



## THE S DOES NOT STAND FOR “SHAME”: THE JOINT MAKING OF A QUEER SUPERGIRL

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### ABSTRACT

One of the major changes that mark twenty-first-century superhero depictions is the introduction of inclusive standards—whether race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—in new or existing reinterpreted characters. Accordingly, the CW network series *Supergirl* (2015–2021), chronicling the adventures of Superman’s cousin, became famous for powerfully challenging the comic-universe canon of the titular heroine’s sexuality, albeit despite the intentions of its producers. When, during Season 2, the show cast Katie McGrath as Lena Luthor, the good sister of Superman’s arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor, the actress’s strong lesbian appeal colored the friendship intended between her character and Kara Danvers/Supergirl (played by Melissa Benoist), so that their bond was immediately coded by viewers—even non-LGBTIQ+ ones—as deeply romantic. While, however, fans clamored that “there is no heterosexual explanation” for the two women’s relationship and demanded that it—and Supergirl’s bisexuality—be acknowledged as canon in the CW and the DC comics universes, the writers/producers of the show gaslighted such expectations to the end by pairing Lena or Kara with male partners and insisting on their being just “friends,” earning the show the title of “the biggest queerbait in television history.” This paper, therefore, reads “SuperCorp” both as a sign of the times regarding popular culture attitudes for queer superheroes, and a significant occasion of what Henry Jenkins has termed the “textual poaching” ethics of twenty-first century media fandom, with consumer creations actually impacting back upon the production process itself.

*Keywords:* queerness, queer fandom, fandom, textual poaching, intertextual, queer baiting.

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Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions. (Jenkins 2012, 18)

### 1. INTRODUCTION: QUEER FAN CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON *SUPERGIRL*

Henry Jenkins's (2012) hat-tipping to the creative power of millennial/Gen Z "textual poachers" has by now become an established variable in considerations of popular culture industries, but also fan identity formation. As Johanna Church (2023) observes:

Fandom of any kind, whether related to sports, movies, or television, is similar to a social identity in that the subject of an individual's fandom becomes part of the individual's self-concept. That self-concept, in turn, is influenced by the individuals' knowledge of/confidence in their membership within a social group, which is then strengthened by their level of engagement in online forums and other forms of social media. (215)

Especially when it comes to queer fandom, the boon of reinventing oneself dialectically in pop culture, the social media, and beyond is corroborated by the link Jenkins (2012) observes between fan ideologies and queer/feminist studies (x–xi). At the same time, the recent "shift in focus from the evidence of queerness and the intentions of creators to the harmful effects of this perceived act of exploitation and homophobia" highlights the importance of fan affect as identity-formative (McDermott 2019, 118). It is such a case of creative fandom poaching as "undaunted" identity affirmation that this paper examines, namely the example of "SuperCorp," the femslash ship<sup>1</sup> engendered by the CBS/CW Network series *Supergirl* (2015–2021). The series chronicles the adventures of Kara Zor-El, Superman's younger cousin in DC Comics, set in the fictional location of National City. *Supergirl* became a social media/platform darling due to the fan perception of the friendship between the titular protagonist and Lena Luthor, arch-villain Lex Luthor's half-sister, as a romantic lesbian pairing.

Fan speculation, fiction and art on this relationship between *Supergirl*/Kara (played by Melissa Benoist) and Lena (Katie McGrath), dubbed "SuperCorp" as a fusion of "Supergirl" and "LuthorCorp" (the Luthors' flagship company), single-handedly carried the show's ratings for five of its six seasons and generated spectacular amounts of fandom material. SuperCorp was the most popular femslash ship on Tumblr in 2017 and 2018 (Hicks 2020, 223) and the tenth most popular show on Tweeter (now X), averaging 40-50.000 tweets a week, with McGrath being the most popular actress across the entire website in 2017 (292). Anna DeGalan (2018) notes the incredible profusion of SuperCorp fan art on numerous popular sites, such as Reddit and DeviantArt (15), while there are thousands of fanmade videos—"cracks," trailers, shorts, compilations or "Vines"—on video-sharing platforms, with thousands, sometimes millions of views each, giving us "A Hundred Reasons to Ship Supercorp" (KG honorarybard 2020a and 2020b), or earnestly arguing "Why Kara and Lena Are Soulmates" (NerdLife), along with 217,580 posts on Instagram ("#Supercorp" 2023, n.p.). On the highly popular queer fanfiction site *An Archive*

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<sup>1</sup> The term "femslash" indicates a romantic pairing involving two women. "Ship" is short for "relationship" but can be used as a verb ("shipping") to indicate fan perception of two characters as a romantic pair.

of *Our Own* (AO3), SuperCorp generated over eight thousand entries (Hicks 2020, 303), which strongly signals the rising visibility of traditionally underrepresented lesbians in pop media culture (Ng and Russo 2017, 1.16) and, especially, in the fanboy-oriented comics domain, with “female superheroes becoming vehicles of female power fantasies and queer desire” (Hicks 2020, 291). SuperCorp, then, helps an old character transition to times when, in Marica Orrù’s words, “old values coexist with new popular culture topics and new social themes” and the new heroes representing them “come with old and new medias, believe in equality, freely express their sexuality, fight for political correctness and defend diversity” (2023, 1).

