INFINITE POSSIBLE FUTURES: HOW TO FAIL AT QUEER ANIMATION

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Film and Media Studies

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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May/2021

STEVEN: *clears his throat* Dearly beloved Gems, humans, lions big and small, living gourds...Onion. We are gathered here today to celebrate Ruby and Sapphire, two of my favorite people, who combine into one of my other favorite people. You all probably know her as Garnet. She's their love, given form. Now it's your turn to talk about that.
RUBY: I know this is all kind of silly, I mean, we've been together for 5,750 years.
SAPPHIRE: And 8 months.
RUBY: I used to feel like I wasn't much good, just one of me on my own. But when we're together, it feels like it's okay to just be me. So I wanna be me, with you, an-and, not even the Diamonds will come between us. And if they try, we'll beat em up!
SAPPHIRE: Ruby, my future used to look like one single, obvious stream, unbending 'til the end of time. In an instant, you pulled me from that destiny, and opened my eye to an explosion of infinite possible futures, streaking across space and time, altered and obliterated by the smallest force of will. What I mean is, you changed my life. And then, I changed your life. And now, we changed our lives.
STEVEN: Ruby, do you take this Gem to have and to hold, on this and every other planet in the universe!?
RUBY: I DO!!
STEVEN: And Sapphire, do you-
SAPPHIRE: Yes.
STEVEN: *whispering* You didn't let me finish.
SAPPHIRE: I'm just very excited.
STEVEN:Then by the power vested in me by the state of Delmarva, I now pronounce you... Garnet!
(Ruby and Sapphire kiss and hug each other. Ruby carries Sapphire up and begins twirling her around, as the couple fuses back into Garnet. The crowd cheers as a pair of red and blue flowers wash up ashore on the beach.)

This particular scene shattered the medium in a way that gave space for the large uptick in queer characters seen onscreen in children's animated television made in the United States. Here is the first wedding between two femme nonbinary lesbians on a children's TV show of any form, it was rare enough to find in adult television and cinema and here it is in a sci-fi space opera series designed to be suitable for ten year olds and older. I know there is much criticism in feminist theory of the fight for the legalization for gay marriage and I agree with all of it. I don't disagree with Mari Ruti she says, "the supporters of gay marriage want equal rights within the system whereas queer critics of gay marriage

see marriage as the rotten foundation of a thoroughly rotten system" because yes she is correct, and here echoes much of Sarah Ahmed's argument's, marriage is fundamentally a Western, capitalist ideal, it undoes much of the revolutionary foundations that make up what it means to be queer (Ruti, 15-16) . What I see in Ruby and Sapphire's wedding is an insistence to be together on their own terms, they are creating what Ahmed coins as, their own "happiness script." Their wedding steps outside the traditional in the sense that these two people are not undergoing the act of getting married for the sake of just adhering to monogamy. Their whole action of being together has always been seen as an act of rebellion in their Gem society, fusion between different Gems is wrong and taboo, viewers view the fusion of Garnet as a metaphor for transness or a lesbian couple. Thus their wedding is an ultimate revolutionary action against their oppressors saying their love is now bound forever by a simple promise they have made to one another by something they have decided to do through the form of marriage. Their own ultimate happiness script came in the form of both rebellion but also simply they chose each other and they just wanted to be together and weddings can be a lovely way of displaying that.

Introduction

In this essay I will be discussing the values, and subsequently the holes made by, queer representation in animated children's television made in the US for eight to sixteen year olds as their target audiences. As Jack Halberstam writes in his text *The Queer Art of Failure*, "Very few mainstream films made for adults and consumed by large audiences have the audacity and the nerve anymore to tread on the dangerous territory of revolutionary

activity; in the contemporary climate of crude literalism even social satire seems risky… I would be bold enough to argue that it is only in the realm of animation that we actually find the alternative hiding" (Halberstam, 23). As a young scholar with much still to read and learn, I claim no expertise of queer theory, but I will be arguing programs that have been considered groundbreaking such as, *Adventure Time, Steven Universe, She Ra and the Princesses of Power,* and *Craig of the Creek*, have made great strides in creating positive, safe queer universes seemingly free of homophobia, and presenting new realities with an abundance of inherently queer relationships of all forms.

These shows have given young audiences exposure to what portions of the LGBTQIA+ community and certain experiences are like in a way that has rarely been seen in most homes, schools, and past TV and film for both children *and* adults. I'm positioning this argument from an optimistic, positive outlook on what this representation means for children. I believe that these programs through their displays of community and found family (very queer concepts, especially when looking back at the LGBTQIA+ community as early as the 1860s in the Harlem Drag Balls), and the value of play, creativity, and failure that is already integral to childhood (but is vigorously taught out of American youth out of a very heteronormative fear of those things because of the queerness in their nature) contain an immense power to educate children in not just what it is to be queer, but empathy, freedom, and yes, even anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist ways of forming relationships.

