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Living in the Liminal: Representation of Transgender and Nonbinary Identity in 'Steven Universe'

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LIVING IN THE LIMINAL: REPRESENTATION OF TRANSGENDER AND NONBINARY
IDENTITY IN *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the children's animated series *Steven Universe*, this research takes a semiotic approach to explore anti-essentialist messages of gender identity. Atypical within the mainstream media, the cartoon expresses dynamic messages about gender by representing nonbinary characters and gender fluid themes. By contextualizing western history of cartoon production, queer representation, and audience reception, this analysis provides insight into the importance of inclusive depictions of transgender identity in children's media. Through close textual analysis and focus group findings with straight cisgender and queer informants, the research examines how the show portrays liminal identities. In a media landscape that distances children and queerness, here transgender identity is simultaneously normalized and othered through the text's visuals and dialogue in constructive ways. Evaluating transgender representation is important because representation, or lack thereof, influences audiences, importantly, the young transgender audiences that consume this series. Through queer narratives, visuals of queerness, and inclusive messages, the show productively incorporates queer themes. By combining textual analysis and focus group findings, this study demonstrates that audiences interpret the programming as constructively depicting queer identities in a media landscape that otherwise often distances children and queerness.

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THE LIMINAL CARTOON

STEVEN UNIVERSE AND LIMINALITY

“Adolescence is widely understood as a confusing, liminal stage in life—indeed as a truly alien stage of life” Sarah Banet-Weiser

In a quaint beachside town, a young boy named Steven Universe ponders why he exists. Steven’s existential thoughts seem dark for a kid’s cartoon, but his pursuit for his identity drives the later seasons in Cartoon Network’s *Steven Universe*. As a half human, half alien, his identity is in constant state of flux. After uncovering a secret video tape addressed to a person named “Nora,” he is even more confused about his existence. The episode’s narrative suggests that Nora, who is mentioned in the videotape, is somehow connected to Steven. After all, Steven and Nora both have identical VHS tapes: one “For Nora” and one “For Steven,” given to them by Steven’s mother before her death. Steven infers that Nora is his sister or a mysterious family member, and because of this, he wants to find Nora in order to answer questions about his past.

Steven embarks on a quest to solve the Nora mystery, ending up on the outskirts of Beach City after being transported there by his pink pet lion. Running up the hill in front of him, he is sure that his pet brought him there to meet Nora. He runs up the hill at dusk, the background sky painted in blue and purple, indicating the liminal time of day. Suddenly, Steven hears soft music and sees long hair waving in the wind. “Nora?” Steven whispers as he approaches the top of the hill. Only, it is not Nora, but Steven’s father. With long hair and a guitar in hand, Greg greets Steven, pleasantly surprised that his son found his “jamming hill.” By challenging the audience’s expectations, connecting long hair and soft music with Greg (a middle-aged man) instead of Nora (an assumed girl), the text deconstructs traditionally gendered traits. Steven then asks if his

dad is Nora, which conveys a logic that in this cartoon world, it could very well be possible. Steven asks his dad about Nora's tape. To calm Steven, Greg plays it for him. While watching his mom's video letter, Steven appears uncomfortable as Rose refers to her unborn child as "Nora" and not "Steven." When the video finally ends, Steven asks who Nora is and his dad replies, "Nora is you."

The plainness of Greg's statement illustrates how *Steven Universe* defines gender as fluid. The mystery is simply solved: Nora is not a long lost twin or a shadowy figure from Steven's past. Nora is Steven. Steven's frantic search, only to discover that he was Nora all along, reveals how identity is not a stagnant object, but a malleable action. Steven asks, "Am I supposed to be—did she want me to be Nora?" His identity is blurred in this moment while he contemplates if he needs to fit into another identity, if he is "supposed to be" this gendered name. However, Greg tells Steven that Rose just wanted her child to be her child and she picked the name "Steven" for a boy and "Nora" for a girl and that was why there were two videos. Although Steven's parents acted upon a tradition of picking gendered names, Greg also adds that parents do not know whether the name that they choose would actually fit their child when they get older.

Steven and Greg's conversation, reminiscent of the family heart-to-hearts on sitcoms, positions Greg as a knowledgeable figure who comforts Steven's anxieties about identity. By reassuring his son that it's okay to be his true self, Greg's rhetoric diverges from the "is it a boy or girl?" strict line of conservative parental thinking. Greg tells Steven that Rose's speech in the video was true. Rose says it was exhilarating that Steven's life would be "full of so many possibilities" and that Steven would be able to "explore them" for himself. Greg continues to comfort Steven by telling him, "I mean, you could be Steven or Nora or anyone else and you can

always change your name.” This striking scene in “Lion 4: Alternate Ending” depicts identity as malleable, where Steven can be Steven, Nora, both, or neither. Identity is an action that changes and grows, according to Rose and Greg’s dialogue. After all, “A human is an action,” as Steven’s mom says in the video. Personhood, in other words, is inherently liminal. It is neither here nor there. By stating that a human is “an action,” the episode positions identity as unfixed, and the individual a self-determining actor. The text’s allusions to gender, by having Steven question his identity through gendered names, reveals the text’s broad interest in the construction of gender as fluid, as liminal.

This scene exemplifies how *Steven Universe* promotes liminality within its narrative. Through the themes of fluidity and defying categorization, *Steven Universe* constructs a discourse centered on openness and inclusion. Although the series has limitations because it is a product of mainstream media, and therefore, integrated into a media landscape that maintains heterocisnormativity, *Steven Universe* subverts the children’s media paradigm. Like the show’s place in western cartoon history, its complex narrative structure, and its focus on gender fluid themes, *Steven Universe* is unique in its ability to challenge, engage, and connect audiences to these themes.

Steven Universe, through its dedication to liminal themes, suggests queer inclusivity, though inclusiveness that is non-assimilative. Inclusive non-assimilative ideology is one where trans people are included into the macro-narrative of children’s media, but not in a way that usurps their identity or transness. In a sense, the inclusion of trans people to the media landscape should not be done by stripping trans or nonbinary identity, but by celebrating it. Alongside the celebration of transgender and nonbinary identity, non-assimilative themes are those that expose

gender as anti-essentialist in nature while exposing the complexity of trans and nonbinary identities.

This research focuses on the show's transgender inclusive, non-assimulative messages. Such messages are especially meaningful for younger audiences, especially children that identify as queer. By evaluating the ways in which *Steven Universe* succeeded in terms of representation, we can better grasp ways to include transgender identity in respectful and complex ways in children's media. Since society distances queerness, and therefore transness, from childhood experiences, this research attempts to expose this sentiment, imploring other children's media researchers to decenter gender essentialism from their work and promote the wellbeing of trans children in the process.

METHOD

Having viewed every episode of *Steven Universe* as well as *Adventure Time*, I am able to intentionally select episodes that exemplify anti-essentialist and transgender themes. Though these concepts do appear throughout the texts, especially *Steven Universe*, the episodes I discuss suggest a repositioning of gender and identity in a clear way. I have also updated research when particular episodes are released, taking notes on specific scenes that would be noteworthy for further discussion in part with the three episodes textually analyzed in depth.

Focusing on the semiotic approach to textual analysis, I analyzed three episodes of *Steven Universe*, taking careful notes on the dialogue and visual images. These episodes include "Sadie's Song," "Alone Together," and "The Answer." The three episodes were chosen because the episodic narrative revolves around the transgender nonbinary character Stevonnie, and the liminal queer character Garnet. The semiotic approach unpacks messages founded on cultural assumptions made by the audience or by the content creators (Baym 328). Therefore, the

semiotic approach allows for a deeper reading of the inferred or latent messages about gender and sexuality.

The three episodes analyzed, “Sadie’s Song,” “Alone Together,” and “The Answer,” were the focus of the research while specific scenes in other *Steven Universe* episodes were also analyzed. Other episodes are used as referential points in order to enhance the argument about trans inclusivity.

“Sadie’s Song” deals with gender expression and deconstructing an essentialist femininity while “Alone Together” portrays a more explicit anti-essentialist view on the gender spectrum by representing a trans nonbinary character. “The Answer,” an episode that focuses on the backstory of a queer female character, critiques social categorization while all of the episodes contain messages about the comfort of de-categorizing preexisting social molds. The three episodes discuss, through signs, inclusive messages on identities that exist outside a heterocisnormative worldview. The research explores how the series represents the trans nonbinary character Stevonnie as well as how the series depicts queer women’s sexualities.

When I speak on transgender and nonbinary identity, I group nonbinary identity as an identity within transgender identity. When I refer to the term transgender in the research, I do so with the assumption that nonbinary identity is within this categorization as well. I make a distinction to say nonbinary in addition to transgender in order to promote the visibility of both terms. By deeming Stevonnie transgender as well as nonbinary, I am making a statement, as researcher, of the inclusion of nonbinary identity with trans experiences. I wish to destigmatize the assumption that nonbinary identity cannot be connected with transgender experiences. By saying that Stevonnie is trans, I make the claim that nonbinary identity is just as trans as binary transness. Stevonnie, who is usually referred to as nonbianry rather than trans, because of their

use of “they/them” pronouns, can also be identified as transgender. By claiming that nonbinary holds a valid position within the wide variety of trans experiences, I attempt to destigmatize the separation of nonbinary and transgender identity. In the same breath, I recognize that some nonbinary people do not identify as transgender. This is an explicit statement on the inclusion of nonbinary identity within the larger discourse on transgender experiences.

The section “Weird” Cartoons: History, Context, and Reception of the Liminal Cartoon contextualizes *Steven Universe* in terms of the how, when, why, and where the series was produced as well as contextualizing unique aspects of the show that break from the traditional, western children’s cartoon. Information is provided about production history in order to present a clear picture of how anti-essentialism and inclusive messages in the text appear.

Anti-essentialist messages are illustrated and analyzed through the textual analyses and focus group findings in *Fusion: Living in the Liminal*, *Pink Boys*, *Girl Crush*, and *Stevonnie: A Trans Children’s Character*. In addition to textual analysis, the focus group sessions are analyzed and interpreted. Conducting focus group sessions is important because the diverse methods I used added breadth to the argument and analysis to my research. Through focus groups as another dimension of meaning making, I expanded on previous conclusions about modern cartoons. I sought the responses of other audience members and examined how the analysis holds up against other viewers. I can counter my perspective as a researcher who has experience interpreting the show as well as a researcher who can acknowledge the trans themes clearly in the *Stevonnie* episodes. I countered interpretation with those of nontrans audiences not as familiar with the series in order to observe the similarities and differences in findings.

Textual analysis and focus group sessions were used in methodology because I wanted to see the comparison of my readings: that of someone steeped in the text’s narrative and thematic

messages, to that of an audience unfamiliar with the text. This was in order to relate the focus group interpretations to previous research. It serves as a check and a counterpoint to own reading and a way in which I learned from the focus group discussions. Through this combination of method, I analyzed how the textual analysis was confirmed and challenged by focus group interpretations.

Some questions proposed before the focus group sessions which informed the analysis are as follows: Do only LGBTQ audiences acknowledge the queer representation and liminal themes? Are cis-straight audiences aware of this representation, and if so, what kind of ways are they influenced by the text? How do queer audiences receive the text? Are queer audiences more critical of the show because of an assumed literacy in queer representation and visibility? What kinds of messages and themes do queer audiences receive? What are queer audience's insights on the larger, cultural shift in children's programming? How does the representation of race and sexuality in Garnet's character (as a Black queer woman) come across for audiences?

The focus groups allow a way for the textual analysis to interact with and engage with audience reception. The focus groups incorporate another layer of depth to the theoretical conclusions made about liminality and queer representation. Applying both textual analysis and focus group sessions deepen the meaning making, allowing for a creative, complex interpretation based on qualitative method. Together, focus groups and textual analysis provide a rich fodder for me to analyze how audiences perceive children's media.

After receiving IRB approval, I scheduled out two focus groups, one a nontransgender LGBPQ audience and the other a nontransgender straight audience. Each focus group session watched two eleven-minute episodes of *Steven Universe*. The first episode viewed was "Alone Together," the second "The Answer." These episodes were chosen because I conducted textual

analysis on each episode over the summer. Additionally, these episodes depicted themes discussed in the research. “Alone Together,” features a transgender nonbinary character while “The Answer” represents a queer romance. Both episodes were explicit in theme, through narrative, visuals, and dialogue, and selected because of this. The nontrans LGBPQ focus group sample coincidentally had participants who all identified as nontrans, which was taken into account with the interpretative findings. There were five participants in the queer focus group and seven participants in the non-queer focus group. The sample size was small, but the research’s goal is not to create grand and general statements about each categorization of people, as non-categorization is a theme within the research. Instead, using qualitative analysis, the strengths of the research relied on the different perspectives of each participant. The size of the sample was not as important as the actual, interpretative findings of the focus group discussions. The research was not looking for larger trends, but how language (and its limitations), categorization, and audience interpretation of transgender texts were illustrated through an audience member’s dialogue.

