CW IS OPEN TO ALL: POST-DIFFERENCE REPRESENTATION AND HEGEMONIC TIME-TRAVEL NARRATIVES IN *DC'S LEGENDS OF TOMORROW*

by

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis examines how a post-difference perspective, where diversity is shallowly embraced, can influence the characters and narratives of a television show, with DC's *Legends of Tomorrow* as the prime example. *Legends* is a great example of this because it is an ensemble show that features characters who are from different races, religions, sexualities, ages, genders and historical time periods. A post-difference lens myopically pushes the narrative that everyone in society is equal, and the discrimination faced by marginalized communities is no longer relevant. This perspective is problematic because it reinforces how whiteness is the norm in society, and the favored perspective, while the characters of color, who are assimilated into white mainstream culture, are seen as secondary and influenced by problematic stereotypes. I focus my analysis on two characters in Legends: Sara Lance and Amaya Jiwe. Sara is a white bisexual woman who is the unquestioned leader of the Legends and has the agency and most screen time out of all the characters. Amaya is an African, heterosexual woman from 1942 who has the same leadership and warrior skills as Sara but has less screen time and is often in a passive, and reactive role to her storyline.

I dedicate this to my mother,

who always believed in me,

always loved me and,

always wanted me to get a master's degree.

Mom, I finally did it.

I think you'd be proud.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The CW's superhero time travel drama *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* premiered in January of 2016. In November of that year, Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States. Through its hiring and storyline decisions, cast of "misfit" superheroes, and in line with the CW's recent #CWOpenForAll campaign, the show at times acts as an inclusive response to Trump's xenophobic and racist rhetoric. The main characters, for example, come from a variety of different backgrounds, offering diversity in their ages, races, sexualities, religions, and even time of historical origin. *Legends* tries to prove itself separate from time travel dramas of the past (such as the historically white-centric *Doctor Who*) by featuring diverse characters and inclusive narratives. There are also many women and people of color acting as directors, producers and writers for the show. Although well intentioned, I argue that *Legends*, in its casting, characterization, and narrative conceit, brings to life a particular vision of a liberal, post-difference America. The myopic writing of the intersectional identities of the characters mirrors and reinforces myopic understandings of race, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. more broadly. Unpacking this show, its active efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, and the limits of this form of representation, exposes that liberal post-difference America accepts people from any background as long as whiteness is still reinforced as the hegemonic norm.

The producers of *Legends* appear to be actively responding to contemporary forms of discrimination (e.g. islamophobia, sexism) by constructing positive depictions of various identities through the narratives of the show. For example, they explore being Muslim in a mainly Christian society, or being a woman in a leadership position. How *Legends* portrays the diversity of its cast and the inclusivity of its narratives is one of the main ways the show pushes against exclusionary rhetoric. In the world(s) of *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, it is characters from

marginalized communities who now must protect history and the future. This is unique since time travel dramas are historically a white heterosexual man's genre. Yet the timeline they are protecting, the one that you and I exist in right now, is harmful for these marginalized communities. Why does a show that upholds such racial and religious diversity--where bisexual women, for example, are leaders--work tirelessly to keep intact a timeline that is steeped in a white, Christian, heteronormative patriarchy, and where America is still seen as the pinnacle of progress? My research question is: How does *Legends* use deviance from hegemonic white heteronormative patriarchy to simultaneously question it while, more subtly, reinforcing it through their characters and their narratives?

This style of shallow inclusivity in representation relies heavily on the idea of a post-difference society. A post-difference society is one where identity politics—meaning the political organizing of those with a shared social identity who have faced historic oppression—are no longer supposed to be relevant since every member of society is already equal (Meyer, 2015, 912). The superficial writing of minority characters in *Legends* comes from the perspective that America is a post-difference society. In my thesis I use the concept of a post-difference society to unpack how and why the diversity and inclusion efforts surrounding *Legends* do not subvert the white heteronormative patriarchal hegemony built into the structure of American society and into many of the offerings of mainstream television.

This research is important because it unpacks how media representation in a post-difference society tries to make society seem more accepting while potentially shutting down avenues for critique and therefore social change. To dismantle the structures of America's post-difference society, there needs to be a discussion of the power structure embedded into the narratives and character representations in American media; simple, tokenized inclusion is not

enough, and can even be hurtful as I will show. To discuss these power structures within *DC's Legends of Tomorrow,* I analyze the characters and narratives on screen and the decisions being made throughout the production process. My primary text of analysis is the third season of *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, with occasional use of earlier seasons as needed for context. The fourth season has just been broadcast.

I came to this research from a place of genuine interest. Another familiar time travel drama, *Doctor Who*, was influential in my life, teaching me that television could be a place to wrestle with complex moral questions and tough social issues. Television scholar Lorna Jowett (2016) argues that television dramas often use characters from underrepresented backgrounds in shows as a progressive way to unpack what various identities truly mean, from trying to understand the perspective of being a Black woman to a gay man. These representations promote a liberal humanistic perspective, pushing the audience to embrace the ideas of diversity and freedom of expression. While these are positive things for television to examine, these representations do not always acknowledge the political significance of these identities (Jowett quoted in Alexander 2016, 151). Television shows do not always authentically deal with these social or cultural issues. Often, the producers or writers of these television shows are not fully aware of the issues such characters might face. Broad cultural debates about representation, diversity and inclusion can be nebulous to pinpoint and have many perspectives to consider, which is why having one concrete example (*Legends*) is helpful in starting this conversation. Crucially, there is a negative underbelly to real life liberal progressivism, which still has a hegemonic hierarchy that accepts diversity as long as whiteness remains on top.

I use both a textual and an industrial approach for my analysis of *Legends*. Through textual analysis, I unpack how the narratives and characters deal with complex social issues. I

have watched all of seasons two and three and have taken copious notes. I focus on four episodes from season three in my textual analysis, which I describe in more detail later in this proposal. Using industrial analysis, I worked through published interviews and trade press publications for context on why the producers, writers and executives made certain narrative and character decisions. *Legends* is affected by the storyworld, the transmedia transfiction (Roberta Pearson, 2017) that exists across three other shows on the CW which are based on characters from DC comics. At the same time, the show is also influenced by network diversity strategies. I analyzed interviews, CW sponsored panels and trade press publications to understand how these network diversity strategies affect and influence *Legends*.

There are two main body chapters in my thesis. Both analyze how the female characters are confined by a post-feminist sensibility (Gill 2012). In this preliminary chapter, I introduce my project and review scholarly work related to my research. The second chapter focuses on the character of Sara Lance and more broadly gender, sexuality and whiteness. Lance is a bisexual, white woman who is accepting of pretty much anyone from any background. She fits the empowering post-feminist warrior woman trope analyzed by Susan Douglas (2010) and Loredana Bercuci (2017). Lance acts as a complex female character who is shown as a great leader, a skilled warrior, and a compassionate person. By positioning Lance as the leader, whiteness is still positioned as the hegemonic norm. As the leader, Lance has the power to order the Legends to do what she thinks is best, which is uphold and protect a timeline steeped in a white, heteronormative, patriarchal hegemony. Many critics consider Sara to be an example of progressive representation as she is a bisexual woman, without falling into harmful stereotypes about bisexual people. Her bisexuality does not define her whole character, just as her gender does not define her either. Lance is more than the sum of her parts (i.e. identities). Nevertheless,

one identity that is not emphasized explicitly in the show, is how her race is reinforced as the hegemonic norm.

In the third chapter, I focus on the character of Amaya Jiwe and more broadly on race and gender. Amaya is an African heterosexual woman from 1942 who wears a mystical totem that gives her the power to summon the powerful spirit of any animal. I see Amaya's arc throughout season three as an unfulfilled attempt at an Afrofuturistic narrative that traps her into traditional female gender norms and stereotypes. Afrofuturism is a genre intended to empower Black people and make them visible in the future (Bould 2007; Burnett 2015; Dery 1994; Murchison 2018) These stereotypes within Amaya's storyline come from comic book depictions of Black women as animalistic and sexualized (Brown, 2015) and of African countries as places for superheroes to have adventures, not as functioning societies (Lund, 2016). Amaya's characterization is hollow, like Kristen Warner's (2018) discussion of the plastic representation of Black people in mainstream American movies, music videos, and television. I argue the myopic representations of the Black characters, and of Amaya's African village, hold the narrative back from being an empowering and nuanced exploration of African pasts, presents, and futures.

Literature Review

There are three relevant sections of literature to review to understand the scholarly conversation that my thesis is joining and the context of where *Legends* is coming from. The first section covers television network strategies broadly, starting with narrative types like narrative complexity and melodrama. I then examine the intricate storyworld *Legends* exists in and end the first section by discussing network diversity and inclusion strategies. The second section considers post-feminism as a sensibility and its prevalence across CW shows, then digs deeper

into the post-feminist trope of the warrior woman and ends by highlighting research about representations of bisexuality. The third section unpacks what Black speculative fiction is, with an emphasis on the subgenre of Afrofuturism. In it, I examine Black and African representation in comic books, specifically relating to the Imagined Africa trope and Black superheroines.

Contemporary Television Network Strategies

Throughout the American television industry, there has been a shift toward narratively complex television storytelling beginning in the late 90's and gaining traction in the mid-2000s (Mittell, 2015, 19). A narratively complex television show, like *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, oscillates between the demands of episodic and serial norms, where many episodes reject having a clear-cut ending by the conclusion of an episode. The purpose of an episode is now to be one part of a cumulative narrative arc that can last throughout a whole season (18). There are many episodes where the purpose is to explore or to set up a mythology of the world the show exists in while also moving season-long arcs forward. Typically, these narrative arcs lead up to the main characters fighting a big bad, a fearsome antagonist, like in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (19). *Legends* follows all these markers of a narratively complex television show by having season-long arcs, and episodes that explore the television show's mythology. This mythology includes the backstory of the characters and the history of the original tribes of the fictional African nation Zambesi. Throughout the third season of *Legends* the characters are trying to prevent an all-powerful time demon named Mallus from escaping his time prison to wreak havoc on the timeline and the world. Mittell's work captures how the narratives operate in *Legends* and describes how important the world building aspects of television have become. Part of the

show's narrative complexity is also the result of the fictional comic book world the characters come from and connect with.

A transmedia transfiction is the fictional world that a story, character or franchise can exist in across two or more types of media (Pearson, 2017, 2). Many narratively complex television shows exist within a transmedia transfiction. The one that *Legends* exists within on the CW is called the Arrowverse, since the show *Arrow* was the first DC comics book show on the CW. With the success of *Arrow*, three more shows based on intellectual property from DC comic books started to air on the network in the span of a few years. Roberta Pearson (2017) came up with the concept of a transmedia transfiction and with a taxonomy to explain the various types of transmedia transfictions (4). *Legends* belongs in a proprietary fantastic time/space transmedia transfiction, which means it is more centered around a made-up place and time than a central protagonist. Characters can come and go, but the setting and the world inhabited by the characters stays the same. In this way, the development of world, its storyline or moral dilemma, may at times be more important than a character's development.

For producers of a transmedia transfiction, it makes sense to keep growing the storyworld outward by pushing out new products. Creating additions to a transmedia transfiction is a stable way for corporations to make profit off of something that has been successful before and has a strong possibility of being successful again. Producers of transmedia transfictions, that are specifically time/place based, create new additions to the storyworld in two ways: by either extending the timeline the transmedia transfiction exists in or establish a new setting within the storyworld (5).

Just like how transmedia transfictions can influence a television show, so can the narrative type of melodrama. Mittell (2015) argues that melodrama is foundational to the

complex narratives in television; instead of outright preaching to the audience about right and wrong, a melodrama teaches the audience about morality through making them get emotionally invested in the characters of a story (44). Through watching the characters struggle with making moral decisions, the audience learns through example how to be a better person. Hector Amaya (2013) thought of melodramas as an "important depository of popular memory and modern ways of reflecting on the politics of the moment" (124). This means that people use popular culture, like the television show *Legends*, as a way to process the political and societal forces of their current time period. If melodramas are more like tools to discuss the political machinations of society, or are ways to reflect on current societal issues, then there is a significant responsibility for these television melodramas to accurately depict these complex political and social issues. If melodramas fail at this responsibility, it can do more harm than good when trying to understand the complexity of these current political or social issues.

The CW network has their own distinct narrative sense of melodrama that delves deep into narrative complexity and excessive displays of emotion. Each show on the CW tends toward a more pronounced plot structure than many narratively complex television shows. The season-long plot arcs wrap up with the main characters embroiled in a cataclysmic and sensational catastrophe in the season finale (Lausch, 2013, 85). By putting the main characters in the middle of these over the top catastrophes, there is an opportunity for the audience to learn from the mistakes of the character. These excessively complicated plots do not need to be grounded within a tight frame of everyday reality. The more important point is for the narratives of these shows to be extravagant in expressing the various facets of melodrama (85). The CW seems to favor the spectacular aspects of melodramas to attain more viewers over the political and ethical

dimensions of the genre: to learn how to be a moral person and discuss current political and societal issues.

The CW using melodrama as more of a spectacle-oriented genre as opposed to a tool for understanding morality and society seems ironic when examining how the CW works to engage their main demographic. Ron Becker (2006) describes the highly sought-after target demographic as "hip, sophisticated, urban-minded, white and college educated 18-49 (perhaps 18-34) with liberal attitudes, disposable income and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility" which he called the "slumpies" (95). Becker was talking about this demographic from the 90's, when television targeting young viewers was beginning to be developed. The slumpy demographic is what the channel the WB was targeting, and the WB eventually merged into the CW in 2006. Now, the CW is targeting a new generation of this specific demographic which have very similar values. The CW has branded itself as liberal, and inclusive, especially when they coined their slogan, "Dare to Defy", in 2016. The narratives including more spectacle than discussion, and featuring diverse casts, can whet the liberal audience's appetite for appearing to be socially or politically engaged, since the audience gets to support a network that holds similar beliefs as they do. The target demographic is a key source of profit for the network since the CW is supported by advertisers, and because of that the network's audience is considered a commodity to be sold to advertisers. The profits made from the advertisers are needed to create more programming, which can then be framed as and providing more opportunities for inclusion and positive representation. The desire to create positive social change through inclusion and better representation is most likely sincere, but the network would likely not threaten their profit margins by advocating radical social change.

Another network strategy with a focus on inclusion is intersectional representation. Melissa D.E. Meyer (2015) used the term intersectional representation to highlight the practice of a television show having a secondary character who fits multiple, marginalized identity categories, such as a Black, heterosexual woman like Amaya Jiwe in *Legends* (904). As a business strategy, intersectional representation makes the show seem more (nominally) diverse to mainstream audiences and is intended to especially appeal to the underrepresented communities now given some screen time. These intersectional representations, however, create a multi-axis way that the character's identities (based on gender, race, sexuality, and/or religion) are seen as outside the norm of society. These characters are noticeably different from the main characters of a television show because of their overlapping, marginalized identities. By having these "intersectional characters" be the diverse secondary characters, but never the main lead, white, heteronormative, middle-class norms are subtly reinforced as the accepted standard in society. The intersectional characters function to create cultural discourse on how society is post-difference (post-sexism, racism, sexuality, etc.) as if the world is now a colorblind multicultural society that accepts everyone from any background because everyone is part of the human race. According to a post-difference perspective, harmful concepts like sexism, racism, and homophobia have been solved and are in the past (904). Meyer says that a post-difference society focuses on how similar everyone is, which stifles discussion about how the multidimensional identities that people have, and the difficulties people face because of them, are often either unexplored or crudely examined.

This othered intersectional character, like African Amaya Jiwe on *Legends*, is rarely as fleshed out as the white characters because the othered character has been assimilated to the white hegemonic culture. The main purpose for that intersectional character is to act as the wise

counsel to the white protagonist. Kristen Warner (2018) would consider this kind of intersectional representation to be a plastic representation, or one that looks like a positive representation but is truly artificial and something molded to fit hegemonic needs (34). Her assessment of plastic representation focuses on Black representation in American movies, television shows and music videos. Warner points out that media executives think that prominently placing the physical image of Black characters, like having an African superhero, is all that is necessary to have great representation, leaving the depth and quality of that representation unexamined (36). Network executives know they do not need to strive for nuanced representations when plastic representation will be considered diverse enough by audiences. This is where the discussion of nuanced representations that show their audiences the complexities of often marginalized identities is important. There needs to be a push for more than representation in physical looks. Rather, these characters need leading narratives that explore their identities genuinely.

Post-feminist Sensibility and Sexuality

The representation of women generally, and female empowerment specifically, demands particular examination when analyzing many CW shows. There is a certain type of woman in CW shows that exemplifies a post-feminist sensibility, especially when one analyzes the women in *Legends* (Lausch, 2013, 91). Rosalind Gill (2012) argues that by seeing post-feminism as a sensibility rather than a political, social or psychological theory, we can expose the contradictory nature of post-feminist discourses (137). This sensibility has become rampant throughout film, television and advertising. There is constant juggling between feminist and anti-feminist themes. The post-feminist woman has the agency to choose to be sexy because it makes them feel great,

which seems empowering. This agency to choose to be sexy is wrapped up in constant body monitoring to make sure these women's sexy bodies fit a conventional standard of beauty. This conventional style is a narrow ideal that most women cannot fit into (139). The post-feminist woman works hard at maintaining or trying to achieve a certain body type because the female's body is seen to be the key source of identity and power in society (138). Gill's critiques of the post-feminist woman are not meant to be prude or anti-sex but to push us to think critically about who benefits from women's personal choices of being sexually objectified. Specific women may get pleasure and power from this form of agency, but as a group, they do not gain as much benefit from promoting a post-feminist sensibility as men do. Gill argues that post-feminist media subverts the patriarchal system only, in the end, to reinforce it.