I will be supporting this argument with select works from Jack Halberstam, bell hooks, Sarah Ahmed, and Mari Ruti. Halberstam's methodology encourages us to explore the power of failure and low-theory, which is how I will be writing my paper. Halberstam

defines 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 that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (Halberstam, 16). Thus in my paper I will also be arguing from the position of low theory using a variety of what may be considered "untraditional" texts and sources, with the goal of accessibility. I also embrace this position of low theory as someone who has still yet to study many of the works that are considered part of the *high* in high theory. I hope to engage with hooks' work to bounce off her brilliant exploration of pedagogy and its need to be exciting, sacred, and *fun*. hooks' text *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* explores the practice of education and how she came to realize how the white America the classroom was not a place for actual learning, engagement, and development, but rather repetitive expectations and domination and how she aims to change that mindset in pedagogy. I believe hooks' ideas on pedagogy can be easily translated to educational measures seen in children's animated television. As for the works of Ahmed and Ruti: their respective projects ground my own as it concerns happiness with feminist reminders that happiness scripts tend to come from Western oppressive spaces, and how I believe these animated shows are attempting, at the very least, to create brand new happiness scripts for a young generation to aspire to, something beyond Ahmed's "happy housewife." I also acknowledge that much of what I will write about is very fresh; it is new discourse and dialogue forming and reshaping constantly as more and more shows are being made this very second. Thus, from time to time I may reference voices from the industry of animation and fans alike who are also engaging critically with this work, but just

more fleetingly, as in, online through social media. I believe deeply in the effects storytelling can have on young children, how it can transform their understanding of the world around them and the people within it. This does come from my own experiences with film and TV as a child as well and how they shaped me.

Representation: Coded v. Explicit

I'd like to begin with *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) created by Pendleton Ward, a show that does not typically acknowledged as groundbreakingly queer (I would argue *The Legend of Korra* also attempted that in 2012). What *Adventure Time* did was be one of the few shows in animated children's television that had serialized storytelling with complicated, overarching plots. Arguably, It also began as aggressively heteronormative as any other children's program, that is, if it wasn't for the character of Marcaline the Vampire Queen, who was given much creative freedom to Rebecca Sugar. "They gave me a lot of creative control over Marceline and then people immediately recognized her bisexuality" Sugar shared this at a panel titled "The Making of LGBTQ+ Children's Media" (2020, Children's Media Association), and it speaks to something about clear, explicit representation and queer coding.

Taking it back a few steps, thinking of what is "explicit" representation, I often think of this, "It's bewildering to me seeing geeks demand more queer representation but revolt in horror against sexuality in media. They want queerness as a cultural performance, not as lived experience; bisexuality as purple lighting & sitting funny, not as love or desire" (@benedict_rs). Often times what is considered queer representation comes down to, what

trans showrunner Shadi Petosky said so well, "So often we're thinking about 'the kiss'" or a hand hold, or passing mention that a certain character has a boyfriend, does that qualify enough as "representation?" The tweet raises an important issue: representation is more than just attaching labels and identities to characters in media, it's giving them these characteristics and then making them fully developed people, having them be integral to the story that is being told, and for the sake of the argument of this paper, for their relationships with the people around them to feel real, whole, and complex.

As for queer coding, let's return to Sugar and Marceline, for the eight years of *Adventure Time*'s run on Cartoon Network she was considered a queer coded character due to many audience members awareness of Sugar's own bisexuality. Others who may not have been aware believed her to be due to behaviors she exhibited in the show, which is what one would describe to be as queer coding. For example, in the episode *What Was Missing* (Season 3, Episode 10), Marceline sings one of her most famous songs "I'm Just Your Problem" to Princess Bubblegum. When Bubblegum responds saying she doesn't enjoy the beginning of the song, Marceline bursts out, "Oh, you don't like that? Or do you just not like me?" She thereby her resentment and sadness with Bubblegum, revealing some sort of rift in their "friendship." I put friendship in quotes because the song does not feel like it is discussing a friendship but something much more intimate, "I'm sorry that I exist, I forget what landed me on your blacklist/ But I shouldn't have to be the one that makes up with you/ So... why do I want to?/Why do I want to..." To add even more queerness to this episode, the whole context of it is Marceline, Bubblegum, and the main characters Finn and Jake are all chasing after stolen items of great emotional importance to them. The item that

was stolen from Bubblegum was a black t-shirt that Marceline is surprised to see and even says that Bubblegum never wore. Bubblegum responds by blushing and says, "I wear it all the time... as pajamas." After this episode aired much controversy erupted around these two characters. When a recap video posted on YouTube series--made by Frederator Studios, produced by Dan Rickmers, called *Mathematical!* --questioned the possibility of the two of them getting together, Rickmers was fired and the YouTube series ended. From then on the relationship between Marceline and Bubblegum remained in the air, a dream of fans, something clearly queer, but perhaps just to be doomed as queer coded or queer bait.