The participants also were of college-age. It would have been helpful to have focus group sessions for younger participants, say preteen or teen, but the series *Steven Universe* is designed for older audiences as well. Conducting focus group sessions with a young adult audience would not be out of the question because *Steven Universe* has an audience demographic atypical from how we usually think about children’s media viewership. A *Steven Universe* fan site conducted an age range poll in November 2014. Out of 663 people who participated, 386 people identified as teenagers (13-19 years old), with 174 people identified as young adults (20-25 years old). Out of 663 people, 56 people identified as adults (over 25 years old), 33 people identified as pre-teens (11-13 years old), and 14 people identified as kids (0-10 years old). Therefore, 58.2% of

people polled were teens. 26.2% were young adults, 8.4% were adults, 5% were pre-teens, and 2.1% were kids (“*Steven Universe* Wikia: Age Range Poll”).

There are flaws with this poll, but it generally reflects a subset of the series’ demographic. The younger children do not have as much access to fandom sites as older people do and are less likely to do an online poll. However, the demographic of *Steven Universe* is well-known, seen through the largely teen to adult queer demographic in online communities and real-life conventions. The high percentages of teens and young adult demographics for the show is not surprising, as the show deals with issues that teen and young adult queer audiences did not see in western children’s animation in the ‘90s and early ‘00s. Conducting focus group sessions with college-age participants is logical because it brings to question why older audiences enjoy a show like *Steven Universe*, and in what ways previous children’s animation disappointed queer audiences.

The focus group sessions were divided into two sections instead of having one focus group of 12 participants because the research needed to distinguish the participants’ answers from a queer perspective and a non-queer perspective. Coinciding with this, the research would have benefited from a majority transgender and nonbinary group in order to compare data from the nontransgender queer group and the transgender queer group. Because of accessibility, and the small sample size, it was difficult to arrange a focus group with a majority of trans and nonbinary participants. However, if this research could be improved, I would have implemented a trans and nonbinary focus group session.

In order to prepare for moderating the focus group sessions, I studied texts that specify how to conduct and analyze successful focus group sessions. The acceptable behavior of the moderator was studied as well as ways in which to maximize discussion and comfortability. The

moderator in the focus group has to, in short, self-moderate in order to create a group atmosphere that is neither forced nor loosely managed. The moderator also makes sure their approaches are able “to draw out people who are reluctant to participate” as well as ensure that participants are not dominating the conversation. Conversations should be, as stated in *Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Group Facilitation*, “reasonably equitable” through the guidance of a moderator who is aware of the social dynamics of the group (Greenbaum 27). In the focus group sessions, there was an emphasis on eye-contact and looking at each participant after stating a question to give participants the chance to answer a question, especially if they are hesitant at first.

In regards to the self-moderating moderator, a “general awareness of group dynamics can go a long way,” according to the grounding research in *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (Stewart and Shamdasani 35). The focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed with the identities of the students coded in the research to ensure confidentiality. Other important aspects of conducting focus groups that the moderator considered are the modes used in creating a cohesive focus group. The moderator created common ground with the participants before discussion in order to allow the participants to feel more at ease when talking in a group (Stewart and Shamdasani 63). This included giving background information on the episode watched and allowing participants to talk about their overall feelings on the text first, then diving into specifics of each episode. Other ways in creating a cohesive group dynamic is through the simple arrangement of participant seats and through establishing a sense of balance between the moderator and participants, which was achieved through having all participants close together and in an arched arrangement so each participant could see other participants (Stewart and Shamdasani 88, 91). Through self-reflection of my own position as moderator, and with the

research I've done on the history of focus group screenings, I was well-prepared with handling the unique constraints of focus group sessions.

“WEIRD” CARTOONS: HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND RECEPTION OF THE LIMINAL CARTOON

A couple years ago, I was sitting with my younger brother as we flipped through channels and finally settled on one his favorite shows: the Cartoon Network classic *Adventure Time*. It was a show known for its stoned teenager demographic and inappropriate humor. He loved *Adventure Time*, and soon after, a newer show called *Steven Universe*. As we watched, the things that struck me about these shows were how different they were to the childhood cartoons I watched when I was my brother’s age. *Adventure Time* and others have a different animation design, narrative structure, and focus on explicit queer themes. In short, his childhood shows seemed a strange landscape full of moral quandaries and inclusive messages. Nevertheless, my apprehension quickly shifted after I recognized the undercurrent of nontraditional thought, as the shows often critiqued conventional western ideas on the nuclear family and gender expression.

Adventure Time and *Steven Universe* are incredibly different in comparison to some of the ‘90s and early ‘00s western kid’s programming. With simplistic facial designs and character movements, the bubbly *Adventure Time* distracts casual viewers from its intricately placed moral messages while *Steven Universe* slowly builds a repertory of queer plots. Emma Jane, who conducted a textual analysis of *Adventure Time*, reveals how the first time she watched the show with her child, her experience felt “somewhat alienating.” I too felt alienated by the difference these series created (whether through animation style, narratives, or complex messages of gender), but they grew on me after I realized the shows’ cleverness. Similarly, Jane became “captivated by the series’ approach to gender, as well as its absurdist humor, its dark subtexts, its emotional intelligence” all of which was cloaked in in-jokes and childishness (Jane 233). Like others that first watched these cartoons, I was transfixed by its ability to bend previous notions of

the stability of gendered roles in children's programming. Its liminal existence: as childish and as mature, its unique animation design, complex narrative, and queerness keeps it fresh and loved by children and adults.

Created by Pendleton Ward in 2010, *Adventure Time* has had 9 seasons, 3 miniseries: *Stakes*, *Islands*, and *Elements*, and other tie-in shorts. It takes place in The Land of Ooo, a strange and colorful post-apocalypse that is populated by candy people, penguins, and princesses. The series stars a young boy Finn and his older brother Jake, who is a yellow magic dog. They live in a tree-house and spend most of their time fighting monsters, saving villagers, or going on adventures. However, much of the show focuses on the ensemble cast which consists of a scientist-princess, a half-demon vampire, a purple space teen, and an anthropomorphized game console. Based on the setting and characters of the show, *Adventure Time* appears undeniably eccentric, at least compared to older western cartoons that play on Boomerang. After its popularity, a newer show emerged in 2013.

The series, *Steven Universe*, was created by Rebecca Sugar, a former storyboard artist on *Adventure Time* and the first female series creator for Cartoon Network. *Steven Universe* has had 5 seasons and a handful of internet shorts and, like *Adventure Time*, is still running in 2018. Set in Beach City, the show stars a half alien, half human boy, Steven, who lives with three alien guardians and his dad Greg Universe. The guardians; Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, are an alien species called "Gems." Along with super powers like shapeshifting and future vision, Gems can also merge together to create 'fusions.' In short, fusion defines two or more Gems, or partially Gem characters melding together to create a new character. This idea becomes subversive when a character like Garnet is created, as she is a fusion between two Gems (both women) who are in

a queer relationship with one another, or when the nonbinary character Stevonnie is created when two children fuse together.

Steven Universe has inclusive (non-assimilative) messages about gender which demonstrate the texts' dedication to anti-essentialist concepts. The series is inclusive in nature, but instead of programming which shows how to get along with others, the text shows how to respect queer people. We often think of prosocial content as preschool-ready public broadcasting meant to educate kids. Much of prosocial programming originated from the FCC requirements in the '70s and was intended to improve a child's self-image and sociability (Strasburger 103). In fact, a lot of research on prosocial content centers on PBS' *Sesame Street*, which came out of this era of regulation. After deregulation in the '80s, which led to "program-length commercials" instead of shows that focused on altruism and education, kid's programs revamped its prosocial image (or attempted to). Prosocial programs were scarce into the '90s, and not until postmodern shows like Nick's *Blue's Clues* and *Dora the Explorer* did a prosocial revival appear to emerge at all (Strasburger 111). Contrary to other prosocial programs, *Steven Universe* and other liminal cartoons do not focus on a strict, preschool model in order to educate kids. *Steven Universe* and other cartoons have a wide age demographic between elementary-age to pre-teen to teen.

By elementary-age, children's desire to engage in prosocial programming is rare, but I argue that programs intended for older kids (and adults) produce prosocial messages differently than PBS or Nick Jr., thus making it accessible for these demographics. It is obvious that prosocial programs have influenced children. As one of the founders of *Sesame Street* says, "It is not whether children learn from television, it is what they learn, because everything children see on television is teaching them something" (Valkenburg 179). By understanding that media inherently impacts audiences, whether negatively or positively, we can surmise that liminal

cartoons also teach children. Specifically, *Steven Universe* produces prosocial messages about gender through supporting concepts that deny traditional gender norms. Just as Greg comforts his child in “Lion 4,” *Steven Universe* as a whole offers comforting messages that promote meaningful and inclusive views on gender expression and gender identity. It is the program’s unique ability as an animation and its narrative structure that make the prosocial messages powerful.

It would be reductive to make clear distinctions between children’s programming demographically, especially when prosocial programming has been strictly thought of as programming that categorizes and teaches children. Why can’t other texts designed for children be prosocial in a context that is specifically queer? By denying prosocial as a potential adjective to describe a text like *Steven Universe*, we fall back into the notion that safe, prosocial programming is heterocisnormative and only about education that revolves around putting people into boxes. A show like *Steven Universe* can be inclusive and non-assimilative. It can be prosocial. That is, much of queer media is assimilative in nature, meaning that texts show how queer people are ‘just like us!’ thus taking away the unique experiences that queer people face that nonqueer people do not experience. *Steven Universe* conveys messages that include transgender people narratively and thematically, but in ways that push back assimilative rhetoric. However, in order for the audience to fully receive such messages, the texts themselves rely on narratives that expand beyond the episodic form.

In addition, because children’s media often depicts queer-coded characters as villainous, there is an assumption that anything queer is ‘too adult,’ and therefore not safe for children’s media. This is toxic in that it assumes queerness is only an adult concept and that children cannot be queer. In opposition to this statement, there are, indeed, queer children. It is only right that

children's media should recognize this reality. By providing inclusive representations of queer identity, the myth that queerness is too adult can be deconstructed.

Ignoring the conventional structure of previous western children's programming, *Steven Universe* moves toward intricate story arcs and complex narratives, which influence the portrayal of messages. *Steven Universe* uses complex narrative in order to complicate characters and provide moving plotlines. Much like adult dramas that rely on long story arcs and cliffhangers, the Cartoon Network series uses this as well. *Steven Universe* breaks essentialist ideas about gender and provides complex representations through narrative payoff and audience investment, which is accomplished through the text's complexity. Mittell describes how complex narrative produces a continuous story instead of a "conventional episodic form" in regards to adult programs (Mittell 18). *Steven Universe* uses a complex narrative, a structure typically not common among children's programming. Because the conventional style was safe (again: profitable) for networks in the Golden Age to the recent past, usual cartoon series had little character age growth, which left long-term character development lacking. It was also assumed by networks and the public at large that kids tuned into cartoons routinely with little criticism about the content; a different (and less condescending) assumption is made about adult audience engagement with complex narrative shows like *Lost* or *The West Wing* (Mittell 38). Although some postmodern cartoons dabble in 'what if' future scenarios, they remain largely conventional in structure. Characters in typical children's cartoons never grow up, continuously beset with Peter Pan syndrome. After all, child characters cannot be in danger of adolescence—a risk that challenges their fixed identity and the show's marketability. Despite this, recent cartoons defy the conventional, stable structure of storytelling. For example, the cartoon character, Finn, ages

in the show *Adventure Time*; his character grows physically and emotionally over long story arcs instead of an ageless, episodic sitcom style.

Unlike the liminal cartoon's complex narrative, the conventional narrative structure usually assigned to children's programming focuses on simpler plots. *Adventure Time* defies simple plots by allowing its characters to grow and change during longer narratives that extend through multiple seasons. *Steven Universe*'s characters also age within the show while the narratives connect into larger arcs typically found in adult programs. Though other cartoons use complex narrative as well, especially shows that focus on character development (*Adventure Time*) or mystery (*Gravity Falls*), the complex narrative in *Steven Universe* is most distinguishable because of how anti-essentialist themes tie into narrative payoff of the series.

Shows like *Adventure Time*, *Clarence*, *The Loud House*, *The Amazing World of Gumball*, and *Gravity Falls* all have elements of anti-essentialist values, queer themes, and complex narrative, but *Steven Universe*'s amalgamation of all of these traits makes the series' inclusive, non-assimilative queer messages stand out.

In the late '00s, *Adventure Time* used pastiche to comment on social issues while main characters in *Steven Universe*, as queer women, comment on discrimination and social categorization. Cartoons are disparaged for being gross and childish at times, but behind their weirdness, texts often critique gender roles, governmental corruption, and self-righteous violence. How did we get from *Tom and Jerry*'s simple plot repetition and slapstick humor to cartoons that ask moral questions that cannot be answered? Postmodern cartoons are a point at which cartoons play with social roles and the traditional. By parodying nuclear families in adult shows like *The Simpsons* or kid's shows like *The Fairly OddParents*, cartoons often convey messages that critique or parody conventional life. *Steven Universe* is often complex in

storytelling all while critiquing aspects of society. Defined by how it de-categorizes gender, the liminal cartoon rewrites the way children's programming constructs the world. While prosocial television educates children, it also enforces a categorical way of thinking, but liminal cartoons can use aspects of prosocial messages in order to alter assumptions about gender and gender expression. Thus, liminal cartoons deconstruct categorization of identity, especially gender identity. Using gender anti-essentialism, the series challenges assumptions about gender expression. *Steven Universe* represents interesting messages on the western animated children's show. Even within the traditional media, the show expresses anti-essentialist messages about gender while also depicting queer characters in complex ways.

