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“The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer”: Queer Interventions as Praxis in Children’s Cartoons

Heather Wright

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“The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer”:

Queer Interventions as Praxis in Children’s Cartoons

by

HEATHER WRIGHT

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018
“The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer”:
Queer Interventions as Praxis in Children’s Cartoons

by

Heather Wright

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

“The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer”:
Queer Interventions as Praxis in Children’s Cartoons

by
Heather Wright

Advisor: Jean Halley

In Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, Scott McCloud considers “the simplified reality of the cartoon,” establishing a definition and theory for the medium (30). McCloud believes that cartoons possess “a special power” that is tied to their unique ability to “focus our attention on an idea” (31). Put simply, there is something about cartoons that allows for an easy exchange of concepts. Cartoons can teach. Using cartoons, a general term, to refer to both comics and animation, this thesis examines the transformative power of queer world building and intervention in recent children’s cartoons and how it functions, and can be further adapted, as praxis.

In “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” bell hooks advocates “using theory as intervention,” as a way to teach others to “look at the world differently” (59-60). Yet, importantly for hooks, “theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (61). hooks calls for theory that is accessible, digestible, and transmissible: “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” (64). For hooks, theory can only be truly counter-hegemonic when it is communicable and paired with praxis. Ideologies cannot be shattered with words alone. But what if we pair them with images?

At the level of form, cartoons are inherently more comprehensible, capable of transmitting information that, in contrast to theory, can be accessed with little formal training. The discourse of cartoons, then, need not be found within the bounds of academia. Cartoons, as a hybrid medium, constructed with fluidity and motion that can contain multitudinous forms of images, signs, texts, and archives, are uniquely suited to counter-hegemonic teaching.

Imbuing cartoons with accessible theory is, in itself, a form of political practice. Cartoonists do not only imagine, envision, and describe new ontologies, but actively depict them in a way that demands participation; cartoons are a collaborative practice, utterly reliant on our ability to understand and act. In this regard, some of the most important—and impactful—queer praxis of today is occurring within the writing, creation, and production of children’s cartoons.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all of my teachers, in life or cartoons or text, who helped me to see past my blinders.
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“I had forgotten that men cannot see unicorns. If men no longer know what they are looking at, there may well be other unicorns in the world.” — The Last Unicorn (1982)

“There is something about cartoons. They’re a magic trick, an illusion—the second you believe they’re really moving, talking, they’ve already fooled you. They’re in your head, you’ve made them real! To love them is to love your own willingness to be fooled.” — Rebecca Sugar, Frontier #14

When I was a child, I used to rent The Last Unicorn from Blockbuster every Friday afternoon. I knew exactly where the VHS sat on the shelf, the films that surrounded it, and every minute detail of its well-worn case. “Don’t you want to see something else?” my mother would sigh. “You must have that movie memorized.”

I did have it memorized. I knew the flow of the unicorn’s mane and the sound and the shadow of her hoofs on the ground. I knew the hot breath of the enchanted red bull and the tired, gaunt face of King Haggard, the monarch who, through magic and greed, chased all of the unicorns from the world into his little corner of the sea so that he could feel joy when he looked upon them there, trapped. But, most of all, I knew the harpy, Celaeno.

Celaeno is a minor character in the film, on screen for only a few minutes. Captured by the old witch, Mommy Fortuna, only to prove that she could hold the creature for a time, the harpy is the only other ‘real’ mythical creature that the unicorn finds herself caged beside in the witch’s otherwise illusory Midnight Carnival. When the unicorn is freed from the witch’s cage by the wizard, Schmendrick, she is faced with the choice of fleeing to save herself or freeing the caged monster. Schmendrick warns her of the danger—“Run! She’ll kill you if you set her free”—but the
unicorn ultimately unlocks the harpy’s cage, Celaeno brutally slaughtering the old witch before taking to the skies to search for others to maim. As a child, I was terrified of Celaeno. She was ugly and alien, with the body of a vulture and three naked, sagging breasts that hung low from her chest. I wondered why the unicorn had risked her life to set the creature free. I had nightmares about her roaming the skies. Watching the scene over and over, I eventually found the answer: fear is not enough of a reason to cage or kill.

When I learned this lesson from the unicorn and the harpy, I stopped killing spiders. Instead, I gathered them into cups and raced them outside, my heart beating loud in my throat. It is one of my earliest memories of an active empathy—an empathy that took effort and sacrifice.

I have been thinking about how we learn something that is difficult. How do we grasp at truth past history and consensus and enculturation? How can we crack our calcified ideologies in order to begin to see things differently, to remain open, to tolerate and accept and understand? How do we look past our blinders in order to see what others see and know what they know? And, crucially, how do we engage others in a similar practice; how do we persuade others to consider difference, to see it and hold it and aspire to it? It is an ongoing, and central, question, and I’d like to put forth that part of the answer lies in children’s cartoons.

In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud considers “the simplified reality of the cartoon,” establishing a definition and theory for the medium (30). McCloud believes that cartoons possess “a special power” that is tied to their unique ability to “focus our attention on an idea” (31). Put simply, there is something about cartoons that allows for an easy exchange of concepts. Cartoons can teach.

I use cartoons, a general term, to refer to both comics and animation. Comics and animation are different mediums with different rules of creation and production, yet, as visual arts rooted in
simplified images, there are similarities in both form and approach that connect them. In fact, animation often involves a storyboarding process, during which cartoonists create their story as a streamlined comic, drawing out each scene in panels. Moreover, I am particularly interested in the recent influx of independent comics artists finding work in the animation medium, since this paper will trace a revitalized commitment to work that is experimental, subversive, and personal in children’s animation to these artists and their comics background. For Rebecca Sugar, creator of Steven Universe, the recent emergence of comics artists in animation “has had a huge effect on the look and feel of what’s going on right now in animation. I think there’s an unapologetic honesty in both writing and drawing that comes through” (MacDonald).

Cartoons have always been teaching. This is nothing new. In Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children, Richard King et al view animated cartoons as “edutainment,” emphasizing their role as “agents of socialization” (51) and noting that “animated films operate . . . as the new teaching machines” (36). Cartoons, then, are capable of teaching—have been teaching—culture, ideology, and history. As teaching instruments, cartoons “possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning” (36). Of special interest to the authors is the tendency for cartoons to teach heteronormativity. Considering arguments against the representation of queer characters in children’s animated films, the authors examine the claim that “animated characters [should] have no sexualities” (50):

It seems undeniable that cartoon characters . . . certainly do have sexualities, which is to say, they have heterosexualities. Despite a tenuous relevance, or an outright irrelevance, to the story lines, “heterosexuality” (in the form of heterosexual relationships, or heterosexually

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oriented banter) pervades most films for children. Indeed, if there is a purpose to these seemingly pointless scenes, the aim could be taken to be the “indoctrination” of children into “the heterosexual lifestyle.” (42)

Inscribed with heteronormativity, many cartoons socialize children to view heterosexuality as normative. Cartoons, then, though powerful teaching tools—capable of socializing, of instilling ethics and ideals and worldview—most often impart dominant and heteronormative ideologies that “maintain the status quo” (49). But, what if they didn’t?

In The Queer Art of Failure (2011), J.J. Halberstam considers the potential for animation to teach the non-normative and the counter-narrative: “While much children’s literature simply offers a new world too closely matched to the old one it left behind, recent animated films actually revel in innovation and make ample use of the wonderfully childish territory of revolt” (28). For Halberstam, “the whimsical nature of the animated world allow[s] for the smuggling of radical narratives,” for “unexpected encounters between the childish, the transformative, and the queer” (43). What is it about this “whimsical nature,” the fantastic and truly innovative, that carves a space for a teaching that is counter-hegemonic?

In “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” (1974) Ursula K. Le Guin reflects on “the uses of the imagination,” or fantasy, considering “the kind of thing you learn from reading about the problems of a hobbit who is trying to drop a magic ring into an imaginary volcano” (43). For Le Guin, the use of fantasy lies in its unique ability to counter socialization, culture, hegemony:

Fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true… its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial…It is by such statements as, ‘Once upon a time there was a dragon,’ or ‘In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit’—it is by such beautiful non-facts that we fantastic human beings may arrive, in our peculiar fashion, at the truth. (45)
The “truth” of fantasy undermines our (human) ideologies, practices, and systems, exposing them as man-made and subject to criticism and revision. If there is a transformative power in cartoons, then, it relies on imaginative interventions, in the building of fantastical worlds that are filled with “non-facts.”

In *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* Ramzi Fawaz notes a “trend toward diversification without creative world-making practices” that has “dulled, if not wholly undermined, the radical political edge of comic books in the contemporary moment” (278). For Fawaz, comics that focus on a representation of diversity without a concurrent, imaginative commitment to destabilizing the hegemonic systems and ideologies that position those characters as other or lesser are at best flat and unconvincing, and, at worst, complicit in their subjugation.

It is the practice of “creative world-making,” then, that gives comics their counter-hegemonic power. For Fawaz, world building “describes instances when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture and, in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies” (14). World building that is imbued with imagination exposes the construction of our own thought systems and institutions, holding them up for criticism and review.

