DIVERSITY IS ALMOST A SUPERHERO:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIVERSITY

IN DC'S *ARROWVERSE*

by

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**DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Yvette Marie Mireles. With this thesis, I want to let you know that you achieved what you aimed to do and that I will forever be thankful for what you've done and continue to do. I love you.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| Abbreviation | Description |
| --- | --- |
| CRT | Critical Race Theory |
| QT | Queer Theory |
| DEO | Department of Extranormal Operations |

# ABSTRACT

In the last ten years, superheroes have entered the mainstream and are a part of media studies. Most of this research has been based in examining the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Therefore this paper examine a part of comic studies that hasn't been explored. This paper analyzes DC's *Arrowverse* using a sociological lens using Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory. The intention of this thesis is to examine the diversity that is presented in the *Arrowverses'* shows: *Arrow (2012), The Flash (2014), Supergirl (2015), DC's Legends of Tomorrow (2016), and Black Lightning (2018).* Race, gender, and LGBTQ+ aspects of diversity are examined using a review of past literature and specific examples of quotes and storylines from the *Arrowverse* in order to examine the diversity presented.

Keywords: comics, media, DC, race, gender, queer, sociology

# I. INTRODUCTION

Comics have been visual representations that contain a multitude of multicultural and socially relevant information. Direct results are that certain comics have molded and confirmed perceptions and other comics offered viewers the chance to have their viewpoints challenged (Klein 1993). Television shows and films are the reason that comic characters are interwoven with mainstream culture today. Comic-Con is an event that occurs every year in San Diego, where big corporations, comic book companies, celebrities, and over 125,000 fans gather to discuss all things film, television, and comics (Smith 2010). This event is physical proof of the social importance that comic culture currently has in mainstream culture.

Past research has examined comics, Marvel movies, or specific DC characters' worlds containing Batman, Superman, or Wonder Woman (Carrington 2016; Gibson; Howell 2015; Lavigne 2015; Low 2017; Robinson 1998). In past research, there is a significant lack of research focusing on a large scope, such as the DC superheroes within the *Arrowverse* television shows. This is an important gap to explore considering the continued success of all the shows and the advertisement of diversity within them. Instead of just looking at one character's *reality* these shows have offered an opportunity to explore diversity in an entire *world* that involves intersecting superheroes. Diversity in this thesis will be defined as race, gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. The word queer will be used as an umbrella term for sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual expression (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). This term will be interchangeable with LGBTQ+ throughout this paper since all aspects of LGBTQ+ falls under the word queer.

The topic that is going to be discussed is DC's television *universe* of superhero

shows. The *universe* has been named the *Arrowverse*; this includes the shows *Arrow (2012)*, *The Flash (2014)*, *Supergirl (2015)*, *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)*, *Black Lightning (2018)*, and *Batwoman (2019)*. This thesis will be examining almost all the television shows that are presented in DC's *Arrowverse,* more will be explained on this later.  Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory will be used to examine the positive and negative aspects of diversity contained in these shows in order to provide a framework for issues of diversity in the *Arrowverse*. The sociological significance of this work is necessary due to the continued rising interest of superhero culture in mainstream American film and television. Examining this will allow for the field of sociology to expand and consider the issues of race and queer issues in a modern contextualization.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Diversity Exploitation

In 2003, the Bunche Center released a report about racial diversity in television in their five-year longitudinal study. This report showed that in 2002, 21.8 percent of all characters were people of color. This is only slightly lower than the percentage from 2014-2015, where only 24 percent of primetime top television network characters were people of color (GLAAD 2019). During the 2018-2019 television season, 44 percent of primetime cable network characters were people of color. NBC lead the top television networks with 47 percent and the CW followed close behind with 46 percent of their characters identifying as people of color (GLAAD 2019). This is 22.2 percent higher than the 2002 television numbers and 20 percent higher than the 2014-2015 numbers.

Outside of the numbers, a superhero's appearance has long been an extension of who they are as a person. The sexualization of female superheroes has been routine in comic books since they began printing. Jeffery Brown (2015) sums it up with black female superheroes being displayed as *exotic* due to their ethnicity and femininity. Vixen, a black female superhero from Africa, from DC comics, is known by academics for being sexualized and exploited for being *exotic* since she is given powers from a totem that allows her to harness the abilities of any animal she thinks of. In addition to the totem, her overall costume has historically been built on animal themes, amplifying her sexuality through clothing and physical appearance (Brown 2015; Davis 2015).

Cyborg, another DC superhero, is a black male who instead of struggling with his race, deals with the implications of his appearance as half robot/ half man. Cyborg's story allows writers and readers to explore his black experience and self under the justification

of exploring his life as a robot in society. While this was done with the best intentions, this allows writers and readers to take credit for racial diversity while blatantly avoiding the discussion of race (Whaley 2015). Meanwhile on the opposite side of the spectrum of the minority experience, Catwoman has been shown in many iterations, such as Latina or African American, and a self-assured woman in her identity as a woman of color (Whaley 2011). She has historically presented herself with owning her agency to walk into rooms of the white elite and state that she belongs there regardless of what the white elite would say (Whaley 2011). While this is a positive aspect of a minority character, the exploitation comes with the overrepresentation of her sexuality. Her race has become exoticized in order to hypersexualize the character and keep readers interested in her as a character instead of delving any deeper into her characterization for decades (Whaley 2011).

DC's Black Lightning, like many black heroes, was exploited and stereotyped as a black man. His power was based on him having the ability to wield lightning, yet he also was stereotyped as an abnormally strong hypermasculine black man (Cunningham 2010). The historical connotations of African American hypermasculinity continue to reinforce negative stereotypes that date back to colonialism (Cunningham 2010). Stereotypes are even more blatantly obvious with one of Black Lightning's original costumes. With this costume there was the typical spandex design, yet his mask covered half his face and contained an afro (Davis 2015). These stereotypes are further compounded when examining his comics and seeing that he is limited to the ghettos and slums in Metropolis, Superman's town, and never receives the credit he deserves since he chooses to focus on his community area (Cunningham 2010).

Black superheroes are given an aesthetic that portrays certain connotations, intentional or not, to signify that they are indeed black superheroes (Davis 2015). Asian superheroes as well are created around certain stereotypes that further the idea of a model minority (Couzelis 2018). Dwayne McDuffie (2009) is cited by Facciani, Warren, and Vendemia in 2015 saying that these characters serve as a tokenized representation of an entire race or ethnicity, thereby making that their whole identity (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia 2015). This token role limits their ability to stand as an actual person who is more complex than this one aspect of their identity (Couzelis 2018).

**Race in Superhero Culture is "Forgotten"**

While race is often a point of discussion when it comes to media, the discussion disappears when looking at comic books. Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia (2015: 221) did a quantitative content analysis on American comic books from 1991-2005. Their data showed that, "79% of the protagonists were made up of white males... and that aliens, demons, and other types of non-human lifeforms were more likely to be represented than all human racial minorities combined." This statistic rings true in application as Marc Singer (2002) points out the fact that in the comic series *Legion of Super-Heroes* from 1958, the Legion tries to recruit an African American superhero claiming diversity since there were other members who were any color, yellow, green, etc., and that it didn't matter. This superficial justification, as Marc Singer (2002) notes, is that instead of dealing with the races that exist in human society, comics have looked elsewhere to aliens and creatures of other races to justify diversity and race issues. Singer (2002) instead presents a chance to rectify this issue with acknowledgement of DuBois' idea of a split identity that minorities often face in their lives. Instead of trying to discuss race in

terms of aliens and such, there are aspects of human life that can indeed explore the split

identity that plagues humans such as race, sexuality, and more (Singer 2002).

A different take on the lack of black characters in superhero comics is the extreme

lack of black supervillains in DC's comics. Unfortunately, after the 1970s, it became

clear that Marvel was leading the way with black villains and DC chose to hold back

(Cunningham 2010). One of DC's earliest black superheroes is Black Lightning in 1977.

While he is a hero, some in his community don't view him as a hero. Black Lightning

throughout the comic series is wanted by the police, just like the criminals and his

nemesis Tobias Whale, an albino black man, that he is facing down (Cunningham 2010).

Cunningham (2010) makes the point when stating that there are no visually black

supervillains. Black characters are relegated to the role of minor villain with no

implication of ever being given a bigger role. Instead supervillain roles are delegated to

aliens or people from other planets deemed as *safer* characters to use.

**Queer Representation: Positive and Negative**

The presentation of queer people on television has evolved from the 90's

stereotypical and racially limiting depictions of queer people with *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*,

and *Queer as Folk* (Ahn, Himberg, and Young 2014). In the 2000s most known

characters of the queer community were known in *American Horror Story*, *Glee*, and

*Sing* (Joyrich 2014). Instead of being stereotypical, these people were portrayed as

normal people with the intention of assimilation into the world around them being

defined as normal (Joyrich 2014). These shows were groundbreaking with the disruption

of the heteronormative binary mold that television had historically been following. This

rang particularly true with Ryan Murphy's, such as *American Horror Story* and *Glee*,

television shows that saw the queer narrative presented as normal and the storyline

narrative upending the world and the lives of these characters (Joyrich 2014). Moving

into the 2018-2019 season of television, 75 out of 857 main cast members, on 111

primetime shows on main primetime networks were identified as LGBTQ. These

numbers account for 8.8 percent of all characters on cable broadcast networks. The CW

ranked as the top network to have LGBTQ representation at 16% of all its characters

(GLAAD 2019). This is a significant from five years ago, where only 4 percent of

primetime cable network characters were LGBTQ (GLAAD 2015).

Since this is a discussion about superhero representation, it is critical to point out

an important rules that dictated how superheroes were shown in comics. Until the 1980s

there was a rule book known as the *Comic Code*. One of the most important rules was

that superheroes must adhere to the heterosexual norm and were not permitted to stray

from the social norm, specifically in relation to marriage and sexual relationships

(Phillips and Strobel 2013). Mainstream superheroes were stuck having to represent a

heteronormative agenda that was intending to push the expected social norm into the

future. When this code ended in the 1980s, the LGBT+ community saw members emerge

in the comics (Phillips and Strobel 2013).

Members of the transgender community have found comfort in the realm of

superheroes and comics. Qualitative interviews done by Andre Cavalcante (2018)

explored the impact superheroes have had for their readers and how characters were

outside of the norm with sexual fluidity and nonconforming physical selves. These

superheroes explore identity safely outside of their selves and the expectations around

them. All of these interviewees spoke about the emotional connection and positive light

that these superheroes placed on sexual nonconformity and how this helped them come to accept the feelings that they experienced. Transgender representation has been explored through DC's Vertigo, an adult audience label. Suzanne Scott, Ellen Kirkpatrick, Mey Rude, J. Skyler, and Rachel Stevens (2015) discussed the importance of Wanda who appeared in the *Sandman* comic series. Through this discussion, these people discussed the importance of Wanda and her determination to become a woman regardless of the body that she was given.

Batwoman is a main superhero character that was a key part of LGBTQ representation for DC. She was originally created with the intention of being a love interest for Batman, however over time her role evolved and she became an out lesbian who explored her sexuality in front of readers who may have never seen queer content (Petrovic 2011). Her storyline in *Batwoman: Elegy* (2009) presents her as a former military member who suffered the consequences of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'. It also covers confronting the heteronormative definitions of a woman by having her with short hair and participating in typically masculine activities to subvert the expectation of continuous stereotypical femininity (Petrovic 2011). This type of content is important to touch on since it doesn't aim to change the ideas of femininity within the costume or herself but offers different aspects of femininity without placing a negative lens on how her gender expression is shown.