FUSION AND CONTEXTUALING THE LIMINAL

Fusion, the overarching motif in the series, is the primary narrative means by which *Steven Universe* plays with gender categorization and queerness. Fusion is when two or more characters merge together to create a new, entirely different being. Fusion is a key element in the show and is referenced frequently, either from Steven excitedly asking Amethyst and Pearl to become the majestic Opal in the episode "Giant Woman" or in more crucial, plot-oriented episodes. In the season 1 finale "Jail Break," the audience learns that one of the main characters, Garnet, is a fusion between two smaller Gems. The text uses fusion consistently and thematically throughout the show's seasons. As a narrative and symbolic device, fusion envelops many aspects of the show, often signifying the liminal, especially in regards to depicting queer identity.

Fusion symbolizes the liminal identity of the text's characters. Because fusions are not two people yet they are made up of two people, they exist in a state of social ambiguity. Their ambiguity is taboo on Gem Homeworld (the alien home planet) because fusions are typically a melding of Gems of different social classes. On Homeworld, Gems fuse together with those of

their Gem type in order to create a fusion that is a replication of their self, but when Gems of different types fuse together, they create interesting and different identities. By analyzing the rhetoric used to refer to fusions, the text alludes to themes of societal otherness of minorities, especially those that do not fit into a specific social box, like transgender (including nonbinary) identities. In the same breath, fusion symbolizes the othering of LGBTQ people, most notably queer women and nonbinary people. We should also recognize that fusion can also deal with minority identities that are seen as liminal, or defying social categorization as well. For example, Garnet is a fusion that is coded as a Black female queer character. Stevonnie is a fusion of Connie, who is Indian, and Steven, who is white while also being a fusion between a girl and boy. Fusion unfolds themes that relate to representation of othered identities, a concept that is not as historically contextualized as other embedded themes, like camp and satire, in the western animated program.

With a modest selection of modern children's programs featuring queer characters or queer themes, it can be troubling to think of the shoddy representation in the '90s and before. Although the '90s and '00s had allusions to the liminal because of the relationship between children's animation and satire/camp, earlier western cartoons cannot stand up against the complex crystallizing of queer themes in shows like *Steven Universe*. Investigating each cartoon era's influence on subsequent eras helps understand why liminal elements appear explicitly in contemporary kid's shows. Although other cartoons within a range of eras also have liminal elements, *Steven Universe*, created in the '10s, most cohesively defines the liminal cartoon.

Liminal elements in cartoons appear cross-generationally, but are most abundant in shows of recent eras, from the '90s to today. However, although the liminal has appeared in thematic ties to camp and satire, liminal elements that pertain to a concrete disavowal of gender

essentialism and cissexism is not apparent. By considering broad trends in western cartoon history, we investigate the connection between the liminal, de-categorization, gender anti-essentialism, and trans inclusivity. For one, liminal cartoons have a production style that is heavily directorial. This broadly encompasses '90s and postmodern cartoons as a whole; in the '90s, cartoons shifted from a largely industrial and separated production to a singular artistic style. A '90s kid might remember the unique palette of each cartoon series of their childhood, from the imaginative nature of *Rugrats* to the more eerie tone of *Courage the Cowardly Dog*. Each series has its own aesthetic, created with a collection of attributes like narrative tone, animation style, and verbal humor. Linda Simensky, a former Nickelodeon employee, describes how “artists were encouraged to speak of their influences” while other team members contributed to a collective, creative process (Simensky 72). Although this type of production has its downfalls, as the myth of the singular auteur surely leans toward the patriarchal and elite, the focus on a singular vision (not necessarily the ‘artist’) created a specific style of western animation during the '90s. It was a process that cemented into future animation production and laid a foundation for series like *Steven Universe*.

Specifically, the '90s aesthetic that I speak of revolves around a singular artistic perspective channeled by young directors who admired “particular directors from earlier eras,” specifically from the Golden Age (Simensky 273). The Golden Age, defined by western animation from the '50s and '60s, centers on such popular franchises as Acme’s Looney Tunes and Hanna-Barbera’s *Tom and Jerry*. While animators in the Golden Age influenced '90s artists, the Golden Age focused energy on episodic plots, exaggerated animation, and slapstick. *Steven Universe*’s production traits gravitate towards influences from the '90s because of the artistic

production style. However, across all eras, the networks in which they were created were founded in mainstream media.

All the children's animation under consideration here are produced by media corporations (as opposed to independent projects found on YouTube or Tumblr) and exist within the mainstream media world, thus influencing production and message. Although the liminal cartoon pushes messages that defy the binary categorization of gender, shows that do this are broadcasted within the corporate mass media. No matter Nick's "coolness" and Cartoon Network's "edginess," these networks are profit-driven corporations that exist because of marketing techniques and brand recognition. Therefore, acknowledging the anti-essentialist views on *Steven Universe* is crucial especially because it is produced inside of the system rather than against it. It's important to reflect on how potential subcultural themes like anti-essentialism and trans-normativity interact within the larger corporations that the children's networks belong to. Although shows that provide culturally resistant messages are arguably "not aimed at overthrowing the hegemonic order," but to "erode the order from within," the refusal to dismantle the entire system reveals how powerful that hegemonic system is (Dhaenens 521). By restructuring gendered assumptions within the corporative oligarchy of networks, artists that work on television production are able to provide a shift in what messages are put forth by the mainstream.

The '90s cartoon produces programming linked to mass media production; two of these networks, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, had the "biggest impact on television animation in the 1990s," largely due to their production freedom and their wedded connection to mainstream media (Simensky 277). Therefore, the shows that ran during the '90s and the animation stage of today share a contextualized world. Liminal cartoons are not inherently counter-cultural

cartoons; they are founded in traditional television, however, this does not necessarily mean that shows like *Steven Universe* are pro-corporate in their narrative messages, but that in order for these shows to run, they have to abide by corporate interest. They cannot, as Banet-Weiser says, work outside of the system (Simensky 180). The mass media world is still abides by the status quo. It's interesting that these shows that critique heterocisnormativity also work within the system that others them. Within this context, mainstream media still largely attempts to maintain a heterociscentric world where queerness is othered. However, within this normative landscape, children's animation can serve as a trans-inclusive respite within otherwise largely transphobic media spheres. *Steven Universe* breaks the conventionality of mass media and the usual mold of children's programming through its dedication to providing queer narratives. The series is not an absolute savior for trans representation. For example, there are layered problems with the depiction of Stevonnie, such as the arguably fetishistic way Stevonnie is introduced in "Alone Together," but *Steven Universe* attempts what other series do not dare go. The mere visibility of transness in children's animation is radicalized because there is no other resource for transgender representation in children's television.

Categorical, essentialist thinking is apparent in most of children's animation. Children's animation, and children's media in general, depicts essentialist thinking. That is, texts claim a biological difference among girls and boys, usually praising that difference with segregated programming. Through Nickelodeon's "girl power" movement and the media's interest in commercializing feminism, some cartoons fixate on essentialist language that put girls and boys into specific marketing categories (Banet-Weiser 104). Similarly, Cartoon Network took after Nick's postfeminist thinking in shows like *Powerpuff Girls* and *Johnny Bravo*. Children's cartoons often would represent an individualized approach toward feminism, an attitude popular

among postfeminist thought. Although shows from my childhood had moments of challenging their own categorization, gender anti-essentialism and deconstructing the gender binary were not prevalent themes, as evident through the lack of queer characters and the construction of a gender binary. While children's animation tends to have characters with diverse ways of expressing masculinity and femininity to often satire these conventions, where neither constructed expression is 'owned' by one gender, gender expression is highly categorized and the differences between women and men are often applauded. If children's animation is essentialist in terms of inferred cisgenderhood, then we must consider how essentialism leads to transphobia in children's media.

Although Johnny Bravo in *Johnny Bravo* expresses a softer side at times and is a satire of 'bravado' masculinity, he is intrinsically a symbol of hyper-masculinity. The three preschool superheroes in *Powerpuff Girls* reflect the "girls rule" mentality that Banet-Weiser describes in her research. In the '90s and early '00s, Nick's "girl power" brand effectively celebrated girlhood, having many series that starred a unique set of girl protagonists during the era. Nick later discarded the term "girl power" for "gender neutral" when it was no longer 'hip' to include majority girl protagonists. Despite the inclusion of girl protagonists, the texts themselves presented contradictions about gender, a political ambiguity that defines "the crux of postfeminism" (Banet-Weiser 131). The disavowal of anti-essentialism, and therefore, non-categorical interpretations of gender, was common in shows from my childhood. The dichotomy of gender blatantly reveals itself in the way children's shows are marketed and the assumptions made by advertisers. Therefore, it may seem "no surprise that preadolescents tend to identify with same-sex characters," as the shows present characters for specific genders to identify with (Valkenburg 74). Why then, if kids identify with characters similar to them (similarities

including a binary gender and expression), do they consume programming that contradicts this notion?

In the late '90s and '00s, characters that subverted gender expression and presentation were often portrayed as villains or comic relief. Described as “The Evilest of Evils,” the villain HIM from *Powerpuff Girls* was represented as the maniacal antagonist, often depicted as campy and sadistic. In connection, take the villains Dr. Drakken and Shego, who though lovable, are the comedic antagonists in *Kim Possible*. These characters are based on camp, which is “concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity,” similar, as Esther Newton describes in *Mother Camp*, to drag, a gendered performance art (Newton 124-5). Although the characters have campy attributes, the texts do not capitalize on camp as a way to include queer audiences. Therefore, there might be a level of dissonance between the text’s wishy-washy campiness and the young queer audience that might crave camp as a way to experience identity in ways that are strictly through villainy.

Steven Universe de-categorizes gender where previous animated series do not. Although queer-coded characters are prevalent in other children’s series, it is through the safe diffusion of camp and villainy that queer themes emerge. *Steven Universe* defines gender as anti-essentialist. Even though anti-essentialist themes in cartoons are enlightening, it is quite interesting that queer representation is easily found in children’s animation rather than live-action series. Besides *Steven Universe*, other children’s animation has featured queer representation, though not as fluidly tied to narrative.

As an update for research, queer themes appear in Nickelodeon’s *The Loud House* and Cartoon Network’s *Adventure Time*. Queer themes also appear in non-commercial platforms. Most uniquely is the popularity of the 2017 animated short film *In a Heartbeat*. The film is a

Ringling College of Art and Design production, written and directed by students Beth David and Esteban Bravo. The 4-minute film begins with the perspective of an anxious redhead named Sherwin who has a crush on another student, Jonathan. In the plot, Sherwin's heart becomes animated and throws affection toward Jonathan. Sherwin's classmates judge him for his crush, resulting in his anthropomorphic heart splitting in two. Jonathan picks up the discarded half and returns to the retreated Sherwin, putting the two pieces back together. The film concludes in the restoration of Sherwin's heart, and the realization that Jonathan also likes Sherwin. *In a Heartbeat* grossed over 35 million views on YouTube as well as winning Gold for Best Animated Short in Student Academy Awards. There are a couple noteworthy attributes to this film. For one, the universal positive reception from various social media platforms echoes the necessity for these types of queer stories, and the desire for these stories by audiences. This film, free from the restraints of corporate interest, refreshingly portrays themes of acceptance and sincerity, connecting ideas of childhood with queer identity. Cartoons have footing in other online mediums, most popularly YouTube, and because of social media, an animated short like *In a Heartbeat* could receive enough donations for the artists to produce a well-acclaimed project.

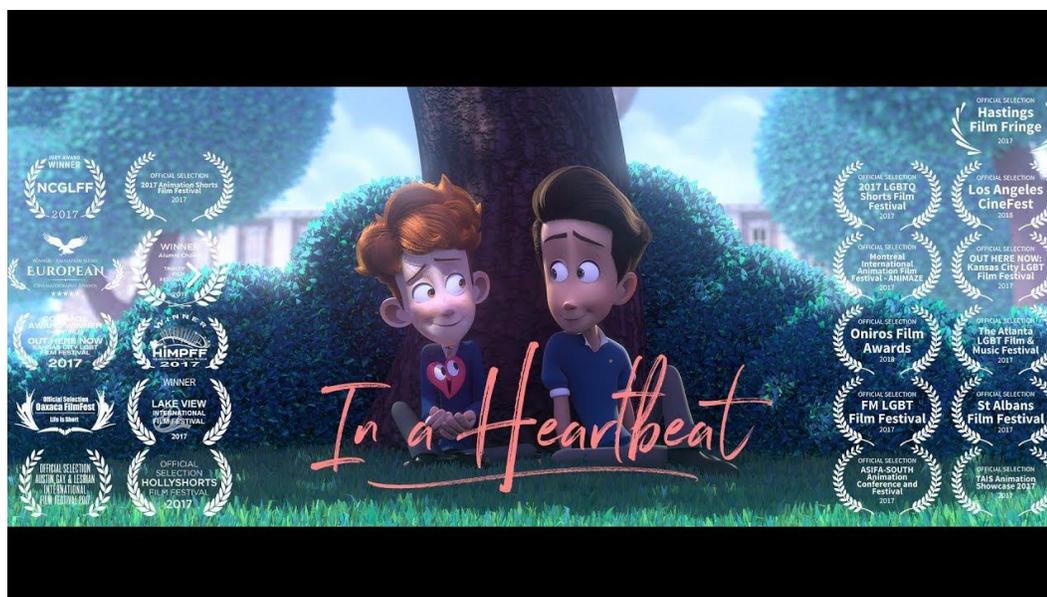


Photo by *In a Heartbeat* Animated Short Film, YouTube

On a corporate scale, other programs have engaged with queer themes. For example, Disney's season 2 premiere of its live-action show *Andi Mack* reveals that Cyrus Goodman, best friend to Andi Mack, is gay. The episode, airing in 2017, features a touching coming-out scene, presenting Cyrus as the first openly gay character on Disney Channel. What is surprising is that this show is not animated, and a fairly new series for Disney. As a live-action program, *Andi Mack* made a surprising leap forward by featuring a gay character on the kid's network. However, the show should not be heralded as the shining star of representation, the sole example used in the future to deny that queer representation needs to be better. The show is a good step forward in terms of pushing queer representation into other televisual mediums, but it should not be romanticized as the example that homophobia and transphobia is somehow fixed or over. This sentiment should be taken into consideration when heralding a series like *Steven Universe*.