This balancing of post-feminist themes can be seen in the popular warrior woman character trope. This trope boomed in the nineties as a post-feminist response to the idea of girl power (Douglas, 2010, 77). *Legends* uses this trope to define many of their female characters. Loredana Bercuci (2017) argues that the warrior woman trope is a cultural aberration because these women are threatening the status quo of typified gender roles by taking on more masculine roles and less feminine traits. The warrior woman is an accomplished and powerful fighter as well as model gorgeous (Douglas, 2010, 78). These women are extremely aggressive, masters of weaponry and machinery, and efficient killers. They can withstand any torture and recover at incredible rates (78). These warrior women are not just armed physically, they are tough verbally. The warrior woman is always ready with a sarcastic comment, a witty comeback or a sly, cutting remark. Susan Douglas (2010) argues that the warrior woman trope is a response to the violence that women face, from sexual harassment to assault (80). For example, the worlds of Buffy Summers and Xena are just as dangerous as reality but these women are always able to

create a spectacle of their fights and overcome the perpetrators. Their shows could be seen as metaphors with feminist icons routinely battling brutish patriarchal society (85). These powerful women can take down armies by themselves, but they must also fit narrow conventional beauty standards while fighting and being a leader. Many of these warrior women are thin, tall and conventionally attractive, as well as mostly white. The warrior woman trope is stuck between subverting standard notions of femininity and conforming to those notions. Even if the producers of *Legends* have the best intentions for creating well rounded, multi-dimensional female characters, the women are held back by the anti-feminist themes that comes from this post-feminist trope.

After examining female representation, I want to look further into another type of representation: bisexual representation in television. Bisexuality is when an individual is attracted to more than one sex or gender (Corey, 2017, 190). Sara Lance is the captain of the misfit, B-list superhero team on *Legends* who also happens to be a white, bisexual woman. In Season 3, Lance develops a romantic relationship with another woman. This new romance is nuanced and crafted with care. Sara's character does not fall prey to bisexual stereotypes, unlike what so frequently takes place on other television shows. Bisexual characters are typically pressured to constantly reaffirm their sexuality (San Filippo, 2015, 31). This usually means that the bisexual characters are constantly sleeping around with people of various genders. When a bisexual person is in a committed monogamous relationship on screen, there can be a simple mistake of viewers thinking the bisexual character is a lesbian or heterosexual (31). I want to make a point about how *Legends* does have some positive and complex representations of various identities, even marginalized ones like bisexuality. Having bisexual characters can also work well for the CW's network strategy of diversity and inclusion because it can make

characters have multi-demographic appeal. With one bisexual character, *Legends* can appeal to an LGBTQ+ audience that might not tune into the CW that much while also not appearing to be too groundbreakingly progressive (San Filippo, 2015, 22). The difference between telling Lance's story authentically and Amaya Jiwe's story authentically though boils down to *Legends*' post-racial perspective that has influenced how Amaya's story is told compared to Sara's story.

The Representation of Race in Speculative Fiction Television

In keeping with my examination of various types of representations, I focus on racial representation with an emphasis on Blackness in this section. To examine representations of race in *Legends*, an understanding of Black speculative fiction is necessary. Black speculative fiction exists across many types of media - films, television shows, books, music videos, etc. Typically, Black creatives use it to envision a world where Black people are no longer oppressed. Black speculative fiction can be science fiction, fantasy or mythology. While *Legends* does not have many Black creators in their crew, Amaya's narrative arc in season three emulates Black speculative fiction.

Afrofuturist fiction is a subgenre of Black speculative fiction that gives Black creatives a space to process themes directly concerning their community. Mark Dery (1994) coined the term Afrofuturism in an interview with some notable Black science fiction authors, but the genre of Afrofuturism has been around for much longer, dating back to W.E.B. Du Bois. Dery defined Afrofuturism as speculative fiction that uses African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns through representing African-American imagery with advanced technology, typically in the future (180). An example would be Amaya Jiwe from *Legends*, who is from a fictional African country of Zambesi in 1942. Amaya joins the Legends, the time travelling

superhero team, in Season 2 and throughout the course of Season 3, Amaya gets glimpses of her future from meeting her granddaughters all grown up and finding out that her village will be destroyed in 1992. Mark Bould (2007) argues that Afrofuturism is a way for Black writers to process the past while also entangling the past and the future together with the present reality (183). This entanglement means that on screen the past and the future exist together such that the future can intervene in the past and the past change the future instantly.

Since 1994, many scholars have elaborated on the definition of Afrofuturism to include themes and concerns of Africans, African diasporic populations and African-Americans (Burnett 2015; Murchison 2018). Joshua Yu Burnett (2015) argues that African authors use speculative fiction as a way to grapple with the neocolonial realities of many African countries (136). Burnett notes that scholarly critics say that post-colonialism is a misnomer since the term declares that colonization has ended. Colonialism has not ended; it has morphed into something less visible. The military might that had controlled and colonized many African countries has left and in the place of that military might is the economic power of Western and Asian corporations (134). Burnett uses the word neocolonialism to better define the current state of African countries. This discussion of neocolonialism and post-colonialism is important when looking at Afrofuturist fiction because it is a common theme explored by Black creatives. Burnett expands upon the definition of Afrofuturist fiction by examining how many Afrofuturist fiction authors, like Nnedi Okorafor and Samuel R. Delany, show that a literal apocalypse, not metaphorical, needs to happen in the books' world to dismantle an African country's neocolonial reality (139). Speculative fiction makes concepts that could only be metaphors in realistic fiction into literal facts. To make an apocalypse happen, then, Afrofuturist authors can use a plot device, like a

macguffin, as the object that creates an apocalypse. This plot device could be a demon threatening to break all of time and destroy the world, like in season three of *Legends*.

The *Legends* story arc following Amaya and Zambesi has many of the markers of an Afrofuturistic narrative and holds great possibility. The progressive potential of uplifting Black superheroes and including Afrofuturism, moreover, is in line with the CW's inclusive branding strategy to embrace as many people from different backgrounds as possible. Unfortunately, Amaya's storyline is a failed Afrofuturistic plot, limited by the comic book origins of the character, the show's post-difference perspective, and ill-conceived ideas about female representation.

Amaya's fictional homeland Zambesi is a crude caricature of an African country. The creation of Zambesi seemed to rely on already established notions in comic books about fictional African countries, like Marvel's Wakanda. I unpack how Wakanda was first imagined in comic books in 1966 because it is very similar to how Zambesi is constructed on *Legends*. Martin Lund (2016) analyzed the comic book character Black Panther's introduction in the *Fantastic Four* comic books in 1966. Black Panther is a superhero that comes from the fictional African country Wakanda. Lund remarks that Wakanda is part of the "Imagined Africa" trope where through cinema and literature the continent of Africa has a storied tradition of being a blank slate where white people can go to have adventures. Such visions of Africa bear almost no resemblance to any real-world African cultures or societies (7). The village and the people inside are benign to any superhero that comes into their village and eagerly assist in the superhero's quest for morality, justice and democracy (2). The Wakanda imagined by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee is ripe with what Lund called imperial psychology and a colonial superiority complex. Those terms mean that there was a hierarchy present in the comics of who is primitive and who is advanced,

white and western people on top. The creation of Wakanda was made with an intermingling of various stereotypes about the African continent and turned African cultures and peoples into a spectacle (9). The creation of Wakanda mirrors how Zambesi is represented in *Legends*. Zambesi is a plastic representation of an African country because Zambesi exists as a place for the Legends to explore and save instead of being a fully realized country.

The character of Amaya is a plastic representation like the country of Zambesi. Amaya has more dimensions than Zambesi, but still lacks in complexity. In part, this is because Amaya's comic book source material reinforces racial and sexual stereotypes. While the writers of *Legends* created the character of Amaya, she is still connected to the DC comics transmedia transfiction. She is the grandmother of the popular DC comics character Vixen, who was born in Zambesi and has the same powers as Amaya. Jeffrey Brown (2015) notes that in the last fifty years, the representations of Black women in comics have not changed from the typical racial stereotypes, which depict them as exotic sexual spectacles that are generally othered (119-120). In addition to fulfilling exotic racial stereotypes, Black women are typically associated with nature, mysticism and totemism (123). The presence of a caricatured version of mysticism and magic in the comic book narratives, for example, lines up with the representation of Africa as a primitive country (128). With this association with nature, Black women are often as "animal-like" as a foil to fragile and chaste white womanhood (123). These stereotypes are a colonial construction, framing Black women as abnormal, overly sexual, and bestial. As a female African character who uses a totem to summon animal spirits, Amaya's characterization depends on these problematic stereotypes.

Black superheroines have the potential power to embody progressive concepts about Black female strength and who can be the hero. Brown (2015) notes that the whole point of a

superhero narrative is to "...right the wrongs, defend the weak, and to be a champion of justice" (125). To be the person who is given the power to decide what are the wrongs, to help the unfortunate instead of being considered the unfortunate, and to be the face of justice is an uncommon position for a Black woman in American media. Brown points out that superheroes help shape Western ideologies since superhero characters, backstories and images are so omnipresent in Western society. By digging deeper into the superhero genre, "They reveal some of the most basic beliefs about morality and justice, our conceptions of gender and sexuality, and our attitudes towards ethnicity and nationality" (119). The superhero genre has played a significant role in contemporary society as a medium to discuss and negotiate identity and representation. That is why the nuanced representation and exploration of a Black superheroine is so important. For example, Brown (2015) found that in *Black Panther: The Deadliest of the Species* (2009) and *Vixen: Return of the Lion* (2009) the female protagonists of both comic books have highly sexualized comic book covers that portray the two African women as bestial and animalistic. The stories inside the comic books frame the two African women as heroes who are strong, mentally and physically, and intelligently work through their conflicts. Similarly, the artwork and narratives inside did not fetishize their Black bodies (134). The African women are connected with animals and African mysticism, but the narratives do not involve romantic plots or even erotic scenes. There is not even a single remark on the attractiveness of either character (132). The same push and pull that characterized the Black superheroines in *Black Panther: The Deadliest of the Species* (2009) and *Vixen: Return of the Lion* (2009) also affected how Amaya Jiwe in *Legends* was conceived and depicted. She is a contradictory combination of colonial stereotypes about Black women while still seeming to be strong and heroic.

Theory and Methods

In my thesis I talk about the many influences that have shaped *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*; from the post-difference culture that the creators of *Legends*, The CW and American society in general exist in, to the comic book foundation of *Legends*. According to this post-difference perspective the world operates in a color-blind and post-feminist way, such that showing the diversity of the world on screen—in a non-threatening way—is now desirable to audiences and advertisers. The diversity shown though is framed in a certain way, where whiteness is still held up as the cultural norm and anything aside from whiteness is othered, is seen as the other option. This is where the concepts of intersectional representation and plastic representation are useful to understand the contradictory nature of a post-difference society. All identities are embraced in a post-difference society, but there is still a hierarchy where some identities are more accepted and understood than other identities.

Stuart Hall (1966) argued that identities are built discursively through specific historical periods and institutional contexts. These contexts perform as sites for these discourses to happen. These discourses are about how different identities should be interpreted by people and how people of these identities look and act. Television is one of these specific historical and institutional sites that cultivates definitive notions about what different identities look like, through representations in their programming (4). I chose to analyze *Legends* because of how the creators of the show are trying to join the conversation envisioning a diverse, multicultural America. The *Legends* narratives and characterization have a dark underbelly, however, when the characters that are more nuanced are white, while the characters that are Black are stuck being defined by stereotypes and flawed ideas about Black female empowerment.

I did a textual analysis on four episodes of *Legends* that examine the intersectional representation of the two characters, Sara Lance and Amaya Jiwe. The Sara Lance chapter focuses more on post-feminist warrior women, white hegemony and her romantic relationship with another woman while my analysis of Amaya Jiwe is more focused on a failed Afrofuturistic narrative arc and the show's use of plastic representation.

Besides a textual analytic approach, I use some industrial analysis in my research to examine the influences of the CW's network strategies on *Legends*. I use trade press publications from *Variety* and *IndieWire* to discuss the production side of *Legends* and to focus on what the president of the CW, Mark Pedowitz, has to say about diversity, inclusion and CW programming. For example, in an article on *IndieWire*, Pedowitz pointed out that 12 out of 17 television shows currently on the CW have female and/or people of color as executive producers (Schneider, 2018). I looked at the CW brand initiatives like the #CWOpenToAll promos that every program on the CW released in October 2018. In the #CWOpenToAll promos, the actors of every show vowed their commitment to welcoming audiences of any background to their network. The promos highlighted how any background or identity can see themselves in the programming released by the CW.

Chapter Breakdown

In my first chapter I have introduced the project. Next, I provided a literature review of television network and narrative strategies, scholarly work on of post-feminism and bisexuality, as well as critical race theory in relation to representation in speculative fiction television. Finally, a theory and methods section followed.

The second chapter of my thesis analyzes how the character of Sara Lance is a post-feminist construction. Following a dive into post-feminism, I examine how Lance's identities make her a site that simultaneously subverts and reinforces white hegemony. I use Season 3, Episodes #1, 16 and 17 for my textual analysis with brief references to other episodes of *Legends* or *Arrow* to give context on the character's backgrounds and motives. In my analysis of Lance, I look particularly at the benefits and the drawbacks of a post-difference perspective for a diverse, youth-oriented, ensemble show. Lance is one of the more three-dimensional characters on *Legends* and the post-difference perspective of the television show has influenced why her character is more fleshed out than Jiwe's character.

In the third chapter I focus on how Jiwe's storyline is informed by Afrofuturism, and why Jiwe's Afrofuturistic storyline is ultimately disappointing. Many of the influences of Jiwe's arc come from comic book stereotypes and canonical storylines. Jiwe spends much of her time either being the wise counsel, mostly toward well-meaning white liberals, or stuck in traditionally feminine roles, such as a girlfriend or grandmother. Jiwe is a post-feminist construction just like Lance is, but her character is far less empowering after scratching beneath the surface. As Kristen Warner would say, Jiwe is a plastic representation. Afrofuturism, as a genre, is built on a foundation of empowering Black voices. Amaya's character has the potential to be an empowering Black representation, but the post-difference perspective of *Legends* ultimately keeps her from fulfilling that promise of Black empowerment.

Through this project I gained an understanding of how well-meaning liberal creators' good intentions can still harm the marginalized communities they are trying to empower. I am interested in this topic because I believe that I am one of those well-meaning liberal creators and want to understand how I can do better in my future creations. It is important to recognize the

positive work that has happened in the realm of mainstream representation, particularly an investment in discussing an increasing number of marginalized identities, and a growing awareness of the concept of intersectionality. It is equally as important, however, to challenge the allies and believers of progressive ideologies to see the flaws in their own work so, hopefully, future representations will be more authentic, and the power structure of society will become more equal for everyone.

Chapter Two: The Struggle Between Promoting Diversity and Reaffirming Whiteness Through the Character of Sara Lance

The character of Sara Lance is one of the longest-running characters in the Arrowverse. Sara has gone from being an integral character in *Arrow* (2012-) as a love interest and vigilante partner to being the captain of a team of time-traveling superheroes and one of the main leads on *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-). From her first introduction in season two of *Arrow* in which she mostly wore a tight, black leather jumpsuit that accentuated her womanly features, her characterization on *Arrow* was hypersexualized. Sara fits a narrow postfeminist sense of American beauty that is common across CW shows: blonde, athletically thin, attractive, and white. Later on, when the character is the protagonist of the Arrowverse television show *Legends*, Sara is no longer as hypersexualized. I chose the character of Sara to analyze because she is a site of negotiation between two contradictory themes within *Legends*. The first theme she embodies is a beneficial willingness to empower and include people belonging to marginalized communities. On the other hand, Sara also epitomizes how the narratives of *Legends* and the leading figures within the Legends group act in a colorblind way that ignores racial identities. This is all the more important because the character of Sara is a celebrated symbol of bisexual

representation and female empowerment. Yet there is not much discussion about the whiteness of Sara and how her race impacts her character, her team and the *Legends* storyworld.

Sara is the captain of a cadre of misfit B-list superheroes, called Legends, who first appeared on *The Flash* and *Arrow*. Several of these Legends are from marginalized communities such as African Amaya Jiwe, African-American Wally West and Muslim-American Zari Tomaz. *Legends* operates under a post-difference logic in which minorities are nominally celebrated and accepted, but the centrality of whiteness and patriarchy – which limit the opportunities for marginalized groups – is never fully questioned. I consider the seemingly non-threatening way white viewpoints are placed in the forefront of this television show, with people of color as the secondary, helpful counselors for white protagonists, as a form of white hegemony. My research questions for this chapter are how does a post-difference perspective influence the characterization of Sara? How does the post-difference perspective, and Sara's characterization, both subvert and reinforce the white hegemony prevalent in primetime American television geared to a mainstream liberal audience?

