

## WOMEN AT REFRIGERATORS: THE GENDER POLITICS OF FOOD AND EATING IN *SUPERGIRL*

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### RÉSUMÉ

Dans la série télévisée *Super Girl*, l'héroïne extraterrestre Kara Zor-El est dotée d'un métabolisme tout aussi « super ». En tant que Kryptonienne, elle peut manger tout ce dont elle a envie, son corps lui permettant de consommer des calories infinies sans les conséquences genrées généralement dramatisées au cinéma et à la télévision. Traitées sur un mode comique, ces scènes soulignent le lien qui unit Kara et sa sœur humaine Alex, et proposent un renoncement superficiel aux normes alimentaires imposées aux femmes. Pourtant, de telles scènes suggèrent-elles une résistance ou une réification de telles normes, en particulier lorsque ses homologues humains ne bénéficient pas d'un tel répit ? Au cours des 60 ans d'histoire du personnage, la nourriture a souvent marqué les divisions de genre entre Kara et son cousin, Superman, tout en ne soulignant que rarement son expérience de la diaspora et sa lutte pour s'assimiler à la fois en tant que citoyenne terrienne et américaine. Alors que la série propose des récits sur la discrimination et les droits des extraterrestres, en énonçant des maximes sur l'autonomie des femmes et leur « pouvoir féminin », elle offre un paysage culinaire fade et largement occidental où la nourriture évoque les stéréotypes de la féminité idéalisée et la pression exercée pour contrôler le corps. Retraçant l'histoire de la bande dessinée du personnage, cet article étudie le rôle de l'alimentation dans la série télévisée *Super Girl*, en examinant la manière dont la nourriture est le lieu d'une critique et d'une réaffirmation des normes alimentaires genrées.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** NOURRITURE – MANGER – SUPER-HÉROÏNE – SUPERGIRL – GENRE – BANDES DESSINÉES – TÉLÉVISION – FILM – FÉMINISME

### ABSTRACT

In the television series *Supergirl*, the alien heroine Kara Zor-El is gifted with an equally super metabolism. As a Kryptonian, she can eat whatever and however much she wants, her body allowing her to consume endless calories minus the gendered consequences implied in film and television. Such scenes work as comedy while emphasizing the bond shared by Kara and her human sister Alex, and function as a surface renunciation of the eating norms placed on women. Yet, do such scenes suggest resistance or reification of such norms, particularly when her human counterparts enjoy no such respite? Throughout the character's 60-year history, food has often marked the gendered divisions between Kara and her male cousin, Superman, while only rarely highlighting her experience of diaspora and her struggle to assimilate as both Earthling and

American citizen. While the series features narratives about discrimination and alien rights, spouting maxims about women's autonomy and 'girl power,' it offers up a bland, largely Western culinary landscape where food evokes stereotypes of idealized femininity and the pressure to control the body. Tracing the character's comic book history, this paper takes up the role of eating in the *Supergirl* TV series, examining the ways in which food both counters and reinscribes gendered eating norms as well as Western cultural assumptions.

**KEYWORDS :** FOOD – EATING – SUPERHEROINE – SUPERGIRL – GENDER – COMIC BOOKS – TELEVISION – FILM – FEMINISM

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“I hope you get fat,” Alex Danvers says to her sister, Kara Zor-El on TV series, *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-2016). “Not on this planet,” she retorts [S01xE03]. As a Kryptonian, Kara Danvers/Supergirl can eat whatever and however much she wants, her enhanced metabolism allowing her to consume endless calories minus the fear of weight gain and perceived impropriety. Such scenes in which the sisters talk and eat have been a long-running staple in the series, now entering its fifth season, and are often played for comedy while emphasizing the bond shared by human and nonhuman sister. On the surface, they also act as a renunciation of the eating norms placed predominantly on women, problematizing the double-standards that treat a man’s appetite as natural and a woman’s as potentially dangerous. “[I]dealized femininity” writes Koch, means to eat “daintily, sparingly, or not at all” (2019: 80), and a woman’s gluttony signals either loneliness or sexual appetite (Hawkes: 2015; Bordo, 1993: 110). Yet, it is Kara’s alien biology that allows her to remain slender, an issue further compounded by her identity as superhero, a genre wherein character traits are even more excessively externalized into physical appearance (Singer 2002: 1), yet whose emphasis on the body often glosses over or omits what and how these superheroes eat. This how and what are important, as food provides clues, some subtle, some less so, about the ways in which these worlds and narratives are constructed, and how they position gender within. Yet there has been little investigation or analysis of the depiction of foodways in the superheroine narrative, and more broadly, the genre itself, in which representations of the body, of ethnicity and identity – albeit often metaphorically – converge<sup>1</sup>. *Supergirl*, whose comic book history is varied and frenetic, and whose series portrays its heroine as a voracious, carb-loading lover of pizza and potstickers, thus provides an interesting subject for analysis, for as Bordo writes, a woman “indulging as freely and salaciously [as a

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<sup>1</sup> Comic books and superhero films, for example, have long relied on the alien or the blue-skinned mutant to stand-in in narratives dealing with othering (Singer, 2002), and sometimes to skirt real world issues of race altogether. A recent example was 2011’s *X-Men: First Class* (Singer), in which the blue-skinned Mystique became the voice of anti-mutant oppression while characters of color were either killed off or became villains.

man]...violate[s] deeply sedimented expectations” (1993: 110). In addition, while her consumption indicates her exceptionalism, her food choices normalize her in a different way, placing her in alignment with the series’ bland and almost monocultural landscape. Focusing on the series, with some forays into her comic book history, this article takes up the role of food and the ways in which, like the depiction of the character herself, eating both defies and reifies gendered and Western cultural assumptions.

