I Think We Made Something Entirely New: *Steven Universe*,
Tumblr Fandom and Queer Fluidity

by

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Abstract

Social media is yet another space where queer youth must carefully negotiate the publicness of their identities while in the process of discovering themselves. The queer science-fiction series *Steven Universe* and its deeply passionate fandom offer anti-normative correctives through an unprecedented convergence of queerness that has simultaneously played out within the networked communities of the social platform Tumblr. The queer potentiality and fluidity expressed in this television series has been adopted by its fans and intensified on Tumblr, where the plurality of identity is acknowledged and encouraged. This thesis argues that this is a political project, precisely because it runs counter to heteronormative expectations of identity and suggests a powerful place for queer collectivity in the lives of these young, queer fans.

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Introduction

When I was young, I remember watching *SpongeBob SquarePants*, a show that appealed to me primarily for its humour and inventive animation. My dad would watch with me, however, seemingly just as amused and entertained as I was by this peculiar series, if not more so. In fact, to this day we continue to make reference to certain episodes or quotes, as the series became a common cultural touchstone for us both. Years later, as a teenager on Tumblr and other fan-centric spaces online, I continued to feel that there was something thoroughly false about how we understand audiences, something wrong about the categorization of fans. Moreover, I sensed a connection between my growing awareness of my own queerness and these online spaces that were dedicated to things that I seemingly was not supposed to enjoy (because they were intended for children), or not enjoy in a queer way.

Queer youth play by different rules. They become accustomed to queerly reading straight texts, or are forced to identify with straight characters, or use their imaginations to discover other possibilities. All of that can only occur, of course, if they are given the freedom to understand themselves and their desires, and we know that a core tenet of queer life is the act of hiding. Many queer lives are structured and fenced in by the closet, inevitably determining many aspects of their lives that have seemingly nothing to do with their sexuality. For many, navigating the closet will affect how they feel about themselves for the rest of their lives. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarked, even many of the most openly gay individuals remain in the closet for personal, economic, or

institutional reasons, "and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence."[1] The ability to be open and honest about one's self is something many queer youth are not able to experience, particularly as they are only then on their way to understanding themselves. In fact, the act of coming out is a bit of a mainstream cultural myth, as it often presupposes that there is a simple before and after, a clean cut. Queer people know this, that coming out is a continuous process, one that may never end, and that the closet is little more than a convenient spatial metaphor that can obscure more than it clarifies. Not only can you be out to different people, but you are always meeting new people who may not know, and who may or may not think differently about you when and if they find out. You must always be wary of a context collapse, in which different spheres of one's public and private lives —work and family, for instance—begin to seep into each other, passing information that doesn't belong in both spaces.

Queer youth (and especially queer youth of colour) risk far more in the publicness of what they choose to reveal and how they express it, both offline and within different online spaces. For them, this constant mediation requires the development of certain strategies and workarounds to avoid unwanted attention in specific areas. For example, coded language even beyond normal queer colloquialisms may be used, or careful decisions must be made about whom to 'friend' on Facebook so that others (relatives, perhaps) do not see. If the wrong person (a family member, a boss) were to gain knowledge of one's queerness, there could be serious economic, social, and personal

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[1] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990): 68.

consequences. As Samuel A. Chambers describes, "Heteronormativity emphasises the extent to which everyone, straight or queer, will be judged, measured, probed, and evaluated from the perspective of the heterosexual norm. It means that *everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight*."[2] Social media is yet another space where queer people must negotiate their position within their heteronormative structures and communities, with features that commonly, for example, suggest friends of friends (possibly to the wrong person), or tag you in a photo you may not want to be publicly seen in.

It's worth strongly underlining this point, because there is a sense, among those who may see history as inherently progressive, that this lived reality has changed substantially. For example, a recent review from Time Magazine of the gay coming-of-age film *Love, Simon* wondered whether the queer kids of today really need such an affirming gay teen movie: "Kids like Simon, in 2018, already have a good shot of fitting in. They don't need this movie….*Love, Simon* feels like a film responding to an entirely different culture, like one in which gay marriage was never legalized."[3] Of course, because when gay marriage was legalized, all queer kids were immediately accepted by their families, friends, and communities.[4] Despite some symbolic institutional changes and a broad liberal-minded aura of tolerance, gender non-conforming behaviour remains taboo to many or makes some uncomfortable when they are confronted by it in public spaces. Queer youth still have far fewer ways of articulating their desires beyond the

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[2] Samuel A. Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009): 35. Emphasis in original.