In this chapter, I consider how a television show committed to championing inclusion but steeped in a post-difference perspective may both advance ideas of equality and subtly reinforce regimes of inequality. In the next chapter, I discuss Blackness and how in *Legends*, the representation of many of their Black characters, especially Amaya Jiwe, is hollowed out or plastic. Kristen J. Warner (2017) discusses how representation in various forms of media, from television shows to movies to music videos, can seem plastic, or hollow, since positive representation is thought to be more based on the visual image of a Black person on screen rather than having those roles for Black actors or artists to speak authentically about their experiences as Black people. In other words, corporate efforts to improve representation typically include

having people of color on screen while avoiding complex explorations of their identities in the narratives (33). In this chapter I unpack how white characters can be seemingly benevolent and accepting of marginalized communities, to the point of appearing to promote and empower these communities. And how this can help hide the ways that centering kind, but paternalistic white characters is problematic, especially when their acceptance of minorities is performative and shallow. The post-difference logic that undergirds this ensemble show with diverse characters, I argue, ensures that white hegemony remains intact. The chapter is primarily based on textual analysis of season three of *Legends*, with some reference to season two, and an analysis of Sara's introduction and backstory in *Arrow*. I have also incorporated insights from examining of industry texts, including trade press and promotional materials associated with *Arrow* and *Legends*.

First, I analyze how Sara's characterization and narratives are influenced heavily by a post-difference outlook which relies greatly on post-feminism, especially when considering the warrior woman trope and Rosalind Gill's (2012) concept of a post-feminist sensibility. Next, I look at how Sara's whiteness, in conjunction with her role as captain and protagonist, gives her the most authority on *Legends*. In this chapter, I also examine how her hypersexualized post-feminist construction in some ways changed and, in some ways, stayed the same from her time on *Arrow* compared to her depiction on *Legends*. Lastly, I analyze how Sara's characterization as a bisexual female is nuanced as well as limiting.

The Rise of Sara Lance: The Sexy Former Assassin in Arrow

When *Arrow* started airing in 2012, there were barely any superhero shows on television and there had only been six Marvel movies released. The Marvel movies were successful, but by

no means had dominated the box office. In contrast, today the CW will have six superhero shows for their 2019 fall lineup and many of the Marvel movies have made over one billion dollars at the box office. *Arrow* began as an attempt to have a dark, grisly action-packed show akin to Christopher Nolan's *Batman*. For example, for the first three seasons there was no magic, no mysticism, just impressive action sequences full of well-trained fighters.

Arrow is about a playboy billionaire named Oliver Queen who gets stranded on an island after his father's yacht is wrecked by a storm in the South China Sea. After five years, Oliver comes back home to Star City as the vigilante the Green Arrow whose purpose is to save his city from crime. Sara is one of the people who was a survivor of that yacht crash, although she did not get stuck on an island but instead was captured and then trained to be an assassin. Sara comes back in season two in which she reveals she had been alive all along and joins Oliver on his fight to rid the city of crime. Throughout season two, Sara is frequently hypersexualized from the way she looks to how she is portrayed in episode promos. Sara fits a hypersexualized post-feminist trope called the warrior woman. This is best exemplified through an analysis of her first episode in season 2.

Sara first appears in the third episode in season two called "Broken Dolls." She breaks through the ceiling to save Oliver Queen from being arrested by the city's police. Oliver is surrounded by ten armed policemen, the lasers of their machine guns focused on him. This picks up from the end of the last episode, which left the audience wondering how he will escape. The beginning of the third episode reveals that he has some unexpected help. Sara breaks through the ceiling to land next to Oliver and uses a sonic blasting device to incapacitate the police. Once Sara crashes, the episode focuses on the police falling to the ground and the windows shattering around them. By focusing on the massive effect of Sara's machine, the show highlights how

powerful she is. The next moments though are a blend of sexualizing her and showing her fighting skills. Sara is wearing a tight leather jumpsuit with a lace-up bodice that emphasizes her cleavage. While she is wearing a mask over her eyes, she has attractive facial features embellished with makeup and long flowing blonde hair. Susan Douglas (2010) discussed how women audiences found pleasure in seeing warrior women on television wearing provocative clothing while also kicking ass, as when Xena would take down a hoard of barbarians while wearing a leather D-cup bustier and leather miniskirt. Douglas argues the warrior woman is a trope that "insisted that females could, and should, combine force and aggression with femininity and sexual display" (98). Sara's appearance and actions in her tight leather jumpsuit create a similar pleasure when she takes down a SWAT team single-handedly by combining both beauty and aggression.

Together, Oliver and Sara jump out of the building's now-broken windows and land in an alleyway. Now that Oliver is safe outside of the building, she starts to walk away. She stops walking once Oliver asks why she helped him. The grim illumination of the alley scene is specifically designed to provide only enough light to outline the silhouette of her body. Sara does not give Oliver an answer, which makes her seem more mysterious. Instead, she jumps up on a car, then to a steel ladder to escape out of the scene. As the camera lingers on Sara's climb, the lights along the building emphasize her lithe figure laced tight in black leather. The way that Sara is shot in the episode, especially her rescue of Oliver and her exit, is done in a postfeminist way. Rosalind Gill (2012) points out that in media displaying a postfeminist sensibility, the female body is portrayed as a window into a woman's personal life. Sara's personal life is supposed to be enigmatic instead of descriptive, she is desirable rather than desiring. Her entrance paints her as more of a mystery than a fully realized person.

Gill argues that, in postfeminist media, a woman's key source of identity and power is her sexy body (137). Sara breaking through the ceiling looking gorgeous and then knocking out a SWAT team shows how her beautiful body and her power as a fighter are linked. For Sara to keep that power, Gill argues that the post-feminist subject needs to look and act a certain way (137). She looks naturally sexy, like fighting in a bodice-lased leather jumpsuit is the most comfortable and basic way to fight off a hoard of police who have machine guns. That is why many of the shots of Sara's introduction highlight both her skills as a fighter and her sexy body, from when she falls through the ceiling to when she leaves Oliver in the alleyway. She barely speaks, except to get information or say a snappy quip. When she is done talking, she takes elaborate means out of any given scene, showing off her physique and her parkour-like skills.

In this chapter I analyze how Sara is influenced by and fits into these overlapping post-something concepts, starting with the ways that Sara Lance's depiction and centrality bolster the post-racial logic of *Legends*. First, to understand the context that *Legends* is coming from, the origin of Sara Lance in *Arrow* is important to unpack. Her whiteness and race are rarely if ever mentioned in *Arrow*. Her whiteness not being mentioned when she is in Star City (which is thought to be the DC Comics's name for Seattle, WA) is not particularly strange, but the same is not true when she is introduced as one of the only white people in the League of Assassins. The League of Assassins is set in the fictional city of Nanda Parbat, which is somewhere in central Asia. Many of the assassins there appear to be of Asian descent. The Asian heritage and cultural norms of places like Nanda Parbat and organizations like the League of Assassins are rarely if ever discussed. The only thing that shows Nanda Parbat and the League of Assassins' cultural roots is the vaguely Indian set decorations and the skin color of the actors and actresses who play the other assassins.

As *Arrow* continues, Sara is revealed to be one of the best assassins of the League of Assassins. There is something odd and uncomfortable about how Sara, a young, white woman from the States, is the best assassin in this legendary group. The League of Assassins has existed in Nanda Parbat, and has been training people, especially Nanda Parbatians, for centuries. By placing Sara as one of the best paints the location of Nanda Parbat as a fantastical place for Sara to explore, mine the country's resources and go back to the States. Positioning Sara as one of the League's best exposes the problematic and colonial connotations of her actions. Through including the Asian-like Nanda Parbat, *Arrow* can seem inclusive by accepting diverse locations and people into the storylines. This inclusion of diversity is influenced by a post-difference push for narratives to embrace diversity as long as whiteness remains on top. The way that Arrow deals with race is to largely ignore it. Nanda Parbat is more of an exotic destination for the home base of some mysterious assassins than an exploration of a South Asian country. The post-racial logic of *Arrow* is different from than in *Legends*. *Legends* uses diversity in their casts and their narratives to give embellishment and flavor to their ensemble cast.

Other than her being white and a woman, Sara is also bisexual and has never had a coming-out arc in either *Arrow* or *Legends*. One reason I consider *Legends* and related CW shows as post-gay is that, as Analise Pruni (2019) notes, such television shows no longer use a coming out story to show a character is gay anymore (27). In the present post-gay media landscape, a character can, without much or any preamble, be shown with love interests or (ex) significant others of the same gender. In episode 13 of the second season of *Arrow,* "Heir to the Demon," Sara's ex-girlfriend comes to Star City to hunt her down and bring her back to the League of Assassins. Oliver and the other characters find out she is bisexual by the arrival of her ex-girlfriend. Sara acts like being bisexual is a commonplace thing and does not exhibit any

mental or emotional struggle over her sexual identity throughout the show. The show's other characters are similarly unfazed by this news. Sara's post-gay narrative is special considering the television landscape in 2013 when the second season of *Arrow* was broadcast. For a long time, LGBTQ representation was narrowly focused on crafting the "coming out" narrative in which a character has to come to terms with their sexuality, and the reactions of the people around that character. By avoiding the familiar, protracted coming out narrative full of anguish, realization and shock, *Legends* reflects the waning social dominance of compulsory heteronormativity and fraught homosexuality (Meyer, 2009, 238). Sara's sexuality, instead, is portrayed as normal. She can fall in love with men, women, or both, and it is not weird or aberrant, but a completely acceptable choice for anyone to make.

Whether depicted as a love interest or femme fatale, or used as a plot device, during her stint on *Arrow* Sara is sexualized, objectified, and used as a tool for other characters' development. Throughout *Arrow*, Sara is framed as Oliver Queen's love interest, girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend. Her character does not have much definition outside of her relationship with Oliver. Once Sara is no longer romantically involved with Oliver, she is used as a mystery for most of the third season of *Arrow*. Early on, she is murdered, and the characters spend most of season three figuring out who killed her. In season four, she is brought back from the dead but is missing her soul. Because she is missing her soul, she is consumed with blood lust, goes on a murderous rampage and must be stopped. Her recurring role from season two to season four of *Arrow* ends with an episode called "Lost Souls" (Season 4, Episode 6), in which a demonologist named John Constantine puts Sara's soul back in her body. With her soul intact, a second chance at life, and her blood lust gone, Sara vows to help people instead of killing them.

Sara in *Arrow* is repeatedly associated with the idea of being lost or broken, which connects back to the post-feminist trope of being a warrior woman. Warrior women characters are transgressive since they both hold masculine characteristics and feminine traits, and because of this are often denied contentment (Bercuci, 2017, 257). The episode she is introduced in is called "Broken Dolls" as if Sara is a broken doll from being an assassin for too long. She is haunted by all the people she has killed. The episode she leaves *Arrow* in is called "Lost Souls" which speaks metaphorically and literally about Sara. Metaphorically, she is a murderer and therefore morally lost from becoming a good person again until she atones for all the death she has caused. Literally, John Constantine needs to put her lost soul back into her body through the use of magic. Loredana Bercuci (2017) discusses how post-feminist warrior women can rarely find happiness because of the struggle entailed in taking on both masculine roles and feminine traits (262). Sara, similarly, is Oliver's equal in combat skills, yet still is feminine from the clothes she wears and how she is styled to her physique. Her tragic history and the guilt for all the deaths she has caused, however, keep Sara from for forming long-term romantic relationships. In *Arrow*, Sara is an outsider who has broken all the rules about morality. She carries this backstory into *Legends* as someone haunted by the death she has caused and who is atoning for her dark deeds.

Captain Sara Lance: The Post-Difference Protagonist of Legends

If *Arrow* is grim, gritty, and dark, with brooding characters steeped in superhero traditions, *Legends* is the opposite. With its funny, bright feel, *Legends* often laughs at the preposterousness of superhero storytelling. In *Arrow*, Sara's skills were always matched with Oliver's, but in *Legends*, Sara's combat skills stand out as the best of those on the team. All the

Legends were recruited by a man from the future named Rip Hunter who thought each of the Legends was insignificant enough to history that they could travel through time to protect history. History needs protecting because there seems to be some villain that is always trying to change the time line to fit their agenda. Season one it is an immortal Egyptian warlock wanting to rewrite time so that he can rule the world, season two it is three villains from *Arrow* and *The Flash* working together to try to give each other happier endings. In season three, it is a time demon named Mallus, who uses his accomplices to destroy time which will let him out of his interdimensional prison. The Legends have been picked because, supposedly by Rip Hunter's loose calculations, if the Legends die in the battle to save the timeline from a great evil, the Legends play such an insignificant role in history that their presence outside their own time will not cause any disturbances. This was the show's polite way of saying the Legends are all B-list and C-list superheroes.

Sara did not start as the protagonist of *Legends*, but as executive producer Phil Klemmer explains, by season two Sara had risen to become the obvious protagonist and de-facto captain for the show (Gross, 2016). No longer in Oliver's shadow, her natural leadership abilities shine through as Sara takes over as the captain of the Legends in season two, episode two, "The Justice Society of America." Even the camera work and the framing of Sara within *Legends* and its promotional texts no longer hypersexualizes the character. Much of the promotional footage focuses on both the action of the episode, in which Sara's martial arts and fighting skills are often prominently featured, and the goofs caused by the Legends collectively. Sara is no longer confined to wearing tight leather jumpsuits for every fight scene; she mostly wears period- and gender-appropriate clothes that do not overly accentuate her curves and chest. This is not to say

Sara is no longer a post-feminist construction, but rather that her character is not as hypersexualized.

Legends features more socially-engaged discussions about identity politics than *Arrow*, such as gender roles and how to be a good ally who can push for a more well-rounded and inclusive understanding of the tasks that each gender typically get assigned to in society. Hector Amaya (2013) discusses how serial melodramas such as telenovelas can be used as a way for the masses to form opinions and understand their social and political world (124). *Legends* operates in a similar fashion, especially when it comes to the discussion of feminism, and women's abilities. Many of these discussions center around Sara, particularly her leadership skills. In episode 2 of season 2 ("The Justice Society of America"), Sara becomes the captain of the Legends. The Legends travel back to 1942 and run into another superhero group called the Justice Society of America, which is a more disciplined and professional group than the Legends. The leader of the Justice Society, Rex Tyler, automatically assumes that the old, white man of the Legends, Martin Stein, is their leader. Martin takes up the mantle of leadership, but flounders when he needs to make some hard decisions involving their team members being captured by the Nazis. Sara, on the other hand, helps Martin make tactical decisions. When Tyler argues that Sara has no authority to make these tactical decisions, Martin stands up for Sara and names her the leader of the Legends. By having what is seen as the normative choice of a leader (an older, white, heterosexual male) hand the mantle of leadership over to a younger woman, the show goes against the expected in some ways. Tricia Ennis (2017) wrote an article on *Syfy Wire* about how the beginning of season 2, especially episode 2, does the hard work of showing and even inspiring young men to be feminist allies for the women in their lives. She discusses how to be a feminist ally and then pulls out textual examples from *Legends*, such as Martin Stein backing up

Sara as the leader of the Legends when other superheroes question her authority. Ennis' reading highlights how *Legends* can be used by a mass audience as a pedogeological tool to discuss and understand various social and political issues (Amaya, 2013, 124), such as how to be good feminist allies.

I would argue, however, that Ennis's praise is somewhat naïve, even premature, especially in light of the racial dynamics of *Legends.* In a show promoting gender equality, it is troubling that Sara needs an old, white, heterosexual man to validate her claim to a leadership position. By needing to wait around to be appreciated as "good enough" by a white male, the show suggests that power and authority may be granted to new communities, but only at the discretion of a benign white man. This process, then, maintains the status quo of white, patriarchal power.

This is a recurring theme in *Legends*, with the women of the show constantly proving to historical figures that they can make great warriors and leaders. In the third season premiere, "Aruba-Con," Julius Caesar accidentally ends up in 2018 Aruba for spring break and brings together many toga-wearing fraternity brothers to join his mission to conquer Aruba. The Legends want to bring Caesar back to his timeline before he causes too much havoc in 2018. Sara goes up to Caesar and asks him to surrender to her team to avoid causing too much commotion, but Caesar, sword raised, declares that he would never surrender to a woman. Within moments, and using her bare hands, Sara has Caesar defeated and captured. By the end of the episode, Caesar learns to have respect for female leaders and fighters because of his interactions with Sara. He asks Sara to be his "Amazonian Queen" and together they could rule the world. While now respected for her fighting and leadership skills by a formidable historical figure, Sara is still put in a feminized role—that of an exotic and rare "Amazonian Queen."

This seems like wish fulfillment in that historical characters, like Julius Caesar, are re-written to be a little more "feminist." Caesar is able to acknowledge the virtues of Sara as a warrior woman. Through Sara's power as a leader and a fighter she teaches Caesar what women are capable of. Certainly, there is a pleasure in showing Sara kick Caesar's ass. After all, Caesar conquered much of Western Europe and he is easily defeated within minutes by this female assassin. This blend of action, combining Sara's beauty and brawn, exposes how powerful Sara is. However, that power is limited because Caesar's revelation about gender equality seems to have little impact in regard to dismantling the patriarchal structure of society.