### **HISTORY: THE SUPERHEROINE AS EXCEPTION**

*Supergirl*, which debuted on CBS before switching to the CW network the following season, arrived as a conflicting mix of second and third wave feminism packaged in a romcom aesthetic. Its overarching theme initially was Kara’s struggle to step out of the shadow of her cousin Superman while climbing the corporate ladder under her Anna Wintouresque boss, Cat Grant, thus aping the postfeminist generational plot of early 21<sup>st</sup> century romantic comedies<sup>2</sup>. The show has also taken stabs at intersectionality, layering its metaphorical commentary on alien rights with infrequent, albeit direct address of race, sexuality, and gender identity<sup>3</sup>.

Supergirl’s history has also delineated what Carolyn Cocca, referring to Wonder Woman, calls the “trickiness of the female superhero” (2016: 52). Similar to Diana, her various incarnations have on one hand pushed for iterations of women’s power and autonomy while often conceding to the stereotypes of idealized femininity and woman/girlhood. Created by Otto Binder and Al Plastino in 1959, Kara made her first appearance as a biological cousin of

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<sup>2</sup> As exemplified by *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006) wherein a younger woman, representative of the “tropes of freedom of choice (McRobbie, qtd. in Cobb, 2011: 31)” is pitted against an older career woman whose success is wrought from the ashes of “familial or romantic intimacy” (Cobb, 2011: 31). While Cat Grant often gives lip service to feminism, exclaiming that a woman has to work twice as hard as a man, for example [S01xE02], Kara is often placed in the position of cleaning up in the wake of her familial neglect: babysitting her youngest child, and in one episode, mediating a dinner between Cat and her eldest son wherein she coaches Cat on how to relate to him as a mother rather than a career woman [S01xE05, E11].

<sup>3</sup> The show has attempted discourse on the overlapping discrimination outlined by Crenshaw (Perlman, 2018). The Martian Manhunter J’onn Jones will occasionally reference his struggles to live on Earth as a black man [S03xE15], while more recent characters such as the transwoman Nia Nal have contended with both anti-alien prejudice and transphobic siblings [S04xE11].

Superman and spent her initial years in a Midvale orphanage before her later adoption by Fred and Linda Danvers (Bernstein, 1961). As Linda Lee Danvers, the heroine shifted through a range of professions and occupations, just as her post *Crisis* character shuffled through corporeal forms. After her death in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman, et al., 1985), Supergirl was resurrected as Matrix, a genetically engineered bioform which later merged with an earthbound fire angel under writer Peter David (1996-2003). She was not returned to her Kryptonian origin until 2005 (Loeb & Turner). Like Batwoman, whose convoluted record of erasure and resurrection has been traced by Lisa Perdigao (2018), Supergirl's rebirths and transformations offer "a metacommentary on the longevity of female superheroes" not included in the privilege of timelessness enjoyed by male predecessors, who as Eco observes, exist in a "continuous...immobile...and ever-continuing present" (qtd. in Perdigao, 2018: 125).

Supergirl and Wonder Woman were rare exceptions to other comic book heroines in that they frequently had their own titles, yet unlike the latter, whose identity has remained comparatively stable despite DC's penchant for reboots, the former fell victim to some of the more loudly-criticized tropes used on female characters<sup>4</sup>. Bound up in that history is her more-often-than-not status as a refugee and her long-unexplored potential for richer stories about diaspora and assimilation. While recent depictions of the Kara Zor-El Supergirl in both comics and the TV series have placed more focus on the trauma of Krypton's destruction and Kara's experiences as a refugee/immigrant, the subtler nuances of her cultural identity remain curiously absent.

## FOODWAYS AND THE SUPERHERO

One of the less apparent, albeit no less significant ways in which this gendered and cultural trickiness presents itself is through food and its

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<sup>4</sup> Supergirl's very first appearance was as 'Super-Girl,' a figment of Jimmy Olsen's imagination made real, and whom he later wishes back into obscurity, a similar fate to Kathy Kane's Batwoman in that "her erasure from the comics is made literal" (Madrid 85; Perdigao 126). Kara would later be 'fridged' (a term coined by Gail Simone in reference to violence against women as a plot device) in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and resurrected as a cloned bioform and lover to Lex Luthor (Wolfman, et. al; Simone; Childs).

consumption. Write Baron, Carson, and Bernard, "...all interactions involving food are necessarily laden with the implications of social status, cultural difference, ethnicity, sexuality, and other markers of identity" (2014: 2), and these implications carry through into fictional depictions, wherein characters' likes and dislikes, and "their interactions during scenes with farming, cooking, or eating" provide evidence for interpretation of these associations (2014: 24). This is no less true of television or the comic book page, whose formats are more easily suited to food advertising and product placement<sup>5</sup>. Interactions and choices involving food also come with gendered associations wherein specific foods and rules about consumption may signal masculinity or femininity. "[By] claiming different roles in regard to food and distinct attributes through identification with specific foods," writes Counihan, "men and women define their masculinity and femininity" (2005: 7). To offer an example, "'light' foods," in the West, "such as fruits, vegetables, pasta, and sweets" are associated with femininity, "while foods associated with men are 'heavy,' a category that includes meat and starches, which symbolize strength and masculinity" (Koch, 2019: 79). These relationships can be seen in everything from yogurt commercials to romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* (Reiner, 1989) in which the latter's habit of asking for dressing on the side reduces the onus on women to control their weight to a comical, feminine quirk (Paiella, 2016).