**Female Superheroes Challenging the Norm**

For the 2011-2012 television year, the Bunche Center (2014) reported that in broadcast scripted shows women comprised 44 percent of roles. On television in the 2018-2019 television year, women made up 43 percent of main cast characters on

primetime cable networks. Out of these women, 46 percent of the characters were women of color (GLAAD 2019). This is a marginal increase from ten years ago which saw 43 percent of women on television (GLAAD 2010). The CW was shown as the leader in 2018-2019 with the network having 46 percent of women on their shows (GLAAD 2019).

Historically in comic books, women have been placed in a stereotypical role of love interests, damsels, wives, secretaries, and at best a *plucky reporter*. It is men who have been given the important role of a superhero who is presented as strong, smart, charming, confident, and as one who never fumbles in a situation (Brown 2015). In every role that stories present, women are seen receiving the shorter end of the stick (Phillips and Strobel 2013). Phillips and Strobl (2013) offer the example of victimhood, where women are presented as victims in a more severe way. Women frequently experience brutal, objectively over-aggressive forms of violence. As such, women are frequently shown needing men to save them instead of being able to stand on their own. This reiterates the issue of accepting women who are choosing to deviate from the heteronormative behavior that women should partake in (Phillips and Strobl 2013).

Writers have continuously chosen to base their male characters' plights with overused storylines instead of exploring the true complexity that man have to offer (Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014). This commonality is exacerbated when women have been relegated to these background characters and not always given their due credit. Gabriel Gianola and Janine Coleman (2018) touch on this hegemonic gender dichotomy when discussing Gwen Stacy's character from her first appearance as nothing more than a supporting character wanting Peter Parker, Spiderman, to love her. While

Peter was trying to solve the issues of the city under his protection, Gwen was only focusing on Peter and love. It was only over the years that readers and writers embraced the concept of the strong, independent character that Gwen Stacy could be. This later resulted in her getting a leading role and becoming Spider-Gwen (Gianola and Coleman 2018). On the opposite spectrum, there has been female characters that strayed outside the norm and broken the barriers to inherently challenge the male agency in superhero culture (Howell 2015).

Wonder Woman, also known as Diana Prince, has long been seen as an antithesis to all the masculinity that has been displayed throughout the DC comics, particularly between Superman and Batman (Jimenez 2018). Wonder Woman has always presented a feminist perspective in superhero culture, offering the readership a different type of hero. Instead of a woman needing a man to save her, Wonder Woman presents a woman saving herself, all while exhibiting masculine traits and feminine traits at the same time (Cocca 2014). She was doing and thinking about more than stereotypical feminine things such as clothes or men, instead focusing on diplomacy, equality, and other topics typically given to men (Cocca 2014). This was even more on display throughout the decades, as her outfit began to reflect the growing fashion freedom that women in each decade were progressively gaining (Brownie and Graydon 2016). Wonder Woman's costume would continue to reject the expected femininity throughout history, instead showing an independence that women had been fighting for. To challenge the American social dichotomy even more so, she is not simply a woman of our society, she hails from a society more advanced than the American society that she protects (Jimenez 2018). Perhaps the biggest part of her identity that challenges the norm, is that her agency is not

in active defiance to the patriarchy. She simply does this because she comes from a place with no men. She knows no better and is not trying to fight against any agenda (Jimenez 2018). She was originally created to challenge and disrupt the heteronormative masculinity in comics (Howell 2015). She is coming from a place with a pure sense of justice and reformation that has not been tainted with the heteronormative aspects of modern human society (Jimenez 2018). This is what makes her the antithesis of male superheroes.

Catwoman has had a significant impact in the DC superhero culture since her creation in the 1940s. She was an antihero who was secure in herself, her race, actions, and sexuality (Whaley 2011). Originally Catwoman was created to become a romantic interest who challenged Batman and his pursuit of justice. Whaley (2011) has discussed Batman's tendency to let her go when he would pursue her for crimes committed due to his attraction for her. However, Catwoman has continually challenged the role of a woman in superhero comics with avoiding putting her into the role of a wife, even with the sexual tension and hints frequently dropped by Catwoman herself. The relationship between these two would never be consummated in some comics, only to be presented as a couple in a different comics that are not the main reality that the comics work in (Whaley 2011). Even outside the comics, Catwoman showed that readers, male and female, enjoy the sexualization of the character, yet identify with the traits that make her a hero like the other superheroes (Whaley 2011). The femme fatale herself has proved even in her current storylines to be more complex and intriguing instead of any idea of placing her into such a limiting role as a wife (Valentine 2018).

## III. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

**Not Expanding the Scope**

While all this literature is critical to comic studies, the issue is that the scope is limited to the comic books. While comic books are a huge corner of the comic media, it is not the only one. There is research referencing DC movies, yet there was nothing on these DC television shows that have now existed for an extended time period. It is important and necessary for all forms of media to be explored in order to gain a complete perspective on DC superheroes.

The scope is also limited when the research is only focused on Marvel's characters and movies. Marvel is one of the foundational companies for comic media, however DC is just as foundational and not getting the same attention. Unfortunately, this creates an uneven scope when all of superhero culture is not getting its fair share of analysis done. This results in the scope of research missing a wealth of untapped information that needs to be examined. The issue with the current scope of all research being done is that it appears to just be spinning its wheels and not moving forward or trying to expand past the basic knowledge of superhero culture. This study will help expand the scope and will explore a large gap of comic studies concerning DC characters in their respective television comic universe.

**Not Identifying the Root of the Problem**

The gap in the literature is a lack of context for understanding this oversight when examining superhero culture. There are multiple aspects of diversity that are presented in past literature that show recurring issues. To reflect there is the issue with exploitation and stereotypes. Stereotypes about black superheroes have done nothing but perpetuate

the lack of diversity being acknowledged in superhero comic culture as a whole. While exploitation may sound like a positive idea for representation, it limits the agency these characters have as heroes. Heroes are being negatively impacted by the exploitation thereby making the audience miss the entire point of diversity.

Then there comes the aspect of how race is explored in different comics. The interesting paradigm in past research concerning the topic of race, both realistically or using aliens, needs to be addressed and acknowledged. Race is a critical continuous point of contention in American society and therefore must be discussed within the fictional American societies that these heroes are protecting. Racial issues have already been affecting the comics; therefore, these issues have already permeated the comic world and needs to be acknowledged as such.

Past research on queerness in comics has been tested in the past with the Comic Code (Phillips and Strobel 2013). This limited making queer characters mainstream for a time with the intention of keeping social norms as they were. Research has also shown that there has been a positive movement forward in relation to queer superheroes getting recognized and valued as equally as other superheroes. There has also been a conscious growth with queer characters' identities and backstories in comics as seen in the literature review. This has allowed all readers to get a glimpse into the lives of queer superheroes and see the *queer* become the norm in a superhero universe.

This literature indicates that all of these women are shown as examples of female superheroes have been shown and evolved over time to stand on their own without the heteronormative expectations that women have faced in society. Instead, these women have embraced gender identity in all its forms in multiple ways, disavowing anyone to

state otherwise. This progressive movement has allowed more women into the forefront and given them the complexity and character exploration that they deserve.

While there has been this past research concerning race, gender, identities, and LGBTQ+ topics in some comics, there is a lack of research tying all the pieces together. It seems that these issues are being discussed in comics, without getting to the root of the issue. In all research found, there is a lack of theoretical frameworks these analyses are being viewed through. This study will use Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory as two theoretical lenses used to contextualize about racial and queer experiences in the *Arrowverse's* modern superhero culture.

# IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

There are two theoretical frameworks that will be used in this thesis: Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory. Below are the breakdowns of both theories and an explanation of the best approach for each of them concerning research.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory was created from critical legal studies and radical feminism theories. The ideas came from CRT theorists seeing issues of race in different aspects of society in the 1970s (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). People studying the law during this time realized that all the progress that had been made from the 1960s, was beginning to come to a stalemate and as such, was not creating any long-term successful reform. The direct result from this was the decision to explore other methods by which to approach the idea of racism and how to combat against a society that experiences it in every aspect of life. Once created, CRT became summarily defined as a theory that critically analyzes how society functions itself within racial lines and hierarchies (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). There are multiple facets from which to study race in CRT, and some theorists choose to focus on those specific aspects. For the purpose of this thesis, all shall be used in order to provide a whole picture of CRT as it applies to the *Arrowverse*.

A breakdown of this theory requires explanation of a few fundamental aspects of Critical Race Theory. One facet of CRT are the idealists. Idealists focus on the idea that racism is a social construction that humans themselves, not based in any form of actual scientific logic, instead manipulating science in order to push a narrative that fit the agenda of the white race (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). The main standing ground for idealists is the culture of American society. To combat racism, idealists state that

changing culture, including speech, media, diversity representation, would all be valid ways to change the racism undertones that plague American society (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). An example of this would be the inclusion of foreign language rappers into the award nominations of English-speaking rappers in America instead of creating a separate category for foreign rappers. For purposes of my research, this field cannot be used alone since it only focuses on surface level change. While these actions are all important, these alone do not stand to change anything in society if there are no bigger reforms being made.

The next facet in CRT are the realists, otherwise known as the economic determinists (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Realists base their idea on the notion that society uses racism to distribute privilege and status (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). That privilege and status is gained through differential racialization, which is used to change a narrative according to the leading needs. Racism allows for the easy manipulation of different minorities to be presented as a general problematic group that poses a threat to the rest, creating a hostility toward a minority when needed (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). An example for this viewpoint is the political stereotype of Hispanics taking all American jobs, hence pushing for stronger immigration policies. This approach would not suffice on its own since these are larger created narratives than the local perspective. These are used for hierarchies as a whole and does not allow for an in-depth examination of how racism effects people independently.

The last major facet in CRT are the materialists. Materialists examine how dominant groups focus on controlling the perceived appearance in order to designate the *weaker* group as the *villain* in society (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). This intentional

agenda push is the middle ground in CRT. Materialists achieve controlling appearances by examining the society around them and adjusting foundational aspects of society in order to create a situation that benefits the dominant group best (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Sometimes that best interest can coincide with the minority's interest, however that will usually not be the case. Even when people have the best intentions with their reform, interest convergence will outweigh their good intentions since no dominant group wants to give away their dominance.

Society, critics, and CRT theorists struggle to stress the importance of race due since race is so deeply embedded in the modern society that it is not so easily recognized (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Because of this, it is critical for all methods of analysis to be used in this critical analysis. Choosing to exclude one would be a disservice to the theory itself. All sides of the spectrum, idealists, realists, and materialists provide a different perspective to examine modern American society. Through all perspectives it becomes a more complete analysis that can truly examine the problems that are residing and highlight the areas for improvement.

The best approach for this complete analysis is through structural determinism. Society's inability to rectify the wrongs of the past is defined as structural determinism (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Two forms of structural determinism will be used to analyze the DC television shows. The first is the empathic fallacy and the second is the idea of serving two master (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). The idea that someone is able to change the narrative simply because they give a rousing empathic speech is nothing more than empathic fallacy (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). This is an invalid approach to racism, since it is absurd to combat historically, racially bound words with new meanings

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of words. Trying to gloss over the racial problems that have systemically plagued American society fixes nothing. Unfortunately, as well, an empathic approach is not one that has ever successfully worked long term. Instead of long-term results, interest convergence occurs down the line and will move empathy away from race into other issues that matter more (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). The serving two masters form of structural determinism has its roots in legal studies. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain it with the idea of a lawyer and client's relationship with each other. Each person has their own agendas and intentions with a case, and in the end, it comes down to the lawyer deciding which person's agenda they are going to follow: their own or their clients?