Through Sara and Caesar's interactions, the CW combines martial arts spectacle and an important yet shallow discussion of women's capacity to be leaders. The plot points of Sara proving her leadership skills to men seem to be, in part, intended to engage the audience on the social issue of gender equality. Specifically, Caesar and Sara embody the positions of the man who is unfortunately ignorant due to historical circumstances and the overwhelmingly worthy, patient, and gorgeous woman. Caesar's anti-feminist reactions to Sara's leadership come off as a part of the comic relief of the episode, although Caesar's anti-feminist reactions are fairly common in reality. Caesar's antics may be portrayed as laughable, but this type of sexism, treating women as pretty helpless things, is no laughing matter. Rather than teasing open a complicated discussion, the CW focuses on the pleasurable-to-watch spectacle of Sara kicking Julius Caesar's butt with her stylish martial arts moves. The CW displays Sara's quick work changing Caesar's mind, oversimplifying as it might be, as a way to have the audience become more socially engaged. *Legends* productively connects it with a recurring if shallow discussion about how gender should not matter when considering what characteristics make for a good leader.

In the next section, I further examine Sara as the de facto protagonist and leader of the Legends, but with an emphasis on the role her unmarked whiteness plays in the show. I also include some industrial analysis of the CW's efforts to promote and celebrate diversity and examine some of the other Legends' problematic interactions with the past. Sara's unmarked whiteness is important to analyze because, while her race is never overtly examined in the show, especially what part it may play in the acceptance of her in this leadership position, she continuously puts the people of color under her care in dangerous and traumatic situations. In general, *Legends* does not confront how dangerous or traumatic these situations could be for the non-white characters. This is related to the fact that the show rarely contends with, even in a shallow fashion, the race relations of the time periods that are being visited.

In particular, the way that *Legends* frames Sara as the leader and the decision-maker exposes the post-racial perspective of the show. The majority of Western history, which provides or informs the spatial and temporal playground for the Legends, would be a fraught site for non-white time travelers, superheroes or no. Yet the historical context of racial discrimination that pervades these times and places are glossed over or barely talked about. One likely reason this whitewashing occurs is that a more in-depth discussion of the historical periods or locales' experiences with discrimination or racism would eventually need to include how white people caused and participated in these acts of discrimination or racism. There would need to be an acknowledgment of white privilege, which could come into conflict with the post-difference outlook of *Legends*. Within a post-difference understanding, whiteness (more as an ideology than specific white people) is portrayed as benign, even as helpful and kind.

Media representation is no longer exclusive to white people anymore, especially in the CW's programming. Mark Pedowitz, the network president of the CW, has said, "We are

committed to making sure our viewers see themselves represented on screen, and that we also have diverse voices being heard behind the camera" (Turchiano, 2018). The diversity present in American mainstream television like *Legends* exposes how diverse identities are being accepted, even promoted in society. Pedowitz, an older white, heterosexual man, is actively trying to make sure that diverse voices are being seen and heard in the 17 different television shows on the CW network, with *Legends* being one. Pedowitz could be seen as one of those beneficent white men who use their power to help the disenfranchised. For whiteness as an ideology to stay in power as the norm, whiteness needs to seem accepting and benevolent, but only to a certain degree. Discussions of the hegemonic powers of whiteness and white privilege would start to peel off the veneer that whiteness, as an ideology, is helpful and benign. When that veneer of kindness is pulled away, the truth that whiteness as the norm is not kind or beneficial to all parties in society would be revealed. Revealing the truth behind the veneer of beneficent and accepting whiteness would expose how racial prejudice and mistreatment is a unifying factor in Western society over the last several hundred years through to today.

The same violation of human rights, based on the color of a person's skin, happens today as it did 300 and 400 years ago. Some of the first enslaved and captured Africans to come to America, specifically Port Comfort in what would be known as Virginia, happened exactly four hundred years ago (Shipp, 2019). 300 years ago, it was a normal and common practice to take African-American children away from their parents when the parents had different slave owners than the children (Williams, 2010). Now, for over a year now, the United States government has been letting illegal immigrants be forcibly separated from their children with the children detained in barely functioning and packed detention centers near the southern border of the United States. While these illegal immigrants are not slaves in America, their basic human rights

of being with their children have been stripped away just like how slaves' rights to their children were (Cediel, 2018).

So far, the Legends have visited with George Washington at Valley Forge and with Ulysses S. Grant on the Confederate Battleground. They have traveled to German-occupied France during World War I, Germany during World War II, 1950's Alabama, Victorian London, and 1930's Hollywood. They have investigated P.T. Barnum's Circus during 1870 in Wisconsin and experienced the Old West in the 1830's (twice: once in Dakota territory and once in Colorado territory). I list out this abridged catalogue of locales and time periods the Legends explore because many of these settings would be marked by significant gender or racial discrimination. Although being a white woman in all of the time periods above must have had its challenges, these challenges are not equivalent to those faced by the non-white members of the Legends team. Many times, the backward-seeming politics and social beliefs of the people they meet while traveling through time and space are brushed aside by a stinging remark, a funny quip or a depressing comment from the Legends. The purpose of those quips is to twofold: to diffuse the situation, and to show that the Legends are morally above the people and locales that are discriminatory.

Sara joins in on these comments and quips, but rarely discusses the unique dangers that the characters of color could face. This lack of overt consideration for and discussion of the racial background of her compatriots, especially the people she considers family, seems ignorant and myopic. Sara's colorblindness may seem harmless at first glance. Analyzing her colorblindness more closely, however, points to how it reinforces the idea that whiteness is the dominant norm that many Western societies operates under, even if this idea is not necessarily true. Examining how race could affect a character time traveling forces us to consider the

hegemonic norms of mainstream Western time travel narratives: they generally center white people, mainly white men. For example, the first 26 years of *Doctor Who*, from 1963 to 1989, did not have a single character of color. It was not until the reboot of *Doctor Who* that having many characters of color was important for the show, especially since the show's characters are a metaphorical representation of British citizens (Charles, 2013, 166). Media studies scholar Raka Shome (2000) argues that whiteness is maintained and produced by the "everydayness" of whiteness, how white people participate in society and how they benefit from various parts of society that would not be so friendly to a person of color. This is in part because racism is often taught as something that happens to people of color. However, there is rarely much discussion about how white people are also "raced" subjects who reinforce and benefit from a society that accepts and promotes their whiteness (Shome, 2000, 366).

Sara's actions are the everyday actions of a white person who does not realize the impact of how her race shapes her interactions within the world she lives in. She does not acknowledge her privilege as a white person in her society, at a cost to her friends, because she does not have to. Sara actively needs to work to see past her whiteness, something her friends of different racial and ethnic backgrounds learned quickly when they were much younger. Sara being white and getting the most screen time and narrative weight reaffirms whiteness as the dominant norm in society. This reaffirming of whiteness makes sense, though, when considering the post-difference perspective *Legends* operates under.

An episode titled "Turncoat" (season 2, episode 11), and set during the American Revolutionary War, provides a helpful example of how a historical period likely would have been dangerous for a time traveler who is not white. The Legends learn that some villains are trying to murder George Washington to turn the tide of the war, so Sara commands Amaya and

Nate to personally go protect George Washington. The two pose as a married couple at George Washington's Annual Christmas Eve Party in 1776. Amaya is an African woman from the 1940's and Nate is a 30-year-old white, male historian from 2017 Star City. Both are heterosexual. Nate and Amaya appear calm and comfortable walking into Washington's house. They do get stopped by an American military general who asks them about their unusual marriage, but Nate and Amaya respond that they are from Boston. Both Nate and Amaya say the made-up fact as if it is an obvious, frivolous answer. The military general is shocked but does not say anything further, as if to not disrespect them. This is the furthest that the episode "Turncoat" goes in discussing race relations during the Revolutionary War era. Amaya could have, and probably should have, been in more danger because of her skin color. George Washington and his wife owned over 150 slaves by the start of the Revolutionary War. While Washington claimed he believed in the abolition of slavery, he also did not want to lose the labor for his Virginia plantation (Pruitt, 2018). Being surrounded by slave owners would likely be a dangerous and emotionally tense situation for Amaya, but the show never addresses such very real concerns. There also could have been a more nuanced exploration of how Amaya generally felt being a Black woman in 1776. Again, there is no exploration of Amaya's outlook or emotions relating to this topic.

One of Sara's basic rules as the captain is to not change history. There is, potentially, a good reason for this rule, one that is often explored in the various Arrowverse television shows. One change through time has unpredictable ripple effects. This ripple effect is a common time travel plot. The show makes it clear that Sara would love to be able to use the Legends' time ship to go back in time to save her sister from being killed in the fourth season of *Arrow*, but she does not because she is worried about the unintended consequences of saving her sister's life. While

the loss of Sara's sister is tragic, and the guilt from not being able to save Laurel does weigh on Sara, I understand Sara's reasoning about not changing the past as inflexible and unclear sometimes. While Sara has admitted she hates being the "bad cop" when it comes to policing her team regarding changing the timeline, she is portrayed as believing she is doing the right thing.

Zari Tomaz, the ship mechanic of the Legends, disagrees with Sara's stance and takes action against it in episode 6 ("Helen Hunt") in the third season. Instead of putting Helen of Troy back in her right time of ancient Troy after the Trojan War started, Zari drops her off at Wonder Woman's home island Themiscyra, where Wonder Woman learned to fight with an elite army of women. There was no reaction or consequence from changing the timeline. This shows that while Sara is right on most occasions about changing time, she is not right about all situations. Sara's reasoning for her policy seems inflexible and unclear since there could be disastrous consequences from changing time, although some changes to the timeline appear to have little to no consequences. In fact, Helen of Troy comes back in the finale of season three to help the Legends fight time demon Mallus' acolytes. Having Helen of Troy learning how to be a warrior on Themysicra changed time for the better, and in the Legends' favor. Sara holds power over what is deemed right and wrong for the Legends. What is problematic about that power though is that Sara does not have a clear and cogent reason for her policy against going back and changing time.

While the exact potential costs of breaking this rule about not changing history are in most cases completely unknowable, Sara's commitment to keeping the timeline as it is has very concrete consequences. Specifically, on multiple occasions, it keeps her teammates that come from marginalized communities from helping out their families who are facing discrimination or violent threats because of xenophobia, white supremacy, and so forth. For example, Zari Tomaz

comes from a dystopian near future in America in which superhuman powers and religion are outlawed. Her brother is a criminal hacker that tried to take down the government but was killed in the line of action. Zari repeatedly asks the team why they cannot go to the future to save her brother, Behrad. The main reason that many of the Legends give, as if straight from Sara's mouth, is that changing the timeline will have unintended consequences.

In the penultimate episode of season three, "Guest Starring John Noble," Amaya goes home to her native country, Zambesi, in 1992 to save her village from being destroyed. Sara is frustrated by Amaya's actions, especially since the big bad of season 3, a time demon named Mallus, would be released to wreak havoc throughout all of time if one more anachronism (a change in the timeline in the show's parlance) happens. The episode focuses on Sara gathering the insight and opinions of many of her trusted colleagues and a historical leader before she decides on what to do about Amaya and the time demon.

First, she relies on her well-meaning white, liberal colleagues like the former captain Rip Hunter and her ex-girlfriend Ava Sharpe. Left conflicted by what her friends have to say, she goes back in time to seek the advice of a young Barack Obama who is studying at Occidental College in 1987. She describes Obama as the one person who "can think straight when the world has gone crazy." According to *Variety*'s Elizabeth Wagmeister (2017), the creative team behind Legends is disappointed and dismayed with President Trump and his administration and sees their show as a way to give some kind of wish fulfillment to people that feel the same way. The choice of Sara seeking out a young Barack Obama's advice is in line with the liberal, progressive perspective of *Legends* since in many ways Obama is a foil to Trump. According to sociologist Edward Bonilla-Silva (2015), Obama is known for his messages of optimism, centrist politics and his often race-less political stances (1367). Young Obama's wise words encourage Sara to

trust in her own judgment which exposes again the post-racial notions inherent throughout the *Legends* storylines and characters. Many proponents of mainstream American liberalism take up a post-racial, colorblind stance as means of addressing the ills of racism and their hope for a better future without asking for substantive changes that may upset the status quo. Similarly, Obama's presidential run offered the promise of a diverse future without asking for almost any structural social changes in return. The image of him in the White House was the fulfillment of the promise of a diverse future; he did not work on or promote any race-based initiatives while on the campaign trail or while President (1367).

Obama's advice fits in line with the post-difference viewpoint of Legends by having a revered person of color give broad and generic counsel to Sara that validates her personal opinions and morals as suitable for deciding the shape of history. Obama standing in as the person that Sara can rely on for advice on leadership is just like the post-difference character trope that Melissa D.E. Meyer (2015) analyzed in her research. Meyer discusses how characters of color are often secondary characters there to help give counsel to the white protagonist (901). The fact that Young Obama's advice and his mere presence in Legends propel the post-racial perspective of *Legends*, which promotes a white person's perspective and journey over a person of color (i.e. Amaya Jiwe), is problematic.

After talking to young Obama, Sara confers with two secondary characters that are Legends, Zari and Wally West. The latter is a young Black man guest starring from *The Flash*. Zari, earlier in the season and incurring some of Sara's wrath, built a loophole-finding algorithm into the Waverider's mainframe. Zari and Wally had been testing to see if there is a loophole in which Amaya's village could be saved in 1992. The two advise Sara that there are no loopholes in which Amaya saving her village would have no consequences to the timeline, meaning that

any change to the timeline would result in the releasing of the time demon Mallus. By the end of the episode, Sara has to make a decision. Either the Legends, with the help of some of their friends and foes, need to fight Mallus, or they have to fight Amaya. Sara feels, in her gut, that it is better to assist a friend instead of turning on that person when they need help. While that final decision is sweet and endearing, the episode prioritized Sara's journey of introspection and growth as she comes to the decision that she wants to help Amaya. The scenes with the characters of color, like Zari and Wally and young Obama, lasts less than five minutes, while the scenes with Sara and Ava discussing the mission and processing Sara's feelings take up much more screen time. Zari exists in this episode to give Sara bad news. She does not have a character arc of her own. Taken together, the penultimate episode's narrative includes people from a variety of backgrounds, but the characters that have the most power, screen time, and development are white. Sara only overturns her rule about changing history after she goes through a long journey of self-discovery with the help of her white well-meaning liberal friends and people of color counseling her.

The decision to change history in "Guest Starring John Noble" shows that Sara can be reasoned with and learn to see from perspectives other than her own. That being said, the episode's narrative prioritizes the white person's journey about what to do about a Black person, rather than focusing on the Black person's journey. In a society steeped in whiteness, in which whiteness is seen as the norm and the ideal, television shows are most likely to include narratives with people of color so long as that narrative is focused more on the white person. The inclusion of settings and people such as Zambesi, Amaya and her family demonstrates the open-mindedness of the show *Legends*, and how accepting the other Legend heroes are of other cultures and other ways of life, but it does little to center or explore those cultures. Whiteness is

portrayed as benevolent by including these other cultures, although the inclusion is only at a surface level. In the next chapter, I discuss how the representation of Zambesi, a fictional African country, and the character of Amaya Jiwe, are myopically created, plastic representations of what an African woman and place would look and act like (Warner, 2017, 33). The main narratives in *Legends* are still focused on the white characters and their decisions and emotional journeys with the characters of color in the background. The subliminal message in the episode "Guest Starring John Noble" is that the acceptable time to change history is when a white person declares changing history is okay. Amaya is displayed as selfish and careless for wanting to save her village, while Sara deciding to break time to help Amaya is portrayed as heartfelt and compassionate. Sara's decisions over when to change the rules of the ship expose how her perspective has more power and authority than Amaya's.

Placing the focus on white perspectives, rather than on perspectives of people of color, is insidious when considering Hector Amaya's (2013) argument about television being a place for mainstream audiences to understand and learn about political and social issues. If *Legends* offers plastic representations of Black people and African cultures that are misunderstood and targeted in society, then those shallow, inaccurate representations inform general perceptions of these people and places. An example of the public being crudely uninformed about African countries was when President Trump called many African nations "shithole countries" (Watkins and Philip, 2018). *Legends* is doing a disservice to their African characters by giving a general overview of African people and locales built on stereotypes while simultaneously benefiting from performing their investment in diversity and inclusion. Whatever the creators and executives intentions might be, such shows still implicitly affirm the status quo of whiteness. What is more, that affirmation may be sneakier and harder to combat than overt racist depictions

because they, like many in American society, are giving lip service to the ideas of inclusion and diversity.

Mark Pedowitz claimed in 2018 that 49% of the series regulars for the 17 television shows on the CW in 2017-2018 were people of color (Turchiano, 2018). The use of the term series regular means that these are people who have recurring roles in their television shows. It does not mean that these 49% of actors have leading roles in their television shows, or even that they appear in every episode of the season. As Warner (2017) has discussed, many network executives know an easy workaround for their networks to seem progressive and caring about representation is to hire racially diverse actors. These racially diverse actors, however, are rarely given complex and authentic characters to play (33).