Like Le Guin, Fawaz notes fantasy’s distinctive potential for such counter-hegemonic teaching. For Fawaz, fantasy—or “popular fantasy,” his proposed “analytical category”—“organize[s] real-world social and political relations” (27) through imaginative world building that holds a “unique ability to destabilize, alter, or altogether unravel existing frameworks in order to present new ways of perceiving the world” (28). The world building of fantasy, as a kind of queer intervention, allows us to see the seams in our restrictive ideologies and institutions, which facilitate a receptivity to new queer realities. In this regard, Fawaz sees the “enchantment” of
fantasy as a “potent tool” for promoting a “progressive ethical orientation to the world” (29).

World building in a cartoon is especially enchanting. For McCloud, “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled…an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36) In cartoons, the reader or viewer participates in the building of story—and, ultimately, a world and reality—through what McCloud calls “closure,” or, “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” that allows us to “mentally complet[e] that which is incomplete based on past experience” (63). For McCloud, closure takes two primary forms in cartoons, and both are central to bringing ‘life.’ In both comics and animation, we use closure to comprehend and build out illustrations that are simplified. McCloud refers to this ability as “non-visual awareness,” or our capacity to “extend our identities into inanimate objects,” which allows—or, rather, requires—us to fill in and give life to simplified images (38).

In comics in particular, the concept of closure is central. For McCloud, “the reader’s deliberate, voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69). Since comics are still images generally contained in panels and separated by ‘the gutter,’ or the white of the page between each panel, comics artists rely on the reader’s imagination and participation to convey action and story:

In the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there! Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. (McCloud 66-67)

At the level of form, then, comics not only allow readers to see the worlds they build, but they encourage, even demand, active participation in their creation.
Many queer and feminist theorists have utilized the concept of imaginative world building as a precursor to political praxis. For example, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” utilizes imaginative world building to put forth an “ironic political myth” (5) that she hopes will be taken up by socialist feminists as “one part of needed political work” (14). Though Haraway’s cyborgs, as she states from the outset, are simply a constructed ironic myth, “a condensed image of imagination and material reality” (7), she views her manifesto as a political tool: “The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, a myth and a tool mutually constitute each other” (33). Pointing to the ways social systems and relations can inscribe themselves on our very bodies, Haraway denaturalizes the dominant tools and myths we use to comprehend the world, simultaneously offering a revised myth that could, if we choose, dethrone the old myths and tools we have come to view as natural, compulsory. Haraway’s cyborgs, then, are meant to inform political practice, her words intended to stimulate, and provide a methodology for, informed political action. Haraway’s manifesto is “a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination – in order to act potently” (66).

What is missing from Haraway’s manifesto, however, is how to enact such ‘potent’ praxis. Though Haraway provides the foundation of a new myth, a new ontology, it is difficult to piece together how one might engage in the process of actually building it. Moreover, how might this new world be shared?

In “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” bell hooks advocates “using theory as intervention,” as a way to teach others to “look at the world differently” (59-60). Yet, importantly for hooks,
“theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (61). hooks calls for theory that is accessible, digestible, and transmissible: “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public” (64). For hooks, theory can only be truly counter-hegemonic when it is communicable and paired with praxis. Ideologies cannot be shattered with words alone.

But what if we pair them with images?

The discourse of cartoons need not be found within the bounds of academia. At the level of form, cartoons are inherently more comprehensible, capable of transmitting information that, in contrast to theory, can be accessed with little formal training:

Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to ‘get the message.’ The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. When pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality,’ they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures” (49).

Used in this way, cartoons exemplify Halberstam’s notion of “low theory”: “we can think about low theory as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory” (16). Cartoons, as a hybrid medium, constructed with fluidity and motion that can contain multitudinous forms of images, signs, texts, and archives,² are uniquely suited to the communication of counter-hegemonic

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² For an excellent and renowned example of comics as personal archive, see Bechdel, Allison. *Fun Home* (2006).
“low theory.”

Imbuing cartoons with accessible theory is, in itself, a form of political practice. Cartoonists do not only imagine, envision, and describe new ontologies, but actively depict them in a way that demands participation; cartoons are a collaborative practice, utterly reliant on our ability to understand and act. In this regard, some of the most important—and impactful—queer praxis of today is occurring within the writing, creation, and production of children’s cartoons.

In this paper, I will examine queer world building and invention in recent children’s cartoons and how it functions, and can be further adapted, as queer praxis. Considering the context and impact of the underground comix movement that emerged in the 1960s and the concurrent rise of a subset comics that were created exclusively for mature audiences, the first chapter, “For Adult Intellectuals Only”? will review the comics form as a medium for both youth and adults. The second chapter, Save it for the Spirit World: The [Queer?] Subtext of The Legend of Korra will explore the accomplishments and limitations of the animated series The Legend of Korra in comparison to The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars, the comics published by Dark Horse Books that serve as a continuation of the show. In the third chapter, “Let’s Make Some Trouble for the Institution”: the Pedagogy of Queer Activism in Nimona, I will analyze Noelle Stevenson’s young adult fantasy comic Nimona and how it serves as a kind of illustrated activism, undermining hegemonic ‘institutions’ through overt, imaginative world building and a subtext of community organizing. The fourth chapter, “Subversive in a Positive Way”: The Radical, Restorative Positivity of Steven Universe, will explore the queer interventions of the animated series, Steven Universe. Viewing the experimental, personal, and subversive approach to Steven Universe, unmatched in children’s animation, as a direct result of creator Rebecca Sugar’s background in independent comics, I will view the series as a patchwork of the two mediums, proposing it as a model for a
queer praxis that is, as hooks calls for, “healing, liberatory, [and] revolutionary” (61).

CHAPTER ONE: ‘FOR ADULT INTELLECTUALS ONLY’?

In the late 1950s, early 1960s, something shifted in cartoons. In 1954, Dr. Frederic Wertham published *The Seduction of the Innocent*, a book based on his long-term research on “the effects that comic books have on the minds and behavior of children who come in contact with them” (Wertham “Publisher’s Note”). Wertham’s work incited a wave of panic on the impact of comic books on youth, especially young boys, resulting in a flurry of censorship, comic book bans, and comic book burnings. In *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America*, David Hajdu examines the influence and reverberations of Wertham’s study and the subsequent “self-regulation in the name of self-preservation” of comics publishers that began with the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc. and its Comics Code Authority, a voluntary code of regulations for the comics industry that was “enacted on the assumption that governmental restriction would be worse” for the comics market (127). The Comics Code—“an unprecedented (and never surpassed) monument of self-imposed repression and prudery”—included “forty-one requirements for comic-book imagery, text, covers, titles, and advertisements” (291-292). The code included the constraints that “policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established

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3 In *The Ten Cent Plague*, Hadju describes a ‘book swap’ in Wakeman, Ohio in 1955 that resulted in a comic book burning. Participants who submitted 10 or more comic books were gifted hardcover children’s books with a letter from the National Child Welfare Committee of the Auxiliary in the front cover that read: “I thank God that I am an American. I love my Country. I love my fellow man. I obey the Commandments of God. I respect authority and the law. I respect the rights of others. I read good books that inspire me to be a good citizen, and refrain from reading books devoted to horror, hatred, violence, crime and other evils that destroy the spirit of America. This book is an award given me for living up to the above code” (299).
authority” and “all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated,” and it mandated
that “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity
of marriage” (291-292). Comics were reviewed by “a staff of five censors…working full-time,
screening comic-book layouts after the inking stage” and those meeting the code’s requirements
were stamped with the Comics Code Authority seal (291).

Despite the mandates of the code and the circulation of its seal, there was still a surge of
demands for “comics legislation led by judges, sheriffs, PTAs, and civic groups in 1954” (293). For
example, in 1955, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors instituted a ban on those comics
“which belittle American institutions or traditions, those which depict details of methods of crime
commission, those which incite prejudice against classes, races or creed and those which tend to
emphasize vulgarity, obscenity or the glamorizing of crime and immoral behavior” (293). The ban
was punishable with “penalties up to $500 and six months in the county jail” (293). In the end,
legislation, the Comics Magazine Association of America, and its Comics Code “prohibited most
of the exciting, and even nominally interesting, content of comic books,” remaking mainstream
comics as vapid children’s fare (Chute, Graphic Women 13).

In the 1960s, the underground comix movement, the x used to “indicate their adult edge,”
emerged in direct response to the Comics Code Authority (Chute, Why Comics? 13). In contrast to
the work produced under the Comics Magazine Association of America, the underground comix
movement was “a vital movement with literary, artistic, and popular force” (13). Comics artists
independently created and produced comics that explicitly resisted the mandates of the code,
including, among many adult themes, subversive political commentary, depictions of violence, and
explicit sexual illustrations.

The work of underground comix artists had wide and lasting implications for the comics
form. In Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, Patrick Rosenkranz chronicles the
underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s in careful detail, considering the evolution and wide impact of the work: “A cadre of cartoonists succeeded in elevating comics to a medium of personal expression and unrestrained passion. Despite repression, rejection, and underfinancing, the comix industry thrived for a time and prepared the way for punk graphics, alternative comics, graphic novels, and other products…” (Rosenkranz 16). In Graphic Women, Hillary Chute notes

The thorny issues that underground comics, which were free of censorship, presented are issues that persist today…It is here that we see the work—adult, identitarian, experimental, confessional—that created the possibilities for today’s diverse comics landscape…The underground shifted what comics could depict (its purview, its content) and, crucially, how it could depict. (14)

For Chute, the push for independent production profoundly altered the comics medium, allowing for work that was deeply personal, explicit, and avant-garde. Chute gives the example from Aline Kominsky-Crumb’s autobiographical strip, “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman,” published in Wimmin’s Comix no. 1 (1972), which includes an image of Goldie masturbating surrounded by vegetables with her legs spread to the reader, thinking, “I’m fucked up I know nobody else does this,” with “I was always horny and guilty” bold across the top of the panel (Chute 36). The overt vulnerability of the image is striking, Kominsky-Crumb baring an embodied, ugly shame.