Then came *Steven Universe* in 2013, two years after *What Was Missing* aired, Cartoon Network gave Sugar their own show, and things got much more gay. Now *Steven Universe* has a special place in the queer canon: it was one of the first programs on television that placed LGBTQIA+ characters at the forefront. It was a truly explicit representation that in many ways opened the gateway for the upswing in explicit queer representation seen in television and even film today. It wasn't just the fact that *Steven Universe* had a lesbian wedding with an on screen kiss that made it explicitly queer; it had a variety of different forms of LGBTQIA+ characters and relationships on screen and a part of the greater story early on--from the non-binary character Stevonnie to the love Pearl had for Rose--there was much that the *Steven Universe* crew fought to be had on the show from its early days in season one (2013-2015). *Steven Universe* can be felt like a parallel to some of what it's like to be queer in the real world. There is something there about the Diamonds being an allegory for Western fascists as they went around space colonizing planets, extracting all its resources until the planet and all its native species died, because

that is very much what they did. They also are similar to fascist dictators in the way they control the Gems under their domain, all Gems serve specific purposes, Rubies are bodyguards, Pearls are servants, Lapis' terraform, and so forth. They are expected to look and behave exactly the way they were designed to, when Gems do not come out properly (i.e. Amethyst, the Off-Colors, Garnet) they are punished brutally, is this starting to sound familiar? Much of *Steven Universe* is about presenting the queer experience in the context of an epic space battle and on a smaller scale Steven's journey of self-discovery. This may be partially why it became such a well-known portion of what exists of the queer canon.

Failure

What I would like to dig into more now are Halberstam's ideas of queer failure, because *Steven* embodies that failure and he understands how "…to fail, and to fail spectacularly" (Halberstam, 5). In his book Halberstam believes failure to be an inherently queer experience, and an *even more* fulfilling process than success, "The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love for art, and for being" (Halberstam, 88). From what I can tell, much of what comes with queerness presumes revolutionary, radical, to break down old societies (Western/Heteronormative) and systems (Capitalist/White Supremacy). That's what makes failure so naturally queer because they often immediately deny those expected norms. Let's look more closely at *Steven Universe*, the eponymous character is the heart and glue of the show. The first season he is a twelve year old boy being raised by his three space alien moms and single dad. His upbringing is already

considered a failure by this world's standards. *Steven Universe* as a show exists, in what Halberstam mentioned in passing, but I'd like to borrow more officially, a "queer universe" (Halberstam, 37). A queer universe is one where notions of homophobia do not exist, gender is fluid, and conceptions of family are varied and accepted; there is a general sense of acceptance and queer vibes all around. I will say that the ideal queer universe contains no racism or abelism, but in the case of *Steven* and *She Ra* that is not the case. That being *Steven* has been criticized for anti-Black stereotypes placed on the racially coded Gems such as Garnet, Bismuth, and Sugilite. *She-Ra* has also been criticized for its treatment of the character Entrapta who was confirmed by showrunner Stevenson as being written as autistic and then being very poorly treated by other characters in the show, going as far as being kept on a leash.

Now, "how does the whimsical nature of the animated world allow for the smuggling of radical narratives into otherwise cliched interactions about friendship, loyalty, and family values?" (Halberstam, 43). That's one of the questions I strive to answer; let's look closely at one of the arcs later in the show of *Steven Universe* called "Diamond Days." In this arc, not only does it look into friendship, loyalty, and family values, but what those mean in a context of failure and how all those supposed "cliched interactions" are actually at their core in the show very queer. "Diamond Days" contains only five episodes and comes directly after Ruby and Sapphire's wedding "Reunited" in Season 5 (Episode 23). It follows Steven and his journey to space and his family's home planet (aptly named) Homeworld. Much like the emotional state of his Gem family Homeworld is a broken planet, barely being held together. Here Steven comes to confront the most powerful of the Gems after finally

reconciling with Blue and Yellow Diamond (who are essentially his aunts). Steven is hoping to convince White Diamond to heal the corrupted (i.e. sick, disabled) Gems that she, Blue, and Yellow had harmed in an attempt to end Steven's mother and their sister, Pink Diamond's, attempt at protecting Earth from their colonial attempt of taking over Earth. When Steven arrives on Homeworld though, White refuses to speak to Steven or acknowledge he is even himself, only addressing him as his mother, Pink.

This series of episodes takes a deep dive into what a toxic family looks like, exploring the history of Pink and her sisters, what led her to leave her sisters, fake her death, and then essentially die in childbirth in order for Steven to exist. In this arc Steven is not just fighting to save Earth and corrupted Gems he is fighting to "fix a struggling family" as he sings in a song titled "Familiar." One of the things I find most remarkable about *Steven Universe* is not just its queerness (although, of course, this means much to me) but also its dedication to growth and change. At the start of the show Steven is very young, he is full of infectious laughter, gets overly excited for things like a cheeseburger backpack, is the embodiment of childish joy and innocence; Steven radiates an undeniable sense of happiness. Ahmed writes, "Statements on the conditionality of happiness — how one person's happiness is made conditional upon another's —ensure that happiness is directive: happiness becomes what is given by being given as a shared orientation toward what is good" (Ahmed, 56). That is to say, happiness often becomes reliant on others, and as Steven matures he becomes a victim of this as well. Ahmed also writes of the "happy housewife" and how, as she gains knowledge of other options available to her, this growing awareness leads directly to her becoming unhappy--as they say "ignorance is bliss." This is what happens to Steven in many

ways as he becomes more aware of what it means to be a Crystal Gem, the trauma that his three mothers/caregivers (Amethyst, Garnet, and Pearl) carry with themselves and with his mother the more difficult it is for him to be the loveable, easy going, cheerful Steven that exists for the earlier half of the show.