This push for physical representation that operates on a surface level can best be seen in the CW's fall 2018 campaign called #CWOpenToAll. The campaign overtly reaffirmed the network's commitment to diversity and representation. In Fall of 2018, every one of the CW shows from 2017-2018 produced a twenty-second promo of their actors, on their television show's sets, vowing their commitment to diversity and inclusion. The promos were sent out to trade press papers and posted on all social media accounts for the CW. The several promos and a handful of tweets and Instagram posts using the hashtag #CWOpenToAll, however, were the extent of the campaign. There was some buzz from trade press papers that wrote up stories on the campaign, like *Variety*, *Deadline* and *The Hollywood Reporter* (Turchiano, 2018; Haring, 2018; and Porter, 2018). Many of those promos are now hard to find or have been taken down by the CW. The hashtag #CWOpenToAll has not been used by almost any the CW social media accounts since February 2019. The campaign seemed to have a short lifespan with little impact. Taken together, the CW's efforts for diversity and inclusion are shallow, focused more on

physical representation and flashy promos than careful, planned out ideas of how to create more complex representations of marginalized communities. While some progressive depictions do exist, they tend to foreground certain characters and arcs over others. Sara's characterization, for example, has explored her bisexuality and her experiences as a female leader in powerful ways, but many of the characters of color on *Legends* do not receive that much attention and nuance.

Sara Lance: Her Positive Yet Limiting Bisexual Representation

Over the third season, a tender romantic relationship develops between Sara and Ava Sharpe. Ava is in many ways the opposite of Sara. Ava is a rule-abiding government worker for the Time Bureau, a bureaucratic police force tasked with maintaining the timeline. When the Legends go back to meet their former selves in the season two finale, the paradox causes the timeline to go haywire and create anachronisms in every time period and location possible. To combat the out of place people and items, Rip Hunter creates the Time Bureau to essentially clean up the Legends' mistake. In the beginning, Ava despises Sara until they get to know each other better. Ava clings to order and regulations while Sara is used to being the outcast and living by her own moral code. Both are very similar in other ways. They both love their work, believe in their jobs, and find them fulfilling. Both women are highly trained fighters and leaders who rarely, if ever, need any backup or assistance. It is their work which constantly brings these self-sufficient women into interaction and conflict. From the moment the two characters first appeared together on screen in the third season premiere, their chemistry was phenomenal. As one pop culture critic notes, Ava seems "custom built just for [Sara]" (Anne, 2018). When Ava gets the chance to go on a mission with the Legends, the two begin flirting. More importantly, they begin to see from each other's perspectives. Sara learns why Ava believes following rules

can make the world a safer place, and Ava sees why the Legends breaks so many rules as many missions require an unorthodox solution.

Sara and Ava's relationship gets tested and goes through many ups and downs, with both characters suffering crises about their identities. *Legends* follows the familiar soap opera tradition of continually destabilizing relationships to create narrative conflict, a common narrative strategy for much of the CW's programming (Lausch, 2013, 89). Sara worries her dark past means that she is not a good enough person to date Ava which is why she breaks up with her. Ava's crisis is more foundational to her sense of self because in an episode called "I, Ava" (season 3, episode 15), Ava finds out that she is a clone. Her name Ava stands for Advanced Variation Automation and AVA clones are commonly used in Vancouver 2213. The AVA clones were created to be the perfect law-abiding worker to keep society safe and in good working order. The AVA clones are also marketed to look like the perfect woman. The best genetic material from women around the world was gathered to create the Advanced Variant Automation clone. All AVAs have the same exact look as each other, and as Sara: they are all tall, athletically thin, white with long blonde hair. This description is also the typified post-feminist version of beauty that is standard across much of the CW's programming (Lausch, 2013, 91). Women on the CW are universally thin, conventionally beautiful, typically white with few exceptions and have a glossy look achieved with makeup and long, stylized hair (91). A post-feminist sensibility is centered around how femininity is displayed and monitored in the female body as if the body was a property that has to be maintained (Gill, 2012, 137). Ava's narrative takes this post-feminist meaning to a literal extreme: she is considered the perfect woman and a commodity bought by bureaucratic agencies to keep society in working order. This post-feminist standard of beauty is incredibly limiting for everyone involved because most women do not fit

into that specific model of beauty. *Legends* has so much potential to portray the future in their liberal vision, in which diversity and inclusion have already happened and in which any background is accepted. Instead, options for acceptable femininity are still limited, and the perfectly calibrated beautiful bodies of women become literal properties for sale.

While the show's diverse cast demonstrates its progressive intent, the narrow version of white beauty it favors, even when picturing a fantastical future, highlights how whiteness is treated as the norm of any Western society, no matter the time period. With a show that time travels, there are barely any limitations to the futures that could be created. In the third chapter, I analyze how season three of *Legends* could be interpreted as an Afrofuturistic narrative through the African character of Amaya Jiwe. Afrofuturism is a narrative genre known for imagining a future in which Blackness is the norm and whiteness no longer holds the dominant power over society. Vancouver 2213 could have had some elements of Afrofuturism, but that would conflict with the post-racial, post-feminist perspective of the Arrowverse transmedia transfiction. Instead, the Vancouver of 2213 mirrors our reality of white patriarchy, in which women's bodies are more like properties and the lily-white blandness of Vancouver 2213, a representation unlike the actual, diverse and bustling city of Vancouver, hides the problematic and post-racial understanding woven into the fabric of this narrative.

While there has been significant positive coverage from trade and popular press publications about Sara as one of the few LGBTQ leads on primetime television, these sources do not address how Sara and Ava's relationship still offers a narrow depiction of queer beauty and love. These articles firmly state their opinions about Sara in their headlines. An article's title from *The Mary Sue* reads "*Legends of Tomorrow* Made A LGBTQIA Character a Main Lead and Improved Because of It" (Alacron, 2017). In *Autostraddle* one of their articles about *Legends* is

titled, “How “Legends of Tomorrow” Became one of the Best Queer Shows on TV” (Anne, 2018). One of *Fandom*’s articles about *Legends* is a celebration of Sara with the headline, “Why Sara Lance is a Breakthrough Bisexual Superhero” (Tygiel, 2018). In our current American mainstream media landscape, with its often limited, simplified, and negative depictions of bisexual romance, the Lance-Sharpe pairing has received well-deserved praise that is one-dimensional. For one, the show does not follow the tired “bury your gays” trope.

“Bury your gays” is a narrative cliché in which members of the LGBTQ community are killed off at a far higher rate than heterosexual people in different types of media from television to movies to books. Often these LGBTQ characters are killed off just after the first depiction of a sexual act as if to paint such relationships as mainly tragic. Sociologist and media studies scholar Erin Waggoner (2018) highlights that there were 35 women-loving-women characters on the 2015-2016 television season and 10 of those women were killed off (1877). Five of the 10 female characters were killed off between January to May of 2016 (1877). With such little representation of women-loving-women characters on television, there is a symbolic annihilation of this representation (Tuchman, 2012, 154). Waggoner (2018) even points out that since 1976, there have been 166 women-loving-women characters on television that have been killed off (1877). These are stark numbers that expose how traumatic the “bury your gays” trope can be. Sara and Ava avoid this trope, especially since the actor who plays Ava, Jes Macallan, has been a series regular in season four and has renewed her contract as a series regular for season five (Andreeva, 2019).

Nevertheless, Sara and Ava’s representation has some limiting factors. Focus on such a meaningful connection between two women gives space for positive representation of women-loving-women relationships. The fact that Sara and Ava both fit into a narrow norm of

attractiveness that centers white beauty and white love, however, undermines the CW's avowed commitments to progressing diversity. For example, there are many queer actors of color on *Legends* that play heterosexual characters, including Amaya, played by Maisie Richardson-Sellers, and Wally, who is played by Keiynan Lonsdale. Not only audience members, but even the actors of *Legends* do not get to see people that look like them have healthy relationships with people of their same gender. Both Lonsdale and Richardson-Sellers are mixed race and bisexual. Both Lonsdale and Richardson-Sellers play characters that are secondary and heterosexual. Amaya and Wally's status as second-rate characters in *Legends* does not give enough space for a complex exploration of their identities, something that I explore more in-depth in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The problematic notion that white perspectives are more important than the perspectives of people of color is subtly and consistently reinforced in *Legends*. That notion becomes more problematic when considering the CW's professed commitments to diversity and inclusion. The character of Sara is a good example of this blend of half-pursing more inclusion while also maintaining the status quo of centering whiteness. Sara may be accepting of people of all backgrounds, and willing to stand up for gender rights to ensure that women can be seen as equals. But she also has a lot of power and acts as the moral arbiter of what is right, while remaining blind to the way her choices sideline or harm some of her crew as well as the rest of humanity. Crucially, although the Legends can fantastically travel through all time and space, Sara does not use her power to enact social change that could make the world more just for everyone. For one, her rule of not changing the timeline, one that is steeped in a white hetero-

patriarchy, is a form of her supporting the status quo. The problematic post-difference influence that has seeped into every aspect of *Legends* is hard to perceive though because *Legends*' outlook is not uniquely theirs and is not completely original. Much of the entertainment industry is steeped in this post-difference viewpoint, which is something that I unpack more in the next chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I have exposed how the character of Sara has been influenced by post-feminist themes regarding how she looks, how she acts and how she dresses. Sara's character type of a warrior woman has been seen before in *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Sara Lance brings something important to the CW with her bold fearlessness and embrace of all different kinds of love. These two themes of her character are refreshing and pleasurable to watch unfold. The fact that Sara is also part of a post-gay movement in which characters no longer need to struggle and go through so much grief about their sexuality is also important and positive. Now, in a post-gay television show, a character like Sara is introduced as bisexual without a coming-out narrative and everyone in the Arrowverse is accepting of her sexuality. Bisexuality is not seen as something strange or abnormal, it is just one of many acceptable ways to be. The CW, however, could push further with their diversity initiatives. Sara can be a pleasurable and somewhat progressive character to watch, but her characterization is not all that new. Sara in many ways takes on tendencies and tropes long associated with white male action heroes: she kicks ass, takes names, and gets the girl.

Sara also is influenced by a post-racial perspective in which her whiteness is rarely mentioned, even though in some situations Sara should acknowledge her white privilege. Her race signifies the reaffirmation of white dominance in American society, in which most of the political leaders and CEOs are white. While characters like the African woman Amaya is seen as

the other woman, the other option for femininity, Sara automatically seems normal to viewers because white, thin, blonde, conventionally attractive women are rampant across television shows. Sara may be powerful, but this threat to social norms seems to be contained by her fitting a narrow sense of beauty, as does her romantic partner Ava Sharpe. How transgressive is their romance, in the end? Their progressive relationship is couched within their white skin and conventional beauty. One of the more problematic parts of Sara's characterization is that she is not able to look past her whiteness, making it difficult for audiences to as well. Her authority and centrality go unquestioned while the complexity of non-white characters and the difficulties they must face time-traveling go unexplored. This post-difference characterization seems like two steps forward for progressive representations of women, with one step back.

The shallow form of diversity *Legends* embraces does give jobs and some prominence to people of color no doubt, but the authentic experiences of people of color are woefully underpromoted and barely visible. The use of multicultural casting in television shows and movies implies that diversity is a main priority for the studios, executives, and networks that produce and distribute them. But these colorblind shows and plastic roles for minority actors are typically written through a white perspective and not indicative of the lived-in identities of people of color. Colorblind shows, in the end, make sure that white people feel less guilty that they still dominate society. To promote better racial representation and the embrace of more meaningful understandings of diversity, there needs to be more time spent on understanding how to do a deeper, more organic way of including people of diverse backgrounds in the creative process and on our screens. In the next chapter, I briefly discuss *Black Panther* and I think that is a good example of a better embrace of African culture that is undertaken from a distinctly Black perspective.

Chapter Three: Amaya Jiwe's Failed Afrofuturistic Narrative and Plastic African Representation in *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*

Introduction

Marc Guggenheim, one of the creators and executive producers of *Legends*, talked to a reporter at the Television Critics Association Press Tour in August of 2017 about the show's third season which aired from October 2017 to April 2018. During the interview, Guggenheim was asked about season three. Guggenheim said, "One of the ideas that's really going to become ascended in Season 3 is, instead of just fixing time, can the Legends actually improve time?" (Radish, 2017). The idea of the Legends improving time over fixing time is directly related to Amaya's third season narrative arc being interpreted as Afrofuturistic. Trying to improve time is a shift from the ways the Legends have acted in the seasons before. Before, the Legends were screw ups who accidentally would change history and in season three, the Legends learn how to change time to make it better. The idea of deciding what is the morally good thing to do—police time or improve it—is a major theme throughout the third season of the television show. Who gets to decide when and how to change time, however, is affected by the logics of the post-difference perspective? Characters of diverse backgrounds are able to *help* change time while the white characters are *in charge* of making the crucial decisions of when and how to do it.

This chapter is dedicated to analyzing the character of Amaya Jiwe, a Black woman from the fictional African country of Zambesi in 1942. Amaya is a complement to Sara Lance, since both women are excellent fighters and leaders. While Sara is a character that is very active in her own storyline, Amaya is noticeably more passive. Throughout season three, she learns more about her future and her descendants. Amaya finds out that she has two granddaughters. One is a

vigilante in present day Detroit that fights crime named Mari. The other granddaughter, Kuasa, is a villainous character who is working for a time demon bent on destroying all of time. Guggenheim discusses how Amaya's storyline becomes about her deciding whether to change history or not, to give her malicious granddaughter Kuasa a better future (Radish, 2017). What I find fascinating about the third season of *Legends* is how Amaya and Kuasa's relationship is explored, and how their native African country of Zambesi is represented. The questions that I ask in the next few sections are: How could Amaya's storyline in season three of *Legends* be interpreted as Afrofuturistic? What are some of the roadblocks, or contradictions, that keep her storyline from fulfilling the potential of Afrofuturism, a genre known from uplifting Black voices? How does the post-difference perspective of the show influence the characterization of Amaya and her storyline?

In this chapter, I argue that Amaya's storyline has the potential to be a nuanced exploration of an African woman's story to save her family, through the use of the Afrofuturism genre. The post-difference perspective of *Legends*, however, limits Amaya's storyline from fulfilling that potential. Amaya's characterization is filtered through many layers of post-concepts, from post-feminist to post-racial, that all leave an imprint on her and her storyline. These concepts though, from post-racial to post-feminist, which all belong under the concept of post-difference, leave the character of Amaya hollow, as if the character herself was made with plastic. Amaya is portrayed as a strong leader and fighter, and an empowered woman ready to right the wrongs of the world, but a deeper analysis reveals that Amaya is in fact not in control of her looks, her actions or her theoretically Afrofuturistic storyline. One more factor that works against Amaya being a nuanced exploration of an African superheroine is her comic book origins

which reproduce long-standing U.S. comic book stereotypes about African superheroines and African representation.

In this chapter, I combine textual analysis of a few episodes from the third season of *Legends*, industrial analysis of trade press articles, and concepts from scholarly literature on speculative fiction and racial representation. I have chosen season three of *Legends*, and especially the character of Amaya, because analyzing the different influences on Amaya's characterization can shed light on how to have more productive representation of Black women in television programming.

A Closer Look at Legends *and the Character Amaya Jiwe*

The character of Amaya, like many of the diverse characters on *Legends*, is there in some capacity as a marketing ploy for the CW's progressive-minded demographics, as Melissa D.E. Meyer (2015) explains about diverse secondary characters in television programming (901). Meyer defines intersectional representation as "a single visual image that contains multiple discourses of identity politics, deployed by television industry as a means of appeasing audiences sensitive to diversity issues" (901). The single visual image that Meyer talks about is a character, one who's very presence brings to mind discussions of identity politics. By having a supporting character be of a race other than white, and, simultaneously, a gender other than male, a television show such as *Legends* can visually illustrate the variety and diversity of backgrounds that exist within society. The way that Meyer uses the word intersectional is indebted to but different from law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) use when she coined the term. For Crenshaw, intersectionality did not directly relate to representation. She uses the concept of intersectionality as a way to show how women who are Black or Latina face compounding levels

of discrimination in society. They face sexism as women, and racism as non-white people. Their specific intersection of identities produces unique difficulties for them that cannot be captured under single-category anti-discrimination laws, or wished away using universalizing, colorblind rhetoric. Meyer (2015) uses the term intersectional representation to highlight a common type of tokenizing representation apparent in contemporary American television. Meyer emphasizes how these women of color characters are used to create discourse about "otherness" in a way that reinforces whiteness while still embracing the idea of diversity (903). Intersectional representation to Meyer is also about how television networks uses the image of a multiply marginalized person as a sales pitch to their audiences, rather than featuring these characters as a means of opening up an authentic look into the lives and experiences of a Black or Latina woman (901).

Characters like Amaya are rarely the main characters. By situating Amaya as a secondary character, whose advice and guidance is crucial to the success and happiness of the main white protagonist, *Legends* shows how diversity is accepted as long as white characters still get the most attention and power. Amaya's multilayered identities are briefly explored, but never fully unpacked. Meyer (2015) points out that the visual of different identities intersecting within one person is the driving force behind this representational strategy. The purpose, in the first instance, is not to offer a nuanced exploration of any of these identities or of how identities intersect with each other in complex ways (901). Amaya's African identity is partially unpacked in season three of *Legends* as well as her femininity, through explorations of her role as mentor, mother and grandmother. How her race affects her as a time traveler or a person, however, is mostly left unexamined.

Amaya's characterization is what Kristen J. Warner (2018) calls a plastic representation: a representation that on the surface seems positive and nuanced, but when deeper analysis is done, the characterization is revealed to be hollow and synthetic (35). Warner specifically writes about plastic representation in relation to colorblind casting. For example, African American Halle Bailey was recently cast to play Ariel in Disney's 2020 live-action remake of the *The Little Mermaid* (Kroll, 2019). In the 1989 cartoon version, Ariel is white. Warner highlights how counting Black faces on television is not enough. She uses the term plastic representation to call out how simply changing the race of a character originally written as white without attending to the racial and cultural specificities of a Black character creates a false and hollow characterization. Interestingly, Amaya's African background is not incidental, but deeply thought out by industry workers invested in improving African representation. And yet her character is shallow and inorganic in a new way. Her backstory is rooted in problematic stereotypes and representations and created by piling them together without concern for the profound diversity of African experiences. In the next few sections, I will explore how Amaya's characterization is shallow.