Despite its prevalence in other media, with the exception of graphic novels, comic book series centering food in the United States have been a fairly recent phenomenon, following belatedly in the steps of Japanese manga among which many such titles exist (Magnet, 2018). In addition, the role of food in the superhero genre – attention to what superheroes eat and how they eat – has remained mostly an afterthought, an aspect not unnoticed by fans of the genre.

[T]here [have been] plenty of grace notes and trivia answers about superheroes' faith, politics, sports fandom, hometowns, sexual peccadilloes...why don't we know Tony Stark's hangover cure... Jarvis's signature...Is there some weird hipster ethnic food that Kitty Pryde keeps bugging her teammates to try? Why is there a food-shaped hole in most superhero comics? (Eckert, 2013)

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. television series are interrupted by commercials, often for food, while comic book pages regularly feature ads for everything from snack cakes to milk.

Culinary fan sites, such as *Geeks Who Eat* attempt to fill this hole, creating Superhero-themed recipes: Captain Marvel inspired cupcakes or meatloaf inspired by Ant-Man and the Wasp (“Prepare for Avengers”, 2019). Yet, a search for Superheroes’ favorite dishes dredges up a palate more reflective of a Howard Johnson’s menu circa 1955. Spiderman enjoys wheat cakes; Batman, a good steak<sup>6</sup>; while Superman has, since the Bronze Age, enjoyed Bœuf Bourguignon, to which was added a pre-Trumpian dollop of ketchup (Zalben, 2012). Although Superman would briefly become vegetarian in Mark Waid’s *Birthright* series (2003-2004), most of these heroes are portrayed as roundly carnivorous, cementing their association with virility and masculinity. “The rational (masculine) person eats for power, strength, and without emotion,” writes Koch, “and symbolizes men’s strength as hunters and vanquishers” (2019: 80).

### **SUPERGIRL AND SUPERMAN: PRODUCTION VS. PREPARATION**

I think it is important, therefore, to start by discussing the ways in which food positions Kara/Supergirl in relation to her predecessor/cousin, Superman. For much of his 81-year history, Clark Kent/Kal-El has been depicted as the adoptive son of farmers, with his image as a hero deeply embedded in the American mythos of wholesomeness and small town values. Writes Superman historian Larry Tye, the stories about Clark/Kal’s Smallville upbringing were “not just about Superboy but about a Saturday Evening Post world of picket fences that needed painting and apple pies warming in ovens” (2012: 108). This imagery connects Kal-El directly with gendered and racialized notions of the American farmer. From comic books to films to television series such as *Smallville* (WB, 2001-2011), he is frequently depicted doing the hard physical labor of farm work, his powers enabling him to hoist heavy equipment or make fast repairs to a barn before sitting down to a well-earned meal prepared by his adoptive mother. This image is in line with what Koch describes as the “deceptive” stereotype of a food grower in Western Society (2019: 17). While she concedes

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<sup>6</sup> Damian, Batman’s son, is vegetarian in comic books, but he’s a child and he’s a very recent character.

that statistically the average U.S. farmer is a middle-aged white male, “the U.S. agricultural system, follows a male-dominated farming system in which mechanization and patrilineal ownership is central,” and contributions from women and people of color, on large farms or “cultivation done for subsistence or communities” go largely unrepresented and are rarely factored into statistics (2019: 18, 21). John Byrne’s 1986 reboot *The Man of Steel* even goes as far as to use a white male farmer to represent humanity itself when Jor-El shows a horrified Lara an image of a shirtless, barrel-chested man standing amid a wheat field. This connection between Superman and the white rural provider was strengthened in *Peace on Earth* (1998), a special publication written by Paul Dini and Alex Ross, depicting Kal-El’s attempts to deliver food to the starving and to people in developing countries. Clark/Kal’s use of superpowers in these stories also reinforces the notion that farming and masculinity are inherently interconnected, emphasizing “stereotypically masculine traits of endurance, physical strength, and independence” while “[w]omen are associated with the household and caregiving: to be a feminine is to be a farmwife rather than a farmer” (Koch, 2019: 23), an image held up in the person of Martha Kent, who, despite Superman’s long history and varying incarnations, has remained, for the most part, a steady, mothering presence on the Kent farm.

Interestingly, the establishment of Superman’s identity as a farmer, and specifically a midwestern one, has been a relatively recent development. Smallville was initially located somewhere on the East Coast near Metropolis (Parker, 2015), and during the Silver Age, the Kents even sold their farm to open a general store in town. It was not until the 1978 blockbuster, *Superman: The Movie* (Donner, 1978), and later Byrne’s reboot, that the Kansas setting was firmly established, placing Kal-El/Clark and Smallville a step further into the ‘real’ world. Yet, with the exception of Mariko Tamaki’s four issue series, *Being Super* (2016-2017), which reimagines Kara as the adoptive daughter of farmers, her setting has been decidedly more urban.

