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RE-PRESENTING IRIS WEST: RACE-BENT BLACK WOMEN IN POST-RACIAL COMIC BOOK ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins in Chapter 1 with an overview of racebending as it exists through the lens of post-racial ideology. The chapter reviews literature addressing the post-racial ideology and the by-product of colorblindness in political and cultural discourse. The context needed to explore the rhetorical complexities of racebending and post-racialism in comic book adaptation is presented in this chapter. Chapter 2 analyzes the character of Iris West alongside Joseph Walderzak's theory of the "heroic damsel" as it relates to recent comic book adaptations and ignores elements of race. Chapter 3 looks at the ways that *The Flash* presents a transgressive character through Iris West's Black depiction despite the series' post-racial orientation. Despite the lack of race discourse on *The Flash*, elements of the series challenge common depictions of Black women in shows similar to the romantic plots of *The Flash.* Chapter 4 looks at theories of affect and counterpublics to establish the foundation of the fandom rhetoric analysis. The chapter analyzes discursive elements of fandom as they exist online in the Iris West Defense Squad through a variety of case studies that showcase the rhetoric of Black women fandoms. Chapter 5 concludes the project by briefly looking at *The Open Up Podcast's* episode that features an interview with Candice Patton as she shares about her experience on *The Flash*. The chapter is a discussion about the consequence of *The Flash's* post-racial depiction of Iris West, especially considering the on-set treatment of Candice Patton.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Six years after the beginning of "The Flash," *TV Guide* released an article entitled: "The Flash Finally Realized Iris West Is Black, and Now the Show Is the Best It's Ever Been." The article celebrated the brief nods the series had made in acknowledging Iris West as a Black character. It noted further that a cookout scene in the season seemed to have "Black" cultural foods in the background and that the lead actress, Candice Patton, was allowed to wear her natural hair in one episode of the show. The addition of a new Black showrunner, Eric Wallace, caused the author of the *TV Guide* article, Keisha Hatchett, to suggest that these moments were a sudden realization that the character of Iris the show had built was a Black woman and, in Hatchett's view, this realization elevated the show automatically (Hatchett). While the elements of Blackness in season six were refreshing after so many years of complete colorblindness, it was insufficient. To put Blackness in the background after so many seasons of neglect is not the transformation that Hatchett seemed to indicate. Small, arguably performative moments of Blackness do not compare to what is now eight seasons of Black invisibility, with Iris West (and, by default, Candice Patton) at the subject of that neglect.

In this thesis, I contend that the acknowledgment of Blackness as only a backdrop in televised versions of superhero serials is part of a post-racial ideology of colorblindness that continues the abuse and neglect of characters, the actors that portray them, and the fans of the comic book genre. Fans and media outlets have encouraged the comic book genre to diversify and expand the repertoire for adaptation, but the genre is not known for incorporating new

characters into these stories. The main characters often remain white and male, and many supporting characters, like love-interests and friends of the heroes, are "race-bent" to accommodate modern appeals for inclusion.

II. FOCUS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Racebending has a long and complicated history that I will explore later in this thesis, but, put simply, the term racebending is used in recent academic and popular literature to describe a media strategy that "changes the race or ethnicity of a character" from its prior identity to a different identity (Racebending in Cinema). I am particularly interested in how the fantasy genre that revolves around comic books changes white female love-interests with long histories in the comic books to Black women for live adaptations of films and television. In recent years, both the television and screen versions of Iris West (*The Flash*) have cast Black women: Candice Patton and Kiersey Clemmons. Likewise, Laura Harrier and Zendaya have played Spiderman's love-interests as Liz Allen and MJ Watson. Other Black women have been cast in roles like *Starfire* on DC's *Titans* (Anna Diop), and, outside of the love-interest role, the most recent adaptation of Batwoman is played by Javacia Leslie. While I appreciate aspects of all of these characters in their respective adaptations, changing long-existing white women characters to Black women without also implementing significant changes to the foundations of the character, their motives, and their histories leads to misrepresentation. This thesis will demonstrate that the original design of these characters expresses an explicit white womanhood that simply changing that character's race, e.g., "racebending," does not disrupt. In fact, racebending may reinforce rather than remove many of the problems that haunt comics in their various mediated forms.

To study the rhetorical practice and consequences of racebending in the popular culture texts of comic book characters, I will focus on the character of Iris West. Iris West, also known in her story's canon as Iris West-Allen, is a fictional character in comic books and television series devoted to *The Flash*. The CW network's *The Flash* was the first iteration of *The Flash* to portray Iris West as a woman of color, specifically a Black woman, played by the actress Candice Patton. Prior to the show's television release, Iris West had been a white woman, beginning with the story's conception and her debut in 1956 (Betancourt). Iris West began her career as the love-interest of Barry Allen, the Flash, who is consistently portrayed as a white male in both the comic book mythos and modern adaptations of both television and film. Although the West character is the girlfriend and eventual spouse of the Flash, she has also been portrayed in various storylines as a journalist, superhero team leader, friend, mother, and daughter. In her current incarnation as a Black woman, she does not possess fantastical abilities, but she is portrayed as a powerful figure, representing the strength of humanity throughout the show. *The Flash*, which appears on the CW network, is currently airing its eighth season, providing me with a generative pool for analysis throughout the series.

My thesis engages both public and academic discussions of diversity and representation in comic book adaptations. Although there is a great deal of debate about the representation of diverse races, genders, and sexualities among the consumers of comic book franchises, which has occasionally been referenced in academic research, the role and significance of Black women within the genre are understudied. A study of Iris West and, especially, how the racebending process of turning West from a white female character into a black female character provides an important amendment to the current scholarship of comics and representation. In particular, I argue that establishing the adapted version of Iris West as a race-bent character without

acknowledging or exploring Black culture, expression, or experience undermines expressions of Blackness and intersectional Black womanhood. In short, the CW representation of Iris West participates in and reflects post-racial and colorblind ideologies that are part of the comic book genre more generally. By extending academic research that examines post-racialism and colorblindness in media, I argue that it is possible to understand the consequences of recent racebending activities in the comic book genre. This analysis of a race-bent, Black woman character featured on television will provide me with an opportunity to critique one example of post-racialism through ideological and theoretical rhetorical observation. Further, examining this character will allow me to formulate their fictional experience alongside experiential, ontological, and epistemological expressions of Blackness based on reality. As we build a greater understanding of popular culture and the sub-category of comic book adaptation, we expand our ability to engage in robust discussions surrounding modern appeals toward film and television representation and its consequence.

III. MODERN COMIC BOOK ADAPTATIONS, HISTORIES OF EXCLUSION, AND THE FLASH

A study of *The Flash's* Iris West sustains a rich potential to utilize a variety of recent theories of race, culture, and representation through the overarching framework of post-racialism and the colorblindness that pervades modern media. *The Flash* is both the name of a character and the title of a comic adaptation on the CW network, originally airing in 2014. Diversity is a feature of this series, as the majority of "team *Flash*" are people of color. Despite this diversity, the show chooses to avoid matters of race in any significant way throughout the franchise. The Flash superhero has taken on many forms, emerging as Jay Garrick, Barry Allen, and Wally

West. The series produced by CW focuses on the Barry Allen incarnation of the Flash. Because Barry Allen is the star and series protagonist, his love life and eventual wife, Iris West, is extremely important to the story that showrunners are attempting to tell. Iris West is, in many respects, an extension of Barry Allen's hero experience.

The superhero genre, which in American popular culture begins in comic books, has a long tradition in American popular culture famous for its reflection of cultural ideology. The comic book genre has an extensive collection of material stretching across episodic comics, graphic novels, cinema, and television. At its best, this genre has told stories that push societal and cultural boundaries. Still, comic books and their characters often reflect harmful ideologies and social forms of oppression. For example, they are famous for a long-standing commitment to the exclusive advancement of white male cisgender protagonists. The genre's long practice of racial and gender exclusion is especially problematic as it expands to include a wide variety of film and television adaptations. The dominance of the genre's whiteness has roots in white supremacy and traditional ideas of masculinity as the basis of heroism. Black characters exist through the white, Eurocentric cultural gaze, which leads to two significant problems in comic book representation. First, characters who are not white frequently have meaning and importance solely because of their race. Second, characters who are not white exist within the story's arc, but their actual race has no meeting or relevance whatsoever *except* as a marker of skin color (Coogan; Ghee, 232). This strange dualism in which race is everything that matters about a character, or it is nothing more than just the color of a person's skin, illustrates how the superhero genre, in its various adaptations, struggles to portray non-white characters with any complexity or relatable set of experiences.

The commercial power and cultural value of recent comic book adaptations such as the *Avenger* series, movies that feature Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman, or more adult offerings such as *The Suicide Squad* or *Deadpool* are built on the fact that comic books appeal to an already existing audience of fans. The assumed base and caricature of the genre's fans are white men who are middle-aged and disengaged with reality, similar to the depictions in the popular series *The Big Bang Theory,* or children who are experiencing a character for the first time. The "renaissance" of superhero popular culture has certainly expanded the public's interest in these figures and exposed a broader, more diverse fanbase. This genre's initial and continuing importance involves a set of relationships that often reveal a long history between a child or adolescent who embraces a character and then continues to follow that character into adulthood. While this sense of familiarity and even affection has led to a very profitable business and rich cultural history, I argue that new comic book adaptations utilize fan relationships and familiarity to emphasize and sustain stories intertwined with whiteness (Barnard, 75). With the biggest Marvel Comics movie releases grounded in long-appearing white heroes like Spiderman, Thor, and Captain America, we see the power of whiteness not only in narrative form but also in how it structures the affections of fans. "White patriarchal universalism" is just beneath the surface of the genre and limits who can feel celebrated and included through the narratives (Howard and Jackson, 2). The presence and preference of whiteness are especially evident within popular genre tropes, for example, the common narrative of a superhero adaptation that pits a white hero against a Black villain.

As time has progressed and more superhero stories are told through diverse platforms, such as limited series and episodic television shows, there has been more effort for inclusion and race discourse. Today there are even comic books and science fiction stories that showcase race

and America's history. With the CW's adaptation of Black Lightning, HBO's adaptations of *Watchmen,* or even the science fiction series *Lovecraft Country*, we witness network and studio attempts to diversify their portrayals of race and broaden the general audience's understanding of important ideas, periods of history, and topics. While these examples are loosely comparable to *The Flash* through their over-arching genre association, it is important to note that these more recent shows are the exception rather than the rule. Among most comic book adaptations and other media that follow similar formats, race is omitted completely. Much of the superhero and fantasy adaptations of the 2000s and 2010s did not include any Black characters; when they did, they were minor roles.

HISTORY OF RACE BENDING

I wish to elaborate on my introduction to identify and describe the history of racebending and the particular strategies used by the companies that manage supernatural, fantasy, or comic book stories and characters. Racebending is a term and concept that can appear in a multitude of different forms, but the term's origins are in the digital ecology of online commentary and blogs. The term originates from a blog's decision (Racebending in Cinema) to criticize discriminatory casting practices in Hollywood, beginning with the live adaptation of *Avatar, The Last Airbender* (Jenkins). The blog Racebending in Cinema created a website, Racebending.com, to anonymously discuss the project's decision to cast four white actors to play what were assumed to be Asian roles in the animated series. As previously stated, the website defines racebending as "situations where a media content creator (movie studio, publisher, etc.) has changed [or bent] the race or ethnicity of a character." The metaphor of "bending" a character's race evolved from the mythos of the animation in question: *Avatar, The Last Airbender.* One of its main character's

primary skills or powers is the ability to "bend" or control elements (Lopez). In this sense, *racebending* is a trope, a symbolic play on the decision to replace Asian characters with white characters *and* a critique of that decision as something akin to magic.

Thus, the original intent of the term racebending was not positive. It was a critique leveled against the creators of the *Avatar* movie and, especially, the film's producers' belief that the movie would be financially successful only if they recast Asian characters with white actors. In short, racebending originated as a way to label racism. Media and cultural scholar, Lori Kido Lopez, expands this definition, establishing that racebending as a strategy is "more than simply changing the race of a character: it is changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability" (433).

The term racebending remains prevalent in discussions of fandom and adaptation to this day, but the connotation and meaning of the term have changed. It has been inverted. Rather than replacing characters of color with white actors, racebending has become the strategy of replacing white characters with actors of color. In many respects, fans are responsible for this shift in strategy. Using Tumblr.com, fans began to express their longing for diversity within their favorite stories in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Elizabeth Gilliland discusses the phenomena of racebending in terms of fan engagement and rhetorical invention. She discusses racebending as an act by fans to "cast" their preferred actors for live adaptations of existing comic book stories. In his article, "Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending," Henry Jenkins articulates racebending as a concept in line with fan poaching. Essentially, he argues that fans take from characters or stories what they need even when the official creators of a comic or live adaptation do not attempt to represent diversity in their media. Jenkins argues that within the

comic book genre, fans of color have a history of negotiating their identities through their creative engagement and alteration of characters, plots, and traditional comic book styles. Because fans of color are often ignored in the stories, fans engage and share online narratives that place their favorite actors of color in the stories they love.

Racebending has now moved from comic book culture among dedicated and often Black fans of the genre to the boardrooms of Hollywood. For various reasons including, but not limited to, fans' demands for racial diversity and the perceived marketability of shows that seem inclusive, the executives who control major animation properties have allowed directors and showrunners to "racebend" long-standing, established characters. But whereas, according to Miller and Worlds, racebending among fans "seeks to identify, amplify, and center marginalized voices," the motives of Marvel or DC and the consequences of how they implement or enact the strategy of racebending are less clear. Miller and Worlds describe the racebending inventions of fans as a kind of rebellion against white supremacy within media and the control of corporations over stories and characters they love. But while racebending can provide opportunities to resist the power dynamics of film, media, and online forums, Miller and Worlds acknowledge that the race-bent characters created by corporations exist as forms of racial capitalism—filling voids for racial diversity but undermining the push for substantive change in the genre. In this study, I intend to study racebending as *both* a form of racial capitalism designed solely for the purposes of enlarging the media market and as a mode of creative, rhetorical invention used by fans to negotiate their relationships with the media they love and their own identities as people of color.

The Flash's Iris West is an example of racebending that illustrates the intersection of race and gender in contemporary attempts to make comic book adaptations more diverse and inclusive. The comic book genre has had a difficult time presenting multi-dimensional women,

typically creating "damsels in distress" that pander to the white-male desire for male heroes and traditionally subservient women. At times, similar to its history with race, female characters are entirely invisible outside of the male character's "use" for them (Dunne, 9; Hunt). The comic book genre often diminishes the agency of female characters by advancing storylines that lessen women's roles and inflate men's importance. The stories promote limiting notions of "what women are and what they can become" (Brown and Louck). This trend disrupts the audience's ability to view women as "whole" beings, typically relying on overwhelming vulnerability and devaluing intellect and strength. As Black women are people who exist at several intersections of society, there are major gaps in adaptations that address them as intersectional. As the genre slowly evolves across its multi-mediated forms today, it has altered the representation of women in adaptations, but this evolution has not included Black women. That is, the intersectional spaces of race/gender are not relevant dimensions of the plot or character development. In many respects, the characterization of Black women in the new adaptations seems analogous to the historical representation of white female characters from the 1950s and 1960s.

The comic book genres' attempts to be more inclusive, through the practice of racebending, have allowed them to diversify demographically. However, I argue in my thesis that this diversification transpires within a "colorblind" sensibility that undermines the attempt to create inclusivity and equity. Further, their efforts are complicated by the fact that they are simultaneously well-intentioned as a commitment to racial inclusion and facile due to the fact that they are economically driven. Nevertheless, these trends do have lasting consequences. For example, there is a real tension between attempts to diversify casts and plots and the more general expectation that comic book adaptations be "familiar." After all, most of the adaptations today involve characters that have existed for many decades within a comfortable white

landscape. This tension may help explain the move toward racebending. Since there have been limited attempts to develop new characters as stories move from their print source material to live-action, the attempt to diversify the genre requires that pre-existing characters be recast as non-white characters. One wonders whether this shift, which I contend is complicit with post-racial ideologies across the media landscape, promotes conversations about race, difference, and social experience or makes apathy for and resistance to discussions of race in media and television.

In other portions of media, "colorblind casting," colorblindness, and other race-defying tools have been utilized to project a world outside of real-world personal and social experience. For example, one of the most successful Black showrunners today is Shonda Rhimes, famous for creating shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Bridgerton*, and *Inventing Anna*, among many others. While Rhimes has positively impacted history through her array of content that features people of color, much of her media enforces post-racial ideas through the casting and writing that promotes ideas of meritocracy and a twenty-first century version of Black respectability. In the shows that Rhimes has produced, characters do not need to concern themselves with racism, because every person is able to earn their place "equally." Race is presented as an abstract discourse predominantly centered around historical discussions of the civil rights movement. This discourse normalizes post-racialism as "realistic and desired" (Lambert, 752). People of color on-screen are released from any effects of racism or obligation to their racial identity (Joseph, 309). Ralina L. Joseph discusses the political significance of post-racial ideas within the media, tying the Rhimes' show *Scandal* to Barack Obama's presidency. Joseph explains that through respectability politics and "strategic ambiguity" inspired by the cultural constraints put on both Michelle and Barack Obama, Rhimes created a new "blueprint"

for what diversity looks like on television (316). That diversity is characterized by wealth, mainstream standards of beauty, and a very traditional sense of success and merit.

This thesis will use several of the insights provided by Joseph to understand how post-racialism operates in our contemporary media culture. Specifically, Joseph argues that Rhimes has created a model that other showrunners follow. In this model, Black women have significant roles within the context of a television series; however, they always operate within an interracial environment that excludes any, or many, Black friends. The characters seem to transcend the experience of race and, especially, racism as it exists within and across Black communities. Finally, the power and influence of these characters as Black people are masked by their exceptional nature compared to the average person. They are, in other words, above average and, therefore, unrepresentative of any racial group or community (316). I think this model applies directly to both the rhetorical style and the increased diversity content within comic book adaptations such as *The Flash.* It may be no coincidence that the media climate of *Scandal* and President Obama eventually produced *The Flash* in 2014.

I would like to now identify a second issue that this thesis will address. So far, I have identified the representation of Black female characters in comic book adaptations as a problem worthy of rhetorical analysis and research. Independent of the intentions of their portrayals or the consequences of their characterization, the actors who are asked to engage in racebending endure racial discrimination, abuse, and even violence from fans and other sources in the "real world." It is remarkable and, perhaps, ironic that even with the post-racial forms and content described above, the racial identity of the actors becomes an enormously powerful catalyst for debate and controversy, especially in online communities.

The Flash was subject to controversy before it aired due to the casting of Candice Patton in February 2014. Consistent with perceptions of the genre, men control most comic book fan culture, commonly referred to as a "fandom." Even before the first episode, Candice Patton encountered relentless instances of harassment, illustrating the intersectional oppressions that the comic book genre makes possible. For example, fans repeatedly claimed that her casting undermined the traditional standards and culture of comic books; however, the traditions mentioned by fans in online posts, editorials, and blogs were traditions that rest squarely in racism and sexism (McCough). Recalling early fan engagement to her casting, Patton states that death threats and slurs were common as she broke into the genre (anakinspatton). In other interviews, she reports that an executive of the CW told her to stay offline after her casting announcement due to the anticipated and subsequent backlash (Bonmolo). Discussions of her treatment in the news media at the time were typically brief and free from "accusatory" language that might make white readers uncomfortable; nevertheless, the hostile reactions of fans demonstrated that, in fact, the viewers of *The Flash* were not colorblind. They not only saw color but they were also offended by it.

The character of Iris West in the CW production series, *The Flash* is a rhetorical figure that allows me to examine ideas of post-racialism and colorblindness within popular culture. Thus, theories and modes of critique that are a part of post-racial analysis comprise the primary framework for this study. Race-bent into a Black woman, Iris West is an intersectional figure who evokes affect in many people but often with divergent results. For white male fans of the genre, Iris West is a problem, an articulation of difference that makes them uncomfortable. For long-time fans of the genre who are Black, Iris West is a welcome representation of identities that have been excluded from comic books or films of the past. As we look at the recent moves

of a consistently delayed genre to include more diverse representations of characters, it is vital to acknowledge the CW*'s* Iris West as a potentially progressive shift in the midst of harmful and limiting ideology.