Thus, much of Steven's growth leading up to "Diamond Days'' is spent on healing relationships, and relationships in *Steven Universe* are so foundational there is a whole device dedicated to it: fusion. In the show fusion is when two or more Gems combine to form one new Gem (Flourite is a Gem fusion of six different Gems, the most known of on the show, a nod to polyamorous relationships). Sugar has described fusion as the physical and visual representation of relationships in *Steven Universe*, from romantic to siblings to friendships, and so on. There is a whole main character dedicated to the importance of fusion: Garnet. Garnet has been seen as the embodiment of a romantic queer relationship, trans identity, and Blackness (albeit with flaws in its execution). For Steven, he witnessed the struggles of Garnet's relationship with herself and with Pearl (and to an extent Amethyst as well), both a romantic one and a familial one.

We can explore both of these in episodes "Cry for Help" and "Keystone Motel" from Season 3 (Episodes 11 and 12). In "Cry for Help" Pearl and Garnet fuse several times to become Sardonyx and destroy a communication tower believed to be made by an enemy Gem from Homeworld. Garnet refuses to fuse with Amethyst claiming together they are too reckless, so she fuses with Pearl because together they will be more careful. From there Pearl betrays Garnet's trust and repairs the communication tower in order to force Garnet to fuse with her. When Garney discovers what happens she becomes enraged. Amethyst

and Pearl claim that "fusing with you is like our one chance to feel… stronger!" Which leads to the next episode, "Keystone Motel", where Garnet unfuses into Ruby and Sapphire because they cannot agree on forgiving Pearl. It isn't until the end of the episode when Steven is so overwhelmed by the discomfort of seeing the two of them fight and he feels to blame for their argument that they apologize and fuse to become Garnet once more.

Now, I've condensed these episodes quite a bit (and on their own they are only ten minutes each as is), but this presentation may beg the question: what is particularly queer about what happened here, doesn't that all just sound like regular conflict between people? For me what makes these instances different is their build-up and resolution. The build-up is a particularly important place for me because it involves hooks' belief that education is a practice of freedom, in this case allowing the viewer to decide for themselves what is the right or wrong thing, "the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination" (hooks, 4).

Often children's television and entertainment is viewed as a medium for education; it's seen as a place to educate young people about basic arithmetic, like *Sesame Street*, or basic right and wrong, like *The Berenstain Bears* (though it's fair to say Sesame Street strives to do both). But in shows like *The Berenstain Bears* or *The Fairly OddParents* the main characters will be doing a "Wrong/Bad Thing" for about ninety percent of the episode and it isn't until the very end of the episode when all gets resolved the character is like "Oh yes that was bad, I'm sorry won't do that again." That's a very short sighted way to engage in education; it offers little attempt at complexity and in my opinion feels like it offers very little respect to children's intelligence.

The child—who we might recall is considered by John Locke as a blank slate—is the site of potential. What happens to the child will shape what the child can become; the child's presumed emptiness becomes an imperative to shape its becoming. Education becomes about directing such potentiality; about steering the child in the right direction. Or to use a metaphor from horticulture, education is about cultivation, whereby, through tending the soil, you encourage the plants to grow in some ways rather than others. To educate is to orient, which is why education plays a central role in debates about happiness (Ahmed, 54).

Essentially I'm critiquing repetition in these shows, a repetition of format, where the beats of the episode are the same, there is little room for change or growth in the characters in the grand scheme of things. It feels like a false sense of victory. Repetition feels good for more pre-school level programs (2-5 years old) that are teaching numbers, letters, colors, basic language, that's efficient and helpful. But when the goal is to teach children more complex and meaningful lessons--say about lying, consent, responsibility-- that format feels lacking and lazy. Returning to my example, the build-up to these episodes and the interactions of these characters are meant to be educational moments about maintaining a healthy relationship with your romantic partner and having healthy boundaries with your family. I would argue these concepts have arisen more from anything then from radical queer and feminist spaces. In the aggressively heteronormative United States, open communication within relationships whether they be with your partners or

with your parents has often become something of a taboo experience. As writer and LGBTQIA+ activist Alexander Leon wrote,

> Queer people don't grow up as ourselves, we grow up playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimise humiliation & prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us & which parts we've created to protect us. It's massive and existential and difficult. But I'm convinced that being confronted with the need for profound self-discovery so explicitly (and often early in life!) is a gift in disguise. We come out the other end wiser & truer to ourselves. Some cis/het people never get there. (@alexand_erleon)

What I understand this to mean is this: queer people spend so much time pretending, attempting to fit into the hegemony of society, to appear as a winner and to avoid being treated as a loser, so to speak. This involves a lot of silencing, internalizing, and when the moment comes of release to be fully, authentically oneself, that can extend into how one handles their relationships--at least, in an ideal world. I think that's the goal for most people. I don't want to idolize the queer person either as clean, perfect, or honest beings either; the whole point of this paper is that we are messy people of failure. What I mean to say:our messiness can sometimes push us to wanting more honest, open connections with the people in our lives.

