully close the circuit I begin here.

[27] du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studes: The Story of the Sony Walkman*.
[28] For an example of this work, see Cavalcante, "Affect, Emotion, and Media Audiences: The Case of Resilient Reception."

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SELECTED FOCAL EPISODES IN EACH SERIES

Episodes listed below were noted during viewing to emphasize/centralize queer characters' story arcs, confessions of trauma or of other identity, or experiences of violence and trauma themselves. In some cases, these episodes also include tropes and/or signifiers previously used to imply queerness (see introduction for more details).

Legends of Tomorrow (2016-2022)

- Season 1 (2016)
    - Night of the Hawk, episode 8
    - Left Behind, episode 9
    - Legendary, episode 16
- Season 2 (2016-17)
    - Out of Time, episode 1
    - Camelot/3000, episode 12
    - Aruba, episode 17
- Season 3 (2017-18)
    - Aruba-Con, episode 1
    - Freakshow, episode 2
    - Helen Hunt, episode 6
    - Beebo God of War, episode 8
    - Daddy Dahrkest, episode 10

    - Here I Go Again, episode 11
    - The Curse of the Earth Totem, episode 12
    - I, Ava, episode 16
    - Guest Starring John Noble, episode 17
- Season 4 (2018-19)
    - Witch Hunt, episode 2
    - Hell No, Dolly!, episode 7
    - Lucha de Apuestas, episode 9
    - The Eggplant, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, episode 12
    - Hey, World!, episode 16
- Season 5 (2020)
    - The One Where We're Trapped on TV, episode 14
- Season 6 (2021)
    - Ground Control to Sara Lance, episode 1
    - Back to the Finale: Part II, episode 7
    - Most season 6 episodes contain references to the Avalance wedding.
    - The Fungus Amongus, episode 15
- Season 7 (2021-2022)
    - The Bullet Blondes, episode 1
    - The Need for Speed, episode 2
    - Speakeasy Does it, episode 4
    - Paranoid Android, episode 8
    - Knocked Down, Knocked Up, episode 13

Supergirl (2016-2021)

- Season 2 (2016-2017)
    - Welcome to Earth, episode 3
    - Changing, episode 6
    - Mr. and Mrs. Mxyzptlk, episode 13
    - Star-Crossed, episode 16
    - Alex, episode 19
    - Nevertheless, She Persisted, episode 22
- Season 3 (2017-2018)
    - Girl of Steel, episode 1
    - Far From the Tree, episode 3
    - Dark Side of the Moon, episode 20
- Season 4 (2018-2019)
    - American Alien, episode 1
    - Fallout, episode 2
    - Bunker Hill, episode 8
    - Suspicious Minds, episode 10
    - Blood Memory, episode 11
- Season 5 (2019-2020)
    - Dangerous Liaisons, episode 5
    - Reality Bytes, episode 15
    - Alex in Wonderland, episode 16

    - Immortal Kombat, episode 19
- Season 6 (2021)
    - Hope for Tomorrow, episode 15
    - Nightmare in National City, episode 16
    - I Believe in a Thing Called Love, episode 17
    - Kara, episode 20

Black Lightning (2018-2021)

- Season 1 (2018)
    - Resurrection, episode 1
    - LaWanda: The Book of Hope, episode 2
    - LaWanda: The Book of Burial, episode 3
    - Black Jesus, episode 4
- Season 2 (2018-2019)
    - Book of Consequences: Chapter 3: Master Lowry, episode 3
    - Book of Blood: Chapter 1: Requiem, episode 5
    - Book of Secrets: Chapter Two: Prodigal Son, episode 11
    - Book of Secrets: Chapter Three: Pillar of Fire, episode 13
    - Book of Secrets: Chapter Four: Original Sin, speiode 14
    - Book of the Apocalypse: Chapter One: The Alpha, episode 15
- Season 3 (2019-2020)
    - Book of Occupation: Chapter One: The Rise of Blackbird, episode 1
    - Book of Occupation: Chapter Three: Agent Odell’s Pipe Dream, episode 3

    - Book of Occupation: Chapter Four: Lynn's Ouroboros, episode 4
    - Book of Resistance: Chapter One: Knocking on Heaven's Door, episode 6
    - Book of Resistance: Chapter Two: Henderson's Opus, episode 7
    - Book of War: Chapter Two: Freedom Ain't Free, episode 15
    - Book of War: Chapter Three: Liberation, episode 16
- Season 4 (2021)
    - Book of Reconstruction: Chapter Three: Despite All My Rage…, episode 3
    - Book of Reconstruction: Chapter Four: A Light in the Darkness, episode 4
    - Book of Ruin: Chapter Two: Theseus's Ship, episode 6
    - Painkiller, episode 7
    - Book of Ruin, Chapter Three: Things Fall Apart, episode 8
    - Book of Resurrection: Chapter Two: Closure, episode 13

