

# Steven Universe, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnavalesque

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## Abstract:

Steven Universe is radically revolutionizing trans representation in media by being willing to give voice to less often represented gender identities. It provides us with a framework with which to investigate how agender and genderqueer identities and experiences can not only function but thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon. This genre, and here Steven Universe serves as an exemplar, tends to embrace a particular reliance on “magic” to define its set of narrative rules, images, and possibilities. An emphasis on magic in the fantasy cartoon makes for an intriguingly complicated and layered pathway to trans representation, and the unique magical constructs within Steven Universe become the key narrative techniques which open the possibilities of what can be called a queer cartoon carnivalesque space. Trans bodies in Steven Universe are malleable, unfixed, ever-changing and able to combine at will. Therein lies their power. The genre of the fantasy children’s cartoon and its incarnation in Steven Universe is thus able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media. In doing so, the show offers us a glimpse into how we can move beyond the magic realm that lends such power to Steven Universe’s gender nonconforming characters, and into a more ubiquitous media representation of a variety of trans identities.

1 In an early episode of *Steven Universe*, the main character Steven breaks out his ukulele to sing a song about his two friends, urging them to work together to magically transform themselves into a greater entity: “You might even like being together,” he sings, “and if you don’t, it won’t be forever, but if it were me, I’d really want to be a giant woman, a giant woman. All I wanna do is see you turn into a giant woman” (“Giant Woman”). This is the world of *Steven Universe*, a Cartoon Network show in which bodies are changeable and combinable, and a young boy sings matter-of-factly about wanting to be a giant woman. Children’s cartoons have seen something of a queer renaissance recently, with shows like *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* and *Adventure Time* willing to bring queer relationships into their worlds. However, even within this recent past, representation of queer characters in children’s cartoons has been mostly confined to lesbian or gay characters, and these relationships often downplayed or unconfirmed. *Steven Universe* is radically breaking that tradition apart by being willing to give voice to other, less often represented queer identities. It provides us with a framework to investigate how trans (and more precisely, agender and genderqueer) identities and experiences cannot only function but also thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon. This genre, and here *Steven Universe* serves as an exemplar, tends to embrace a particular reliance on “magic” to define its set of narrative rules, images, and possibilities. An emphasis on magic in the fantasy cartoon makes for an intriguingly complicated and layered pathway to trans representation, and the unique magical

constructs within *Steven Universe* become the key narrative techniques which open the possibilities of what can be called a queer cartoon carnivalesque space. Trans bodies in *Steven Universe* are malleable, unfixed, ever changing and able to combine at will. Therein lies their power. The genre of the fantasy children's cartoon and its incarnation in *Steven Universe* is thus able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media. In doing so, the show offers us a glimpse into how we can move beyond the magic realm that lends such power to *Steven Universe*'s gender nonconforming characters, and into a more ubiquitous media representation of a variety of trans identities.

2        *Steven Universe*'s interaction with trans representation relies on separating gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation in the mind of its viewers. Essential to that separation is the alien race called the Crystal Gems, who take their names from their defining stones. The three members of this race living in *Steven Universe*'s Beach City are known as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. The protagonist of the show, Steven is the son of the now deceased Gem Rose Quartz and Steven's human father. Throughout the show Steven lives with Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, who are trying to help him develop his Gem powers. While Gems all seem to take on female forms and pronouns (and each of the main three are voiced by female voice actresses), writers and animators from the show have asserted that they are agender, or at least outside the human gender binary (Jones-Quartey). In a recent Reddit AMA, the show's creator Rebecca Sugar specifically stated that "Steven is the first and only male Gem, because he is half human! Technically, there are no female Gems!" (Sugar AMA) The Gems' agender identities are asserted in the actual show as well as in outside comments by creators. Gems have bodies that they are able to change at will, and this magical ability to mutate their bodies makes the standard feminine features that they often display less important in defining their gender. In an attempt to explain this to the viewer (and to Steven), Pearl calls Gem bodies "human constructs" ("Reformed") and Garnet asserts that Gem bodies are "only an illusion" ("Fusion Cuisine"). Their bodies also have no vital organs and no heartbeat ("Nightmare Hospital") meaning that the inside of their forms are both as malleable and as arbitrary as the outside. Gem bodies need not take human form and features, let alone display female traits. The flexibility of Gem bodies (and the frequency at which they change) sets up their feminine gender traits as illusory. The Gems' bodies serve as projections, allowing them to blend into their human environment, and their use of female pronouns is similarly arbitrary.