Although the series has depicted queerness in ways that are refreshingly un-categorical and anti-essentialist in nature, other children's texts should use the series as a template while also

learning from the mistakes that *Steven Universe* has made in regards to the character Stevonnie. These mistakes can be attributed to the arguable fetishistic nature of introducing Stevonnie in contrast to a fusion like Garnet, who is shown in full view instead of fragments of the body. Additionally, it is not only about the content of the series, but the personal connection to the text and content creators that are important.

In order to contrast cisnormativity, children's television series should involve queer people, especially transgender people, in the content creator role. In short, transgender and nonbinary people should be able to tell their stories for young queer audiences because of the healthy impact that may have for transgender children watching. Trans content creators can aid in the representation of trans children's characters by pointing out problems in representation that nontrans content creators may ignore or look over when forming the nexus of a character's identity.

Steven Universe creator, Rebecca Sugar, speaks about her connection to the show and how explicit queer children's media is necessary. At the San Diego Comic-Con in 2016, an audience member asked *Steven Universe* creator Rebecca Sugar what inspired her to focus on LGBTQ themes. Sugar replied that "in large part it's based on my experience as a bisexual woman;" her experiences definitely are representative in her work on *Steven Universe*, representation she has been praised (and criticized) for (Rude). It is the personal connection to the media content as a queer content creator to the series that elevates its emotional entanglement with the public. In a *Rolling Stone* article, "'Steven Universe': How Rebecca Sugar Turned TV's Most Empathetic Cartoon Into an Empire," Sugar's "personal investment" in the series propelled the popularity of the series: "Sugar's personal investment in *Steven Universe* – the extent to which she is willing to unmask herself in her creation -is part of why the show has become so

popular, and in particular why it has become a lifeline for many LGBTQ teens and young adults” (Thurm). It is Sugar’s personal tie as a bisexual creator, producer, writer, etc. that differentiates the series. However, what Thurm miscalculates in the article is the importance of the queer young audience as well and how the audience influences Sugar as well. It’s important to keep in mind Sugar’s intentions while analyzing the texts because her work with *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* challenges what children’s programming can and cannot do in regards to gender and sexuality. As mentioned in the podcast *QUEERY with Cameron Esposito*, Sugar extrapolates her dedication to young queer audiences, audiences that influenced her in regards to coming out (Esposito). Although the series is produced in the mainstream, the work of various artists (not just the creators and directors) on the show influence the prosocial messages put forth. I focus mainly on transgender and nonbinary identities and subverting gender expressions in this research, however, Sugar’s comment on wanting to represent queer women who love women is something that also needs recognition.

Although other cartoons have liminal elements, much of children’s animation relies on the assumption that there are only two genders and that gender is inherent at birth. In order to analyze media texts in a way that reflects the current rhetoric of queer individuals, queer themes in programming should be anti-essentialist and push away from heterocisnormative themes. However, when queer themes are represented in children’s programming, there are still limitations due to the hegemonic media system in which these series are produced. For one, it is through animation that queer themes pop up most. Queer people are not depicted in the ‘real’ of live-action shows. The liminal cartoon ranges in terms of theme, plot, setting, and audience demographics, but there is one similarity between series that illuminates the heterocisnormative ways of mainstream television and that is through animation as a medium.

Why is it that the most explicit LGBTQ representation in children's media relies on animation rather than live-action shows? Why do we see the clearest themes of anti-essentialist values in cartoon series that convey a fantasy setting?

There are more openly queer characters in shows like *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, *The Loud House*, and *Clarence* (all animated programs) than there are live-action series. And even within those four cartoon series, for example, shows like *The Loud House* and *Clarence* represent gay couples in mostly referential terms. For instance, both couples in each program, an interracial gay couple in *The Loud House* and a lesbian couple in *Clarence*, are parents of the main character's best friend. They are within the narrative, but their existence relies heavily on the child referring to them and less on continual, episodic visibility as main protagonists. As for *Adventure Time*, the queer couple Marceline the Vampire Queen and Princess Bubblegum are only made explicit through the content creators answering if those two characters had a relationship in the past. It is never fully actualized within the show like the way *Steven Universe* embeds queerness narratively and thematically. It is important to note that *The Loud House* and *Clarence* are also grounded as a slice-of-life or coming-of-age genre with pretty standard settings. Although a show like *The Loud House*, which revealed Luna, one of the protagonists, as having a crush on another girl in "L is for Love," the show lacks a repetitive queer narrative. The only explicit queer representation I've encountered in children's programming is animated.

Animation relies on camp and pastiche as a way to confront the binary, and therefore, the fabrication of gender essentialism. Camp "reveals the constructedness of the binary of sex, of gender, and of the sex/gender system" and, thus, camp in animation criticizes the traditional more thoroughly than live action programs. Animation inherently distances itself from reality because of its medium, thus making it "possible to push the boundaries further when it comes to

portraying subversive views” (Prosser 35). Adult animated sitcoms that use parody (unsuccessfully at times) shift the way audiences react to its messages because it is a cartoon, thus ‘unreal’ and detached from the audience’s “moral sense” (Van Bauwel 126). I argue that children’s programs simultaneously work with parody and camp when they are animated because of the distance between animation and the real world. Live-action programs rely more on traditional values because the audiences perceive the programs as ‘realer’ than animated series. In a western context, children’s cartoons are deemed immature and therefore of no value for other demographics, particularly adults.

Invoking misnomer ‘it’s only a cartoon,’ animated shows can present nontraditional values and messages that critique the traditional conceptions of gender. Cartoons may have an ‘advantage’ at parody, but what does this say about cartoons and queer themes in general? Would a show like *Steven Universe* be able to exist if it was a live-action program? The fact that many nontraditional series are limited to animation reveals a progress not yet achieved. Despite this gap in representation, *Steven Universe* negotiates anti-essentialist ideals, even if predominantly through an animated medium constructed through a hegemonic media system.

While a series like *Steven Universe* is no longer something fresh and surprising in my mind as it once was when I first watched children’s animation with my brother, the show still evokes a sense of confusion and “weirdness” for other individuals, as conveyed through focus group sessions. It is not merely the age or climate in which audiences view a show with explicit transgender themes, but the accessibility of that language that audiences can interpret and understand. For example, the focus group sessions, predominantly nontransgender, could not as easily string together the specific transgender themes within the episode “Alone Together,” though the depictions of queer female love in “The Answer,” were more strikingly understood.

The representation of queerness as female romance in “The Answer” garnered visible reaction and discussion amongst focus group participants. The language used to interpret queerness in a romantic sense is more readily available than how to interpret transness. I owe this to the combination of cisnormativity in media at large, and in particular, to how transness is regarded as something ‘adult’ and ‘dangerous’ in children’s media. While there are meager representation of queer romance in children’s programming, the representation of transgender experiences are even more unstable in their invisibility onscreen.

While analyzing transgender and nonbinary representation in the series is the main focus of this research, the ways in which *Steven Universe* regard female queer sexuality should also be recognized as an important element of the series, especially with the character Garnet and her unique position as someone who symbolizes inclusion, and non-assimilative inclusion.

QUEER THEMES

GIRL CRUSH

*“... Well I am even more than the two of them
Everything they care about is what I am
I am their fury, I am their patience*

I am a conversation!

*I am made of love
And it's stronger than you...”*

-Estelle as Garnet, “Stronger Than You”

Steven Universe uses the concept of fusion as a way to channel themes of societal oppression into the center of the series’ narrative. Garnet, the primary motherly figure to Steven, is a fusion between two Gems: Ruby and Sapphire, a fusion that is considered unacceptable on her home planet because she is a fusion between Gems of different social classes (Ruby is a soldier while Sapphire is an aristocrat). Fusion’s ambiguity is a tool to teach child (and adult) audiences about social issues while deconstructing involuntary categorization of individuals. By deconstructing the “us vs them” mentality, a mentality commonly used in kid’s programs, liminal cartoons disrupt the desire for audiences to categorize characters based on their social identifiers.

Fusion-oriented episodes represent the societal persecution of LGBTQ couples and people of color, the hyper-sexualization of transgender people, and dangers of abusive relationships while it is also used as a tool to portray marginalized identities in a discriminatory society. In “The Answer,” Garnet tells the story of how Ruby and Sapphire met and fell in love and explains to Steven that when she came into being, a “furious crowd closed in” on her. This crowd of Homeworld Gems say Garnet is “unbelievable, disgusting” and “unheard of.” Garnet’s

unique appearance reflects her unconventionality in Homeworld society and it is Garnet's stark difference that the crowd hates her for. Her birth, which occurs out of queer love, further positions her as a character at odds with the rest of her society. Homeworld resembles a categorical hive-mind, a society with a strict hierarchy and social expectations.

The creation of Garnet resembles the importance of 'coming out' in our own society and the often persecutory reactions from the public. As Larry Gross says, coming out is "the most momentous act" that has grown increasingly publicized by the media (Gross 122). Too often, LGBTQ people are still in "enemy territory," the scrutinizing public that mirrors the crowd Garnet tells Steven about (Gross 121). Homeworld society resembles western society more than the usual beach setting of *Steven Universe*. By comparing the problematic ideas of class hierarchy, gendered categorization, and minority persecution with an alien planet, these ideas are further othered to the audience watching the show. When an audience identifies with Garnet and then sees her persecuted by her own 'home,' that audience can interpret, whether deliberately or not, ways in which their own society dictates the expressions and livelihoods of those marginalized. Not only does Garnet contradict Homeworld, but her stark appearance does as well, an appearance that depicts the liminal and criticizes a categorical thinking.

With her melding of color, profound voice, and afro, Garnet's physicality marks her as a visible outsider to the usual, predetermined social roles on the planet. The reaction of the crowd reveals how Garnet's new form, a large pink-blue fusion, highlights the crowd's ignorance at those that defy society expectation. Garnet's melding of traditionally gendered colors shows the audience the clear connection to her gendered otherness in contrast to the hyper-categorical Homeworld society. The crowd that ogles Garnet fears her difference, as her existence objects the status quo. Garnet reveals this to Steven when she says that "they have never seen a fusion of

two different types of Gems,” thus exposing Garnet’s uniqueness in Homeworld, a uniqueness that does not mean her rarity. Later in the series, we learn that there are other Gems and fusions like Garnet who exist in the peripheral of Homeworld society, deemed as outcasts for their very existence. These sentiments clearly relate to LGBTQ experiences in a homophobic and transphobic society because of Garnet’s visible melding of traditionally gendered colors and the rhetoric used by the ignorant crowd. She is not a categorical pink, blue, white, or yellow Gem, but a visible rainbow of difference, an oblique reference to the rainbow flag, a symbol of LGBTQ identity. Unlike *Adventure Time*, which uses identity transformation to “present grotesquely morphing bodies” in order to challenge conceptions of feminine beauty, *Steven Universe* uses fusion to portray nonbinary genders and queer romances (Jane 240). Although fusion has been used to represent an abusive relationship (for instance, Garnet says that the fusion Malachite is not a healthy relationship in “Jail Break”), the show primarily uses fusion in order to depict characters that have strong bonds with one another, either familiar, friendship, or romance-based. In general, fusion is a narrative strategy used to convey complex issues. Fusion conveys ideas that, at first glance, seem intense for a younger audience (representing societal oppression), but these necessary themes reflect prosocial, as in inclusive, messages to its audience by having the audience identify with Garnet while she is othered by her home.

Garnet is a symbol of queer love while she is also clearly represented as a Black woman. Garnet’s natural hair, voice (played by British singer Estelle), and the source of her superpowers represent physical and symbolic traits connected with groups of disenfranchised peoples, specifically Black LGBTQ people. Interpreting Garnet as a character of resistance also can, as Janet Staiger mentions, “remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Staiger 142-3). Isolating minorities

in an attempt to ignore double or triple minority individuals also denies the fact that oppression is institutionalized and pervasive. In “Off Colors,” oppression is represented as a societal system of interlocking oppressions.