The exceptional popularity of SuperCorp appears disproportionate to critical ratings of the show: a mere 6.2 average in *IMDb* (“*Supergirl*: Ratings” 2023, n.p.) and a 46% audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes*, though critics gave it a resounding positive 90% on the “Tomatometer” (2022, n.p.) largely prompted by the shows’ socially-aware politics. One would then be compelled to seek the *whence* of this extreme popularity of SuperCorp (among other popular shows with explicit lesbian pairings) in the *frisson* created by the writers of the show. They would offer visual and textual romantic cues with no possible heterosexual explanation in one moment, coding the twain as queer, and at the next gaslight fans with the insistence that the two women are just “friends,” to the point where fans became rightfully enraged with what they perceived “as perhaps the biggest, worst example of queerbait in modern television history” (Laguerre-Lewis 2021, n.p.; also, abnormallyadam 2021). Granted, queer coding—that is, giving a character behavior and personality traits perceived by audiences as queer regardless of the character’s (stated or unstated) gender and sexuality—may happen intentionally or accidentally on the part of the producers. Nevertheless, queerbaiting is always purposeful in its attempts to attract LGBTIQ+ audiences, and hence perceived as a sign of disrespect by fans regardless of their sexual identity, as it happened with *Supergirl* (Fierra 2019, n.p.; Liszewski 2017, n.p.; Stacy 2020, n.p.). In fact, for all its toxic effect on queer identity formation and validation, queerbaiting is by now established as a ubiquitous marketing practice in popular culture industry (McDermott 2021, 848–50). Industry practices might also explain why SuperCorp was refused canonical validation: as Alex Zalben notes (2020, n.p.), a lesbian or bisexual *Supergirl* “would be the sort of thing that would rapidly work its way all the way to the top of the AT&T chain [the company that owns DC Comics] and be promptly shut down,” since corporations bank on cautious conservatism in order not to alienate lucrative mainstream audiences. Such practices have been resonating with wider culture, where the real-life experience of lesbian individuals is often “denied or doubted,” purposefully mis-interpreted “as a type of intense bonding between women” (Seidman 2004, 144). Even worse, “[h]omonegative tropes dominate representation of lesbian women on television. The evilness and death tropes (based on the dead lesbian syndrome) emerged from criticism about television depictions of lesbian supporting characters as villainous

or expendable” (Parker et al. 2020, 396). Validating SuperCorp, then, instead of queer-baiting, would fly in the face of multiple homonormative cultural industry injunctions.

Yet what is interesting is not just that queer fandom rebelled defiantly against corporate homophobia, but how their influence actually helped *rewrite* the show while it was still in the making. It is a paradigmatic case of textual poaching having evolved into a burgeoning “participatory culture,” where “more groups assert control over the processes of cultural production and circulation” (Jenkins 2012, xxi). Furthermore, SuperCorp constitutes a case of transmedial convergence, as fan ascription of queerness upon Supergirl is not just based on the TV show, but reappropriates elements already present in the Golden Age inception of her character. It is also a paradigmatic case of working out the limitations of the oppositional model of fan culture, namely addressing the “tension between fascination and frustration, suggesting that fans are involved in a process of negotiation with the rights holders, seeking to influence the text where they may,” and signaling their appreciation of a cultural text even by “claiming the right to retell the stories in their own terms” (Jenkins 2012, xxi). In that sense, the Kara/Lena fan femslash evinces what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified as “queer shame”: acknowledged homophobia which nevertheless functions “as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy,” fueling queer performative activism (1993, 4). Politically, this kind of shame can serve the expedient non-fixity of queerness, as it “generates and legitimizes the place of identity—the *question* of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity-space the standing of an essence” (Sedgwick 1993, 14). In simultaneously claiming queerness and denying its shameful aspect, therefore, this conception of queer performativity as “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” would be a fitting tool to examine the aforementioned love/hate relationship of queer fandom to producers (1993, 15). Sara Ahmed (2014) concurs by noting how such “negative affect” (her term for “shame”) galvanizes queer bodies into forming activist communities among themselves, (101), but also, notably, inventing ways of negotiating their place within “the circuits of exchange within global capitalism” (165).

Hence, one reads the desire of queer fandom to make SuperCorp “endgame” and “canon” as implicated with queerbaiting and homonegativity. Although essentially pernicious, queerbaiting could be the impetus for action towards a more empowered affirmation for queer minorities, while also serving corporate interests. Instead of a simplistic oppositional schema, we could instead envision a positioning of the queer self/ves *in juxtaposition* to the hegemonic and also in *symbiosis* to it: from opponents to partners or, as Lena put it, “a Luthor and a Super working together” (*Supergirl*, So2E05). After all, for Alexander Doty, queerness in popular culture is “less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception” (1993, xi). In today’s universe of unprecedented rapid-response and networking capacities, fans do not have to

take gaslighting or the “Bury Your Gays” trope passively, but respond powerfully as a nation united by the same negative affect forces that would isolate them.