3        All the Gems, but most frequently Amethyst, shape-shift into other forms, sometimes

even assuming the forms of the other Gems (including Steven) to mock them or make jokes (“Cat Fingers”). In “Tiger Millionaire”, Amethyst shape-shifts into a large wrestling alter-ego which she names Purple Puma. Puma displays physically male sexual embodiment, including huge muscles and a skimpy wrestling outfit that shows a vast quantity of chest hair. Steven uses male pronouns to refer to Purple Puma when explaining his wrestling background to the other Gems, saying that “He was the wildest cat in the jungle, so wild, the other cats couldn’t take it. So she, I mean he, went to look for somewhere he fit in, somewhere with other people who felt misunderstood” (“Tiger Millionaire”). While Amethyst is using the persona of Purple Puma as a disguise and wrestling character, and Steven is telling the story of that character, the audience is also meant to see the similarities between the character and Amethyst herself. For the time in the ring, Amethyst literally becomes Purple Puma. Her ‘body’ is transformed to display male physical characteristics, and her pronouns are male. This gender performance makes her no less Amethyst in the eyes of the other characters, and no comment is made by the show on the fact that it is her body in the ring that literally becomes her wrestling costume. If the male body that she takes on as Purple Puma is a performance, it implicates her normal appearance as a kind of costume as well. Her appearance as male is no less performance, costume, or construct than her normally female-gendered body. Any appearance she may choose to wear becomes performance. The Gems use their changeable bodies to subvert standard markers of gender, asserting that their bodies are not real in the way that humans perceive bodies as real.

4      It may be useful here to take a moment and examine the importance of magic and disbelief as it is at work within *Steven Universe*’s universe. When we talk about the genre of children’s fantasy entertainment, we often remark upon the imagination and wonder that it provokes in children. But as adult viewers, we’re conditioned to watch cartoons with a willing suspension of disbelief that allows us to accept and enjoy its magic constructs. Simon During critically examines the way that suspension of disbelief works in the realms of fiction and nonfiction, asserting that suspension of disbelief “seems to make it possible both to believe and not believe in magic” and that such this process is the “way consumers of modern culture learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction, and another in relation to the everyday world” (During 50). If we consider During’s framework as it is applied in *Steven Universe*, we can extend this theory even further. While readers of fiction may always have to suspend disbelief, the audience of fantasy cartoons *expects* to suspend disbelief and to a greater degree. This suspension, this release from reality is what makes the genre pleasurable. But it is also what gives *Steven Universe* power. It is the working of

specifically cartoon magic that allows gender identity to be so thoroughly and easily disconnected from physical gender traits/manifestations. It is not surprising to the audience that cartoon bodies are malleable and differentiated from real bodies in their plasticity, and *Steven Universe* takes advantage of the fact that the audience expects a level of body magic from the cartoons, more than from other fiction.

5 During asks us, “If one believes (or disbelieves) in magic implicitly in order to commit oneself to a wider set of values, then what is the effect of that language game which allows us to suppose that belief is also a subjective state?” (49) Gem magic is perhaps how we can begin to answer During’s question in the context of *Steven Universe*. The ability of the Gems to change their gender presentation at will is a type of magic that fundamentally disconnects notions of perceived gender from gender identity in the mind of the viewer. When the viewer is told that the Gems’ bodies are constructed or unreal, the viewer is forced to reconsider the implications of the female-coded body traits that they may see when they look at Garnet, Amethyst, or Pearl. The show even disconnects gender identity from pronouns; none of the Gems see themselves in terms of human femininity, and yet they all use ‘she/her’ in reference to one another. It is precisely the “language game” of *Steven Universe* that allows gender identity to be so thoroughly and easily disconnected from both the physical language of the characters’ embodiments and the language that they use to communicate with one another. Within *Steven Universe*, belief is a subjective state, and its effect is that the show’s magic opens up the possibility of representing a diversity of gender expression and embodiment. During ultimately places magical entertainment at the “ideological crossroads of superstition and enlightenment,” where he claims that it is “nugatory (in theory) and powerful and profitable (in fact)” (51). Magic, and the fantastical far from diminishing the power of whatever narrative it features in, can actually become the vehicle that supports an expansion into new lines of thought.