This episode cements that Garnet’s experience was not isolated, but part of a larger problem of injustice in Homeworld. For example, just as Garnet symbolizes the greatness that comes out queer female love, she also equally symbolizes Black resistance. Garnet, who wears sunglasses to wary others away from her three eyes, averts a colonial, white gaze and establishes herself as the seer (quite literally). It is a symbolic notion, though noteworthy, that Garnet’s extrinsic power originates from her three eyes, especially when Black people historically were punished for their gaze (hooks 307). Garnet, who shields her eyes from the public, thus deflecting the gaze, also can see into the future, extending her ‘seeing’ abilities as an emblematic beyond. Garnet’s other superpowers come from symbols of Black resistance.



Screencap by SoftyHeart, *Deviantart*

Her Gem weapons are two gauntlets, a visual cue that alludes to the Black fist and her source of power as a fusion comes from queer love. Homeworld, with its social classes and persecution of individuals seen as other, is clearly marked as institutionalized oppression. In “The Answer,” Garnet as a Black woman and as the living embodiment of queer love, reflects the intersection of Black queer womanhood, as a resistance to a world that oppresses her. Furthermore, Ruby and Sapphire become something greater when they fuse together. When Garnet is formed as this greater being, her appearance is more clearly signified as a Black woman. However, it is important to note that Black women express a spectrum of external and internal appearances in regards to physical appearance, personality, style, and modes of expression. Garnet should not be the sole definer of Black womanhood. Additionally, Ruby and Sapphire’s greatness is out of their ability to be recognized, through the signified, as a person of color. Garnet, the merging of two Gems, one feminine and one masculine, reveals complex ways of female gender expression. Gem bodies, after all, are never essentialized to begin with. Unlike humans, Gems are created like rocks and their bodies the simple projection of their Gem core. Fusions twist this unessentialized state more-so by pushing and pulling different identities into one another to create a “conversation,” as Garnet puts it.

At the end of the episode, Garnet runs into Rose and her daring bodyguard Pearl; their conversation summarizes the ways in which the text’s visual and verbal signs convey anti-essentialism. When Garnet comes across Rose, she is confused why Rose and Pearl are not upset by Garnet’s appearance like the rest of Homeworld, but Rose pacifies Garnet’s worries and asks how Garnet feels as this new being. Garnet reveals a plethora of emotions she experiences (lost, scared, happy), but trails off with worry, asking Rose, “How am I so sure that I’d rather be this than everything that I was supposed to be? And that I’d rather do this than everything I was

supposed to do?” Garnet questions her present identity as a “supposed to be” identity, a sentiment that mirrors Steven’s words in “Lion 4” when he asks if he is supposed to be Nora instead of Steven. In both cases, characters lament over their unfixed identity through the “supposed” self and societal obligation all while using language that infers identity as action.

In the focus group with nontransgender queer participants, the idea of belonging and acceptance was extrapolated. A participant, Pat, articulated, “I thought it was really exciting that despite societal expectations, [Sapphire and Ruby] carried on. [The fusion] happened by accident, kind of like an impulse, and then...they were rejected by their society so they made themselves happy.” Like Pat said, Sapphire and Ruby carry on despite Homeworld’s ridicule of them. Their fusion is one that is instant, something that is an “impulse,” portraying the naturalness of the queer act, no matter if Homeworld others them. Ruby and Sapphire are othered in “The Answer” as a fusion that is markedly different than the other Gems on Homeworld. They have to create their own home on a different world in order to live a life less shackled to oppressive class and racial structures. However, Beach City is not haven from these structures at all, but a place less knowledgeable to the hierarchy of Gems and fusions on Homeworld. Garnet is an othered character and the text plays with her otherness in positive and negative ways. Another participant, Ginny, described how Garnet was visually different than the other Gems. She said, “...she had different colored everything...even her hair was splotched together...[The appearance] looked like it was an amalgam.” Garnet’s difference is highlighted as a positive against the oppressive categorization of her home planet.

In a later episode “Your Mother and Mine,” Garnet fawns over the other Gems and fusions who have been outcast like herself from Homeworld. She hugs Rhodonite, wanting to know the story of how a Ruby and Pearl met, Garnet saying she wants “all the details.” Garnet,

much like when she saw Stevonnie for the first time, is overwhelmed with excitement in seeing Gems that are just like her. She calls them beautiful and rare, at which point makes the other Gems feel uncomfortable in this appraisal. To reflect this point, Rhodonite says, “Who would say nice things about Gems like us? We're completely inappropriate, and so are you. We should all be ashamed.” This episode continues the themes of internalized otherness, as Garnet tries to help the other Gems realize that their personhood is valid because of its rejection to Homeworld’s categorical norm.

Speaking on Ruby and Sapphire and categorization, both Ruby and Sapphire defy their social role. Ruby does not have to become an assimilative being that creates one large Ruby. In this way, Ruby is othered as a character that defies class expectations. Ruby falls in love with an upper-class Gem, a narrative that can be easier to interpret because the audience can understand the visual and verbal cues in the episode that explains Garnet’s existence. Sapphire is also seen as other because her Gem ability, to see into the future, is broken temporarily by the spontaneity of Ruby’s actions. The audience in the focus group understood the narrative and thematic messages put forth. Whereas Stevonnie, a transgender character, does not have the same luxury as the pre-established language the audience has in categorizing Garnet’s personal narrative in the episode.

Garnet, as the fusion between Ruby and Sapphire, is someone who is inherently unfixed. Her very being depends on the love between two characters. Garnet’s consciousness, while the fusion between Ruby and Sapphire, also is of her own creation, her own separate experience. By questioning the validity of a static existence in the text, the show points out fluid ways of being while also presenting anti-essentialist concepts as self-empowering. When Rose tells Garnet in “The Answer” to never “question this,” referring to Garnet’s present self, she proves that Garnet

is valid even if deemed a societal other to Homeworld. “You already are the answer.” Being ‘the answer,’ as Rose states, poses a unique definition about the state of one’s gender identity.

Although fusion represents an unstable identity, it also reflects a validity in that instability by having Garnet’s existence be the answer to why she exists in the first place. Garnet, whose identity encompasses many things (liminal gendered expression, Black queer resistance), cannot change to be what she is “supposed” to be. In other words, just because gender identity is anti-essentialist in the text, thus, an action, it cannot easily be “made or unmade.” In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler mentions how constructivist sexuality (much like an anti-essentialist gender) cannot be mistaken for a “‘freedom of a subject to form (sic) her/his sexuality as s/he pleases.’ A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice” (Butler 94). Using the same rhetoric, on one hand, Garnet ‘is’ the answer, but Garnet’s identity is also a complicated one. Steven, after hearing Garnet’s story, asks what the answer was, unsure what Garnet means, in which Garnet replies, “Love.” The tender tone of Garnet and the warm symbolism around the episode’s bedtime story trope, comes full circle in this ending line.

Much like Greg’s calm reassurance to Steven about his (gendered) identity, Garnet’s simple use of “love” to refer to her own existence presents prosocial, altruistic messages about gender and also queer experiences. “Love,” which embodies the popular LGBTQ slogan “love is love,” reassures its audience of the beauty and simplicity of queer identity through Garnet’s character. The power of “love” connects to the episode’s love story between Sapphire and Ruby and is emblematic of the text’s main goal: to provide compelling narratives revolving around characters that defy categorization and hegemony. Mirroring in “Your Mother and Mine,” the episode concludes with Garnet uplifting the other Gems who have been deemed outcast from society. She says, “Rose used to say there was something about Earth -- something that set Gems

free. But it's not just Earth. Look at you. Love, freedom -- it's universal. You all prove it every moment you live as yourselves. You can show everyone.” In this statement, much like how Rose reassures Garnet, Garnet reassures other Gems. She says that it is not the location or the happenstance that ignites hope and love between identities that have been othered, but through marginalized identities themselves. In this, Garnet marks ‘love,’ a callback to queerness, as the gateway to “liberation.” Understanding that the term liberation is often contrasted to the term assimilate in how to recognize and include queerness in a larger narrative, we can see how Garnet’s rhetoric subliminally pushes against inclusion-through-assimilate. Instead, inclusion is uplifted as a concept that does not encourage assimilation of the queer self.

Around three years ago, when my brother was 12 and I was 18, we were watching an episode of *Steven Universe*. I asked him if he was aware of the queer themes of the cartoon. He replied, in a tone of nonchalance, “That they’re gay. Yeah, I’m not dumb.” That memory struck me, for one thing, as a personal moment that stated the obsolescence of my own childhood cartoons. My brother, referring to the fusion Garnet, instantly understood the messages being put forth by the show. Garnet symbolizes romantic love between two women, othered by their home because of their queer love. Garnet is liminal; as Ruby’s butchness and Sapphire’s femme-ness, as an othered fusion, as being two people and yet none—yet despite her ambiguity, she is meaningfully and explicitly a Black queer woman, a connection my 12 year old brother could pick up on.

Audience members have always engaged in queer readings with media texts, however, complicated visual messages about gender identity in children’s animation are more recent. Alexander Doty states that it is not surprising that in a heterocentric culture, the media wants to “devalue any potential” of lesbian, bi, or pan readings of women characters (Doty 41). By

denying the complex visibility of these identities, it further denies the reality of queer identities in real life. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich states that by denying women the validity of their experiences, it creates an “incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the (sic) sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other” (Rich 139). What kinds of powers are reenacted when queer women discover representations in the media that are complex and prosocial? These representations are one of many needed to build complex understandings of gender, but the necessity for representations that both complicate identity and celebrate queer sexuality is profoundly important.

Much of children’s education centers on the categorization of objects—matching colors, finding the thing that ‘doesn’t belong’—all of which convey binary understandings of the world while securing an “us vs them” mentality. With this in mind, it is not surprising that children connect with characters that “present the world in binary contrasts” (Valkenburg 67). I challenge the core of Valkenburg’s statement, however, by referring back to liminal cartoons. If children are so keen on watching shows that construct identities in a simple binary, then why are cartoons that focus on derailing these concepts so popular? Liminal cartoons disrupt categorization and find pleasure in the deconstruction of binary thinking. Although there are cartoons today that mimic the traditional conceptualization and categorization of the world, children do not inherently gravitate to these kinds of portrayals, as evidenced by shows like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *The Fairly OddParents*, *Gravity Falls*, *Adventure Time*, and *Steven Universe*. There is certainly a “general pattern of gender stereotyped behaviors” in kids’ programs, but recent content analyses suggest a “neutrality” when it comes to traditional gender expressions, although still markedly unbalanced in these portrayals (Hentges 320). The shifting depictions of

gendered tropes reveal a change in the way television audiences think of gender and representation.

Animation, which have a history of critiquing the status quo in comparison to live-action programs, portray these messages to a child audience. The adolescent, in a liminal state of existence, arguably enjoys programming with ironic detachment or parodic elements of the conventional. Children, deemed media vulnerable yet media savvy, exist in the ‘fantasy’ of childhood that is always “under siege” (Elderman 293). The child then finds solace in programming that parodies the rules inflicted on them by the real world. Cisnormative rules in real life, like when adults perform a child’s “gender work” before they are born, seep into the media (Eckert 7). When childhood, at risk of falling apart, needs protection from adult (queer) content, it is unsurprising that heterocisnormative media wants to then maintain a binary difference between girls and boys. By claiming power through an essentialized gender difference, queer themes are often disregarded or actively pushed away.

Although we have the complicated and liminal character Garnet, in general, “no studies have focused specifically on female minority characters and their representations in terms of race, gender, and class in animated cartoons, leaving a gap in research addressing portrayals of female minority characters and the messages those representations convey to children” (Keys 356). While *Steven Universe* provides its audience with representation, children’s media research ignores the representations of various children’s media characters, and in turn, do not analyze the (in)visibility of these characters and representational discourse. There is, then, a gap in children’s media research in regards to female minority characters in children’s media. While animated children’s programs make up about 80% of children’s fictional programming, there is still little to no representation of female minorities (Keys 359). Much like the analysis on Doc McStuffins

as a fictionalized Black hero in the article “*Doc McStuffins and Dora the Explorer: Representations of Gender, Race, and Class in US Animation*,” Garnet in “The Answer” symbolizes a female Black hero who leads the rest of the Crystal Gems. However, much like Keys argues, to say that representation of female minorities, particularly the intersection between female race and sexuality identities, is now suddenly prospering is to take a large leap in the wrong direction.

As I argue for more trans representation, we also must keep in mind the ways in which representation should not be assimilative. Children’s media programming should also not mirror that of adult programming. When adult programming glorifies representation, they do so in a neoliberal sense, one in which diversity is but a check list to mark off, and not about the complex, nuanced, and deep aspects that representation garners. Additionally, adult programming fosters representation that is often reduced to the “sensationalist” portrayals, which is even more apparent in adult programming produced by the corporate machine (Capuzza 215). In short, like mentioned in other aspects of this research, it is important to use *Steven Universe* as a template for future representation in regards to its depiction of non-categorization of social molds and destigmatizing anti-essentialist ideology from children’s media. I propose representation that has both breadth and depth, representation that moves away from the pitfalls made by adult programming. However, this is can be seen as a utopian proposal when much of children’s television is controlled by conglomerate systems that seek to appropriate and market diversity. It is interesting that *Steven Universe*, created within this system, expresses attributes that challenge previous conceptions of children’s programming.