This concept of underground comix as “confessional” is echoed by many comics theorists. For Charles Hatfield, “underground comix conveyed an unprecedented sense of intimacy, rivaling the scandalizing disclosures of confessional poetry but shot through with fantasy, burlesque, and self-satire” (7). This explicit, honest, and experimental intimacy remains at the core of the comics medium, especially in indie and alternative comics.⁴

⁴ See, among many others, Bechdel, Allison; Barry, Lynda; and Spiegelman, Art.
Comics as art form, then, as outlet for personal expression and subversive creativity, was removed from the hands of children. What was once solidly viewed as a children’s medium, was split into two factions: those comics that bore the Comics Code seal and those that did not, those that were considered mainstream and those that were “in tune with the radical sensibilities of the Vietnam-era counterculture” (Hatfield 11), those that were for children and those that were exclusively “an adult commodity” (Hatfield 7). Robert Crumb’s Zap Comix No. 1 (1968), for example, has the words “Fair Warning: For Adult Intellectuals Only!” above the issue title on the front cover (Hatfield 13). The first issue of Wimmin’s Comix (1972), edited by Patricia Moodian, similarly notes on the cover that it is for “Adults Only,” emphasizing the “Sex, Revelation, Psychotic Adventure and more…” that can be found in its pages (Hatfield 15).

Yet, comics have never been viewed as wholly adult. Viewed by Wertham and many others as “an invitation to illiteracy,” comics were firmly relegated to the low brow, to popular culture (118). For Chute, “While graphic narratives may retain the oppositionality inscribed at the level of form that is characteristic of avant-garde production, they refuse the status of art objects. The cultural connotation, and the very historical definition, of comics points to what is reproducible, reusable, removed from the esoteric ‘high’ sanctity of the unique and the singular” (Graphic Women 11). In other words, comics, though taken from the hands of children and re-inscribed as a medium for ‘adult intellectuals,’ have remained accessible.

Some comics artists use this accessibility to their advantage, creating comics that are conduits for theories and philosophies that were once restricted to the academy. For example, Kelly Sue DeConnick’s Bitch Planet series (2014 -) serves as a scaffold for a radical feminist politics based on noncompliance. The series follows a group of cis- and transgender women incarcerated

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on “Bitch Planet,” or, the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost. Bitch Planet is an off-world prison that houses women arrested for noncompliance, an offense that ranges from murder, to obesity and a failure to adhere to prescribed gender roles.

*Bitch Planet* blends radical feminist politics with a compelling, provocative story and explicit depictions of bodies and violence that evoke the work of underground comix artists. *Bitch Planet* #1, for example, begins with a spread of the new inmates, naked and in suspension as their ship flies into space (see fig. 1). The inmates are exposed to the reader as they listen to a man’s voice tell them that “Earth is the father. And your father…has cast you out. For your trespasses, your gluttony…your pride, your weakness, and your wickedness are such that you are beyond correction or castigation. Like a cancer you must be excised from the world that bore you” (2-3). On the same page, the women are evaluated by prison guards, one man remarking, “rough batch” (2). These women, suspended as if in utero, exposed to both reader and guards, will, on the following page, be re-born into the Bitch Planet facility. In this way, DeConnick scaffolds the reader’s parallel birth into the *Bitch Planet* universe, allowing an abrupt, yet accessible, entrance point to both the fictional world of the comic and the interlaced feminist politics and criticism. By weaving theory and politics with art and story that is intimate and provocative, *Bitch Planet* serves as a clear pathway to feminist theories and terminologies, as well as a diverse community of readers.

DeConnick also brings feminist theory into the non-story elements, like the back cover and the backmatter. Most issues of *Bitch Planet* contain satirical advertisements on the back cover; *Bitch Planet* #10 “President Bitch,” for example, reads like a page in the fictional “Compliant Woman’s Weekly,” with fictional advertisements for preventing wrinkles through bird feces and a quiz for how to determine whether it is “time to tell your ‘B-F-F’ ‘B-Y-E’” for “demanding time and attention you owe to your family first.” The backmatter generally includes, in addition to an
author’s note, articles on feminist history and theory and pathways to additional resources. Most of the issues end with photographs of the *Bitch Planet* community of readers, often showcasing their noncompliance tattoos, a testament to the series’ impact and reach.

Fig. 1. “Beyond Correction.” Prisoners en route to ‘Bitch Planet’ from: DeConnick, Kelly Sue, writer and Valentine De Landro, artist. *Bitch Planet*, no. 1, Image Comics, 2014.

However, though *Bitch Planet* is certainly an accessible conduit to theory and community for those already invested in a radical feminist politics, the series may not serve the same “low theory” function for someone averse or resistant to feminist ideologies and practices. Though feminist theory, politics, and practice are certainly scaffolded in the series, there is no slow peeling away of hegemony here; *Bitch Planet* is abrupt, harsh, and unforgiving in approach.

But what if this concept of comics as conduit, as “low theory,” is brought to children’s cartoons? What if comics for children can (or already have) cease(d) to be filled with vapid, good-
versus-evil stories that simply instill or re-inscribe hegemonic institutions? It is here, I think, that children’s cartoons, imbued with imaginative world building and an accessible theory “that flies below the radar” have a special use for political practice (Halberstam 16).

CHAPTER 2: SAVE IT FOR THE SPIRIT WORLD: THE (QUEER?) SUBTEXT OF THE LEGEND OF KORRA

If comics are a sprawling underground where anything is possible, children’s animation has been a different world. Television, after all, shares a similar history of ire and censorship with comics. In fact, Wertham even touched on TV in The Seduction of the Innocent: like comic books, Wertham saw the television as “an intrusion into the home” in need of focused “scrutiny and correction” (374).

In recent years, however, there has been a small push for the inclusion of queer (or, rather, gay, lesbian, and, to a lesser degree, bisexual and trans) representation in children’s media. The Legend of Korra (2012-2014), a continuation of Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008), created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, is at once a pioneer of queer representation in children’s entertainment and a testament to its limitations. Though The Legend of Korra is certainly bold in its subject matter, exploring issues of trauma, terrorism, and fascism, its on-screen representation of a queer character, though widely lauded, ultimately falls short.

The Legend of Korra is set in a fictional world with five geographical ‘kingdoms’: the Air Nation, the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation, and the Northern and Southern Water Tribes. Some humans in this world have developed ‘bending’ abilities, with which they can manipulate a single element: air, earth, fire, or water. The Avatar, a reincarnation of a spirit, Raava, who fused with a human long ago, is the only human who can bend all four elements. When an Avatar dies, they are
reincarnated, but they retain access to the memories and spirits of past Avatars through their fusion with Raava. The Avatar is described as the bridge between the human and spirit worlds and is meant to help bring peace and balance to the world. *The Legend of Korra* centers on young Avatar Korra—the reincarnation of Aang, the Avatar in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*—as she learns to bend all four elements and find her own path and approach to living as the Avatar.

Though a thorough exploration of the subversive elements of *The Legend of Korra* would certainly be worthwhile, this paper will focus only on the revelation and treatment of Korra as a queer character, which, as it happens, limits our discussion to the series’ final scene, where Korra and her friend Asami grasp hands and, according to the series’ creators, begin their romantic relationship.6

In the final scene of “The Last Stand,” the series finale, Korra sits with her good friend Asami, during the wedding of their friends, Varrick and Zhu Li, staring out at Republic City and the bright light of the newly-opened spirit portal, which has made the spirit world truly accessible to humans, other than the Avatar, for the first time. The two reflect on the events of the past few days, and Korra asks, “So, what now?” When Asami laughs and suggests a vacation, they decide to travel through the portal to the spirit world together. As they approach the portal, the backdrop of Republic City behind them, spirits fly around the bright yellow light of the portal, and large spirit vines scatter the ground. It is as if they have already left Republic City; they are in another world. The two exchange a smile before grasping hands to walk up to the portal, turning to face each other as they step in (see fig. 2).

To give the implication of romantic intimacy weight, Korra and Asami’s final pose echoes

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6 Though creator Bryan Konietzko insists that “If [Korrasami] seems out of the blue to you, I think a second viewing of the last two seasons would show that perhaps you were looking at it only through a hetero lens,” the queer subtext that he seems to be referring to is fairly limited. Though Korra and Asami share a close friendship, the series offers little explicit romantic interaction before the final scene, which, in itself, is more subtext than text. See: http://bryankonietzko.tumblr.com/post/105916338157/korrasami-is-canon-you-can-celebrate-it-embrace.
the positioning of characters Varrick and Zhu Li during their wedding just a few scenes earlier, the two facing each other, bodies close and hands clasped. This final pose also mirrors the ending scene of Avatar: The Last Airbender, in which main characters Aang and Katara grasp hands and face each other after embracing. The music in each of the three scenes is soft, sentimental, and familiar. However, though Avatar: The Last Airbender ends with a deep, dramatic crescendo as Katara kisses Aang, closing the space between them and solidifying their romantic bond, The Legend of Korra seems to simply fade away, the characters absorbed in bright light, the romantic music slowing and distorting until it ceases. Though the implication of an intimacy is certainly implied, the confirmation of romance is noticeably absent.