Kara/Linda was most often a denizen of a small town (Midvale or Leesburg, Virginia) or National City and distanced from her cousin’s symbolic

association with national agriculture. Nevertheless, the preparation and presentation of food factor into many of Supergirl's early stories, reflecting a period in which female domesticity was put forward as a nonnegotiable option for women and girls. When she first appears, Superman promptly places her in the Midvale orphanage, demanding that her super heroics be performed in complete secrecy. Many of Kara's early adventures are those in which food and its preparation are crucial to maintaining her secret identity. She bakes chicken and refreezes melted ice cream for her fellow orphans (Binder, 1960; 1959: 101, 18), and burns a roast with her heat vision to fend off potential parents (Binder, 1959: 26). Kal-El's demand for invisibility necessitates the performance of domesticity in which cooking, cleaning, and serving others are intertwined with the suppression of her identity. Thus, from her very beginnings, gendered divisions between the production and preparation of food are used to differentiate Kara and her cousin.

### **FOOD AND KRYPTONIAN DIASPORA**

As mentioned above, stories exploring Kara's status as a refugee went largely unexplored until Jeph Loeb's resurrection of her Kryptonian origin (2005). For the first time, Supergirl "struggled with making friends and dealing with people who hated her for not being from the same place...[s]he also had a big history that she found frustrating to try to impart to her well-meaning cousin" (Cranz, 2018). More recent comic book incarnations, along with the TV series, have done more to establish Kara's closer connection to her home world, underscoring her trauma and feelings of loss, as well as illuminating other aspects of her culture. Yet, beyond the Silver Age excess of 'feast trees' and 'roast babootch,' food is used sparingly to evoke Kal-El or Kara's memories of their home world or the 'alienness' of their culture. Since John Byrne's reboot of Superman, Krypton has often been depicted as less perfect civilization than its utopian predecessor, sterile, cerebral, and perhaps morally compromised, a place where food might function as it often does in science fiction to express a "loss of meaningful connections with society," or concerns about "homogenization" and

“the impact of technology” (Forster, 2004: 264, 253)<sup>7</sup>. This invites into obvious question: wherefore Kryptonian foodways?

In *Supergirl*'s 2005 run, food is used only as a metaphor for power, when she attempts to adopt the secret identity of a high school student. Making her first visit to the cafeteria, she is lectured by a friend that “Eating is primal...that’s why people make such a big deal out of where you sit, who with, and what they eat” (Loeb & Turner, 2016). Yet, we do not see Kara eating or reacting to food, only her struggle to fit in with other girls who viciously fat shame a fellow classmate, causing her to give up on her human identity altogether. The question of what and how much to eat is thus placed squarely in the human realm and distanced from Kara’s purview.

In the *New 52* (Green & Johnson: 2012), this distance is lessened somewhat when a scene in a New York pizza parlor highlights her feelings of loneliness and alienation. “I haven’t had anything to eat since I arrived on this planet,” she says. “I haven’t slept. I haven’t needed to. But now, seeing these people eating, smelling their food. It smells good! I miss it. I miss being hungry.” Nothing specific in the smell or the taste stirs this longing, simply the craving for the desire itself and the lost rituals of eating. It is not until the *Rebirth* series (Orlando, et al., 2018) series that food provides direct insight into Kryptonian culture. Kara’s adoptive father Jeremiah Danvers is characterized as a gastronome who encourages her to eat as a means of familiarizing herself with her new home. “Food is the best way to get to know a culture,” he says, offering up a spring roll, “and earth offers quite a variety.” Kara remarks that such diversity is “still strange” because “Krypton adopted a unified global cuisine centuries ago.” In a later scene, she attempts to return the favor, adapting a Kryptonian recipe of “Kvornish pork” for her parents. Jeremiah remarks that the flavor reminds him of shogayaki, a Japanese dish containing ginger. Kryptonian food is finally granted a flavor, one refreshingly not drawn from Western food culture.

The addition of an identifiable flavor is striking, compared to an eating

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<sup>7</sup> In cinema, food is often used to evoke memories, particularly of childhood (Baron, et al.: 2014) or the lost home as in *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) where a steak conjures up the comforts of an Earth which like Krypton, has been destroyed (Parascoli, 2008: 21-22).

scene in the animated film, *Superman Unbound* (Tucker, 2013), in which Superman seems to enjoy a Kryptonian meal with Kara's parents in Kandor City. Sound is used – Superman biting into a piece of fruit – to emphasize the enjoyment and sense of nostalgia, but the food itself appears bland and colorless. “We don't have soil to grow food,” says Zor-El, “no springs for fresh water. Brainiac gives us everything we need and nothing more.” Here, food is used to underscore Allura and Zor-El's distance from the source, “the connections,” Forster writes, “between what we eat and what we are” have been commandeered, emphasizing the vulnerability of the body, a “deliberately targeted zone...ultimately vulnerable to outside social, cultural, or technological force.” (2004: 263, 253).