PINK BOYS

Moments before being ushered on stage to sing, Sadie dunks her head in water to wash away her makeup. Bare-faced and in a disheveled skirt and crop top, she exclaims that performing in Beach City's Beachapalooza is not something she actually wants, but something she feels obligated to do in order to please her mother. Before this happens, however, Sadie peeks from behind the stage and sees the crowd full of her peers. Sadie mentions that she can't breathe, reaching for a cup of water anxiously. Steven gasps at the sight of her and exclaims, "Oh no, you ruined my lipstick!" while he attempts to reapply it for her. Steven's attempt at drawing a smile on her face results in Sadie shouting at him, ripping the water dispenser lid off, and sinking her whole head in. Sadie then yells at Steven for acting like her mother, but when her mother hears this, Sadie confesses that "This," pointing to her feminine outfit, "is not your daughter." When it is time for Sadie to go onstage, she nervously says, "How did I let this happen? I don't want to do this!" Steven covers his mouth with his hand with realization and replies, "You never did. It was always me."

This striking scene in "Sadie's Song" reflects the nuanced way in which *Steven Universe* bends societal obligations of gender and expression. Steven realizes that he had pushed his own love of makeup, dance, and costumes onto Sadie when he says, "It was always me," understanding that he should be wearing the makeup. Steven's effort at applying lipstick to Sadie, lipstick he says is his ("you ruined my lipstick") reflects a sense of ownership over a femininity he unsuccessfully casts on someone else. Earlier in the narrative, he forcefully encourages his friend beyond her level of comfort by suggesting dance moves and outfits he likes. When Steven realizes that he had made Sadie express herself in an unauthentic way, Steven has to resolve the situation by having both Steven and Sadie stay true to themselves.

Therefore, in order to resolve the episode's problem, Steven puts on Sadie's outfit and makeup and takes her place in the show, singing a pop song to accompany his performance. The shots that surround Steven during his song involve close-ups of his mascara, twinkling eyes, and executed dance moves, along with a grand finale of glitter. Unlike the Homeworld crowd, the audience at Beachapalooza applauds Steven for his nontraditional presentation. His ownership of his femininity further illustrates the text's anti-essentialist leanings. Assuming "that the feminine belongs to women," no matter how saturated in feminist rhetoric the assumption is, is guilty of essentialized thinking (Butler 156). Therefore, Steven's feminine expression within the show challenges the notion of ownership over certain gender expressions. In a later episode, "Sadie Killer," Sadie returns to performing, but does so by adorning gothic makeup and a horror aesthetic, inspired by her love for scary movies. Sadie still possesses her teenager womanhood, but through expressions not so easily marked as essential to girlhood.

Steven's traditionally feminine performative style pervades this episode and the series as a whole. *Steven Universe* is not the only children's cartoon to play with gender expression, thus revealing a trend in regards to the liminal cartoon and gendered themes. Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* depicts identity as multifaceted with thematic displays of "social androgyny" (Jane 234). The series uses gender performance as a way to represent "anti-essentialist" views through destabilizing gender roles. For example, *Adventure Time*'s main protagonist Finn, much like *Steven Universe*'s Steven, is "a far cry from the dominant tropes associated with masculine leads" (Jane 239, 237). Finn's femininity is a part of his expressive fluidity as a character, represented through, for instance, the ever-changing length of his blonde hair. *Steven Universe*, I argue, plays with femininity in more blatant ways in comparison to *Adventure Time* because Steven's femininity connects to the series' narrative and plot.

Steven's pink shield, rose quartz bellybutton, and pink pet lion reveal a thematic connection between Steven and the traditionally feminine. These feminine symbols are Steven's source of power and drive the plot forward. For example, in "Off Colors," Steven's tears bring the teenager Lars back to life, subsequently turning Lars pink in the process. In "Lars of the Stars," Lars too becomes empowered after submerging into the pink, both internally and externally. Not only has Lars' body changed into the traditionally gendered color, additionally, his hair becomes a portal for other characters to travel through. Lars realizes that it is okay to be himself after Steven saves his life, resulting in Lars becoming nurturing in his own way toward his new alien friends. He then escapes the oppressive Homeworld on a stolen ship full of alien outcasts, the ones that Garnet praises for their differences. Lars becomes captain and adorns a large, fantastical cape and stylish costume. Lars, excitedly bantering with the antagonist Emerald, does so with a flamboyant performance. After Lars says to Emerald, "You're not going to hurt this ship! You love this ship! It's your best friend. You'd much rather let it get away than destroy it," Lars poses and laughs. In reaction to Lars' confidence and glee, Steven comments, "Wow, Lars, I missed you." Furthermore, at one point in the episode, Lars cheers when he receives skull earrings, an accessory he had previously felt embarrassed to adorn himself because of his concern with how the "cool kids," would think.

Steven, and in turn Lars', connection to femininity and emotion undermines the essentialist, binary categorization between genders and reflects a sense of, at the least, some progress in regards to reevaluating concepts of gender. Steven's femininity contributes to the over-arching storylines of the series because his emotional depth and femininity save characters' lives and propel narrative arcs. In *Children, Adolescents, and the Media*, Strasburger and others state that young kids' "initial understanding of gender as a social category" emerge with simple

visual cues like “hair length and dress.” What happens, then, when shows like *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* use gendered visuals in order to blur what it means to be a boy, girl, or other or no gender? When children use media to categorize the world around them, they too must be influenced by the active breaking of that gender categorization. Children’s ideas about gender “grow more sophisticated” as they “search for cultural meanings about gender” in the media, usually then discovering gender rules within media texts (Strasburger 15). However, the liminal cartoon pushes against this notion of binary, feminine/masculine thinking in hopes of skewing gender expression and its forced boundaries.

Understanding that children are “active and engaged viewers,” and not merely watching cartoons for its fast pace and bright colors, we can deduce that *Steven Universe*’s themes of gender fluidity influence viewers’ concepts of gendered social roles (Strasburger 104). Referring back to “Sadie’s Song,” we can interpret that the switch of gender expression between the teenage girl (Sadie) and the young boy (Steven) speaks to anti-essentialist values, conveying that message to its viewers. Just as *Adventure Time*’s Jake the Dog wears makeup and roleplays as women from time to time, *Steven Universe*’s Steven displays a pleasurable freedom in expressing his femininity (Jane 238). Sadie’s act of dunking her head in water, a cleansing ritual, reverses the typical makeover trope abundant in other media texts, declaring that her teenage girlhood need not be typically feminized. Meanwhile, the Beachapalooza crowd rewards Steven’s performance and his femininity by actively enjoying his performance as a feminized spectacle as one crowd member declares that the “mystery guest had Steven written all over it,” thus further portraying that Steven’s femininity is something recognized within the world of the show and is something the real world audience should also applaud.

In other cartoons, like *Adventure Time*, one of the secondary characters, BMO (a living video game console), is genderless while other background characters are gender ambiguous. Characters that quip at gender roles include the Ice King, who sports a traditionally feminine muumuu while other characters, like the comical array of princesses, are often strange in appearance and do not abide by feminine beauty ideals. Instead of typical makeup tropes, the series uses identity fluidity to represent anti-essentialist values. Many characters in *Adventure Time* go through a reversal of the makeup trope, often changing into grotesque monsters or animal-like beings.

For example, the undead Marceline the Vampire Queen, a half-demon vampire hybrid, shifts into a towering beast in order to scare the protagonists Finn and Jake. These “metamorphoses...highlight the program’s framing of identity (like its framing of gender) as being fluid and performed rather than fixed and permanent” (Jane 240). *Adventure Time* sets up an atmosphere of pleasurable experimentation with identity fluidity by blurring the categorization of gender, often by using its dark humor and animation to have fun with blurring gendered lines. *Adventure Time* shows symbolic change toward the liminal cartoon while *Steven Universe* goes further by representing different genders sincerely inhabiting feminine and masculine traits in a way that is anti-essentialist and non-judgmental.

Gender anti-essentialist themes are common throughout *Steven Universe*. The series regularly portrays the protagonist in situations that challenge normative ideas of gender expression. Steven’s major character traits revolve around his femininity as a young boy. Furthermore, Steven possesses attributes typically assigned to girl characters; for example, he is known to be the crier in the show, as his friends point out in the episode “The New Crystal Gems.” Of course crying is not an essentially gendered activity, but the text uses this societal

myth in order to challenge the audience's expectations. The text also uses fusion in order to deconstruct the gender binary and present characters that refuse categorization. The show is not a phenomenon with these themes, though it is unique in western children's animation to represent a transgender character. The fact that children's animation challenge the traditional says a lot about the expectations of the child audience and the show creators. Besides *Steven Universe*, there are other children's cartoons that play with gendered assumptions and, therefore, have concepts of the liminal. When looking back at postmodern cartoons, we can find camp readings in *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Banet-Weiser 204), and gender fluid themes in Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (Jane 233). Because of the medium of animation, there are a wide range of cartoons that spoof conventional life, whether engaging in camp, parodying the nuclear family, or deconstructing concepts of gender. It is because of animation's 'pretend' nature that allows for social parody and criticisms on traditional life. However, I argue that *Steven Universe*, unlike other cartoons, hones in anti-essentialist ideas of gender more clearly than other texts. While other shows have liminal elements and sometimes depict characters with nontraditional gender expressions, *Steven Universe* explicitly and broadly represents prosocial messages about gender.

Depictions of gender in *Steven Universe* are grounded in anti-essentialist semiology because the series critiques the gender binary through signs in the text. The signs, including dialogue and visuals, challenge essentialist views of gender, that gender is inherent at birth. The semiotic approach, which derives "meaning from the relationships between signs" heavily relates to the designated text because the visuals especially challenge assumptions about gendered symbols (Berger 29). Liminal cartoons engage with anti-essentialist themes by representing nontraditional gender expressions and gender fluid themes through various signs in the narrative. The text portrays gender expression as fluid and not bound by one's gender. Gender expression

and gender fluidity are two different concepts, though they can overlap in some cases in the text. Gender expression, which consists of how different characters express themselves outwardly (either through a constructed femininity, masculinity, or neutrality), does not necessarily guarantee queerness, but, at the very least, conveys expressions irregular in mass media's functionalist culture.

Queer theory encapsulates themes of gender anti-essentialism, as queer theory “argues that the construction of biological sex, gender, and sexuality as well as the relations between them can be exposed by revealing their inherent frictions, instabilities, and incoherencies” (Dhaenens 523). Queer theory, an amalgam of theories that demonstrates and resist the oppressive forces at odds with queer identities, has had an agenda based on “normalcy and visibility” (Renn 132, 134). In alignment with queer movements, queer theory mirrors an urgency to be tolerated, accepted, and seen. However, *Steven Universe* reflects how queer theory needs to be updated in order to support current rhetoric on queer identity, queer movements, and a diverse range of queer ideologies. Queer theory should not be about normalcy or about the assimilation into a cis-straight dominant discourse. Current children's programming reflects the emerging resistance against the (heterocisnormative) categorization of characters onscreen. Just as in the series, the point of queer theory should not revolve around the categorization of queer identities into the framework of a cis-straight perspective, but about the ability to de-categorize identity in a way that does not dilute identity.

De-categorization does not entail a loss of identity, but a re-working of how we contextualize queer identity, specifically transgender and nonbinary identities. An excerpt from “Queering the Binaries,” in which a transgender individual expresses the way cisgender people control trans identity, clarifies this point: “We are supposed to pretend...that the vestigial female

parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all” (Cromwell 512). Just as this testimony indicates a perspective of trans resistance against a hegemonic cisnormativity, so do themes of gender fluidity in children’s cartoons portray a resistance to a largely cisnormative media culture. Gender fluid themes in *Steven Universe* connect to ideas of anti-essentialism in television because it too points out the illegitimacy of essentialized genders, revealing gender as a continuum, though this concept is most profoundly analyzed in transgender theory.

Characters like Stevonnie from *Steven Universe* and BMO from *Adventure Time* exist in-between the binary or completely outside of its borders. Although *Steven Universe* does not outright depict a constructionist view of gender as broadly “artificial,” nor does it provide a nihilistic view of gender, the text surprisingly depicts gender as unrestrictive (Butler 22, 129). Gender is an “activity,” as Butler conceptualizes. Gender is not a theatrical performance, but a repetitive action, unfixed in its position from birth (Butler 143). Gender is more than two, and it can be conceptualized as more than a spectrum as well. Some describe gender as a 3-D model or a galaxy. These are merely visuals to define a construct both complex and ungraspable. Much like the symbolism used in this research to describe the synthesis of focus groups and textual analysis, Riki Wilchins defines gender as a lens. Wilchins says, “Gender is like a lens through which we’ve not yet earned to see. Or, more accurately, like glasses worn from childhood, it’s like a lens through which we’ve always seen and can’t remember how the world looked before. And this lens is strictly bifocal” (Wilchins 13). Gender is not an essentialist two, or a bifocal, but society dictates this conceptualization in order to reinforce a gendered hierarchy, cissexism, and transphobia. Those that defy the myth of the binary face confusion from those that abide by the construction of a gender binary and gender essentialism. However, it is important to understand

that the idea of gender as anti-essentialist does not mean that gender is inherently invalid, as that would discredit transgender experiences.

