

Nia Nal the Super Girl: Transgender Representation and Body Image

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With the production of television series such as *Pose*, *Transparent*, *I am Jazz*, *I am Cait*, and *Orange is the New Black* in conjunction with current political discussion on transgender rights involving transgender military service and the bathroom bills, transgender and gender diverse (TGD) representations have become a vital issue within American culture. *Orange is the New Black* and *Pose* focus on subjects directly impacting the TGD communities today, while *I am Jazz* and *I am Cait* follow the stories of Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner navigating life as transgender women. These series, surprisingly diverse in their racial representations of transgender identity, open the door to transgender existence in hegemonic media. In their latest season, the CW television series *Supergirl* has introduced the newest superhero to join the crew: a transgender woman named Nia Nal, who is able to see the future through her dreams. This new addition to TGD representation simultaneously breaks through to new territories as well as reinforces the existing hegemonic image of TGD identity and the gender binary.

The influx of TGD characters has begun to assert an ideal transgender body upon the media-produced transgender narrative while furthering representation and acceptance of the existence of transgender people. Despite their innovative portrayals of these transgender characters, the effect of the combined representations creates a specific and narrow image of what it means to be transgender. As E.T. Booth explains: “As is the case with any marginalized group... an increase in media representation may be just as likely to further confuse the issue as to clarify it, particularly when the commercial interests controlling those

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representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms” (Booth 191). Because American popular culture represents so few of these characters, their portrayal is crucial as it produces the stereotypes that are then taken as truth in audiences that have no other interactions with them (*Black Feminist Thought*). Therefore, it is important to watch how these new and generally successful television series handle the diversity, or lack thereof, of TGD experience and identity.

Within the aforementioned series, the TGD characters offer a narrow view of TGD identity (Price et al.). They are exclusively male-to-female transgender, either already fully transitioned or working toward the presented ideal of fully transitioned. These characters largely identify along a strict gender binary and their outward appearance reflects this identification. What these representations therefore portray is a physical body image that falls in line with the body ideal of cisgender¹ women. While this image in and of itself is not all together negative, it has the capacity to further the gender binary and definition of female, and by extension transgender female, as a single particular image: that of hyper-effeminate, skinny, and hegemonically beautiful. Although “passing,”² is discussed in the FX series *Pose* as the end goal, these series already physically represent each of these characters represented as this passing image; only through the discussions of their transgender identities do the series communicate to the audience that they are not ciswomen. The most notable exception to this rule was the lead character in the series *Transparent*, previously played by Jeffrey Tambor, who also happens to be the only transgender character within these series that was not played by a transgender actor. What Tambor’s representation implies is that the physical appearance of that character is not representative of the “authentic” transgender identity in the same manner as those characters played by transgender actors.

In examining Nia Nal in *Supergirl*, played by transgender actress and activist Nicole Maines, this paper asks the questions of how this newest representation of TGD identity contributes to the media image of what it means to be a TGD person, what specific body image is developing as the “acceptable” transgender body, and how this representation reaffirms or deconstructs the gender binary ideals of the female and TGD body. In aiming to contribute to the limited rhetorical study of TGD representation, this paper calls for a recognition of how these current TGD

¹ Cisgender refers to those who identify with the gender assigned at birth (Capuzza and Spencer).

² Passing is defined in this case as the ability to present as cisgender (Fritz and Gonzales 1192).

representations dictate the accepted TGD body image, and thereby what becomes the hegemonic definition of the “real” or “authentic” TGD body. Through the rhetorical analysis of Nia Nal’s character, this paper finds that hegemonic mediated definitions of feminine beauty are placed upon the transgender characters within these series, presenting the transgender-ideal as that of the cisfemale ideal. The actors themselves adhere to the hegemonic dictations of beauty through their physical depiction of the body image ideal, creating a sense of authenticity of identity behind the characters and into what becomes the culturally dominant definition of the TGD body. This repeated imagery not only reinforces the “authentic” TGD body, but furthermore underpins imagery of the culturally dictated “perfect” woman, emphasizing gendered roles of femininity onscreen and off.