One accordingly could see “SuperCorp” as the queering of the term “Supergirl” (and the superhero conventions and tropes) through a bricolage by fans, comic-book authors, and network producers/writers alike, predicated upon what Eve Ng names “queer contextuality, referring to how both the current and previous landscapes of LGBT media narratives inform evaluations of particular texts” (2017, 1.3). Instead of being daunted into silence by the rampant machismo of traditional comics culture, fandom selectively repurposes that very tradition towards identity-affirming creations.

## 2. SUPER-SHAMING AND ITS ORIGINS

What is particularly interesting in the case of Supergirl in this battle of representational affects is, of course, that her history of (queered) shame is precisely predicated on her being the most super-powerful body on Earth while, simultaneously, belonging to what is traditionally known as “the weaker sex.” The Golden Age Supergirl debuted in 1959 in *Action Comics* #252 with an inherent heteronormativity problem: marketed as an “adorkable” Super-variant targeted at teen girls, she was still too strong to fit normative femininity. Hence, “Supergirl’s early stories attempt to resolve her difference by continually seeking a male partner for her. Time and again, however, Supergirl’s power makes the task impossible” (Hicks 2020, 297). The shame factor is embodied in Supergirl’s first “boyfriend,” an annoyingly “all-American” kid named Dick Wilson (“Richard Malverne” 2023, n.p.). Dick develops an interest in Supergirl because he accidentally takes a picture of her flying and then dedicates his life to proving, through a number of schemes, that his classmate Linda Lee (the alias of the Golden Age Supergirl) is an alien superheroine: the exposure of an accidental photograph leads to a hunt for the “exposure” of her secret identity, conflating her superpowers with some form of shame that must remain hidden. Furthermore, this shame is coded as sexual and gendered, since Dick also develops amorous feelings for Supergirl, and the two even date for a while, as a concession to all-powerful heteronormativity. Dick’s attraction to Supergirl “highlights the metaphorical link between her sexuality and her powers. It also emphasizes the sexualization of Supergirl’s secrets” (Hicks 2020, 296). Yet, in the end, the attempt to harness Supergirl’s threatening unfeminine difference via a number of male suitors, from Dick to Batman, proves futile, as she is physiologically impossible to contain within heteronormative narratives of masculine superiority and control. This holds equally true for the television show, where Kara confesses that, during her first make-out session with a classmate, she broke his nose (So2, E14). The popular association of the nose with the penis suggests a logical chain of thought: as the “Girl of Steel” is invulnerable *everywhere*, heterosexual penetration threatens castration, affirming that “Supergirl’s ‘true’ sexual self ... has obvious vagina dentata connotations” (Hicks 2020, 297–98). In his study of *The Supergirls*,

Mike Madrid traces through Supergirl's multiple (re-)incarnations as alien, robot, magical wish-come-true, or highly sexualized, autonomous, and more-powerful-than-Superman tweener her impossibility of conforming to submissive feminine standards no matter the occasion, revealing the comics Supergirl as quintessentially queer (2009, 94–99)—hence, not alien to the idea of a SuperCorp.

The decades-long standstill of Supergirl against patriarchy would only shift in the late twentieth century, as queer fandom gained force and recognition in popular culture. As Kara Kvaran notes, the homophobic trend of the decades-long rule of the Comics Code Authority on the mainstream, fanboy-oriented comics industry “has changed in the past decade, as Marvel and DC Comics have both made an effort to include homosexual characters and storylines in their major titles, and in recent years, the depiction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in comics has vastly improved” (2014, 142). This trend gained considerable support from Comics/Queer Studies critics who have argued that the superheroic body has always already been not only “supersexed,” that is, overly charged with gendered eroticism, but also inherently queer in its affiliation with alien/mutant/freak/monstrous Otherness<sup>2</sup>:

As a biological misfit, the superhero inhabits a body that deviates from real-life bodies and may therefore queer mainstream views of gender and sexuality rooted in references to the physical body. As a social outcast who must hide or sublimate a secret (and occasionally sexual) identity and is burdened by the great responsibilities that come with superhuman powers, the superhero has the potential to queer normative notions of male and female corporeality despite its overt promotion of an idealized and hypersexualized heteronormative body. (Stein 2018, 20)

One could then argue that what SuperCorp fans did was paradoxically, both against the grain of queerbaiting shaming *mores*, and yet essentially already inherent to the character's constitutive “super” femininity.

### 3. CODING AND BAITING: *SUPERGIRL* PRODUCERS AND FANS

Signaling its awareness of such a dynamic to engage potential queer viewers, the CW show makes use of the “queer” (baiting) trope right from episode 1. Kara Danvers (Supergirl's civilian identity in the show), after her first, forced public super-feat (read: “outing”), tries to reveal her super status to Winn Schott, a co-worker attracted to her. However, he assumes she's coming out to him as a lesbian: “This conversation between the two friends was written as a direct nod to the LGBTQA+ community since the phrasing

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<sup>2</sup> Here Otherness, as theorized by a series of philosophers, is taken as a necessary intersubjective constituent of identity, applicable to all categories predicated on some form of difference such as race, gender, sexuality, culture, or ethics, and eliciting bias against those deviating from the normative constitution of these categories.