IV. MEDIATED AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS OF POST-RACIALISM IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Rhetoric and media critics of the "post-racial" ideology are focused on its false claim that modern society has somehow transcended or moved beyond ideas of race and, especially, the identity politics that sometimes characterizes race's recognition. Further, post-racialism is prescriptive; it insists that race *should* no longer be considered important to society. Catherine Squires states that the term "post-racial" reflects society's hopes and fears regarding race, positioning race as a "social construct, not a constituent element of humanity" (Squires, 5). The ideology of post-racialism presents a reality that rejects and, therefore, undermines the lived experience of marginalized people. Black people continue to fight to make themselves heard against the loud apathy expressed within the American political space. In Squires's book *The Post-Racial Mystique*, media is a pivotal method by which this ideology spreads into our cultural norms.

In his article, "Post racism: A theory of the 'Post' as a Political Strategy," Kent Ono describes the prevalence of post-racism during and after Obama's election:

> Thus, even as I would argue that post-racism is pervasive, cutting across media formats and socially stratified institutions, and therefore is already in many ways naturalized, having become part of the landscape of cultural politics in the United States, it is not

> impossible to change, nor does it remain immune to critique and rearticulation; nor is it a monolith, able to maneuver and undermine in every instance (Ono, 232).

There is no place where society can avoid this outlook as it has become the foundational perspective in the United States for those who seek to avoid or "minimize" racism (228). The strategies to promote post-racism are ever multiplying due to multi-modal platforms that expand their reach. This thesis affirms that post-racialism is not a stagnant idea that only reveals itself through politics but an immersive and delusional ideology that desires to silence marginalized voices within America at any cost. Both Ono and Squires allude to how the media have adopted this ideology, but the idea that the post-racial ideology is "naturalized" into society's political makeup through the media is foundational for this project. This project seeks to understand how entertainment articulates a form of post-racism that binds and silences Black women, Black characters, and Black fans.

Intertwined with post-racial perceptions is the principle of colorblindness that makes excuses for maintaining the current socio-political power dynamics that benefit dominant white groups. Colorblindness or "colorblind racism" is defined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as a racial ideology that is an "extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in 'raceless' explanations for all sorts of race-related affairs" (1364). The liberalism he refers to is the post-racial sentiments that diminish marginalized groups' experiences with racism to comfort the white majority. Utilizing the above discourse of post-racialism and colorblindness, I will establish these ideas within the context of Black women characters in comic book adaptations. Through analysis of CW*'s The Flash*, I plan to argue that the decision to race-bend the character of Iris West is a decision born from the colorblind, post-racial mindset.

Two Dimensions to Post-racialism

The most pivotal dimensions of post-racialism to consider in the conception of this project are, first, the political context of a post-racial moment in 2008 and, second, a mediated cultural production of post-racialism that occurred around the same time. In much of the political discourse surrounding Barack Obama, his Blackness was metaphorical proof of racism's end. In a *Washington Post* article entitled, "Why Obamamania? Because He Runs as the Great White Hope," David Greenberg explains Obama's popularity as a refection of post-racial desire among white voters. When Barack Obama became the President of the United States, the explicit presence of a Black President indicated America's successful transformation into a more equitable society. To Greenberg, Obama represents an opportunity for white Americans to discard the "shameful past" of racism and, instead, embrace a nominally Black leader who could service as proof that Dr. King's famous dream had become a reality. President Obama was widely recognized as America's first Black President, but in another sense, his experience as a Black man was deemphasized. For much of the election, Obama was discussed without any connection to race; consequently, "the realm of whiteness" remained intact (Love and Tosolt, 22). In this respect, Obama was an ironic figure. His Black body was proof that Black individuals could properly assimilate to white culture and society, but in that assimilation, what remained were the norms of a white political culture that no longer needed to be transformed.

To understand the post-racialism embodied by Barack Obama's reception more fully, it is useful to compare it to Michelle Obama's reception as a distinctly Black woman. In contrast to Barack Obama, Michelle Obama became a problem for post-racial politics because her

Blackness was more obvious and overt. Criticism of Michelle Obama was more often tied to the presumption that she represented an angry Black woman archetype. Michelle Obama threatened white perception of what a First Lady "should" be, and in the media she was attacked for both her race and gender despite Barack Obama's neoliberal, post-racial appeals (Meyers and Goman, 22). This situation was not confined to the 2008 election. Throughout the Obama presidency, post-racialism is both projected onto Barack Obama and perpetuated by him through various messaging, while, for Michelle Obama, the presence of race remained a problem for the administration's critics. Michelle Obama did not benefit from Barack Obama's post-racial orientation, despite her accommodation of the post-racial unity emphasized at the time. Though these two representations created complications for Obama throughout his presidency, they also provided the President with the support of individuals attracted to the idealistic unity imagined in a post-racial society. Any benefits received from Barack Obama's perpetuation of post-racialism do not seem to benefit Michelle Obama. Barack Obama emerged from the post-racial ideology as a bearer of the American Dream and promised, while Michelle Obama's intersectional identity seems to threaten the post-racial imaginary (Madison, 321).

Within the post-racial imagination, Obama becomes the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream—the fruit of a patriarchal, integrative Civil Rights Movement. Further, Barack Obama creates a new political scene, affirming the country's national goodness and confirming the end of systemic racism. On the campaign trail and throughout his presidency, the Obamas are seemingly united in their efforts for a unified America, but Michelle Obama is not received warmly by the media. Michelle Obama interrupts idealistic discussions of race in America with

her presence. In addition to race, Michelle reveals the intersecting oppressions of gender and class. We can see this tension in the rhetoric surrounding Michelle Obama's characterization of motherhood and family care. Despite multiple media events that portray Michelle Obama in traditional gender roles, criticism of her as overly aggressive and controlling was common. Like many Black women before her, Michelle Obama seemed to have relatively little control over how she was received (Madison, 321).

Though Barack Obama represents well how post-racialism operates in political discourse, this project is focused on how post-racialism operates culturally in modern forms of media entertainment. The television show *Scandal* bridges the post-racial ideology's political and cultural effects by demonstrating its application to media entertainment. Within Scandal, any progressive depictions of Olivia Pope as a Black woman must war with the post-racial ideology, which strips the story of all modern race discourse. Olivia Pope is seen as a marker of racial progress because she is a Black woman, but any sense of progressivism is based solely on the casting and physical depiction in the media. The attempt to commodify Black women in media desires the benefits of Black women's fanbase support and positive discussions surrounding Black representation without a commitment to robust Black expression.

The character of Iris West builds upon the media's depictions of the post-racial ideology we see in *Scandal*. The recognition of her race through racebending amidst the post-racial ideology presents that her race has to do with anything other than a marker of "progress." The whiteness presented in superhero media, like *The Flash,* feigns inclusivity by ignoring its biases and prejudices. The white superhero exists in a post-racial world to embrace whiteness, and

whiteness becomes the "greater good" of everyone in society, including people of color. In a sense, casting Black women in these roles is a televised expression of the colloquial phrase, "I have Black friends—" there is no commitment to a presentation of Blackness and Black womanhood with any complexity or nuance. Racebending, in this sense, becomes a political and cultural strategy to cement the post-racial ideology in recent comic book adaptations.

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As stated previously, the primary artifact for this study is the character of Iris West as she is presented in the CW*'s* adaptation of *The Flash*. While the character has appeared as a Black woman in print sources and will continue to be Black in the *DC* film premiering in late 2022, the CW*'s* depiction provides one of the first and most detailed storylines among the recent media incarnations of the West character. This character is present in every season of the continuing series as a supporting character to the main protagonist, The Flash, which makes her character useful to this study.

In short, I believe that within the comic book genre, the post-racial ideology has weaponized appeals to "diversify" the media through the rhetorical and media strategies of racebending. Although Iris West is no longer a white woman, the racism and misogynoir that permeates our world still extend to and through her fictional space. The failure of the series to acknowledge her Blackness reinforces to viewers that whiteness is the center of *every* universe,

supernatural or otherwise. To accomplish the analysis of Iris West in my thesis, I will seek answers to three research questions:

R1: How does racebending on *The Flash* reflect post-racial, colorblind ideologies, undermining robust and varied expressions of Blackness and the lived intersectional experiences of Black womanhood in the United States?

R2: How is Iris West rhetorically transgressive in comic book adaptation, and does that transgressive move resist the post-racial ideologies that dominate US media culture?

R3: How does representation and, especially, racebending in all of its forms evoke affect among Black women who are fans and engage in the culture of fandom?

Ultimately, I plan to answer these questions using rhetorical criticism and discuss the consequences of Iris West's characterization relative to the broader comic book genre and superhero adaptations.

IV. PURPOSE / RATIONALE OF STUDY

While the topic of Black women in comic book adaptation is culturally significant within American popular culture, it has seldom been studied by scholars of rhetoric. Across the board, there is a lack of material about the role of supporting characters and how they often reinforce hegemony on-screen. While some scholars have discussed topics like racebending and fandom or with love-interests, there is a need for a more in-depth study of the rhetorical significance of racebending when tied to cultural ideologies. Iris West is an occasionally studied figure who is

pivotal to the genre, paving the way for other Black women, and more sustained engagement is needed with this topic to understand the need for adequate representation in comic book adaptations. My hope is that this thesis will enhance the research literature within the interdisciplinary study of comic books and comic book adaptation.

While comic books are infamous for the stigma that pervaded the genre from its inception in print, this stigma continues into perceptions of recent adaptations in both television and film. In addition to the devaluation of comic books and popular culture among rhetorical critics, there is a stigma specific to the CW and the adaptations they produce. Specifically, the shows that CW has released so far are often "campier" than the major motion pictures produced for Marvel or DC. Their production value is far less than what you would see in theatres, and their plots are often overly dramatic. *The Flash* features a relationship-driven adaptation of the character that is joyful, light-hearted, and energetic. In some respects, these features have distinguished *The Flash* from hit superhero films such as *The Avengers* and shows like *Arrow* (Kain). The demographic market that CW seems to be targeting with *The Flash* is different, perhaps because the CW pursues a woman-based audience through their programming.

The CW used to have an almost exclusively female audience before they transitioned into superhero television. In 2017, Mark Pedowitz, the network's President, remarked on The CW's desire to re-attract its female audience. The CW Network was once almost exclusively female, but the addition of multiple superhero series dramatically increased male viewership. Their audience is now 50/50, with their linear age at 47 and their digital age at 25 (Gajewski). These terms distinguish who is watching via the subscription/cable format versus the individuals who

view through the online format (Vinikas; Nielsen). Clearly, there is quite a dramatic age range among the viewers of *The Flash* and how the viewers interact with the program. Although there is a stigma with the network and the media they produce in some circles, the characters they write are pivotal to the genre and, by extension, the field. There is a wealth of media to analyze as the production of superhero serialization is one of the last genres focusing on markets that embrace the long-form television formatting that was more popular when the goal of television was syndication (Nededog). In a broader media world that has reduced most programming to 6 to 13 episodes per season, television seasons on the CW are commonly run between 18 to 23 episodes per season, only recently considering a decrease in the number of episodes. While this allows more time for viewers to build relationships to lead and supporting characters, it can cause fatigue both in audiences and the writers, producers, and actors.

VI. PLAN OF STUDY AND CHAPTER PREVIEW

Chapter 2: **Chained Representation: Iris West, Intersectionality, and the Strategy of Racebending in *The Flash***

Chapter two focuses on racebending as a phenomenon within the comic book genre as it pertains to popular adaptations. As a genre typically dependent upon expressions of white men and masculinity, this chapter will extrapolate the constraints of the genre as it relates to the intersectional identities and experiences of Black women. As race-bent characters typically fail to escape the whiteness of the character's origin, transforming that character into an authentic and multi-faceted Black woman is a difficult task and has presented either harmful stereotypes or the

erasure of Blackness as a distinctive culture and life experience. This chapter will provide the necessary context to set up the study of Iris West and critical concepts related to the study of Black women. Throughout this chapter, I will research perceptions of Black womanhood and the history of intersectionality, using the rhetorical significance of racebending as a tool for representation on screen.

Chapter 3: **Rhetorizing Iris West: Transgressive Black Women in Comic Book Adaptation**

This chapter establishes the variety of ways that Iris West is a transgressive, progressive character, even amid harmful ideologies and stereotypes reinforced through the form and industry of the comic book genre. I will argue that this character is transgressive using theories of transgression and analyzing common expressions of Black womanhood in media. Establishing the history of Black women characters within different spheres of popular culture creates a narrative for the rhetorical significance of Iris West throughout the comic book genre and adaptation. While limited in their reach and effect, the transgressive features of race-bent characters sustain the potential to push the bounds of representation across popular culture.

Chapter 4: **"She noticed you!": Affect, Representation, Acknowledgement, and Response in Black Women Fandoms**

Fans and fan interaction are integral aspects of representation in the comic book genre. This chapter addresses the relationship between the actors that perform the characters of Iris West, the fans who advocate for the progression of the characters, and the stories presented for mass consumption. Layered expressions of Black representation within film and television are

often achieved after external pressure that comes from multiple sources. Expanding on how fans acquire affective ownership of famous characters, I would like to delve into the discursive process of character ownership. The history with Black women characters, including threats and abuse to the actor, creates anxiety surrounding the character. Because the character is Black, they are often treated as disposable, undesired, and, in many instances, eliminated. I would like to investigate how this affects fan relationships and engagement with Iris West and a fan community known as The Iris West Defense Squad. This chapter will build upon personal ethnography and includes discussions at the intersection of digital and comic book fandom.

Chapter 5: **Conclusion and Discussion**

In the conclusion of this thesis, I discuss the consequence of Iris West's character within the genre as it relates to other Black women characters. As previously stated, more Black women characters have been brought into the genre in recent years. Some of the characters have been race-bent, and some were originally Black within comic books but are being adapted for the first time on screen. In many ways, Iris West was an experiment, but through the advocacy from Candice Patton and Black fandom, her character has served the genre positively. The conclusion will provide space to trace the ripples of impact that have spread throughout newer adaptations and ultimately answer two main questions:

D1: What are the rhetorical implications of Iris West within the genre of comic book adaptation, and how does the genre positively evolve past Iris West?

D2: How do racism, post-racism, colorblindness, and racebending (when presented concurrently) ultimately reinforce white supremacy and respectability politics?

Chapter 2

Chained Representation: Iris West, Intersectionality, and the Strategy of Racebending in *The Flash*

In Sony's *The Amazing Spider-Man* 2, the character of Gwen Stacy falls to her death in a clock tower in the final moments of the film due to her superhero-boyfriend's inability to save her. It is not uncommon for superhero love-interests to die in comic book narratives, but the events leading up to Gwen's death articulate a trope in comic book adaptation called the "heroic damsel" (Walderzak) that is especially important to this chapter. Throughout the franchise's films, Gwen is discouraged from helping with any heroics regarding Spider-Man, despite her inclination to assist her partner's endeavors. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* 2, Gwen's death is framed as if it were her fault because it is Gwen's agency and stubbornness to engage in dangerous activities that lead to her demise. Her presence at the clock tower alerts the villain, Harry Osbourne, of Spider-Man's hidden identity. Harry, who was already aware of Peter Parker and Gwen's relationship, uses that new knowledge to reach his revelation. Because of this revelation, Harry decides to attack Gwen in the middle of a fight with Spider-Man, eventually dropping her from the top of a clock tower. Peter fights to save Gwen in these moments, extending his webs to reach her, but Gwen dies. Even today, fans of the *Spiderman* franchise debate whether Gwen's death is due to hitting her head against the ground or if Peter is directly responsible because the webs that were meant to catch her actually break her back.

Gwen Stacy is an interesting example to juxtapose alongside Iris West from CW*'s The Flash* for two reasons. First, *The Amazing Spiderman* franchise is commonly compared to *The*

Flash as they both premiered the same year and included similar heroic archetypes. Secondly, Gwen Stacy presents a narrative of hyper-independence and participates in moments of heroics as much as she can while still being human. Amidst Gwen's heroics, there is a focus on her safety from both Peter Parker/Spiderman and her father, who works in law enforcement. She must balance heroic action and helplessness throughout both *The Amazing Spiderman* films, caught between sexist tropes and postfeminist individualism (51). *The Flash's* Iris West often finds herself in similar positions, reflecting the heroic damsel archetype throughout various storylines in the series. Walderzak's theory suggests that female characters who embody the heroic damsel archetype often find that their characterization within a film or show is contingent on the men with whom they interact. Speaking of Spiderman, Walderzak notes that "Despite all of Gwen's brilliance and resiliency, her tragic murder begs the question as to whether she would have, in fact, been better capitulating to Peter's orders to surrender her agency" (53).

Considering Iris West's position as a heroic damsel alongside her post-racial depiction reflects a culmination of historical events and ideological beliefs. With respect to how *The Flash* portrays her character, Iris West is shaped by the comic book genre's representations of female whiteness. However, with respect to how certain audiences perceive her character, Iris West is an incomplete expression of the lived histories of American Black women. When considering the implications of this conflicting racialization, racebending has the ability to reimagine an already existing character with new considerations. However, when racebending is presented without direct attention to Blackness, as with Iris West's portrayal, the normative whiteness of the genre goes unchallenged for traditional audiences. Instead, we get what Kristin Warner describes as, "dipping white bodies in chocolate," an expression of diversity that prioritizes whiteness

whenever it can and ignores the racialized histories of a change in skin color for the character (257). If there is no alteration to the whiteness which pervades the “original” iteration of the character, whiteness undermines the transformative potential of the race-bent character.

Racebending without character amendment becomes a vehicle for post-racial ideologies. It reinforces the claim that race is little more than an outward appearance and has nothing to do with history, politics, culture, or experience. While casting a Black woman can impact fan communities regardless of the story, there are rhetorical consequences when narratives involving Black characters omit a robust notion of Blackness. Without mention of Blackness, what do the writers and producers “re-present” through casting a Black woman? I argue the goals of these stories are to re-package the comic book genre’s affinity with whiteness through the presentation and storytelling associated with the race-bent character.

This chapter discusses how racebending in “*The Flash*” reflects a white, 3rd wave feminist ideology by casting Iris West as the heroic damsel archetype. When featured alongside a post-racial context and its extension of colorblindness, robust and varied expressions of Blackness and the lived intersectional experiences of Black women in the United States are undermined through Iris West’s presentation.

It is not enough to say that the representation of Iris West in *The Flash* is "color-blind" or that it avoids any recognition of the lived experience of Black women. Those claims amount to a critical argument about absences. What this chapter attempts to do is to articulate West's present characterization to explore the identity inherent to this character as it is portrayed in the series. My argument in Chapter 2 is that the dialogue, plot, and character development of Iris West in *The Flash* follow what Joseph Walderzak calls the "heroic damsel" archetype. This archetype emerges out of the politics of third-wave feminism. It assigns agency to a female character,

presuming her independence, power, and significance, but then the archetype undermines that agency by demonstrating that the female character must be saved. What seems, at first glance, to be a heroic characterization of feminist potentiality is undermined by inherent flaws in the female protagonist, such as crippling insecurity or over-eager, and therefore unwise, decision-making. There are multiple examples of the heroic damsel in third-wave media products; Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Dana Scully in *X-Files*, and Jane Foster from *Marvel's Thor series*. In fact, the heroic damsel has become a staple of comic book characterizations today.

Iris West's characterization in *The Flash* follows this model, but what is especially important in West's case is that by following the heroic damsel in distress archetype, the potential agency and characterization of Black female heroism is displaced. The heroic damsel in distress archetype is steeped in a white form of compromised female agency. Race has little place in this narrative. Moreover, class and sexuality are also excluded. In other words, it is the intersectional lived experience of being a Black Woman in the West that is excluded or displaced by a form of female empowerment that turns out to be little more than the revival of the traditional damsel in a new, modern dress.

The lens of intersectionality allows us to consider the convergence of race and gender to conceptualize the rhetorical repercussions of post-racialism and colorblindness in Black representation. Displays of sexism and interpretations of feminism become the most relevant foci of study as I consider the abundance of possible stumbling blocks for stories involving race-bent Black women. Like many other comic book adaptations, *The Flash* struggles with realizing the sexist tendencies of the genre and often employs common comic book tropes without awareness of the rhetorical implications. The show finds itself warring with the inconsistent treatment of

female characters and inconsistent use of feminist ideology, which present variations of white feminist history but do not account for race or intersectionality.