The argument between Ruby and Sapphire is about fusion, to quote Ruby, "It's **FUSION**, Sapphire! What's more personal to us than **FUSION**?!?!" nothing in *Steven Universe's* queer universe (wink, wink) is more important than relationships, and the same

can be said about the queer space of our reality. I also mentioned the resolution of this example being a queer one, here I return to Halberstam and failure. Halberstam argues that "The beauty of these films is they don't fear failure, they do not favor success, and they picture children not as pre-adults figuring the future but as anarchic beings who partake in strage and inconsistent temporal logics" (Halberstam, 120). This is particularly true of *Steven Universe* in some ways especially in the earlier portion of the show when Steven is younger and he has very little fear of failure, even a great resiliency to it, and it is once he ages and does fear failure does his grasp of his understanding of himself and his closest relationships become fuzzy. This becomes quite explicit in the epilogue of the show *Steven Universe Future*, but for now let's move on to another queer universe and how it seeks to educate about alternative forms of kinship, something more leaned into the found family then *Steven Universe*.

Kinship

"Why...does the nuclear family continue to dominate kinship relations when in realty people are enmeshed in multiple and complex systems of relation? [The family has been studied] as a disciplinary matrix and linked to its particular forms of social control to colonialism and globalization" (Halberstam, 72). At this point this can feel quite obvious to some, but the familial structure is hegemonic, so anything outside of that becomes incorrect and by extension a failure. In terms of what kinship should look like for children, it's been quite clear what that should look like: man plus woman, married, with children, generally, or at the very least girl wants a boyfriend if you're watching Disney Channel in the early 2000s

and 2010s. Halberstam also writes that, "children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death or failure, they are collective creatures" (Halberstam, 47). So children's understanding about relationships/kinships, including both what they are and what they might be otherwise,come from their lived experiences and what they consume in media. I believe Halberstam to be incorrect here: I actually believe children to often find themselves looking for connection, companionship, relationships, maybe not romantic at first but they do seek some form of coupling in their young lives. From my personal experience at least, my younger sister and I have a large age gap of almost ten years but she constantly seeked my presence since she could begin to crawl, so I am unsure if I can agree with Halberstam's belief that children are perfect beings who are "not coupled."

Which leads me to the concept of found and chosen family, something that is critically important for queer youth in history and in the present andomething I believe Halberstam may have been meaning to address. "A chosen family is a group of individuals who deliberately choose one another to play significant roles in each other's lives. One definition of chosen family is a group of people to whom you are emotionally close and consider 'family' even though you are not biologically or legally related" (Queer Queries). Radical queer theory at times is about avoiding structures like the traditional family, "In every society, the promise of happiness clings to particular goals—goals that are deemed necessary for the attainment of the good life—so that those who are perceived as falling short of such goals are also perceived as falling short of happiness" (Ruti, 20). Thus escaping one's biological family for a found or chosen family may seem like another attempt to fit

within the happiness scripts presented by society. I counter that with these queer chosen families most often occur for queer youth who have experienced some form of trauma and/or homelessness, and have created these families to fill in spaces beyond what the basic heteronormative undertstanding of what a family is. Often found families involve, "Sharing resources, whether that's money or time or knowledge or a computer or a bike or music or coffee or a couch to sleep on. Trusting others to say no when they need to and yes when they want to. Traveling together, sometimes in silence. Helping each other move. Mutual respect, trust, and love" (Queer Queries).

The found family trope is one that has existed in film, television, and literature for a long time I would say. I think it would even fall under queer coding considering how gay found families are in their nature. Some examples that come to mind from literature are Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and every Rick Riordan book series. From television NBC's *Superstore* and *Brooklyn 99*, *Friends,* and the best example of all FX's *Pose*. In film there is the *Star Trek* franchise, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (really look at most Marvel films), *Ice Age*, and so on and so forth. But unsurprisingly it gets explored the most in children's content, especially children's animated television.

In Noelle Stevenson's *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, a reboot of the 1980s show of the same title. It should come at no surprise that the reboot became an explicitly queer show when the original *She-Ra, He-Man,* and *Captain Planet* all had some serious queer coding themselves, but what's wonderful about this reboot is how much of every element it felt as queer. From the first episode before anything romantic happened between anyone there is an immediate understanding that this is a queer universe. This is one of the

most exciting things about these shows being animated because, "Obviously there is no guarantee that animation, stop-motion animation in particular, will produce politically progressive narratives... However, animation allows the viewer to enter other worlds and other formulations of the world" (Halberstam, 181).

She-Ra presents found/chosen families from the very first episode, "The Sword Part 1" (Season 1, Episode 1) where we meet Adora right away in the Fright Zone, an orphan raised as a soldier for the Horde army trained to destroy the Princesses of the Rebellion. Positioning her as an orphan immediately places Adora as someone who should be looking for her family, but that's never the intention; for her, the Horde is her family, the mysterious, masked woman very not evil named Shadow Weaver fills the role of her mother figure. The people Adora is raised with Catra, Lonnie, Kyle, Rogelio, are not entirely her siblings either Shadow Weaver and the nature of the Horde has made no intention of fostering any sensations of familial bonds, just manipulated Adora into making her depend on Shadow Weaver's approval, up until Adora leaves the Fright Zone finds the magical Sword that turns her into She Ra and in a very Platonian fashion never return to the Horde and join the Rebellion to stop Shadow Weaver and its leader Hordak. Adora leaves and finds new friends (or "family"), Glimmer and Bow, who have strong understandings of family and love, with whom she begins learning from scratch what that means.

