7-21-2017

Girl Crush: Liminal Identities and Lesbian Love in Children's Cartoons

Madison Bradley
Ursinus College, mabradley@ursinus.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media_com_sum

Part of the Communication Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons, Television Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Girl Crush:

Liminal Identities and Lesbian Love in Children's Cartoons

Abstract:

A textual analysis of the cartoon *Steven Universe*, this project takes a semiotic approach to explore anti-essentialist messages of gender identity. I argue that within the mainstream media, the cartoon expresses prosocial messages about gender by representing nonbinary characters and gender fluid themes. Using children's media studies, queer studies, and reception studies, I investigate how the show portrays liminal identities. In particular, I focus on how lesbian existence and gender fluidity are simultaneously normalized and othered through the text's visuals and dialogue. Critically analyzing the ways in which the media represents queerness as 'too adult,' this study reveals that children's programming can constructively depict queer identities in a media landscape that otherwise often distances children and queerness. By contextualizing the history of cartoon production, queer representation, and audience reception, my analysis provides insight into the importance of prosocial depictions of gender identity in children's media.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE LIMINAL CARTOON

"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 humanity is in constant state of flux. After uncovering a secret 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 assured that his pet brought him there to meet Nora. It is dusk at the time he runs up the hill, a 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. In order 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 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 as an actor with choice. 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.

Gender fluid themes are common throughout the series and in fact, *Steven Universe* regularly portrays the protagonist in situations that challenge normative ideas of gender expression. His 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 a concept called 'fusion' in order to deconstruct the gender binary and present characters that refuse categorization. The show is not a phenomenon with these themes. The fact that children's cartoons 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. In fact, when looking back at postmodern cartoons, we can find camp readings in *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Banet-Wesier 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 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 on 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 fluidity, 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). This argument is connected 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. Gender fluid themes can be represented through nonbinary characters. Characters like Stevonnie from *Steven Universe* and BMO from *Adventure Time* exist in-between the binary or completely

outside of its borders. Although the liminal cartoon 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 (143). 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.

Liminal cartoons have prosocial messages about gender which demonstrates the texts' dedication to anti-essentialist concepts. 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's *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 (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.

Ignoring the conventional structure of children's programming, the liminal cartoon moves toward intricate story arcs and complex narratives, which influence the portrayal of messages. The liminal cartoon 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 children's cartoon uses this as well. Liminal cartoons break essentialist ideas about gender and provide 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 (18). Recently, children's cartoons have more of 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* (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'

prosocial messages stands out.

Focusing on the semiotic approach to textual analysis, I analyzed five episodes of *Steven Universe,* taking careful notes on the dialogue and visual images. The semiotic approach unpacks messages founded on cultural assumptions made by the audience or by the content creators (Baym 328). I argue that by using a semiotic approach, I can better understand the inferred understanding of gender and sexuality in the shows. The episodes I analyze include "Sadie's Song," "The Answer," and "Alone Together." I use other episodes as a referential point in order to enhance my argument. "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 nonbinary character. "The Answer," an episode that focuses on the backstory of a queer character, critiques social categorization while all of the episodes contain prosocial messages about gender. Future research will explore other episodes that revolve around the nonbinary character, Stevonnie, and how lesbians, bi, and pan women are represented in the text. In the sections "Weird Cartoons" and "Contextualizing the Liminal" I provide information about liminal cartoons and production history in order to present a clear picture of anti-essentialism and prosocial messages in the text. Anti-essentialist messages are then illustrated and analyzed through the textual analyses in "Fusion as Liminal Existence," "Pink Boys," and "Being Nonbinary." The conclusion forecasts future research and illuminates the underlying importance of this research by thinking about the LGBTQ child. Having viewed every episode of *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*, I am able to intentionally select episodes that exemplify anti-essentialist themes and prosocial messages about gender. Though these concepts do appear throughout the texts, especially *Steven Universe*, the scenes I discuss suggest a repositioning of gender and identity in a clear way.