used by Kara is similar to a ‘coming out’ narrative, even down to her nervous behavior of stuttering her words and her movement of pacing on the rooftop of CatCo World Wide Media” (DeGalan 2018, 6). Even though Kara refutes Winn’s conclusion with an emphatic “I’m not gay!” the fact that Winn serves as the equivalent for Dick Wilson signals an admission on the part of the show’s writers that sexual dynamics are no longer heteronormatively granted. Instead of hiding in shame, this Super comes out confidently; instead of using that shame as a fulcrum-point to lay a romantic and controlling heteronormative claim to Supergirl, this “Dick” yields to her superiority from the start, coding it furthermore as queer. The lesbian “coming out” trope is used again, as DeGalan notes (2018, 5), in Kara’s subsequent conversation with her adoptive sister Alex, who wishes to keep Kara’s superpowers hidden in order to protect her. Kara describing her first public use of her superpowers as “[s]cared, but good scared. Like, like that moment right before you kiss someone for the first time” (So1, E01) links superpowers and sexuality with “someone,” not necessarily male, in a precarious way that echoes Ahmed’s negative affect of shaming desire. Yet Kara leaving open possibilities of what her “coming out” “means” embraces the heroine’s twenty-first-century potential “as a narrative whose meanings emerge from its ability to provoke controversy and sanction multiple readings” (Stein 2018, 31).

The gesture then initiates a dialogue with queer(-friendly) fans whom the producers/writers expect to be already versed in comics and sub-textual poaching, like crack videos or slash/shipper fiction. Studies on queer superhero shipping (by Bolling 2014; also Schott 2010, among many) evince “how the public recognition of the superhero as a queer figure has transitioned from twentieth-century attempts to subvert the mainstream reading of hypersexualized yet heteronormative body images and gendered narratives to the more pervasive (yet still controversial) current embrace of the figure’s queer potentials” (Stein 2018, 16). Thus, the show is seen as consciously setting up a challenge with its queer audience to read Supergirl as lesbian or bisexual, even despite her denial—which is why this snippet from the pilot episode is one of the first things challenged and mocked in fan creations, such as the video series by the highly popular “Queen of Crack,” Niki Sky (2016).

The challenge was bolstered by the show’s notable showcasing of sensitive social issues, which garnered it four GLAAD Media Award nominations for 2017 and 2020–2022 (*IMDb*, “*Supergirl: Awards*” 2023, n.p.): “Throughout its six-season run, the show tackled nuanced themes like trans rights, BLM, and fascism, through a feminist/queer lens. It also showcased female friendships without relying on familiar tropes, like the ‘mean girls’ or ‘enemies-to-friends’ clichés” (Church 2023, 213–14). Alex, the sister who kept Kara “in the closet,” comes out (So2, E05) as a “powerful, supportive, and protective” lesbian (Hicks 2020, 303), amplifying Kara’s queer vibes:

Alex's embracing of her sexuality is portrayed in such a way that when she "comes out" to her sister, we as an audience can see that this scene is structured almost exactly like how Kara's acceptance of her new identity as Supergirl. Knowing all of this, we can conclude Kara's embracing of her Supergirl identity is scripted to be seen as a queer narrative, while Kara is hegemonically "straight" character, Supergirl is undeniably a queer character. (DeGalan 2018, 6)

Buoyed by enthusiastic fan responses, Alex's lesbianism became a main show subplot, culminating in a happy wedding to her African-American partner, Kelly Olsen, and their adoption of an alien child as the close of the show's final season six. Other key queer characters include the lesbian cop Maggie Sawyer; the half-alien transgender superhero Dreamer, played by trans actress Nicole Maines, whose moniker combines queerness with allegorizing on the rights of immigrant children raised in America (which, technically, both Supers are); and her boyfriend, Brainiac-5, something of a queer overkill as a computer-alien hybrid encompassing multiple selves, including a lesbian. There was even a "SuperCat" lesbian ship scenario between Kara and her domineering employer, the flamboyant "Queen of All Media" Cat Grant, "portrayed by 1990s postfeminist icon Calista Flockhart" (Hicks 2020, 302), who also matriarchally officiated Kara's "coming out" by coining her "Supergirl" moniker (So1, Eo1). In that sense, the show could be said to possess a quality sought after, according to Michael McDermott, by many queer fans, i.e., diversity instead of the usual token representation of *one* minority individual embodying "every experience, every trait, every perspective" (2021, 846).

The introduction of the character of Lena Luthor, however, played by Irish actress Katie McGrath (So2, Eo1) was the pivotal moment for queer fan poaching. Originally there for a mere three-episode arc, McGrath's character was meant to serve the show's habit of reversing known Superman tropes by presenting a good and ethical Luthor who would be not the Super's arch-enemy but a good friend. Nevertheless, McGrath's Lena resonated so much with fans that the producers saw fit not only to make her a permanent key character, but to gradually elevate her intense friendship with Supergirl to the *primus mobile* of the show's plot arcs. Specifically, Lena's trajectory was linked to, and shaped by, perceived and measurable queer fan responses to the show, as noted in the *Supercorp Shipping Wiki*:

Supercorp is one of the most popular and common ships in the Supergirl fandom. The moments where Kara consoles Lena at L Corp, CatCo or most any time they get close on screen, the actors have been noted by fans as having chemistry. On AO3, Supercorp is the most written ship for Lena, and the most written for Kara. It is also the most written ship in the Supergirl (TV 2015) tag. Moreover, it is also the most written femslash ship and the 32nd most written on the site overall. (n.p.)