Having the main character Adora learn what a family can look and feel like, given that she is essentially a blank slate of a person, is a clever tool in terms of teaching its audience what kinship can look like. What's groundbreaking about Adora's journey is how throughout the duration of the show it is clear that while she is trying to save the world, she

is learning to be a part of it. Having been so sheltered much of her life and then being just thrown into the middle of everything is entertaining, but also a great learning experience for the viewer. In Season 1, the episode "In the Shadows of Mystacor," (Episode 7) Adora travels with Glimmer and Bow to Mystacor, where Glimmer's aunt Castaspella lives and in a humorous moment Bow asks Adora, "Adora, do you know what aunt means?" and she responds, "No. I was just hoping somebody would eventually explain." In Season 2 (Episode 7), titled "Reunion," Adora meets Bow's fathers, George and Lance, what confuses her is not the concept that Bow has two fathers it is the fact Bow is lying about being a member of the Rebellion to them (this is never a subject of question, this is in fact the first explicitly gay representation in the show). Then throughout the show the core relationship and conflict between Adora and Catra often revolves around Catra's sense of feeling abandoned and betrayed that Adora had left the Horde, left her with Shadow Weaver who was throughout their childhood together continually abusive to her.

What's important to note about the connection between Adora, Catra, and Shadow Weaver is that this introduces something about why chosen families are formed: trauma, abuse, manipulation. Shadow Weaver playing an abusive maternal figure to both Adora and Catra shows two different reactions and effects of that manipulation: Adora who leaves and forms a healthy found family who supports her, and Catra who stays in that unhealthy environment chasing the praise and affection of her abusive maternal figure. Eventually it isn't Catra who leaves but Shadow Weaver who abandons her, leading Catra to an even more dark spiral of self-harm and abusive behaviors. The journey Catra takes from the beginning of the show, resenting Adora's decision to become a princess and joining the

Rebellion (one could say joining a family without her) is an angry one, fueled by repressed romantic feelings. Catra watches from afar as Adora from explores sisterhood, companionship, finds a safe place to sleep, share meals, people to trust, and discover the foundations of things they did not have growing up and Catra still did not have provided--all of this provides "teaching" example for viewers concerning the consequences of denying one's feelings, not having access to healthy support systems, and so forth.

She-Ra's finale, "Heart Part 2," rattled the world in a way that was felt almost as culturally profoundly as the moment Darth Vader said to Luke Skywalker, "No, I am your father" (or at least *I* think so). When Catra confesses, "Don't you get it? I love you. I always have" and then the two women kiss, saving Etheria, saving the galaxy, saving one another; it was more exciting, tear evoking, life-changing, than any on-screen gay wedding could ever be. Because of their kiss, their profession of love so boldly being the core of the show, the thing that saved it all it finally did something no other film or TV show had done before, it had allowed queer love to be. In Stevenson's own words, "To have a character be openly queer, it gives young queer kids hope and inspiration that maybe their lives could turn out okay, that there's a future for them as bright as anyone else's, and it helps kids who aren't queer develop empathy and understanding for people who might not be exactly like them. It's more than just normalizing, it's an attempt to create a better world" (Opie, *Digital Spy*). *She-Ra* gives a plethora of characters and alternative forms of kinship for children to look to and connect to, so that when they are exploring the world they need not fear the dynamics that are unfamiliar to them, but recognize them.

Play, Imagination, & Failure cont.

It would be remiss to near the end of this paper without discussing something inseparable to children, something I don't find myself doing often unless I am visiting my family and spending time with my younger sister: playing. What is play, according to an old article from *The Atlantic* in 1987, "Generally speaking, *play* refers to the young child's activities characterized by freedom from all but personally imposed rules (which are changed at will), by free-wheeling fantasy involvement, and by the absence of any goals outside the activity itself" (Bettelheim, 42). As outdated as this article is, Bettelheim did make some good points about how important it is to allow children to have the space to be themselves and for adults to understand that when children are playing that is a very serious space. I find it important to discuss play and children's imagination in relation to the creation of queer universes. A queer universe contains all this potential, it allows relationships of all forms to exist freely, gender expression is diverse and free to explore, there's a sense of safety in the very world building of the mise-en-scene of the content.

A show I believe that captures the essence of of a queer universe and all the elements of this paper in a more nuanced way is Cartoon Network's *Craig of the Creek* created by Matt Burnett and Ben Levin (both previously writers on *Steven Universe*, none of this queer work happens in a vaccum but more on this later). *Craig of the Creek*, focuses on the titular character, Craig, and his two best friends, J.P. and Kelsey, and their adventures in the local creek in their neighborhood where they spend their time after completing their homework and then heading home for dinner time. It's a show about community, being a kid, and *failure*. Every episode is incredibly simple, it's an adventure of being afraid about

going into the fifth grade, not wanting to get your clothes dirty, returning a book to the library, learning to play a tabletop game that's definitely not Dungeons and Dragons. What these characters are always doing, they are always in some form of play, they are in the motion of playing, and they are never ready to admit defeat either. There is something to be said in that when you are playing you can never truly fail. In the show these children are given such healthy boundaries and freedom in their play that when faced with challenges they maintain a great resiliency, "Perseverance is easily acquired around enjoyable activities such as chosen play. But if it has not become a habit through what is enjoyable, it is not likely to become one through an endeavor like schoolwork" (Bettelheim, 42). Let's take one episode from the show and break it down to show how it functions as a queer universe using play as that extra glue and how failure makes it all the more simple to facilitate healthy queer relationships central to that universe.