Batwoman (2019-2022)

- Season 1 (2019-2020)
    - Pilot, episode 1
    - The Rabbit Hole, episode 2
    - Tell Me the Truth, espiode 7
    - Crisis on Infinite Earths, Hour Two, episode 9
    - How Queer Everything is Today!, episode 10
    - Grinning from Ear to Ear, episode 14
    - Off with Her Head, episode 15
    - O, Mouse!, episode 20
- Season 2 (2021)

    - Whatever Happened to Kate Kane?, episode 1
    - Prior Criminal History, episode 2
    - Bat Girl Magic!, episode 3
    - Fair Skin, Blue Eyes, episode 4
    - Gore on Canvas, episode 5
    - It’s Best You Stop Digging, episode 7
    - Survived Much Worse, episode 8
    - Rule #1, episode 9
    - And Justice for All, episode 14
    - Kane, Kate, episode 17
- Season 3 (2021-2022)
    - Antifreeze, episode 4
    - A Lesson from Professor Pyg, episode 5
    - How Does Your Garden Grow?, episode 6
    - Trust Destiny, episode 8
    - Meet Your Maker, episode 9

Roswell, New Mexico (2019-2022)

- Season 1 (2019)
    - Pilot, episode 1
    - So Much for the Afterglow, episode 2
    - Don’t Speak, episode 5
    - Smells Like Teen Spirit, episode 6

    - Songs About Texas, episode 9
    - I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing, episode 10
    - Champagne Supernova, episode 11
    - Creep, episode 12
    - Recovering the Satellites, episode 13
- Season 2 (2020)
    - Good Mother, episode 3
    - Sex and Candy, episode 6
    - The Diner, episode 9
    - American Woman, episode 10
    - Mr. Jones, episode 13
- Season 3 (2021)
    - Black Hole Sun, episode 3
    - Tones of Home, episode 9
    - 2 Become 1, episode 11
    - Never Let You Go, episode 13
- Season 4 (2022)
    - You Get What You Give, episode 5
    - Missing My Baby, episode 8
    - Down in a Hole, episode 10
    - How’s It Going to Be, episode 13

APPENDIX B

DEPICTING INTEGRATIVE REPRESENTATION

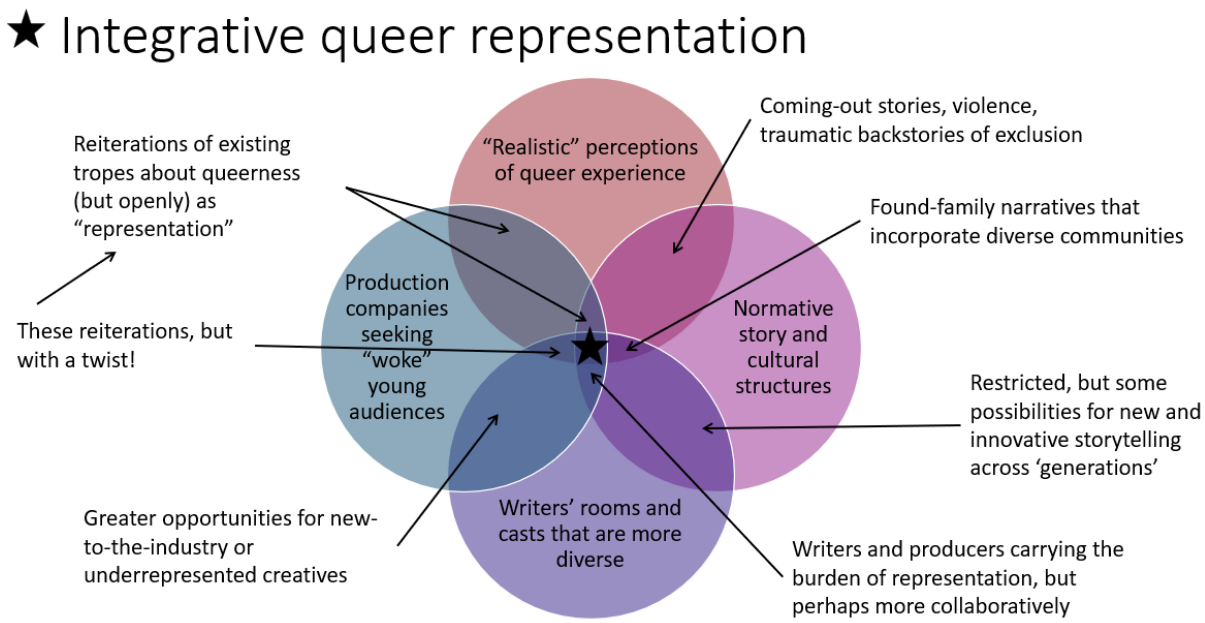

Figure 55: A diagram that attempts to characterize the multiple facets of integrative queer representation as posited by the conclusion of this dissertation.

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