A fundamental part of it was due to the actress portraying Lena Luthor: "The emotional drama of the friendship that develops between both Lena and Kara as well as Lena and Supergirl is bolstered by these tensions and by the onscreen chemistry between

Benoist/Supergirl and McGrath/Lena. This in turn fuels fans' championing of a romantic interpretation of the two's relationship" (Hicks 2020, 302). Noted for her alabaster skin, McGrath "has her whiteness regularly fetishized within fan art created by Supercorp shippers, who often present her as either significantly paler than Kara, on occasion, without any skin color at all" (Hicks 2020, 304). This whiteness, coupled with McGrath's irrepressible Dublin "posh" accent and poise, along with the Luthor predatoriness of her role, strongly gesture towards the tradition of female vampires which, since Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 *Carmilla*, has linked vampirism to "marginalized sexual behaviors," predominantly lesbianism (Borgia 2016, 110). McGrath, a charismatic actress with the odd ability to queer every role she's ever played, came to the show already credited with two successful lesbian roles and a vigorous queer fan following in tow, and proceeded to bombard Kara with every lesbian-coded stare or gesture imaginable, including a celebrated sexy lip bite while inviting her "only friend" to her fundraising gala (So2, E05). For DeGalan, "when you consider the acting cues McGrath uses to convey chemistry with Kara Danvers, in terms of lip bites, lingering eyes, stuttering in speech, accidental sexual innuendos, breath hitches, etc., it becomes abundantly clear to the fandom that their 'shipping' of SuperCorp has some legitimacy within the show" (2018, 19). Even though she claimed she initially had no perception of any lesbian undertones to her role (Mitovich 2017, n.p.), McGrath became the most supportive cast member of the right of fans to read the show as they saw fit, and was reciprocally "hailed by fans as 'captain' of the Supercorp ship" (Laguerre-Lewis 2021, n.p.), "signing fan art and meeting with Supercorp fans, with Melissa Benoist ... later following suit" (Church 2023, 223).

Furthermore, the gestures used to express Kara and Lena's "friendship" were from the start engineered to parallel tropes of heterosexual superhero romance. Supergirl's frequent rescues of Lena often involve the iconic "bridal carry" pose and, in a particularly lesbian-leaning episode involving a romantic *Titanic* allusion (So3, E05), Kara would rather risk dropping half a cargo plane loaded with poison in National City's water supply than drop Lena trapped in the other half of the hull. In turn, Lena's sultrily-delivered phrase that "Supergirl may have saved me, but, Kara Danvers, you are my hero!" (So2, E12) was reiterated in the linked CW superhero show *Legends of Tomorrow* during the wedding of Barry Allen, better known as the superhero The Flash, as a marriage vow by his bride Iris (So3, E08). These coding clues alone would be sufficient to debunk any heterosexual explanation for all fans with an even rudimentary knowledge of comics.

#### 4. QUEERING THE POWER DYNAMICS: DAMSEL, YES, DISTRESS, NO

The queerest of elements, as per the present analysis, however, comes from the way Supergirl as a sign is repositioned according to millennial/GenZ standards through her lesbian pairing to Lena: the staple for any heretofore romantic relationship with a (super)hero has been gendered inequality between them and their partner, as he is the

savior, she the damsel in distress. Yet here it is Lena who emerges as the dominant partner, and as such presents an affirmative model for queer dealings with dominant societal forces such as heteronormativity or corporate culture, one based on equality-in-difference and versatility. Described by McGrath as “a badass” and “a powerhouse” (Mitovich 2017, n.p.) whose friendship with Kara allows her “to be honest and vulnerable” (Hatchett 2021, n.p.), Lena becomes a metonymy for the “Supercorp fandom ... organized around the figure of Lena Luthor rather than Supergirl” (Hicks 2020, 307). As shall be shown, this inverted dynamic turns SuperCorp into a case of what Adrienne Rich hailed as an empowering, nurturing “lesbian continuum” free from phallogocentric violent hierarchies, “a range ... of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (1980, 648).

A brunette to Supergirl’s blonde, Lena exemplifies the darker, worldlier, and moodier of the pair as per the “Hair Contrast Duo” trope predominant in pop-fiction lesbian pairings (*Tropedia*, 2023, n.p.). As Olivia Hicks observes, “the potential threat of Supergirl’s strength is nullified by Lena’s intelligence and wealth” that often saves Supergirl’s life (2020, 310), and “even the name ‘Supercorp’—an amalgamation of ‘Supergirl’ and ‘L-Corp,’ Lena’s company, which is in turn easily reinterpreted as a reference to lesbianism (*The L Word*)—alludes to the erotic appeal of superpowered and/or superpowerful female bodies” (306–07). One could even suggest that the choice of “Corp” showcases Lena’s body as a synecdoche of the infinite resources and capacity of her corporation in the same way a hegemon’s body would be seen as a supra-human synecdoche of their kingdom. Lena’s stylish dark androgynous business suits, contrasted to Kara’s submissive multi-layered pastels “portraying passive femininity” (DeGalan 2018, 12), are a sartorial match for the iconic Super-suit. From “BFFs forever!”—an ironic exclamation offered by McGrath during one of her first interviews, indicating that the term was queered from the beginning (Lena Thorul 2022)—Lena moves to becoming Kara’s “boss”—a loaded term that Kara seems to delight in repeating, and to which Lena responds with a texted heart emoji (So3, Eo1)—to manifesting witch powers and becoming perhaps the most effective of the Superfriends in season six. With quotes like “Oh, I know I’m the best!” (So4, Eo2) and “I’ve never stood behind a man” (So2, E18), McGrath’s Lena dominated the show as a lesbian sexual trigger. This is both well-documented both in fan reactions and McGrath’s own sassy retort, when told that she is “in love with Lena”: “Wouldn’t you be?” (Mitovich 2017, n.p.). No wonder McGrath was nominated for “Choice: Scene Stealer” at the 2018 Teen Choice Awards for her galvanizing portrayal.