Postmodern cartoons are the inception 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. In the late '00s, *Adventure Time* used pastiche to comment of social issues while main characters in *Steven Universe,* as queer women, comment on discrimination. 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? Liminal cartoons that (for the most part) have the kids' demographic in mind are often sophisticated 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 kids, it also enforces a categorical way of thinking, but liminal cartoons 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 fluid themes and challenging assumptions about gender expression, *Steven Universe* represents interesting messages of the liminal cartoon. Even within the traditional media, the show expresses anti-essentialist messages about gender while also depicting sapphic and nonbinary characters in complex ways.

WEIRD CARTOONS

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 assumed 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 prosocial messages. Nevertheless, my apprehension quickly shifted after I recognized the undercurrent of nontraditional thought, the shows often critiquing the system from which they were birthed.

Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* are incredibly different in comparison to some of the '90s and early '00s 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 (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 lumpy 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 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 2017. 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.' 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 "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.

Fusion represents many complex themes and symbolizes the liminal identity of the text's characters. Because fusions are neither two people nor just one, 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. 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. In the same breath, fusion symbolizes the othering of LGBTQ people, most notably queer women and nonbinary people. Fusion's cohesiveness with the overall story of the series rivals other cartoons, especially the more category-centric cartoons I grew up with. 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 lesbians. Yeah, I'm not dumb." That memory struck me, for one thing, as a personal moment that stated the obsoleteness 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.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE LIMINAL

Investigating each cartoon era's influence on subsequent eras helps understand why liminal elements appear extensively 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. By considering broad trends in cartoon history, we investigate the connection between the liminal, de-categorization, anti-essentialism, and gender fluidity. 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 (72). Although this type of production has its downfalls, the focus on a singular vision created a specific style of animation during the '90s. It was a process that cemented into future animation production and laid a foundation for the liminal cartoon. 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 (273). While animators in the Golden Age influenced '90s artists, the Golden Age focused energy on episodic plots, exaggerated animation, and slapstick. Liminal cartoons' 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 cartoons under consideration here, whether liminal or otherwise, 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 and liminal cartoon produce 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 liminal cartoon share a contextualized world. Both are not 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 (180). The mass media world is still largely functionalist; the media sends messages to sustain the status quo of society. It's interesting that these shows that defy the status quo also work within the system that others them. Within this context, mainstream media still largely attempts to maintain a heterocentric world where queerness is othered. However, within this normative landscape, children's animation serves a surprisingly progressive role, represented through the way *Steven Universe* breaks the conventionality of mass media and the usual mold of children's programming.

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'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. 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 nonbinary identities and subverting gender expressions in this essay, however, Sugar's comment on wanting to represent women who love women (either lesbian, bi, or pan) is something that also needs recognition, which I intend to do in future research. Sugar and her crew focus narratives on Stevonnie, a nonbinary character, and subvert assumptions about an essential, gendered form. In other words, gender is an unessentialized action (though a significant one), such developed and integrated concepts scarce found in cartoons of various eras. In fact, although other cartoons have liminal elements, much of children's programming relies on the assumption that there are only two genders and that gender is inherent at birth.

Categorical, essentialist thinking is apparent in cartoons that 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*. While liminal cartoons tend to have

characters with diverse ways of expressing masculinity and femininity, where neither constructed expression is 'owned' by one gender, gender expression in non-liminal cartoons have categorized gender presentation that often applaud the differences between women and men. Although Johnny Bravo expresses a softer side at times, he is a symbol of hyper-masculinity while 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 (a brand they later discarded for "gender neutral" shows) effectively celebrated girlhood, having many series that starred a unique set of girl protagonists. Despite the inclusion of girl protagonists, the texts themselves presented contradictions about gender, a political ambiguity that defines "the crux of postfeminism" (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?

The individualized approach toward feminism, which is popular among postfeminist thought, reflects a consistent, categorical approach to gender found in children's cartoons. Although shows from my childhood had moments of challenging their own categorization, gender fluidity and deconstructing the gender binary were not prevalent themes. Much of kids' 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 this statement, however, by referring back to liminal cartoons. If children are so keen on watching shows that construct identities in black-and-white, 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, 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 unbalanced (Hentges 320). The shifting depictions of gendered tropes reveal a change in the way television audiences think of gender and representation. Cartoons, which have a history of critiquing the status quo in comparison to live-action programs, then portray these messages to a child audience. The child, 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 functionalist 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.