6 The very functions and facts of the Gem race therefore begins to open up the possibilities for queer representation in the show. Other magical abilities they have push the representation of trans gender identities even further. The Gems’ agender identities come into play again during the process of “Gem Fusion”, a magical construct in which Gems can fuse their bodies together. These Fusions have greater magical and physical power than the individual Gems, and take on the physical and personality characteristics of both of the Gems involved. Fusion is achieved through a series of elaborate dance moves the two Gems perform together, during which the two individuals must be perfectly coordinated and of the same state of mind. It is Fusion that pushes the magic of the fantasy cartoon to its most useful

for queer representation in *Steven Universe*, as Fusion serves as the prism through which the show addresses agender desire and genderqueer representations. Not only does this representation through Fusion break down barriers for the representation of genderqueer and agender people, it represents a distinctly queer carnivalesque space where gender-play and performance are integral to social interactions and identity-formation.

7 The movements and magic required in order for Gems to fuse, and indeed in the world of the Gems in general, allows for the relationships between the Gems to stand in a sort of carnivalesque atmosphere, one that subverts traditional distinctions between body and mind, relying instead on performance to shift and create the material of the Fusion's body. Most Fusions in *Steven Universe* are not only produced by ritualized, synchronized dance but also accompanied by or closely followed by song, strongly linking the performance and inhabitation of Gem Fusion to the type of "folk carnival humor" that Bakhtin identifies as characterizing the carnivalesque. The spectacle of Fusion itself could certainly be considered as falling under what Sue Vice reads as "Ritual spectacles" like "carnival pageants" or "comic shows of the marketplace" (Vice 345). Fusion is meant to be performative, and to be identified by both the participants and the audience as a symbol of change and power. Its routinized but individualized series of movements makes it simultaneously a ritual and a process of individualization. Because Fusion allows two individual Gems to combine, it undermines the dominant order of the corporeal body, equating the physical substance of the body not with a fixed, rigid or imposing structure but as something malleable, combinable and more powerful in its enactment of fluidity. While the Gems have the ability to change their own bodies at will, only Fusion actually increases their physical and magical capabilities. It is the total destruction of the individual body, in favor of intimately combining with another being. While the Gem Fusion is sometimes resorted to in *Steven Universe* in order to help the Gems fight a particularly difficult battle often Fusion is a site of play or light-heartedness, an expression of emotional and physical closeness, or a mechanic for humor. According to Vice, carnival allows for the "free and familiar contact between people who would usually be separated hierarchically", for "unusual combinations" and also for a bringing down to "the level of the body" (Vice 346). Fusion operates within exactly this kind of time and space; magic acts as the vehicle that transports the Gems (as both actors/participants and spectators) into the literal combined body of the Fusion performance. In performing a Gem Fusion, the individual Gems temporarily cease to exist, becoming one conjoined entity, in a state of "becoming, change and renewal" (Vice 346). The Gem Fusion is the literal embodiment of carnival time within the show.

8 That carnival time of Fusion is made possible by a performance of the Gem's desire for one another. *Steven Universe* insinuates through its various displays of Fusion that to the Gems the act of Fusion is an intimate and perhaps inappropriate or private occurrence. Each Fusion dance is slightly modified to take into account the specific personalities of those participating in it. In "Giant Woman" we learn that not only must Gems be in physical synchronicity during their dance, but they must also be mentally synced in order to perform Fusion successfully. We also learn that if they fall out of sync, the Fusion dissolves, leaving them as individuals once more ("Giant Woman"). This indicates that Fusion requires an extremely high and sustained level of mental and physical intimacy between Gems. When Garnet and Amethyst fuse in "Coach Steven" Pearl covers Steven's eyes to try and stop him from watching the dance that Garnet and Amethyst perform to fuse into the stronger Sugilite ("Reformed"). There can be no doubt that Fusion is a semi-sexual or at least desire-coded occurrence. Apart from the fact that Pearl deems the dance inappropriate for young Steven to see, there is the body language of the dance itself. When Pearl and Garnet attempt to teach Steven the process of Fusion, there is obviously a coded desire between them in the closeness and movement of their dance which includes flushed cheeks, heavy breathing, and daringly deep dips.