### **ALIEN AND HUMAN TASTES ON TV**

On the series there are even fewer references to the alien, much less Kryptonian palate, an odd omission on a show that often uses food to mediate its characters' relationships and emotions. In one, Mr. Mxyzptlk offers Kara a cup of “Thoni tea” a delicacy on Krypton, yet Kara signals her rejection of him, along with an offer of champagne, by downing a glass of orange juice [S02xE13]. In Season 3, an even more glaring lapse occurs when Kara returns to Argo, a Kryptonian city that has survived the destruction of her planet. There, she reunites with her long lost mother Allura and attempts to reacquaint herself with her culture [S03xE21]. The episode, titled “Not Kansas,” evoking Superman's rural roots rather than the otherworldliness of Oz, was roundly criticized for its lack of emotional weight. “Not Kansas” wrote AV critic Carolyn Seide, “is theoretically all about the emotions of Kara's homecoming. But rather than feel like a reunion with her long-lost home world, it feels more like an awkward high school reunion in which Kara has to make small talk with the teachers and classmates she mostly forgot about” (2018). Nowhere is this evinced more than during a dinner scene wherein Kara and Mon-El share a meal with Allura and Kara's old friend, Thara Ak-Var. The restaurant is lackluster in appearance, more frequent flyer lounge than alien setting, and the characters – using very earthlike forks – take bites of food while conversing about a backyard gazebo. Despite the

business with the food, not a single line is dedicated to what they are eating, either to emphasize the coldness or warmth of the setting or Kara's feelings toward it.

This lack of cultural specificity does not limit itself to Krypton, but reveals itself in the show's earthly flavors. The foods preferred by its characters are generic and ethnically unthreatening, packaged and easy to obtain, with sweets, pizza and potstickers being mentioned most often – the former two being Kara's declared favorites[S02xE01]. Characters are often seen grabbing take out in the first season from Noonan's, a forgettable location, which served as a setting until the show relocated to Vancouver. Such familiar food choices may be chosen to ground the viewer or to appeal to the show's 18-34 target demographic as well as meet production practicalities (Lausch, 2013: 1; Sheppard, 2018). The presence of fast food or takeout can also signal the disturbance of daily or perhaps more traditional routines (Baron, et al., 2014: 157). Kara and Alex are career women with no time for complicated meal preparation. Yet, National City, ostensibly a multicultural city awash in intergalactic aliens, is curiously devoid of any culinary diversity beyond Chinese takeout. Sophistication is signaled by references to French and Italian, or what might be regarded as fusion dishes. Kara may recommend Alex to try the “Bolognese stuffed calamari at Ill Palazzo” [S02xE13]. Sam Arias is seen fussing over cookies from an “Italian bakery” [S03xE09], while tech mogul Maxwell Lord attempts to woo Alex with a taste of snail caviar [S01xE15] that she immediately spits out, recalling the French restaurant cliché in which snails or steak tartar are unveiled upon a shocked American diner. In addition, With the exception of Brainiac-5's penchant for “apples and olives” pizza [S04xE02], alien flavors are limited to Mxyzptlk's reference to Thoni tea [S02xE13], and more specifically alcohol. Mon-El's requests for Zakkarian ale and his coaxing Kara into getting drunk from an alien liquor [S02xE03, E06, E15] are the show's few allusions to alien appetites; Similarly, Maggie Sawyer's Latinx heritage, alluded to in Season 2 and confirmed in Season 3, is only vaguely signaled with a throwaway line about “peach mojitos”

and a gift of tequila to Alex's father [S02xE14]<sup>8</sup>.

### **FOOD AS FEMALE BONDING AND RESISTANCE**

Yet, as flavorless as the landscape may be, food nevertheless plays an important emotional role in *Supergirl*. Season 1 established the show's sofa scenes in which the Danvers sisters indulged in take out and generous glasses of wine. As stated above, these scenes would become a much-loved staple of the show and functioned, initially, to underscore the intimacy between the two women, one that in the first season prioritized their relationship over those with the male characters. Although Season 1 presents Kara with a romantic interest in the photographer James Olsen, and Alex more dubiously with the tech giant/villain, Maxwell Lord, this closeness echoes the concurrent first season of Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, Season 1, 2015-), establishing a nonsexual bond between women that is nevertheless queer in its prioritization of female intimacy. While Kara and Alex often commiserate during these scenes, they also differ from the cliché of the lone woman indulging herself in wine and pints of ice cream, where awash in self-judgement, she rarely seems to enjoy the food.

Such scenes also foil those involving the male villains. In *Supergirl*, Maxwell Lord, attempts to woo Alex Danvers with an expensive meal, at one point reaching across the table in an attempt to feed her. Alex stops him, taking the utensil from his hand and stating that she can feed herself. A similar scene plays out in *Jessica Jones* (Netflix S1 2015) between Jones and the mind-controlling villain, Kilgrave [S01xE08]. No longer under his power, Jones joins him for dinner at the apartment of one of his victims where he attempts to use food as a means of control and manipulation. Unlike Alex, who meets Lord in an evening gown, Jones appears in her usual outfit of jeans and a leather jacket, causing Kilgrave to inquire, "no dress?" She does not wait to be served, but helps herself to a generous glass of wine, gulping it down and refusing the meal of pasta Amatriciana, which Kilgrave claims is her favorite. "That's your favorite meal,"

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<sup>8</sup> Tequila is again referenced in a deleted scene in which Maggie and Alex discuss their wedding plans. Maggie describes it as the "biggest, gayest, most tequila-soaked blowout in history" and later, they drink tequila to steel themselves against the pain of breaking up[S03xE01; S03xE05].