I will begin the chapter by establishing Iris West within the heroic damsel archetype. Next, I will analyze episode eleven of season three of *The Flash*, "Dead or Alive," to analyze how the heroic damsel archetype frames the characterization of Iris West and negatively impacts her position as a race-bent Black woman. Lastly, I consider how the heroic damsel archetype avoids the intersectional experiences of Black women and consider how the show might change if those considerations were taken seriously.

Progressive Representation in the Media

Representation is a concept that has received a lot of attention from a wide variety of scholars. I begin my approach to representation with Stuart Hall's notion that connects representation to racial discourse (46). In his article, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," Stuart Hall describes representation as a discursive process that is continuously unraveling and transforming. He argues that the expression of cultural identity is constantly "becoming." Within the media, he argues that cinematic representation is a conversation of identity formation. He states, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (70). Hall defines representation as a process of identity's evolution, consequently, screen representation is a process of how societies position race, gender, sexuality, and class. While I consider Hall's perceptions important, it is necessary to extend this frame to examine current conversations surrounding representation in media.

Kristen Warner explores diversity movements within contemporary film and television products. She adds to Hall's discussion about identity by alluding to today's common desire for diversity but also how that diversity is never actually fulfilled. She states that contemporary audiences have a greater opportunity to witness "different bodies" outside of traditional cultural screen depictions. Warner affirms that "this diversity serves as an indicator of progress as well as an aspirational frame for younger generations who are told that the visual signifiers, they can identify with carry a great amount of symbolic weight" (33). The new expectation for diverse characters in cultural spaces is often seen as positive. It signals progressive action and makes it possible to reach a show's diversity goals by simply adding actors of color while never providing a robust backstory for those characters or giving them opportunities for complex character development.

I contend that racebending becomes a crutch for diversity when it does not consider the consequence of the change it makes. It is not that Iris needs to exhibit only certain behaviors or language to present herself as a Black character. The issue, instead, lies in a lack of any discernable identity for the character that is associated with Blackness. Iris West's representation reflects histories that do not apply to Black women's experiences, positioned by sexist comic book tradition rather than the lived experiences of Black women. Intersectionality is the major difference that would transform the depictions of Iris West in *The Flash.*

The traditions of the comic book genre have long been limiting for female characters and especially love-interests. Many narratives present female characters as objects that provide a function for a man, not multi-dimensional characters. They are often presented as useless damsels in need of protection or, the other extreme, infallible "superwomen" that replace the role of men (Stabile). The damsel in distress narrative presents a character who is defined by their

weakness and vulnerability, in need of constant protection. The damsel lacks agency, unable to think for or defend themselves to amplify the men around them. In the second example, women reduce their agency to fulfill masculine stereotypes, which assume the only women who do not need protection from men are women without weakness. Both the damsel in distress and the "superwoman" negatively affect all the characters within this genre, reflecting stereotypical and limiting views of masculinity and femininity. In modern comic book adaptation, the "superwoman" narrative is reimagined through a postfeminist worldview where gender equality is assumed.

Sexism, Postfeminism, and the Heroic Damsel

Before we can address how *The Flash* represents Iris West, we must first briefly discuss the implications of its representation of the show's hero, Barry Allen. After all, the show is called *The Flash. The Flash* is seemingly more racially inclusive than other comic book adaptations that star white men, but Barry Allen's centrality orients every other supporting character around his whiteness. In many ways, the number of minority characters that surround Barry Allen calls more attention to this race and the whiteness that he represents. No other culture or racialized experience is relevant in the stories of *The Flash* other than Barry's own. Berlatsky writes in his book chapter, "Flash of Two Races," that repression is at the root of the decisions to omit racial politics as there are a wide variety of ways that the CW's *The Flash* could incorporate race matters into the series. For context, Barry Allen's biological parents are taken from his life in middle school; his mother is murdered, and his father is wrongfully imprisoned. In the CW's adaptation, these circumstances lead him to live with and be raised by Joe West, Iris West's father, who is both a police officer and a Black man. The most obvious

way *The Flash* could incorporate matters of race would be to delve into the implications of the white lead character growing through and past his pre-teen years in a Black family.

So how does the representation of Iris West relate to Barry Allen's character? I contend that the most consistent representation of Iris West reflects aspects of postfeminism and will shift in and out of focus depending on the episode. Jess Butler discusses postfeminist media performances in their piece, "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," explaining six tenants commonly seen within postfeminist character narratives. The two tenants that are most pivotal for the analysis of *The Flash* are their fourth and fifth considerations. The fourth tenant "encourages self-surveillance and self-discipline," and the fifth tenant "emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom" (44). Butler continues this discussion by considering the work of Angela McRobbie's "The aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change." McRobbie contends that within the new freedoms allowed by the postfeminist perspective, there are new pathways of regulation that disadvantage marginalized women. Much of postfeminist scholarship ignores race, noting that postfeminist television representations often exclude women of color, as many postfeminist scholars focus on the analysis of white women characters in media (Butler, 47). Amanda Lotz notes that postfeminism in contemporary media showcases the various power dynamics at play for modern women (115). Lotz emphasizes that although this could promote rich, complex, and multi-dimensional displays of womanhood, highlighting the difference between various women's experiences, most often, these media portrayals are flat and one-dimensional.

Defining the Heroic Damsel

There are multiple elements of postfeminism present in *The Flash* and other comic book adaptations, but my analysis of Iris West will focus on a theory that is specific to the comic book genre, Joseph Walderzak's theory of the "heroic damsel." Walderzak establishes this theory in "Rebooting the Damsel: The Transformation of the Damsel Archetype in Spiderman, Superman, and Batman Films from 1978-2014." Similar to the ideas posed by McRobbie considering the effects of postfeminism in regard to regulation, Walderzak addresses how the postfeminist perspective augments gendered tropes with the postfeminist orientation. Walderzak argues that the result of this augmentation is a character archetype who both embodies the "regressive hysteria" of the damsel in distress and the strong female empowerment of postfeminist media imagination. Despite their presumed power, Walderzak argues that this is still a character defined by weakness because she needs to be saved (48). The female character may perform some acts of heroism and agency, but she is also dependent on patriarchal regulation. To explain his argument, Walderzak analyzes *The Amazing Spiderman* franchise, which began in 2014. He spends special attention on the character of Gwen Stacy to further define the qualities of the heroic damsel. According to Walderzak's theory, whether the heroic damsel reflects strength or weakness, the character always affirms the patriarchy (52). The heroic damsel is a repackaging of female regulation in stories where weakness and vulnerability are negotiated according to male sensibilities. Still, the heroic damsel appropriately depicts the tension between sexist trope and postfeminist performance, which increases in intensity when considering its implications for intersectional Black womanhood.

Iris West and *The Flash's* Season 3

Traditional ideologies of patriarchy affect Iris West's character in her interactions with men throughout *The Flash*, as the tension between sexist and traditional gendered experience battles a postfeminist agency. The strategic use of masculinity within the episode further reveals the necessary engagement with both race and gender when representing Black women in television. As *The Flash* omits race, it conflates several waves of feminism as they apply to white women. This complicates Iris West's character for three central reasons. First, there is no consideration for intersectional expression within these depictions of feminist ideals in *The Flash*. Second, many of the interpretations of gender are rooted in sexist tropes that generally affect white women due to their histories. Last, there is a tension between the "traditional" sexist histories of white women in the US vs. a postfeminist ideology inspired by other television shows within the fantasy genre. All three of these examples are consequential within the representation of Iris West, but I argue that the tension between these ideas more fully explicates Joseph Walderzak's theory of the heroic damsel.

"Dead or Alive"

Within the first few minutes of "Dead or Alive," Iris' safety is the primary topic of conversation among the characters in *The Flash*, independent of their awareness of her future fate. The figure who is mostly left out of Iris' fate is her father, Joe West, who is unaware that his daughter may soon be stabbed to death. He voices his concern to Barry Allen and Iris' brother, Wally West, about a journalistic story he did not want Iris involved with early in the episode. In this scene, Joe metaphorically "passes the torch" of Iris West's honor to Barry,

calling him her "live-in boyfriend" in order to establish a sense of protective responsibility. Joe asks, "Could you look out for her and maybe get her to back off a bit because this isn't something she should be doing on her own." Rather than speaking with Iris, Joe asks Barry to make sure that Iris is not involved with the case, and since he is not involved with the plots that engage Iris' possible harm, it seems that this hyper-protection is out of some form of primitive duty on Joe's part. Barry affirms Joe in his concern and promises Joe that he will speak with Iris. Throughout this interaction, both Joe and Barry show their distrust of Iris. She cannot be left to her own desires or safety and, instead, must be regulated by them.

The interactions between Barry and Joe contrast with the interactions between Barry and Iris, revealing the tension between sexist tropes and postfeminist ideals as the episode continues. Barry approaches Iris, not out of a hyper-protective, domineering stance, but rather suggesting that she back away from her journalistic pursuits until "Team Flash" can assess whether her future murder can be altered. The engagement between Barry and Iris assumes that she will not listen to him at all, as Barry frames their discussion by explaining that they have enough to worry about without her risking her life for her work. While this is clearly a gendered consideration, regardless of the manner in which he delivers his request, there is an unspoken assumption that Iris has no intention of listening to him. Self-determination and individualism determine Iris West's decision to defy both Barry and Joe to accomplish her journalistic goals without their help (Butler, 44). Iris West is not a character that would bend to the whims of the men around her, but that does not stop the inclusion of sexist tropes around her. While a truly postfeminist text would position Iris to pursue the story alone, the tensions of traditionalism vs. postfeminism occur once again as Iris' solution to appeasing her father and boyfriend. They are "resolved" by Iris convincing her brother to chaperone her adventure.

Hyper-protection and assumed vulnerability meet Iris again as Wally, her brother, is already familiar with her story, telling her that both Barry and Joe had told him to make sure that she stays away from perceived danger. Through this episode, Wally is the masculine protective barrier that surrounds Iris' agency as she fulfills the role of the heroic damsel. Wally's decision to assist Iris in her dangerous endeavors comes with the assumption that she cannot be trusted alone. Her brother Wally willingly participates in Iris' defiant plans to pursue the journalistic story because his position as a superpowered man counteracts her pursuit of danger in this instance. If her antics lead to her death after she was warned by three men, the episode rhetorically suggests violence or death is simply the consequence of not listening to her patriarchal "protectors." Rather than framing the episode's subplot around Iris' journalist arc, the subplot becomes one that perfectly positions Iris West between independence, self-surveillance, and a constant need to be saved (Butler, 44; Walderzak, 48). This episode of *The Flash* ignores an opportunity to showcase how Iris could pursue her passions despite a grim future, but the series would rather reinforce situational and male-dependent female regulation. Most of Iris West's characterization might cause one to assume there has been growth since the original damsels of the comic book genre, but the tension of the heroic damsel reiterates the genre's dedication to tradition above progressive change.

As Iris and Wally arrive at the abandoned warehouse that Iris intends to investigate, Wally makes a point to survey the perimeter. Iris uses her few minutes alone to break into the warehouse to take pictures of the weapons inside. Suddenly the criminal she's attempting to reveal comes out with a large gun. The unnamed criminal comes toward her with the gun, and Iris does not flinch, instead, she moves toward the criminal, seemingly unfazed by the threat. She walks so close to the gun that her chest meets the barrel and says, "Everyone's got to go

sometime, right? And I am pretty sure today just isn't my day." Iris' dialogue alludes to the idea that as she is already aware of her future death, she knows that she will not be killed by the warehouse criminal. The boldness of her approach to this danger communicates the idea that she is in control. She's going to make choices, by herself, for herself, no matter how anyone else in her life attempts to dissuade her. The "too stubborn for their own good" and the bravery of the heroic damsel trope is in full effect with Iris' lack of fear toward a legitimate threat. This scene could be interpreted as proof of a strong, postfeminist depiction, but ultimately it is yet another set up for Iris to be saved, this time by her brother Wally.

As Iris steps up to the gun, Wally bursts into the warehouse to defeat the criminal and disrupt Iris' reckless activity, exclaiming, "What the hell, sis. Are you trying to get yourself killed?" to reprimand Iris' behavior. One would think that with Iris just standing up to a criminal with a gun, she would fight back at Wally's chastising remarks, but the scene progresses with Iris reacting as if she expected him to interrupt her interaction. It is unclear if Iris' intentions all along were to show off Wally's heroics or to prove her own when she celebrates the experience as a victory. To elaborate on Walderzak's findings, it is important to consider the heroic damsel as a headstrong figure that cowers to patriarchal protection as the situational orientation of this trope presents an erratic story where the female character cannot be situated into one personality or way of being. Instead of always representing the traditional damsel in distress narrative or pushing through with the postfeminist agency, the heroic damsel has no set way of being because it is always at the whim of what the male character needs. Rather than orienting Iris West in full submission to stories of being saved or making her a figure who never needs to be saved, the heroic damsel creates a narrative where it almost seems like the character desires this duality.

The following scene begins with both Wally and Iris listening to their father yell at them about their careless police interference and potential danger while Barry Allen visibly shakes his head at Iris in disappointment. Originally directed at both of his children, Joe West focuses on Iris, saying, "…You had you and your brother out there in danger, and for what? A story?" In his anger, he reduces Iris West to her role as an older sister and child who is responsible for her younger brother, which counters the narrative presented earlier in the episode when Wally is told to dissuade Iris from potential harm. Who is in charge of the heroic damsel? The "illusory" and situational nature of the archetype not only displays a tension between traditional sexist views and postfeminism, but it reveals the comic book genre's commitment to patriarchy through its reliance on regressive positioning (Walderzak, 53). Joe West ends his rant with "And where the hell were you?" pointing at Barry Allen and referencing the talk they had early in the episode about Iris' protection. Iris' protection is handed off between the different men in the room multiple times throughout the scene without meaning, affirming the circumstantial and inconsistent representations of the heroic damsel.

To be clear, Joe is unaware of Iris' future fate and is, therefore, not enacting exhibiting a hyper-protective stance because he understands what Barry knows, that Iris is anticipating her own death. His behavior alludes to an unspoken rhetorical standard of heroic damsel regulation through which Iris West suffers the most. Even though he is referencing his own daughter, the signal to Barry communicates that Barry should "keep his woman in line," appealing to sexist views of female vulnerability. Agency and heroic impulse are a result of a gendered naiveté with Iris West, even though this is a world where The Flash/Barry Allen honors his every superpowered whim.

Iris West attempts to defend herself against Joe West's rage, but Wally West interjects to disclose her proximity to the criminal's gun. This standoff with three disappointed men is meant to alert the audience to the idea that Iris' own awareness of her future death is changing her sense of caution in the present, but it is a disjointed approach that removes Iris' point of view from the plot of the story. The scene continues with Barry asking to speak privately with Iris, which allows her an opportunity to speak and share her thought process after the events at the warehouse. The dialogue exchanged between Barry and Iris is as follows:

> **Iris**: This story is going to change lives, Barry! Why do you think you're the only one allowed to risk your life to do good?
>
> **Barry**: I don't. It's okay to be afraid of the future, but I won't let your die.
>
> **Iris**: I'm not afraid to die, Barry. I'm not!
>
> **Barry**: Then, what?
>
> **Iris**: I'm afraid *cries* What if I end up just like my mom? Just gone without making a mark, without leaving anything behind.
>
> **Barry**: Your mom, she left something behind. She left a brave, wonderful son and the woman that I love. All right?

The heroic damsel archetype is very clear through this dialogue and through Iris' need to "do good," her assertion of her goals, and the imposed vulnerability written into the scene so that the interaction ends with Barry Allen at the center. The scene opens with Iris caring about the public through her passion for journalism and challenging the protective stance that's been held by him and other men in her life. He is allowed to be reckless and independent, and she should also have the same opportunities in a postfeminist world. She tries to make their interaction about the story that she is writing, but Barry interjects to insert himself as her savior.

Emotional vulnerability is a tool used in *The Flash* to position Iris as weak when her physical body is not in danger. “It’s okay to be afraid of the future, but I won’t let you die,” reframes Iris’ need to create something for herself into a story about her emotional vulnerability caused by the future fate of her murder. In this sense, Barry is communicating that Iris should be docile and secure because he is her savior and protector. He views Iris’ need for danger as proof of her fragile emotional state rather than seeing Iris’ intrinsic desire for heroism throughout her journalistic career. In his mind, Iris is acting “crazy” because she doesn’t trust that he can save her. This beginning interaction is a test to see if she actually went to the warehouse to pursue a story out of genuine interest or if she went because she believes that her time is short, and she has to make a difference while she can.

The heroic damsel cannot be trusted with their heroic instincts and is defined instead by weakness, even though her actions reflect a different narrative. Iris’ motives reflect the story’s desire to continuously position her as someone needing to be saved physically and emotionally. She brings up her mother, which, to viewers of the series, seems random. Iris’ mother’s primary story arc was in season two, over a season before this episode. Iris’ mother is not a recurring topic on *The Flash,* and she has seldom been mentioned since the beginning of season two. I conclude that Iris is comparing her death to her mother’s passing solely so that Barry can save her emotionally. Rather than mentioning Iris’ determination to write a story or even her fears about her mother’s life, he affirms her existence by reducing her once again to the “woman that I love.” As I have already explored, Barry’s constant ownership of Iris is harmful, but to make it worse, there is a comparison posed within the wording, which frames Wally West as “brave and wonderful” while Iris is affirmed in connection with Barry Allen’s love.

In his work, Walderzak mentions that the heroic damsel normalizes harmful partner behavior and narratives of the "abusive boyfriend," where issues with the romantic aspect of this characterization are ignored or even admired by the girlfriend (51). While Barry is not necessarily abusive in this interaction, he is consumed with his own perspective, abilities, and desires. He bypasses his own authentic emotional expression in an effort to save Iris from herself. It is important to note that the heroic damsel does not correct or interfere with her partner's possibly concerning traits. The role of the heroic damsel is malleable—reactive to the male partner at all costs, even when their partner character behaves in a manner that is inconsistent with previous characterizations. It seems that the heroic damsel is fulfilling a fantasy depiction of a woman who is strong, independent, and brave until it is time to fall into male submission. Is Iris not also "brave and wonderful," or are those remarks only for displays of male heroism? One might consider standing up to a criminal alone as incredibly brave, but for the heroic damsel, it is a sign of distress and vulnerability. If the criminal had shot Iris, it would be her fault because of the warnings despite her actions not being bolder than many of the male characters' actions.

By widening the perspective of the heroic damsel archetype, the emphasis on a woman's weakness is made clearer through their partner's superpowers. Barry Allen's speed gives an external condition that makes him more equipped to be reckless or pursue danger. Whereas Iris' humanity provides an easy excuse to re-direct her heroic efforts in favor of something "safer." Ultimately, the reasons for these roles are rooted in sexist traditionalism and, even more, based in white masculinity and white saviorism when considering how race affects this narrative. The heroic damsel cannot also be powered because it might challenge her ability to be saved by a man. Additionally, the clashing descriptions of Wally as "brave and wonderful" versus Iris' "the

woman that I love" could arguably be tied to one character having powers and one simply being human. It seems *The Flash* needs to remind its viewers that Iris West is a weak, human girl and Barry Allen is a strong, superpowered man to situationally strip Iris from her strength.

Iris West's subplot ends in the episode in a scene where Barry gleefully reads her article. He affirms her work but segues his congratulations to discuss Iris' future murder, like most of the discussions that they have in this episode. The scene ends with him declaring to Iris, "The Flash is going to save you." This final statement brings up one last aspect of Walderzak's theory. As superheroes typically have two personas, their superhero side, and their more human side, like The Flash and Barry Allen or Spiderman and Peter Parker, the heroic damsel usually interacts with these figures separately. Walderzak argues that *The Amazing Spiderman* uses this separation to disconnect Spiderman's harmful behavior from Peter Parker's harmless persona, but in *The Flash*, the linguistic shift is to reiterate imposed security. The whole episode essentially confirms that Iris is uneasy about Barry's ability to save her in the future, so she disconnects the version of himself that is her partner to emphasize the part of himself that is a hero.