9 The Fusion dance can be nothing other than a specifically queer performance, one that continues *Steven Universe*'s project of actively distancing gender identity from both the physical body and sexual desire. The carnivalesque space of Fusion in *Steven Universe* is one in which Judith Butler's assertion that "the phantasmatic nature of desire reveals the body not as its ground or cause, but as its *occasion* and *object*" is physically realized (Butler 96). According to Butler, there is no disconnect inherently present in the idea of agender or unsexed desire (and I do not mean to conflate these terms here, but use them together to illustrate a being completely outside normative frameworks of sex and gender). After all, desire is not intrinsically connected to any piece of the body, rather it is determined by its phenomenological object. "The strategy of desire is," Butler continues, "part of the transfiguration of the desiring body itself" (96). While desire as abstracted from both gender and physical sex may be impossible in the culturally restricted 'real world', it seems to be present and at work within the carnival time that is *Steven Universe*. The process of Gem Fusion insists upon the intimate, sexual, and romantic implications of the transformation into one body at the same time as it continues to champion and indeed rely upon the agender status of its participants. In this case, the phenomenological object of the Gems' desire literally transforms the body, not merely by signifying gender upon it, as in Butler's work,

but actually allowing the desiring subjects to combine their bodies. *Steven Universe* therefore insists that desire is disconnected from gender identity, and that agender beings such as the Gems experience the same desire for romantic, sexual, and emotional closeness as cisgender people. In fact the show goes a step further, in attributing a special and immense physical and emotional power to a Fusion formed of two Gems.

10 One of the most powerful representations of Fusion comes to the viewer in the surprise reveal that Garnet herself (remember, though they are genderless, the Gems all use female pronouns) is a Fusion, and has been throughout the previous forty-eight episodes without ever becoming unsynchronized. We've seen previously how difficult it is for Gems to maintain their fused states because of the deep harmony of mind and body that Gem Fusion requires. In "Jailbreak" we find that the two beings whose Fusion creates Garnet, Ruby and Sapphire, have been separated and are desperate to return to their fused state. Ruby thinks nothing for the other trapped Gems (Pearl, Amethyst, and Lapis) when Steven helps her escape. The same can be said of Sapphire, who Steven also frees from her cell. The two run through the spaceship, ignoring the plight of their fellow Gems in search of one another, even ignoring Steven (who Garnet is usually desperate to protect). When they find each other they immediately run to one another and embrace lovingly and Sapphire kisses Ruby. "Did they hurt you?" Sapphire asks and Ruby responds, "Who cares?" They laugh, and Ruby picks Sapphire up, spinning her around and around ("Jailbreak"). Their spinning fuses them once again, their laughter turning to Garnet's and her jubilation at being restored is obvious upon her face. Ruby and Sapphire's Fusion is a rush to reunite, to be whole again by becoming one body and mind again. As the reunited Garnet fights opposing Gem Jasper, she begins to sing:

We are here to stay like this forever. If you break us apart, we'll just come back newer. And we'll always be twice the Gem that you were. I am made of love. Of love. Love love. This is who we are. This is who I am. And if you think you can stop me, then you need to think again. Because I am a feeling, and I will never end[...]Cause you think that you've seen what I'm made of. But I am even more than the two of them. Everything they care about is what I am. I am their fury, I am their patience, I am a conversation. ("Jailbreak")

The bond between Ruby and Sapphire is so complete that they cannot see themselves without each other. Their power is their synchronicity, their closeness of their thoughts, feelings and bodies. *Steven Universe* represents the Fusion of these two Gems in terms of a deep and powerful relationship and not just any relationship, but a specifically and unequivocally romantic one. Garnet's song highlights the fact that Jasper is "single" in both senses of the word. Garnet's creation is one not only of a tight bond but a synchronicity that is the product

of complete and total love. She is made of the emotions and attributes of both Ruby and Sapphire, the physical embodiment of their closeness, the “conversation” between them. It would be hard not to read Garnet’s existence as a manifesto for a kind of queer love, one that defies fixed gender and stable embodiment and which celebrates the desire of those that lie outside the gender binary. Not only is the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire not based on normative binary gender identifications and sexuality, but also they choose to spend their lives as one combined consciousness. Garnet is a product of Ruby and Sapphire’s agender desire, passion, and love. Such a symbolic union is possible in the realm of cartoon magic, which allows the symbol of the joined lovers to become actualized. In no other show is an agender relationship shown so beautifully, powerfully and with such acceptance.