Fig. 2. “Spirit Portal.” Asami (left) and Korra (right) hold hands in the final scene of The Legend of Korra from: Konietzko, Bryan and Michael Dante DiMartino, creators. “The Last Stand.” The Legend of Korra, season 4, episode 13, Nickelodeon, 19 Dec. 2014.
After the series finale, Vanity Fair called The Legend of Korra “one of the most powerful, subversive shows of 2014,” claiming that the final episode “changed the face of TV” (Robinson). Notably, however, as Vanity Fair mentions later in the article, The Legend of Korra changed only the face of Nickelodeon’s online streaming platform:

The Legend of Korra was never quite forbidden, never completely canceled, perhaps due to that lingering Avatar goodwill. However, during the show’s first season, it aired in a coveted Saturday-morning slot. After killing off a character on-screen in the Season 1 finale, Korra was considered too risqué and adult for the Saturday-morning crowd and was moved to Friday nights. But Korra continued to air dark material. That, coupled with less-than-stellar ratings, an ill-timed leak of episodes, and any number of mysterious behind-the-scenes factors, resulted in the surprising move to online-only Korra. In its final seasons, Korra became too dangerous, too risky for Nick to air. (Robinson)

Three days after the series finale, creator Bryan Konietzko wrote a blog post confirming the romantic relationship: “Korrasami is canon. You can celebrate it, embrace it, accept it, get over it, or whatever you feel the need to do, but there is no denying it. That is the official story…Korra and Asami fell in love. Were they friends? Yes, and they still are, but they also grew to have romantic feelings for each other.” For Konietzko, the finale was no “slam-dunk victory for queer representation,” but a “somewhat significant inching forward.” When he initially proposed the idea of bringing Korra and Asami together, Konietzko and the rest of the team expected road blocks: “At first we didn’t give [Korrasami] much weight, not because we think same-sex relationships are a joke, but because we never assumed it was something we would ever get away with depicting on an animated show for a kids network in this day and age, or at least in 2010.” Konietzko, somewhat delicately, references working with the network, Nickelodeon, to see whether bypassing the “unwritten rule” would be possible: “We approached the network and while they were supportive
there was a limit to how far we could go with it.” Konietzko describes going “back and forth” with Nickelodeon on the storyboards for the scene, a process which results in the final image of the two, “clasping both hands in a reverential manner.” Korra’s queerness, then, is left to subtext.

While *The Legend of Korra* left most of its explorations of queerness to subtext and interpretation, *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars*, the comic series published by Dark Horse Books and acknowledged by Nickelodeon as “the official continuation of *The Legend of Korra*” is bold in its depiction of queer relationships.

![Image](image-url)

Fig. 3. “Welcome to the Spirit World.” Korra (left) and Asami (right) kiss in the spirit world from: DiMartino, Michael Dante, writer. *The Legend of Korra: Turf Wars Part One*. Dark Horse Books, 2017, pp. 13.

The comic begins where the series finale ends, with Korra and Asami holding hands as they
leave the light of the portal to enter the spirit world. The next few pages follow them as they explore the colorful, fantastic, and thoroughly “unpredictable” spirit world, where “you never know when the ground might drop right out from under you” (5). As their vacation comes to an end, Korra and Asami grasp hands once more—a clear reference to their pose in the series finale—and kiss, the panel zooming to reveal their blushing faces (see fig. 3). Korra and Asami’s queerness, then, is left not only for the comics medium, but for the spirit world. The imaginative construction of the spirit world as an uncontrollable, unknowable space, a queer reality that cannot be subjected to human, normative rules, restrictions, or ideologies, makes Korra and Asami’s relationship possible.

In “Alien Cryptographies: The View From Queer,” Wendy Gay Pearson questions whether the simple representation of queer characters is enough to make media ‘queer.’ For Gay Pearson, queerness involves “a movement beyond the inclusionary towards a radical re-writing of the assumption within the show of the naturalness, endurance, and fixity of our current understandings of sexuality and its relationship to the sex/gender dyad and to cultural institutions,” a feat that can be accomplished through creative world building and queer intervention (16). In this regard, the difference between The Legend of Korra and Turf Wars is in the imaginative, queer world building of the spirit world. In The Legend of Korra, the audience is left to interpret the continuation of Korra and Asami’s final moments; the characters approach the spirit world, but never reach it. As viewers approach the opportunity to glimpse into a queer world, the show ends, leaving them to fill in the ending as they see fit, establishing what is possible for both the spirit world and Korra and Asami’s relationship. Leaving the ending open, however, risks the potential for a queer reality, since the viewer may simply inscribe a heteronormative worldview; the final moments of the series ultimately does little to counter normative conceptions of sexuality and/or queerness. The simple inclusion of queer characters, especially left to subtext, does little to challenge or counter
normative, restrictive ideologies.

CHAPTER 3: “LET’S MAKE SOME TROUBLE FOR THE INSTITUTION”:
THE PEDAGOGY OF QUEER ACTIVISM IN NIMONA

_Nimona_, Noelle Stevenson’s web comic turned graphic novel, follows the story of Nimona, a young shapeshifter who, in the first chapter, begins working as a sidekick for the supervillain, Ballister Blackheart. Throughout the narrative, Nimona and Ballister fight against the heroes of the “Institution,” most notably Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, the champion of the Institution and Ballister’s arch nemesis. Though _Nimona_ introduces Ballister as “Ballister Blackheart, the biggest name in supervillainy!” Stevenson ultimately resists an easy classification of hero/villain (2). Ballister, who was once one of “the two most promising heroes the Institution had ever seen” loses his arm when Goldenloin shoots it off with a weaponized lance after Ballister’s “fair victory” during a jousting tournament (5). After the joust, the Institution “had no use for a one-armed hero” and Ballister “took the only other viable option,” supervillainy (6). Ballister’s relegation to supervillainy keeps him “locked into a system where [he] can’t win,” fated to continuously fight and lose against Goldenloin and the Institution (6).

Ballister, then, is subject to the limitations of the Institution, which is reliant on a hero/villain binary. For example, Goldenloin says, “You can’t blame me for how your life turned out! You made the choice to turn evil!” Ballister’s response is biting: “Choice? I never had a choice! The Institution needed a villain. That lot fell to me. I never chose it. And it could just as easily have been you, had that ‘accident’ happened differently!” (96). In fact, Goldenloin ultimately reveals that Ballister’s injury was orchestrated by the Director of the Institution: “She told me that I had promise. That I was her choice for the Institution’s champion. But she said I’d
have to prove myself against you in the joust, or that chance would go away” (182). On the day of
the joust, the Director gives Goldenloin a weaponized lance, and an Institution soldier warns him
that “she expects you to win” (183).

From the beginning of the narrative, Ballister complicates the designation of supervillain.
When Nimona proposes a plan to murder the king, Ballister resists: “You can’t just go around
murdering people. There are rules, Nimona” (4). For Ballister, “killing solves nothing” (21). In
addition, after robbing “His Majesty’s Royal Treasury” bank, Nimona, in dragon form, Ballister
riding on her back, flee into the sky with the gold. Flying over the square of people below, Ballister
upends the bags of gold into the crowd. Nimona questions him: “What, are you Robin Hood now?”
The people grasp at the gold laid bare on the street, soldiers, wailing spears, attempting to keep
them at bay. Ballister, looking down at the chaos, says, “No. I’m a supervillain” (77). The
juxtaposition of Ballister’s traditionally heroic actions with the repetition of the word, supervillain,
encourages readers to think critically about the designation.

In fact, if there is ‘evil’ in Nimona, it lies in the Institution. Stevenson’s setup of this role
reversal is slow but deliberate, offering readers a chance to discover it for themselves. For example,
before it is revealed that “the Institution really IS up to no good,” Stevenson alludes to the
hero/villain flip through image alone (see fig. 4). The statue of Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, the face
of the Institution, towers over a barren street, intermittent street lights revealing a few pacing
Soldiers. The lights, harsh against the blackened street, resemble spotlights. A man sleeps below
the statue of Ambrosius, presumably homeless. As the man is evicted by a passing soldier—“You
can’t sleep here, bub. Get a move on”—the words, “OUR HERO,” emblazoned and gold coated at
the foot of the statue, stand out against the night sky (19). Nimona flies over the scene as a fire-red
bird, stark against the toneless city. Nimona, in plain opposition to the Institution, possesses a
vibrancy that is lacking from the people that the Institution is supposed to be serving. The
juxtaposition of the words “OUR HERO” with the soldier’s lack of care reveals the limits of the Institution’s heroism. The implication here, made accessible by Stevenson’s use of literal identifiers like ‘Institution,’ ‘hero,’ and ‘villain,’ is that institutions are inherently limited and produce restrictive, impractical binaries.

Fig. 4. “Our Hero.” from: Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona*. Harper Teen, 2015, pp. 19.

With *Nimona*, Stevenson plays with a pedagogy for civic engagement, for queer activism. Nimona and Ballister’s actions against the Institution foreground the potential, and process, for undermining institutions. By encoding the Institution’s top secret plans, Ballister discovers that they are growing “Jaderoot…a very rare, VERY poisonous plant” that is “pretty much only used in dark sorcery” that was banned by the Institution “long ago” (41). Growing the Jaderoot “risk[s]
contaminating the entire kingdom’s crops” and proves to Nimona and Ballister that “the Institution is totally crooked!” (43). While Nimona moves to immediately show the plans to the kingdom, Ballister warns, “It’s not that easy. The Institution will discredit anything I say. Even if we did get it out, they’d find a way to cover it up” (43). Instead, Ballister comes up with a different plan, and says, “let’s make some trouble for the institution” (43).