The Denial of Intersectionality

In the prior section, I've illustrated how the heroic damsel archetype pervades the characterization of Iris West. This characterization is rooted in the form of third-wave white feminist agency and is subject to that movement's problems. Of particular interest to my thesis is the fact that the heroic damsel archetype reinforces a whiteness that denies the lived experience of Black womanhood. Black women have rarely been afforded the opportunity to be a damsel, old or new. More to the point, Black women exist within an intersectional space of multiple axes

of oppression. Thus, what the heroic damsel archetype excludes is precisely the experience that Kimberlé Crenshaw calls intersectionality.

In "Mapping the Margins, Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw explains how different frameworks of identity cross paths in the experience of Black women. While older research described similar ideas with labels like "multiple-consciousness," Crenshaw coins the term of intersectionality, particularly addressing ways that Black women encounter both racism and sexism at the same time (1242). She also engages with how both feminist and antiracist movements evade the interconnections of oppression. This evasion allows feminists, regardless of the wave, to avoid individuals who experience oppression in multiple ways simultaneously and who engage in a politics that goes beyond gender (Ibid). One group that exemplifies the politics of intersectionality is the Combahee River Collective. Active in the 1970s, they expanded the concept of intersectionality to define the term as "the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering" (Taylor, 5). I am not expecting *The Flash* to fully present the diversity embodied by the Combahee River Collective, nor am I asking the show to engage in radical, intersectional politics. However, I am asserting the importance of considering intersectionality when presenting a Black character. This is especially important because the showrunners are engaging in the activity of racebending. I contend that to benefit from the perceived diversity of racebending, showrunners have an additional responsibility to consider how they present diversity through the transformation. Without change, *The Flash* promotes a characterization that undermines definitions of Blackness rooted in issues of class, gender, and race.

It is often difficult to imagine alternatives to such entrenched representations of Blackness as we see on *The Flash*. However, for the sake of argument, we might consider changes in the dialogue that takes place between Barry Allen and Joe West. Joe and Barry's discussion assumes that Iris has always needed a protector and she cannot defend herself in dangerous situations. An intersectional lens would consider the lived experiences of Black women and recognize several related histories; for example, a history of violence against Black women, which stems from the colonial era until today. In this history, the presumption that they can be protected is itself a fiction. The second history is one of long-standing, Black women's self-defense, which includes escaping from enslavement, fighting for employment opportunities, and engaging in non-institutional health care. The third is participating in forms of protecting others. Every major political movement to advance the betterment of the Black community has involved Black women as leaders. These leaders often go unrecognized, but that, too, is a sign of their intersectional exploitation. An intersectional approach to the dialogue between Joe and Barry would reflect at least some of this history. Rather than see Iris as someone who needs their protection, they might discuss how they can partner with Iris to ensure her safety as she pursues her goals. This change would mean Barry and Joe's dialogue would affirm Iris West's capability rather than assume her vulnerability and inevitable failure.

A second way to imagine how intersectionality would make a difference would be to shift Iris West's behavior from being a secret to the men she loves to being publicly acknowledged and supported. The heroic damsel narrative forces Iris West to act in secret rather than be public and honest with other people on the show. Even her brother Wally is forced into secrecy in order to hide from the overprotective interests of Joe and Barry. The choice to present Iris' journalistic endeavors as a secretive rebellion made to challenge the authority of her father and her partner

assumes that she should not and likely cannot display public agency. Perhaps, the postfeminist archetype of the heroic damsel necessitates this kind of private secrecy. Women are allowed to have power, but only when that power does not publicly offend male presumptions of ultimate authority. The showrunners insist that Iris convert Wally to her hidden, rebellious approach to journalism rather than simply creating a subplot where the siblings work together. Intersectionality would allow for Iris to be bold and public about her motives, able to include the men in her life free of her own assumed fragility.

Beyond this episode, intersectionality could positively transform the entire series of *The Flash* by adding race and class to the show's attempts at establishing gendered forms of agency. The inclusion of intersectionality would have the greatest effect on the characterization of Iris West, but intersectional changes to the television show would also impact the characterization of the lead protagonist, Barry Allen. True intersectionality within the series would require Barry Allen to engage with race through both his personal and superhero developments. It is important to remember that in his backstory, Barry was raised within a Black family. Any character raised under those conditions would likely have been shaped by different experiences than the typical, middle-class, white suburban family. And yet, as the show is currently produced, Barry Allen shows none of that recognition. Intersectionality in *The Flash* would advance his relationships with the West family but also affect the rest of the team.

Conclusion

The heroic damsel archetype explores the tension between comic book genre's propensity for sexist storylines and postfeminist ideologies that permeate television. Competence and determination are available to Iris West in some situations, but in some ways, its function is to

present a story just "progressive" enough to leave the damsel undetected by most of *The Flash's* fanbase. Sexism becomes an anchor for stories featuring women in comic book adaptations as the damsel becomes a trope that is easy to employ when centering heterosexual, white superheroes. Walderzak's theory of the heroic damsel provides a framework to look at the indecisive female characters in modern-day comic book adaptations, but the theory does not consider the factor of race. A few comments here in the conclusion about how race might complicate the theory of the heroic damsel seem in order.

The intersectional experience of Iris West reveals even more problems for the heroic damsel archetype when one considers the intersection of race and gender. Blackness in *The Flash* only exists through a character's skin color, as the series does not ascribe any value to cultural expression outside of comic book tradition. Race-bent Black women should be allowed to embrace Blackness, and their womanhood should not be subjected to exclusively white feminist histories that do not consider intersectional experiences. Race-bent love-interests like Iris West struggle to have a cemented identity when they are stripped from every aspect which could separate them from being only objects of affection.

Additionally, Barry Allen and Iris West's interracial romantic relationship also alters the configuring of the heroic damsel narrative and treats Iris' Blackness as yet another weakness from which she must be saved. Employing the heroic damsel archetype with a race-bent love-interest exposes the obvious ignorance from which the writers and creators of *The Flash* attempted this adaptation. What is more startling than the convoluted histories of women in the comic book genre is the genre's commitment to colorblindness. Between the trope of the heroic damsel and the commitment to colorblindness, Iris West is reduced to a caricature of what she could be with the embrace of intersectionality. More recent race-bent love-interests simply do

not have a backstory outside of the affection of the white male hero to whom they are bound. Not learning from Iris West, characters like MJ from the *Spiderman Homecoming* franchise are presented with ambiguity and targets of exceptionalism.

Racebending comic book love-interests are more than a trend; they are an attempt to commodify "diversity" without engaging in political discourse. While creators get to represent both Blackness and women through their race-bent love-interests, the constant shuffle to ignore race and gender robs the character of identity. Black fans manage to connect with what is presented to them, grateful for inclusion even if it is fragmented, but they should not have to choose. Black women are not easily commodified, even though many of the race-bent Black love-interests seem to be included with goals of commodification. Racebending is more than an easy diversity swap; it should reflect a commitment to the character through authentic representation. Fans deserve multifaceted, multi-dimensional Black women characters who reflect and acknowledge the complexities of Black womanhood.

Chapter 3

Rhetorizing Iris West: Transgressive Black Women in Comic Book Adaptation

Post-racialism pervades *The Flash* and complicates representations within the series, predominately affecting the character of Iris West. Even though, as the last chapter demonstrated, *The Flash's* Black representation is often problematic, there are qualities of Iris West that indicate the possibilities for growth within the genre. These positive qualities are transgressive within the context of the white American television landscape, where Black women characters are presented through racialized stereotypes that amplify whiteness. While the Flash is a television show that features many characters of color, it presents itself within traditions of whiteness through its writing. The lead character, Barry Allen's white male perspective, is the primary throughline of the series above its heroics, comic book tradition, or romantic subplots. While the show refuses to acknowledge race, Iris West's Blackness onscreen is presented as positive and accepted through the rhetorical messaging of the show, which offers a narrative counter to the exclusive norms of white television.

Comic book films and television adaptations have reached their modern success largely without the inclusion of Black women. For many years, Eartha Kitt and, more than thirty years later, Halle Berry's portrayals of *Catwoman* were the only substantive role allowed to be played by a Black woman in comics (Sawyer). Due to films and television shows like *Black Panther*, *Black Lightning,* and most recently, *Naomi*, culture has seen an onset of more prominent Black characters in recent years. As previous portions of this project established, the racebending of comic book characters has launched a new opportunity for diverse stories within the genre.

While this is not a perfect representation of Black womanhood within the genre, racebending does make room for transgressive representations within broader popular culture, especially for comic book adaptations. In this sense, when contrasted with the historical exclusion of Black women, I argue that the CW's Iris West is a transgressive depiction in both the genre of comic book adaptation and in Western media.

Though *The Flash* television show avoids topics of race, Iris West's Black female identity rhetorically affects the storytelling in racially progressive ways when you compare Iris' characterization and treatment to typical treatments of Black women featured in shows which feature white leads. Regardless of the writers and studio's decisions to project a post-racial world through *The Flash*, the show's audience can observe a Black woman who is vital to the show's story, shows emotion, and harnesses agency onscreen. With Black womanhood and post-racialism as the backdrop of this project, I will consider the three elements of story centrality, character emotion, and character agency to articulate Iris West's transgressive qualities.

In this chapter, I will analyze Iris West through her positive genre contributions through the framework of transgression. Her development throughout the Flash provides rich content for the analysis of Black women within media and the comic genre. This chapter will progress in five parts. First, I will define transgression for this project, establishing why it is necessary to use this particular term to engage with Iris West's character. Then, I will address the contextual basis of Iris West, The Flash, exploring ideas of race and gender in television shows with a similar audience. I will then analyze Iris West as my rhetorical text, explicating her transgressive qualities in her characterization. Finally, I will discuss the impact of Iris West, what she means for representation in comic book adaptations, and future transgression within the genre.

Transgression, Comic Book Adaptation, and Iris West

When rhetorically considering the intersection of race, gender, and transgression, it is vital to establish the definition for the purposes of this project. Chris Jenks defines transgression as "conduct which breaks the rules or exceeds boundaries." Through his conversation about the term, he establishes transgression as a tool of integration with ideas of resistance that "produces places for people." The Flash does this through its inclusive racial landscape, where Iris West is one of several people of color featured regularly. In a television show based on whiteness, excluding people of color is a boundary typically established through casting. Though there is diverse representation in *The Flash*, all characters of color within the show exist in supporting roles to allow prominence for the central whiteness of Barry Allen. Other definitions consider themes similar to Jenks, as Stallybrass and White consider transgression to be an infraction of the binary structures. These two definitions are generative beginnings to the ideas surrounding transgression, allowing us to consider the boundaries of television and comic book adaptation, as the structural basis of both is white masculinity.

Tremiko Melancon creates a basis for studying transgression and Black women in their book, *Unbought and Unbossed Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation*. In this dialogue, Melancon discusses how Blackness is naturally transgressive, as whiteness is the societal norm. She explores ways Blackness is conflated with transgression, specifically concerning Black women. Her research considers how negative depictions of Black women amplify white superiority within the Western societal framework. Positive portrayals of Black

women are transgressive by design and release Black women from harmful stereotyping. The expression of Iris West's positive orientation may not be a typical pattern where transgression is discussed, but Melancon's assertions explicate how Black womanhood transgresses the white media space. Through the post-racial representation of Iris West, the inclusion of Blackness that is not demonized allows Iris West to transgress.

Building upon both of the above definitions, Joke Hermes and Annette Hill theorize transgression in regard to contemporary media culture, beginning with ideas of power and hegemony as factors that dominate culture (5). While they believe that cultural hegemony should begin discussions surrounding transgression, they offer the perspective that television media commodifies transgression as often as it supports the dominant cultural standards (6). In this sense, television shows feature media with the sole purpose of "exceeding boundaries," as Jenks suggests. When evaluating modern television material, they suggest that evaluation should consider if the material is created solely to transgress. I think that Hermes and Hill present an interesting argument concerning post-racial television that participates in racebending and blind casting.

I believe that this commodification of transgression influences the decisions to include people of color within genres prone to exclusion. There is a capitalistic drive to "diversify" positions of television to enhance the reach of the media. For example, Candice Patton's casting as Iris West exposed Black women to a franchise that they likely would not have watched without her Black woman identity. Racebending serves as a bridge that connects Black representation to transgressive commodification within comic book adaptation.

Racebending in comic book television and film is a commodified transgression that rhetorically acknowledges the white supremacist past of the genre as it replaces canonically white characters with people of color. Creators of white media recognize the value of a diverse audience. Still, they are able to hide behind colorblind racism to prevent this transgressive casting from going "too far," which, in this instance, means allowing the character to engage with their racialized identity. In some ways, the choice to race-bend in comic book adaptation is a process of introducing media to a new group while simultaneously trusting that this race-bent character will not disengage the hegemonic masculine base of the genre. While this established binary of the genre may be shocked or outraged at the change, the media creator trusts that the core white male base will not forfeit their commitment to their love object solely because of racebending supporting characters. Regardless, white, heteronormative masculinity is the basis of every decision within this genre, even when considering moments of transgression.

A primary marker for the centered whiteness of comic book adaptation is the race-bent character appearing as an optional or as a character who needs to be "eased" into the story. An example of this treatment is Zendaya's MJ within *Marvel's Spiderman* franchise. In her expression of MJ, the studios who cast her wanted to shock the audience with major change by casting her as a character outside of the white, red-haired women who have donned the role. Even though the studios decided to race-bend the character, there were safety nets in place in case fan outrage at this decision was so severe that they needed to alter the story to omit the character altogether. Zendaya's cultural popularity enhanced the likelihood of reception, but the slow integration of her role within the franchise can be interpreted as a nod toward white comfort. The first film of the franchise, *Spiderman Homecoming,* allowed every presentation of

Zendaya's character to be accompanied by an affirmation to the audience that she would *not* be the central love-interest of the franchise. While Zendaya's popularity was used to sell the movie as she starred in all press conversations, she was only featured in three minutes of the film (Buchanan). This could indicate the character's small role was to surprise the audience, but the rhetorical implications of the decision to limit her story affirm a normative whiteness, regardless. As a result, the character exists on the periphery of the story to test white reception. She is a source of commodified transgression to engage with a desire for diversity in this genre, but whether these representational choices are sustained rests within the lens of white hegemonic masculinity.

The trend of racebending love-interests seems strategic in this sense as they come with the assumption that their character is a trial. While some themes of transgression are present throughout the entire series of *The Flash*, Iris West gains screen-time as she gains support from fans. Her importance within the peripheral life of Barry Allen is evident early on in the show, but her screen time is limited, much like Zendaya's, for much of the first and second seasons. The slow progression of the story for these race-bent, Black women characters reveals them as trials to test whether their transgressive place in the genre can be commodified alongside the hegemonic conventions of *The Flash* and its audience.

The Flash as a series primarily operates within the dominant cultural media framework and is laden with hegemonic values. Outside of Iris West's Blackness, there is not much that pushes the boundaries of contemporary media when considering the infusion of superheroes in popular culture. What separates *The Flash* and Iris West from normative culture is the Black representation and the positive portrayal of a Black female character. For *The Flash* to break the

boundaries of what is typical for comic book adaptation, it is necessary to consider the histories associated with comic book adaptation while still evaluating Iris West's Blackness as a transgression in the broader media landscape of young-adult dramas.

The Flash and the Black Women of CW Dramas

To further explain transgressive depictions of Black women in Western media, I must assert that I am not comparing *The Flash* and Iris West to Black television series' that articulate displays of Blackness in relation to a Black audience. It is clear that *The Flash* desires a white audience and that any support from Black fans, or any other marginalized group, is merely accidental or exceptional. This consideration makes *The Flash*'s transgression more comparable to the primary television features of the CW network: young-adult dramas. In many ways, *The Flash* is more reminiscent of a drama than a superhero show, as it prioritizes relationships over action in most instances. The *DC Comics* television shows on the CW network could very well be categorized as "superhero dramas," where the network boldly incorporates its historical success with white teen and young-adult dramatic narratives into the superhero adaptation genre. While *The Flash* is more often compared to other superhero media, it has been classified as a drama in award shows like the 2015 People's Choice Awards, where it won "Best New Drama" (Paige). When viewed in connection with the CW's long-term success with shows like *Gossip Girl*, *One Tree Hill,* and *90210*, there is a rationale for *The Flash*'s transgression by means of inclusion and positive representation. As Iris West lacks any supernatural ability, her moments of involvement within *The Flash* series are exclusively dramatic and provide the basis of my comparison.

Gossip Girl is an apt example of the CW's hallmark genre; this series aired between 2007 and 2012, only ending two years before *The Flash*'s arrival on the network. It is infamous for its impact in shaping the CW network as the first original show featured in its entirety on the platform. The CW network is a result of a merger between two failed networks: UPN and the WB, which launched with programming from either of the two "parent" networks (Herman). *Gossip Girl* is a book adaptation of a series of the same name. The show depicts the life of the "New York City elite" by following a series of fictional teenagers who live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The show stars all white families at the core of the "old money" in Manhattan. Although the show doesn't focus on matters of race, it does examine class to establish the characters. Privilege and whiteness constitute the basis of *Gossip Girl*'s plot and its popularity as a pivotal enterprise for the CW (Févre-Berthelot, 10). Any characters of color appear on the sidelines far into the series run on the network (De Maria).

Women headline the series, played by actresses like Blake Lively and Leighton Meester, but the show is not known for its kind treatment of female characters. Sexist ideologies pervade the series and affect both women and men. In *Gossip Girl*, the goals and concerns of the characters rest solely within their sexual relationships. Social currency and identity formation are negotiated according to the characters' sexual relationships, as this show displays characters using sex to gain status (Van Damme, 83). The show allows these central characters to establish definitions of masculinity, femininity, and sexual expression through their white privilege. In many ways, *Gossip Girl* is completely contrary to the orientation of *The Flash*, but the centrality of whiteness and tropes of gendered romantic roles which impact the character's identity are themes across both series.

Another example of young-adult drama on the CW is a show called, *One Tree Hill,* which began airing in 2003 and ended in 2012. This show also features a white, fictionally teenage cast but is based in North Carolina rather than New York City. Again, characters receive their value and storylines based on their romantic involvement. Additionally, this show often features women who need to be saved by men in many situations, following the "damsel in distress" trope often relied on by comic book writers (Van Damme, 83). Interactions between men and women often make the women reactionary and dependent on the male character.

Both *Gossip Girl* and *One Tree Hill* represent 2000s norms for young-adult dramas, which were the CW network's main genre before engaging with superhero television adaptations like *Arrow* and *The Flash*. While both shows could be the primary focus of studies depicting white womanhood and sexism, it is important to note the exclusion of Blackness within both of these shows. Despite several flaws in these shows, the most egregious problem is that they are a united force of white supremacy within their television space and make whiteness more central to their shows than any romantic relationships between characters. Any Black characters included within shows do not have any major effect on the core, close-knit white, heterosexual relationships that define the genre of young-adult drama.

In the context of white media and expressions of Black womanhood, caricatures from American slavery often encapsulate their depictions. Stereotypes have founded perceptions of Black women in white media and include but are not limited to the Mule, the Jezebel, the Breeder, the Welfare Mother, the Freak, and the Superwoman (Collins). As stereotypical depictions of Black women morph and change over time, modern representations often augment some of the historical tropes. Still, Black women characters seldom exist without a racialized

flaw (Ramirez). Flaws are often displayed through romantic relationships with men as Black women characters are too educated or too independent to have stable or healthy relationships with men in media depictions (Ramirez). Black women and their fictional representation are seldom allowed to be "vulnerable, desirable, loving, carefree, silly, elegant, soft or genteel" (Darling and Evans). I argue that Darling and Evans offer a compelling and accurate description of Black women characters in television, provided one is analyzing shows that cater to whiteness like the majority of the CW networks line-up. The constant approval of whiteness is the connection between young-adult drama television and the dramatized comic book adaptations that come later for the network.