CRT has been criticized for the fact that it has never been a positive outlook on life (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), however it is this framework that will allow for society to move past any weak foundational attempts to rectify and move past the issues that have long existed. CRT theorists are aware of the fact that they cannot simply approach their studies step by step. Instead what they declare needs to be done, is a radical, wide-reaching reform that tackles many pieces at once (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Since intersectionality exists between all social institutions in modern society, the reform approach must be handled the same way. Otherwise, theorists will face the same struggles that have plagued other reforms, and nothing will truly wind up changing. One aspect that CRT has not been given enough of a chance to explore, is media. While CRT has examined other aspects of American society: law, medical, education, etc., media is an area of study that is rife with potential. CRT was built with the intention of activism (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), and therefore it stands to reason that a main front for CRT activism should be through various outlets presented in media. This where the CRT will

be applied to *Arrowverse* shows. All of these shows will be critically examined in order to see the true progress that has been made in this form of media.

**Queer Theory**

Queer Theory is a relatively new theory that came out of feminist theory that relies heavily on post-structuralist theory (Ritzer and Stepinksy 2018). This theory examines sexual orientation, sexual identity, and how it is presented in social life (Ritzer and Stepinksy 2018). Instead of accepting that sexuality is a preset, predetermined part of a human, this theory embraces that defined sexuality is a social construct. Queer Theory emphasizes that sexuality in all its forms is a fluid aspect of a person and instead that people embrace not having a specific identity define their entire existence (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). To provide some context, queer is the umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and any other members that don't comply with the heteronormative binary (Ritzer and Stepinksy 2018).

Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) built off Arlene Steine and Ken Plummer's (1994) idea that there are four key foundations that define Queer Theory. First, it is assumed that sexuality can be understood through sexual powers that exist in every aspect of life. Whether overtly or covertly, in every situation a person's sexuality is presented and handled accordingly. Second, sexuality is seen as an action, or a verb, instead of an identification, or noun, of a person (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Instead of seeing sexuality as a solid, set in stone part of a person's identity, Queer Theory acknowledges that sexuality is a continuously evolving aspect of a person (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) build this assertion by touching on Judith Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) theory that sexuality and gender are performances that are given. The

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continual performance that is given is the reasoning behind sexuality never staying set in stone, instead sexuality is bending to the fluidity of the performance. Third, Queer Theory highlights and expands on the issue of identity politics. Queer Theory argues that by simply focusing on one aspect of a person's identity, it only reiterates the social normative that is being argued against (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Instead of fighting against the norm, queer theorists state that the best way to create change is to open spaces for queer identifying people in the mainstream thereby reshaping the social norm (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Fourth, Queer Theory states that society itself is governed by sexual desire, therefore in order to understand society, one must understand the desire that drives its people (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018).

Critically, within Queer Theory it is of the upmost importance to understand the heterosexual- homosexual binary. Sexual identity was traced by Foucault back till the 19th century and from then till now, society has reiterated that homosexuality is inferior to heterosexuality (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). The post-structuralist lens that Queer Theory functions through has stated that this binary is codependent on each other and therefore needs to remain existing in order to maintain the unequal power structure that exists (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Both sides of the binary are negatively impacted; homosexuals are negatively impacted since heterosexuals are limited in their understanding and empathetic response since they have never or will ever need to hide their sexuality. Heterosexuals are negatively impacted due the social norm of hiding any queer aspects in their sexuality (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). Outside of the existing terms listed above, this binary also negatively impacts people who do not fit either of the identifiers or the gender labels. Those outside the binary are excluded in societal norms.

This binary continues existing in society and is needs to continue being analyzed in order to explore the impacts it is making in every aspect of life. However, this binary is what Queer Theory is aiming to look past. Instead, the core aim of Queer Theory is to move past all binaries, power structures, and societal norms and view sexuality as an evolving piece of human existence (Ritzer and Stepinksy 2018). This core definition will be used to explore the *Arrowverse*.

# V. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the DC *Arrowverse* shows and the diversity represented in the shows. There will be five shows that will be examined: *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Supergirl*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Black Lighting*. As of Fall 2019, *Batwoman* is a show that exists in this universe as well, however due to the show being so new, there is not enough data to properly examine in this paper. The *Arrowverse* was created in 2012 with *Arrow*, followed by *The Flash* in 2014, *Supergirl* in 2015, *Legends of Tomorrow* in 2016, and *Black Lightning* in 2018. They have earned the title of the *Arrowverse* due to the shows interweaving and the characters moving throughout the shows, except for *Black Lightning (2018)*. There are six full seasons of *Arrow (2012)*, five for *The Flash (2014)*, four for *Supergirl (2015)*, four for *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)*, and two for *Black Lightning (2018)*.  All shows are being examined with the latest season ending as of May 2019. Most shows have resumed as of Fall 2019; however, the line has been drawn at May 2019 in order to ensure proper completion of the seasons being examined.

I have chosen to examine these shows collectively by aiming to highlight recurring trends that occur through all shows. I feel that this method will allow the examination of the shows and give a proper number of examples from each trend. This was chosen due to the problem that collectively, as of May 2019, there are hundreds of episodes. While I have seen all the shows up to the current season, this would not be conducive to showing the overall diversity presented, positive or negative, that I am trying to highlight. This would also not allow readers who have not seen the shows to understand what is being discussed and examined. The intention is to show Critical Race

Theory and Queer Theory in a modern context in television. This context just so happens to be occurring within superhero shows. I also considered examining diversity through specific character storylines. However, with so many characters in all the shows, this would not provide a coherent process to guide the trends through. By examining the recurrent trends in the shows, this will highlight the overall positives and negatives in the *Arrowverse*. This will allow readers outside the viewership base to evaluate and understand the trends that are occurring.

As discussed before, past research into media concerning diversity has not properly given an in-depth general examination into the DC *Arrowverse*. Hence the critical analysis here will prove vital towards the examination of superhero culture that has begun playing a bigger role in society with the rise of superhero media in film and television. My intention through this critical analysis will be to prove that while there has been positive movement toward diversity representation, all diversity presented in the *Arrowverse* proves to be subservient to the storyline of the main white lead characters of the *Arrowverse*. This will be explained through certain trends broken down in the analysis.

Critical Race Theory will be used to point out the trends displayed in the presented society concerning racial divides and hierarchies (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). The theoretical framework structural determinism will explain the trends I will analyze concerning race. Queer Theory will be used to evaluate: sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual representation aspects of diversity in these shows. To reiterate again, the current gap in literature is that there is no theoretical framework in which superhero culture is being explored through. Also, there is no research that has been done

on these DC television shows universe that started in 2012. Therefore, Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory will be used to examine the positive and negative aspects of diversity contained in these shows in order to provide a framework for issues of diversity in the *Arrowverse*.

**Each Show's Premise**

the *arrowverse*. The *Arrowverse* is comprised of multiple universes due to the fact that it is known in the shows that there are 52 universes. Therefore, not all the shows and its characters are all in the same universe. *Arrow (2012)*, *The Flash (2014)*, and *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* are located in the same universe, *Supergirl (2015)* is located in a different universe, and *Black Lightning (2018)* has its own. Even though they are located in different universes they are part of the collective *Arrowverse* since they are all connected through the various storylines.

arrow. *Arrow (2012)* is based on a billionaire playboy, Oliver Queen, who was stranded on an island known as Lian Yu. After five years, Oliver Queen is found and returns to Starling City to avenge his father's sins, known as The Hood. Oliver proceeds to murder elite people on a list who have committed various crimes in the city. However, as the show goes on Oliver reforms his methods by not committing murder and trying to reform his city. Early on he is assisted by John Diggle and Felicity Smoak. Later seasons also include a various number of people who will become his partners and help him protect the city from various threats.

the flash. Barry Allen is the main character working as a forensic analyst with the Central City Police Department. When STAR Labs particle accelerator explodes Barry is struck by lightning that gives the metahuman power of speed. With this new power he

goes on to become The Flash and takes on other criminal metahumans that threaten the safety of Central City. He is joined by his adoptive father Joe West, friend and eventual wife Iris West, and STAR Labs scientists Caitlin Snow and Cisco Ramon.

*supergirl***.** This show follows the story of Kara Danvers, Superman's cousin who also arrived on Earth as a 13-year-old when she escaped Krypton when it exploded and killed everyone on the planet. The storyline begins with her working at Catco Magazine and embracing her powers to save the city and becoming Supergirl. She is assisted by her sister Alex Danvers, an agent with the Department of Extranormal Operations (DEO), DEO Director Hank Henshaw, also known as the alien J'onn J'onzz, Winn Schott, and James Olsen.

*DC's legends of tomorrow***.** When the future is threatened, Time Hunter Rip Hunter time travels goes back in time to gather a team of heroes who can help win the battle in the future. These heroes work to fix time anomalies and fight enemies who threaten to destroy the timeline. This cast was originated out of characters from *Arrow* and *The Flash*. This cast has a rotating group of heroes but has a core group of Sara Lance, Mick Rory, Ray Palmer, Jefferson Jackson, and Martin Stein.

*black lightning***.** Jefferson Pierce, aka Black Lightning, was a superhero in his younger days in his community defending the citizens from gangs and local violence. However, he hung up the suit in order to take the position of principal at the local high school and work to making a bigger impact in the community. When the show begins, he is working at the high school where his oldest daughter, Nyssa, works, and where his younger daughter, Jennifer, attends. The show sees him getting back into being a hero and the evolution of his daughters gaining their own powers along the way. The key thing

to point out is that these characters, as of May 2019, have not interacted with the rest of

the *Arrowverse.*

## VI. FINDINGS

**Descriptive Statistics Character Breakdown**

      For the following tables, characters are considered main characters if they have

appeared in the shows for at least ten episodes. This number was chosen due to the

number of episodes per season, at least 18, therefore this is a sufficient amount of time to

be given an important role within the show in order to be recurring that often.

Table 1. Gender Breakdown

| Television Show | Number of Main Characters | Male | Female | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrow | 53 | 32 | 21 | 0 |
| The Flash | 30 | 21 | 9 | 0 |
| Supergirl | 26 | 9 | 17 | 0 |
| DC's Legends of Tomorrow | 20 | 12 | 8 | 0 |
| Black Lightning | 14 | 8 | 6 | 0 |
| **Total** | **143** | **82** | **61** | **0** |
| **Percent** | **100** | **57.3** | **42.7** | **0** |

      Table 1 breaks down the gender identification of all characters who exist in the

shows. *Arrow (2012)*, *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)*, and *Black Lightning (2018)* all are

the closest to having characters split down the middle in terms of gender. On the other

hand, *The Flash (2014)* has had significantly more male characters, whereas *Supergirl*

*(2015)* has had significantly more female characters. When all the characters are added

up there is shown to be sixty-one females and eighty-two males overall in the *Arrowverse*

that have had roles that saw them in ten episodes or more. This is reflective of past and

current superhero representations in media and displaying a heroes' power as something

that most men will possess.