Media Construction and Body Image

Media and the consumption of popular television series are closely tied to the development of American society’s definitions of the ideal body and gender definition. Kimberly Bissell and Amy Rask assert that as a result of the distortion of body image, “the media are one of many potential variables related to increases in disordered eating[...] The media are often held partially responsible for young females’ desire to be extraordinarily thin because of the number of media messages promoting the ‘thin ideal’” (643). This understanding of media’s influence in the construction of hegemonic norms enforces a specific type of body as the ideal. Media thereby constructs the identification of the “normative” body, and what is not only accepted, but desirable within a given identity (S. Butler and Bissell 230). Judith Butler identifies gender as a performance of social construction (*Gender Trouble* 129). The culture constructed through media dictates the accepted performances of gender. Identities are placed in strict hegemonic definitions of male or female based on the representation and presentation of the physical self. John Sloop explains that “bodies are forced into male/female categories; once in these categories, they either need to properly perform [...] or the search is on for the causes of their ‘malfunction’” (182). This definition of the proper performance is exemplified through the physical body, and the enactment of gender representations.

Media thereby place TGD identification into classifications of either strictly male or female (often female with few exceptions), asserting a divisiveness

between the two. In doing so, the portrayals of these characters then represent the ideal body image not of the transgender body, but of the cisgender body it has been identified as. Michal Morgan, James Shanahan, and Nancy Signorelli explain that television “is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives” (34). Television specifically is inherent in the social construction of the ideal image. Kevin Deluca, Ye Sun, and Jennifer Peeples further this idea of media prevalence to the construction of social existence: “media produce the public sphere and public screens as primal scenes of Being.” (147). The images within social media become emblematic of reality: “In our public discourse of images, images are important not because they represent reality but create it: they are the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet—the nexus between culture and politics” (Hartley 3). In other words, through the creation of a singular image of TGD embodiment, these television series thereby construct the social hegemonic definition of the ideal TGD body.

Through the presentation of the body, embodiment becomes a demonstration of authenticity and identity representative of the actors as well as the characters they play. Butler asserts that “Embodiment is not thinkable without a relation to a norm or set of norms” (“Critically Queer” 28). What this means is that without the regulation and dictation of mediated images constructing the “norm,” no specified definition of the embodied exists. The physical bodies of the actors thereby become a measure of the culturally defined “authentic” transgender body, aligned within the gender binary and defined through gender-specific hegemonic regulations. Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hébert assert that “media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization” (298). However, within the presentations at play, rather than restructuring concepts of gender through TGD representations, an ideal body image and narrative is placed upon the TGD in line with the ideal body image of the cisgender body. Susan Stryker explains:

...it is increasingly obvious that transgender phenomena are not limited to individuals who have ‘transgendered’ personal identities. Rather, they are signposts that point to many different kinds of bodies and subjects, and they can help us see how gender can function as part of a more extensive apparatus of social domination and control. Gender as a form of social

control is not limited to the control of bodies defined as ‘women’s bodies’, or the control of female reproductive capacities. Because genders are categories through which we recognize the personhood of others (as well as ourselves). (61)

The defined gender and gender representation of the TGD body must therefore align with the media constructed definition of the gender acceptable, in order to claim personhood. Furthermore, those who persist outside of these identifications have historically been dehumanized, seen as mentally deranged, unstable, and often dangerous (Cavalcante). Sloop expounds upon this defining of the “Other” or those outside of the mediated norm, as particular behaviors and personifications of identity are reinforced by media through the repetition of these trends across differing media. He explains that these representations of gender “ultimately provide a reifying crystallization of cultural expectations of gender normativity... [as they] focus on specific clothing choices and body movements as signifying masculinity” (174). Masculinity as well as femininity therefore reinforce upon the transgender representations within the series. The portrayals of these images, then, are presented within the cultural expectations of the gendered “ideal” body image.