In Season 1, Episode 18, "Vulture's Nest" Craig, J.P., and Kelsey meets a group of four college aged students living in their neighborhood, who are in a band called Bad Moves (real life band cameo) rehearsing out of their garage. The band teaches the kids to roughly play their respective instruments and invite them to write a song to perform at their upcoming concert. At the same time the kids discover an old abandoned barn in the creek that Craig is afraid of due to a recurring nightmare he has been having about a vulture attacking him in the same space. The next day the kids return to Bad Moves and find out that they can no longer have their concert from their garage due to noise complaints and they need a new venue if they would like to perform. Craig tells them about the abandoned barn they found in the creek and the show goes on even though he is too afraid to get close to it. The night

of the concert the lead singer, David, thanks the audience for coming and invites Craig, J.P., and Kelsey to come on stage and perform. Kelsey and J.P. comfort Craig, saying that he should not feel any pressure to approach the barn and perform if he does not feel safe due to his vulture fear; they're happy to stay with him. In the end Craig faces his fear and goes on stage with his two friends and Bad Moves and sings his song.

Now there's the summary time to slow down and pick it apart. To begin with there are many moving parts to this episode that make it really powerful in subtle ways. To begin with there's a sense of mentorship between the band and the kids, that's an important step in community building and education. Anyone can be a mentor or teacher, any space can be a classroom, something I believe hooks understands well when she writes, "This demand on the students' part does not mean that they will always accept our guidance. This is one of the joys of education as the practice of freedom, for it allows students to assume responsibility for their choices" (hooks, 19). These college aged characters who were living with some twelve other people in their house may not have sought out to be mentors or teachers to Craig and his friends but when they kids approached their garage they did not talk down to them or turn them away as older characters in children's media often do, they welcomed them almost as equals. When the kids asked them questions about their living situation and about their music, they answered honestly and made them feel like they could learn their skill, a passing down of knowledge. That's something I believe to be undeniably queer an urge to care for one another and especially the youth and establish community (I also think this is something that occurs more in BIPOC queer communities then in any other). This happens often in this show, this is one example with elders down to children,

but Craig and his friends have done the same numerous times to other kids they have seen in the creek who have not felt welcome before. They probably have reciprocated that behavior because it has been something so normalized in their lives.

Another moment from this episode is Craig's fear of the abandoned barn and the attacking vulture, a child's nightmare, one that the people around him, both his close friends and the band members, never push against or question. There's a healthy boundary set around Craig and his fear to deal with it at his own pace and ask for help when needed. At the concert while Bad Moves is performing Craig feels guilty that his friends are sitting so far from the stage and can barely hear he tells them they don't need to sit with him, to go have fun and dance without him, Kelsey responds, "Hey, don't sweat it Craig, we're loyal." There is that kinship, an undeniable bond of friendship that isn't attached to expectations of anything in return. When Craig decides to face his fear it's a decision he makes on his own because he feels safe to, because of all the support systems he has beneath him, he chooses to approach the barn he fears to take a chance at happiness.

In *Craig of the Creek*, this episode no exception, every adventure is a learning experience, every adventure is them playing in the creek, playing and learning are the same to them and playing in the creek brings these kids endless amounts of happiness.

> If happiness is an affective form of orientation, then happiness is crucial to education, which can be considered an orientation device. The child—who we might recall is considered by John Locke as a blank slate—is the site of potential. What happens to the child will shape what the child can become; the child's presumed emptiness becomes an imperative to shape its

becoming. Education becomes about directing such potentiality; about
steering the child in the right direction. Or to use a metaphor from
horticulture, education is about cultivation, whereby, through tending the soil,
you encourage the plants to grow in some ways rather than others. To
educate is to orient, which is why education plays a central role in debates
about happiness (Ahmed, 54).

This is something queer universes in children's animated television does everytime: they
cultivate happiness. In *Craig of the Creek* it's highlighted through their focus on play as a
form of liberation almost in the same way Halberstam views failure, "...there is something
powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be
enough, if we practice them well" (Halberstam, 120). Through play and through failure these
communities and relationships have brought to young viewers radical new worldviews to
look up to, to poke around and consider. All this is not even highlighting how *Craig of the
Creek* has a young Black boy leading the show as well as many other Black and Brown kids
being prominent leaders and characters in the show.

Conclusions

"[I] think somewhere along the way 'representation is important' got mixed up with
'tv is important moral representation' and now ppl think every tv character has to be
someone you'd root for or see as a hero when that's just not the case. tv is just storytelling.
we should try to tell as many stories as possible and that means tv characters are allowed to
be annoying or unlikeable or wrong or imperfect...tv isn't required to be a moral reflection or

moral guide. seems a bit self-righteous to me, but i mean it can work too. ted lasso does it very well (it wants to entertain.)" (@theeashleyray)

Do visibility and representation really help or is it more harmful? In some ways with the rise of queer representation in all media being has become more of some marketing tool, less a serious engagement in questions of identity and more of a political statement, something to be weaponized. As much as there is to celebrate in the rise of queerness in children's cartoons, there is always something to criticize. Ruti criticizes Halberstam's look at queer failure, "those who have been severely marginalized are unlikely to experience their failures as anything other than failures and even more unlikely to be interested in further failure in the name of radical politics; those who have genuinely failed in relation to our society's dominant happiness scripts are unlikely to experience their failure as a sexy political stance" (Ruti, 35-36). It is hard to argue with Ruti's claim, because when you have no energy or resources or support to experience failure as anything but it's really nothing but that.