Beyond the purely physical domain, Lena is the one who most boldly yet judiciously questions Supergirl’s moral authority and motives, even accusing her of having “a god complex” (So3, E18). Contrasted with that, shy, babyface Kara is shown becoming mesmerized or flustered around Lena, even to the point of almost outing herself as Supergirl during their second meeting when she blurts out accidentally “I flew here—on...a...bus”

(So2, Eo3). Kara's often risible attempts to mask the use of her powers around Lena (as in So4, Eo2) recall the Golden-Age Supergirl's submissiveness, who would "exercise power through spectacles that displace it, either by rendering it invisible, or by attributing it to a masculine source" (Link 2013, 1180). Indicative of Kara's status in the relationship is her being labeled in all kinds of Supercorp fan creations as "puppy": *An Archive of Our Own* alone lists a combined 296 works with Kara as, or associated with, a puppy, or exhibiting puppy-like behavior (2023)—which, given that McGrath is an enthusiastic dog owner who refers to dogs consistently as "puppies," only highlights the idea of an erotic roleplay between "mistress" and "submissive."

Lena has a further advantage in being portrayed as more experienced in sexual relationships with men and always carrying a strong erotic chemistry when it comes to her women "friends." By contrast, the Girl of Steel is a suitor-bruising "Iron Maiden," which explains the need to romantically involve her with Mon-El in season two: as a Daxamite from the same planetary system as Krypton, Mon-El is the closest physiologically to a non-incestuous super-male that could deflower the virginal Kara. Played winningly by Chris Wood, Benoist's real-life husband, Mon-El is nevertheless told off as "a lying jack-ass" who disrespects, undermines and demeans Kara (So3, E15). The fact that he was hated by fans precisely for his old-school male lead traits confirms how the relationship paradigms have shifted in the twenty-first century: for Hicks, "The unpopularity of the pairing of Supergirl and Mon-El ... relative to the popularity of Supercorp suggests it is out of step with the desires of a significant portion of the show's audience" (2020, 303), and explains the subsequent harried defenestration of that "love eternal" (So2, E22). The schema could in fact encompass all other heterosexual pairings to which the two women were subjected by CW's producers to exorcise SuperCorp, yet were dropped when fans rejected them riotously. In fact, the show's final desperate attempt to make Kara heterosexual, the reporter William Dey, became so hated by exasperated fans (Palat 2020, n.p.) that his character not only got another girlfriend, but was also subsequently murdered by Lex Luthor for good measure (So6, E18). Similarly, when Jack Spheer, Lena's former business partner/lover and her professed "Kryptonite," falls prey to a villainess manipulating his nanotechnology, Lena herself chooses to kill him to save Supergirl, after which she is comforted by a very intimate hug and promise of forever protection and support by Kara (So2, E18). In fact, evincing the influence of SuperCorp shippers on the show, a much later episode revises completely Lena's hybrid partnership with Jack, whom she abandons because she wants to be "the Luthor that shares her home with a Kryptonian! That helps her put the world back together instead of tearing it apart!" (So5, Eo6). Making Supergirl's "outing" the occasion for Lena's move to National City in intentional pursuit of a relationship oddly described as "sharing a home" rephrases their "friendship" drastically as irresistible lesbian attraction, and repurposes the show's heteronormative interjections into ways for the two women to become (romantically) linked.