Specifically, in relation to *Supergirl* and the other series represented within this paper, these characters are forced into the cisfemale ideal of beauty, reinforcing a theme of transgender as solely a desire to be fully female. This sole representation presents a false image of the transgender desired identity as either fully male or fully female. Niki Friz and Amy Gonzales state: “Trans bodies are often dichotomized as masculine or feminine, yet, as trans individuals transition to different gender identities, they may or may not want to be or be able to pass—to appear as their preferred gender—which is often determined by social or outside forces” (1192). Within these series, the idea of passing is presented as the ultimate goal, with a full gender transition as the only path to achieve this passing identity. The body image thereby presented is one of the passing female that the audience would likely not perceive as transgender without the explanations of the series themselves. In their 2017 review of transgender television characters, Jamie Capuzza and Leland Spencer explain that “all the lead and supporting transgender characters reinforced the gender binary and gender stability, identifying consistently with either masculinity or femininity” (225). Through the repetition of this specific transnormative identity within these series, the hegemonic understanding of transgender becomes further constricted through the gender

binary. These series present transgender characters as fully male or fully female, restricted within those cis-centered hegemonic ideals of beauty (Miller 127). Again, the one exception to this physical representation is that of *Transparent*, as moreover the only character of these series that is played by a cisgender white male. Therefore, authenticity of experience and representation is portrayed as that of passing through the transgender bodies of the actors playing these characters.

Body image and presentation of the gendered self are inherently tied to the transgender identity, as the performance of gender becomes that of the culturally defined male or female body. The physical presentation of self therefore becomes linked with the identification of gender and the associated body image. When self-presentation does not meet the perceived image of the “ideal self,” the individual is at risk of mental health disorders such as depression, low self-esteem, body dysmorphia, and anxiety (see Becker and Hamburg; Bissell and Rask; Rield, Camargo and Taylor; Harrison and Cantor; Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner). In comparison to the cisgender norm, the transgender community is at higher risk within this identification through the added pressures of marginalization and minority stress compiled with the pressures of passing within day to day life in order to minimize transphobic and anti-trans responses (see Budge, Andelson and Howard; House, Van Horn and Coppeans; Morris and Galupo; Testa, Habarth and Peta; Testa Michales and Bliss). According to Ezra R. Morris and M. Paz Galupo, “transgender individuals experience greater body dissatisfaction than their cisgender counterparts has been suggested by previous research, although it is unclear whether such body dissatisfaction is attributable to trans-specific experiences, such as gender dysphoria, or general factors such as weight concerns”(2). Within their 2019 study, Morris and Galupo found that those who identify as transgender have much lower self-esteem in relation to body image than their cisgender counterparts (8). In 2016, Brandon Velez, et al. conducted a study of body image and over-exercising habits in transgender men. They found that transgender men often “feel that their bodies fall short of the masculine ideal perpetuated by a sexist, heterosexist, and cissexist (i.e., privileging gender conformity and devaluing gender nonconformity) society” (498). Further research supports the claim that TGD people report higher levels of body dissonance and uneasiness and body image disturbances (see Bandini, Fisher and Castellini; Fisher, Castellini and Bandini; Velez, Breslow and Brewster; Vocks, Stahn and Loesner). Therefore, when looking at the development of what media and television present as the representative body of the transnormative, these representations further deny

those whose bodies do not mirror the specific image of the presented transgender ideal.

The mediated representations of the TGD body fall into the historic tropes of media regulations of female bodies through oversexualization, the “thin ideal,” and the hyper feminizing of these physical representations. These negative body images and dissonance are further exacerbated by mediated reinforcement of the ideal body and the sexualization of the “thin ideal”:

...internalization of SSA [sociocultural standards of attractiveness] leads to greater self-objectification, which manifests behaviorally through body surveillance, or persistent monitoring of how one’s body looks rather than how it feels, functions, or performs. Persistent body surveillance decreases body satisfaction and increases body shame because of the nigh-impossibility of meeting society’s rigid standards of attractiveness. Greater body dissatisfaction, in turn, promotes disordered eating and other negative mental health outcomes. (Velez, Breslow and Brester 498)

The sexual objectification of the transgender body, and the reinforcement of the feminized gender ideal, puts transgender people at higher risk of low self-esteem and body dysmorphia as their physical selves and identities do not match those presented on the screen. This disconnect between screen and reality has the potential to lead to eating disorders, self-mutilation and self-harm, and higher risks of suicidal ideation.