11 Fusion becomes an important tool for the representation of another form of nonbinary gender embodiment in the Fusion that Steven achieves completely by accident in “Alone Together”. The Gems attempt to teach Steven how to fuse with another Gem, with Amethyst standing in as Steven’s dancing partner. However, the instruction does not work, the two instead merely fall over each other laughing. Nor does Steven’s attempt to fuse with Pearl come to fruition. Pearl tells Steven not to worry, that Fusion is a difficult skill to achieve for a variety of reasons, and that they are not even sure that Steven will have the ability to create a Fusion because he is half-human. When Connie (Steven’s best friend) later asks him if the Gems can write down the steps, he asserts that the dance is only part of the process towards Gem Fusion: “No...I don’t think it’s just about the dancing. When they fuse, they glow and kind of...phase into each other. I don’t know if I can even do that.” (“Alone Together”) Steven understands and reiterates to the audience that Fusion is about more than just movement, it is about a level of togetherness that he is not sure he can experience. Steven invites Connie to conquer her fear of dancing in front of other people and to dance there on the beach with him. They hold hands and as they dance harder and harder together, they laugh and indeed begin to glow. At that moment, Connie catches the falling Steven (looking as if she has dipped him over her knee) and the two perform a Gem Fusion by accident. Their Fusion, nicknamed Stevonnie by Amethyst later in the episode, is not only the first Fusion between a Gem and a human, but the first gendered Gem Fusion. Because Steven is the first Gem that openly associates himself with a gender, and he happens to identify as male, and Connie identifies as female throughout the show, Stevonnie cannot be said to be agender. Their Fusion therefore is unique from both a species and gendered point of view.

12 Stevonnie goes home to announce themselves to the Gems in hopes that the Gems will know what to do about their Fusion and to celebrate the fact that Steven achieved Fusion in



the first place. Their announcement of their Fusion is with pride, rather than trepidation. The scene is a coming out of sorts for Stevonnie. While Pearl asserts, worriedly, that they should be separated immediately, Garnet is absolutely beside herself with happiness (dramatic considering Garnet's usually deadpan demeanor). She grabs Stevonnie and looks at them with a huge smile on her face: "Listen to me. You are not two people. And you are not one person. You...are an experience! Make sure you're a good experience. Now GO HAVE FUN!" ("Alone Together") Stevonnie and the experience they are having in this new body is perhaps particularly legible to Garnet, since she herself is a Gem Fusion (though neither Steven nor the audience know this at the time of "Alone Together"), and thus Garnet emphasizes that the level of closeness in Fusion is one to be embraced, celebrated even. Stevonnie takes this advice to experience and enjoy the moments as a Fusion seriously. By urging Stevonnie not to worry about the combination of their separate identities and the implications of their new body, Garnet is reconstituting the Fusion that worries the other Gems as a place for play and learning. This Fusion is about experiencing life in the moment, about play and most of all about a deep celebration of closeness. Garnet obviously thinks that Steven and Connie can learn something from the experience of sharing a Fusion together. The events that brought their Fusion together in the first place were, after all, a moment of play, trust, and pushing boundaries.

13     Never has carnival time been more relevant to *Steven Universe*. The very bodily performance of Stevonnie subverts and undercuts hierarchical imposition of gender and heterosexuality. Stevonnie is not, as in the case of the other Gems and their Fusions, deliberately outside the gender binary, since both Steven and Connie claimed their respective gender identities before their Fusion. On the other hand, Stevonnie does not (either physically or mentally) fit within the categories of male or female. They are deliberately genderqueer and display androgynous physical features. Importantly, Stevonnie herself never comments on feeling strange or out of place in their physical body. Far from being worried about the gender of that body, they seem to take the new body they have been given as an opportunity, as Garnet puts it, for "a good experience". Stevonnie runs down the beach, doing cartwheels and flips, relishing in the strength and grace of their body, appreciating it for its abilities. They lie in the ocean and let it wash over them, seemingly totally content with their Fusion.