Discussions of whiteness and Black women within the comic book genre impact how we can combine discussions of young-adult drama and comic book media as both impact Iris West's treatment. Chamara Moore discusses Black women superheroes as a product of Black female subjectivity. Black characters within superhero media have the opportunity to enhance the genre greatly, but Black subjectivity looms over these characters, allowing them to be oppressed due to their race and gender onscreen and in fan interaction (4). This marginalization affects fan response to the characters as they are often criticized more due to their social status. The reaction to Black female characters highlights how society "stereotypes, mistreats and often dehumanizes black women is so deeply ingrained into their subconscious that it even clouds their opinions of fictional characters" (Darling and Evans). Moore expands her discussion of Black female subjectivity to discuss the impact of race-bent, Black female love-interests in comic book adaptation, reducing their stories to products of male affection (10). Considering how CW shows

like *The Flash* utilize tropes from both genres of young-adult drama and comic book adaptation, there is a trend to link a character's identity to their romantic relationship within both genres. While this is an unfortunate reality, it is familiar to the viewer within the context of white, heterosexual relationships onscreen.

I agree with Moore's assertions about the difficult racial climate that clouds fan response within the comic genre, but I would like to offer an alternative viewpoint to her statements about race-bent love-interests. The inclusion of Black women in romance narratives for a white audience is already a rupture to the binary structures of white media because the dominant representations exclude Black women from any sustained romance plot (Jenks). In addition to this pivotal consideration, Iris West's *The Flash* depiction does not solely revolve around her partner's gaze. While many of her plots include Barry Allen and their eventual family, Iris West has qualities and interactions that do not center this gaze. By her inclusion, Iris West provides an example of the ways that Black women characters can exist outside of normative media presentation.

Transgression and *The Flash's* Iris West

There are many transgressive characterizations of Iris West throughout *The Flash* television show. She is the first, Black woman written as a comic book story love-interest in a comic book adaptation. As a Black woman, she is a television character with independence, agency, and emotional connection. Critically considering the contextual basis of both young-adult dramas and comic book adaptation informs how transgression exists within *The Flash*. Iris

West is a figure who is allowed to embrace her emotions, work, and fight crime when needed. Moments of transgression for Iris exist throughout the series, but the material gains richness in later seasons as the show more fully develops the character. This portion of my chapter will provide examples of Iris West's transgressive behavior throughout the series.

Iris West and Emotions

As I illustrate Iris West's emotional disclosure within *The Flash*, I will focus on episode two of the fourth season, "Mixed Signals." This episode features a plot in which Iris and Barry see a therapist and discuss some issues with their communication. While initially comic relief within the episode, Iris turns the dialogue toward a more serious tone as she opens up about feeling abandoned by Barry.

An important element of transgression occurs when Iris interrupts Barry in this scene. Before her confession, Barry seems to be navigating his way around their communication issues and shifting the focus of their problem to his perception rather than listening to Iris' point of view. As this show primarily focuses on his character, his perception usually dominates every scene. Many comic book love stories are only presented from the male viewpoint, overstepping a woman's thoughts, opinions, and desires to satisfy the male gaze. Barry reiterates to Iris that he is "sorry" and expects that to end the conversation surrounding the conflict. From the beginning of the scene, the story seems like it will fit a traditional hero-centered conflict that allows for easy resolution. He attempts to save the day by showering her with affirmation and statements of love: "We're Barry and Iris…I am so in love…." Before he can finish his profession of affection, Iris interjects with a challenge. Addressing a past incident where Barry left for over six months

without warning, Iris explains her distress and interrupts him crying: “Then how could you leave me? You left me, Barry. You just left me standing there alone. How could you do that?”

This scene allows the viewers to engage with more of the difficult interpersonal complications of heroism, displaying how the constant need to save the world can leave your relationships at risk. Iris is typically exceptionally accommodating with issues surrounding Barry’s heroism, but in this episode, it is her feelings that take center stage. She is not only allowed by the script to make her feelings known, but she asks him to include her more in those decisions that affect them both. Barry is surprised by this emotional outburst but is receptive to Iris’ needs overall. Iris’ outburst could have been presented as another issue in which she needed to be saved, but in this instance, it is Iris that takes control of the dialogue, and Barry is invited to participate as her partner. He is not expected to fix her feelings of abandonment so much as work with her to ensure that the relationship is meeting both of their needs equally. This dialogue is, I argue, transgressive.

First, Iris is allowed much more emotional range in this episode than is typical of her character or, especially for Black women in the media. As she sits down with Barry in therapy, they begin in a light, joking tone, hoping to get to the root of their communication problem. As they talked, she opened up about the fear of abandonment that she was unable to express before the therapist assisted in the discussion. As Black women are often presented as strong and belligerent characters, this scene allows for softness, sadness, and fear often missing from Black women’s narratives (Darling and Evans). Though race is still not a mentioned aspect of this series, Iris’ confession considers her humanity and seeks to display the full range of emotions that Black women possess. Iris is allowed to cry and feel fear without Barry “fixing” it or saving

her. The scene ends with her confession and allows Barry's character and the audience to sit with her grief and loss.

Another essential consideration of this scene's transgressive features involves the emotional security and safety demonstrated by the characters' interaction throughout the scene. Not only is Iris able to display sadness at this moment, but her sadness is also received by both the couple's therapist and her partner. Her ability to disclose complex feelings to Barry rhetorically represents a closeness that begets mutual vulnerability. Within this interaction, she is not forced to "get over" her feelings or to sacrifice them for the "greater good." Iris West is allowed to safely show up fully in a therapy setting to emotionally disclose without judgment. The subjugated treatment of Black women within the comic book genre often leaves them without a point of view which Moore argues creates stories constantly intertwining the Black woman's identity with the white male lead. While it is true that the story resolves with both characters working together to agree and communicate, Iris' ability to disclose disrupts both the stereotypical characterizations of Black women and the blind support typically offered by women within the comic book genre.

The story resolves later in the episode as the two characters mutually decide to communicate as a team after having a conversation about emotional disclosure. Through this interaction, *The Flash* not only shows that Iris is allowed an emotional point of view but presents a Black woman with a supportive partner through Barry. He listens to her and responds as a result of her disclosure instead frantically apologizing and protecting himself. He articulates a desire to communicate both his heroic and personal ventures with Iris, affirming her importance and authority within the show. While Iris is involved in pivotal moments throughout the series,

the first three seasons gradually incorporated her significance into the series, much like the discussion I offered earlier in this chapter surrounding Zendaya and the *Spiderman* franchise. Story arcs like the one featured in "Mixed Signals" showcased a commitment to the character long-term.

Iris West is a character who expects to be treated well by the people around her. She represents a woman who demands care from her partner beyond his existence or superpowered behavior. She wants to be heard, respected, and included as an equal rather than used as a prop within the edges of the story. For Black women characters, this is not standard treatment, especially when you consider this storyline absent sexualized content. The interaction here could have been swayed to focus on Barry's perception and desire, but it remains focused on Iris and their relationship instead. Iris West is presented as a Black woman who is worthy of respect, attention, and safety through this interaction with her partner.

Iris West and Agency

Early in the show, the audience is made aware that Iris West can take care of herself. She can physically fight and wield a weapon, but she is also an advocate for her career and ambitions. As women in comic book narratives are often controlled and utilized as male property that advances the male hero's story, Iris establishes an alternative to that tradition. Instead of giving her one marginalized role, she is a character allowed to show many elements of her personality throughout the series. To provide an analysis of Iris West's agency within *The Flash* television show, I will focus on the 13th episode of the fifth season, "Goldfaced." This episode

builds upon the slow-building journalist story arc that appears throughout the series, showcasing Iris West in a secondary plot that allows her to scope out a story.

The episode begins for Iris inside the office of her media company: "The Central City Citizen." She sees an article online that refers to her blog as "boring," and, piqued by that description, she decides to write a story about the season's villain, Cicada. She had been trying to avoid writing about this topic to ensure her own safety and not complicate the work of Team Flash, but she decided, after reading the blog, that it was worth the risk. While she runs the idea past Barry, it is evident within the scene that she will pursue this article independent of his response. Her next scene shows the beginning of her interviews with a civilian about the villain and his motives as she tries to release information to the public about dangerous activities that they could not know about without her knowledge and expertise.

She reappears within the episode, breaking into the villain's house alone, looking for information about him for her story. As Cicada returns to the home moments after she breaks in, she hides first and then sneakily makes her way to the front door to appear as an innocent visitor to the house. While the villain is hostile and locks her into the house, she sits down at the table, claiming that she is there to write a story about lead in the neighborhood's water supply. Unarmed and non-powered, Iris West stares Cicada in the eye, knowing all the damage he could do to her because of determination and agency.

While other stories and even previous seasons of the Flash would have had her call someone to save her immediately upon Cicada's entrance to the house. This scene shows that Iris can take care of herself and think on her feet. Unless there is an imminent threat to her health, she doesn't need a chauffeur or someone to save her. This approach to her character allows her to

be direct, making her aims known to the audience as she confidently asserts her position within the story. Unlike the typical structures within the comic book genre, no one is checking on her constantly or outrageously worried about her safety. While Iris' partner, Barry, knows that she is on a mission, there is an understanding that she can take care of herself. There is an unspoken understanding by this season that Barry would be there if Iris requested his assistance. Throughout this episode, Barry is consumed with another mission while Iris pursues her story, and as a result, *The Flash* displays them working and fighting crime independently, not diminishing either of their characters.

Later in the episode, Iris ends her rouse with the pretend story about lead poisoning and plans to leave the villain's home when she picks up the purse that she broke in with. Immediately, Cicada reminds her that she did not walk through the front door with a bag and prepares to attack her. The villain has a superpowered weapon and apparent strength, but Iris holds her own in a fight. She sprays him with pepper spray, knocks him to the ground, steals his weapon, and stabs him with it in an open wound. Finally, Iris looks at him as he yells in pain to say, "We're gonna beat you," announcing her position as a part of his opposition. By the time she calls "Team Flash," the situation has been dealt with, and their purpose is simply to scan the perimeter and help her problem solve. In the end, Iris finds a clue that she presumes will help the team defeat Cicada.

The "damsel in distress" generic form is not apparent within this episode. Iris is bold, calm, and capable as she declares her own investigation without anyone else's help. When it takes a turn and puts her life at risk, she utilizes practical tools and skills to fight back rather than panicking to be saved. When Barry hears of Iris' apparent danger in this episode, it is clear that

he is concerned, but the episode does not center his response but Iris' agency throughout the threat. Throughout this storyline, *The Flash* promotes a Black woman who can advocate for herself on screen without needing supernatural abilities. Her story references her connection to an extensive community that cares about her and some romantic involvement, but her strength and determination are presented within this narrative as a superpower equally as important to other characters. As the comic book genre and even young-adult dramas like *Gossip Girl* often feature the "damsel in distress" trope that inflates gendered expressions of heroism, Iris' storyline within this episode disturbs a long-established tradition of genre television.

"There is no Flash without Iris West"

The importance of Iris West to Barry Allen is a throughline for much of *The Flash's* storylines. Several seasons have showcased their relationship, focusing on their connection and mutual influence. West's primary role is to serve as the love-interest for the white male hero, The Flash (Barry Allen), but I argue she does not fall into the typical traps love-interests face in comics or Western media. She sets a new precedent for romantic leads on television, as she is tied to the core of the storytelling and not pushed to the sidelines of Barry Allen's story and his powers. Her importance in the narrative exists through key lines spoken to and about her in the story, her treatment as Barry's partner, and her inclusion within heroic storylines as an asset. Her character is not a passive inclusion based on the necessity for a romantic subplot for the series but is, instead, interconnected to every aspect of the story. As I analyze the importance of Iris West throughout *The Flash*, I will focus on the repeated theme and metaphor of Iris being a "lightning rod" throughout the series.

The relationship between Barry Allen and Iris West progresses slowly throughout the first two seasons and the first half of season three. Though it is established that they will end up together, it takes several seasons to progress. In *The Flash*, the symbol of a lightning bolt is part of the emblem of The Flash's suit and serves as an iconic reminder of his super speed. Barry Allen was struck by lightning to receive his powers. Referring to Iris as a lightning rod throughout the series and seeing her connection to the superpowers of The Flash reminds the audience that Iris is more than a chosen partner; she is intimately tied to the framework of Barry Allen's supernatural abilities and, by extension, bound to the center of the show.

The lightning rod imagery begins on screen before it is ever verbally acknowledged. In episode 19 of season one, a flashback shows Iris and Barry's connection before the characters know that he has powers. Before he became, *The Flash,* Barry Allen was struck by lightning and entered a coma for nine months. Episode 19 shows Iris as she touches his hands in the hospital room during Barry's coma. Emotional from his condition, she reaches for his hand, and a spark of lightning shocks her. This spark is the beginning of a supernatural connection that occurs with no one else in Barry's life. Iris is struck by lightning again in the 20th episode of season one. The Flash saves her life at the end of the episode by setting her on a platform, and as he lets go of her hand, another spark escapes his body, alerting Iris that The Flash and Barry Allen are the same person. This throughline continues through the next few episodes in season one as the show utilizes this lightning imagery to reveal Barry's identity as the Flash to Iris (1x21). As Iris realizes The Flash's identity, she is able to begin understanding how important she is in Barry's life even before they have a romantic relationship.

The most direct example of Iris' position as a "lightning rod" occurs at the end of season two. Barry's powers stem from a power source called the "Speed Force." The term lightning rod is most immediately tied to Iris' ability to stabilize this power within The Flash. In season two, episode 22, Barry gets propelled into the "Speed Force" and appears unable to get out. Iris is able to cut through the noise of Barry's emotions to reach in and assist Barry in his escape. Upon his return from the "Speed Force," he says, "the sound of your voice will always bring me home." Barry and Iris are not romantically tied at this point either, but there is a constant emphasis on their connection existing outside of just romance. A significant undertone within their interactions speaks to a relationship between them that is focused on mutual emotional grounding with the ability to affect every part of their lives.

The theme continues in episode 21 of season 3. After a severe memory lapse, Barry forgets his identity and how to use his powers. Spending time with Iris re-ignites his abilities and eventually restores his memory. While I could mention several other examples, moments occur throughout the series to ground Iris' importance in Barry's life beyond the typical love-interest subplot and lead them to work together as the show continues. Iris' connection with Barry's heroism keeps her at the forefront of the story in a way that is unique. In a genre where heroes try to separate their love lives from their lives of heroism, Iris and Barry keep their teamwork, romance, and supernatural connection at the core of their relationship.

There is an additional consideration to be made throughout this theme: Iris is not in competition with any other character for Barry's affection. The "lightning rod" imagery presents Iris as the only bond of relevance to the hero's story, alleviating anxiety about Iris being replaced or killed off throughout the show. They establish early on in the series that the character, his

heroism, and the series are dependent on Iris West just as much as Barry Allen. The lack of competition experienced by Iris vastly differs from the norm. Darling and Evans argue that adaptations that feature a white male protagonist generally show Black women on the sidelines in favor of a white woman. Even if the protagonist is sexually attracted to the character, that does not necessarily correlate to emotional ties or a relationship outside of sex. Almost every depiction of Iris and Barry's love story rests on an emotional connection above any type of physical connection. There are moments throughout the show that have not heavily featured Iris and even times where Barry casually dated other characters, but these moments were typically framed around Iris' perceived availability rather than a fight for Barry's affection.

The onscreen treatment of Iris West is transgressive for a Black woman character, but I argue it is even more so because of Barry and Iris's interracial relationship. Iris West being Black and Barry Allen being white is not a focus of the television show. And while that is sometimes at the expense of a lack of acknowledgment of Iris's Blackness in everyday life, interracial relationships are not typical in comic book adaptations. Iris West is a woman worthy of attention, affection, and protection, which are not themes typically associated with Black women characters in media. One of the ways this is displayed is how Barry Allen values her and gives to her. Love is expressed through fantastical displays of affection like home renovations and personalized songs. He speaks about her fondly and defends her in conversation even when she is not around. In a series led by a white man, it is easy to marginalize or objectify the love-interest to please the needs of the title character, but Iris West represents the idea that Black women deserve to be central in stories.

My claims about *The Flash* are contrary to the claims made by Darling and Evans concerning how Black women are sidelined in romantic dramas. The vast majority of *The Flash* features Iris West and her Black family. Unlike other dramas on the CW, relationships on *The Flash* are not based on mutual sexual exploitation in the ways suggested by Van Damme but are presented as a result of long-term friendship (83). Transgression in the case of *The Flash* involves a Black woman incorporated into every part of the story, adored, and respected without question. The centrality of Iris West's character also affects her hyper-sexualization as she is seen as a complete individual with a personality and contributions rather than just a body. Affection in *The Flash* is subtle, based on a fate connection and word choice, which works well when combined with the centrality of Iris West's character.

Conclusion

Rhetoric affects how to look at the character of Iris West as a Black woman in a comic book adaptation. She is pivotal to the main story of the hero and not simply a sexual object. In media, these themes do not fit into the typical expression of Black female characters. The CW*'s The Flash* depiction of this character allows for emotional vulnerability, personal agency, and story centrality, stretching the historical boundaries of the comic book genre.

As discussed in chapter 2, Iris West is not a perfect character. She still falls into common traps of racism and sexism that plague the genre of comic book adaptations. Nevertheless, I consider her transgressive qualities to be a movement in the right direction. Her addition to the genre is consequential and inspires the genre to be more inclusive for Black women. While much

can be improved with her characterization, the transgressive decisions in *The Flash* are positive moments of representation for fans of the genre.

I do not think that *The Flash* should need to invoke a post-racial sensibility in order to present a love story that features a Black woman. There are many opportunities to establish a narrative that centers on Black women and still acknowledges Blackness as an aspect of their identity. The post-racial ideology presents the treatment of this character as only possible through the lens of colorblindness. The implication in this instance is that a Black woman character in this genre could not have agency, emotional depth, and story centrality while still acknowledging her Blackness. Black women characters like Iris West should not need to sacrifice Blackness in order to be represented.

As Melancon explains, positive representations of Black womanhood transgress cultural spaces which often stereotype and marginalize Black women. The imperfect characterization of Iris West represents the reality of Melancon's assertions that Iris represents a long-lasting, Black love-interest who has positively impacted the genre throughout her run. Fans around the world praise Iris West not only because of the race-bent casting, which provides opportunities for Black women in a beloved genre, but because of the positive treatment and long-term commitment to the character.

Through this adaptation's decision to present Iris West as a Black woman, she shows the impact of representation within the comic book genre. What would it mean to include more multi-dimensional Black women in the genre? The first instance of Iris West appearing as a Black woman occurs on CW's *The Flash* but is now the standard presentation of Iris West throughout many character iterations. Much of this is inspired by the fans of Iris West and their

online campaigns to #KeepIrisBlack. When a solo film for *The Flash* was announced to be a part of the DC extended universe (DCEU), fans announced the impact of the CW's Iris West to convince the film creators to cast another Black woman to play the character (Tandon). Tandon chronicles fans' responses to the #KeepIrisBlack hashtag, noting:

> "#KeepIrisBlack bc black women deserve to see themselves as leads, ESPECIALLY in superhero films where they are ALWAYS excluded" (@youngavengersaf).
>
> "In summary, #KeepIrisBlack because it's important to see black women as leading ladies, especially on the big screen. Count me out if not." (@iriswestallens).
>
> "Main reason why I started the flash was bc first time I saw that a black girl like me could be loved by a superhero #keepirisblack" (@taliaalghul).

Her impact is tangible and continues to impact the genre. As a result of this Twitter campaign, Iris West will continue to be Black in the film adaptation. The fan response emphasizes the importance of representation in media.

Now that Iris West exists as a transgressive Black woman in this genre, how does the genre move forward from here? Is her character still considered transgressive in today's comic book adaptation climate? I think Iris West remains transgressive in comic book adaptation because the sample size of Black women in this genre is too small for any significant movement outside of Iris West. Since her creation, more Black women have existed in these adaptations across both of the main superhero content producers, *Marvel Comics* and *DC Comics*. Even within the CW superhero dramas, Black women are present in almost every new adaptation. The longevity and character development of these characters will provide more insight into what it means for Black women characters to disrupt the genre in future projects. To analyze their characterization, it is

necessary to consider what it means to be transgressive post-Iris West—making sure that more multi-dimensional, stereotype-disrupting Black women exist within the genre.