In examining the mediated image of the transgender identity, it is important to recognize and examine the ways in which these representations further enforce upon viewers the “thin ideal,” and traditional hegemonic definition of feminine beauty. Through the singular image and narrative of the ideal thin woman presented by the media, the feminine ideal of beauty has continued to decrease in waist size (Owen and Laurel-Seller 979). This specific body shape represents an unhealthy and unattainable size for most women, creating a sense of inadequacy and incompetence through an inability to achieve this particular image (Bissell and Rask 650). Thinness has become the “culturally conditioned” idea of perfection through these persistent images on public screens (Pipher 78). Brooks and Hébert explain that “feminine beauty [is] constrained to light skin, straight hair, thinness, relative youthfulness, and middle-class status” (300). Thinness, along with lighter skin, relative youthfulness, and overall passing figure of femininity become

emblematic of what it means to be a cisgender women, and, furthermore, of transwomen.

Through the rhetorical analysis of the new transgender character Nia Nal in *Supergirl*, this paper finds that these mediated definitions of feminine beauty are placed upon the transgender character. *Supergirl*, in relation to the previously aired transgender representations, presents the transgender-ideal as that of the cisfemale ideal. The actors themselves adhere to the ideals of beauty through their physical embodiment of the cis body image ideal, creating a sense of authenticity of identity behind the characters and of what becomes the hegemonic definition of the transgender body.

Rhetorical Bodies: The Embodiment of Performance

As transgender representation continues to increase, the bodies of the transgender actors and characters themselves become sites of rhetoric through the discursive elements of authenticity and the embodied construction of social realities. Celeste Condit asserts that “the human body is a medium with specific properties that drive and shape discourse both in the moment and through time” (387). The body is in and of itself rhetorical when presented on public screens and television as it shapes the social identification of the normative body. Kevin DeLuca explains that, “Bodies are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what they mean in particular contexts” (12). In defining bodies as rhetorical, the actors’ physical personifications of their characters move the character away from abstract into a lived experience. Within the contexts of media representation, the physical bodies within popular media exemplify the hegemonically constructed image of these bodies, and thereby what becomes defined as the acceptable othered body. In other words, as marginalized communities are represented on screens, these representations dictate the dominant understanding of the “correct” embodiment of these identities, especially for audiences that have not encountered these communities (*Black Sexual Politics*). Regarding TGD bodies, Capuzza and Spencer explain:

Examining both the quantity and quality of transgender television depictions is important because media construct, reinforce, and challenge existing social definitions of gender. Invisibility, stereotypical representation, and assimilation of transgender people in the media can

contribute to the public's lack of understanding or acceptance of this population [...] Additionally, these representations have the potential to influence how transgender people see themselves, which can exacerbate internalized transphobia. (215)

This means that the bodies represented onscreen become emblematic of what not only is constructed as the hegemonic ideal of TGD identity, but furthermore reinforce within the TGD community itself what is and is not beautiful. As stated above, body image is tied to the embodied representations onscreen, as these images become the cultural ideal.

These embodied characters not only effect TGD communities, but furthermore reinforce hegemonic dictations of the gender binary. Susan Stryker explains that the basis of transgender identity stems from the restrictions of societal gender norms and the strict gender binary, and thereby the issues restricting transgender identity are strongly linked with feminist movement goals of gender equality and freedom of the body. The embodiment of TGD body image is therefore further problematized through the ways in which it reinforces the gender binary on both TGD identity as well as within hegemonic culture as a whole. These gender restrictions dictate the bodies that are acceptable and unacceptable within the dominant social culture. Sim Butler and Kim Bissell explain, "the pressures to classify and order bodies, and therefore offer access, be it literal or symbolic, to some and not to others, highlight the struggles between social constructions and self-determination" (240). Gender identification and the embodiment of that gender thereby dictates who is accepted within the dominant culture and who is denied entry. Furthermore, through the representation and assertion of hegemonically denied and erased identities, the bodies themselves have the power to become a form of resistive rhetoric in breaking down social constructs of normative identities and representations, or further reinforcing those normative stereotypes and regulations. As Butler and Bissell explain, "hegemonic constructions create, through discourse, the arbitrary binaries of normal and abnormal [...]. As these constructed labels are based on abstractions, they are often justified, policed, and articulated within social discourse" (233).