[3] Daniel D'Addario, "*Love, Simon* Is a Groundbreaking Gay Movie. But Do Today's Teens Actually Need It?" Time Magazine, March 8 2018. http://time.com/5190982/love-simon-groundbreaking-gay-movie/

[4] I am being sarcastic.

restrictive and insufficient heteronormative language they are given. Without understanding how social media networks have reaffirmed and strengthened these cultural structures and norms, we would have a more difficult time understanding queer fandom and the appeal of a network like Tumblr.

That is the impetus for my work that follows. *Steven Universe*, a currently ongoing Cartoon Network animated series, will be the text through which this analysis is done. It is a queer series, ostensibly intended for children, but another example of the fallacy of imagined audiences, and a further instance of queer media having a significant impact on queer youth, and on queer adults. As one of the largest and most passionate queer fandoms in the 2010s, particularly within online communities and focused on Tumblr, it provides an ample opportunity to understand the publicity and privacy of queer youth in a modern context. There are numerous forums and websites devoted to *Steven Universe*, countless videos picking it apart on YouTube, endless amounts of fan art and fan fiction. Tumblr's Fandometrics, which tracks the most active fandoms on the popular social platform, routinely has *Steven Universe* placed at or near the top of all categories week-by-week.[5] As an introduction to the wide and thorny world of Tumblr fandom, and its *Steven Universe* community in particular, I first turn to the Steven Universe Wiki. It seems as though some users feel more comfortable discussing their concerns about Tumblr in a space removed from the platform. In an exemplary post, a user named Spacepiratekilx created a thread on April 6, 2015 called "What the heck is with fans on Tumblr?!?", and wrote:

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[5] The show was ranked #1 for 2016 in the Animated TV Show bracket. Tumblr Fandometrics, Dec. 3, 2016, https://thefandometrics.tumblr.com/post/153399149169/tv-animated.

WHAT THE HECK IS WITH TUMBLR TURNING FANS INTO
FANATICS?!?!?!?

Like seriously, has anyone noticed that? On this wiki, reddit, and to a lesser extent
deviantart, SU fans are pretty chill and nice. But on Tumblr, some SU fans are
fricking psychos! Now I'm not saying EVERY SU fan on Tumblr is a jerk. I
actually know quite a few SU fans on Tumblr who are genuinely nice and funny
people. I just think it's weird that most of the "bad" SU fans are only on Tumblr.
It's as if Tumblr has these subliminal messages that increase aggression.[6]

Of course, the word 'fan' comes from the word 'fanatic,' itself from the Modern

Latin *fanaticus*, meaning "insanely but divinely inspired." But colloquially, and in

Spacepiratekilx's mind, a fan and a fanatic are two different things. They also suggest

that there must be something about Tumblr in particular (its "subliminal messages") that

raises aggression in its users. In any case, a diverse fandom congregates feverishly on

Tumblr. For many reasons, this short-format sci-fi coming-of-age story inspires deep love

and fanaticism in its fans, which has led to a fascinatingly complex queer ecosystem. I

argue that this unique series and its fandom suggest that the separate rules for queer youth

continue to reign, yet they are working to envision a reworking of the public/private split

they endure—for now within the networked communities of Tumblr.

Before moving on, I'd like to explain how I am understanding and using the word

"queer" in the context of this research, and likewise in the context of my own life. Queer

is an elastic term that can mean many different things, but its essence is the general

upending of normativity. Beyond demarking same-sex behaviour, it is sometimes used as

an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community, as a way to describe unconventional

expressions of gender, anything that vaguely alludes to some kind of non-normative

expression, and as Alex Doty put it, "to describe those aspects of spectatorship, cultural

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[6] Steven Universe Wiki, http://steven-universe.wikia.com/wiki/Thread:78922.

readership, production, and textual coding that seem to establish spaces not described by, or contained within, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered understandings and categorizations of gender and sexuality."[7] My approach to queerness and queer theory is not simply as it relates to sexuality, or as a theoretical framework to work from. For me, it is a form of cultural politics, and I am using it as a way of articulating and investigating *Steven Universe*'s queer identities with its queer politics. Queer theory burned brightly and has become saturated to the point that everything can be "queered" by dissertation writers without a clear indication of what their contribution to queer theory actually may be. In the interest of avoiding that fate, I intend to position myself by using queerness as a methodology and as a politics. Queerness, for me, is about *potentiality and fluidity*, which I endeavor to manifest through the theoretical and political contexts I analyze. As a series as singular and singularly interested in this confluence of queer elements, *Steven Universe* is the ideal vehicle for this discussion.