Chapter 4

Blurred Discursive Lines: Candice Patton, Affective Counterpublics, and Black Women Fandoms

Candice Patton started a movement on Twitter in 2018 that inspired dozens of interracial couples and families to post photos in the comments of her Twitter feed. The incident began when a Twitter user who used the handle @OlicityStan commented on the interracial relationship featured on *The Flash*, stating: "I have nothing against white men having jungle fever. Most of them are losers who can't get with attractive white women." Later in the thread, the same user referred to Black people as "savages," engaging further in hate speech on @OlicityStan's tweet thread. While unsettling, most online interactions like @OlicityStan's do not reach a major audience. In this instance, however, the tweets reached thousands of Twitter users and prompted a show of support for Patton because Patton, the actor playing Iris West, shared the interaction with her followers. Along with a retweet of @OlicityStan's original post, Patton declared, "Since you [@OlicityStan] continue with racist comments in my mentions you must want attention. Here you go…" Sharing this message openly with her online followers was strategic rhetorically. It invited her fan base to respond to the tweets, and, at the same time, it illustrated the abuse that Patton was regularly receiving.

Online hatred and racism welcomed Candice Patton to the world of comic book fandom before *The Flash* aired publicly. As I have argued earlier in this thesis, the character of Iris West is presented in a post-race fictional world. The real-world actor playing Iris West was forced to deal with explicit racism and misogynoir, most often expressed by "fans" of the show on platforms like Twitter and Tumblr. While scholars often acknowledge comic book fandom for its capacity to build community, Patton experienced firsthand the pitfalls of normative whiteness

among comic book fans. Due to the influx of tweets in a celebrity's inbox, it is unlikely that an actor will respond to a tweet like this. Perhaps Candice Patton understood her fanbase and anticipated their vocal response. Regardless, her decision to retweet the statements of her attacker became a call to action to her fans to handle the offense on her behalf.

The tweet from @OlicityStan was eventually deleted after Patton sent her army after the tweet and the user. The fans of Candice Patton obliterated the account, reporting the @OlicityStan and condemning the sentiments of the post. Underneath Patton's repost of this tweet, responses of praise and lament echo through the thread. For example, @SassinPants affirms Patton stating, "It's always the unmoisturized, dusty, and dry folks who stay loud and wrong. Girl continues to shine as we bask in your #Blackgirlmagic." Other comments apologize to Candice Patton, not only for the original tweet but also for the frequent expressions of violent hate she faced online. The pro-Candice Patton fan base became real and material in a unique way as they shared pictures of blended families and interracial relationships. Using the label of @OlicityStan's original post in their replies, fans such as @jennlee44 posted a photo of her and her husband's interracial relationship and then wrote, "Anymore room on the loser bus?"

The incident that surrounded @OlicityStan's tweet is only one of many examples as different fan communities came together to fight against the racist hatred received by Patton. Two broad groups emerged—a fandom comprised of mostly white fans who expressed hatred of Patton and sought to protect the whiteness of their favorite comic book characters and a new fandom that defended Patton. This second group of fans was largely comprised of Black women who viewed Patton's presence as a welcome transgression of the comic book, superhero genre. This second group devoted their time and energy to defending the fictional character they loved and the actress with whom they identified. This group of fans formed alliances with names such

as the Iris West Defense Squad. Due to social media and digital fandom, Black women worldwide connected through the shared affectual experience of "seeing" themselves reflected in a genre they loved. This affective experience, how certain fans responded to it, and what they did with that new shared sense of identity is the focus of this chapter.

This chapter will study the rhetoric of Black women fans of Candice Patton and *The Flash* to contend that this community is an affective counterpublic established through a shared experience of Blackness and their response to the racebending of Iris West. Within the other chapters of this thesis, I have established the importance of racebending Iris West and the complexities it reveals in the comic book genre regarding representation. This chapter looks more deeply into the connection fans have to Iris West and Candice Patton. It will address the relationship between the actor who performs the character of Iris West, the fans who advocate for the character's progression, and the stories presented for mass consumption. I will begin this chapter by chronicling the necessary context of racist hate and abuse received by Patton. This context is crucial because it was the catalyst that brought together the counterpublic of Black women who worked to defend Patton. After, I will discuss the interrelations of fandom, Blackness, and affective counterpublics. Next, I will analyze several fandom interactions that explore elements of fan affect through the rhetorical artifacts of Black women fandom. Finally, this chapter concludes by examining how studios and showrunners negatively impact fans in their exploitation of Black characters and Black actors. There is an opposition between the CW*'s* perceived hate speech policies and the network's silence amidst Patton's experiences.

Hate Speech, Racism, Candice Patton, and Iris West

The racist hate directed toward the actor Candice Patton led to the creation of a distinctive online community—the Iris West Defense Squad. The Iris West Defense Squad's primary function was (and is) to protect the fictional character of Iris West and advocate for a more expansive role for her in *The Flash* series. Through their continuous support and advocacy, they were able to utilize the show as an "identificatory model of their Black selves," which they battled for quality content and onscreen material for the character they loved (Warner, 253-254). The Iris West Defense Squad made their passion for Iris West known by fighting for romantic and independent storylines for Iris. Online discourse from the Iris West Defense Squad showcases a desire from fans to see a well-rounded Black woman character through Iris West. While not everyone in the Squad is Black, the majority-Black fandom responded to Black representation through online mediated interaction with the series.

Fan culture has long been an interest of cultural and rhetorical critics, looking to define what it means to participate in popular culture through fandom. John Fiske defines fandom by its connection with groups of consumers who select a type of media or a celebrity from broader popular culture and utilize it to create shared meaning together (30). He describes that these connections are "often associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race." Fans bond over a niche interest and their identities, using both to create a shared, new meaning within this group.

As Black fans negotiate their Black identities with and against the narrative representation of Iris West and the online hatred directed at Candice Patton ignites, an affectual

response based on the fan's lived experience emerges. The collective participation of fandom is an outlet to defend not only Patton but also themselves. The collective experience ignites a sense of power created by a united affination with the fandom's interest. Racialized attacks on the fictional character and actual actor offend the identities of the fanbase, generating online advocacy and protection. The IWDS is not a group established solely around a love object or interaction with the popular; much of the group's online interaction works to defend both Iris West and Candice Patton from the greater threat of white fandom spaces. While the hate directed toward both the character and actor is quite intense, like Fiske suggests, I believe the fierce protection from fans stems from the shared identity of Black womanhood.

Building upon Fiske's articulation of the discursive process of fandom, Henry Jenkins sets the boundaries for what it means to be a fan in his foundational book, *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins describes the fan experience as one that allows the individual to "construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images." He also establishes that a significant component of fan culture involves the fan's articulation of their concerns and opposition to their favorite media (23). The fans are engaged and participating in the process of this media, but online fandom expands fan engagement with websites like Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube, as these platforms allow fans to have direct access to the popular.

The creation of identity and vocalization of opinion through the collective experience of fandom can be positive when directed toward enhancing one's connection with the popular. Through the mediated expressions of fandom, fans can clearly explain their desires and goals for television shows, music, or movies to which they have attached themselves. Many fans of *The Flash* use social media to express their support for the series and its actors, but negative remarks and opposition to characters illuminate the racism that permeates white fandom spaces.

Much of the IWDS's history lies in their promotion of the Iris West character arc onscreen, but online hate spawned a different role for the fandom because of the constant online attacks directed at Candice Patton. Patton was "tagged" and "mentioned" in perverse material all over Twitter and Tumblr upon her casting and throughout the seasons of *The Flash*. An account on Twitter called "Solas Regrets" preserves a thread of 60 instances of online abuse directed at Patton through December of 2016. Many of the *Flash* "fans" who authored this online abuse claim to dislike Patton because she does not reflect what they grew up reading in the comic books. These fans prefer "purity" as the stories are converted from books to adapted media like television, and Patton represents a shift toward perceived political progressivism and woke culture. Their level of discontentment is nothing more than overt racism in most instances, as illustrated by the archive created by Solas Regrets.

Throughout the Twitter thread, Patton is attacked through text and images on Twitter. Tweets show fans comparing the actress to a gorilla. Other images show Patton painted white with a photo editing application with the caption: "Candice Patton looks better whitewashed" (BellaDashwood). The thread showcases tweets referencing Patton as a "thing" and calling her racial slurs. One commenter tweets: "#KillIris please!!! Only Barry and Caitlyn make the sparks…" (iamfreesoul3). The last tweet references a common request within the anti-Iris *Flash* fandom community that demanded the showrunner select any other white actress/character in the series to replace Iris West's role as Barry's love-interest. In the instance of the tweet, iamfreesouls3 refers to Caitlin Snow, the only white female recurring character on the show at the time of the tweet.

The comment of iamfreesous3 is common within anti-Iris *Flash* circles. Statements made online begin as seemingly innocent requests for an alternative pairing and then, through retweets

and mentions, devolve into overtly racist statements about Candice Patton. @Kubaniito tweets, "regardless of grants hair and eye color he is still a white male just like barry, that's the core." In this tweet, the author refers to Grant Gustin, the actor that plays Barry Allen and the Flash, explaining that while this casting changed the hair and eye color from the print version of Barry Allen, the "core" of the character is the same because he is still white. The anti-Iris fans of *The Flash* are clear in their communication of hatred toward Iris West's Blackness, but for brevity, I will limit the examples and shift my focus to the process of ownership fans feel over both the characters and the actors who portray them. As fans think they have ownership over *The Flash*, directing hate toward Patton, the same individuals reference Gustin as if they are friends. The participation in fandom blurs discursive lines as conversations about Iris West become conversations about Candice Patton. Racist fans of *The Flash* have no problem saying publicly that their hatred for Iris West and Candice Patton is due to the Blackness that the fictional character and real actor represent. Given the comments of Chapter 2 and the degree to which *The Flash*'s showrunners and directors have tried to avoid plots and dialogue that include the experiences of Black women, this level of hatred is remarkable and speaks to the cultural and ideological power of white supremacy.

Blurring the discursive lines of fandom becomes more severe as the actors who play these characters interact with "trolls" who engage in vicious online attacks. Candice Patton has a history of responding to fans who demand that her character die or call her slurs. Typically, she replies with witty comebacks, humor, and sarcasm. Throughout the series, she engages with fans and haters on social media, liking tweets from supporters, advocating for greater representation on the show, and sharing racist tweets on her page to invoke the Iris West Defense Squad's "attack-mode," like the example in my introduction. As much as the fans see and respond to the

racist comments directed at Patton, they display their connection to her Blackness with an affectual response that generates more love for her character. With efforts to make the character of Iris West trend on Twitter as new episodes air, these pro-Patton fans attempt to increase popularity and support for the fictional character Iris. Many fans create private group chats to discuss their passion for Iris' character, engaging in both fanfiction and fanart to represent the intense tie to this figure.

As the fan relationship grows between the fandom and Iris West, I argue the relationship between Black women fans and the persona of Candice Patton strengthens alongside it. Patton is well aware of the identity relationship her fans have with her and Iris West. She constantly uses her position as a public celebrity to bring up issues of representation and Blackness through mediated content and at fan events. Each of these instances, in turn, provides a platform to advocate further for her character. Additionally, her engagement with fans through the utilization of the Iris West Defense Squad highlights her ability to use the fanbase to help her fight back against the racist treatment she receives. Amid the violent speech directed at Patton, it seemed that there were no actors or studio executives who wanted to support her cause, so her Black women fans became the line of defense against the haters and "trolls."

The Affective Counterpublic of Comic Book Fandom

The publics sphere has long desired to "socially integrate" society while relying on exclusionary practices and elitist values (Calhoun, 6). Nancy Fraser expresses similar ideas through her analysis of the publics sphere's focus on the bourgeoisie. In her analysis, she considers the effects on people who are not the privileged, wealthy members of society, explaining how individuals are regularly excluded from what constitutes "the public" due to their

race and gender. To tie discussions of publics to ideas of fandom, it is crucial to examine elements of publics theory throughout culture, not simply in elite settings. Fandom, in its various forms, has a dominant sphere and a marginalized sphere, what we might call a counterpublic (Kang, 134). Fraser refers to this idea with what she names "subaltern counterpublics," addressing the ways that marginalized groups of people create their own sphere and discourse despite the dominant society. I argue that comic book fandom groups exist as a counterpublic because participation in fan culture exists outside the dominant mainstream spheres of public experience. While I think that all comic book fans exist in a counterpublic, white fans and marginalized fans, like Black women, exist in a separate counterpublic. The white counterpublic of fandom relies on its connections to whiteness and white identity creation to sustain itself. A marginalized expression of fandoms, like those hailed by Black women, exists separately, participating in fandom to negotiate expressions of Black womanhood.

There are several similarities in how discussions of fandom and discussions of publics intersect. Fraser identifies her study of publics with participation, similar to Jenkins' ideas for the creation of fandom communities. She describes an interrelation between publics and social identity, stating, "Participation means being able to speak in one's own voice...to construct and express one's cultural identity through idiom and style" (69). Fandom is a process of negotiating a fan's identity alongside the collective bond of a cultural artifact while still managing a position in the entirety of culture.

Michael Warner explains that a counterpublic is a means through which identity is "formed and transformed." Existing in a subordinated group adjusts the members' major values, beliefs, and distinguishing factors in a manner that may not be entirely understood by individuals outside of the counterpublic (424). While on a surface level, the material at the core of both

counterpublics is similar—both counterpublics share an appreciation for the comic book superhero genre— the interpretations and meanings associated with that genre are dependent upon each group's orientation toward whiteness. The processes of participation and negotiation with the desired object—the genre—occur regardless of one's racial identity, but the counterpublic of white fandom benefits from its ties to whiteness independent of the cultural stigmas surrounding comic books and their adaptations. Black women fandoms bring intersectional, marginalized identities to the outlet of fandom and exist in a parallel counterpublic that, ultimately, is stigmatized twice over. Their counterpublic is "counter" to mainstream forms of public affiliation, *and* they are counter to the white norms and expectations of traditional comic book counterpublics.

The Counterpublic of White Fandom

Mel Stanfill explains that whiteness is a structural foundation of fandom and fan studies constituted through the avoidance of racial difference (311). Stanfill bases his discussions on a popular term used to describe white institutions. Just as "predominately white universities" alludes to a university focused on preserving ideologies of whiteness and histories of exclusion, Stanfill describes "predominately white fandoms" as forms of community that focus on the preservation of their own whiteness and histories of exclusion. In his book chapter, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies," he establishes this analogy to note whiteness as a dominant function of fandom in which colorblind racism is employed to claim racial neutrality while sustaining racial exclusion (307). In this sense, fandom interaction extends Bonilla-Silva's claims about colorblind racism and the projected "race-less" society that continues to marginalize and oppress (1364). As white fans engage with fandom, they center

themselves and their experience above all else. Thus, white identity becomes the basis of fan expression and community. In essence, fans use their fandom object—e.g., properties such as *The Flash*—to represent themselves. While this affirms Jenkins' assertions surrounding fandom and identity creation, the engrained whiteness of fandom absorbs other fandom experiences through the centering of white identity (23).

Helen Young theorizes that the roots of fandom's whiteness are enhanced by many stories having racist origins. She notes the extensive history of exclusion in fantasy and other genres. In her study of online fandom, she argues that the "conventions" of genre promote whiteness through their stories and authors (738). I think this point is pivotal as it implies that the centrality of whiteness in fandom was curated by the creators of the fans' love object itself. As it is integrated within the stories of fantasy, whiteness in the object and the fandom is invisible to the fans until its purity is challenged (739). While Young speaks of fantasy, I believe these ideas identify themes within comic book fandom.

I argue that often the ideology of whiteness can be "invisible" in culture as it establishes a norm that is pervasive in that culture, but I also agree with Stanfill and Young's claims that colorblindness is a cover that allows whiteness a sneaky integration and centrality. The most critical aspect that ties together elements of Stanfill and Young's outlooks explores whiteness as the intended result of fandom. The whiteness of fan content and fan interaction rhetorically signifies that the media created and the discourse surrounding it must serve white individuals first and, sometimes, exclusively. When the centrality and priority of whiteness are challenged, the racialized attacks aimed at actors such as Candice Patton are an obvious result.

The Counterpublic of Black Women Fandom

I contend that Black women fans of Iris West exist within an affective counterpublic. When considering fandom studies and comic book adaptations, Black women also exist outside of the dominant culture, forming a counterpublic centered around the affectual response to television representation that identifies the members of Black female fandom. To be clear, Black women participate in fandoms that do not include any representations of Black womanhood, but there is a unique response to characters with which they identify, and that is the focus of this study. Many Iris West Defense Squad members were already fans of the comic book genre, but they created a new space to bond and express a collective identity because their own identity was represented in the genre they loved by the character of Iris West.

Black women are regularly left out of the conversations involving fan culture and community, but they continue to thrive amidst constant othering (Warner, 34). Clearly, their ostracized treatment in discussions of white fandom is racialized and not based on Black consumerism or participation. Kristen J. Warner addresses this in her chapter, "ABC's *Scandal* and Black Women's Fandom," arguing that fandom has moved away from identity-driven expression, which makes Black women fandoms unique in modern culture. As I have established, fandom discourse has traditionally focused on white men and women, rarely, if ever, considering Black women as an interested audience (33). As whiteness is already deeply rooted in fandom interaction, white fans have little need to engage explicitly with how their own identity is reflected in their object of desire. Concurrently, Black women regularly interrogate their identity relationships to the objects they love; consequently, they resonate deeply with fandom spaces where they can show up fully with every aspect of their identities. Black women are not welcome in most fandom expressions and are forced into their own area because "these women choose to exist despite their invisibility and exclusion" (35). Black women are fighting to

make themselves known in fandom spaces, especially when provided with a figure with which they can identify.

Black women desire to participate in fandom; consequently, they are constantly searching for figures that represent their experience but also allow them to escape from oppression in their daily lives. This process is as related to the concept of affect as it is to fandom. Simon O'Sullivan, Brian Ott, and Greg Dickinson establish the difference between affect and emotion in their work, "Redefining Rhetoric: Why Matter Matters," by defining affect as a bodily sensation or "fluctuating intensity." In this discussion, they describe how affects are a "mode of becoming and, hence, a way of knowing" (66). As Black women fans negotiate their identities alongside their chosen popular culture artifact and in the collective space of fandom, the concept of "becoming" allows for observation of how affect can inspire individuals through the fandom space. Fandom exposes the fans to new insights, exposing an embodied affectual experience of recognition and participation. I believe this affectual response in fandom is personal and collective, even sometimes involving the fans' object of desire in the process of its own becoming.

In conjunction with this view of affect, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick articulates how affect is a process of individuals being "attached to things, people, ideas, sensation, relations… and any number of things including other affects" (19). Building from Kosofsky Sedgewick, Hollis Griffin seeks to understand the intersection of affect and television, viewing affect as a "relational system" with the ability to create multiple modes of connection. When watching television, many stimuli work together and illuminate the process of affect as a form of attachment. In this way, fans can have an affectual response to the media they consume, to one

another, to the discussions and online engagement they experience, etc. Each of these responses informs how they understand and relate to the media that they consume.

For this chapter, I would like to think about affect as an embodied experience of becoming and attraction that is in constant relationship to other affective experiences. Fans attach to their object of affection, other fans, and the embodied reaction to their interest. *The Flash's* Black female fans describe a sense of attachment and belonging when discussing Iris West's casting and the television serial, but they also convey an embodied response to the hatred and experience that is leveled at Candice Patton as an actress. There is also a separate affectual experience within the community of fandom that has been built around these affects. The affectual response builds community between the fans and positions them within their own social relations and publics sphere. Fans have created a sustained counterpublic through online and in-person engagement connected to *The Flash* and the experience of Black woman representation.

Combining counterpublics theory with theories of affect, identity, and community leads me to consider affective counterpublics. Zizi Papacharissi discusses the relationship between emotion, affect, and acting within the context of political online discourse. To Papacharissi, an 'affective public' is "networked public formations that are mobilized . . . through expressions of sentiment." This idea of sentiment is foundational to my discussion here. At the interrelation of affect and counterpublics, sentiment is the concept that grounds this bond between fans and establishes a community or network with the purpose of uplifting and protecting a character or popular figure—i.e., what is seen in and experienced by members of the Iris West Defense Squad.