To understand how Amaya Jiwe's failed afrofuturistic plot fits into *Legends* there needs to be some description of the show. In the show's third season, the Legends pursue the mission of fixing all the anachronisms because at the end of season two, the Legends literally "break time." At the end of season two, the Legends go back to their pasts and work with their past selves to stop some terrible villains from getting tools they need to rewrite time. By going back to the past and working with their future selves, a paradox happens, breaking history and scattering people, places and things throughout time. That is why the Legends team is a rotating

cast that changes over the seasons. By the end of season three of *Legends*, for example, only three of the original cast members from season one remained as series regulars.

For the second season of the show, the showrunners of *Legends* wanted to pull in the DC comic book character Vixen, a contemporary Black vigilante from Detroit with a mystical totem that can summon the powerful spirit of any animal. Those plans never came to fruition because the actress from the *Vixen* animated show had scheduling conflicts (Prudom, 2016). Instead, the showrunners created the character of Amaya Jiwe as Vixen's grandmother who came from Zambesi, a fictional country in Eastern Africa, in 1942. Focusing on Jiwe, the show was able to keep telling the Vixen storyline with a different family member that has the same supernatural totem (Prudom, 2016). Amaya Jiwe is also called Vixen as her superhero name, and shares the same costume as her granddaughter, the present-day Vixen. As the show is set on a time traveling ship that can go anywhere, it is not uncommon for some of the Legends to be from different time periods.

Amaya Jiwe is a series regular for seasons two and three. The rest of the Legends in season three include four white, heterosexual men: Ray Palmer, a happy-go-lucky tech genius and former tech CEO; Mick Rory, an ex-criminal obsessed with fire; Nate Heywood, a historian with the ability to turn his skin into steel; and Martin Stein, a brilliant physicist and one half of a nuclear powered superhero. The other half of Stein's superhero persona is a young, African-American man named Jefferson Jackson, better known as Jax. Martin and Jax depart season three in the first half of the season with Jax only appearing once more in the finale. The second half of the season has a young African-American male named Wally West, originally from *The Flash*, as a guest star. All the above-mentioned characters, except for Amaya Jiwe, all come from present day America, either from Star City or Central City. The last member of the Legends in

season three is Zari Tomaz, a Muslim American hacker and mechanic who is from a dystopic Star City in 2042.

Amaya, as previously stated, is from the fictional African country of Zambesi from the year 1942. The placement of Zambesi in the African continent is nebulously articulated in *Legends* as being close to or where Tanzania or Kenya is. Amaya's native village is never given a name and is said to be near Mount Kilimanjaro which is on the Tanzanian and Kenyan border. I will go into further analysis of Zambesi in a later section, for now the focus of this section is on the actress who plays Amaya, the character Amaya, and her boyfriend, another Legend named Nate. The actress who plays Amaya, Maisie Richardson-Sellers, comes from a mixed-race background and therefore is a lighter skinned Black woman. Richardson-Sellers is from London and graduated from Oxford University before getting into acting. While the character Amaya is heterosexual, Richardson-Sellers identifies as bisexual. The character of Amaya has an American accent in *Legends*, and there is not a clear reason why the character has an American accent. Amaya is from a fictional Eastern African country and spent a considerable amount as part of the superhero group the Justice Society of America during World War II. Amaya meets the Legends in 1942 Paris while fighting off the Nazis with the Justice Society when she decides to join up with the Legends. From the backstory that *Legends* gives for Amaya, she has not spent any time in America before time traveling with the Legends. These details are important because accent, appearance, and skin color affect the authenticity of a representation and reflect the unspoken preferences (and thus politics) of a show, network, and society.

Another character of the Legends that I will spend some time analyzing is Nate Heywood, since Nate and Amaya have a romantic relationship that spans across season two and three. Nate is from Star City in 2017 and is the history expert of the Legends. He is white and

heterosexual and tries to live by a humanistic perspective that all life is important. Nate and Amaya are deeply in love with each other for most of season two and three. At the beginning of season three, Amaya leaves Nate after living with him for six months in Star City in 2017. Amaya leaves Nate because she finds out that her staying in 2017 would threaten the existence of her granddaughters. She returns to Zambesi in 1942 to ensure that her granddaughters are safe, even though both Nate and Amaya are heartbroken about the breakup. Nate and Amaya's relationship starts back up once she joins the Legends again in season three. Nate brings significant tension into Amaya's burgeoning relationship with her granddaughter, Kuasa, especially since Nate is not Kuasa's grandfather. Nate and Amaya's relationship are doomed to fail if Amaya wants to make sure not only her granddaughters exist but thrive in the future.

Afrofuturism, African Signifiers and Amaya's Storyline

Amaya's Season 3 storyline is steeped in Afrofuturism, a genre known for uplifting Black characters and narratives. Afrofuturism explores themes and concerns specific to the Black community (including African-Americans, Africans, and African diasporic populations) through plots that use advanced technology, and a jumbled sense of temporality where the past, present, and future are interwoven together (Dery, 1994, Bould, 2007). Amaya's storyline in the third season of *Legends* blends the past, present, and future together seamlessly since Amaya, from 1942, develops a complicated, yet deep relationship with her granddaughter, Kuasa, who in 2018 is all grown up. Kuasa's sister Mari is barely seen but is much discussed and plays a somewhat large role in Kuasa and Amaya's. Mari, the modern-day vigilante called Vixen in Detroit, has only a brief, less-than-a-minute cameo in the first episode of the third season. Much of the anxiety of season three, and the conflict for Amaya and her descendants, stems from the fact that

in 1992 their Zambesian village will be destroyed. After Amaya's family's village gets destroyed, her two granddaughters get separated and the future, older version of Amaya (hereafter called Elder Amaya) is murdered. Having Amaya's family become part of the African diaspora by force shows how the storyline tries to connect with a common African concern: the separation of family and the loss of their home culture. Literature scholar Joshua Yu Burnett (2015) discusses how speculative fiction has specific potential to discuss the alienation, isolation and dislocation of Africans and African diasporic populations (136). Kuasa was thought to be dead and was raised in a war-ravaged county all by herself while her sister, Mari, was adopted by a family in Detroit and takes on the mantle of becoming Vixen there. By having Amaya come from the past, and getting to know her granddaughter, Kuasa, in the present, Amaya's storyline mirrors what Lisa Yaszek (2018) has said about Afrofuturist creators using stories about the past and the present to envision a better future (Yaszek quoted by Murchison, 81). Zambesi being destroyed in 1992 and Kuasa and her sister Mari being scattered across the world is in Amaya's future. The show depicts Amaya developing a relationship with Kuasa in the show's present, the year 2017. By bringing Amaya from the past to get to know and then save her granddaughter and country in 2017, Amaya's future, the show fits the Afrofuturistic trope of combining the past and the present to create a better future. Amaya has the power, through being from the past and having access to a time traveling ship, to create a better future for her family and her country.

The show is already a speculative fiction show because of the fantastic setting of travelling anywhere in time and space (on Earth). The plots of *Legends* use advanced technology like the from-the-future time traveling ship, Waverider, which has an artificial intelligence named Gideon. Amy-Louise Pemberton, a white British actor, voice acts and occasionally makes an anthropomorphic appearance as Gideon on the show. There are also various machines and

applications created by the notable engineers of the Legends, like Ray Palmer, Jax or Zari Tomaz. One application built into Gideon's hardware is the anachronism finder that is used in almost every episode. Near the end of season three, Zari builds the loophole finder application into Gideon's hard drive, which can tell how changes in the timeline can affect the timeline. All these applications and machines have a role in Amaya's journey as she fights to save Zambesi in 1992 and provide a better future for her granddaughters.

Jason Mittell (2015) discusses how narratively complex shows often have various levels of plot that interweave together in a season. The A plot is the most important, followed by the B plot and sometimes even a C plot. Generally, an A plot is about stopping a big bad from rising to power to destroy the world, which is exactly what occurs in *Legends* (19). The overarching plot, or the A plot, of season three of *Legends*, is about how the Legends need to stop a time demon named Mallus from escaping his time prison and wreaking havoc on the world. Mallus was trapped by the leaders of five out of six tribes of Zambesi in a prison outside the concept of time. Each tribe leader had a totem that controlled an element. The totem that Amaya wields in the show comes from her ancestor, one of the founding leaders of Zambesi. Every anachronism that happens, like Julius Caesar appearing in 2018 at a spring break beach party in Aruba or Helen of Troy in 1920's Hollywood, breaks Mallus's time prison a little more. For much of season three the Legends have two goals: put the anachronisms back in their proper historical period and find the lost totems of Zambesi before Mallus's accomplices do. Mallus's accomplices are a villain from *Arrow* named Damien Darkh, his daughter Nora, and Kuasa, Amaya's granddaughter.

Centering Zambesi and the totems puts Amaya and her African roots in a prominent role throughout the third season. There are many scenes, flashbacks and drug-induced visions that take place in Zambesi. The world building is a crucial part of narratively complex television

shows, like *Legends* (19). The Mallus storyline, for example, is the narrative drive that fuels the A and B plots of *Legends* across season three. Amaya is seen to be a crucial source of knowledge for the totems and is therefore essential to defeating the big bad of this season. She teaches the Legends and other novice totem bearers how to use the totems. The penultimate episode of the season, where the main conflict of the season reaches an apex before the denouement, is set in Amaya's village in Zambesi. Having Amaya and her African identity be integral to the overall A plot of *Legends* is in line with the CW's brand of being an inclusive and diverse site of creativity and culture. Further analysis of Zambesi and Amaya, however, show that both the place and the character are more plastic than progressive representations. While having Amaya's African identity be part of the A plot of the Legends overall fits with CW's brand of inclusion and diversity, Amaya's backseat role in her own narrative arc belies how that inclusion and diversity are shallowly conceived.

The main B plot throughout season three follows Amaya getting to know her granddaughter, Kuasa, who is working for Mallus, and Amaya's struggle to choose whether to protect her family or protect all of time. Amaya and Kuasa's relationship is important since there are not many relationships between two Black women on network television, especially in mainstream speculative fiction television. Amaya knows saving her village would mean breaking the timeline so much that it would risk Mallus becoming free and destroying the world. In season three, episode 10, "Daddy Darkhest," Kuasa reveals to Amaya that she is working with Mallus for the chance to go back in time and save their village in Zambesi in 1992 from being destroyed, especially to stop the Elder Amaya from being murdered. Amaya disagrees with Kuasa's reasoning in this episode since, to Amaya, being a superhero means putting the world's safety above one's own safety.

Here, Kuasa's reasoning is more in line with Afrofuturistic standards, where different temporalities of past, present and future combine to tell a story that gives hope for a better future. Kuasa's backstory shows how her separation from her family, and the trauma she experienced witnessing the destruction of Zambesi and the murder of her grandmother, influenced her life. Knowing Kuasa's backstory sheds light on why she would partner up with a malicious demon for the hope of going back in time to save her family, and her country. While Kuasa is framed as a villain throughout the third season, she learns from the example set by her grandmother on how to be a hero. What is problematic about how the season puts Kuasa and Amaya into conflict is that Amaya, who is seen as a hero, is a light skinned Black woman while her granddaughter, Kuasa, played by British actress Tracy Ifeachor, is seen as an antagonist and is a dark-skinned Black woman. This conflict being potentially related to the darkness of these women's skin lends itself to the idea of colorism, the notion that lighter skin is more socially desirable and acceptable than darker skin.

How the people, the place and the culture of Zambesi are represented in *Legends*' third season is also worth consideration in relation to the aesthetics and goals of Afrofuturism. One of the defining features of Afrofuturism is the combination of technological advancement with authentic African and African diasporic signifiers (Dery, 1994, 180; Burnett 2015, 136). The classification of Season three of *Legends* as theoretically Afrofuturistic becomes murkier when analyzing in depth the show's representations of African people, settings and cultural objects.

Zambesi as a country is not well-constructed. Amaya's native village, moreover, does not even get a name. The show provides almost no knowledge about the country, including its government structure. Amaya is seen to be the protector of her village, which is why she wears her totem. There is a slight implication that she is the ruler of her village in season three, episode

17 (“Guest Starring John Noble”). While Amaya is away, though, there is no answer as to who the village leader would be or if the rural village is the capital of Zambesi. It is unclear what Zambesi’s relationships are like with the neighboring countries and the world at large, or even if it is technically a nation state.

The location of where Zambesi would be on the African continent is unclear as well as why the country is called Zambesi. The name Zambesi could be from the Zambesi River, that flows through the Southern African countries of Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique to the Indian Ocean. In season three of *Legends* episode 17 (“Guest Starring John Noble”) there is a text on the screen that states the location, Zambesi, and the year, 1992, and then also that Amaya’s village is “14 kilometers west of Mount Kilimanjaro” which would put the village in Kenya. There are thousands of miles between the Zambesi River and Mount Kilimanjaro. The cultures of Eastern Africa and Southern Africa do share some similarities, but also are significantly distinct. The nebulous location of Zambesi is not something that was created for *Legends* specifically; it but has been part of the DC Comics series about the contemporary Vixen since 2009.

Zambesi as a place has a timeless feel, as demonstrated by the virtually unchanged appearance of Amaya’s village from 1942 to 1992. Over those fifty years, the village has grown to include more buildings and houses, but it is still displayed as primitive and inaccurate. These buildings and houses are a mix of corrugated tin buildings and rondavels. Rondavels are round, one-room huts, traditionally made with cow dung, mud and water for the walls. Thin wooden poles woven together are used to make a cylindrical roof (Ndandani, 2015, 7). The rondavel is specifically a South African architecture style that is seen primarily in rural areas. Some of the more modern rondavels are made with concrete walls although the roofs are typically still

wooden logs woven together with long, dried out grass. Rondevals typically have rudimentary electricity, although that means mostly having a plug or two and having working lights (14). This style of huts is mostly used by impoverished populations who do not have much money to spend on electricity or on electrically-fueled machines.

The rondavels in Zambesi have orange clay-looking walls with dried palm leaves woven into the roofs, unlike the traditional rondavels that have dried grass. Dried grass is used more because palm trees are only available in very tropical areas. Much of South Africa's climate, which is where rondavels are traditionally built, is not tropical. Amaya's specific rondavel has thin logs for walls with gaps one case see through, which does not seem structurally sound. The rondavels represented in Zambesi are a crude imitation of what rondavels are actually like. The mud and cow dung may seem primitive or disgusting, but they are a practical and efficient choices. Cow dung and mud are ubiquitous in many rural areas and are used for the walls because it is good for the hot weather, while still insulated enough to keep warm during the cold winters.

The loose-fitting logs for walls are problematic because Amaya's rondavel is depicted as primitive, which connotes African culture as primitive, which it is anything but. That Amaya's village in Zambesi seems a reasonable depiction, especially for 1992, says much more about the CW and its imagined audience than it does about any real place in Africa. Zambesi is a plastic representation. On the surface, *Legends* seems progressive by featuring an African locale so heavily in their narrative. When analyzing the Zambesian representation, though, the depiction of an African village, culture and people is hollow and synthetic, meaning that the depiction is neither authentic, natural or accurate. The culture and people exhibited in Zambesi pushes the

Western idea that Africa is not so much a continent full of various countries and cultures, but one singular country with of undifferentiated, "primitive" cultures.

The plastic representation of Zambesi works against the ways that Amaya's narrative arc could be interpreted as Afrofuturistic. The advent of electricity in the village is shown by the electric lights around the village, although that could be the most technologically advanced feature of the village. Amaya's village shows no futuristic technological marvels, suggesting technological progress is not a big concern for Zambesi. Nor does the use of corrugated tin in its buildings point to Zambesi as a wealthy economy. While many African countries have struggling economies where electricity can be a scarce. One of the more distinct things about African rural villages is the stark contrast of families not having running water and plumbing in their houses while owning and using laptops and huge flat screen televisions. The conception of a timeless, and in a way primitive, rural, village is more in line with the offensive manner in which the fictional African country of Wakanda was depicted in Marvel comics when first introduced in the 1960's. Zambesi is thus shown as primitive, underdeveloped and undifferentiated from the rest of a fictionalized timeless and backwards Africa. How Amaya's village is represented as rural and rudimentary belies how the continent of Africa has a long history of urbanization that reaches farther back than many European countries (Lund, 2016, 9). Ignoring the urbanity of African countries is another way *Legends* ignores the scope and realities of what African countries look like and pushes the narrative of Africa as underdeveloped and destitute. That narrative is not true, especially when looking at how ancient African countries had an impact on global affairs. Carthage, a city-state in North Africa, was thought to be one of ancient Rome's rivals (Andrews, 2017). There is also the Mali Empire in West Africa, which was very wealthy from trading, and housed the city of Timbuktu. In Timbuktu there was the Sankore University

which housed over 700,000 manuscripts in their library. The narrative of the continent of Africa being impoverished and underdeveloped is some based on real facts, and some on old, colonial stereotypes (Andrews, 2017). By portraying Zambesi with old, colonial stereotypes has the opposite intention. Instead of giving an empowering envisioning of an African locale, like how Afrofuturistic stories do, *Legends* leans into problematic stereotypes about the continent of Africa.