The potential of queerness has always been to create alternative ways of being. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed writes, "As a structure of feeling, alienation is an intense burning presence; it is a feeling that takes place before others, from whom one is alienated, and can feel like a weight that both holds you down and keeps you apart."[8] Ahmed explains how in Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt* (and Todd Haynes' then-unfilmed adaptation, *Carol*), Therese and Carol are able to plan for a life together as a lesbian couple, but only by, somewhat heartbreakingly, destroying the traditional tenets of (hetero)normativity (ie. Carol loses custody of her children).[9] The pair are unable to

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[7] Alex Doty, "Introduction," *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 7.
[8] Sara Ahmed, "Happy Futures," *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 168.
[9] Ahmed, 247.

exist together in both worlds, and are forced to make their choice to come together at the

expense of the normative world. I understand Ahmed's approach to queerness as a force

that transforms this feeling of alienation, in whatever form it may take, into a

revolutionary consciousness intent on change and alternative ways of living. This feels

liberating, and constructive. It also seems to sharply inform *Steven Universe*'s queer

ethos: an insistent optimism in the face of alienation.

Likewise, the trans writer, activist, and professor Dean Spade explains how

queerness is utilized and conceived of in his own community:

> In the queer communities I'm in[,] valuing friendship is a really big deal, often
> coming out of the fact that lots of us don't have family support, and build deep
> supportive structures with other queers. We are interested in resisting the
> heteronormative family structure in which people are expected to form a dyad,
> marry, have kids, and get all their needs met within that family structure. A lot of
> us see that as unhealthy, as a new technology of post-industrial late capitalism that
> is connected to alienating people from community and training them to think in
> terms of individuality, to value the smaller unit of the nuclear family rather than
> the extended family.[10]

In the same way, Steven Universe as a character is a gateway to exploring his "chosen

family" of the Crystal Gems in a queer dynamic not unlike Spade's community. Spade

describes elsewhere how the systems and institutions that shape our understanding of the

world are "actually perform[ing] deadly violence against those people whose lives and

identities become misclassified or unclassifiable."[11] It is fertile ground applying a version

of radical queer theory to television, arguably the most mainstream medium today, while

contextualizing it through this systemic framework. Ahmed and Spade are responding, in

some way, to the polemic of Lee Edelman, who argued that the sense of optimism

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[10] Dean Spade, "For Lovers and Fighters," *Make* (Makezine), 2006.
http://www.makezine.enoughenough.org/newpoly2.html
[11] Dean Spade, "Trans Law and Politics on a Neoliberal Landscape," *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* vol. 18, Spring 2009: 363.

embodied by the child (via reproduction) was, in fact, the antithesis of queer politics. For him, the future potential of the child has nothing to offer to queers, and instead he suggested the embracing of the death drive, the Freudian seizing of negativity and self-destruction in the face of an oppressive social order.[12] Many have debated these points in the intervening years, including, most significantly, José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz, critical like Edelman of the queer cultural assimilation that occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, argued instead for queer futurity and utopia. He articulates the radicalism of the utopian force within queer politics, and how the denial of queer hope is not possible for many. He asserts the importance of queer collectivity, as performed through aesthetic works and their mediation, with "a type of affective excess that presents the enabling force of a forward-dawning futurity,"[13] revealing the political potentiality of this utopian queer affect. My personal understanding of queerness is intimately motivated by this conception, but more than that, I argue that this affective excess which enables queer futurity is acutely apparent and emphatic in the queer Tumblr fandom of *Steven Universe*.

In the spirit of the call for a "goodwill ethics" approach to online research methods put forward by Brittany Kelley, a scholar of digital cultures, emotion, and fandom, I'd also like to transparently explain my own participation on Tumblr and how I went about analyzing various posts and profiles.[14] I recognize the power academia has in comparison with (often marginalized) fan communities, and I take that responsibility seriously. At times, I refer to specific posts and users, but only when it seems particularly

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[12] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[13] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 23.

[14] Brittany Kelley, "Toward a Goodwill Ethics of Online Research Methods," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 22 (2016).

necessary, and never to invite a particular judgment.[15] As Kelley explains, we should

strive to represent these communities how they might represent themselves. "We enact

reciprocity not only by providing balanced accounts of the communities we study, but

also by accepting and fulfilling some roles these communities might ask of us. We are

transparent when we state our positions, values, institutional affiliations, and methods,

and are willing to negotiate the latter."[16] I hope to have met these worthy standards.