14     Stevonnie's sole purpose for the rest of the episode seems to be to investigate the space afforded to gender ambiguous or genderqueer persons within the world of Beach City. They take the androgynous bodily performance and try it out on the 'real world'. The magic Fusion of Steven and Connie into Stevonnie allows both of them to experience a full range of

gendered interactions and correspondingly exposes the audience to the impact that perceived gender has on our everyday experiences. Stevonnie's body is ambiguously gendered based on their representation as an amalgamation of both Steven and Connie, but it is their interaction with members of Beach City that point out the perceived non-normalcy of such a genderqueer presentation. Gayle Salamon's excellent work may be able to help us encode the social signals that Stevonnie faces. Salamon contends, "the importance of the body for establishing a gendered subjectivity has less to do with its morphological configurations and more to do with how flesh must be signified and resignified, where this resignification will sometimes involve changes to the body, and sometimes will not" (Salamon 128). In the case of Stevonnie, the body has changed, but the resignification of that body comes not from the internal perception of self, but from the cultural resignification of that body by external forces. This normalizing force is even more felt (by both Stevonnie and the audience) because Stevonnie's body resists easy categorization. And Beach City's reaction, its general attempts to comprehend and signify gender upon Stevonnie, is mixed.

15 When Stevonnie walks into the doughnut shop both the female and male employee (with whom Steven is friends throughout the rest of the show) blush. Neither of the employees recognize Steven within the Fusion, as his body has changed dramatically. Stevonnie orders two doughnuts, and both employees seem to be unable to take their eyes off them. Each of them also expresses some form of unease during the encounter, whether it is the flush of their cheeks or the halting quality of their speech. Whether these expressions of nervousness around Stevonnie are from attraction to Stevonnie or from a confused reaction to their ambiguously gendered body is not entirely clear, but it is clear that the interaction both of them have with Stevonnie is uncomfortable. Presumably, Stevonnie is not used to an interaction which calls to the fore the configuration or expression of their body in a way that the genderqueer body of Stevonnie does. They leave the doughnut shop and there is a moment of conversation in which Stevonnie speaks to themselves about the possibility of breaking back into two people: "Are you okay?" Stevonnie asks themselves, "We can stop if you...No. No. Don't worry." ("Alone Together") There is a sense of melancholy about the experience with the two employees that seems to stem from the misrecognition of Stevonnie, a change from the welcome reception that Steven usually receives from his friends that work there. This unspoken awkwardness, the misrecognition and the discomfort that Stevonnie has with the experience speaks to the common experience of genderqueer and trans people out in the world where they face an experience defined by their gender presentation and identity rather than their individual humanity. *Steven Universe* presents Fusion as a site of play, but it

does not gloss over the social stigma against nonbinary gender expression. The strength of its representation of the trans and genderqueer experience is that it both celebrates expression and teaches acceptance. There is no shying away from the pain of being misrecognized or misgendered.

16 Later, at a dance that Stevonnie is invited to by an older kid, the character of Kevin allows the show to further explore the mixed social experiences of genderqueer people. Kevin comes up to Stevonnie at the dance, expecting to dance with them. He calls them “baby” in his introduction, immediately making the space between them one of potential romance and sexual tension. While the audience notices this tension, Stevonnie seems to be momentarily unaware of it. Kevin’s advances escalate when Stevonnie leaves the dance floor:

STEVONNIE. I don’t (pushing Kevin’s hands away) - I don’t want to dance anymore.

KEVIN. What are you talking about? We’re the best thing that’s ever happened to this place. Come back out with me.

STEVONNIE. Why should I?

KEVIN. Because we’re angels walking among garbage people. We’re perfect for each other.

STEVONNIE. (Angrily) How can you say that?! You don’t even know us!

KEVIN. Oh, woah. I’m just looking for a dance! Don’t get crazy! (“Alone Together”)

The figure of Kevin is perhaps a daring choice for a children’s cartoon, but it shows that Steven Universe is willing to go further than other children’s shows. Stevonnie’s interaction with Kevin at the dance is one in which they are sexualized, even despite their protests. Kevin sees Stevonnie as a sexual object, he even tries to pull them back on to the dance floor. Unfortunately, this is also a realistic part of the trans experience. Genderqueer and trans people face a statistically much higher rate of sexual violence, with as many as one in two transgender people reporting being sexually victimized, often more than once (Stotzer 173). The sexualization of trans people becomes a part of Stevonnie’s experience as well, and their reaction to this manifests itself as anger: “I’m not your baby!” Stevonnie tells him, before going off to dance aggressively by themselves (“Alone Together”). Steven Universe does not avoid the negative experiences that Stevonnie occasions, instead it uses those experiences to teach Steven, Connie and its young audience what it feels like to be in the shoes of trans people. Any viewer familiar with the show would know that this is not the same treatment that Steven usually receives, and so this episode is different. It is different precisely and exclusively because Steven’s gender presentation/identity as Stevonnie is different. Ironically enough one of the most seriously and dangerously ‘real’ moments of the show is brought

about because of the magic of Fusion.