Moving toward the performativity of the body, Michelle Holling and Bernadette Calafell state that the body and identity are tied to cultural performance. These cultural performances have the power to remake and deconstruct dominant restrictions on identity and thereby reconstruct the social norms: "Exemplifying the

performative elements of identity and the body, are cultural performances [...]. Cultural performances, thus, serve as a basis for personal and social identities” (61). However, when media representations restrict and narrowly focus these embodied performances, they can serve, rather, to reinforce preconceived notions and stereotypes of identities that exist outside of the dominant norm. The depicted body and associated identity become emblematic to the physical performance and representation of narrative, as they further construct what is perceived as culturally correct (Pérez and Goltz). This narrative of identity develops through the representations of these identities within the societal public screens, or public discourse as generated through media and screen culture (Deluca, Sun and Peeples). Furthermore, through the personal identities of the actors within these identities, the “performed or embodied narratives offer the ‘performance of possibilities’ as spaces that highlight the importance of a historical voice wedded to experience” (Holling and Calafell 61). The lived experiences of the actors themselves become married to the identity of the character, furthering an element of perceived authenticity in these representations as the embodied TGD normative.

Through the theoretical framing of bodies as resistive rhetoric in relation to media constructed body image, the bodies of Nia Nal in *Supergirl* and other transgender representations become sights of conflict working to both reinforce and resist hegemonic dictations of gender identity. The personification of the transgender superhero reasserts an otherness to the character herself outside of her transgender identity. She can embody a marginalized identity of supernatural in relation and direct correlation to her transgender identity. This othering allows discussions of marginalized identity both from the perspective of an intersectional TGD identity as she is able to discuss her superpower, alien heritage, and her gender identity as elements that stigmatize and separate her from the hegemonic norm. Through this character representation, Nal’s body becomes a sight of this same conflict within the definition of representation, as she is both a new and innovative character of TGD identity, while still playing into the physical embodiment of the hegemonic construct of female beauty and identity.

Analysis: The Performativity of Female

Gender identity and performance are inherently tied to TGD representation. J. Butler explains that in regard to gender performance, performativity “is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability

of highly invested terms” (“Critically Queer” 28). Performance in this instance is dictated by hegemonic culture and social constructs enforced upon the individual body as gender labels and expectations. These underlying hegemonic currents of signification manifest through the interpretations of gender and gendered identity. Through an analysis of Nia Nal’s gender performance and physical embodiment of the gender binary as representative of transgender authenticity of identity, two elements of her interactions emerge: Nal’s physical representation and image, and her identification as female. Through these categorizations of emergent gender identity, the tensions of positive deconstruction and negative hegemonic reinforcement of the gender binary develop. Throughout this series, Nal’s performance and interactions with other characters demonstrate the duality of representing an under-represented character within hegemonic constructs of acceptability. What this means is that Nal’s character falls into the hegemonic constructs of gender performance, specifically within the performativity of female. This construct reinforces dominant ideals of feminine beauty and the TGD identity throughout the series, imposing a specific body image and body ideal on both the identity of female, and the transgender and gender diverse.

In approaching this artifact, the first iterative gender categorization comes through the physical representation of Nal’s identity and image. Throughout the series, Nal is presented as purely feminine in dress, style, and body type. The first time the series introduces Nia Nal to viewers, she is wearing a green flowery dress, with high heels, long flowing brown hair, pink stylized makeup, and she is babbling to the main character Kara Zor-El, Nal’s new boss (“American Alien”). Immediately, the series sets the tone for Nal’s femininity, marking her as purely female in hyperfeminine style and through her identification and connection with Zor-El. At the end of their first meeting, Zor-El makes the comment of how scary it is to see her younger self so exactly emulated in Nal. Furthermore, Nal sets up her understanding and deep connection to personal presentation of self through fashion and clothing, stating “What we choose to wear tells a story about who we are. Whether you wear black and leather or pastels and silk, you’re creating an inner version of yourself whether you realize it or not” (“American Alien” 00:14:00-00:15:31). This statement harkens directly back to Butler’s constructions of performativity as the ways in which Nal chooses to present herself directly dictate how she would like to be perceived by her colleagues and plays into the cultural constructions of subversive gendered imagery.