When Ballister creates a “superficial non-toxic agent” that will mimic the effects of Jaderoot poisoning, he notes that “once a few cases have broken out—people’s imaginations will start to take over” (58). For Stevenson, then, imagination is a powerful tool for counter-hegemonic teaching. In fact, Ballister’s chosen method of poison delivery, apples, is a clear reference to classic fantasy, Nimona noting: “whoa, that’s old-school villain right there. Are you pissed that you’re not the fairest of them all?” (58). The apple, here, serves as an imaginative intervention, capable of subverting the Institution and exposing them as man-made and subject to activism.

When people at the Royal Jousting Tournament become ill from eating poisoned food, the crowd revolts, throwing the tournament into chaos. The Institution soldiers, in full armor with shields and spears, start out anxious—“N-now everyone, stay calm!”—and then grow violent, stabbing one of the crowd with a spear buzzing with green electricity. The soldiers, brandishing their spears, threaten the mob into submission: “All right, everyone STAND DOWN. I’m authorized to use this weapon on any of you!” In this midst of this chaos, Ballister’s voice interjects, the sound of the distorted frequency paralyzing the Institution soldiers. In the following panel, Ballister’s words are overlaid on the scene, the people paused to listen and the soldiers still on the floor, their weapons discarded. While Ballister speaks, Stevenson zooms in on the thoughtful faces of the crowd:

People of the Kingdom. My name is Ballister Blackheart, but I’m sure you know that already. You may think of me as your enemy, but I have only ever fought against the
Institution, not against you. Your true enemies are the ones who have beaten you down and kept you in compliance through fear…They’ve locked us into a system where they hold all the power. In return, they promised you safety, but they’ve broken that promise. In their quest for war, they’ve endangered the very people they swore to protect. They took away your power. It’s time to take it back. (137)

One way to take back power, to disrupt institutions and their conditioning, Stevenson suggests, is through fluidity. Nimona’s character, whose shapeshifting abilities defy what Ballister considers possible, undermines science and fact: “Every time she changes form, every single cell in her body is destroyed and new ones are generated in their place. She’s not molding herself into new forms, it’s like every time her whole body dies and a new one grows in its place” (192). Ballister makes repeated attempts to classify Nimona, to make her fit within the confines of the known world as he views it: “See, that right there. You just altered your own mass. That’s impossible…What can’t you do? What are the rules?” (36). Nimona’s enigmatic, queer fluidity marks her a target for the Institution. The Director views Ballister as “a terrorist” and Nimona as “a dangerous weapon,” unworthy of sympathy: “I know an abomination when I see one…What are you?” (198). Nimona is a threat because she is an unknown, because she cannot be fully known. She, quite literally, undermines our ideologies and ‘institutions.’

Nimona has no clear origin. In fact, though Stevenson plays with the concept of “the backstory thing,” Nimona resists a clear lineage or history. Though Nimona tells her backstory at the beginning of the narrative, it is later revealed that she “made it up,” (167). In fact, Nimona’s story is merely a conglomeration of archetypal origins: the perfect nuclear family—“I lived with my parents in a tiny village. You know, super normal and boring stuff”—that is ruptured when “raiders from the west…come without warning, pillaging and burning everything” (25). Young Nimona, carrying a basket of berries on a path through the forest one morning, happens on a witch
at the bottom of a great hole in the ground who offers a “magical gift” if the child can help with her rescue. Nimona asks to be made “strong enough to defeat the raiders,” and the witch turns her into a great dragon (26). However, when she returns to her village in dragon form, her family and neighbors are afraid of her, and she spends “the next few weeks attempting to change back,” her form changing from bear, to rabbit, to horse (28). When Nimona finally changes back to herself, the raiders have already devastated her home, killing her parents and everyone she knows. Nimona’s backstory, a hackneyed assemblage of classic fairytale and normative heroic origin story, serves only to exaggerate her difference, her position outside the normative.

Ballister questions whether Nimona’s human girl body is her “natural form”—“I took it for granted that this was your natural form. But it’s not, is it…What are you trying to hide? Who are you really? What are you really?”—but, for Stevenson, this question misses the mark (168). Nimona’s ‘natural form’ is fluid, unsettled and indefinable. There is no origin, no shape or representation that came first. This question of Nimona’s “natural form” evokes Judith Butler’s theories on gender. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Butler denaturalizes gender: “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (190). For Butler, gender is a construction, an idea(1) built up through reiterative acts and enforced through societal pressure, often violence and shame. There is no origin, no “‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes” (190). Nimona’s form, like gender, is a construction, a series of copies built from “cultural fictions”—or social consensus of what a rabbit looks like, how a fox moves, how a dragon behaves, and how a girl can be—with no identifiable origin. In this regard, Nimona’s shifting form queers our conception of bodies as fixed and innate.

Nimona’s shifting form grants her an advantage in her activism. Fighting the Institution,
Nimona continuously changes shape, from armored ankylosaurus to triceratops, bear, fox, octopus, and bat. The Institution’s attacks are feeble in comparison, the soldiers scrambling to keep up with Nimona’s shifting form. While the soldiers struggle to catch her, Nimona’s fox form jumps between two panels, its sleek body crossing the white of the gutter and emphasizing her distinct advantage (see fig. 5). The beady black eyes of the soldiers are noticeably absent from their green visors as they fight. Nimona’s attacks, then, unbound by form or convention, render the Institution’s practiced, poised, and technologically advanced assault ineffectual. Her fluidity, of motion and form and intent, erodes their power.

Fig. 5. “The Upper Hand.” Nimona fighting the Institution from: Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona.* Harper Teen, 2015, pp. 147.

At the climax of the battle, Nimona, in dragon form, becomes overwhelmed by a duel-wielding soldier in heavy armor. The soldier slices his glowing, green swords through her scaled neck, and the next panel, in silhouette, shows her severed head as it falls to the ground. Here, Stevenson seems to slow time, illustrating Ballister’s pained reaction panel by panel. However, on
the page that follows, Nimona appears to regenerate, an ethereal dragon emerging from her fallen body and devastating the Institution soldiers. The implication here is hopeful and didactic: it is in the blurring of boundaries, in viewing bodies and institutions and motivations as unfixed, as subject, that hegemonic ideologies and institutions can be undermined.

CHAPTER 4: “SUBVERSIVE IN A POSITIVE WAY”: THE RADICAL, RESTORATIVE POSITIVITY OF STEVEN UNIVERSE

Steven Universe is, at its heart, a bildungsroman. The series follows Steven Universe, a boy who is part human, part ‘gem,’ who lives in Beach City—a fictional seaside town set in the northeastern United States—with the Crystal Gems, a small group of rebel extraterrestrial gems who have made it their mission to protect the earth and its inhabitants from their kind. Gems are aliens from another planet—referred to only as ‘Homeworld’—who are, quite literally, gem stones. Though gems resemble humans in form, their bodies are merely solid “conscious manifestations of light” that project from their gemstones (“Last One Out of Beach City”).

Steven is the child of Rose Quartz, the leader of the Crystal Gems, and (the human) Greg Universe. Rose Quartz gave up her physical form so that Steven could exist: “Rose disappeared to create an entirely new being, with all of her self integrated into half of [Greg’s] self” (Sugar, Guide to the Crystal Gems 19). Steven, then, is “human cells held together by gem magic,” a composite of human and gem (Atwood, “Fusions”). Steven and the remaining Crystal Gems, his caretakers, live in a small beach house constructed against the Crystal Temple, a magical sanctuary that serves as a home base for the gems. The Crystal Gems consist of Garnet—a fusion of the characters Ruby and Sapphire—Pearl, and Amethyst. Steven’s father, Greg Universe, a failed rock star who lives in his old touring van, is also a major presence in his life.
Thousands of years before Steven’s existence, the Crystal Gems revolted against their homeworld and the hierarchy inscribed by the imperialistic Diamond authority—towering, god-like gems who hold all of the power in gem society—to protect life on Earth from colonization and ruin. In *The Guide to the Crystal Gems*, Pearl explains: “gems are a species, but the Crystal Gems are a movement. Five thousand five hundred years ago, we fought for this planet’s independence” (4). The “radical doctrine” of Rose Quartz and the Crystal Gems (13) is simple: “Fight for life on the planet Earth, defend all human beings, even the ones that you don’t understand, believe in love that is out of anyone’s control, and then risk everything for it!” (“Season 5 Catch-Up”). In *Steven Universe*, then, embracing difference is a revolutionary act.

In many ways, *Steven Universe* is, simply, a story about growing up. Viewers watch Steven grapple with his hybrid upbringing, with episodes centering on his gradual discovery of the ‘gem powers’ he inherited from his mother—including the ability to produce a shield from his gemstone, envelop himself and others in a protective, pink bubble, and heal humans and gems with his healing spit. Steven learns about the history of the gem revolution, the gem Homeworld, and, of course, tackles questions of purpose, friendship, and love. Notably, throughout the series, viewers access information only as Steven does; as Steven learns, viewers learn with him. In this way, Steven’s perspective serves as a scaffold, allowing viewers to [re]develop alongside him. This redevelopment is framed as overtly positive.