Ruti also argues, "From this point of view, the valorization of failure results in depoliticization: if failure is just as good—nay, better—than success, then there does not seem to be much point to agitating for social change of any kind" (Ruti, 37). In my interpretation of queer failure that pushes towards the sort of galactic creation of queer universes and relationships in television, I believe that it *does* push towards all sorts of social change. I think Halberstam saw failure as better than success because failure was what led to change and growth while success led to stagnancy.

Failure is in large what brought us this far. If you were to map out a timeline of shows that built off one another it would probably go: Nickelodeon's *Legend of Korra* (Korra and Asami), Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (Marceline and Bubblegum), Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe* (Ruby and Sapphire), DreamWorks' *She Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and now Disney's *Owl House* (Luz and Amity). That's perhaps is a very broad timeline to be sure but these shows definitely had a domino effect in a way and something similar in the sense that they all had prominent romantic lesbian couples become canon. What could be its own paper in and of itself is how these all are lesbian couples, which is wonderful but why no gay couples? Perhaps because a lesbian couple is more palatable to the male gaze, especially if one of the women in that couple is always a White woman. But that's a discussion for another time.

What is also important to note is that the showrunners on these shows, Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino (*Korra*), Adam Muto (*Adventure Time*), Rebecca Sugar (*Steven Universe*), Noelle Stevenson (*She Ra),* and Dana Terrace (*Owl House*) all had different power struggles behind the scenes with the studios who were producing their shows. Konietzko and DiMartino were never permitted to make any queer representation explicit on screen, Sugar is known to have gone through the most brutal experience with their crew to get much of the representation seen in *Steven Universe* on air, "I kept asking for an explanation as to why not and the only answer is bigotry... There's this idea that LGBTQ is inherently sexual and we are constantly seeing children express their genders if they're normative. And constantly having them consume hetero relationships so it was a matter of bigotry" (Sugar, The Making of LGBTQ Media, 2020). It can be said the shoulders

of Sugar and the *Steven Universe* crew opened up the gates to allow other studios and executives to be more open and permit more queer representation in children's shows, and it wouldn't be wrong. Sugar's own journey through understanding their bisexuality and transness and failure is the journey seen in the show and in many ways echos the queer art of failure (roll credits).

I do have an intention to move away from the negative connotations of the term "failure." In reality, all these shows, all this representation is for children, are designed and geared for children *for a reason:* so that these kids may find themselves earlier, so that they may be able to see themselves on screen from a young age and not have to go through unnecessary trauma and avoidable anxiety that many elders in the LGBTQIA+ community may have had to go through from not having the resources accessible to them from a young age to understand in a healthy and loving way who they were. This representation of queer universes in children's animation allows young audiences to see what it means to be queer whether they are queer or not and find safe communities and spaces to be a part of perhaps because of the shows they are watching, content can be a great unifier in all ages really. Perhaps the representation of queerness in animated children's television isn't as active a form of progress in the lives of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially for queer BIPOC, but as cliche as it sounds, queer youth are the future, and representation does matter. At the end of the day I'm guilty of feeling optimistic, hopeful. I see Luz, Kipo, Benson, Shep, Min-Gi, Lake, Garnet, Catra, Marceline, Double-Trouble, Puddle, Lance, and you know I feel joy that they exist, I feel some hope that some little kid sees themselves in them. I hope that one day I can work on a show and do more to keep pushing forward.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly I want to thank my advisor Professor Scott Krzych for guiding me through this process and listening and caring as I rambled to him about cartoons for over a year. He even offered to try and watch *Steven Universe* for me, bought the DVD box set of the show and everything. Thank you so much Scott, I am so humbled that you wanted to let me do this project at all. Thank you to the Film and Media Department for four years of interesting classes that built up to this project, to Dylan, Tima, Ji Soo, Arom, and of course Baran thank you for your guidance. I am so excited to be working in this department full time next year.

To the love of my world, Harrison Lake, I would quite literally not be alive without you holding my hand and heart this past year throughout quarantine and Animal Crossing sessions and crying and procrastinating and oh my goodness binging and rewatching and staying up late and talking about and yelling about and just fangirling about cartoons 24/7 I love you so much. Same goes to my best friend, my roommate, we came out of the womb together we've known eachother 42 years, Marve Romero Aguiñaga, who has put up with about the same amount of cartoon talk and consumption but you love the end song of *Craig of the Creek* as much as I do and for that you are my people.

To my family all the way in Miami I miss you and can't wait to hug you and give you this presentation in Spanish. Te extraño y no puedo estar aquí sin ustedes. Los quiero y pronto nos veremos. To all my found family and friends, Maddy and Amy, Isa, Katie, Luis, Cassie, Kassy, Carol, Monica Sanchez, Idris, Nicolette, Stirling, Bella, Mimikyu, Lili, Danny, Max, and Mr. Hill the English teacher who chose me first. I love you all. Found family is family and queer as hell.