While her decision to present as purely female is not in any way a negative, what becomes a negative are the ways in which this identification reinforces the hegemonic understanding of femininity as flowery, pink, and, more importantly, hyper thin and image obsessed. Nal as a character works toward presenting a strong and intelligent woman while falling into the tropes of femininity as thin, long-haired, and babbling. Her physical stature is presented by the series as smaller than that of her female co-stars, and the clothes, hairstyles, and makeup she wears demonstrate a stereotypically feminine figure of tiny waist and fuller (but not too full) hips and breasts. Nal herself, through a constant flow of flowered dresses and heels, demonstrates the iconic feminine figure in bright pink lipstick with a soft spot for the poor and downtrodden. Her female beauty is remarked upon by other characters throughout the series as she goes in and out of maybe dating one of the other alien characters, Brainy. What these visual cues and Nal's own assertion of the personal choices of self-presentation do is work towards erasing Nal's transgender identity and enforcing that of a cisgender pure female identity. Nal's body and how she chooses to represent herself become emblematic of the cisfemale identity and the ability to pass within this identification.

This flowered girly image is not a condemnation of hyper femininity; however, this image demonstrates how these series reinforce a specific gender performance as the authentic transgender identity and experience. In the first episode that Nal is introduced, her TGD identity is unknown and undiscussed within the series. In the second episode of season 4, "Fallout," Nal takes the time to inform her boss of her TGD identity to explain her passion for equal rights and justice for aliens (one of the main plot lines in the series). Her revelation of TGD identity to her boss is clearly not so much for the storyline of the episode, but rather for the sake of the audience to inform them that she is a transgender woman. What is left undisclosed in this specific conversation is that she herself comes from alien heritage. As the discussion with her boss centers on alien rights and alien identity, a disclosure of her alien identity rather than her transgender identity would have made more sense within the context. Instead, the series chose to take this moment and clue the audience in to the fact that Nal is transgender, allowing for a transgender representation that is "palatable" to a cisgender dominant audience, as she fits within the hegemonic constructs of what female should look like.

Nal's demonstration of image choice and physical embodiment of the "desired" gender harken back to the series *Pose*, as the main characters regularly comment upon the desirable figure as that which can pass "like a white woman" ("Pilot"

00:23:28-00:23:47). Similarly, teenager Jazz Jennings underwent weight loss in order to prepare for her bottom surgery. The imagery and narrative surrounding Jennings' weight loss center on finally feeling like her true self not in relation to the gender corrective surgery, but in hitting the target weight that she sees as the ideal (Jennings). The physical bodies of the characters in *Pose*, *Doubt*, *Sens8*, as well as Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner themselves, demonstrate an assertion of the ideal body image upon the TGD body. These representations and filmed experiences establish the TGD ideal as that of passing female in line with the thin ideal and the appropriate dress and presentation. What this does is constrict TGD identity to that of the unidentifiable TGD person. As long as a TGD person has the ability and desire to present as purely female, then he, she, or they will be accepted within the dominant culture. However, if they choose not to or are unable to physically present and portray themselves within these beauty ideals, then they are not in line with the "transnormative" and are further cast out and stigmatized.

Even as her super alter-ego, Dreamer, Nal's female imagery and physique is reinforced through the structuring of her costume and superhero disguise. This outfit specifically emphasizes the feminine lines of her breasts and hips, making them appear larger and more pronounced even than her dresses and heels. This imagery confirms to the audience that although she may be super, she is still a woman. Furthermore, Nal's superhero self falls into the forever trope of a female superhero who puts her hair down in order to fight the bad guys rather than pulling it back to keep it out of her way while fighting. As a result, Nal's long flowing hair becomes a part of her superhero identity, creating a halo around her shoulders, a cloud that moves with her even as she takes down the villains, all the while her pink lipstick is never out of place. Nal's image emulates and reinforces the identification of "real femininity" and gender performance, as she is made acceptable along the gender binary so that audiences can understand and accept her within the hegemonically structured series.