Trans theorist Susan Stryker articulates how scholars misinterpret Butler's notion frequently in regards to gender and performance. Stryker states:

The notion of performativity...is sometimes confused with the notion of performance, but this is something else entirely...To say that gender is a performative act is to say that it does not need a material referent to be meaningful, is directed at others in an attempt to communicate, is not subject to falsification or verification, and is accomplished by 'doing' something rather than 'being' something. A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means. The biologically sexed body guarantees nothing; it is necessarily there, a ground for the act of speaking, but it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender. (Stryker 10)

Stryker reiterates what Butler proposes, which is that gender is not an essentialized object dictated by one's body. Rose's character mirrors the idea of gender as action in "Lion 4" when she excitedly links humans to beings of action, but her anti-essentialist sentiments are just one of many in the show. The text flips expectations of socially recognized, 'feminine' signs, like long hair or the color pink, and detaches it from gender. The show frequently portrays characters unwed to categorical gender expressions (girls like pink while boys like blue, etc.) while declassifying gender as an essentialized possession. These sorts of messages challenge typical categorical thinking abundant in kid's programs.

Steven Universe portrays nontraditional gender expressions and also, significantly, nonbinary identities. In a scene in "Alone Together," there is a close-up of Steven's pink flip-flops next to his best friend's blue ballet flats. The narrative creates an uncertainty if Steven would be able to fuse like the rest of his Gem guardians when his attempts at previous fusing fail. Sitting with Connie on the beach, Steven listens as his friend reveals she wishes she had the opportunity to dance like older kids. At first, Steven and Connie goof around like kids do,

dancing in fun and silly ways. When Steven trips and falls, however, Connie catches him in the typical dipped stance, the traditional, gendered positions are reversed. Connie assumes the lead position while Steven is the dancer being dipped. In this position, they both laugh, and suddenly, in this unconventional moment, Steven and Connie become someone else. They become an experience, a conversation, a fusion.

STEVONNIE: A TRANS CHILDREN'S CHARACTER

When Steven and Connie fuse together to become Stevonnie, they initially stumble with what language to use for themselves. Stevonnie awkwardly tries to stand up, unaccustomed to their new height and body, while they refer to themselves as “you” in place of “I.” They stand and remark that “This is great,” referring to their existence, quickly going into a mock-serious tone, stating: “I’m a fusion.” Stevonnie runs, trips, and continues running, excited to tell their alien guardians that Steven successfully fused. Stevonnie, like Garnet, is more than two identities put together, yet Stevonnie’s existence is even more complicated in its liminal place. They are a fusion between a half alien, half boy and a human girl. A fusion of both boy and girl, Stevonnie merges two binary genders as one while also being alien and human at once as well. “Alone Together” is an introduction to the transgender nonbinary character Stevonnie and challenges strict gender identity and the binary simultaneously.

After Garnet’s comically intense pride at seeing Stevonnie, she ushers them aside to give them advice. This encouraging advice paints fusion and Stevonnie’s nonbinary identity as a liminal pleasure. Garnet says, “You are not two people and you are not one person. You are an experience. Make sure you are a good experience. Now Go. Have. Fun.” Her advice, a balance of seriousness and light-heartedness, portrays the liminal. Just as in “Lion 4,” when Rose refers to humanness as active, “Alone Together” uses fusion to portray identity as not only an action, but

also as not two things (“You are not two people”) and not just one (“and you are not one person”). Similarly in the season 1 finale “Jail Break,” when Garnet calls her existence a “conversation,” Garnet takes Stevonnie aside to explain the complicated nature of being a fusion.

Garnet’s acceptance toward Stevonnie illustrates an uplifting message about gender identity, especially when the reassurance comes from Garnet, who has experienced persecution from her home planet. Stevonnie’s family views their unfixed identity as valid. For example, the other characters quickly use “they/them” pronouns for Stevonnie. Pearl’s main concern when seeing Stevonnie is the fact that Connie (a human) fused with Steven (half alien), not because they are different genders. However, Pearl is the symbolic catalyst that reflects the oppression transgender and nonbinary people face. Pearl remarks that, “This is unprecedented,” and touches Stevonnie’s legs, an action connoting space and discomfort toward Stevonnie’s form. Pearl touches a trans person’s body without their permission, a sign that equates to the way cisgender people feel entitled to transgender people’s bodies, medical/social transition, and personal history. The taking of trans bodies is also apparent in the rest of the episode’s plot with the character Kevin, who tries to claim Stevonnie’s physical space and body while they are dancing at a high school party.

“Alone Together” features themes that appear ‘darker’ or more ‘mature’ than what is expected for a children’s series. However, the show’s themes convey the oppressive micro and macroaggressions trans people face each day by both strangers (Kevin) and family (Pearl.) In actuality, these themes are not merely ‘mature,’ like how *Adventure Time*’s political critiques are described as. Instead, the episode embeds messages into the narrative that expose the mistreatment of transgender and nonbinary people. These themes appear too adult, but they are

the reality of transgender people old and young. Specifically, the way society fetishizes, claims, and others transgender children is reflected in the episode.

For example, the scene in which the audience meets Stevonnie is one that is troubling because it reveals audience discomfort to blatant themes of transphobia. After a flash of pink light, Steven and Connie fuse and the audience takes the perspective of Stevonnie. In a first person perspective, we open our eyes, as Stevonnie, and look down at their legs. There is a close-up shot of Stevonnie's feet, a CU of their hand going up their leg and thigh. This specific shot is an anxious one, as the audience is both in the place of Stevonnie, and yet, displaced from their body. We are object and voyeur, and immediately, the text fetishizes Stevonnie through the audience's coerced voyeurism at a trans and nonbinary body. Instead of revealing Stevonnie as whole, they are first presented as body parts separated and segmented from their face. Much like how transgender people are objectified as sexual body parts, Stevonnie is also objectified through the CUs of their stomach and feet and the fabrication of the camera's tilt up their legs. Alongside this, the audience sees Stevonnie through Stevonnie's POV, which makes the audience connect with Stevonnie. The episode attempts to make the nontransgender audience uneasy by having them connect with Stevonnie's experience, arguably in a way that is not successful. The introduction of Stevonnie critiques the fetishizing of transgender and nonbinary people and displaces the viewer. This critique can be lost in the audience's discomfort, especially those that are not aware of how Stevonnie represents transgender people's experiences.



Photo by *The World of Steven Universe*,
worldofsteven.com

Through cisnormativity, audiences might not be able to interpret the text's introduction to Stevonnie as one directly linked to transphobia. The audience's discomfort is heightened when the audience is aware that Stevonnie is a child. Stevonnie is the fusion between two children, one fourteen and one twelve. Suddenly, Stevonnie adopts a body that society fetishizes, a concept familiar to the way society begins to sexualize children who have begun puberty. This othering and problematic reality for children is emphasized when that child is also transgender because trans people face objectification of their bodies by transphobic society. That is why the narrative in the episode is one that stands out clearly. Throughout the episode Stevonnie is subjected to fetishistic attention. They are fetishized by the characters in the episode because of the othering of their body and their liminality as someone between human and alien and girl and boy.

When Stevonnie explores their identity for the first time, they witness the objectifying gaze of their peers as well as unacceptance from Pearl, a motherly figure in their family, as stated earlier. Even characters that are fan favorites express apprehension when seeing Stevonnie. For

example, Pearl expresses uncomfortableness toward Stevonnie, wondering if Stevonnie is ‘appropriate.’ One of the first statements made in the queer (all participants identified as cisgender) focus group was about this interaction. The participant, Pat, said, “The first thing that comes to mind is that Pearl was...horrified that the fusion took place between Steven and Connie...her reaction was kind of jarring.” It is this jarring portrayal of Pearl as protective-yet-unaccepting that contradicts typical animated programming’s desire to box characters into one-dimensional categories. Pearl’s lack of acceptance for Stevonnie represents how nontransgender family members can perpetuate transphobia through the mask of protection and concern. The contrast between Pearl’s reaction and Garnet’s reaction symbolizes the complexity of this episode, as it delves into what it is like to be othered by family members.

It is the acceptance of Garnet, another fusion, who takes Stevonnie under her wing and tells them that they are an experience and that they are a whole being, not merely two people scrambled together. This rhetoric pushes against Pearl’s, but it does not wash away the statement Pearl made about Stevonnie’s identity being inappropriate. After listening to Garnet’s advice to “Go. Have. Fun,” Stevonnie visits the donut shop that Steven and Connie usually frequent. Stevonnie is amused and unsure why the two employees, both a teenage girl and boy, are flustered by Stevonnie’s presence. The show capitalizes on this through the blush marks on both characters’ cheeks when Stevonnie walks into the shop. One participant, Riley, mentioned how, “it was interesting that at the donut shop both of the kids seemed to be attracted to them...They were appealing to both genders, almost.” Although this statement can be supported by the visuals of the animation, especially if an audience member is familiar with the way flirting is stylized in cartoons (with the hyper-dramatic stumbling over words and marks on the cheeks to indicate blushing,) the participant verbally seemed unsure with their statement. The use of “almost” as a

marker for the end of a sentence suggests uncertainty, possibly because of the atmosphere of the focus group, the hesitancy to speak in a group, or the uncertainty on how to read the episode. Stevonnie, play-acting, dramatically asks for two donuts, in which the characters blubber over each other and give Stevonnie their food. When Stevonnie leaves, they shrug off the strangeness of the interaction, more focused on the fact that they can eat two donuts instead of one, a tie-in back to their naivety or innocence to the objectifying world around them because of their age. The episode uses visual markers and Stevonnie's internal diegetic narration to reveal that the encounters they have with other people in town are unsettling. This is not overlooked by the audiences in the focus groups and brought up during discussion.

Participants drew on themes of spectacle and performance in "Alone Together," though never making the clear jump into talking about Stevonnie's identity as a trans nonbinary character. As Ophelia noted in the session, "...it was interesting how [Stevonnie] walked in and it was such a reaction [from the crowd.]...The dance was overwhelming because everyone was staring at them. It was almost like they were a spectacle." Stevonnie is othered, objectified, and coerced to perform for a fetishistic, cisgender public. Surely they are a spectacle in the eyes of their nontransgender peers. The theme of spectacle was something understood by the cisgender LGBPQ participants. When Stevonnie goes to a teenage dance, they are stared at by the other party-goers, though briefly. When Stevonnie begins to dance as well, Kevin, a teenage boy with an obsession with looking cool, invades their space.

A participant expressed their lack of comfortability when Stevonnie did not act in a way that would have led to a wholesome closure to the episode. Instead of walking away from all the transphobic eyes on them, Stevonnie reacts to the teenager Kevin, and his attempts at possessing Stevonnie's body and emotions. Stevonnie says, as Pat recalled, "It was brave of [Stevonnie] to

be like ‘Hey, you wanna dance, then fine I’ll dance and my name is Stevonnie and I’m not your baby.’” Instead of walking away, Stevonnie feeds into the way Kevin others them. Reasonably, participants were uneasy with this action, one argument centering on the fear of what the text is trying to convey about consent, specifically with Kevin as the perpetrator who possesses Stevonnie’s space. Ginny stressed how Kevin “penetrated” Stevonnie’s space, repeating the word “penetrating,” or some variation of it, three times during the discussion. Ginny noted how, “the thing that I focused on was the situation where Stevonnie didn’t want to dance, and like, being pressured into dancing, and...the fact that Kevin still penetrated [their] space, that is...violent.” Pat said, “I think I...would have felt more comfortable if they had walked away and just continued their fusion on their own.” The audience reused similar phrases, accessing their comfortability level in each episode or scene, which led to their judgment of that episode.

Because the episode pushed back on the common assumption that kid’s programming is neatly happy-go-lucky and nonthreatening, the audience emphasized feelings of uneasiness or confusion from the episode’s subversion on the typical animated structure. The cis LGBPQ participants understood their confusion on various levels. Ginny described confusion at the conclusion (or lack thereof) of the episode. Ginny said, “The fact that they end up fusing, that was weird. I didn’t know how to understand that. And then in the end when they unfused, after like, the anxiety and the nonconsensual dancing, and all of that, I didn’t exactly—I didn’t know what to say about it.” Ophelia had a similar sentiment and said, “It was weird because I wanted them to choose to unfuse at the end.” Pat said, “I also didn’t feel a strong sense of closure, mostly because, they didn’t walk away in that situation with Kevin.” These statements, although valid in the fact that it is uncomfortable to watch an episode in which a character cannot break

away from the oppressive forces (Kevin, the party, etc.) that coerce them into performing as spectacle, convey a nontransgender perspective on this episode.