Table 2. Diversity Breakdown

| Television Show | Number of Main Characters | Non-White | White | Alien | Hybrid | Other | Unidentified |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrow | 53 | 23 | 29 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| The Flash | 30 | 9 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Supergirl | 26 | 5 | 12 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| DC's Legends of Tomorrow | 20 | 6 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Black Lightning | 14 | 12 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | **143** | **55** | **76** | **8** | **1** | **2** | **1** |
| **Percent** | **100** | **38.5** | **53.1** | **5.6** | **.7** | **1.4** | **.7** |

Table 2 does a general breakdown of the species and race for all the characters that are shown in the *Arrowverse*. This table shows the characters in each show who are white, non-white, alien, hybrid, or other. The breakdown of this aspect is reflective of the focus that each show works with. *Arrow (2012)* has an almost even mix of humans who are white or non-white. There are no aliens, hybrids or others on this show. Which corresponds with the *Arrow's (2012)* approach to local city-based enemies and threats to Star City. *The Flash (2014)* is interesting since Table 1 showed that there are significantly more men; this table shows that there are over twice as many white characters. There are also no aliens or other kinds of characters since the show deals with humans that have gained powers. *Supergirl (2015)* has a more interesting breakdown

since they factor in aliens within their show. The result of this is that there are eight aliens listed which diversifies the list more. It is important to note though that the person designated as a hybrid and most of the aliens are shown as white passing. J'onn J'onzz, also known as Martian Manhunter, and M'gann Morzz are two aliens who assume the form of Black people in *Supergirl (2015)*. Therefore, even though there are aliens in the show, there are still predominately white people being displayed on the show. *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* focuses on time travel and history for most of the shows course. While there are magical creatures in season 4, none of them are classified in this list since they don't appear in enough episodes to qualify in this analysis. The two characters classified as other are an artificial intelligence woman and a clone from the future. Both women are played by white women. Unsurprisingly the only show with a predominately non-white cast is *Black Lightning (2018)*. This table clearly shows that while diversity is present in the *Arrowverse*, there is still a strong skewing that leans toward maintaining white superheroes.

Table 3. Race/Ethnicity Breakdown

| Television Show | Non-White Characters Total | Asian | Black | Hispanic | Alien | Hybrid | Unidentified | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrow | 24 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| The Flash | 9 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Supergirl | 14 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| DC's Legends of Tomorrow | 8 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Black Lightning | 12 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | **67** | **15** | **30** | **10** | **8** | **1** | **1** | **2** |
| **Total Percent** | **100** | **22.4** | **44.8** | **14.9** | **11.9** | **1.5** | **1.5** | **3** |

While the majority of characters are still white, as shown in Table 2, there is an interesting analysis to be had in terms of diversity when it comes looking at characters that are classified as non-white. *Arrow (2012)* as the most interesting mix in Table 3 with their non-white characters being an almost even mix of Asian, Black, and Hispanic people. *The Flash (2014)* shows a breakdown with Black characters having the majority over Asian and Hispanic minority characters. With *Supergirl (2015)* the breakdown changes since the majority of the non-white characters are aliens. However, as discussed above Table 2 the majority of the alien characters are played by white actors and are therefore white passing in the *Arrowverse*. With *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* the majority of the non-white characters are Asian characters. *Black Lightning (2018)* is a predominately black show. This is reflected with the majority of the main characters being black.

Table 4. Sexual Orientation Breakdown

| Television Show | Number of Main Characters | Non- LGBTQ+ | LGBTQ+ | Unidentified |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrow | 53 | 45 | 4 | 4 |
| The Flash | 30 | 26 | 2 | 2 |
| Supergirl | 26 | 17 | 4 | 5 |
| DC's Legends of Tomorrow | 20 | 15 | 4 | 1 |
| Black Lightning | 14 | 11 | 2 | 1 |
| **Total** | **143** | **114** | **16** | **13** |
| **Percent** | **100** | **79.7** | **11.2** | **9.1** |

These shows have been celebrated as being a major source of LGBTQIA+ support (GLAAD 2013; 2015). While this has been proven by past statistical reports, there is still

a large gap between the number of straight people and LGBTQIA+ people in the

*Arrowverse*. Out of 143 total characters, only sixteen 11.2%, are identified as part of the

LGBTQIA+ community. Depending on the show and the number of characters within

this analysis, the proportion by show varies. *Arrow (2012)* has only had four LGBTQIA+

characters with them in over ten episodes. This aligns with the overall general statistics

for the *Arrowverse*. *The Flash (2014)* is the same as the *Arrow (2012)* with only having

two LGBTQIA+ characters out of their thirty. Meanwhile newer shows such as *Supergirl*

*(2015)*, *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* and *Black Lightning (2018)* have larger amounts of

LGBTQIA+ characters appearing in ten or more episodes. Therefore, while there has

been progress in LGBTQIA+ representation, looking at this statistically shows that there

is more progress to be made.

Table 5. LGBTQ+ Breakdown

| Television Show | LGBTQ+ | Lesbian | Gay | Bisexual | Transgender | Queer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arrow | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| The Flash | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Supergirl | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| DC's Legends of Tomorrow | 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Black Lightning | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | **16** | **5** | **3** | **5** | **1** | **2** |
| **Percent** | **100** | **31.3** | **18.8** | **31.3** | **6.3** | **12.5** |

Table 5 show an interesting breakdown of the LGBTQIA+ characters in the

*Arrowverse*. *Arrow (2012)*, *Supergirl (2015)*, and *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* have the

most LGBTQIA+ characters out of the *Arrowverse*. The majority of the characters

though are either lesbians or bisexuals. Now what is important to note is that this will

warrant further discussion on the choice to have a majority of the LGBTQIA+ characters be women. There is also a lack of male gay characters in the *Arrowverse*. This would also be interesting to further explore to see if there is a correlation between the majority LGBTQIA+ characters being women and not men. The good news is that there is representation for the transgender community with Nia Naal, also known as Dreamer, being the first openly transgender character and superhero in the *Arrowverse*.

To recap these tables broke down the diversity aspects such as gender, sexuality, racial/ethnic, and aliens that are shown in the *Arrowverse*. This allowed for readers of this to understand what the *Arrowverse* is working with in terms of the characters that are included in this thematic analysis. This will help lead into a discussion of the diversity in the *Arrowverse* using Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory.

**Thematic Analysis**

**one step forward for racial diversity, two steps back for racial lines.** These shows are often, as seen in the GLAAD (2015;2019) yearly reports, as being a key area of television that has seen a substantial amount of diversification occur. While this is something to acknowledge and praise, as with other facets of media studies, this diversification needs to be analyzed in order to provide perspective on the diversity and the power that it can truly hold in society. This is going to be done using all aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT). There is no one method to examine race within CRT and therefore it would be ineffectual to do so in this content-analysis. Below is the reasoning as to why using only one would be ineffectual and why all the pieces are needed to examine a topic such as race in any context.

As seen from the tables above, specifically Tables 2 and 3, there is a diverse

presentation of characters in the *Arrowverse*. To refresh, Table 2 shows that 46.9% of the characters are classified as non-white compared to the 53.1% white characters.  These numbers reflect what the GLAAD reports (2015;2019) were saying about diversification. Looking at Table 3, 44.8% of the characters are Black, 22.4 % are Asian, and 14.9% are Hispanic. These are not numbers from television shows or even the Marvel Cinematic Universe to provide some context in relation to the size of the *–verse*. Moving past that and looking deeper into the plethora of diverse characters, it is clearly shown that all characters are not simply there as a token piece. As noted during the Table analysis, these are all characters that existed in ten episodes or more. There was a storyline and purpose behind each character. The lack of tokenization that occurs and the opening acceptance of diverse backgrounds something to applaud and acknowledge. Sixty-seven of the 143 total characters included in this content-analysis have storylines and explanations for why they exist and how they got to where they are in their respective shows.

Therefore, the argument can and should be made that the *Arrowverse* does make an effort in diversifying the characters on their shows. Following the idealist argument of Critical Race Theory (CRT) this would be the exact kind of way to be actively challenge the racist narrative that is presented in television. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) point out that the idealist perspective aims to combat racism by changing various pieces of culture, including media, and allow for inclusion of unknown cultures to exist in the mainstream..

Digging deeper, while using CRT, would be looking with the perspective of economic determinists. This theory centers around racism as the tool that determines privilege and status (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Economic determinism helps explain and highlight the fact that almost all characters of non-white backgrounds would be

classified as B or C characters since they are not classified as the main character or storyline in their respective shows. I stated that almost all the characters are characters of non-white backgrounds. However, *Supergirl (2015)*, is the only the non-white main title card character. The caveat with this is that she, while an alien, is classified as white passing. Unless she is seen using her powers, there are no identifying pieces of her that could give away that she is an alien. Being white passing allows her to gain insight and the benefits of being white just like the other main title card characters. Due to her being white passing, I would give her a classification of white when it comes to economic determinism.

The problem with analyzing this diversity with just the idealist argument proves the exact point and problem that Delgado and Stefancic (2017) say: this alone is a surface level examination of the diversity in these shows. this does not provide enough context of their role in the *Arrowverse*. While it is beneficial and necessary to have storylines containing diversity characters, their character's importance is just as important as well.

As stated earlier, with Supergirl being considered white passing, that would break down the hierarchy (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) that is presented in the *Arrowverse*. Economic determinism presents this strong, valid argument, and yet because it is looking at a general system, it as well does not offer the opportunity for in-depth examination. Therefore it cannot be used alone when examining the *Arrowverse*.

Structural determinism, the middle ground for CRT research, is the best method for allowing general, overarching and in-depth examinations to occur. This method is focused on identifying where society is unable to move past the wrongs that occurred in past history (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). This is where the *Arrowverse* can really be

examined using in-depth storylines and scenes. As mentioned before all non-white characters are relegated as supplemental members of their respective teams. Being a supplemental role designates that while being there, seen, and working towards the same goal as their respective leader, the racial lines that have long existed in history and stand as the foundation for racism continues to exist.

There are many examples of the racial lines, and society's inability to move past historical racial wrongs, that are drawn in the various shows and how they limit the non-white characters within their society. While this limitation does exist, it is not really discussed unless it can be used to exploit the assumed roles that each race is expected to have in society. Or what occurs are racial problems that are acknowledged and then moved on from. There seems to be a resolution at the end of the episode in order to carry on with the show's storyline.

In the very beginning of the show, *Arrow (2012)*, Season 1 Episode 3, "Lone Gunman", Oliver is looking where to put his secret base in Starling City and decides on an old family warehouse in the Glades. The Glades are known as the lower socioeconomic area of Starling City. Diggle immediately calls out Oliver on the privilege that he has and is using. Below is said conversation:

> Diggle: Well this is the Glades right. Your rich white friends wouldn't come to this neighborhood on a bet.

> Oliver: I am Oliver Queen right? People would stand in line for three hours if I open a club.

> Diggle: And no one who actually lives in the Glades will see a penny of those cover charges.

> Oliver: If we make a successful business, gentrify the neighborhood-

> Diggle: I was wondering when we would get to that. The white knight

swooping in to save the disenfranchised. And all by his lonesome with no help from anybody.

This conversation touches on a very natural part of racism that has historically been occurring in real society and is a very prevalent part of current social development in various cities. The white savior complex that exists as if the issues that need saving aren't happening because of past racially motivated decisions that all forms of CRT would agree with. This recurring theme of the white savior complex and the struggles that face the Glades are the main enemy in the first season of *Arrow (2012)* with the main nemesis, Malcolm Merlyn trying to level the Glades, kill everyone in them, and rebuild the city as he sees fit. Merlyn and a group of elite, wealthy members are working to continue with the blatant racism in order to achieve what they wish for and want to happen with the people seen as the enemy, just like the materialist aspect of CRT reiterates is a main facet as to why racism continues to prevail in modern societies. The *Arrowverse* is no exception to this rule.

There are also instances, outside of big moments such as the ones above that touch on the continuing racial issues in casual conversation in the *Arrowverse*. The main initial *Arrow (2012)* team includes two white characters, Oliver Queen (the Green Arrow), Felicity Smoak, and one Black character, John Diggle. In Season One, episode 19, "Unfinished Business", Oliver has Diggle go purchase drugs in order to help them catch the dealer selling them. It is revealed that this was the plan since Diggle is a Black man and therefore is stereotyped as not sticking out in a criminal transaction such as this. This is even joked about on Diggle's part when he states that he, "the person of color has successfully purchased your drugs".