she says, “now it makes me nauseous,” referring more to Kilgrave than the food. Like Kara’s voracious eating, Alex’s spitting into a napkin and Jones’ guzzling of alcohol and outright refusal to eat – a refusal not motivated by control of appetite – signal the rejection of male control and gendered expectations. Jones’ penchant for strong drink also suggests the heroines’ exceptionalism and liberation from such constraints. Similarly, Alex Danvers and her erstwhile lover, Maggie Sawyer, frequently toss back beers or shots of whiskey, betting or gifting each another with bottles of scotch, while Cat Grant and L-Corp mogul Lena Luthor are also shown mulling weight-of-the-world problems over scotch, thus complicating the cliché in which “Out-of-control men turn to alcohol. Sad, lonely or out-of-control women turn to sugar” [Hawkes, 2015]. In addition, while Alex’s heavy drinking is used both in comedic and dramatic moments, as when she steels herself to come out as a lesbian to her mother [S01xE04, S02xE08], her love of drink has remained refreshingly devoid of pathologizing via the alcoholic plot, affording her a similar hard-boiled license to Jones.

### **THE HUMAN/ALIEN DOUBLE-STANDARD**

Overindulgence in food remains a privilege solely afforded to Kara. She downs slices of pizza [S01xE01], gobbles pot stickers from a tray at a posh gala [S02xE05], orders extra helpings of sticky buns prompting surprised remarks from her server [S01xE03]. In short, she eats with a vigor and lack of reserve generally coded as male (Bordo, 1993: 108). These same double-standards carry over into cinema as when Julie Christie’s Mrs. Miller establishes her “manliness” in a scene wherein she wolfs down food. “A woman who eats like this is to be taken seriously, is not to be trifled with, the movie suggests (Bordo, 1993: 110). Yet, Kara’s freedom to eat is not granted to the other women who remain under the expectations of femininity.

Alex Danvers also falls under these strictures, her workaholic nature signaled through lines about forgetting to eat [S01xE09]. Outside of her sofa scenes with Kara, she is only seen overindulging in food when she is troubled by a personal or professional matter. A Season 4 scene shows her “stress eating” over

her new responsibilities as Director of the Department of Extranormal Operations [S04xE01] or consuming chocolate while fretting over a possible adoption [S04xE20]. In Season 2, after being confronted by Maggie about her sexuality, she eats a doughnut to ease her confusion [S01xE05]. These brief scenes highlight Kara's privilege, while placing Alex into the role of the feminine emotional eater, whose eating is measured by attempts to "control bodily urges through restriction and denial of hunger" (Bordo, 1993, qtd. in Koch 2019: 80). When Winn Schott, a nerdy male character is caught "stress eating" [S01xE16], the scene is played as straight comedy, emphasizing his weakness and by implication, femininity. *Supergirl* thus attempts to have it both ways, allowing only Kara to transgress feminine eating norms, while the usual messages are reinforced upon her human counterparts.

### **FOOD AS RELATIONAL POWER**

Food also reflects the tension between Alex and Kara and the relational power imbalance in their family. While scenes of sisterly bonding are frequent, it is established that Alex still bears some resentment towards Kara, whose sudden arrival in the Danvers household usurped the older sister's status and limited her independence. Alex is described throughout Seasons 1 and 2 as feeling the pressure to take care of Kara, whose needs as well as the secret of her alien heritage have always taken priority. This conflict becomes apparent in abovementioned exchange wherein Alex initially refuses to give Kara a last potsticker from her container. Kara jokingly threatens to "melt" Alex's face if the food is not quickly relinquished. Although Alex responds with a quip about Kara getting fat, she relents, revealing a dynamic in which Kara's needs, as evinced by her food needs, are always placed first [S01xE03]. Kara's voracious appetite can as such be interpreted as echoing the gendered imbalances in families where the needs of male children are privileged over those of females. This process of sacrifice, observe Charles and Kerr, takes place largely through "ideologies of food needs which prioritize biological difference as determining that men and women have very different, biologically given food needs...justified in terms of

men's greater physical activity at work than women and in terms of the 'fact' that men are bigger than women" (1991: 80-81). Kara's eating one on hand rejects the feminine expectation of self-control, but her appetite is nevertheless prioritized due to an inherent biological difference, and thus coded more as a masculine privilege rather than a disruption of the rules. This disparity is born out later in the show's first Thanksgiving episode[S01xE11], in which Alex, worried about the fallout of Kara's revealing herself as Supergirl, frets over Eliza's impending arrival in National City. "At least she's making pie," Kara remarks. "Yeah, sure," Alex retorts. "Your favorite."

Alex's quip about fatness is indicative of the problematic messaging about body image on a show whose women are uniformly thin. Similarly, *Jessica Jones*' first season contains a scene in which Jones, surveilling an apartment *Rear Window* style, watches a woman get off a treadmill to eat a burger and says, "2 minutes on a treadmill, 20 minutes on a burger" [S01xE01]. The Jones line was demonstratively crueler, and received considerable criticism online (Kivan, 2015), while the more implicit body shaming in *Supergirl* went under the radar. It is possible that former's place on Netflix, along with its TV-MA rating, brought in an older and more critical audience. *Supergirl* began on a more traditional network and has maintained a PG-14 rating, although its fans have been loud both in regard to both perceived sexist messaging and criticisms of its LGBTQ representation (Long, 2015; Smith, 2017).