The muddled African signifiers continue from the undisclosed location to the lack of technological progress to how the people of Zambesi dress and talk. Amaya, Elder Amaya and Esi, Amaya's daughter, are the three main Zambesian characters that have screen time while the *Legends* episodes take place in Zambesi. Kuasa is never seen in Zambesi. Both Amaya and Esi are depicted wearing head wraps and dresses made of African Wax fabric, a very popular type of fabric in West African cultures with a growing presence in almost all African countries. African Wax fabric is made by a dying process, started by the Dutch, that seals in the bright colors and designs (Grosfilley, 2018, 28-29). Having Amaya and Esi wear African Wax fabrics lends some authenticity to their clothing choices. Elder Amaya though is dressed in flowing fabrics of warm colors that could be from anywhere in the world. The weaving of the cloth that Elder Amaya wears is not specific to any African woven fabric. Amaya, Elder Amaya and Kuasa all have American accents without a given reason, when both of the actresses (Maisie Richardson-Sellers plays Amaya as well as Elder Amaya and Tracy Ifeachor plays Kuasa) are British. A British accent even for these Zambesian women would make more sense than an American one, because there could have been some kind of British ties to missionary work or the colonization of Zambesi by the British. Instead, both Richardson-Sellers and Ifeachor need to put on a well-rehearsed American accent. The strange thing is that Esi, Amaya's daughter and Kuasa's mother,

has a vaguely African accent in the ways that she pronounces her vowels. One difference that could implicitly give insight to why Esi speaks with a vaguely African accent and Amaya and Kuasa do not is that Amaya and Kuasa have traveled to many more places than Esi. When Esi is introduced as a minor character in season three's penultimate episode "Guest Starring John Noble," Esi has never left Zambesi.

To review, there are many, often conflicting African influences in how Zambesi and its people are represented. There are ties to West Africa from the use of African Wax fabric, to Southern Africa from the rondavels and the name Zambesi, as well as Eastern Africa from the location being near Mount Kilimanjaro. Amaya's family totem, moreover, deepens the connection to West Africa as it is tied to Akan folklore. The Akan people live in present-day Ghana and a little bit in Cote d'Ivoire. The most popular and well known West African folktales comes from the Akan people. In Babatunde Harrison's (1973) collection of West African folktales, he describes the importance of these folktales as they are passed down from generation to generation as moral instruction in Akan values (5). Amaya's family totem is called the Anansi totem or the spirit totem and can control the spirit of any animal. Anansi, sometimes spelled Ananse, is a mythological spider that is known for his wisdom and cunning (1). He is sometimes portrayed as a powerful trickster god, and someone very powerful. Harrison notes that these folktales were sometimes called ananse-stories. Ananse the spider showed God his acute wisdom and cunning, and God was so impressed that he told Ananse many kinds of wise sayings through the use of stories (1). In the Arrowverse, Amaya's family was given the totem by Anansi, who is characterized in *Legends* as a trickster god. Connecting Amaya's powers to the mythology of Anansi, or Ananse, could be another way to show Amaya and her family's African roots. By

shoving all these African signifiers from all over the continent together, however, the show creates a general but confusing sense of Africa, not an accurate or authentic one.

After a quick google search of the words “obabaa” and “nanabaa,” I found out that Elder Amaya, Kuasa and Esi talk to each other using kinship words from the Twi language, the language of the Akan people. Frequently, Kuasa calls Amaya ‘Nanabaa’ which in Twi means grandmother. Esi calls Elder Amaya “maame” which translates to mother, and Elder Amaya calls Esi “obabaa” which means daughter (Learn Akan). These ties to Akan culture seem incongruent to where Zambesi is hypothetically located, which is supposedly somewhere in Eastern Africa. To put all these African signifiers together would mean that Zambesi uses Southern African architecture with Akan, West African cultural roots, such as their language and folklore. Zambesian people wear West African clothing while the country is geographically located in an Eastern African place although it is named after a river in Southern Africa.

While the inclusion of Anansi references connects Amaya and her family to real aspects of African culture, the actual use of the totem feeds back into old stereotypes of associating Black superheroines with mysticism, totemism and nature (Brown, 2015 123). This stereotype, with its heavy association with mysticism and natural forces, is positioned in stark opposition to man-made technologies. Having a totem that can take on any animal’s spirit, and therefore powers, connects Amaya with an old colonial stereotype of African women as the “embodiment of an abnormal, voracious and almost bestial sexuality” (129). This colonial stereotype can be seen in Amaya’s sex scenes. In season three, episode 11 (“Here I Go Again”), Nate and Amaya are heard having sex off screen by Zari. Amaya tells Nate, “Come on, Tiger!” She then summons the spirit of a tiger and her moans become mixed with tiger growls as she and Nate continue their coupling.

The muddled African signifiers, the colonial stereotypes and the focus on Amaya's sexual and maternal roles limits the positive possibilities of her characterization. Instead of fulfilling her potential as an empowered and empowering woman, Amaya lacks an identity of her own outside of her relationships and heritage. Much of the focus of her season three storyline arc ties back to her trying to decide what is more important: doing what is right for all of humanity or what is right for her family. The three themes that interlace in her decisions of what to do about her village are underscored in *i09* staff writer Beth Elderkin's (2018) assessment of Amaya: "Amaya's obsession with her family, her totem, and her doomed relationship is putting everyone in the universe in danger." All three factors Elderkin mentions relate to Amaya's gendered relationships as a grandmother or girlfriend. Amaya has barely any characterization outside her romantic relationship and her role as mother and grandmother to her future descendants.

Amaya Jiwe's Backseat Role in Her Storyline

Amaya, at first glance, is an empowered Black woman who is able to take down an army of Belgian soldiers by herself in episode 1 ("Aruba-Con") or take command of Blackbeard's crew of pirates in episode 12 ("The Curse of the Earth Totem"). Like how Susan Douglas (2010) describes the post-feminist television trope of the warrior woman, Amaya is shown as a leader and a fighter. For example, she single-handedly takes down Blackbeard, one of the most fearsome pirates in history. The first glimpse of her in season three shows Amaya as a powerful warrior, ready to stop whole armies from attacking her beloved people. She does this all while wearing a flattering dress, just like how Susan Douglas describes Xena would be effortlessly fighting in a thong and D cup leather bustier against barbarians pillaging villages (84). The

season three premiere, “Aruba-Con”, has a pre-end credit scene that flashes to Zambesi in 1942 where Amaya comes out standing tall wearing a headwrap and dress made out of African Wax fabric to stand against an army of Belgian soldiers. Rondevals with thatched roofs are behind her. She uses her totem to harness multiple animal spirits to kill the force that is attacking her village. She is able to stand up to the Belgians, notorious colonizers of the Congo, stopping the same from happening to Zambesi. Her victory provides a satisfying sense of wish fulfillment as she, a beautiful warrior woman, takes down the Belgian imperialists single-handedly.

The pre-credit scene teases the image of Zambesi, which had not been seen in *Legends* until the season three premiere, thus broadening the locations used in the Arrowverse transmedia transfiction. Having Amaya fight off the Belgian soldiers signifies how a different story about an African locale would be told in this comics-based superhero show. Lund (2016) discusses how in many comics the African continent has been depicted as a primitive place that is full of natural resources, and ripe for white interference (8). Amaya’s village in 1942 is very pastoral, and in some ways rudimentary and underdeveloped as the village consists of a few rondavels. The comic book imagery of the timeless Africa that is rural and underdeveloped is still depicted in this scene, and other scenes of Zambesi. The difference between what Lund is talking about with white interference is that the pre-credits scene has Amaya make sure that no white interference harms her homeland. Susan Douglas (2010) claims Xena, defeating aiding barbarians in spectacularly choreographed action sequences, was a metaphor for battling against the patriarchy (85). Similarly, I would argue Amaya taking down those colonizers offers a triumphant metaphor of a Black woman overcoming a white imperialist patriarchy. The troubling part of Xena’s hollow metaphor though is that the systematic ills of patriarchy will not be dismantled by one woman kicking ass in a leather thong. Neither will the way whiteness is dominant in society be

deconstructed by one woman in one African village taking down a small troop of soldiers. These warrior women, like Xena and Amaya, may be a symbol of hope and courage, but their symbols are shallow when facing the harsh reality that our society is a white-dominated patriarchy.

Amaya fits a post-feminist image of successful femininity. She is light-skinned, thin, with her hair perfectly, messily done, and always looks model gorgeous, both in her everyday clothes and her period-appropriate garb. When she is not wearing her leather clad jumpsuit, she is often seen with a leather jacket and black skinny jeans on. Her hair, though, is relaxed or permed for half of her episodes, which shows how white mainstream culture is so influential in her life, such that she relaxes her hair instead of letting her hair grow naturally. Amaya's constant upkeep of her hair is the body monitoring that Gill (2012) says is one of the defining features of a post-feminist sensibility (137). The female body is seen to be a key source of identity and power within society, which is why Amaya's efforts to maintain her relaxed hair implicitly reveal her committed attempt to fit into a white mainstream idea of beauty (139).

In the other half of the episodes, her hair's natural kink shows through, although the styling blends from natural afro to relaxed, straightened hair. For eight episodes, Amaya's hair has wavy curls that, I am estimating, require lots of hair products. Black feminist scholar Cheryl Thompson (2009) argues that the root of Black women needing to keep their hair relaxed or in a weave instead of its natural nappy curls is self-hatred. Using the term self-hatred may be strong, Thompson admits, but she argues the word is nonetheless true, evidenced by the arduous, painful process that is necessary to keep up that kind of hairstyle (2). A chemical procedure needs to be re-administered every six to eight weeks to keep hair relaxed and straight. The chemical procedure damages the hair and can often burn the scalp. Why do many African and African American women feel pressured to keep their hair straight, then? There could be a few reasons.

One is that Amaya could be considered an Americanized version of Africanness. Amaya's Americanized African look fits into conventional American beauty standards. Rosalind Gill (2013) argues that post-feminism has allowed women to feel they have agency in their looks and their bodies, but that agency and independence are only allowed to women that fit a narrow category of beauty; mainly being tall, thin and fair (139).

Notably, one of the only episodes where Amaya is seen in an afro is season three, episode 11 ("Here I Go Again"). The Legends have just come back from a mission where they traveled to 1975 to stop Napoleon Bonaparte from stealing a copy of ABBA's hit song "Waterloo." Amaya wears a disco jumpsuit and an obviously fake afro. The fake afro, in part, goes along with the zany 70's disco outfits that all the Legends wear in the episode. By the next episode, the wig is off, and she is back to wearing her hair relaxed again. Instead, Amaya spends the majority of season three of *Legends* wearing hairstyles that are conventional for white women, which can be a lot of work and physically damaging to Black women's hair. When Amaya gets the chance to have an afro, a natural Black hairstyle for African or African diasporic populations, her afro is not real. There is contemporary movement in the U.S. of Black women promoting "natural hair," meaning wearing their hair in an afro or having voluminous nappy curls. Amaya's hairstyles, instead, fit with conventional beauty standards for women on television, which are overwhelmingly white.

Overtly, Amaya is depicted as a strong independent woman who can take care of herself, her village and all of history. Yet, Amaya spends most of her time in Season 3 reacting to events that happen around her instead of playing an active role in her theoretically Afrofuturistic storyline. She implicitly exists to scold, mentor, and teach the Legends and her family, which keeps her in the back seat of her own story. For example, in season three, episode 16 ("I, Ava"),

Sara Lance, the captain of the Legends, is taking a break from the Waverider to clear her head and leaves Amaya in charge as the interim captain. Sara's exploration outside of the Waverider is the A plot of the episode. The B plot is about how Amaya deals with being the captain and how Nate and Kuasa work together behind her back. Amaya is in charge of the Waverider, but that does not mean that she has all the authority and respect that Sara receives from the Legends. Nate undermines her authority when he teams up with Amaya's granddaughter Kuasa to steal back Amaya's totem from the nefarious Darkhs (the secondary antagonists), without telling Amaya. Even when she is nominally in charge, Amaya is still a secondary character who functions, at best, as the wise counsel. Meyer (2015) has talked about the trope of the secondary character of color as comedic foil and wise counsel to the strong white female protagonist (911). Amaya fits Meyer's points since she is more of a guiding force for the characters around her even though she is technically given a position of power. Her power is undermined and whittled away by her granddaughter and her boyfriend. Amaya is there more as a television strategy to engage in discussions about identity politics in a world where diversity is accepted as long as whiteness is still considered the dominant norm (901).

Kristen J. Warner (2018) discusses how networks do not feel the need to push for more authentic forms of diversity when physical diversity—the mere inclusion of bodies of non-white bodies—has appeased a network's target demographics enough (33). Kuasa and Nate do not tell Amaya about their plan because they are worried that Amaya would try to join them and get hurt. Nate comes up with a plan in which Kuasa pretends to hold him hostage to exchange him with the Darhks for Amaya's totem. Once Kuasa realizes that Amaya loves Nate, and he loves her back, Kuasa betrays him to the Darkhs and gets Amaya's totem back. Kuasa considers Nate a threat to her since she knows for a fact that her grandfather is not Nate, a white American, but a

man from Zambesi. Throughout the episode, Amaya is not the subject of the sentences, but the object for Nate and Kuasa to lie to, placate or love.

My point is that Amaya's desires or feelings are not an active or driving force of the plot. The episode's B plot focuses on Nate's idea for getting the totem back, and his tense partnership which leads to Kuasa betraying Nate and giving him over to the Darkhs. After Kuasa betrays Nate, she presents Amaya with her totem safe and sound while Nate is missing. Here, Amaya acts as wise counsel to her granddaughter, as Meyer (2015) discusses. Amaya becomes angry at Kuasa and lectures her about how a totem bearer is a person who cares about the wellbeing of everyone. Amaya does attempt to rescue Nate, but she is easily defeated. In the end, Kuasa rushes in and saves the day by sacrificing her life for Nate's life to prove to her grandmother she is a good person. Kuasa dies in Amaya's arms and leaves Amaya feeling lost that she could not have done more to prevent her death. This storyline, driven by Nate's plans for Amaya, and its backfiring, demonstrates how his emotions and decisions have more narrative weight than Amaya's. Even worse, because of Nate's plans, Amaya's granddaughter dies since *Legends* is more focused on Amaya's relationship with her white boyfriend than herself or her granddaughter.

The way that Nate's thoughts and plans about Kuasa have more power over Kuasa's fate than Kuasa's own suggests how his good intentions have negative, and even colonial, connotations. Remember, Amaya is, in Meyer's (2015) parlance, the intersectional character, who is there to remind the audience how diverse and inclusive *Legends* is. Amaya is there to fight for justice for everyone like a good superhero would, which is why she scolds Kuasa for trading in Nate to the nefarious Darhks. To be a good totem bearer, a.k.a. a superhero, one needs to take on the post-difference perspective that everyone is worth saving, even the people who are

a direct threat to your own existence and that of your family. Meyer discusses how the intersectional representation of a character like Amaya is the result of television networks efforts to frame the conversation about identity politics through a post-difference lens (911). A post-difference perspective is one where discussions of identities are supposed to have moved past looking at race or gender. Instead we are all encouraged to look what is common between everyone. Which is mainly being white in a dominant white society or being assimilated into a dominant white society (904).

Such a perspective empowers members of the white mainstream, both validating their point of view and limiting any guilt they might feel for silencing other voices. Amaya's post-difference perspective clashes with the empowerment that could come from her being part of an Afrofuturistic storyline. The story may make Amaya look strong and powerful, but her main power lies within her role as the wise counsel, who teaches the Legends and her granddaughter how to have a post-difference superhero perspective. That very perspective, that Amaya teaches and believes in, carries harmful connotations for her family and country. Consider, for example, the end of episode 16 ("I, Ava") when Kuasa dies to protect Nate from the Darkhs' wrath. Kuasa's sacrifice is framed as her redeeming herself by caring more about Nate than her family. A plot twist of a villain redeeming herself to save one of the central superheroes is an oft-used trope in superhero narratives. There is, however, another facet to Kuasa's sacrifice which connects with the post-racial perspective of *Legends*, where anyone, no matter the background, can be redeemed. It sounds morally good to be selfless, but why does a Black woman have to put aside her racial identity and national history, indeed her very existence, in order to save a white man? Kuasa's death has colonial connotations similar to the dynamics described by Lund (2016) at the inception at of the Black Panther comics in the 1960's. All the native Wakandans in the

comic's early issues were eager to assist the white superheroes in their quest for morality, justice and democracy (2). In the final moments of the episode, Kuasa becomes an eager, disposable African villager who assists the white Euro/American superhero's quest.