Queer fan appreciation for Lena strongly centered around her darker traits, especially the highly-eroticized “redeemed bad girl” trope. In the final episode of season four (E22), Lena even shoots in cold blood her evil brother, whom she idolized as a child, to prevent him from further harming the world and Supergirl. With his dying breath, Lex tells Lena that Kara is Supergirl, goading Lena into seeing this as a violation of her most intimate trust and sending her in a supervillainous revenge spin in season five, foreshadowed by her previous self-assessment as a having “the emotional range of Medea” (So3, E12), a murderess infamously triggered by betrayed love. Lena’s extreme reaction is indeed paradigmatic of “a woman scorned”: she punches Supergirl in virtual reality (So5, E01) and even uses kryptonite on her for real, only stopping short of murder (So5, E08). In contrast, Kara, when faced with the possibility of physically assaulting Lena’s weaponized bunker, simply raises her hands in surrender, something she had never done with any other opponent (So5, E08). As if those coded clues about the nature of Lena’s ire weren’t enough, the CW writers, compelled by fan anger over the damaged relationship, retrospectively rewrote Lena’s motive for shooting Lex. At the pivotal moment her clandestine grudge (and her fratricide) is revealed, she screams tearfully at Supergirl “I killed my brother for you, for our friendship, you understand what you’ve done?!” (So5, E07). Since at that moment Kara is in Supergirl costume and the two are alone in the Fortress of Solitude (the Kryptonians’ iconic hideaway in the North Pole), it appears as if Lena’s motives were altruistic. However, when Lena shot her brother, she did not know Kara was Supergirl. Ergo, “you” and “our friendship,” further contextualized by Lena’s earlier description of Kara as “someone you love” that goes on to “betray you,” are in fact directed at Kara Danvers, not world-saving, and point to an emotion generated by Kara strong enough to turn ethical Lena into a fratricide (So5, E07). Even Lena’s eventual attempts to apologize and excuse herself (So5, E19 and So6, E01) are verbally constructed to intimate retrospectively that her project, “Non Nocere,” a mind-controlling implant used to excise violent or scary emotions from the human brain, was meant to be used on herself to get rid of her enormous “hurt” over Kara’s betrayal, the magnitude of which could only accord with passionate love. While Hicks reads Kara keeping her identity secret as a form of domination over Lena, reciprocally “Supergirl’s lack of knowledge about Lena results in a lack of control that undermines her powers, mirroring her loss of power in the relationship” (2020, 309). Kara’s propitiatory position is further highlighted by her constantly tearful apologies and her unwavering protectiveness of an increasingly hostile Lena. Notable among such occasions, and clearly written as a nod to the SuperCorp fandom, is the show’s celebrated 100<sup>th</sup> episode, a parody of *It’s a Wonderful Life*: offered the chance by a magical imp friend to do over her life, Kara chooses to fix her “betrayal” of Lena (instead of, say, saving Krypton or preventing Mon-El from leaving Earth), leading to a series of variable relationship scenarios (So5, E13). While none of the alternative realities features explicit lesbianism, Kara’s driving impetus, the profundity of her

interactions with the various Lenas, and the devastating results of not being in Lena's life in one of them (with Lena being turned into a literally heartless cyborg dictator) parallel George Bailey's iconic attempts at rebuilding his relationship with his loving family. The allusion solidly casts the two women's bond as far more than "friendship," even queering the show's use of the word itself (as indicated also by fan perception of the loaded term, for example in the tongue-in-cheek hijacking of the word "friend" in the SuperCorp Mexican soap-opera parody film by Vale 2020; or the playful deconstruction of the term by QTPQueen 2021, among other creations).

It can be inferred, therefore, that the inversion of the power relationship between the Super and the Luthor resonates doubly in terms of the queer fandom's relationship to shame: first, it allows Supergirl to bypass the shameful impasse of having to yield her super self to an inferior masculinity, by offering a relationship of equals that is outside of gender hierarchies. Secondly, the resolution—albeit after a long and very troubled course—of the revelation of Kara's super (and queer-coded) secret to Lena paved the way for the broader, happily effected, "coming out" gesture that would come in the show's final episode. Their relationship faced literally the worst possible scenarios, and still survived and improved, giving hope to queer fans that their own coming out would eventually not alienate the ones they hold dearest, but in fact strengthen their bonds.

## 5. THE ALTERNATE UNIVERSES OF "#SUPERCORP: ENDGAME"

In season six, the queer fans' unwavering support of McGrath's Lena and SuperCorp became the formative plot paragon, as a repentant Lena is reinstated as Supergirl's savior from certain death, her challenging conscience over bad decisions (So6, E14), magical partner in crimefighting, and sharer of intimate moments of affection. Scenes like their potsticker dinner, charged with lesbian sexual innuendos about Lena sticking her fingers into Kara's mouth (So6, E14); and especially Benoist leaning towards McGrath at a 10" angle, as if about to kiss her, when Supergirl is reunited with her friends after her imprisonment in the Phantom Zone dimension (So6, Eo8), reverberated through lesbian fans creating countless memes, cracks, and fanfiction references as the moment when "the Maid of Might" became the Maid that Might.

Accordingly, when it became known that season six was going to conclude *Supergirl*, queer fan demand for "SuperCorp: Endgame" became so vocal and insistent, that it was expected the CW producers would respond with some gesture of acknowledgment to the show's more loyal ratings supporters. The final episode, "Kara" (So6, E20), focuses on the wedding of Alex to her partner and the reunion of all the Superfriends, with auspicious paths established for each one. But it is also where Lena and Cat Grant help Kara resolve her mounting distress with her life, an arc set up throughout season six, in a way that reads as a specific effort on the part of the writers to appease the SuperCorp fandom short of canonizing Endgame. Lena shows up at the wedding in a completely out-of-

context glamorous outfit with a plunging bra-less neckline, and initiates a heartfelt talk with Kara, who confesses she constructed Supergirl to hide her true self from public view—a confession paralleling accounts of closeted queer shame. With Lena’s support a tearful Kara overcomes her fears, telling Lena that, “of all the friends I’ve ever had, you have ... challenged me the most”); then Lena takes her by the shoulders and caresses them slightly – the closest to a lover’s touch the fans would ever get—before the two embrace. Immediately after, Kara takes off and abandons her glasses, effectively coming out of the closet as both Supergirl and Kara Danvers. McGrath’s own summation of the scene as noting “the difference” between the former, guilt-driven Lena, and her blossoming eventual self (Hatchett 2021, n.p.) makes the final episode as much “Lena” as it is “Kara,” setting up the couple as the fundamental unit of the show. Kara and Lena are shown discursively “poaching” their inherited shame—the Luthor criminal legacy and the glasses given to Kara by her adoptive parents to hide her superpowers, respectively—to create whole new and liberated selves, thus encouraging queer fandom to do the same with the queerbaiting of produced canon.