QUEER THEMES

When queer themes are represented in children's programming, it is through animated series, not something as 'real' and identifiable as live-action shows. The liminal cartoon ranges in terms of theme, plot, setting, and audience demographics, but there is one similarity between cartoons that illuminates the functionalist ways of mainstream television. 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. It is important to note that these two cartoons 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 recently 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, usually in a humorous way. 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 (Prosser 35). 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." 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, in the same breath, can work with parody and criticism 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. By the misnomer 'it's only a cartoon,' animated shows can present nontraditional values and messages that critique the traditional. 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 medium? The fact that many nontraditional series are limited to animation reveals a progress not yet achieved. Despite this gap in representation, liminal cartoons spearhead anti-essentialist ideals, even if only through an animated medium.

FUSION AS LIMINAL EXISTENCE

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 (122). Too often, LGBTQ people are still in "enemy territory," the scrutinizing public that mirrors the crowd Garnet tells Steven about (121). Homeworld society resembles American society more than the usual beach setting of *Steven Universe*. By comparing the ideas of class hierarchy, gendered categorization, and minority persecution to an alien planet, these ideas are further othered to the audience watching the show. 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 large size, 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 say that "they have never seen a fusion of two different types of Gems," thus exposing Garnet's uniqueness in Homeworld. 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, the 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 used as a strategy to convey complex issues in a narrative-embedded way. Fusion conveys ideas that, at first glance, seem intense for a younger audience (representing societal oppression), but these intense ideas reflect prosocial messages to its audience by having the audience identify with Garnet while she is othered by her home.

Garnet is a symbol of lesbian 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" (142-3). Isolating minorities in

an attempt to ignore double or triple minority individuals also denies the fact that oppression is institutionalized and pervasive, of oppressions bleeding into one another. 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 in Homeworld. For example, just as Garnet symbolizes the greatness that comes out of lesbian love (or any wlw 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. Her Gem weapons are two gauntlets, a symbol 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, who are not as clearly coded people of color (though a default whiteness is also not to be assumed), become something greater when they fuse together. When Garnet is formed as this greater being, her appearance is more clearly a Black woman, thus defining Ruby and Sapphire's greatness out of their ability to become more clearly 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 mentions.

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 an action.

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 to never "question this," referring to Garnet's present self, she proves that Garnet is valid even if 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

(lesbian love, 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" (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.

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.

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" (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. Steven's 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 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 (15). However, the liminal cartoon pushes against this notion of binary, feminine/masculine thinking in hopes of skewing gender 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, in some way, viewers' concepts of gendered social roles (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.

The text 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 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.

BEING NONBINARY

When Steven and Connie fuse together to become Stevonnie, they initially stumble with what language to use for themself. Stevonnie awkwardly tries to stand up, unaccustom to their new height and body, while they refer to themself 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 goes off 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," an introduction to the nonbinary character Stevonnie, challenges strict gender identity and the binary.

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.

Their solidarity illustrates an uplifting message about gender identity, especially when the

reassurance comes from Garnet, who has experienced persecution from her home planet. The

other characters quickly use "they/them" pronouns for Stevonnie, conveying how Stevonnie's

family views their unfixed identity as unsurprising. In fact, 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. When transgender characters are invisible in mainstream media, the fact that a

children's show so casually introduces a character that confronts the gender binary is quite note-

worthy.

Characters that defy binary genders are scarce in mainstream television, especially a

character that is as narratively important as Stevonnie. 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. Other characters 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 show uses identity fluidity to represent anti-essentialist values. Many

characters 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 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.