The end of "I, Ava" shows Amaya using her agency to make a big decision: she steals a transport pod from the Waverider to go back to Zambesi 1992 to make sure her future self, her future family and her village survives a terrible attack. While Amaya does not blame Nate for Kuasa's death, Amaya does believe that by saving their village, she can make sure that Kuasa never turns to villainy or dies in the first place. The B plot of the next episode (ep. 17, "Guest Starring John Noble") follows Amaya as she tries to save Zambesi. A little before halfway through the episode, Nate decides to help Amaya save her village. There is a tender conversation between Amaya and her future daughter Esi about the totem, the responsibility of being the totem bearer and being afraid of that responsibility and power. The episode is set up to make the audience believe that once Amaya helps Esi take the totem's power, Esi will be the one to save the village. To destroy the village, Mallus sends a telepathic gorilla named Grodd to wreak havoc. When Grodd comes to destroy the village, Amaya is unfortunately incapacitated by a leg injury. She hears that Esi and Elder Amaya need help to fight off Grodd. So, in her place, she asks Nate to help her family. While Amaya's daughter Esi and Elder Amaya fight Grodd for their life, Nate comes in at the last moment and uses the Earth totem to send a pulse through the ground. The pulse makes the ground rise up to hit Grodd so hard that he is sent flying through the sky and thus Nate saves elder Amaya and Esi. The fact that Nate risks his life to save Amaya's family is sweet and shows how much he cares about her. His decency and kindness, however, have a dark side when viewed in light of the historical precedence set by white men in African locales. The show's narrative seemed to be building up to tell a uniquely African story

that featured multiple generations of African women coming together to save their village. The storyline concludes, instead, with Nate using one of the totems of Zambesi, providing the defining final blow.

Post-Difference Perspective in the Entertainment Industry

The *Legends* creators write their characters as post-feminist and post-racial as if racism and sexism no longer hold the characters back from fulfilling their potential. This is particularly strange as *Legends* seems to not consider how race would create conflict for people of color time traveling to the past, when there was often much more racial segregation, inequality and discrimination. There is some discussion of how hard it can be as a woman who time travels to the past (although the discussion is framed in a post-feminist way), like in sixth episode of season three ("Helen Hunt"). When the female Legends meet Helen of Troy, they teach her to become a warrior who can defend herself instead of relying on other people to fight for her honor. What's more when the Legends are specifically put in situations where race and racism must be directly addressed, the topic is broached in a sanitized fashion, as if to neutralize it through quips and moral platitudes. In episode 14 of the third season, "Amazing Grace," the Legends go to 1950s Memphis to save Elvis from his possessed guitar killing him and his town. Oliver Sava (2018) wrote in his episode review on *A.V. Club* that, "This series doesn't have the best track record when it tackles race relations, but I'd rather see the writers try to address these topics instead of ignoring them." The episode ignores how uncomfortable Amaya and the other Black character on the Legends' team, Wally West, would be in pre-civil rights Memphis. Amaya has a blissful time with Nate where he gets to show her the birth of his favorite musical genre, rock and roll. While there is a brief scene of a bar with many Black people dancing, the

episode ignores how Black musicians were an integral part of the foundation of rock and roll music. What is prioritized in the episode is Nate getting to show his passions and ideas, instead of Amaya's perspective on the segregated South. By ignoring the racist history of Southern United States, on the cusp of the civil rights era, the episode whitewashes over hundreds of years of racial inequality and promotes the harmful post-difference perspective implicit to *Legends*. Notably this episode breezily conceals both the harms of racial hatred and the powerful contributions of African Americans to US music traditions.

Discussions of gender on *Legends,* and in many CW television shows, are based in a post-feminist sensibility where any woman can be included in the conversation, but they all have to fit a narrow sense of beauty. For example, many of the female scientist characters in *Arrow* and *The Flash* have PhDs and are the smartest in their fields of biology, chemistry, and engineering. All of the characters, from Felicity Smoak to Caitlin Snow, also wear tight pencil skirts or dresses with heavy makeup and perfectly styled hair. These characters can seem empowering because of their technical knowledge of STEM fields, all while looking pretty doing it.

While these shows frequently feature at least a shallow discussion about gender equality, the characters of color's racial backgrounds are not part of the conversation about female empowerment and independence, even though in real life prejudice is inherently experienced by bodies that always already raced as well as gendered in different and specific ways. Discussions of characters' racial identity and history are rarely explored. This keeps these characters of color assimilated into a white mainstream culture. Frank discussions about racism demand acknowledgment of how white people have contributed to and benefited from the oppression of people of color, and still do today. Discussions about gender, on the other hand, do not

necessarily have to threaten the white hegemony present in society. The same goes for explorations of sexuality. How Sara Lance has discovered and owned her bisexual identity has been celebrated by trade press articles for being groundbreaking and refreshing, and it is (Alacron, 2017; Anne, 2018; Tygiel, 2018). Sara Lance and her girlfriend, Ava Sharpe, have a supportive, nuanced and complex relationship together. The problem though is that both Sara Lance and Ava Sharpe fit narrow, conventional standards of beauty, being very in shape, white women with long, blonde, hair. Women of conventional beauty standards get to be accepted and embraced for their nonnormative romantic relationship, while women of color do not get that same attention and care.

I want to note that the CW is at the forefront of American television network efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. Of the CW's 2017-2018 lineup, *Bustle* writer Shannon Carlin (2017) pointed out that 67% of the network's showrunners are women. *Legends* has had eight executive producers for the show from 2016-2019. Three of those executive producers have been female, with one of those three women being Asian. The five other executive producers are white men, and one of them is gay. *Legends* also features the first Muslim superhero on television with the character Zari Tomaz. Yet even as the CW stands today, the network has room to create more opportunities for diversity and inclusion. There is a sincere appetite for better representation, but the capitalistic demands of the CW will always outweigh such socially-focused desires. Having such a diverse group of superheroes work together to fight a great evil certainly moves the social conversation about inclusion and diversity forward, but not by much. The main characters are most likely still white, with characters of color as secondary characters.

There is a larger industrial and social context that influences the writers and creators of *Legends*. This post-difference perspective is problematic, but also common. This is the

perspective that much of American society operates under, and the writers and creators of *Legends* are steeped in this perspective as much as many other creators working in Hollywood. Consider, for example, the drama surrounding the selection of 2018's Best Picture Oscar winner. *Black Panther* was seen as a major success in 2018, generating over 1 billion dollars in profit with its mix of substance, action, and artistic innovation. In a refreshing change of pace, most of the people who were involved in making the film were of African descent (Desta, 2018). The movie is a superhero drama that was directed, acted, and costumed by Black creatives. The release of that movie was a triumph that celebrated Black people and Black culture. The superhero drama fused Afrofuturistic genre conventions into a superhero film to give a thought-provoking consideration of African and African American perspectives on morality and identity. *Black Panther* was the first superhero film to ever be nominated for Best Picture by the Academy Awards (Tapley, 2019). In spite of its widespread appeal, however, the movie *Green Book* beat *Black Panther* for Best Picture from the Academy Awards. *Green Book* is a movie about a white man from New York learning to be less racist after being the driver for acclaimed Black pianist Don Shirley. The movie, as film critic A. A. Dowd (2018) pointed out, prioritized the emotional journey of the white male driver as he discovered that racism is terrible over that of the Black historical figure, who was placed in the literal and metaphorical back seat. *Variety* author Owen Glieberman (2019) called *Green Book* unabashed liberal comfort food for Oscar voters since the movie's main theme is to show how far society has come by telling a story of overcoming racism. The choice of *Green Book* as Best Picture supports the underlying notion that a white person's perspectives and emotional journey are the most important, even when telling the story of a Black historical figure, Don Shirley. Even when the film is named after a book written, produced and shared by Black people so they may get by in the face of violent, systemic

exclusion. This notion is subtly implied in *Legends*, just as it is across many other mainstream television shows and movies.

Legends is not the only show in the Arrowverse to struggle with its post-difference positioning. While the CW has the television show *Black Lightning* (2018-Present) which is about a Black family of superheroes with supernatural powers, with a Black female showrunner, the show is technically not part of the Arrowverse transmedia transfiction. A good example of another show in the Arrowverse that comes closer to exploring the racial identity of their main characters is *The Flash* (2014-Present). *The Flash* tells the story of how a young crime scene investigator named Barry Allen gets struck by lightning and then is able to run faster than the speed of light. Barry uses his newfound powers to fight off crime in his city with the help of his friends and family. Barry's love interest and eventual wife, Iris West, is a young Black woman with dreams of being a reporter. Iris is brilliant, ambitious, caring and gorgeous. Her hair is constantly relaxed with voluptuous waves. Barry was taken in by Iris's father when he was ten, and the whole West family (from the father to Iris' brother, Wally) plays an integral role in the narratives of *The Flash*. As she and Barry start dating, and later in their marriage, the couple showcases how interracial couples can be supportive, caring and functional. One thing that makes this heartwarming representation seem shallow though is there is barely any discussion about Iris's race and how that affects her life. *Legends* is not the only show in the Arrowverse that operates under this post-difference perspective. The post-difference perspective is ubiquitous throughout the whole transmedia transfiction.

Conclusion

By analyzing these other movies and television shows, I hope to show how *Legends* post-difference perspective is not unique, but it is harmful. I chose *Legends* as my main text of study because I thought that it would be a good example of how a post-difference perspective operates. I have made my case about how Amaya Jiwe's character is shallow and a plastic representation of a Black woman, shaped by the post-racial perspective in *Legends*. Because her character is shaped through a post-difference lens, she is presented as a post-feminist warrior woman: engaging, tough, and independent.

I have only analyzed season three of *Legends*, but there are other seasons that could be analyzed. The character of Amaya Jiwe went away after season three, although the actress Maisie Richardson-Sellers still stays on as a series regular playing a shapeshifter named Charlie who takes on Amaya's look. Charlie is a more explicit example of the post-racial lens that *Legends* has, as her skin color is not a part of her identity as a shapeshifter at all. For example, the show does not analyze how Charlie would feel going back to say, the Regency period of England, in the body of a Black woman.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to open up discussions on depictions of race and gender in network American television, and to show how even seemingly progressive representations are still hollow and synthetic when analyzed further. There are multiple contributing factors that encourage this shallowness of representations: the comic book source material, the post-difference perspective so pervasive throughout the American mainstream entertainment industry and society more broadly, and the economic pressures of television production. In the first

chapter of this thesis, I outlined the scholarly literature that has come before me to define the important concepts that are the foundation of my research as well as show the scholarly conversation that I am trying to join. Both the second chapter and third chapter focus on race and gender. The second chapter focuses more on the power and ideology behind whiteness, while the third chapter looks at how *Legend*'s representation of Africa and African people is seemingly progressive on the surface, but once closer scrutiny is applied, the problematic nature of the representation is exposed.

The overarching intention of *Legends* is to be inclusive and have a diverse cast, which is borne out by the diversity of the cast in season 3. Phil Klemmer, one of the executive producers of season 3 of Legends, spoke at a Television Critics Association press tour in 2017 about how the show thrives off of bringing more people with different perspectives into the conversation because when a scene is being done with eight people, each need to have a distinct voice to stand out (Wegmeister, 2017). The *Legends* writers and producers strive for diversity, as demonstrated by creating Zari's character or posting a picture of their writing team on the *Legends'* Writer's Room Twitter on September 18, 2018, with the hashtags #showusyourroomchallenge, #RepresentationMatters, #ShowUSYourRoom, and #LegendsOfTomorrow. The picture included with the post features twelve men and women, of different ages, races, and sizes, sitting on or standing near a couch. (LoT Writers Room, 2018). Yet the fact that there is such intention for diversity and inclusion makes the shallow representation of the character Amaya all the more disheartening and depressing. The fact that Legends applies a post-racial and post-feminist lens when writing their characters and their narratives is equally disappointing and confusing.

Regardless of positive intentions, the representations of the characters in *Legends* still reinforce problematic and inaccurate stereotypes about whiteness, femininity, Black women, and

African people and cultures. In the second chapter, I explore how white characters' perspectives are typically favored over the perspective of characters of color. There is more screen time and narrative space for the exploration of the emotional journey of a white character over a character of color. Sara is the captain of the Legends, and her leadership is rarely undermined. When Amaya becomes the interim captain of the Legends for an episode, however, her boyfriend and granddaughter repeatedly undermine her authority as the leader. When Amaya goes against Sara's command of changing the timeline, Amaya is portrayed as selfish for wanting to save her family and village from being destroyed and scattered across the world. When Sara decides to help Amaya, she is displayed as being kind and benevolent for deciding to help a friend and break her rule against changing time.

In chapter three I examined how African people and culture play an integral role to the larger, overall narrative of season three. A thorough analysis of the representation of the African people and culture in the show, however, exposes the colonial and white-centric stereotypes that are being reinforced. The smattering of African signifiers from all around the continent pushes the idea that African is not a continent made up of 54 distinct and vibrant countries, but that Africa is one general, unified entity. I delved deep into the genre of Afrofuturism, known for its potential for uplifting Black people through African or African-diasporic signifiers, advanced technology, an intentional playing around with temporalities, and for Black characters at the forefront of the story. There are so many qualities of Afrofuturism that Legends season three fits into. Amaya's season three storyline, though, is a failed attempt at Afrofuturism. *Legends* fulfills some of the surface qualities of Afrofuturism but does not empower the Black characters included in the story. Amaya is held back by colonial and comic book stereotypes of Africa-ness and being a Black woman. Amaya is also held back her lack of agency; she is more reactive than

active. The dominance of white characters and their development is an ever-present shadow over Amaya's storyline as well as her granddaughter Kuasa's.

I hope that as more television research happens, especially with a textual and industrial approach, there will be more analysis of the racial structures hidden in plain sight in the foundations of media texts and media industries, no matter the progressive and well-meaning intentions of the creative team. The concept of post-difference perspective is unwieldy and complex. However, to address how discrimination and oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality intersect and reinforce each other, and how such realities are not being represented more fully, we need to pursue more complex ways of discussing representation.

While I am satisfied with the claims that I have made and proven, there are some limitations to my research. I focused my research and writing on two characters, Sara and Amaya. I knew that I wanted to write two chapters for my thesis and believed that having a chapter mainly on one character each would give me enough space to thoroughly analyze the characters, their representations, and their influences. There are many characters that I could have analyzed, however, that are also in *Legends* from Zari Tomaz, the first Muslim superhero on television, to the African American men on the show like Wally West or Jefferson Jackson.

Zari's characterization has an interesting background since one of the executive producers, on *Legends*, Marc Guggenheim, specifically chose to have a Muslim superhero on the show. According to Guggenheim, the creative team decided on having a Muslim superhero because of the political climate surrounding the 2016 presidential elections when Donald Trump was elected. For Guggenheim, the choice to make Zari Muslim was personal because he has a sister-in-law that is Muslim (Wagmeister, 2017). Zari's creation was a direct reaction to divisions in American society, particularly a rise in xenophobia. One could examine Zari's

characterization in comparison to Amaya's. In what ways are the two women similarly sidelined? Does problematic stereotype influence Zari's characterization as a Muslim? In what ways does Zari fit the tropes of a secondary character of color talked about by Meyer (2015)?

I focused my gender research on femininity without analyzing much of the masculinity of the male Legends. There could be more analysis done to show the nuanced way that masculinity is portrayed in the show, from male friendships, to what being manly means to definitions of sexuality. In the fourth season, one of the defining relationships is a close friendship between two Legends, Nate Heywood and Ray Palmer. The character of John Constantine is added to the Legends in season four as well. The character of Constantine was featured in two eponymous and unsuccessful media properties: a television show on NBC in 2014 and a feature film in 2005. Both disregarding a key detail from the comic book source material, erasing John Constantine's bisexuality. The *Legends* television show depicts him as bisexual for the first time in moving images. John's bisexuality also has a positive and large role to play in the fourth season since the midseason finale's world-ending conflict is solved by John kissing a man he loves.

In the other shows in the Arrowverse transmedia transfiction there could be more to study in the future, especially considering that the CW is premiering *Batwoman* this fall for the 2019-2020 season. *Batwoman* is about Bruce Wayne's cousin Kate Kane, an out and proud lesbian, who wants to rid Gotham of crime and violence by picking up her famed cousin's mantle of being a vigilante. Kate is portrayed by out and proud lesbian actress Ruby Rose. I will be curious if the same aesthetics from the rest of the Arrowverse will be part of *Batwoman*'s overall look and makeup. In the "First Look" trailer for *Batwoman* released on May 16th, 2019, Kate is shown returning to Gotham to save an old ex-girlfriend, suggesting her lesbian identity is fairly central to Kate's character and narrative in the first season. Another avenue to research about *Batwoman*

in the future is how femininity is portrayed with Kate, who in the "First Look" trailer changes Batman's iconic suit to fit a woman (The CW Network, 2019). The suit is skin tight and emphasizes her breasts. How much does *Batwoman* fit into Rosalind Gill's concept of a postfeminist sensibility? Other than her batsuit, Kate has many tattoos, a cropped pixie cut, and wears a lot of black clothes and leather. Another question could be: how much does Kate Kane fit into the look of a CW woman, as explored by Kayti Lausch? How is Kate Kane similar or different to the CW warrior woman type and how much does that play into the elements of a postfeminist sensibility?

Even outside of the Arrowverse transmedia transfiction, but still looking at current the CW programming, there could be more research on *Black Lightning* which features a family of Black who are superheroes. Many of the producers and writers behind the show are Black as well. *Black Lightning* has similar executive producers as the shows in the Arrowverse, like Greg Berlanti and Sarah Schechter. The comic book source of Black Lightning comes from DC comics, which is the same comic book lore that informs the Arrowverse television shows. Some research questions to be answered could be: Why is this Black superhero family separated in its own universe? How is *Black Lightning* similar to the Arrowverse shows and how is it different? How does the racial representation in *Black Lightning* compare to the Black characters in *Legends* or *The Flash*?

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