The intentional queer nod of that scene is affirmed also by its immediately-preceding desperate phone call by Kara to Cat Grant, who reveals that she has known Kara’s secret all along, ending the agony of “telling” on the latter’s part that is identical to a gay coming out scene. Cat even helps Kara express herself by offering two characteristic words for how the latter is feeling: “Bi...furcated? Inauthentic?” Flockhart’s intentional pause after “bi” is a wink to fans for the acknowledgment of Supergirl’s bisexuality, bringing the show full circle to the pilot episode and Kara’s “I’m not gay!” on CatCo’s rooftop, now repurposed as the initiator of Supergirl’s process of self-acceptance. The show’s conclusion thus becomes an instance, according to Ramzi Fawaz, “when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture and, in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies” (qtd. in Stein 2018, 24).

In that way, despite the denial of a clear canonization of SuperCorp that left many queer fans frustrated (Harrington 2021, n.p.; Zalben 2021), the challenge for restorative and shame-free production was answered by effectively relinquishing power to creative queer fandom, allowing them space to read the ending as they wished. And the fans responded, even to the point of wresting control away from the CW and DC. As told by Church, “On November 17, 2021, something exceptional happened in the realm of TV fandom: lesbian fans of the TV show *Supergirl*—a CW drama based on the bisexual DC character—created an alternate ending to the series” (2023, 213). Taking advantage of social media technology and the time difference between airings of the show across the U.S.,

... a faction flipped the script by writing a new, queer ending and presented it as fact. For 24 h following the finale, fans on Twitter falsely broadcast ‘Supercorp kissed’ to the world. Rather than accepting a truth they did not support, the Supercorp fandom rewrote the show’s

conclusion, transmuting their feelings of anger and betrayal over being Queerbaited into an alternate, reconciling narrative. (Church 2023, 214)

Church analyzes extensively the roots, mechanics, and impact of that gesture as a moment of queer fan triumph against CW gaslighting, thus in a sense repeating the inversion of the power relationship between the superhero and their love interest that *Supergirl* was all about. Questioning the concept of the canon as invincible orthodoxy that is exclusively producer-derived, LGBTIQ+ fandom offered a new paradigm of the reciprocal relationship between powerful creators and smart, tactical consumers enabled through twenty-first century media and ethics.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The queerbaiting by *Supergirl*'s producers served the show's ratings while maintaining the heteronormative DC canon, but also generated anti-shame discourses for LGBTIQ+ visibility among queer fans that decisively revise past renderings of the character. The creation and promulgation of SuperCorp, an alternative reading of the "friendship" between Kara Danvers (Supergirl) and Lena Luthor as a romantic relationship of equals in the TV show in fact became a vehicle for the resolution of a number of canonical issues related to superpowered heroines: "Within the Supercorp fandom, Supergirl's power is less a problem than it is a solution, and superpowered female sexuality is not a source of anxiety but rather a cause for very enthusiastic celebration" (Hicks 2020, 312). Given that creative fan "confessions are important statements of existence" (Hicks 2020, 311), SuperCorp fans were empowered not only as a minority, but also as consumers on the receiving end of media broadcasting. This became particularly evident in the ambivalent conclusion of the show, that not only signaled a clear coded concession to queer fans, but also gave fandom the opportunity for a massive case of character poaching: "Rather than relying on showrunners to validate their feelings, the Supercorp fandom took back the narrative and rewrote the script—literally. Their version of events was met with an outpouring of queer joy and pride from the fandom, with tweets and retweets from the supportive online community helping to divert attention from the unsatisfying original narrative" (Church 2023, 227). Queer fandom, then, proved an equal opponent to shaming corporate practices, while participatory in their product. One could even further register this impact of queering the comics canon in events outside the show, for example, in the publication of DC Comics's limited series *Dark Knights of Steel* (Taylor and Putri 2021-2022) that, shortly after *Supergirl*'s conclusion, gave the world a lesbian Supergirl character openly in a love relationship with Wonder Woman. McDermott, speaking about the value of positive affect to queer fans facing queerbaiting, concludes that "perhaps the attachments to queerness for fans can serve not as a political identity or a history of censorship and punishment, but as hope. This hope is both a critical affect and a methodology, not always a heteronormative futurity" (2021, 856). And, as fans know, the big "S" on the Supers' chest,

“the crest for the House of El, ... translates to the words ‘Stronger Together’ in Kryptonian and represents a symbol for hope to the people of Earth” (DeGalan 2018, 2).

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