17 Steven and Connie's Fusion eventually breaks apart, leaving the two in their original bodies, and at some level it seems to come as a relief to them. While Stevonnie was an experience that both of them enjoyed when they were alone on the beach or with the supportive Gems, out in the semi-realistic world of Beach City the social gender stigma made the overall experience a mixed one. Stevonnie's importance for the queer carnival of Steven Universe is that their experience highlights that all identities are socially dependant, and that queer bodies or identities can present both a space for wonderfully subversive gendered play and open up different (and sometimes negative) social interactions based upon that gender play. As mixed as Stevonnie's experience is, that experience is a form of revolutionary representation for trans individuals across the gender spectrum. Steven's time as Stevonnie teaches him about experiencing social stigma and being treated merely as a romantic/sexual object. It also teaches him that gender is fluid, shifting, and defined however the individual wants it to be defined. It teaches Steven (and the audience) empathy for those facing negative or violent reactions to their gender identity, but also that there is power in gender expressions across the spectrum. In one of Steven Universe's more recent episodes we see that Steven has incorporated gender play into his life outside of Fusion, when he dresses in drag to perform a song at the Beach-a-Palooza (a talent competition being held by the town). The show makes no mention of his heels and makeup, treating his drag costume as just another aspect of Steven's performance ("Sadie's Song"). Perhaps Steven's time as Stevonnie taught him to be more open to the possibilities of gender and performance (this time without the need for magic), just as it is trying to teach viewers the same.

18 When we think about trans representation in media, we often think of adult shows where such themes may be deemed more 'appropriate', then we hope that subsequently such representation will slowly move into children's shows. But with Steven Universe we have an exact reversal of this process. Steven Universe is a show that makes use of its specific kind of narrative magic in a variety of ways to teach and entertain its young audience. But the show has found fans amongst older viewers as well, precisely because it is willing to push the boundaries of gender representation. Not only is Steven Universe perhaps the queerest children's show, it may be the most gender-progressive show on television. It achieves the representation of genderqueer and agender characters through the magical formal elements that naturally belong in a cartoon universe. In cartoons magic provides the opportunity for imaginative play and learning. Children's shows, and children themselves, are willing to suspend disbelief and open themselves to possibilities that are not fully culturally accepted

and they are less socially conditioned to be biased against experiences or people that are new to them. Relevantly, within this genre the expectations of older viewers are conditioned to allow them to accept magic and its function within the world of the fantasy cartoon, so that they can follow and enjoy its story. Steven Universe takes advantage of this narrative expectation to imbue its magic with the power to represent queer gender expressions and changing bodies. The utopian play space, the cartoon carnivalesque space that the show creates, functions equally as powerfully for viewers of all ages and allows for genders outside the spectrum to exist and even flourish in a concrete way. It may be that shows like Steven Universe are examples of children teaching their parents, and adult audiences, how to open up to allowing trans identities the space and respect in media that they deserve.

19      Granted, there is much work still to be done. Like *The Legend of Korra* or *Adventure Time*, Steven Universe is a show steeped in fantastical, the carnival time. While it may be grounded more in our own world than other cartoons, the representation of trans people in Steven Universe still hinges on the magic that allows bodies to change at will or fuse together. During creator Rebecca Sugar's Reddit AMA, a questioner asked her about trans representation in the show, and Sugar focused on the safe space that fantasy provides, calling it "the best use of fantasy" to represent and tackle difficult issues: "The weird fun cartoon doesn't stop to talk about this, it just is this, in the safe space of fantasy. It's very important to me that this show makes people feel represented" (Sugar AMA). But trans identities are being lived without the aid of such magical constructs everyday, outside the safe space of fantasy. What would it mean for children's media to begin to represent these identities without the aid of magic or the fantastic? A show like Steven Universe should be applauded for its willingness to take on difficult and complex topics and representing trans characters (especially those genders that are usually deemed too complicated for television). However, the next evolution in such representation may lie outside of fantasy, out in the 'real world'. While the narrative power of Steven Universe is that we carry its message of gender play and acceptance with us, we must still encourage media makers to represent trans characters outside fantasy's comforting bubble.

## Works Cited

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