In Season 2, episode 2 "Identity", of *Arrow (2012)* these societal lines are casually reminded when Oliver becomes the CEO of his family's company and the Arrow team needs to start having day jobs where they can work in close proximity to each other. Again, Diggle casually jokes that his job is the worst out of all the team since he has to be "Oliver's Black driver".

As stated before, these racial issues expand past *Arrow (2012)* and into the rest of the *Arrowverse*. Take for example when the *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* team are traveling all over the timeline handling their missions. This rotating group of people are always diverse and accordingly because of this are at times relegated to exploitation in order to cover all bases. This provides a historical timeline to the pervasive racial issues that plagued American history.

The farthest back the *Arrowverse* goes is 1856 when the Legends go to fix history in New Orleans. During Season 4, Episode 7 "Hello No, Dolly" the Legends go on a mission after history is rewritten and Marie Laveau, one of the few women of color with power during this time, is framed for a string of white women are murdered in the town.

In Season 2, Episode 4 "Abominations", the Legends go back to 1863 during the American Civil War. During the episode they decide to send Jax and Amaya undercover as members of a Southerner's slaves in order to steal the Confederates' army plans. Before going undercover Jax's best friend and superhero partner Dr. Martin Stein tries to get him to reconsider. During this conversation Jax points out that these issues during the American Civil War occurs in current times as well:

> Dr. Stein: This time period is replete with various perils. Perhaps it might be easier if you were to remain behind and keep Dr. Palmer company.

> Jax: Perhaps you should remain behind. No? Because you're not Black.

Because you think that me going back to 1863, I can't handle it.

Dr. Stein: That doesn't mean there's a need for you to subject yourself to the horrors that await you in that era.

Jax: Okay now, I get it might be difficult for you to understand this, but I've been Black my entire life, Grey. And honesty, I can't think of a time period we could go to where I wouldn't face some sort of racism.

Jax's point of is reiterated when they travel to the 1950s in Season 1, Episode 8 "Night of the Hawk" and deal with small town racism in two clear instances. First, Jax, Dr. Stein, and Sara Lance are all at a dine-in and they each point out their perspective of the 1950s:

Dr. Stein: "Seeing white picket fences and perfect family houses, its enough to make one nostalgic.

Sara: Or nauseated.

Dr. Stein: Oh come on Ms. Lance, even someone as jaded as yourself can't deny how idyllic this time was.

Jax: Yeah. (with two white high school boys glaring at him) If you're white.

Sara: And a man. And straight. And—

Dr. Stein: Okay, okay, I get the point.

Then again with Ray Palmer and Kendra undercover as a couple during this time buying a house:

Realtor: There is of course crown moulding. All original floors. Stucco ceiling. There's a small room, above the garage suitable for live-in help.

Kendra: Oh we won't need a maid. My husband and I get along just fine on our own.

Realtor: You know I have a lovely Tudor style in another town. A more… accepting one. Forward thinking….

Kendra: No, that's- that's fine. I like my towns backward.

Then there is the casual historical explanation of racism in Season 3, Episode 14 "Amazing Grace". During this episode the Legends are in Tennessee focused on getting Elvis' guitar and Nate Heywood is explaining the history and importance of rock n' roll in music history. This is a time when racism would have been just as prevalent, and this is shown when Elvis plays a show on Memphis Street in a Black bar. Nate breaks down rock n' roll's history to Amaya saying:

> Nate: Beale Street was the heart of the music scene in Memphis in the 1950s. Brothels, churches, juke joints, all next to each other, all black owned. This—this was the spirit of rock n' roll.

Yet the episode, in tradition with rock n' roll history goes on to discuss the importance of Elvis to music history, ignoring the fact that the music that he played was and is tied to Black culture. This white man is clearly shown taking the Black culture for himself and using it for his own personal gain.

Jump forward to current history and *Supergirl (2015)* touches on the racism that is still faced by people of color. In Season 3, Episode 3 "Far From the Tree", while fighting over the issue of Maggie's sexuality, her father makes the point of the impact that racism has had on him and continues to have:

> Mr. Rojas: I came to this country at nine years old. At eleven I was working in a factory.
>
> Maggie: Yes, I know. Yeah.
>
> Mr. Rojas: Do you? Do you know that I was the only Mexicano working alongside a bunch of white boys? Do you know that they would wait for me at night by the road, and laugh, and call me wetback, and kick me till my ribs were broken?

Maggie: Papa what does this have to do—

Mr. Rojas: With you being a lesbian? I worked to win their respect… I endured for my children so that you would never have to face that kind of hatred. So that you would belong.

Maggie: I am accepted for who I am. The world is different now.

Mr. Rojas: They are building a wall to keep us out, because in their minds we are nothing but rapists and murderers. The only thing they hate more than a Mexicano, is a homosexual. The world is not different, my dear.

Having these historical examples provides a critical examination of the history that is shown in the *Arrowverse*. While most of the history is United States history, it is critical to explore the impact of racism that has impacted the United States and the iteration of the United States in the *Arrowverse*. This form of media is working to highlight the wrongs that have been done in idealists, realists, and materialist ways providing an intersectional example to explore the topic of race in.

It is important to note since CRT has always had an activism goal and history to it. This activism is reflected in the shows through the perspectives and approaches that they tackle the topic of race. Instead of ignoring it, the characters are shown fighting against, regardless of the show. There is an intersectional approach shown with how racism impacts all people. As stated before all characters have storylines and important roles in their respective groups. This breaks the tradition in past comic history with race being the token and sole part of their identity (Couzelis 2018; Davis 2015; Facciani, Warren and Vendemia 2015).

All of these examples highlight the point that Critical Race Theory is trying to make; racism is not something that is separate from the media that viewers consume. Even in this television universe that is fictional and has superheroes, systematic racism is

presented in various ways from casually to explicitly in the episodes. While the premise

and storylines may be based in the superhero realm, the issues that even they face are

based in societal truth. The inability to rectify the wrongs of the past is apparent in each

of the shows. While the characters may act like they are better than the rest of society,

there are still flaws in these groups as shown in the examples above. Therefore, while

there is a step forward for racial diversity in the *Arrowverse*, the persistent unavoidable

actions of racism that pervade society will continue to push back against any progress

that is made.

       **the everlasting alien variable.** There is one topic that is not discussed in this

section that is popular in comics. Aliens have historically been substituted for racial

diversity in comics (Facciani, Warren, and Vendemia 2015; Singer 2002). Or they have

been used as the justification for diversity in comics (Singer 2002). While CRT has never

been used as a lens for examining aliens, there is a precedent that exists since aliens have

been used as a racial diversity answer, even though aliens would be defined as a different

species. The hierarchical issues that CRT breaks down applies to aliens in the absence of

human racial issues being addressed. Exploring the diversity in the *Arrowverse* allows us

to tackle this issue as well since *Supergirl (2015)* provides the activist exploration of

alien and human relations. While racial issues are mentioned and dealt with as they occur,

there is not an extensive examination of race in the show. Below will be a discussion of

aliens in the *Arrowverse* and how these tie to CRT.

       From the beginning of *Supergirl (2015)* there has been an exploration provided to

the viewer of the changing perspective toward the various aliens that exist in National

City and how to approach them. In Season 1 there are two main nemeses that Supergirl

faces: Maxwell Lord, a human, and Astra In-Ze, an alien. They both are working to achieve their superior viewpoint. Maxwell Lord spends the season working to achieve destroying Supergirl since he believes that aliens are a threat to the human race. Astra In-Ze instead believes the human race is inferior and therefore works to take over the minds of the humans in order to have them fix their society. With both of these characters and their missions, the materialists aspect of CRT is presented. Materialist stress the point that dominant groups work to designate their superiority and therefore the weaker group (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). With Maxwell Lord the weaker group is merely one person: Supergirl. He believes that it is right to use his wealth and scientific power to destroy Supergirl and instead take the mantle as the defense of National City in order to benefit his notoriety and superiority. With Astra In-Ze, she defines aliens as a superior species. She, along with criminal alien followers of hers work towards creating a machine that can be used to take over National City. With each villain battling Supergirl these characters fight as the self-defined dominant group unwilling to give their power away. The dichotomy is not even acknowledged in the show however viewers are presented this viewpoint. By the end of the season the lesson is that neither perspective is correct and that everyone can coexist. However, the entire season reflects the problems that are defined in CRT and the hierarchical issue of a dominant group and their reign over a weaker group. Instead of dealing with race, each villain works within the guidelines that have historically been displayed with race.

Season 2 of *Supergirl (2015)* does the same thing instead with a human organization known as Cadmus working to deal with the "alien problem" that National City is facing. Season 2 spends the season exploring the relations between humans and

aliens in the *Arrowverses'* United States. Cadmus arrives in Season 2, Episode 2 "The Last Children of Krypton" with their manifesto presented on all screens in National City stating:

> People of National City. The Earth has been stolen from us. And the enemy has come in the guise of heroes. They say they come in peace, to protect us from ourselves. But how long will it be before these gods decide to rule instead of serve? We are the antidote to their poison. We are the scientist who will show them what humans are capable of. Those who have sided with the invaders will not be spared. You cannot stop us. We are everywhere. We are Cadmus.

Cadmus follows this up with various attacks against the alien population including the distribution of alien weapons to humans in order to attack the alien population, the creation of super-powered humans to attack Supergirl and various aliens, and creating a bioweapon built to kill aliens upon dispersion in the air. The materialist approach is displayed with Cadmus and their fight to keep the dominance that humans believe they have in relation to aliens and alien sympathizers. The villainization of aliens in the first season of Supergirl was limited to Maxwell Lord. With Cadmus it shows the growth this anti-alien sentiment and the fact that there is an existing human agenda who assumes that these aliens are there to serve the humans as needed.

Early in the season, the President of the United States addresses the alien population publicly and aims to grant them citizenship through the legislation known as the Alien Amnesty Act. This episode, Season 2 Episode 3 "Welcome to Earth", presents multiple perspectives regarding human and alien relations and what this Act will do. Supergirl, Alex Danvers, and J'onn J'onzz discussed the Act stating that:

Supergirl: Wait the President is coming here?

Alex: Yeah, she wants to tour the DEO while she's in National City to

sign the Alien Amnesty Act.

Supergirl: It's amazing. An executive order allowing aliens on Earth to come out of the shadows and live as full citizens. She's making history.

J'onn J'onzz: Not in my book, I think she's making a big mistake.

Supergirl: Now how can you of all people say that?

J'onn J'onzz: Because it's been my hard experience that humans and aliens don't mix.

Supergirl: What about you and me?

J'onn J'onzz: What about us? We can look like them, we blend in. A lot of aliens can't. And people in this world don't have much tolerance for others who look different. I sat that as an alien and as someone who's worn the face of a Black man for 15 years.

J'onn J'onzz offers an interesting perspective when it comes to race and aliens existing in society. When he first arrived on Earth, he was hunted down with the intention of being killed. When he was found he took the identity of an agent and shapeshifted into a Black man in order to blend in. J'onn in the conversation above manages to call out two aspects of CRT and how society is impacted by this theory. First, he explains his reticence to exposing all aliens that register with this Act and that while it is idealistic and hopeful, it does have serious repercussions for the people it seeks to help. While the idealist goal to battle racism is changing culture (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), such as a rousing speech from a president and the Alien Amnesty Act, J'onn is correct that these measures are not strong enough to battle the racism that persists in American society. Then he backs this up by stating that his experience as an alien and Black man have showed that society has not changed from in his last fifteen years with the materialist mindset of him being seen as a member of the lesser group.