Within the mediated space of television, a dialogue occurs between the character, the actor, and the fans. This dynamic is often the focus of fandom studies that describe how

individuals attach and negotiate their identities in connection with the popular. The analysis I am engaging in here is in conversation with Kristen J. Warner's discussion in "(Black Female) Fans Strike Back: The Emergence of the Iris West Defense Squad." Fandom expression within the Iris West Defense Squad gives Black women rhetorical agency to uplift and support their "fan object" while advocating for "racial visibility" for themselves and their fandom community (Warner, 253). Throughout the history of the series, fans have taken it upon themselves to help Iris West to be the best possible representation of a Black woman despite the compromises and complexities that corporate racebending creates in its preferred modes of narrative representation. In this way, the actor, Candice Patton, becomes a key node of shared connection and collective advocacy. Fans see and embrace the creation of a Black Iris West, despite its problematic execution, as positive. They then use that moment of representation to connect with the person behind the role, looking at Candice to affirm their concerns about and connection to the series.

The "*DC* in DC" Event as a Constitutive Touchstone

In this section, I will analyze an event that shows Black women fandom as an affective counterpublic. I will study a panel discussion where Candice Patton describes Blackness and representation at a public fan event. The interactions that occur at the "*DC* in DC" event between Candice Patton and her Black women fans are an example of a moment where the fanbase recognizes itself as the collective that it is. This interaction was not the first time that fans of Patton were able to connect through a live, shared experience of affective affiliation and fandom love, but I believe this moment is a constitutive touchstone.

Candice Patton at "*DC in DC"*

In January of 2018, *DC Comics* hosted their "*DC* in DC" event at the Newseum in Washington, DC, to showcase marginalized groups in comic books and introduce their new series on the CW, *Black Lightning. DC Comics* brought in-field experts, television show producers, and actors from the comic book adaptations to speak on various panels for the event. Candice Patton was one of the featured actors and appeared on two panels: "The Many Shades of Heroism: DC Heroes Through the African American Lens" and "Wonder Women." I attended this event and witnessed Patton's answers to the commentator's questions. My analysis here is based on my experiences at the event and the videos I took there.

On the Wonder Women panel, Patton was asked to speak on representation and her role in inspiring young Black girls. Her response, as I have transcribed it from the video, is as follows:

> **Candice Patton**: "These girls that come up to me they look…like me. They look how I looked as a child. And how I craved to see that…I craved that so much as a child, and it was just never there. So, all of my heroes were, you know, white and blonde…what makes it difficult for a woman like me is that it felt *outside* of myself. It felt like something 'over there' for people who looked 'like that'...it felt like 'that's so cool,' but that could never happen to me. I'm always going to be the 'best friend.'"
>
> **Commentator**: "Seriously! We [Black women] were never *Barbie*; we were always *Christie*."

> **Candice Patton**: "Yeah, we were always *Christie*! And even when I was starting in Hollywood, all of the roles that I would go in for were the best friend of the 'pretty white girl,' and so for the first time, *I'm* the pretty white girl!"

Within this short dialogue, Patton describes the exclusion at the core of Black women's engagement with popular culture in the United States. She explains that in her experiences, white and blonde features were central element to the leading women she saw on television. Patton alludes to a time when Black actors were not leading characters or leading love-interests, often serving within the role of "best friend" to a white lead when reflected in media. Patton relates to the audience and the fans who come up to her, expressing their Blackness through the expression, "they look like me." While she can relate to their experience, she exposes this experience as outside of what is "normal" to American popular culture and greater society in the United States. This connection between Patton and the young girls who "look like her" depends on two central experiences: Blackness and fandom.

The fans in the audience listening to Patton can recall similar feelings, existing outside of cultural norms for media representation. In this explanation, Patton acknowledges that her portrayal of Iris West manifests some of the representation she wanted growing up. Through this acknowledgment, I contend that an affectual bond between Patton and the audience is built. Patton and her Black women audience share a deep desire to be seen and represented in genre television. Most importantly, Patton describes the affective process as a becoming and an attraction.

Patton describes having "heroes" and figures of influence, similar to how her fans view their experience with Patton's character on *The Flash.* There is a desire to see people on television and in culture who can identify with your experience, and Patton describes this desire

as a “craving.” Black women are constantly negotiating their identities alongside culture, connecting to whatever is available to them at the moment. She states that representation of Blackness within the media of her upbringing was “never there,” insinuating that the lack of representation in media was a problem noticed by Patton even before she was at the age to put words to what she observed (or didn’t observe).

The words “never there” speak to more than just the lack of Black women and Black love-interests in the comic book genre; the words point to the larger process of cultural production. Patton unknowingly describes to her fans an affective process of engaging with media, and her description simultaneously expresses the lived experiences of the counterpublic of Black female fandom and identifies Patton with that counterpublic. Her words may not make sense or have the same impact on individuals outside of the counterpublic of Black fandom. Individuals outside of the counterpublic, individuals who grew up feeling represented in every mediated space are not likely to relate to Patton’s perspective.

The affective bond between Patton and her fans is evoked further as the fans watch Patton testify about the difficulties and challenges of being a Black woman who must accommodate normative whiteness in culture and in her acting career. In her comments about Black women being subjected to roles of the “best friend” instead of leading women, her example reinforces sentiments of undesirability and exclusion. In this context, there are specific roles and experiences for people who are white with blonde hair and roles for people who are Black, prepositioned by society’s anti-Black sentiments. The commentator echoes Patton’s point with another example of Black women's marginalization: the difference between Barbie and Christie. Patton and her fans share in the collective experience of marginalization that begins in early childhood as Black women in media are shown as accessories to white womanhood. Both

Patton and the commentator allude to ways that diversity and representation are used by popular culture to complement whiteness. Minority characters are always best friends rather than the hero or heroine that is worthy and desirable by all. Patton explains the history of typical Black women's roles to separate the character of Iris West from the representations of Black women from Patton's upbringing.

In response to the dialogue transcribed above, the crowd cheers and joins Patton to celebrate three main affective experiences. The first is the embodied reaction to Iris West's groundbreaking lead role in The Flash series representing a Black woman as desirable in American media. Patton represents the history of longing experienced by her and her fans as Black women fight to relate to characters "outside" of themselves. The second affective experience involves Candice Patton as a presentation of what it means to show up boldly as a Black woman, even on a panel of majority-white women. Her final assertion within this clip is, "for the first time, I'm the pretty white girl!" "I'm the pretty white girl" asserts that her position on *The Flash* is not that of a "diversity hire" or best friend. She is worthy of the female lead and willing to own it. Third, she speaks to the experience of comparison that Black women feel in the United States, as their worth, beauty, and relevance are compared to the standard of whiteness (Bryant, 81). Patton speaks to a desire to exhibit a new reality through media representations where Black women can set their own standards for their lives and, perhaps, declare a new "standard" for others who will come afterward.

Fans attending this panel witnessed Patton step into her identity as an actress, a fan, and a Black woman, which allowed them to connect to her experiences. This interaction displays the blurred discursive lines in fandom when fans are invested beyond the fictional character from their chosen media. Because affects are attracted to other affects, each element of this experience

speaks to a different aspect of a multi-dimensional fandom experience. As Patton relates to every part of her identity in this panel, she reaffirms how Black women uniquely bring their identities to fandom. Patton and her fans can communicate through their shared identities in this affective counterpublic.

The Iris West Defense Squad in Action: Fandom Rhetoric Analysis

To fully flesh out the fandom community surrounding Iris West and Candice Patton, it is necessary to analyze fandom rhetoric further. In this section of my chapter, I will present four separate examples which depict online discourse associated with Candice Patton and Iris West. Warner suggests this fandom shows up to defend as a reflection of personal and collective agency. While I agree with Warner's claims, I think it is essential to acknowledge that there is no limit to how fans can advocate for their love object through online fandom. Participation and advocacy in the Iris West Defense Squad include interactions with various goals. The over-arching goal is the defense and support of Iris West and Candice Patton, but the expressions of agency show up differently in every interaction. This portion of the chapter engages with ways fans defend against attacks, how fans hold actors accountable, how fans celebrate their love object, and how fans support each other in interactions with the popular.

Fandom Divisions

I mentioned earlier that among the broad array of fans of *The Flash*, there is considerable division regarding who should be Barry Allen's love-interest. Much of the protection offered by the IWDS is in response to racist fans that want the fictional character of Caitlin Snow to replace Iris West as the primary love-interest. While that is not automatically a racialized desire, discussions that begin with the suggestion of Caitlin Snow often lead to intense displays of overt

racism. In these instances, the Iris West Defense Squad responds to the attacks on both Candice Patton and Iris West. Within fandom, it is common to have a joint title given to a couple on the show. This tag or label is commonly referred to as a ship name. Within the fandoms of *The Flash*, Iris West and Barry Allen are affectionately referenced as "WestAllen" or "WA." For the pairing of Caitlin Snow and Barry Allen, the couple is labeled as "SnowBarry," and fans of the Snow and Barry relationship are called "Snowbarries" or "SBs."

On a Tumblr Blog called "The Linguist," there is a post called "Open Letter to the SnowBarry Fandom." Within this post, The Linguist references how SnowBarry fans, Snowbarries, consistently argue that their preference for the Snow Barry relationship is not a racist hatred for Iris West. In this letter, The Linguist provides a basis for their claims by posting screenshots from a Tumblr account called "SnowBarry WC." The screenshots posted by The Linguist show startling language that degrades Iris West, Candice Patton, and their Black fans. Specifically, the SnowBarry WC blog attacks the decision to race-bend the character of Iris and claims that Candice Patton's Blackness ruined any chance the show had to follow "comic book canon." Multiple comments are made throughout the SnowBarry posts about Candice Patton's skin, while, in contrast, the defenders of SnowBarry argue extensively that Caitlin Snow looks and acts more like 1950s Iris West even though Caitlin Snow was never a love-interest of Barry Allen in the comic book lore. They write, "She [Iris] does not represent humanity, Caitlin does, that's why she's well-liked, and Iris never will be. CP's rank personality is a big part of why Iris' persona isn't genuine or likable" (The Linguist). Discursive lines between the actor and character are crossed again as Candice Patton's personality is identified as the reason for contempt toward the character of Iris West. Additionally, fans of Iris and Patton are referred to as "testosterone-filled black bitches" in SnowBarry WC's dialogue. The Linguist uses these posts and statements

to demonstrate that SnowBarry fans who argue that their position has nothing to do with race reveal the exact opposite in their own discourse.

In online communities, it is the IWDS that locates and exposes racism, such as the ideas posed by SnowBarry WC. The Linguist screenshots the racist posts before they are deleted from the original blog, organizes the posts into an open letter, and then shares their thoughts as a form of analysis to fight back against the racist abuse. The Linguist's open letter serves two primary functions in fandom interactions. The first purpose of the letter is to alert others who defend Candice/Iris that a new instance of racist abuse has emerged. Fandoms of one counterpublic are not always aware of what occurs in other fandoms. The second purpose of this open letter is to provide a model for other members of the IWDS to follow as they encounter hate speech that resembles the posts from SnowBarry WC.

The open letter on Tumblr is essentially an ethnographic project to analyze SnowBarry statements in a public space. The Linguist presents the actions of SnowBarry WC as something the Iris West Defense Squad should know about and stay away from, revealing the severity of the racism within the Snowbarry fandom. In the letter, the warning to the IWDS reports other online accounts that frequently interact with SnowBarry WC, showing the members of this counterpublic which websites, blogs, and account users have similar opinions. The Linguist comments that they have been watching SB fandom interactions for over two years and have thoughtfully decided never to remove the post. The letter ends with "It has to be said, and it has to be seen," which further showcases the writer's desire to reveal the findings to a broad audience.

The Linguist's letter stands up to some of the perpetrators of Candice Patton's abuse by calling them out individually within this online forum. The evidence posed throughout the letter

disputes and disrupts the SnowBarry fandom's assertion that their preference for the Snow and Barry pairing is unrelated to race matters. While many commenters beneath the letter continue to argue The Linguist's claims against them, the messages exchanged through Tumblr blogs are preserved through this post. The narrative within The Linguist's letter presents the message to hopefully deter individuals from aligning with racist messaging while also validating the efforts of the Iris West Defense Squad. Fan activism, in this example, exposes hate that might go unseen without their aid.

Fans Hold Actors Accountable

In a now-deleted post from July 11, 2019, the lead actor on *The Flash*, Grant Gustin, posted a video on his Instagram which showed his support of the LGBT community. While fans of Candice Patton did not insinuate his support was misplaced, this post's comments were flooded with criticism. Patton's fans questioned how he could so boldly support one marginalized community while still avoiding any public statement about the racism experienced by Candice Patton throughout the five years that *The Flash* had aired. A Business Insider Netherland Post chronicles the exchange as one fan writes in Gustin's comment section, "does blocking people without saying a word actually count as defending a costar against racism they've faced for 5 years? genuinely asking" (Singh). Many fans have been engaging in advocacy surrounding *The Flash* throughout the entirety of the show by questioning the silence of Patton's white costars about her treatment.

After a long history of Patton discussing her racialized experience both on set and in fandom spaces, why are the people surrounding her allowed to ignore her comments? Fans

wanted more from Gustin, making their desire to be heard clear as support for Patton flooded his comments. The fans felt that if he could stand up for one marginalized group, he could publicly acknowledge the racial discrimination that Patton regularly faced. Another follower responds to Gustin, saying, "imagine what Candice goes through and feels seeing those nasty things in her mentions and notifications every day, but you're not ready for that conversation" (Singh). Gustin replies,

> I'm actually here trying to have it. Candice is our Iris. My Iris. Always has been and always will be. I'm pretty sure I've made that clear in every single interview I've given about our characters over the years. And Candice and I have always worked professionally together. She knows I have her back. I will absolutely be better about denouncing hideous remarks and not just blocking. There's nothing else I can say. Peace.

Gustin is correct in his claims that he's affirmed Candice's casting as Iris West, sharing positive feedback about her audition. He explains in several interviews that her portrayal was extraordinary and separated her from the other women who auditioned. The results of this encounter lead to Gustin posting a video that acknowledges the fan concerns, explaining that the comment section "turned into something completely different that had to do with race and *The Flash* and support or lack of support that's not existed for five years publicly, I guess" (Singh). Gustin alludes to other times that he has advocated for Candice Patton in interviews, implying fan comments were not acknowledging his prior responses. His opening comment reveals a disconnect between his messages and the fans' claims. The fans recognize Gustin speaks about supporting Patton but assert that his previous support does not outwardly acknowledge her

Blackness. It seems that privately there have been outward displays of support, but fans craved a public display from Gustin that focused on the specific and lived experience of anti-Black racism.

Some fans even tried to help Gustin defend Patton by leaving suggestions in the comments section of the Instagram post. One fan, Biggurlgeek, tells Gustin to tell his audience that Candice Patton is "black and beautiful" and begs that he "denounce fans that want Barry with Caitlin because she's white..." Not only did the fans demand that Grant Gustin intentionally defend Candice, but they also helped him to craft a message that would please their desires. The statement released by Gustin utilizes the help offered to him by Iris West fans and uses some fan-suggested language in his response. Fandom engagement with Gustin's Instagram post led him to make his stance on the matter clear and direct. In the video he posts, he explains,

> I want to go ahead and make a blanket statement, PSA, put it out there right now on my Instagram if it hasn't been taken in through interviews over the years. But our Iris is an African American actress. She is black, she is beautiful, and she is our Iris, and she always is gonna be. Always has been, always will be.

Regardless of the fan responses to Gustin's new statement, publicly supporting Candice Patton in this way was a direct result of fandom interaction. Many fans praised Gustin for his efforts, elated to see his affirmations after their five-year-long wait, but some only became more hesitant about his motives. To some fans, this public declaration of support was performative and only further highlighted the disturbing treatment encountered by Patton. A blog called "The Female Blerd" features a post entitled: "Blindspots: Why Grant Gustin's Recent Defense of Candice Patton Upset Me." The writer expresses disappointment in the response because it was directed to the fans, not Candice Patton. The writer states, "Am I disappointed? Yes, in Grant

and in myself because I saw him and many of The Flash's cast ignoring the clear hate that Candice was getting, and I ignored it because I did not want to taint my view of them or the show…." To some fans, this public declaration of support was performative and only further highlighted the disturbing treatment encountered by Patton. Additionally, the model of Gustin's response articulates a desire for fans to leave him alone. The motivations for this video are not entirely clear, but what is clear is that the fans of *The Flash* and the IWDS wanted to see the series' lead "stand up" on behalf of Patton and, in that respect, they held Gustin accountable for the type and degree of support her was offering to Patton.

The experience noted through Grant Gustin's Instagram post comment section locates an example that acknowledges the complexities of fandom interaction. In defending Candice Patton to Gustin, ultimately, the fans got the results they wished for through his video response, but the video was clearly for the fans' approval. While he is criticized, there is no other way Gustin's response could be received. Fans did not want to believe Gustin supported Patton privately; they wanted to hear him say it to *them.* After years of supporting Patton through fandom interaction and affective response, the leading actor's support provides a sense of validation for all of the labor of the IWDS.

Appreciation for Iris West

In an article entitled "Thank You, Candice Patton, For Being Iris West," on a popular blog, *Geeks of Color*, J'Neia S. describes her response to Candice Patton's casting and portrayal of the character. J'Neia expresses her initial disinterest in *The Flash* adaptation, assuming there would be a "majority white cast" like other superhero shows. She describes the show's airing while she was a sophomore in college with "identity issues," depression, and anxiety: "...my

mood lifted just enough to for me to get up and turn the TV on." A lifetime comic book fan, J'Neia explains the difference between this media and the other media she consumed, explaining the juxtaposition of Candice's portrayal alongside the reality of constant injustice and misogynoir experienced daily by Black women in America.

J'Neia writes, "I felt myself grappling with an essential part of who I was and how I could exist as a Black woman in a world that had already decided I wasn't pretty enough (or maybe I was, for a Black girl)." J'Neia alludes to how whiteness defines the beauty norms and impacts personal perceptions and self-esteem as whiteness is both "valued and desired" (Rosario et al., 502). "You're pretty, for a Black girl" is a common phrase said to Black women in America, implying true beauty is reflected in whiteness alone. J'Neia comes to *The Flash* and Iris West within her process of identity negotiation, where she is deciding who to be while connecting to a broader world that has opinions about who Black women should be.

The article describes the impact of Candice Patton's Iris West and how the character transformed how J'Neia viewed her identity and Blackness. Iris West is not a token character marginalized within the series; she is seen as beautiful, worthy, and brave. Representation allowed J'Neia to locate these things in herself alongside Iris West and presented a counter-narrative to the poor treatment received by Black women day-to-day. In a sense, the Black representation of Iris West is aiding fans to resist US cultural ideologies of racism and colorism.

The open letter/article ends with, "Thank you for courageously bearing the racism and misogyny of those who cannot stand the sight of you in the position you are in and slaying every single episode anyway." This experience, explained by J'Neia S., speaks to the rhetorical process exposed when Black representation and affect reach an intersection within the counterpublic of Black fandom. As Black women already feel left out of comic book media, as J'Neia expresses

through the assumption of a white cast, the affective response to Iris West's Blackness provides new pathways for fandom affect as the character provides a reimagined identity for the fan. Moments of transformation and positive self-esteem throughout the letter reveal the bright sides of fandom interaction, but J'Neia ends by discussing the impacts of racism in fandom.

At the intersection of Black representation, fandom, and affect is a discursive process where, as J'Neia describes, the representation of a character inspires investment in the actor who portrays the character. In addition to this investment in the material, inspiration also can lead to a community based on interaction with people who have similar experiences. I remember the original posting of this article, as many of the Iris West fans or Iris West Defense Squad (IWDS) were in a similar age range as J'Neia when she posted this letter. I created my own version of this letter between my freshman and sophomore years of college in a YouTube video called "How Candice Patton Changed My Freshman Year," including similar sentiments. My video also describes how the character of Iris West and, eventually, Candice Patton's figure evoked confidence and inspiration within me. Interactions like those described in J'Neia's blog post and my YouTube video illuminate ideas posed by Michael Warner as counterpublics like fandom transform one's perception of self, transforming one's identity.

J'Neia and I both wanted to speak directly to Candice Patton about the affective experience produced by her, "our," Iris West. Still, we could not finish our responses without acknowledging Candice Patton: actress and survivor of hate speech and racism. As a race-bent, Black woman character, Iris West allowed us to escape from the difficulties of our daily experience, but Candice Patton and her online discourse reminded us of the real-life challenges of being a Black woman in America. In my experience and observation of the IWDS, the knowledge of Patton's online abuse from non-Black *Flash* fans created more motivation from

fans to protect Iris West and Candice Patton. Due to social media and digital fandom, Black women worldwide connected over the affectual response to "seeing" themselves reflected in a genre they loved and rallied to advocate and defend both the representation that occurred onscreen and the human being who made that representation possible.