Peridot, a gem from Homeworld and one of the primary antagonists in *Steven Universe*’s first season, offers a look into the structures and ideologies of Homeworld. When Peridot and the Crystal Gems form a collaborative truce in order to dismantle ‘the cluster,’ a mass of fractured gemstones in the middle of the Earth’s crust that could destroy the world at any moment, Peridot is, for the first time, confronted with difference. For Peridot, Earth is foreign and uncomfortable. Talking into her tape recorder, she says, “As you can see this planet is annoying and everything is
annoying” (“Too Far”). Peridot’s ideologies and biases are apparent. Peridot calls Steven “the
Steven,” thinking in terms of the systems on Homeworld, where a gem’s name is their species and
function (“Too Far”). In addition, Peridot is surprised to see Amethyst following orders from a
fusion:

You’re the one who should be in charge. Pearl is a pearl. Garnet is a fusion. I don’t even
know what he’s supposed to be. You’re the only Crystal Gem that’s actually a gem. You
outrank everyone on your team—they should be listening to you! You’re a strong, singular,
fully functional soldier... (“Too Far”)

Peridot carries the weight of Homeworld ideology in her interactions with the Crystal Gems, and
she is unable to comprehend their freedom from those systems. For Peridot, Pearl’s class—and
nature—is intended to be subservient and Garnet, a fusion, is repulsive, taboo: “Would you mind
unfusing? It’s making me incredibly uncomfortable” (“Too Far”). Peridot’s reactions to the beliefs
and behaviors of Steven and the Crystal Gems, then, ultimately serves to juxtapose Homeworld and
Earth, granting viewers the opportunity to re-encounter Earth ideologies.

Peridot, who moves, somewhat slowly and not so gracefully, from antagonist to friend,
offers viewers the opportunity to see how such growth and transformation can happen: how it can
be precipitated and encouraged, that it is filled with mistakes and setbacks, and that it requires time,
patience, and forgiveness. In this regard, Peridot’s characterization reveals much about Sugar’s
methods and intention for Steven Universe. For Sugar, “Peridot’s arc is something that happens to
a lot of people, when you believe in the way that things are and then you meet someone where the
way that things are is bad for them and you have to change your thinking” (Atwood “Peridot”). For
Sugar:

[Peridot] isn’t maniacal, or arrogant, she’s actually very humble. She believes she exists to
serve Yellow Diamond, she wants to do a good job, and she’s frustrated that the Crystal
Gems are disrupting what she believes to be a system that makes sense and benefits everyone. But she slowly starts to realize why that system failed Pearl, Amethyst, and Garnet, and as she begins to respect their integrity, she starts to consider a world where they could coexist. (McDonnell 135).

Peridot’s character exemplifies Sugar’s commitment to *Steven Universe* as a show that is “subversive in a positive way” (McDonnell). For Sugar, *Steven Universe* “very gently explain[s] why caring about people who are different from yourself benefits everyone” (Atwood “Peridot”). Before Peridot arrives on Earth, Steven wonders, “maybe when Peridot gets to Earth she’ll see how nice all of the people are and she won’t want to hurt anyone” (“The Return”). It is Steven’s patience, positivity, and capacity for empathy that makes this transformation possible.

Accordingly, *Steven Universe* resists a concrete delineation of good versus evil, friend versus foe. Though the beginning of the series begins with the gems frequently fighting a variety of monsters, it is quickly revealed that the monsters are actually gems that were ‘corrupted’ during the gem revolution: “All of those monsters we fight used to be just like us! But they’ve become corrupted and broken. We have to take care of them, subdue them, contain them. It’s the best we can do for them for now” (“Ocean Gem”). Viewing enemies as “just like us” eliminates the us/them binary and establishes a need, a responsibility, for understanding over violence. For example, when Steven accidentally releases a corrupted gem, the Centipeedle, from its bubble, he notices that “it looks so scared” and attempts to calm it (“Monster Buddies”). Lying flat on his stomach, vulnerable, Steven talks softly with the creature until it relaxes, approaching him (see fig. 6). When the gems, noticing the monster’s proximity to Steven, begin to attack, Steven begs them to stop: “Don’t hurt it…It’s just scared and confused. Please, Garnet, I’m begging you” (“Monster Buddies”).

In fact, *Steven Universe* depicts a radical, restorative empathy. Steven has literal
“empathetic powers” that Garnet describes as “unusual” and “something to celebrate” (“Your Mother and Mine”). Steven can, quite literally, feel what others are feeling, even his enemies. In “Steven’s Dream,” tears continually stream from Steven’s eyes as Blue Diamond cries: “My dreams. I was seeing through her eyes. I’ve been crying her tears.” In addition, Steven’s gem powers—a magical shield, the ability envelop himself and others in a protective, pink bubble, and healing spit—resist violence. Instead, Steven’s gem powers are rooted in a strength born of compassion, in a restorative empathy.

Fig. 6. “Monster Buddies.” Steven calms a corrupted gem from: Sugar, Rebecca, creator. “Monster Buddies.” Steven Universe, season 1, episode 23, Nickelodeon, 11 Sep. 2014.

In Steven Universe: Art & Origins, show writer Matt Burnett acknowledges Steven Universe’s commitment to depicting acceptance and empathy:

The thing about Steven Universe’s particular message about love and acceptance that I find most interesting, and, I think, can be challenging, is the totality of it… Steven can never
bring himself to hate anyone. The ultimate solution to all of the problems the show presents is never violence, really—it’s education and understanding. Steven always tries to understand who someone is, and why they are the way they are, and tries to teach them what he believes in and why it works for him. In the real world, you can’t just get rid of the people you disagree with, no matter how immoral you consider their point of view. You just can’t. You have to figure out a way to inspire change in their way of thinking. (224)

*Steven Universe* serves as a model for this type of accessible intervention. Through imagination and positivity, Sugar offers viewers the Foucauldian possibility to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault 9).

The concept of fusion, for example, illustrates the construction of taboo. Through fusion, two or more gems can come together to create “someone entirely new” (“The Answer”). Garnet is “an entirely new [kind of] fusion formed, not for power, but for love” (“Your Mother and Mine”). Ruby and Sapphire choose to exist as Garnet because they are, quite simply, in love. Though gems are inherently sexless, they present in a way that viewers would recognize as feminine and use she/her pronouns. So, when Ruby and Sapphire are unfused, their affection, and relationship, is explicitly queer (see fig. 7).

Ruby and Sapphire’s fusion, devoid of practical use and formed outside of normative bounds, is an offensive, punishable transgression. When Ruby and Sapphire unintentionally fuse for the first time, an angry crowd of gems surround them, shouting that their actions are “disgusting” and “unheard of” (“The Answer”). Blue Diamond, furious that Ruby would have the audacity to fuse with “a member of [her] court” orders that she be shattered, killed (“The Answer”).
In The Steven Universe Podcast, Sugar comments on the Homeworld taboo of gem fusion between different gems:

If you are a gem, you are a certain type of gem, and that gem is a certain color, it looks a certain way, it has a certain cut, that’s your name, that’s who you are. If you have five rubies and they all combine, they become one huge ruby, but they are still a ruby…When Ruby and Sapphire combine, that is new. They can change color: they are not red or blue they are purple. They have two different types of gems and now they have become a person that isn’t either of those gems…When two gems of two different colors and two different types combine, Homeworld doesn’t know what that is and they are not comfortable with that. They want to know who everyone is by looking at them…what their gem type is, what their job is. There are no gray areas like that for Homeworld. (Atwood “Homeworld Gems”).

“Jailbreak.” Steven Universe, season 1, episode 52, Nickelodeon, 12 Mar. 2015.
Fusions, then, subvert the ideologies of Homeworld by offering new ways of being that fall outside of the system.

The Off-Colors, a cadre of gems who live in Homeworld’s subaltern, are outcasts from Homeworld society because they participate in fusion. Socialized to believe that fusion between different gems is a revolting, punishable offence, the Off-Colors harbor a deep sense of shame. For example, Rhodonite, a fusion, says to Garnet, “We are completely inappropriate and so are you! We should all be ashamed” (“Your Mother and Mine”). Sugar’s concept of “off-color” gems is reminiscent of Gayle Rubin’s concept of the “hierarchical valuation of sex acts” (147). Leaning on Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Rubin seeks to undermine dominant, essentialist ideologies on “sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale, the hierarchical valuation of sex acts, the domino theory of sexual peril, and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation” and create a revised “pluralistic sexual ethics” (147-148). For Rubin, sexuality is “organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others” (180). Rubin demonstrates this construction of sexuality with the “Charmed Circle,” which contrasts “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” that is “heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla” with the sexuality of “The Outer Limits” that is “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned” and includes sex that is “homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, sadomasochist” (152). Fusions can be viewed as a model of Rubin’s “Outer Limits,” their actions relegating them to ‘off-color’ status, a classification that excises them from Homeworld’s social structure and subjects them to humiliation, punishment, and death.

While the act of fusion relegates a gem to off-color status, it also transformative, capable of altering a gem’s body, powers, and perception. For example, before Sapphire fuses with Ruby, she
assumes that her future, her self, is fixed: “She saw her whole life laid out before her, and she had already accepted all of it” (“The Answer”). It isn’t until she fuses with Ruby that the scope of her life changes to include possibilities that feel “wrong and new” (“The Answer”). At the end of the episode, Garnet asks, “Why am I so sure that I’d be this than everything I was supposed to be? And that I’d rather do this than everything I was supposed to do?” Fusion, then, is a way to step outside of the bounds inscribed by the ideologies of Homeworld.