Nal's female identity marker, furthermore, plays a major role in her identity as both alien and transgender, as it frames the genesis for her powers. Nal's alien side of the family has the power of clairvoyance through dreaming that is passed from the mother to the "destined" daughter of each generation. Nal describes her relationship with her family as positive, as her family easily accepted her desire to transition to female from a young age. She explains: "I always knew that I was a girl. My parents were amazing. They always affirmed my authentic self and helped me transition young" ("Blood Memory" 00:8:40-00:9:30). Although her family

accepted and affirmed her identity as female, they still assumed that her mother's powers would pass to Nal's cis-sister, Maeve. When Nal reveals that she has already begun exhibiting clairvoyance in her dreams, her mother immediately apologizes for not considering her sooner saying: "Of course it's you. It had to be you...I'm sorry I was so blind" ("Blood Memory" 00:22:30-00:23:03). Nal's mother immediately accepts the completeness of Nal's female gender and role as daughter, taking responsibility for her lack of thought and understanding of the depths of Nal's identity as daughter and woman. Maeve on the other hand responds angrily and violently against Nal stating: "How did someone like you get the powers? They're supposed to be passed down from mother to daughter, so how did someone like you get them? You're not even a real woman" ("Blood Memory" 00:35:47-00:36:30). This exchange is the first time within the series that someone questions Nal's identity as female, however it is done so within a moment that completely and totally reinforces Nal's identity as daughter and woman as her destiny was always to inherit her mother's matrilineal powers.

Demonstrating Nal's powers through her identity of female reinforces her gender performance as that of the ideal female and allows the producers to dispel the notion that because Nal is transgender she is not a "real" woman. While this notion is positive and a beautiful acceptance of transgender women as authentically female, the lack of diversity in this representation further reinforces that no in-between or other way exists to identify as TGD. Nal's identity as purely female, in relation to the strictly female transgender women in the other series, reinforces the hegemonic understanding that there is either male or female and no in-between, oversimplifying both transgender identity as well as completely ignoring those who do not identify along the gender binary. Therefore, Nal's portrayal and performance of "pure womanhood" not only reinforces hegemonic dictations of femininity and transgender female identity, but furthermore erases and denies those that do not identify within these lines. By using her alien identity in order to assert her female identity, the series articulates Nal as above and outside of the human transgender identity, as she is accepted not only for her ability to pass as female, but as well for her ability to pass as pure human, another common theme within the series.

Although Nia Nal's character portrays her transgender identity through a hegemonic lens of the acceptable body, it is important to recognize that this series also attempts to place Nal in conversation with the larger cultural discussion of transgender identity and rights within the United States. In the same episode that Nal "comes out" about her powers to her family, the opening shot of Nal is in the

women's bathroom as she talks to her sister on the phone ("Blood Memory"). This image, as she works through getting home for a holiday, is a rejection of the denial of transgender rights and identity in mainstream American culture, as a direct reference to the Trump administration's mandate that people use the bathrooms of the gender identified on their birth certificate. In shooting a scene with Nal casually interacting with other women in the bathroom, this episode directly fights against conservative assertions that TGD people are deviant and dangerous and should not be allowed to use bathrooms outside of their birth certificate gender. Although Nal can present fully as woman without suspicion, this scene is a clear statement of why TGD people should be able to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity as she would be visually out of place in the men's bathroom.

However, even within this scene, the ideal gender representation is again reinforced through Nal's unquestionable right to use the women's bathroom, as she can pass completely as hegemonically constructed female. This scene specifically demonstrates how Nal's embodied representation of TGD identity becomes both a sight of resistance and a sight of conforming to hegemonically dictated norms of gender and gender identity. How Nal presents herself, how her identification of female is asserted, and the actual scenes in which the series places her simultaneously work against transphobic political rhetoric, while still placing her within the hegemonically constructed gender identity.

Outside of her family and co-workers, Nal's embodiment of the ideal and desirable TGD identity is reinforced through her roommate, Yvette. Yvette, by assumption, is another transgender woman; however, she does not fall within the same beauty standards of Nal. Rather, the series portrays Yvette as a caricature of a sassy, black, drag queen, with stylized hair and makeup and the continuous catchphrase of "This is my jam!" ("Menagerie" 00:18:30-00:19:20). Yvette is presented solely as a source for comic relief, a character to be laughed at and mocked, serving the purpose purely to make Nal seem more "normal" and "desirable" in the eyes of her friends and co-workers. Yvette, a large TGD woman of color, always happy with chocolate and making a sassy comment about beauty, sleep, or dancing, serves only to demonstrate the ways in which Nal is the ideal and she is not. She is not a character to be related to or even really noticed except in contrast to other characters, especially in order to make another character feel uncomfortable or out of place. Yvette, therefore, serves purely as a tool through which to construct Nal's hyper femininity and feminine ideal as more relatable and

by contrast the desired TGD identity, making those outside of Nal's identity a source of derision and contempt.