A different perspective is presented with Lena Luthor, CEO of Luthor Corp in *Supergirl (2015)* aiming to monopolize on this anti-alien sentiment by creating a product that identifies if a person is an alien or not. Below is her justification when she is interviewed by Kara Danvers (Supergirl):

> Lena Luthor: It's an alien detection device that allows humans to find out who among them is not truly one of them.
>
> Kara Danvers: How does it work?
>
> Lena Luthor: It's just a simple skin test.
> …..
>
> Kara Danvers: But won't a device like this.. Doesn't it go against everything America is supposed to stand for?
>
> Lena Luthor: Such as?
>
> Kara Danvers: Well freedom... against persecution, oppression. America's always been a country full of immigrants.
>
> Lena Luthor: It's also always been a country full of humans.
>
> Kara Danvers: Don't you think that this device will force aliens back into the very shadows the President is trying to shine a light on?
>
> Lena Luthor: If aliens want to be citizens, that's now their right. But if humans wanna know which of their fellow citizens aren't actually one of them, then that's their right too.

The aspect of CRT known as the realists is reflected with this presentation of society here is using racism to determine privilege and status (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Lena's perspective is that they are allowed to be citizens but in order for that to happen they will also need to be identified by anyone that demands to know. This method of distributes the status for aliens as "other" and "less than". It is something that is acknowledged by an alien during this episode when she states two different quotes on this Amnesty Act:

Villain: Amnesty is just another way to disguise registration.
….
Villain: "I've been to half a dozen planets just like this one. You want to know what they all have in common? The locals lock away anything that they think is different. Out of prejudice, out of fear.

Both the villain and Lena Luthor bring up the same point regarding the identification and public display of acknowledging the dominant group's perspective and belief that aliens are seen as lesser. Looking back through history it is reflective of the various identification markers that various people, majority being the Jewish community, had to wear during the Nazi regime. Which is the clearest reflection of structural determinism and the inability to rectify the wrongs of the past regarding the alien population in National City. The racism that minorities have faced in American history is displayed to the alien population that exists. The exact rules and history that minorities have faced is repeating in the show with aliens. This in itself proves to be the prime example then for why CRT applies to the aliens that shown in *Supergirl (2015)*.

As stated before, past comic history has used aliens of various sort as a method to explore diversity and inclusion (Facciani, Warren, and Vendemia 2015; Singer 2002). Therefore, when using this history and Critical Race Theory to explore the aliens in the *Arrowverse*, it is clear that this past research is valid and has theoretical support since the various aspects of CRT are met through various aspects.CRT typically stresses the difficulty of explaining racism that is deeply embedded in societal foundations (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). However, in *Supergirl (2015)*, the show brings to the forefront the issues that are typically not seen in order to show the battle that exists with racism in American society through the guise of alien populations.

**black lightning has once again been failed.** In past comic history the character

of DC's Black Lightning is one of the few and earliest Black superheroes. From his origins, he has been based in local community-based crime working against the gangs there. During this time, there has historically been the question of whether or not he is a hero or not (Cunningham 2010). Building off of this there is also past discussion of the credit that Black Lightning has never received for his work since it was based in a subsection of the city he resided in (Cunningham 2010). As well, his costume has been stated as emphasizing his hypermasculinity and Blackness since he old costume in the comics included an afro (Davis 2015). In this analysis of *Black Lightning (2018)* the television show, we will be addressing these issues and how it compares.

Black Lightning is based in Jefferson Pierce's local community where he is a principal at a local school. When the show starts, he is no longer a superhero, however after his youngest daughter, Jennifer, is abducted by the local gang he rescues her and takes the mantle of Black Lightning on again. Thankfully, during this show his face cover does not include an afro, as has been shown in past comics. Instead he is given a face mask that aligns with the designs of other heroes. The suit though is similar however it is more focused on the lightning and electricity that the suit contains. Yet because the suit is skintight, this does offer the view of hyper-masculinity since Jefferson Pierce himself is a strong man. He does not look as big as the comic character has since he is a human and limited to the constraints of the human body, not what graphic designs allow for. Throughout the show Black Lightning is seen as a hero in the community, particularly since he is going after the strong local gang known as The One Hundred. While he is seen receiving the recognition from the community, it is not known if he receives the same thing from the city itself.

Outside of just Black Lightning it is important to note the diversity that this show present. As discussed in the various table breakdowns of the shows, this show contains an almost equal male to female ratio, is a primarily black cast with only two characters identified as white and appearing in more than ten episodes, and includes two members of the LGBTQ+ community. Outside of the numbers it is shown that his daughters were passed down various iterations of his powers and the show explores how both daughters handle their growth within these powers. This includes seeing his oldest daughter, Anissa, assuming the role of his partner and becoming a superhero known as Thunder.

Now, as I've stated multiple times in various locations in this thesis, as of May 2019, this shown was not part of the *Arrowverse*. It was the only superhero show on the CW network that was not presented in the *Arrowverse*. Now since we are past this date, I can say that after the *Arrowverse* crossover event that occurred in December 2019, *Black Lightning (2018)* has now joined the *Arrowverse*. Since this analysis is examining the *Arrowverse* it could appear confusing as to why this is included in this analysis. Yet this separation is the exact point that I am trying to make in this section. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have stated that the racism in American culture is deep and pervasive, something that may not always be apparent. I argue that this separation is the exact type of racism problem that is the *Arrowverse's* greatest fault. After making four superhero shows and connecting them within the first season of each, this is the show that is kept apart. A show that is a primarily black casted show. Why is this the only superhero show on the network that was kept separate. More so have they deeply considered the reasoning that they have? While the creators of the show may have has their own reasoning for this and saw it as a valid reason, they did not consider the historical racial

connotations. Just like the creation of the character having him never getting recognition and having an afro included in costume (Cunningham 2010; Davis 2015), here Critical Race Theory shows that there is a precedent and a theoretical reasoning that provides an answer as to the impact that this has in media studies. *Black Lightning (2018)* offered a profound opportunity to really emphasize the inclusion and diversity activism that idealist push for if it would have been included from the get-go. Instead the show has had to wait years before it is included. Once again the *Arrowverse* fell to the problems of other media studies with its failure to attempt a grand scale rectification of the past wrongs.

**the fallacy of basic women.** Queer Theory, since it stems from feminist theory, works well in analyzing women in the *Arrowverse*. In each show there are women who stand as something more than simply being a woman. Each female character, as Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) would say, perform multiple aspects of their identity. Their sexuality as women is more than a guiding narrative as has been seen in the past with comic book iterations of the characters and the creation of new characters within the shows. Previous examinations (Brown 2015; Gianola and Coleman 2018; Phillips and Strobl 2013; Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014) have discussed that women have historically been relegated to romantic roles or supplemental lesser than roles. With the female characters in the *Arrowverse*, women are either superheroes or assisting the heroes and providing valuable key support to them. Below are specific examples pertaining to various shows that highlights various women whose storylines have been told and discusses the presentation of women in their respective superhero teams.

Felicity Smoak's character, in *Arrow (2012)*, is a computer specialist with an invaluable ability to hack various forms of databases, camera, and government agencies

in order to provide real time, critical information to the heroes in *Arrow (2012)*. While she is the main love interest, and eventual wife to Oliver Queen, this does not prove to be a barrier to her overall role on the team. She has her sexuality shown and expressed with this relationship however it is not defined as a descriptive identity piece. She chooses when her sexuality gets to be used and it does not need to be the forefront piece of her self-expression. In fact, Felicity remains regarded as the key computer person in the *Arrowverse*. Her storyline throughout the show sees Felicity, a graduate of MIT with a background in computer science, working as IT at Queen Consolidated. She is approached and occasionally asked by Oliver Queen to help him with technology issues he faces while working as the Green Arrow. Over time her role expands and takes on a key role in the Arrow team when she believes and agrees to work on achieving their shared dream of making Starling City a safe place again. From IT, Oliver promotes her to his secretary when he takes over as CEO of Queen Consolidated. While the role of secretary would appear as a step back in terms of breaking social norms, in fact, as Wonder Woman did in the original comics, Felicity instead is doing this in order to work full time on Arrow business while at work. In fact, it's a point of contention that she makes very clear in Season 2, Episode 2 with her promotion, explicitly stating:

> Felicity: I quit.

> Oliver: No you don't.

> Felicity: Yes I do. Not my old job in the IT department, but my new job as your executive assistant. Which you think I'm going to accept. Your thinking could not be more wrong in this matter.

> Oliver: I need a Girl Wednesday.

> Felicity: It's Friday... and the answer is no!

> Oliver: These computers have been upgraded. Far more processing power

50

than your typical secretary.

Felicity: Did you know I went to MIT? Guess what I majored in? Hint, not the secretarial arts.

Oliver: Felicity! We all need to have secret identities now. If I'm going to be Oliver Queen, CEO, than I can't very well travel down 18 floors every time we need to discuss how we spend our nights.
….

Felicity: I worked very hard to get where I am and it wasn't so I could fetch you coffee!
…

Felicity: Fine. Oh. May I get you a cup of coffee?

Oliver: *sighs* You're not offering to get me coffee, are you?

Felicity: Yeah. Nope. That won't be happening. Ever!


In fact, it is a repeated point throughout the season that she never does get him coffee. She refuses to take that role as secretary as her official job and breaks with the normative unless required by an outside person to think she was a secretary. Her goal and priority are working as their technology expert since Oliver and Diggle are not capable of doing what she does. Later in the show, after Oliver loses the company, she is recruited by Ray Palmer to become his Vice President of Palmer Technologies. He recognizes her skill and qualifications as a computer scientist to provide key help to advance his company. When, Ray Palmer, is assumed dead, Felicity becomes the CEO of Palmer Technologies for a brief time and works to create more technology that could be used to help team Arrow in their quest. Years later, after coming out of witness protection, she and Curtis, a friend and fellow hero on team Arrow, create their own tech company called Helix Dynamics. While they work together as a team, Curtis eventually leaves and gives her his half of the company. Upon this occurring, Felicity creates Smoak Technologies

which in Season 6 proves to create the most advanced security system for Star City.

Felicity breaks from the heteronormative storyline since she is not limited to the love interest. While her and Oliver's relationship is a storyline throughout this show, Felicity is always shown as an independent woman capable of taking care of herself and taking care of the heroes in their daily life and in the field. She does not let her gender as a female or her sexuality as a female hinder her true goals and aspirations. Instead she shows that even while not having powers or being a seen hero, that her mind and skill are what keep their team functioning. Women are typically not seen in a STEM field like this; yet, Felicity proves that women can be queer and stand as the leader of the technological side of the *Arrowverse*.

Sara Lance begins as a minor character in Arrow who was having an affair with Oliver Queen, her sister's boyfriend. Her initial role was based in her sexuality and her deviance, fulfilling the historical stereotype within the comic world. However, by the second season of *Arrow (2012)*, Episode 3 of the show, she is revealed to be alive, was rescued by a ship led by Dr. Anthony Ivo. Dr. Ivo teaches her about science and has her help with a medicine that can make someone have superhuman strength and regenerative abilities. Upon Ivo's death she went and joined the League of Assassins for six years working for them. She comes back as a powerful woman aware of her power and ability outside of her sexuality, being able to use her body as a weapon instead. Her character's story arc shifts to her breaking down every heteronormative expectation of women in a comic world. Through her time on *Arrow (2012)* she works with the Green Arrow, Oliver Queen, to help defend Starling City and goes back to the League of Assassins occasionally. Her breakout and performance of self, as described in Queer Theory, is

based on handling the darkness that she identifies within her from her time working as a trained killer. This darkness storyline is one which has repeatedly been done by men in comics, therefore it breaks new ground with Sara being the one to carry this torch. In Season 2 of *Arrow (2012)*, Episode 5, she has a conversation with Oliver about this stating:

> Sara: I would have killed him. I was ready to. He'd be dead right now if you wouldn't have stopped me.
>
> Oliver: But he's not. That's all that matters.
>
> Sara: That's not true. I wanted... to kill Roy. Because that's what I do. That's who I am. 'Cause I spent six years in the darkness and I looked into the eyes of the devil and I gave him my soul.
>
> Oliver: Let me help you get it back.
>
> Sara: No, you deserve someone better. Someone who can harness that light that's still inside of you but I'm not that person... and I never will be.