LESBIAN LOVE AND RECEPTION: FUTURE RESEARCH

Queer readings have always been in the media texts we consume as audience members, but not until recently do these readings evoke such complicated and visible messages such as in children's animation. 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 (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 sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other" (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 complexity, but the necessity for representations that both complicate identity and celebrate queer sexuality is profoundly important. Children's animation in particular not only evokes liminal identities and prosocial messages about gender, but also represents prosocial messages about queer sexuality. Even though anti-essentialist themes in cartoons is enlightening, it is quite interesting that queer representation can be found easily in

children's animated shows rather than live-action ones. That is why my future honors research will study receptions studies on LGBTQ audiences, most importantly, LGBTQ children. I will conduct more textual analyses on *Steven Universe*, focusing on the portrayals of lesbian existence and how different types of queerness are explored through the avenue of kid's programming.

THE QUEER KID

"For the cult of the child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for the culture at large…is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" Lee Edelman

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.' This story, one of many, quite clearly reflects the overall disconnect the public has towards LGBTQ experiences and childhood (Gross 122). Society exiles queerness from the grasp of childhood, proposing it as exclusive to adulthood, and further, defining the queer as too mature, too sexual. 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 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) 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. Evidenced through my own database research, children's media studies focuses largely on advertising and the harmful effects media has on kids. It's troubling to

find little to no studies on children's media and queerness, all while sorting through pages of analyses urging protection for 'the child consumer.' 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 social issues as 'too adult.' That is why it is no surprise that portrayals of queerness prop up in cartoons, thus still 'safe,' and 'just pretend.' 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 and convey the messages other kids' programs should use when moving forward in a society that is currently under a cultural transformation in regards to queer experiences.

Works Cited

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship.* Duke UP, 2007.

Baym, Geoffrey. "Critical Interpretive Methods: Social Meanings and Media Texts." *Media Research Methods: Understanding Metric and Interpretive Approaches*. Ed. James A. Anderson. SAGE, 2012, pp. 323-50.

Berger, Arthur Asa. *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life*. SAGE, 1997.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge, 1990.

Dhaenens, Frederik. "Articulations of queer resistance on the small screen." *Department of Communication Sciences*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2014, pp. 520-531.

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. U of Minn. Press, 1997.

Eckert, Penelope. *Language and Gender.* Cambridge UP, 2013.

Gross, Larry. "Gideon Who Will be 25 in the Year 2012: Growing Up Gay Today." *International Journal of Communication*, 2007, pp. 121-38.

Hentges, Beth, and Kim Case. "Gender Representations on Disney Channel, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon Broadcasts in the United States." *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2013, pp. 319-33.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Feminist Film Theory*. Ed. Sue Thornham. New York UP, 1999, pp. 307-320.

Jane, Emma A. ""Gunter's A Woman?!"--Doing and Undoing Gender in Cartoon Network's Adventure Time." *Journal of Children and Media, vol.* 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 231-47.

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York UP, 2015.

Prosser, Jay. "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantion of Sex." *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E Hall et al., Routledge, 2013, pp. 32–59.

Rich, Adrienne C. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Feminism and Sexuality.* Ed. Jackson & Scott. Columbia UP, 1996, pp. 130-141.

Rude, Mey V. "Rebecca Sugar is Bisexual: "Steven Universe" Creator Comes Out at Comic-

Con." *Audostraddle.*

Simensky, Linda. "The Revival of the Studio-Era Cartoon in the 1990s." *Funny Pictures: Animation and Comedy in Studio-Era Hollywood*. Ed. Daniel Goldmark and Charlie Keil. U of Calif. Press, 2011, pp. 272-91.

Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies*. New York UP, 2005.

Strasburger, Victor C., Amy B. Jordan, and Barbara J. Wilson. *Children, Adolescents, and the Media*. 3rd ed. SAGE, 2014.

Valkenburg, Patti M., and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski. *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*. Yale UP, 2017.

Van Bauwel, Sofie, and Frederik Dhaenens. "Queer Resistances in the Adult Animated Sitcom." *Television & New Media*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 124–138.

Wartella, Ellen, Leanne Beaudoin-Ryan, Courtney K. Blackwell, Drew P. Cingel, Lisa B. Hurwitz, and Alexis R. Lauricella. "What kind of adults will our children become? The impact of growing up in a media-saturated world." *Journal of Children and Media,* vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 13-20.