Conclusion

The various examples of fandom discourse revealed through online fandom interactions reveal the rhetorical process of fandom. While some scholars have focused on fans' actions to protect their "fan object," I argue their most significant source of connection is through the affective counterpublic created through their response to Candice Patton and Iris West. In this chapter, I establish the Iris West Defense Squad as an affective counterpublic.

While Patton bonds with her fans through articulating the experiences of Black womanhood and exclusion, it is necessary to also note that this is not a perfect representation. The affectual bond between her and her fans does not address the post-racial ideology reflected onscreen in *The Flash* and discussed in chapter 2. Onscreen iterations of Iris West do not engage matters of race, but the mistreatment of Candice Patton online is purely racial, evoking affect in the Black female audience. As Candice Patton engages with fans about her experience with racism and representation, fans can connect through her racialized experience as both a consumer of television and the actress they love. While the fan relationship exposed through this constitutive touchstone is rhetorically rich, it highlights a major concern as comic book properties cast Black women in race-bent roles without the promise or interest to protect them from hatred and online trolls. Due to the lack of protection and advocacy from television

networks or other actors, fans feel responsible for creating a line of defense for actresses like Candice Patton.

While I appreciate that fictional stories are beginning to include Black women, what does it say about Black women's real-world experiences that they are left to defend themselves in the workplace and online? Fans step up to support these actors in whatever ways they consider best, typically advocating through online discourse. Even though fans were highly protective of Candice Patton and Iris West, it did not usually influence the level of public support she received from the CW or *Flash* producers. Since George Floyd's murder in 2020, networks like the CW have been more vocal about the experience of Black actors in genre television, but there is much progress to be made.

The Flash television show's *Twitter* account released a CW statement on June 15, 2020, which stated:

> Words matter. The CW is committed to making our social pages a safe place for our fans and talent. We will not tolerate and will block racist or misogynistic comments as well as any hate towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Jessica Castillo at *TeenVogue*, released an article after this post named "The Flash" Fans Defend Candice Patton in Light of The CW Policy," where she chronicles how the Iris West Defense Squad called out to the network. @Katieminard writes,

> this is nice and all but let's not forget Candice Patton has been speaking up about the racist comments she's been attacked with from "fans" of this show for 6 seasons and they're just now doing something."

@bestofiriswest responds, "Candice Patton spent 6 years taking it all by herself, do better for her and for so many other black women who work at your company." This claim is not enough to

compensate for the ongoing abuse received by Patton and the other Black actresses working for the network. The post made by the network further highlights a disconnect between the fan discourse of groups like the Iris West Defense Squad and the people who have the power to defend actresses like Candice Patton on a larger scale. Fans can do what they can in their advocacy, but the primary function of these interactions is to reinforce an identity-centered community around the affective experience of fans. Fan spaces like the "*DC* in DC" event in Washington, DC, and online fandom discourse, represent moments of fandom interaction that affirm the affective experience of fandom for Black people. Rather than being protected by the television studio, the CW, or the Warner Brothers corporation, Patton must advocate for herself, or her fans must advocate for her. As fans watch Patton fight against constant negativity, fans are inspired to advocate for her within their fandom, willing to step in on her behalf. Through this exercise, they defend Iris West, Candice Patton, and their identities as Black women in America fighting to be seen every day.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

On August 1, 2022, online news sources announced that the 13 episodes of the 2023 season, season nine of *The Flash* would be its last (Goldberg). While there had been speculation that the show would soon end for several years, the official end was met with mixed reactions from fans who followed the series for nearly a decade. In some respects, the cancelation may have little to do with the show. The CW seems to be revamping its platform once again and several superhero-themed shows have been canceled within a short period of time. As the climate of superhero-inspired media appears to be changing and as the CW purges *DC Comics* content and *Marvel* is producing content for streaming limited to *Disney+*, the question of "What's next?" seems to loom in the background of the genre. In addition to the change in platform and storytelling within the comic book genre, *The Flash's* ending presents an opportunity for honest and expressive context for the series' post-racial, colorblind orientation with the character of Iris West.

On July 3, 2022, an interview performed by Elliot Knight with Candice Patton about abuse on-set and within fandom aired. It focused on both the general pitfalls of being a Black actor and the specific violence Patton endured on *The Flash*. While it is unclear whether the airing of this interview was planned in conjunction with *The Flash's* cancelation, *The Open Up Podcast's* first episode features the first interview with Candice Patton specifically meant to highlight the layers of abuse on *The Flash*. Due to the apt timing of the interview and the podcast's intersections with the themes of this project, I would like to offer a brief analysis of the podcast's content, as the interview confirms, explicates, and ultimately summarizes this thesis. Most significant to this project, the podcast includes engagement with how Blackness interrupts

normative whiteness both on-set and within the series of *The Flash*. While this chapter will not delve too heavily into the on-set treatment of Candice Patton, it is necessary to draw from a few of her experiences to discuss how the comic book genre can move forward.

What is overwhelmingly clear in the confessions aired on *The Open Up Podcast* is that the rhetorical considerations highlighted within this thesis surrounding *The Flash's* choices to ignore Blackness and Black womanhood were intentional on the part of the network, producers, and even the showrunners. Patton highlights the battle she faced throughout the series against harmful and unending microaggressions. The overarching commentary of the podcast suggests that the creators of the show attempted to extend the post-racial ideologies presented on *The Flash* to Candice Patton and refused to consider that her experience might be different from her majority white costars. In the interview, Patton highlights her treatment on-set and with "higher-ups" (like the studio of Warner Brothers and the creators of the show), explaining that it was "so bad" that she wanted to leave the show by season two. She continued to work on *The Flash* not primarily out of love for the show but out of her contractual obligations. From the show's refusal to hire a hair stylist with experience with Black hair to the producers' unwillingness to defend her from social media attacks, Patton describes pervasive white supremacy on set. Not only was her Blackness was not considered, but her Black experience was not believed when she expressed it to others. Any moves she made to advocate for her own Blackness as an actor or for the fictional character of Iris West were ignored until the point when she decided to abandon politeness and respectability.

The work climate on the set of *The Flash* was so hostile that Patton eventually decided that she had to shed her "nice girl" mode of relating to her co-workers. She describes her need to develop a more direct, "tough" persona to survive the constant racialized abuse. She mourns the

fact that she became the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype in the minds of network creatives and executives but understood why a more aggressive and defensive posture is often necessary for Black women who struggle against what Patton calls "the way the world responds." Though I have communicated previously in this project the difficulty of Patton's experience with fandom racism, the racist on-set treatment she describes in this interview highlights the harm of post-racial storytelling imposed on *The Flash*. The attempt to commodify Black women through racebending centers whiteness within every facet of the show.

Patton's recent disclosure of her treatment erases all speculation among the *The Flash's* fanbase. Indeed, it confirms three critical arguments of this project. The first is that *The Flash* engaged in the intentional avoidance of politics and, further, that any substantial engagement with race was viewed by the network as political. Of course, race and representation are political, but, as this thesis had demonstrated, the absence of race and the support of a post-racialist ideology is equally political. The second aspect highlighted through Patton's comments is that *The Flash* production, writers, and creators are aware of their racialized failings on-screen and off. Even if one argued that the whiteness of the industry and the show's creatives posed a blind spot at the beginning of the series, fan discourse and Candice Patton's constant advocacy revealed the problems quite explicitly. The show had all the information needed to correct itself over the course of seasons, and while there seems to have been some effort to help the issues on set, on-screen representations were continuously ignored even after they were brought to the attention of the network and showrunners. Third, the CW and *Warner Brother*'s refusal to protect Candice Patton and their complicit contributions to her abuse are violent acts that position Patton as the target and the problem when she decided to assert herself on social media or on set. She was left to fight for herself, and, when she did, the network manipulated the discourse

surrounding her efforts to suggest that she needed "special treatment" due to her Blackness. Her Blackness rather than the white supremacist roots of Hollywood, fandom, and the comic book genre became the focus of public attention in news releases and commentary provided by the CW.

Much more could be said about the interview Patton gave in *The Open Up Podcast*. It could be studied in its entirety as its own chapter, because it affirms and explicates several Black women's experiences in the workplace and, even more specifically, what it means to work as a Black woman in Hollywood. Due to time constraints and the expectations of a thesis's conclusion, I would like to consider my research questions within and through Patton's claims at the end of *The Flash*. First, I will consider the rhetorical implications of the Iris West character and how the genre can move forward. Then, I will discuss how this project reveals the white supremacy and respectability politics that continue in the comic book genre.

Rhetorical Impact of Iris West

The impact of *The Flash's* racebending of Iris West continues to propel through comic books and science fiction as the racebending of characters continues in Hollywood movies and television serials. Though the issues of social media protocols and fandom discourse have now become public in race-bent casting decisions, racebending Black women in adaptations is seemingly so successful that online furors do not change the decisions of network executives. *The Flash* will air for nine seasons of television on the CW, the longest-running superhero series in recent CW history. The popularity of the series as one of the most watched/streamed shows through the nine-season run presents factual evidence that the inclusion of a primary, race-bent character did not harm the show; it helped it. One could paint a picture where the decision to

"avoid" politics by de-emphasizing and even ignoring race was the right commercial decision that led to the successful integration of the show and solved the age-old problem of having no Black characters in the comic book genre.

I believe that progress for Black women characters like Iris West within the comic book genre needs to be defined in ways that don't only focus on commercial success or general popularity. Progress for Black women characters should be defined according to the character's role in the story and the consequences of that role for broader discussions of race and racism. The answer to the whiteness and racism in superhero adaptations isn't merely to create Black women superheroes. That is, the inclusion of Black women as leading heroes is deeply important to the comic book genre, but the evidence and analysis of this thesis suggests that more attention should be played to the role and consequences of supporting characters. There are ways to write supporting characters in comic book stories which bring humanity to the stories without racist and sexist tropes. Additionally, acknowledgment of Blackness and intersectionality add value to storytelling and further strengthen the human character's ties to "the real world." Many of the rhetorical problems with Iris West's characterization could be significantly improved with a commitment to seeing her as a Black woman and not simply a comic book love-interest who happens to be a person of color.

In Candice Patton's own words describing the character of Iris West in *The Open Up Podcast*:

> I was put in to play this white person, but this character wasn't tailored to a Black woman because I'm playing her, and I come with Blackness and a Black experience. And as much as I can be the heart of the flash and the love of his life

> and this tenacious reporter and super smart woman. I'm different because I'm Black, and that comes with some things.

Similar to what Patton discusses in this quote, the decision to racebend must include changes to the "original" character beyond the color of their skin. Racebending in the comic book genre must include a total shift of the character's being that acknowledges the reality of a racialized ontologies in the United States and the West. Comic book stories are fantastical in nature, but due to their typical grounding in aspects of reality via politics and conversations of crime and justice, the acknowledgment of race is non-negotiable. The writers and creators of the show can try to resolve the problems that this thesis has considered by giving the characters such as Iris West their own agency and, in the process, a full acknowledgment of their race and gender.

This project has demonstrated the need for inclusion throughout the comic book genre, but it has also demonstrated why that is a difficult place to begin the work of inclusive storytelling. It is not at all clear that the genre values Blackness in any capacity. If the genre continues to racebend superheroes and their love-interests, it must consider what it means to value Blackness not only as a genre (a rhetoric of expression) but also among its fans. If Blackness is something for the production companies, writers, and creators to "get around" their lack of diversity then situations and harmful ideologies will persist without concern. Instead, Black characters deserve treatments that value Blackness enough to holistically portray the characters and actors with care.

While the economic success of race-bent characters is an aspect of this topic that must be discussed, forward movement must consider more than the economic agenda of the media. Even if future television shows or films wanted to copy *The Flash's* model for Iris West, new, widely

spread information about the "behind-the-scenes" problems Patton faced showcases ways that the genre needs to expand its perception of Blackness and Black womanhood. The way Black actors are treated while filming is undoubtedly relevant to the discussions of racebending's commercial success because it exposes the "higher-ups" inability or unwillingness to deal with abuse and racialized violence. The absence of care for actors like Patton extends discussions of where Black individuals exist within the white imagination. There is an unspoken expectation for the Black actor and, by extension, the race-bent character to fit into normative whiteness without issue or comment. This expectation causes real harm.

The Flash's end invites cast disclosure of on-set treatment, which further exposes rhetorical tensions between the benefits of representation and the disgusting realities of racism for Black women actors and fans. Actors like Patton need to share their stories with freedom, but it is vital to shift focus to the continual racebending in the genre rather than solely focusing on the testimony of those actors who experience racism. There are new and emerging stories that now feature race-bent Black women that can learn from *The Flash's* carelessness.

Rhetoric informs television creators' ability to observe the multi-faceted impacts of post-racialism at every level of the creation process. From the narratives presented on-screen, the rhetorical effects of casting, fan affect and participation, and other facets of the rhetorical process of television, creators can grow in their understanding of how television impacts an audience. The network's decision to avoid race within their shows does not free the audience from the political discourse of race, instead, this decision highlights how television writers and creators ignore and devalue race through their depictions.

Respectability Politics and the Comic Book Genre: A Summary and Exploration

This thesis has analyzed discussions surrounding the rhetoric of Black women characters in comic book adaptations. Several key arguments considering post-racialism on *The Flash* are addressed in this project, but many other questions could be asked regarding this topic. One vital question within the political landscape of this project includes the function of respectability politics for Black characters and actors within the comic book genre. This conversation includes, but is not limited to, a discussion regarding the evolution of respectability politics for Black individuals within the United States and how respectability functions in the modern day.

Iris West is not allowed to explore the real-world experiences and culture of Black womanhood on *The Flash*, due to the show's decision to ignore race and gender on the show, as has been well established within this project. The Flash amplifies whiteness and white patriarchy with a diverse world of characters, symbolizing that individuals of all races can come together if they are willing to perform whiteness. As a result, I argue that racebend character is always both post-racial and respectable—constantly praising, valuing, and performing whiteness while simultaneously being stripped of any displays of Blackness.

Current iterations of respectability politics present respectability as a political move with the goal of forward progression—a shedding of what could be considered "ghetto" or hostile. In many ways, respectability politics is a call for assimilation to the "rules" of white society, where many elders from the Civil Rights Movement would claim the reward is racial progress. In his piece, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," Frederick C. Harris describes a type of respectability among Black Americans where the goal for the elite Black community is to separate themselves from qualities and behaviors that would be undesirable to American white society (33). He argues that Obama's presidency furthered the narrative to suggest that individuals needed to be

transformed "rather than the communities" (34). The rhetorical inferences of respectability politics create the conditions for a Blackness that is consumed by the white gaze to the extent that every piece of clothing and all ways of being must be acceptable to white society.

Osagie Obasogie and Zachary Newman describe respectability politics regarding white cultural dominance in their piece, "Black Lives Matter and Respectability Politics in Local News Accounts of Officer-Involved Civilian Deaths: An Early Empirical Assessment" (541). Respectability politics utilizes ideas of individualism and exceptionalism to articulate a Black person's societal worthiness through a reflection of propriety. In their expression of respectability politics, the term refers to a discursive process by which Black individuals can "evade discriminatory attitudes" by augmenting their behavior to conduct themselves in presentable and respectable ways to the white public (541). Obasogie and Newman extend this argument to consider the function of respectability politics when considering the political climate of post-racialism and colorblindness (549). Because the post-racial ideology views racism as an issue of the past, the politics of respectability can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy that exists within post-racialism. It is both a means to create the conditions of post-racialism *and an* explicit sign that the empirical claims of post-racialism—racial identity no longer matters in the United States—are true. (551).

The post-racial ideology and respectability politics are inextricably linked as they seek to masquerade American histories and present(s) with something seemingly more favorable. For post-racialism, Black individuals' blind inclusion is to be praised as it proves that America is past the "race stuff." Within a framework of respectability politics, Black individuals must earn their place by proving their adoption and approval of white societal rule. The correlation I witness between post-racialism and respectability politics lies in how post-racialism requires a rhetorical

performance of respectability politics for the race-bent character. When a formally white character is presented in a Black body without change or alteration of its ontology, the character represents a tacit agreement with the sentiments of whiteness. Iris West, therefore, is a representation of whiteness in a Black presentation, but she is also, at the same time, a performer of the respectability politics that allows her color—as a demographic fact—to be interpreted as the affirmation of white societal rule.

The discussion of racebending, post-racialism, and Iris West is even more complicated when you consider what it means to be one of the first depictions of a race-bent Black woman within the comic book genre. To view the racebending within the ideology of post-racism is to witness the rhetorical performance of a slightly altered respectability politics. In the post-racial ideology's desire to prove the end of racial issues, it normalizes the political strategy of respectability by presenting a Black character whose only connection to race is the color of their skin, while, simultaneously, that character performs whiteness. Racebending that is consumed with whiteness presents Black characters that rhetorically affirm the obsession with "good" vs. "bad" Blackness and Black politics. As Iris West assumes the identity of a white 1950s character, her adoption of whiteness communicates ideas of morality and desirability consumed by the white gaze. I do not necessarily think that the writers and creators are mindful of their decisions to present a "respectable" Black character that differs from a disrespectable black character, but I do contend that the white cultural gaze can only tolerate Blackness when it is affirmed by a white moral understanding of right and wrong, respectable, and disrespectable forms of Black being and acting. The "progressive" decision to cast a Black woman in the role of Iris West communicates that a white-centered respectable Black Iris West is forward movement for this genre.

As I have previously noted, we see stories and scripts consumed with whiteness throughout *The Flash,* but I have not discussed the physical ways the show emphasizes whiteness in detail. While this attention could have been its own chapter, I would be remiss to conclude without acknowledging the physical ways that the character of Iris West reflects post-racism and respectability politics. The consistently straight hair and "natural" makeup reflected on Iris West seem associated with the idea that Iris West reflects an exceptional and acceptable form of Blackness. The show represents the Iris West character as white as possible to further negotiate and affirm her as a respectable person of color. After the initial casting of Patton which, for commercial reasons, emphasizes the actor's African American heritage, the character of Iris West goes through a process that I call "re-whitening." In this process, the studio attempts to prove the value of the race-bent character for the show by presenting the character as white adjacent. I contend that the actual hope of re-whitening is to allow white audiences to understand the new, race-bent character as a value-added dimension to the comic book stories' cannon. This hope is, in part, an attempt to commodify Blackness and benefit financially from diversity, but ultimately it encourages the white audience to ascribe further to the sentiments and ideologies of colorblindness and post-racialism. At its most basic level then, racebending presents racial assimilation and white performance as the answer to issues of difference and systems of racial oppression. The Black woman is cast to replace a historically white role, and then the creators and writers fight to convince the audience that the addition of a Black character actually produces a value that is so adjacent to the white character that little has actually changed. Instead of believing that Black womanhood presents a benefit to the character of Iris West in and of itself, *The Flash* presents a character who must manipulate the audience into believing she is "white enough."

In the current displays of racebending in media, the post-racial patterns we find in Iris West have continued. There is clearly some benefit to racebending characters, but I argue the impact it can have is limited by the aversion to race discourse within the stories commonly seen in media. The studio's refusal to address intersectional identity when it casts Black women hurts the character's development, actors, and fans. Stories seem to lack interest in including Black female identity beyond the "unique" casting decision. As the film version of Iris West comes to movie theaters in the fall of 2022, there is no reason to believe that a robust and complicated Black woman identity will appear in this new vision of *The Flash*. Iris West will be played by a different actress, but in the news reports and trailer, the film seems to continue the CW*'s* colorblind, post-racial structure. This reality is disappointing for any hope of a progressive Iris West or changes to the industry. With more characters being race-bent as Black women in comic books and fantasy adaptations, I hope that depictions will begin to represent aspects of Black womanhood in a way that affirms rather than avoids Black ontology. More than just a physical change of race for the character is needed. Media that seeks the commercial benefits and moral high ground of diversifying the superhero cannon have an obligation to depict robust and varied forms of Black expression and identity.

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