After her death and rebirth, she grows and works towards being repentant of the murders she had committed before she died and after she was reborn during Season 4 of *Arrow (2012)*. It is after her rebirth that she is recruited to become a part of the Legends, thus becoming a member of the new show *Legends of Tomorrow* in 2016.

On *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* she works towards repenting and working on a team to protect society. Throughout this show she earned the respect of everyone in multiple ways. For one, she does with her open and honest display of her sexuality. This will be discussed later. However, she does not let her sexuality define her as a person or as a hero. The other way is how she handles life, her relationships with the team, and ultimately herself as a leader. She continued to focus on doing good working within the Legends team through time. In season 2, because of this dedication she takes over as

Captain of the Legends. Even when the role is challenged by outsiders, Sara Lance is

protected and keeps her role with the support of her team. The best description of this is

when she is challenged by Rex Tyler. Martin Stein, a member of her teammate stands up

for her and clearly states:

> Sara: I can't let you do that.
>
> Rex: You don't have the authority.
>
> Martin: Yes, she does. Miss Lance speaks for all of us. I have watched her become the beating heart and steady hand of this team. She is the proper person to lead us. And if she says that we are going to rescue our people, that is what we are going to do.

Her gender is emphasized in this role as being a woman and breaking the

heteronormative scape of this show. Even with her gender personified, she continues to

lead the team with an efficiency that any captain should have.

Sara Lance's evolution in the *Arrowverse* is not what is typically seen in past

comic norms. Phillips and Strobel (2013) discuss the Comic Code and the original rules

that would allow deviation from the social norms in reality and highlight that women are

typically damsels or victims that can't stand without the helping hand of a man. Sara's

evolution from a stereotypical forgettable love interest to one of the key figures in the

*Arrowverse* points out that in all ways she has deviated and embraced her queer,

identifying as a bisexual and as a woman, identity in the modern heteronormative agenda

in a comic world. She has not been given an overused plotline or expected plotline from

past comics (Gianola and Coleman 2018; Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014);

instead her character was created as a new character and has now become vital role in the

*Arrowverse* as a main leader. Her legacy as the first feminist perspective (Jimenez 2018)

in the initial shows superheroes with the Green Arrow and Flash is one that is not forgotten.

On the other hand, while there has been progression for some women concerning their storyline, there is an example of one woman who remains limited. Iris West, in *The Flash (2014)*, is a reporter who at firsts reports on the Flash himself and then moves on to helping the team work to take down metahumans who threaten Central City. One part of her character's whole storyline is that she is Barry Allen's love interest. She is initially presented from the first episode as the girl Barry Allen has been in love with since they were children. What she doesn't know is that the Flash is her best friend Barry Allen. This is a fact that she won't become aware of until the second season, following the death of her boyfriend. Instead of her role as Barry's love interest being the focus the entire time, there is significantly more that she does by reporting and providing technical assistance to the team.

She spends the first season working on reporting sightings of the Flash and building a blog for people to keep track of events involving of the Flash while her main job is working as a reporter at a local newspaper. In her field she asserts herself as a strong, independent investigative reporter who is trying to prove that the Flash exists and is working to keep the city safe. Even when her father and her boyfriend insist that she stay clear of the Flash, she works to keep reporting and doing her job. This in fact is a running point of tension for most of the first season since it's clear that her reporting is becoming more important than the opinion of her boyfriend, breaking with the heteronormative perspective in comics that women are meant to stand aside and out of danger in order to allow for the masculinity to remain at the forefront. Upon learning that

Barry is the Flash, she begins working with Team Flash protecting Central City and reporting on metahuman crime.

Her attitude for fighting carries on once she is on team Flash. In Season 3, episode 11, Iris recruits her brother Wally into helping her take down an arms dealer without the help of her father or team Flash. In fact when recruiting Wally she questions why Wally knows about the case with the arms dealer. Wally then goes on to explain:

> Wally: Because both Dad and Barry want you to lay off of it. The phrase "death wish" got tossed around a lot by them.

> Iris: Okay I do not have a death wish. I just want to see justice done.

Iris and Wally both go on take down the arms dealers. However, after doing so, both her father and Barry lecture them on going into the field to stop crime without them. Iris then goes on to defend herself stating that their afraid of her dying and or getting hurt and that she is not. She is focused on making an impact and being remembered for her actions. However, by the end of the exchange, it goes back to Barry and Iris facing things together. This was an instance where she truly got to show off her strength and identity as a female and it was shut down by the men in her life. She was re-relegated to the wife role who must always remain safe.

While she does play an important role on team Flash, the limitation comes in her female identity and performative nature in the show. Iris West's main role in this show is her evolving relationship to Barry Allen. From the get-go, the Flash's relationship with Iris, even without her knowing it's him, got her held hostage by a former classmate who became a metahuman in Season 1 Episode 6, "The Flash is Born". The former classmate takes her hostage in order to get her to start writing about him instead of the Flash. This

risk continues when the first season ends when the Reverse Flash tries to kill Iris because he knows who Barry is and that Iris is the most important person in Barry's life.

Her damsel in distress self proves to be a recurring theme in her role throughout the show. When Barry changes the timeline and everything changes, Iris remains as the damsel and female forever basing her identity around him. This counteracts the goal of feminist and then Queer Theory have regarding women owning and expressing their own identities. Season 3 sees Barry spending a season trying to defeat Savitar in order to avoid Iris being killed by him. Once again she almost dies because the villain knows the Flash's identity as Barry Allen.

Overall, her character is a mixed bag. On the one hand, Iris shown as a capable independent woman aware of her identity and the presentation of it. Yet, it is often shown only in spurts and is instead only encouraged when she can remain somewhere safe in order for the men to work and not need to save her.

The *Arrowverse* has moved women in comics into the twenty first century. They are no longer limited to a heteronormative feminine perspective and instead these shows have embraced the complexity and natural competence that women have. Each woman is presented as independent, strong, and smart in multiple fields breaking down any part of their self as static. Even when limited, like Iris West, they are still shown as capable of not needing to be limited. Therefore, while not all these women are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they are indeed queer. Just as Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) aimed to moved past, their identities are not defined by the femininity or their sexuality. Instead these pieces are moving parts of a continuous, superfluous performance of their inherent self. Through their actions and performances as members in each of their

respective teams they emphasize just what Queer Theory is trying to explain when it comes to modern society.

**LGBTQ+ diversity representation.** Perhaps the most groundbreaking thing that these shows have done is bring LGBTQIA+ representation to the forefront of superheroes' worlds. One of the main points in Queer Theory was the creation of open spaces for queerness to be normalized in society (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018). These shows have made a strong case to be considered as open spaces for queer people to help the mainstream normalize queer people in every situation. The characters that will be discussed highlight a few points when looking at it through Queer Theory. First, it addresses the idea of open spaces both for mainstream representation and open spaces within the shows themselves. Second, there is representation in various forms. As seen below in the with multiple examples, there are queer people of all ages and genders that have important roles in the show and do stand merely as minor background characters. Each person has their role and a well-rounded storyline that is not merely ignored or disregarded. Third, the portrayal of these characters touches on the fact that their identity and sexuality are not the highlighted main part of their person. Instead, as women in the *Arrowverse* were explained earlier, these characters show that their sexuality and gender are superfluous and the performance of them is only as needed and not to be merely the key descriptor of their selves.

The first character to touch on is Sara Lance. While Sara Lance has been used earlier in this paper, one of the most important parts that she has played in the *Arrowverse* is being the first member of the LGBTQIA+ community openly shown. It was revealed in Season 2 of *Arrow (2012)*, Episode 13 "Heir to the Demon" where Sara

is being hunted by a member of the League of Assassins. It is revealed that the person hunting Sara down is a woman, Nyssa al Ghul, who used to be Sara's girlfriend while she was with the League. What made this a bigger moment was that this occurred during the time in the show when she was having a sexual relationship with Oliver Queen. During the episode and the rest of her time on this show, she never directly states what her inherent sexuality is; instead, it is just presented as her being bisexual and it is just a simple fact of her as a person. This casual open representation received no push back from anyone of her family or close friends. Instead it was accepted as normal and never did disrupt or cause any kind of ordeal for the character. This broke the heteronormative trend in television where there was a coming out scene. Instead of coming out in an emotional, highlighted scene, it is merely a small part of the storyline. The main storyline is Sara being hunted to return to the League of Assassins; that is the reasoning for Nyssa al Ghul to be there in the first place.

Even when Sara joins the Legends on their show, she never has a coming out to any of the other characters. Instead anytime that she is seen having a sexual relationship with anyone, it is simply acknowledged and accepted as a part of the storyline. Take for example, in the Season 2 premiere of *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)*, the team is on a mission and trying to protect people in 1637. Sara is protecting the queen, she is quickly seduced by the queen and they are shown engaging in a sexual scene, while the rest of the team is fighting the enemies. Once the scene comes to end, Sara's activities are pointed out by a group of all men and accepted. It is not overly sexualized, considered deviant or out of the norm. This natural safe space allows for her to do as she pleases, and it is touched on only in a positive way that never aims to make that the main descriptor to her

identity. In fact, in later seasons when Sara gets a girlfriend on *Legends of Tomorrow (2016),* Ava Lance, their relationship is in fact the highlighted relationship of the show itself. It plays an integral part of season 3 the same way that any heteronormative relationship is played out on this show or others in the *Arrowverse*. Sara has become the flagship character for the LGBTQIA+ members of the *Arrowverse*. She brought and continues to bring queer people to light in a casual and natural way allowing for the representation of a female-to-female relationship to occur even in the context of time travel.

The next character to discuss is Alex Danvers on the show *Supergirl (2015)*. Alex Danvers is Supergirl's sister, in her late twenties, and an agent with the Department of Extranormal Operations (DEO). She is a high-ranking member that works to protect the people of National City from alien threats.  Alex plays an interesting role in terms of being queer. During the first season of the show she is not shown having any type of romantic interests. The only instance of a romantic instance is when Maxwell Lord's, during Season 1 Episode 10 "Childish Things", attraction to her is displayed and he flirts with her. Alex then chooses to use her sexuality and his attraction to her to distract him with a date in order to help her boss gain intel on Maxwell. Immediately upon her arriving to the date, the tension is there with Maxwell stating:

Alex Danvers: You're staring.

Maxwell Lord: Just wondering where you're hiding your gun under that dress.

Alex: Behave and you won't have to find out.

From there the dinner date is also a conversation to size each other up. Alex always performs as an agent and a sister; however, this example was the first instance of Alex using her sexuality and her gender to work for her. From here, her sexuality will not be explored or shown until the second season.