Earth’s inscribed gender roles are challenged in a similar way. Steven not only disregards gender roles, he actively counters them in a way that is truly comfortable for him. For example, Steven, not even considering the bounds of gender, decides to sing in drag at Beach-a-Palooza, an annual music festival in Beach City (see fig. 8). The audience cheers, unfazed. It is the viewer, then, who must confront what feels ‘different’ about Steven in a dress.

Fig. 8. “It Was Always Me.” Steven performs at Beach-a-Palooza, an annual music festival in Beach City from: Sugar, Rebecca, creator. “Sadie’s Song.” Steven Universe, season 2, episode 17, Nickelodeon, 17 Sep. 2015.
In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” drag, for Butler, subverts the understanding that heterosexuality is the biological, natural, original, that homosexuality is a copy or a defect:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation…there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. In fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself…In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – and failing. (313)

Drag, as imitation, calls attention to the imitative nature of gender and sexuality, positioning heterosexuality as a copy itself, “a copy of a copy, for which there is no original” (314). This is important, for Butler, because the “parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (314). Heterosexual identities, then, merely produce the effect or illusion of being inherent, normal, natural, and compulsory.

Butler asks, “What…does it mean to pursue disruptive repetition within compulsory heterosexuality?” (318). If heterosexuality itself is repetition and imitation, then how can we identify in a way that is disruptive to heteronormativity? Butler seems to suggest that the answer lies in “sites of disruption, error, confusion, and trouble” (309-310). Butler seeks to “engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effects of drag” and “[work] sexuality against identity, even against gender” (318). Rather than identifying in a way that positions heterosexuality as origin and homosexuality as copy, Butler asks that we find power and purpose in those places where we resist categorization, those boundaries that disrupt dualism, those spaces of
confusion and trouble. In *Steven Universe*, this kind of fluidity is encouraged.

For example, in direct contrast to the rigidity of Homeworld, Earth, in *Steven Universe*, is repeatedly described as a place that allows for, even cultivates, malleability, change, and difference. For Sugar, it is ‘natural’ for humans to change: “Everything should grow and everything should change and isn’t it so great how it comes so naturally to humans…” (“Three Gems and a Baby”). Humans, *Steven Universe* emphasizes, literally ‘grow’: “When a gem is made it is for a reason. They burst out of the ground already knowing what they are supposed to be and that is what they are, forever. But, you, you’re supposed to change. You’re never the same, even moment to moment. You’re allowed and expected to invent who you are. What an incredible power: the ability to grow up” (“Greg the Babysitter”). For Sugar, humans possess an uncanny, inherent ability to adapt and transform, but such malleability is often hampered by restrictive, constructed ideologies and systems: “People grow whether they want to or not, but growing up is something you’ve got to decide to do” (“Greg the Babysitter”). In this regard, *Steven Universe* calls for “life that exists for itself,” a way of being that is unbound by convention (“Your Mother and Mine”).

*Steven Universe* explicitly disrupts the heteronormative concept of a traditional, nuclear family, calling for a reimagining of the bounds of family. In the episode “Fusion Cuisine” (2014), Steven’s nontraditional family structure is brought to the foreground when Connie’s parents ask to meet Steven’s family for dinner. When Connie calls Steven to tell him, it is revealed that she lied to her parents about the Crystal Gems:

“[My parents] say they will not let me see you again until they meet both of your parents in person…They want both of our families to go out together for dinner…you can’t bring everybody…because I told my parents you have a nuclear family…my parents think you live with your mother and father” (“Fusion Cuisine”).
Invested in seeing his best friend, Steven works with the gems to see which of them might best fit the role of a traditional mother figure: “Which of you would make the best and most nuclear mom?” (“Fusion Cuisine”). However, none of the gems fit the role: Garnet is too quiet, Amethyst too ‘gross,’ and Pearl refuses to eat human food. Ultimately, in order to bring his entire family to dinner, Steven convinces the gems to fuse with each other—“it will be like I’m actually bringing my whole family!”—forming the towering Alexandrite, “a six-armed giant woman” (“Fusion Cuisine).

At dinner, the juxtaposition of Connie’s nuclear family with Alexandrite and Greg—who donned a green sweater for the occasion—implicitly positions Steven’s family as nonnormative (see fig. 9). Despite their attempt to replicate the heteronormative nuclear family, Alexandrite literally disrupts the traditional family table with her hulking form and unfamiliarity with human table manners. Alexandrite, quite literally, does not fit. Connie asks, “What is this thing that you brought to dinner?” (“Fusion Cuisine”). Ultimately, the gems forcibly unfuse, arguing internally over whether or not to eat a plate of shrimp, Connie’s parents gasping in surprise.
“Fusion Cuisine,” however, ultimately ends with an affirmation of nonnormative families. When Steven and Connie, frustrated by the events at dinner, attempt to run away on a passing bus, both families scold the two for their actions. Steven, grounded and banned from watching television for one thousand years, exclaims, “how can you do this to me!” and Greg, his hands on his shoulders, says, “because we love you, Steven” (Fusion Cuisine”). Connie’s parents compliment Greg and the Crystal Gems on their grounding skills—“That was a masterful use of the ‘because we love you’ shutdown”—and affirm their legitimacy as a family structure: “I did not know what to make of the two of—excuse me—four of you, but I see that you are responsible parents…caregivers, guardians” (Fusion Cuisine”).

In fact, in Steven Universe, families based on bonds of affinity are as strong, if not stronger, than those of blood. In “Gem Harvest” (2016), Steven meets his blood uncle, Andy DeMayo, when Andy flies his airplane to visit the family barn. Uncle Andy, surprised to learn that he has a nephew, is enraged when he learns that Greg has permitted “alien refugees” to live in the family barn: “They’re illegal aliens? You couldn’t even marry an American? You turned your back on your family just so you could get in with a bunch of weirdo hippy martian immigrants…get the heck off my planet, out of my country, and out of my barn!” (“Gem Harvest”).

For Andy, the barn represents “years and years of family tradition”; he has memories of the family gathering there once a year to “catch up, eat a big meal, have a good time” (“Gem Harvest”). Steven, attempting to dispel conflict and get to know his uncle, suggests that they all “make a big traditional family meal and eat it together. You’ll have a good time, and then you’ll
have to admit [the gems] are family” (“Gem Harvest”).

In contrast to the family table of “Fusion Cuisine,” the family dinner in “Gem Harvest” “throws all tradition out the window” (“Gem Harvest”). The dinner is prepared with an oven fashioned from an old airplane engine that Andy deems “an abomination…they butchered my parent’s plane and made…whatever this thing is,” and Steven uses his gem shield to harvest vegetables for the meal (“Gem Harvest”). In an effort to appeal to Andy, the gems purchase a 3-tiered traditional wedding cake for dessert, complete with fifteen bride and groom figurines. Pearl, showing off the cake, says, “So, Andy, we heard you like marriage, so we thought, why don’t we all marry each other?” (“Gem Harvest”). The gem’s misconception of the human, heteronormative construct of marriage disrupts its position as natural and essential, allowing viewers to see it for what it is: just another human custom, tradition.

Seated around the family table, Steven, Greg, and the gems laugh at shared past experiences. They have an easy comfort with each other, without tension or judgement. Andy, in contrast, looks down at the lone groom figurine on his cake slice, set apart from the others. Despite his blood relation to Steven and Greg, he is not connected; he does not belong. In fact, with Andy’s character, “Gem Harvest” seems to illustrate the inherent limitations of the traditional family model: “I’m the only one who didn’t [leave!]. It was your goofball father who was the first one to high-tail it out of here…I was the only one who tried to keep everything how it used to be. I knew what it meant to really be a family. And look what that got me: nothing!” Andy’s reliance on tradition, on a family system that is closed and unchanging, ultimately leaves him isolated. Andy’s rigid concept of what it means “to really be a family” is set in direct opposition to Steven’s idea of family as varied and in flux. At the beginning of “Gem Harvest,” for example, Steven accepts a sentient, barking pumpkin as a family member without hesitation, saying “it’s nice to have a new addition to the family!” “Gem Harvest,” then, complicates the fixed conception of family as
biology. Instead, it offers a revised familial model: that of affinity and shared experience. The answer to Andy’s isolation, then, is a blurring of the bounds of family and a commitment to change, growth, and acceptance.

The experimental, personal, and subversive approach to *Steven Universe* is utterly unmatched in children’s animation. Before beginning her work in children’s animation, Sugar was an independent cartoonist, creating comics and animation shorts that were not geared toward a younger audience. For Sugar, comics and animation are mediums of personal expression, of perspective:

> When people talk about perspective, especially in drawing, it’s always very dry, it’s always very mathematical…But it’s really not about that. When you’re giving your perspective to someone through drawing, you’re placing yourself into the scene. You’re saying this is where I stand, literally, next to these characters. The way you draw the background, the size of the characters in relation to you, you are planting yourself next to and in the scene that you’re creating, and you’re sharing that with the people who are looking at it, you’re sharing your perspective with them. (“Writing with Rebecca”)

In her unfinished comic “Margo in Bed,” Sugar describes the main character, Margo, as a “self-insert character”: “[Margo in Bed] was about obsession—stomach-turning embarrassment…A total loss of control…feeling powerless. I was working through something. I was trying to strangle every drawing into submission. I didn’t care if it made sense to anyone” (“Frontier: Rebecca Sugar”). In “Margo in Bed,” Sugar’s emotions are present in her line work; fear and obsession and shame seep from every pencil stroke. Sugar’s scribbling, disordered form—with panels seeming to

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7 Sugar started her career in animation in 2011, working as a storyboard revisionist for *Adventure Time*. 

overlap with little delineation and Margo’s hair and flowing dress rolling away from her in lines that intrude and blend with the background—instill a chaos, a sense of urgency and confinement (see fig. 10). Sugar’s expressive illustration in “Margo in Bed” demonstrates a clear inheritance of subject and form from comics artists in the underground comix movement. “Margo in Bed” is, in a very real sense, a confessional, surging with emotion and constructed in a way that both resists and toys with the forms and limits of mainstream comics.