If Stevonnie were to have walked away, thus making the nontransgender audience comfortable, the trans themes in the episode would have been moot. An ending where Stevonnie walks away, perfectly unharmed, would indicate that transgender people can just as easily walk away from transphobic situations, unharmed, as well. Instead, in a scene that is both painful and powerful to watch, especially as a trans audience member, Stevonnie ‘dances’ when Kevin coerces them, though their dancing is aggressive and angry. They stomp repeatedly on the ground and grunt, at which makes Kevin blue in the face from fear and embarrassment. What is important here is that when Stevonnie starts jumping up and down, Kevin misgenders them by saying, “Okay, bring it back girl.,” thus resulting in Stevonnie intensifying their movements. Stevonnie unfuses then, leaving a tearful Steven and Connie in their place. Steven and Connie cry while laughing. While the music intensifies, the timbre metallic with a chaotic rhythm, Steven and Connie continue jumping and stomping. While this happens, the DJ throws a bunch of glow-sticks while shouting, “Yeah!” which adds to the unsettling tone at the end of the episode. Without closure, the episode ends abruptly, representing that issues like the ones shown in the episode cannot be so nicely tied together at the end of eleven minutes.

Although *Steven Universe* content creators problematize some of the concepts relating to the liminal, the overall effect of the episode is to make the audience self-reflect on their cisgender privilege while letting transgender audiences feel visible. There is an emphasis of not necessarily soothing a transgender audience in this episode, but representing common themes in trans people’s everyday life so a young transgender audience can perhaps point to the screen and think, ‘oh, this is exactly how I feel, how my family thinks, how my friends interact with me,

how groups of people fetishize me, etc.’ There is a sense of uncomfortable catharsis as a transgender audience member when Stevonnie stomps around after being misgendered. There is also sentiment of, ‘I wish I could visibly, dramatically, and angrily depict my frustration after someone misgenders, fetishizes, or others me as a transgender nonbinary person’ when Stevonnie retaliates by dancing in a way that overpowers Kevin, making Kevin embarrassed and blue. In a similar fashion, this rhetoric, as a trans nonbinary audience member, parallels to how trans people reclaim spectacle-hood. The visual of Stevonnie ‘throwing a tantrum’ can also be Stevonnie feeding into their role as spectacle. The ending is jarring and surely uncomfortable, but Stevonnie’s reaction to their fetishization is one that screams a common sentiment held among some trans people. One that is, ‘well, if I am a spectacle to you, then I will own that spectacle-hood. Now look who is uncomfortable.’

The way in which cartoons like *Steven Universe* constantly push the audience to reflect on the episode is an attribute from the text’s complex structure, a complexity that comes as a surprise for young adult audiences. The focus group further crystalized the effect that liminal, modern cartoons have on audiences. In contrast to earlier western programming, which fixates on the episodic plot and light-heartedness of children’s content, “Alone Together” is combative in nature. The content creators attempt to make the audience evaluate the characters’ actions within the episode. Being unfamiliar with the complex narrative structure, a concept described by Mittell, some audiences may feel uncomfortable or confused when pressed to discuss the plot and themes of the episode. This came to fruition within the focus group session to those that did not have a background in animation that follows longer story arcs. At one point, Ginny describes how “...I didn’t know if each episode builds on top of the other, or if each scenario is like, an individual scenario, so I didn’t know what was going to happen with their fusion.” Pat stated,

when talking about the conflict between Stevonnie and the predatory teen boy Kevin, “I just, there was so many different emotions I was experiencing in that scene that it left me kind of confused.” The participants, of whom are not familiar with the structure of *Steven Universe*, lacked language to discuss the narrative and themes. The audience is taken out of their narrative understanding of the episode, which is a feeling a young adult audience who are used to children’s animation as un-complex, would be unaccustomed to.

The episode engages the audience in a way where we are supposed to identify with Stevonnie and the way their gender is defined as liminal within the narrative of the show. Even the problematic introduction of Stevonnie is set up in a way where we identify with them, not around or nearby them. Through the use of first-person perspective, the audience follows Stevonnie and listens to their internal narration in order to feel a part of Stevonnie’s experience as well. This level of connection adds to the discomfort when other characters objectify and fetishize Stevonnie. Instead of pushing away from the discordant feelings that Stevonnie has, by embracing the discomfort, we then challenge the way we, as audience, categorize and judge Stevonnie and their actions in “Alone Together.” By leaning into the discomfort, we can question why the creators would portray such an unsettling episode for the first notable transgender nonbinary character in western children’s animation. In essence, by separating value judgement and refocusing the position of the audience to media text, we can learn how transgender children are impacted by transphobic society.

The creators convey the way Stevonnie is inherently fetishized, even as a child, because of their newfound identity as something other. However, this intention falls flat in some regards. By showing the glimmering, slow movement around their body, especially as the introductory visual of Stevonnie, the creators unintentionally fetishize them just like the characters do in the

episode. The introduction of Stevonnie, inevitably, defeats the purpose of the rest of the episode's critique on transphobia. Though the episode has elements of transphobic depictions, the trans themes themselves were explicit, and often made to shock or push the audience to reflect critically. Just as the introduction is supposed to make the audience feel uncomfortable, or question why a children's show would represent a child in this way, the audience, assumedly, would carry on this dissonance with the text's content. However, the disruption of the narrative flow of the show pushes cis audiences (both queer and straight) into territory they lack language for.

Liminality, specifically liminal identities at odds with categorization, was difficult to discuss amongst both cis straight audiences and cis LGBPQ audiences. Because of the lack of language to discuss liminal themes, specifically themes involving a character like Stevonnie in "Alone Together," audiences tended to avoid (whether intentionally or unintentionally) the explicit trans themes within the episode. The concept of the liminal can be confusing for audiences to fully comprehend, as suggested by the focus group discussions and previous research in children's media. Although the focus group had limitations, like sample size, the results from the sessions in conversation with the textual analysis create an interpretation of how transgender themes are digested. Nevertheless, this is an interpretation using trans theory, transgender experiences, and previous textual analyses. Therefore, the analysis discussed focuses on these core concerns: that of transgender representation.

In "Alone Together," liminality pertains to the themes of the other, specifically how society others transgender and nonbinary people because a cisnormative society cannot properly categorize transgender identities. The liminality of trans identities, however, should not be mistaken for characteristics of fakeness or elusiveness because they cannot be categorized by a

cisnormative perspective. Assuming so would make cisness the default, a cissexist claim. Rather, the concept of the liminal represents how society constructs identity in the binary. Severe categorization, something which permeates the structure of most western children's programming, is one of the reasons why I argue that audiences do not have the tools to discuss transgender themes fruitfully and respectfully. Not only is this disappointing with the way cis audiences conceptualize transness onscreen, but it is also disappointing because it bleeds into the way cis people perceive real life trans people as the uncategorized other. Through Stevonnie, the episode opens up an array of specifically trans themes, some of which include internalized transphobia, the fetishizing of trans and nonbinary people, the spectaclization of transness, and the rejection of cisgender appropriation of trans bodies. The episode is full of complex depictions of how trans and nonbinary people interact in a cisnormative world, a world that others and objectifies them.

RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

HEY, QUEER KID

Society exiles queerness from the grasp of childhood, proposing it as exclusive to adulthood, and further, defining queer as too mature, too sexual. Around 1972, after his mother warned him of “homosexuals” hurting and killing him, ten-year-old Aaron Fricke knew his own budding gay identity was “in the eyes of my mother and many others, something more vile” (Gross 122). This story, one of many, clearly reflects the overall disconnect the public has towards LGBTQ experiences and childhood. Childhood and queerness are still disconnected from one another in the eyes of the public. Childhood, which is alleged as continuously “under siege” by the media and adult society in general, then “embodies a fantasy” that cannot withstand queerness in the same breath as childhood (Edelman 293-4). The myth of childhood is created; the child is innocent, childhood is under attack, and it is the adult queers who attack it. This way of thinking—by creating LGBTQ people as the predators to the (straight cis) child, harms not only adult queer individuals, but the LGBTQ child, the queer kid. Protectionist ideologies, self-righteous in its attempts at shielding children from adult (queer) content, are inherently homophobic and transphobic.

Although providing children with safe and respectful media content is good-natured at its core, this line of thinking easily leaks into harmful ideologies that promote queer identity as ‘too adult,’ and therefore, not good-natured, not respectful, not safe. That is why it is no surprise that portrayals of queerness are more common in animation, thus still ‘safe,’ and ‘just pretend’ than in live-action. Although there are other scholars that are beginning to study *Steven Universe* and modern cartoons, the availability of that research is limited. Even more surprising is the lack of

research on Stevonnie as the first major nonbinary transgender character in western children's media.

We need to have more queer media makers in order to foster inclusive, non-assimilative messages about queer identity. Only when multiple networks, large and small, engage with diverse LGBTQ characters and stories will there be noticeable change in terms of positive representation. In adult programming, transgender representation has increased, if minimally. Although transgender actors' "first-hand experiences may bring more sensitivity and authenticity to these performances," much is contingent on "the way the roles are written" (Capuzza 221). This is troubling then, if trans representation is falling on the shoulders of trans artists in various areas, but not uplifted in others, like writing, producing, and directing. Even more troubling is the fact that trans roles are given to nontrans actors quite frequently in adult programming. In adult programming, "on the rare occasion transgender people made it to the small screen" depictions were often grounded in harmful stereotypes in order "to ridicule this community via humor, disgust, fear, alienation, and anger" (Capuzza 215). Children's media cannot duplicate the representative ideologies of its adult programming counterpart, and instead, media avenues should uplift trans voices by allowing their stories to be written and directed by other nonbinary and trans media artists.

Each series, on different networks and media platforms, must be one point of light that adds to the ever-growing and evolving spectrum of queer representation. Characters should not be exclusively white gay children on live-action children's programs like how adult programming depicts what queerness looks like. Audiences, especially queer audiences, should be able to see their own faces onscreen, especially queer children that are people of color, that are trans, and specifically, making sure that queer representation is not heterocisnormative.

Considering that television and screen media is the predominant childhood activity around the world, children's media content and its connection to minority representation is worthwhile to study (Wartella 14). In a media landscape that hides or distorts queer people, especially LGBTQ children, liminal texts like *Steven Universe* are significant because they convey messages of recognition and inclusion. Children's shows have the opportunity to depict queer children as natural, as human beings, a statement that is a (sadly) provocative one.

The influence that media has on child audiences is not a one-way street. Queer children are picking up on messages in children's media that not only impact them, but reflexively impact the media makers as well. The relationship with television media and audience is more dynamic than the one-way mirror-monitor we tend to associate it with. *Steven Universe* creator Rebecca Sugar recently opened up about this phenomenon on the podcast *QUEERY with Cameron Esposito*. Talking about her coming out story, she revealed that it was the child audiences watching her cartoon that culminated in her own public coming out as bisexual (Esposito). Sugar, who had publicly come out during a Comic-Con panel about the series, revealed how pleasantly surprised she was that her show has helped not only queer children, but herself as well (Rude). Children's media should react to and entwine with inclusive and non-assimilative messages in their content, for it is not only the children that are impacted by representation, but that children impact the media they consume as well.

EPILOGUE

"You're unusual, Steven, like them and like me. It's not something to fear. It's something to celebrate" –Garnet, "Your Mother and Mine"

This research has been personal to me because of my own experience with media as a child and now young adult. Like other queer young adults who flock to a children's show like *Steven Universe*, I also watched the series to find inclusive representation. Being a queer audience member is often isolating because of the way queer-coded characters were antagonists, comic relief, or invisible. Like my own experience at a distance from children's media, I know that other queer audience members had similar experiences. It is important to center the audience wellbeing of young queer audiences and to make sure that young transgender audiences can see themselves respectfully represented onscreen.

When I was a child, I had an internal compulsion to fixate on characters that were curiously familiar to me. I thought they were merely interesting or humorous, but looking back, the comedic cartoon villains and campy androgyny I was so fascinated with explains much more. The feeling was reflective, seeing something like myself reflected, fragmented, in queer-coded characters on television. Coincidentally, all of the queer-coded characters in my childhood were villains. Well, it wasn't coincidental. I remember playing with my neighbors and they would tell me, "You should play Dr. Drakken," a villain from *Kim Possible*, in which I would shrug the statement off, internally grateful that at least they suggested a male character and not a female one. "But you're so great at playing him!" They said. As if it was natural. I always felt fake.

When I acted traditionally feminine, I was a disguise inside myself, ribbons inside, silk scratching, bows and bells belted bellies and lungs. But when I said no. No, that isn't me, I'm not that girlhood which swallowed me whole, a pain swept through my chest. And sometimes, it still does. I felt like disgust, I felt facsimile. No matter what, I was stuck in a gendered limbo. I was a rascal, something slippery that could not be caught.

And the children's shows ridiculed us for this. Ridiculed us, children who were always so *greedy* for someone that was fragmented behind the screen. We were children trying to see what was not there.

Stevonnie is the first nonbinary character I ever saw on television.

Would I have gone through all the cycles of isolation if I watched "Alone Together" when I was a little kid? When Stevonnie aggressively stomps on the floor, they perform a reclamation of the trans self. Even now, I hold onto that scene. I think, at least there is one character. At least there is one character like me. And couldn't there be more? Is there such hope as that?

I am excited that nonbinary and trans children can see Stevonnie onscreen and feel, just for a moment, like they are not a mere reflection of themselves, but a whole and complete person. They can finally see somebody like them and not feel so alone, not feel so shattered when the ciscentric society either ignores transness or tries to get rid of it. But there can be more, diverse, broadly inclusive representation. And there should be.

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