Season 2 of *Supergirl (2015)* presents Alex with an interesting storyline. Alex spends the season exploring her sexuality and especially as an older person, outside of her teens, who never knew this. In Season 2, Episode 3, titled "Welcome to Earth", Alex meets a National City police office, Maggie Sawyer, who helps her hunt down an alien who is targeting the President of the United States. It is with a conversation in Season 2, Episode 5 "Crossfire" where Maggie assumes that Alex is gay, that Alex begins to consider her sexuality. By the end of the episode, Alex goes to Maggie to talk about herself. Alex breaks down stating,

> Alex: My whole life has been about being perfect. Perfect grades, perfect job, and the perfect sister taking care of Kara. But the one part of my life that I've never been able to make perfect was dating. I just never really like it. I... I... And you know I mean, I tried. I got asked out. I just... I never liked... being intimate. I just... I don't know. I thought maybe that's just not the way I was built. You know, it's just not my thing. I never thought that it was because of...the other. That... Maybe I... I mean... I don't... I don't know. Now, I just... I can't stop thinking about...
>
> Maggie: About what?
>
> Alex: That maybe... There's some truth to what you said.
>
> Maggie: About?
>
> Alex: What you said. About me.
>
> Maggie: Hmm...
>
> Alex: I have to go.

This was the introduction to her exploring her sexuality and no longer keeping it at the back of her mind. Instead, she has brought it to the forefront and allows it to play a role in her life. While at the same time Episode 6 "Changing" is about her exploring her sexuality's performance in the spaces that she exists in. Which is transformative since past literature has shown that queer characters are typically seen as just learning about their sexuality, such as *Glee (2009)*, or are already established in it when the show begins (Joyrich 2014). By doing this, the show becomes an extended piece of the *Arrowverse*, where queer characters are accepted and embraced. Plus, it provides an open space for viewers to experience queer spaces in a safe way, much like Scott's, Kirkpatrick, Rude, Skyler, and Stevens (2015) mentioned regarding transgender comics. This episode is the strongest display of opening a safe space for a character in the *Arrowverse*. This is led by Maggie stating:

> Alex: Maybe it's just a phase. Maybe it isn't real.
>
> Maggie: No, it's real. You're real. And you deserve to have a real, full, happy life. Okay? Tell your family. This is the biggest thing that's ever happened to you, and you shouldn't have to do it alone.

The episode explores how she navigates that performance in her social life. Particularly she deals with coming out to her sister and how it will be entered into their mainstream life. Instead of having it all figured out and making a statement, Alex fully admits to being lost. It begins with them having a discussion about Alex's emotions and this new, confusing part of her identity.

> Alex: I mean... um... to develop feelings for her.
>
> Kara: Feelings? Like...?
>
> Alex: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Those feelings.

Kara: Oh-

Alex: So Maggie thought that I should tell you. And so I did. I just... I just did.

Kara: So... She's gay?

Alex: Yeah

Kara: And are you saying you're gay too?

Alex: I don't know. I'm just trying to make sense of it all. It's so complicated.

Kara: Alex, it kind of sounds like you're coming out to me. Have you ever felt like this before?

Alex: Not like this.

Kara: Have you ever been with a girl?

Alex: No. Never

Kara: Okay, what's different? I know you haven't been dating much lately...

Alex: This isn't because I haven't found the right guy.

Kara: I never said it was. I'm just...I'm just trying to understand, okay?

Alex: You know, I'm up all night, just thinking about it. And if I'm being honest, you know, I realize that...Maybe I've had thoughts like this before. Do you remember my best friend in high school? Vicki Donahue?

Kara: Yeah, I remember Vicki. You guys had a really bad falling out right?

Alex: I used to love sleeping over at her house. In her room, in her bed. And I think...um... I think I felt something then and it scared. You know, because... because the next thing I knew, I'm fighting with her over something so stupid. And we just... we just drifted apart. I... I shoved that memory down so deep inside, that... It's like it never happened. I'm remembering stuff like that now...

It is through this episode and the following seasons that established the creation of safe spaces as the normative in *Supergirl (2015)*. Alex goes on to partake in relationships and she is able to perform her sexuality and identity when and where she pleases in the everyday life that is presented in the show. Therefore, when Nia Nal arrives as a new journalist at Catco Magazine under Kara Danvers, *Supergirl (2015)*, it is only fitting that when she comes out as transgender that it is widely and supportively accepted. She is able to perform her identity and sexuality as she pleases. This leads to her fervent passion to ensure that the same open space is created for aliens in National City. In Season 4, Episode 2 "Fallout", you see Nia Nal come to the defense of an alien when his cloaking device stops working. Three human men attack him, and she stands in the way of their attack and going on to say:

> Nia Nal: As a reporter for Catco Worldwide Media, I am going to make sure everyone knows about the violence and cruelty I witnessed here today. (Pointing at one man) You sir, are the traitor.

When she returns to work, she presses the editor in chief about Catco's position on the alien resistance cult. Nia goes on to discuss how she is a transgender woman and that she knows what it's like to be attacked and denied because of who she is. She then presses on to state that the magazine needs to show that this kind of behavior needs to stop and that an open space needs to be created for those that are different from them. The lack of safe open space that she was denied, that has not historically existed (Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018), is something that she aims to provide for all forms of *other*. By doing so, breaking the social norm and allowing people to perform their identities and sexualities as they wish is okay to do.

Her role as a member of queer diversity in this season makes history when she

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goes to become Dreamer, a superhero with abilities such as superhuman durability and the ability to use dream energy as a weapon and see the future. Dreamer is the first open transgender superhero in both the *Arrowverse* worlds and on television as whole. The importance of this cannot be understated in a superhero series. Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) explain the idea of moving past one specific part of a person's identity in order to break the social norm. With Nia Nal becoming a superhero, she moves past her transgender identity and assume a role that is higher and reiterate that her identity, like all the others, varies depending on her needs.

There are also male characters in these shows who following the same path as these characters in their breaking of the heteronormative setting. John Constantine is perhaps the best character to have a plotline focused on his bisexuality. Originally a character on his own show on NBC during 2014-2015, the *Arrowverse* saw him enter during season 3 of *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)* as himself and becoming a member of the Legends in the following seasons. He is an antihero who works as a warlock helping people with their supernatural issues. This is important to mention since his bisexuality was never discussed during the show's run on NBC. However, in the *Arrowverse* it has been one of the bigger points in his characters storyline.

Constantine's bisexuality is a running theme throughout the show. Often it is seen when it comes to his habitual flirting with characters throughout the show. Take for example one of his appearances in *Legends of Tomorrow (2016)*, Season 3 Episode 10, "Daddy Darkhest". During this episode the team is helping Constantine get a girl out of a mental institution. While hiding from the orderlies, Sara Lance and Constantine have a conversation and wind up having sex. Afterwards, when saving another character, they

are in the middle of the rescue conversation with Sara saying:

> Sara: Okay, the symbol that Nora drew was a time travel spell, right? So why don't we just cast the same spell and get out of here?

> Constantine: She was channeling the power of Mallus when she cast that spell. Not even I have that kind of juice.

> Sara: I do. You said I was strong enough to hold my own self.

> Constantine: Yeah, well, I was—trying to seduce you.

> Sara: Oh please. I was seducing you.

He is also seen in later episodes flirting with two other men on the team, not with the intention of having any kind of relationship with them. This casual flirting is necessary to bring up since the flirting is not a piece that sticks out of the narrative. Instead, the open communication is something that has been normalized and accepted as part of the character and social norm. This aligns with Ritzer and Stepinsky's (2018) argument in Queer Theory with the mainstream of the *Arrowverse* being an open space for queer identities.

Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) discuss the importance of not staying focused on the specific queer identity of the people and moving into this open space. This is best demonstrated when his past relationship, with a man named Desmond, becomes one of the main parts of the storyline in Season 4. Six months before Constantine joined the Legends, he had to send his boyfriend, Desmond, to hell since Desmond's body is overtaken by an all-powerful demon: Neron. This demon, Neron, turns out to be the main nemesis for the Legends in Season 4. This became clear in Episodes 7, "Hell No, Dolly" and 8 "Legends of To-Meow-Meow" when he is ordered by Desmond's ancestor to go back and save his life. During these episodes Constantine repeatedly goes back in time

and tries various methods trying to save Desmond from the demon and being sent to hell. In the end Constantine fails, however it becomes one of the main goals for the entire team to achieve. Each member conveys empathy and understanding for losing a loved one in this line of work and that understanding, and acceptance is the point that Ritzer and Stepinsky (2018) want social norms to be. Instead of being tokenized as a one-off thing, they accept that this is part of Constantine's identity and background and move past it with little to no blatant discussion.

These characters do not aim to be seen in their societies as assimilated. In fact, the premise of these show breaks assimilation rules and doesn't have these characters not trying to regulate this performance into heteronormative stereotypes. This normalization of a queer identities and relationships is positive progress in comics where literature has shown that queer characters have often been relegated to the outlier comic book series and not accepted in mainstream comics since it would have broken the Comic Code (Joyrich 2014; Phillips and Strobel 2013). Ritzer and Stepinksy's (2018) four main points of Queer Theory are touched on in many instances through the *Arrowverse* for their queer characters. The most interesting thing to note with this is the notion of the homosexual-heterosexual binary that Ritzer and Stepinksy (2018) discussed and is mentioned earlier. Their binary discusses the struggle heterosexual people experience for homosexuals and homosexuals struggle to hide queer aspects of their identity. What these characters have been able to show is that there has been an effort made in the *Arrowverse* to breakdown this binary. These shows do not rely on these characters sexualities but instead acknowledges it as a part of they are as people. The goal of Queer Theory is to move past

these binaries (Ritzer and Stepinsky 2018) and that is exactly what is slowly happening

here.

# VII. CONCLUSION

## Limitations

Like with all studies, this content-analysis does have its limitations. The first and most apparent is the issue of the generalization of tackling a topic as large as the entire *Arrowverse*. The *Arrowverse* is comprised of five television shows and therefore provides hundreds of episodes available for analysis. While I have reviewed all episodes, I have not included all examples that apply due to time limitations. Future research should include the examination of diversity within each show specifically and the impact that each show has on its audience. These are all shows that have enough content to explore these diversity themes within and have the comic past that allows for a comparison and other examinations of the content presented.

I have also not focused on the makeup of the villains in each episode and each separate show. This could provide an interesting analysis in terms of diversity presentation regarding the villains. Particularly since this has been done with previous content (Facciani, Warren, and Vendemia 2015). Future research should aim to explore these other characters in both quantitative and qualitative studies.

Since I have only used two theoretical concepts in this analysis, this leaves plenty of room to expand the analysis using other theories and exploring how they intersect within the parameters of these shows. Finally, since this analysis consists of just these television shows, there is plenty of further resources, both in media and literature that is capable of being explored within a sociological context.

**Conclusion**

This has been a content-analysis that examined DC's *Arrowverse* shows on the CW network. The analysis has been conducted with the intention of examining various themes of diversity within five superhero shows. The diversity has been examined through the sociological lens of Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory. Past research (Brown 2015, 2017; Carrington 2010; Cocca 2014; Davis 2015; Francis 2015; Joyrich 2014; Ryan 2011; Singer 2002; Whaley 2011) has shown that there has been multiple analysis done regarding superhero culture in both comics and film. Past analysis has however lacked a theoretical base in which to create a foundation for the points that have been made. This content-analysis aimed to provide a theoretical framework in which to examine diversity in superhero culture done in the context of the *Arrowverse*.

Race, diversity statistics, women, and LGBTQ+ representation were all explored in this analysis using the various storylines in each show and specific quotes were used in order to provide specific examples to prove the points that are being made. These themes were explored and there is enough evidence to show the point that while there has been progress made in terms of diversity within the *Arrowverse*, it is not perfect. Nor should it be expected to be perfect. Media and social norms have repeatedly shown that our history is struggling to rectify the wrongs of the past and providing open spaces to change social norms regarding women and the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, it was necessary to see how the issues of society are reflected even in something such as superhero shows. This is just the beginning for research regarding the *Arrowverse* and I look forward to continuing this exploration in the future.

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