Fig. 10. “A Self-Insert Character.” A page from Sugar’s unfinished comic, “Margo in Bed” from: Sugar, Rebecca. “Frontier: Rebecca Sugar.” Frontier, no. 14, Youth in Decline, 2016.
Steven Universe holds a similar approach, the setting and many of the characters based on Sugar’s personal experiences. Sugar frequently refers to the show as a “massive pastiche” of the memories, interests, and mannerisms of the Steven Universe crew: “One of my early goals was that I wanted everyone’s personal experiences to have a home in this show. A lot of us are writing from a personal place we haven’t seen on television that we would love to see—we are all still just making the show that we want to watch, and that’s the most important thing. To tell the truth” (McDonnell 221). Sugar credits her autobiographical approach to Steven Universe to her work on “Margo in Bed”:

I brought back Margo as a character…I was unpacking all these feelings about a relationship I’d left. It became my favorite way to do a project, just dive into it knowing there’s something there you’ve got to figure out, like jumping into a pool with your eyes open—it might hurt a little, but you’ve got to see everything, and then you’ve got to swim. There’s no way I’d write the way I write if I hadn’t dug into projects…in this way. I think Steven Universe is, in a lot of ways, me unpacking. (McDonnell 15)

While the personal, confessional approach to Steven Universe is rooted in Sugar’s work on “Margo in Bed,” the show’s humorous, imaginative subversion is more reminiscent of her published science fiction comic, Pug Davis (2010). Following the escapades of Pug Davis—a janitor from Earth who was gravely injured in a science lab and reassembled with the hybrid body of man, pug, and machine—and The Blouse, his trusted sidekick, Pug Davis explores similar issues of queerness, monstrosity, and colonization.

Like Steven Universe, Pug Davis plays with the construction of gender through the fantasy. In an effort to lure Pug Davis from a bar to murder him, an aggrieved non-humanoid alien

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shapeshifts into the figure of an idealized, almost Betty-Boop-like woman, Sugar juxtaposing the fluidity of the alien form with a woman’s curved legs and lace garter (see fig. 11). The alien’s chosen form is the result of considerable “research,” and the alien assumes that if Pug Davis “likes Earth so much…he must like earth women.” When Pug Davis, more interested in his drink, ignores the alien’s advances, it moves on to attempt to woo his known sidekick, The Blouse. Blouse, however, is more interested in the alien’s choice of dress and shoes than its sexual advances. Eyes wide, the alien pauses with its finger up to its mouth and thinks, “Ohhhh…I read about this” and exits the bar, only to return in the next panel as a muscular, well-groomed man in a white tank and skinny jeans.

Fig. 11. “He Must Like Earth Women.” An alien shapeshifts to resemble an earth woman from:

In just a few panels, Sugar denaturalizes (human) gender, illustrating the literal edifice of an Earth woman that is based on research into Earth culture and history; Sugar’s alien dons and projects femininity and masculinity according to the “cultural fictions” it expects Pug and Blouse to comprehend and value (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190). Moreover, the alien’s projections of gender are based on research that is outdated—the recognizable femininity of Betty Boop a clear indicator of era—a mistake that serves to further underscore the social and historical construction of gender.

In *No Straight Lines*, Justin Hall quotes Angela Bocage, author of *Real Girl* (1990): “If gender identities, the realness of girl and boy, are plastic, they can be melted down. Re-shaped. First a re-imagining of the possibilities would be called for…Comics are well suited to these explorations…Comics can show subjective worlds very well.” Sugar brings this concept of re-imagining, so present in independent comics, to children’s animation, infusing creativity with a radical positivity that promotes [re]development. For Sugar, “When you have a message of love and tolerance, it’s very hard for someone to say no, because it’s love and tolerance. Where I’ve stood throughout, when it comes to what I want to say and standing my ground, is that it will always be better to send this message of love and tolerance. It will always make sense” (McDonnell 224). It is in this restorative, positive approach to counter-hegemonic teaching that *Steven Universe* is able to encourage and affect growth toward a “progressive ethical orientation to the world” (Fawaz 29).

CONCLUSION

In the episode “Hole in the Sky” (2017) of Netflix’s *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016-) a group of rebel defenders, the paladins of Voltron, detect a distress signal that leads them to a ship
that is stuck in what appears to be a black hole but is actually a portal to an alternate universe. Pidge, a young scientist and one of the five paladins, tellingly says: “the Euclidean space around the ship is obviously some kind of anomaly, but the energy source doesn’t originate from anything that resonates with my understanding of how reality works” (“Hole in the Sky”). Once through the portal, the paladins are confronted with a literal “alternate reality” where the war with the Galran Empire, the malevolent, imperialistic force that the paladins of Voltron have been fighting in their own reality, has ended. The Alteans, the driving force in the rebellion against the Galra in Voltron’s reality, have come into power, instilling “peace and stability” across the universe” (“Hole in the Sky”). However, though the Altean empire is described as a “peace movement,” sparing warring races from a “barbaric, futile existence,” the Altean’s bring “peace and order” through a technological advancement, the hoktril, that “saps the fighting force from [their] enemies, their will” (“Hole in the Sky”). The paladins, viewing these “non-cogs” as slave labor, take issue with this approach. The Altean commander defends the actions of the Altean empire: “Thanks to us, no innocent will lose its life to the free will of an evil being” (“Hole in the Sky”).

Ultimately, “Hole in the Sky” complicates such designations of good and evil. Confronted with this “peace at the sake of freedom,” the paladins of Voltron question this good/evil binary: “It wasn’t that long ago that we thought all Galra were bad. Maybe things aren’t as black and white as [they are] making them out to be” (“Hole in the Sky”). Indeed, though “the preservation of life is Altea’s highest priority,” the actions of the Alteans in the alternate universe are not depicted as not wholly different from that of the Galrans; though they utilize different methods, both empires are colonizing and enslaving other races.

Flipping the antagonists in such a way forces viewers to grapple with an Altea that cannot be viewed as wholly good; just as not all Galra are evil, Alteans are not categorically pure. Alteans, like Galrans and humans, are susceptible to ‘evil,’ to fascism and dictatorship. Instead of placing
the root of ‘evil’ in entire races or groups of people, “Hole in the Sky” seems to suggest that there is something inherently wrong with empires, with (human) constructions of governance and organized systems of power. Significantly, it is through the creation and juxtaposition of an alternate world, a reality that does not fit easily into the viewer’s “understanding of how reality works,” that Voltron is able disrupt such binaries and hold our systems and ideologies up for review (“Hole in the Sky”).

In “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness” (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa argues that “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness” (102). Anzaldúa’s search for a new mythos is a calling for a new ontology, “a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (103). Here, Anzaldúa is urging readers to engage in an imaginative, counter-hegemonic world building that dismantles dualistic ideologies and fosters empathy, connection, and healing. Significantly, Anzaldúa calls for this “change in the way we perceive reality” to be relayed through “a new value system with images and symbols” (102-103).

For the sharing of this new system, I have proposed the hybrid, fantastical, and positive form of the children’s cartoon.

There is a dire need, right now, for messaging that is positive, accessible, and counter-hegemonic, that resists the constructed binarisms of us/them, good/evil, human/monster, that examines and criticizes systems and ideologies rather than individuals, groups, or nations.⁹ There is a need for teaching that is counter-hegemonic in a positive, accessible way, a teaching that

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⁹ For example, in a televised address, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, spoke of Syrian leader Bashar Assad: “These are not the crimes of a man…they are the crimes of a monster.” See: Cooper, Anderson. CNN, 14 Apr. 2018: https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/04/14/trump-crimes-monsters-us-syria-airstrike-sot.cnn
uncovers the limitations and constructions of ideology and worldview without isolation or ridicule or judgement. Put simply, there is a need for an access to and engagement of those who are most different from ourselves; we need to bridge the gap. For this objective, we should be looking at the imaginative, positive, restorative, and subversive messaging of children’s cartoons. The cartoons I have covered in this paper are just a sampling. Cartoons like Netflix’s *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, Disney’s *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016) and *Doc McStuffins* (2012 - ), Cartoon Network’s *OK K.O.!* (2016 - ), Black Mask Studios’ *Quantum Teens are Go!* (2017 - ) series, and Nickelodeon’s *The Loud House* (2016 - ) all warrant a closer look.

There is a moment in *The Last Unicorn* when the unicorn leaves the bounds of her forest and encounters a man who mistakes her for a white mare. Initially offended, she soon remembers that men cannot see unicorns as they are: “I had forgotten that men cannot see unicorns. If men no longer know what they are looking at, there may well be other unicorns in the world.” As a child, I wanted to see this truth. I tried desperately to look at the world with new eyes, to see past whatever human fault was blinding me from seeing what was real, from seeing the unicorns and harpies and magic of the world. Cartoons have always held this power. I think it is time we begin harnessing it.
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