Conclusion

Supergirl continuously affirms and reinforces Nal's femininity through both her physical personification of woman as well as through the elements and scenes that continually mark her as "authentically woman." While this character addresses a much-needed misconception and denial of transgender women as women in general, this also presents a transgender character through the lens of body performance within the "acceptable" different. Her characterization portrays the hegemonic ideal image of woman as hyper thin, long haired, and culturally beautiful as demonstrated through both her fashion choices as well as the assertion of her female identity and beauty by other characters.

This dictation of hegemonic constructions of female beauty places further pressure upon a community of people who are already at higher risk of mental health disorders such as body dysmorphia as well as minority stress disorders. As transgender activists and scholars Che Gossett, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton assert, "Fashion and imagery hold power, which is precisely why the state seeks to regulate and constrain such self-representations to this very day" (xvi). The representation of Nia Nal in conjunction with the other television media representations of TGD identity as female identified further marginalizes and stigmatizes those who do not identify with or can present their gender within the same performance of female and woman. This is important because these representations dictate that the only TGD identities that are deemed acceptable are those who can physically present themselves through the ideal body image of woman, further enforcing the gender binary and unrealistic body images for both cisgender women and TGD people.

Nal and other TGD characters portray a narrow vision of the diversity of TGD identity and the cultural marginalization and oppression associated with it. Through the physical enforcement of the hegemonically acceptable body upon the TGD representations currently present on network television, these series are making a statement of the types of bodies that are deemed worthy of acceptance and those that should continue to be cast out and ignored. By developing Nal as both a TGD character and an alien, the series *Supergirl* filters the issues that Nal faces as a result of her TGD identity through the lens of the alien identity, placing this discussion

further outside of the “real” or “normal.” Therefore, in discussing TGD rights and the difficulties facing these communities, this series denies the reality of their day to day oppression by refocusing the discussion on “alien rights” and “alien identity.” Furthermore, Nal’s TGD identity then becomes further removed from reality as it is inherently tied to both her alien identity and her superpowers. Thus, Nal’s TGD identity is placed in direct correspondence with her alien identity, further denying the realness of TGD identity and refocusing her body as purely female.

These findings are significant as these representations dictate the TGD “acceptable” identity, further stigmatizing and othering those who fall outside of this physical representation. This increased stigmatization increases risk of body dysmorphia, eating disorders and distorted body image, increasing the likelihood of suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders associated with minority stress and discrimination of those who identify as TGD (see Bissell and Rask; Budge, Adelson and Howard; Field, Camargo and Taylor; Harrison and Cantor; Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner). Not only does this body image contribute to the development of the TGD hegemonically dictated ideal body image, but it further reinforces the gender binary and how gender identity is defined by the cisgender dominant culture.

These strict iterations of the gender binary not only affect those who identify as TGD, but also cisgender people, especially women, as they reinforce unhealthy imagery of the “thin ideal” and gender roles of the female as pink, long haired, and soft hearted. Nal’s association of “pure female” in conjunction with the portrayals of other transgender female characters in popular television series, reinforces stereotypes of femininity and the female gender role as these characters play into the soft-spoken, often flippant, babbling, and clothing obsessed image of the stereotypical woman. These images increase the likelihood of eating disorders and body dysmorphia in TGD people and ciswomen further bolstering the hegemonic declaration that to be a “real woman,” transgender or not, means to look like these characters. The physical representations and bodies of these characters act rhetorically to enforce the hegemonic image of the “perfect woman.” While the character of Nia Nal is not an inherently negative portrayal of TGD identity, the physical embodiment and body image of Nal in conjunction with other transgender female characters, creates a narrow image of what it means to be TGD and female in general.

This paper only begins to touch the tip of the iceberg in relation to TGD body image and the stress and health disorders related to body image. *Supergirl* accurately represents the pitfalls of representation of marginalized people as it offers both a breaking of the dominant norm as well as a reinforcement of hegemonic constructs upon marginalized identities. What this study does is identify a need for further work on the dangers of a transnormative body image in relation to mental health and access to affirming care for TGD communities.

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