Nowhere is this split more pronounced than in the character of Kara's boss, Cat Grant. Grant exhibits an obsessive need for control over her diet, demanding a biohacking coffee drinks [S01xE03] and berating an employee for drenching a miniscule looking salad in a "sea of ranch like little Kate Winslets in Titanic" [S01xE01]. Her thinness and adherence to rigid nutritional strictures suggest what Paresecoli calls the fantasy of "total mastery over the body (2008:86), and the popularity of the self-help and wellness industry, shifts its "allegiance from otherworldly powers to more mundane authorities" (2008: 86), revealing the show's dichotomy. As in her earlier appearances, *Supergirl*'s secret identity requires subordination to a system of rigidly gendered expectations

under the banner of successful womanhood. We are told again and again that Kara respects Grant, whose hyper slim body is the model of the “feminine success associated with upper-middle class women who have the time, resources, and access to personal trainers and medical advancements to achieve this ideal” (Koch, 2019: 82). Cat’s ability to maintain these professional and corporeal standards rationalizes the denial of appetite and the double-standards placed on women as a necessary part of female success, and more importantly, is reliant on the labor and bodies of others, assistants who like Kara, would find it far more difficult to meet them absent powers.

Her job at Catco Magazine, which sits on the fence between traditional and tabloid journalism, also differentiates her work from Clark Kent, a more traditional reporter, for one of the ways traditional and tabloid journalism differ, writes Dawn Heineken, is in their depiction of the human body. “Traditional news reports like the traditional action hero, frame the body as...the ‘object of expert knowledge’ or one which needs ‘institutional control.’ Tabloid media, on the other hand, are ‘grotesque’ and feminine. Tabloids construct a lived body, connected to the experiences of everyday lives...” (2003: 142). Kara’s job thus places Supergirl’s lived experience at odds with the strictures of journalistic ethos as when her male editor, Snapper Carr interviews Supergirl, yet refuses to print the story due to a lack of verifiable sources [S02xE15].

### **ROMANCE AS REINSCRIPTION: THE MON-EL PROBLEM**

Just as food signals the prioritization of Alex and Kara’s relationship in Season 1, it signifies their distancing in Season 2. The following year, the series shifted its location to Vancouver under the CW network, taking its focus off the Danvers sisters’ relationship and placing it on romance. Kara’s Season 1 slow burn with James Olsen was retconned in the first episode, while Alex Danvers came out as a lesbian, entering a relationship with Detective Maggie Sawyer<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Retcon refers to retroactive continuity, in which new or additional information is imposed on previous events in a story to account for an inconsistency or shift the direction of a narrative (Friedenthal, 2017). Prior to Season 2, there were no hints that Kara was second-guessing her romance with James.

Congruently, the eating scenes also shifted their focus: James Olsen's delivery of pizza and potstickers to Kara on their first date goes uneaten, signaling her lack of interest when Kara preempts the date to go on a rescue mission. This is later contrasted by a scene in which Mon-El, who replaces Olsen as the love interest, brings a bag of the latter to her door to console her over the loss of a job [S02xE15]. Maggie Sawyer, having previously rejected Alex for being fresh out of the closet, also tenders a first romantic overture with a pizza delivery [S02xE08]. As with Season 1, many of the eating scenes feature takeout, yet Season 2 also conveys its mixed feminist messages through those in which the characters cook or prepare food.

In the beginning of the second season, Kara is tasked with the job of helping the wayward Mon-El assimilate to life on Earth. She gets him a job at Catco and helps him prepare a proper human disguise. Mon-El is initially comical, a square peg and a foil for the rigid bureaucracy of the Department of Extranormal Operations. Nevertheless, the show telegraphs its romantic plot and an unequal dynamic through a scene of her preparing his breakfast. She serves him a tall stack of pancakes which he attempts to eat with his hands [S02xE05]. In the same episode, food marks Mon-El's recalcitrance when he shirks his job to lounge about chewing red licorice and is later caught in a supply closet mid-coitus with Eve Teschmacher. Both food and sex are used to signal Mon-El's lack of discipline and inhibition, which Kara is then tasked with bringing under control, the clichéd fixer-upper trope in which a woman civilizes a rough or "substandard" man, and is "[forced] to put in the work to ensure he becomes a suitable romantic partner" ("Mon-El is Supergirl's Kryptonite", 2018). As in similar plots, Kara's attempts to change his behavior rarely succeed, with Mon-El's obstinacy played for comedy and Kara coming off as the uptight woman who simply needs to loosen up and enjoy life. While Mon-El eventually attempts to reform his frat boy attitudes, his fish-out-water schtick works to downplay any progress made by his enlightenment. A later episode [S02xE17] shows him cooking for Kara, wearing an apron and learning from a cookbook. "You have changed!" Kara announces, as if a single act of cooking breakfast in bed can redeem him. This grand

pronouncement along with Mon-El's misfit act misfires, lending it the retrograde quality of a *Mr. Mom* (Dragoti, 1983) style scenario in which we are invited to laugh at a man in an apron. Like this, Mon-El's alienness is used as cover to employ a number of antiquated and gendered tropes, as in the Thanksgiving episode [S02xE08], a near tradition excluded only during Season 3, when he presents Eliza Danvers with a pillowcase full of "stuffing" which he has torn from his mattress. Eliza and Kara prepare the meal as Mon-El retreads the cliché of the hapless male in the kitchen.

Eliza is also the character most often seen cooking or preparing meals for the other characters. This pattern is drawn from the Superman stories in which Clark returns home to a meal cooked by Martha Kent. That Eliza is a doctor and a biochemist has done little to alter the ways in which her motherhood is used as a ballast for the other characters. While she occasionally helps around the DEO laboratory, her main role is caretaker, there to give a heart-to-heart or to serve a homecooked meal. "In the heteronormative family structure," writes Koch, "foodwork is not only associated with women but made deeply personal as a place for women to display their emotional commitment to their families" (2019: 60). Eliza's mothering is contrasted by her daughter Alex's attempts in the kitchen, which are either disastrous or nonexistent. In a Season 2 episode, Alex's attempt at paella results in a kitchen fire and the ordering of pizza [S02xE19]. Her inability, or at least infrequent cooking, is again referenced in Season 3 when she and Maggie Sawyer sit down to lasagna, a meal Eliza has prepared for the two of them in Alex's apartment. After thanking Eliza, Maggie remarks, "Alex and I order in so often I've forgotten what real food tastes like" to which Alex responds with a reproachful glare [S03xE03]. While brief, these scenes suggest Maggie and Alex's lack of normativity as queer working women, differentiating them from the caretaking offered by Eliza and that demanded by Kara's heterosexual romance with Mon-El.

### **EATING AS ACCOMMODATION**

Kara's taste for masculine-coded pizza and potstickers is also coopted

through the romance plot, reinscribing her eating as accommodation. Now in the role of fixer-upper, Kara must either convince him to reign in his impulses or loosen up and accept his foibles. In a drinking scene, where Mon-El coerces her into getting drunk for the first time, Kara is first portrayed as a scold, telling him to stop flirting with the women in the bar and to work more on controlling his powers. Mon-El agrees, but only if Kara will drink the alien rum, to which the uptight Kara responds by downing it in one swallow, becoming instantly and uncontrollably drunk. While Kara and Mon-El are from enemy worlds, their drinking does not act as a leveler to their relationship. In contrast to a scene discussed by Forster in *Alien Nation* (Baker, 1988), in which "...an inebriating drink acts as a social/racial leveler here, where hierarchies are abandoned and an equal footing permits free speech" (259), Kara's drunkenness merely turns her into a silly caricature and becomes means by which Mon-El can wink at the audience. Kara's romance with Mon-El rewrites her as a 'cool girl,' a term coined by crime writer Gillian Flynn to describe a woman who pretends to "adore[s] football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping...and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2...(2012 : 210)." This shift is emphasized in Season 3, when Mon-El travels back in time to the 21<sup>st</sup> century with his new wife, Imra. Kara, still mourning his loss in the second season, comes upon the couple digging into an enormous plate of ribs in the alien bar. Imra exclaims how strange it is to have to eat with her hands, which signals her as feminine and dainty, before Mon-El affectionately wipes a smudge of barbecue sauce from her chin. Imra is the cool girl from the future, uptight and chilly, but happy to accommodate her husband's enjoyment of messy and coded-as-masculine food [S03xE09], and thus usurping Kara's own masculine eating and its ostensibly liberating message in Season 1<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, fans who disliked the Mon-El character often equated him with the bland convenience foodstuffs, referring to him as white bread (Gelman, 2018), Mayo, and hot dog ("Supergirl Musical Cemented", 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Like Catco magazine, and her Matrix incarnation, *Supergirl* the series is also a hybrid, existing on a plane between the superhero genre and teen soaps such as *Riverdale* (CW, 2017-)<sup>11</sup>. The show's approach to the character, like her long history in comics, has also reflected an uncertainty about how to deal with her. Unlike Superman, she is less strongly embedded in the American iconography as exemplified by Superman's role as a son of farmers, and has come, albeit lately, to identify even more with the anxieties of the immigrant experience. Yet, while food is often used in cinema to communicate characters' cultural identity and emotions, the former is rarely, if ever exploited to provide insight into Kara's past, an omission that also reflects the lack of diversity in the down-to-earth setting with its packaged, mostly Eurocentric allusions to food. While the comics have sometimes used food to express Kara's estrangement from her new home, the series has placed its focus on cementing relationships and emotions, while couching Kara's appetite in a form of privilege. Kara eats what and however much she wants, yet this gleeful lack of control does little to break the gendered rules of feminine eating reinforced through characters like Cat Grant. If we analyze the eating practices in the series as a means to unpack its conflicting approaches to feminism, Kara's unbridled appetite reveals less of a pushback against gendered eating norms, than an anomaly that confers on her the status of 'cool girl' afforded the privilege of masculine-coded eating. Kara's consequence free consumption of junk food might be considered another superpower, a natural fantasy in a real world of exacting expectations placed on women. Through food, the show packages wish fulfillment as liberation, with Kara's secret identity providing the leverage to confer a message of empowerment rendered impossible for its human characters and elusive to the heroine herself.

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<sup>11</sup> This hybrid status is partly due to the show's move to the CW network, whose programming mixes genres such as live action paranormal mysteries and superhero dramas with romance, an infusion that has enhanced the success of its other shows *Arrow*, *The Flash*, and *Legends of Tomorrow* (Riesman, 2017).

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