As such, it should be made clear that I came to Tumblr far before I discovered

Steven Universe, starting around 2008. My identity there was (and largely remains)

pseudonymous, and I have been active in several fandoms on the platform, including

Harry Potter, Nine Inch Nails, and *Twin Peaks*. Like many others, I also enjoyed the

platform's openness to porn and sexuality, of all types. In general, it was a space I

enjoyed because I felt like I could be my rawest self and could find like-minded people to

interact with and follow. It was open and anonymous, so I could fashion my blog in

specific and intimate ways but with a certain amount of privacy. It was absolutely a far

different experience than what any other social media provided, and it brought new

concepts, ideas, words, and communities to my attention. It seems important to explain

this relationship I have with Tumblr, leading to my active participation in the *Steven*

Universe fandom. At this point, I am much more of an observer, without posting or

interacting very much. It seems natural, though, that this series and its fans have

coalesced on Tumblr. I have remained a participant-observer, as a member of the *Steven*

Universe fandom, though I enjoyed the show before I discovered the extent of its

representation on Tumblr. I perused relevant blogs, took notes on interesting posts and

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[15] Moreover, every Tumblr user I mention is pseudonymous, excluding Paige Paz.
[16] Kelley.

users, and searched through hashtags to observe various fan communities for my work here. While many fan scholars have had to contend with their own fandom in conjunction with their scholarship, leading to Henry Jenkins' use of the term 'acafan,' I follow Alex Doty, who argued that expressions of emotion and enthusiasm are not antithetical to the intellectual work we do. I see no obstacle in problematising the categories of 'fan' and 'academic' in ways that challenge the mistaken myth that criticism or analysis should not apply to what we are enthusiastic about, or that such enthusiasms preclude rigorous critique.

A note on methodology. In a somewhat unconventional approach, my object of study is not *Steven Universe* as a text, per se. Instead, my primary object is the social media platform of Tumblr. Platform studies tends to consider contemporary media platforms, from smartphones to websites. I am not interested in the material frameworks of platform studies, but the design and algorithmic logic of Tumblr will be significant, conducting what Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort called the "investigation of underlying computer systems and how they enable, constrain, shape, and support the creative work that is done on them," in their foundational book on platform studies, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*.[17] I intend to commit to Bogost and Montfort's definition, while acknowledging the need for more self-reflexivity and specificity in the field of platform studies, as called for by scholars such as Dale Leorke.[18] Therefore, I must make a clear distinction between fans, the individuals who enjoy something, and a fandom, the cultural and social community, in this case as it exists on Tumblr. My

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[17] Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009): vii.
[18] Dale Leorke, "Rebranding the platform: The limitations of 'platform studies,' *Digital Culture & Education* vol. 4, no. 3 (2012).

analysis, though it includes individuals, is about the *Steven Universe* fandom on Tumblr, and what they produce and experience there. Using the methodological framework of platform studies is a useful way for me to bring together different fields—fan studies, queer theory, publics,[19] digital media—in a clear-sighted consideration of this fandom. It should be noted, then, that my conclusions are not necessarily related to other fandoms, or other platforms.

This thesis has been organized according to the main theoretical aspects under study. In the first chapter, I analyze the series itself and the various and distinctive ways in which it is queer. What kind of difference does it make that many of its writers and animators are themselves queer? How does queerness become represented through the show's animation, and what does the medium of the cartoon offer? What about the narrative itself, with its queer characters and relationships? Ultimately, then, what are the political implications of this queer assemblage? In this chapter, I answer these questions through close analysis of certain moments in the series, aided by comments from its creators and relevant theories of queerness. Before we can understand some of the larger cultural machinations this series puts into motion, we must have a fundamental sense of what makes *Steven Universe* queer.

In the second chapter, I examine the show's fandom, and consider some of the most significant theories of fandom to date, particularly psychoanalysis, ontological security, and community formation. Each has elements that are useful, but it's difficult to

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[19] Previous work on publics has informed not only my own work, but also the work of theorists I cite elsewhere in this thesis. For example, Michael Warner's article "Publics and Counterpublics" (2002) has been foundational on the topic, describing what a public and a counterpublic are, and how we are all related to them and to other people as participants in modern society. Warner's explanation of counterpublics, as opposing dominant norms but inherently remaining a public all the same, is also key to later discussion of how publicness operates online. See also: Habermas, 1962; Fraser, 1990.

fully capture the scope of the *Steven Universe* fandom on a platform like Tumblr without merging, shifting, and fusing them together. The shape that forms of these fan communities is surprising, and reveals new ways of seeing the self when it comes to these strong affective fan investments.

Finally, in the third chapter, I bring these intermingling factors and phenomena together to outline an argument for Tumblr and the *Steven Universe* fandom as a unique but instructive convergence that has acted as a crucial outlet for queer youth in the modern digital age. Queer youth have always, in multifarious ways, struggled to assert some control over their identities. This is why the collective affect that I survey here is a compelling queer political project that is impacting today's queer youth in forms and conditions that we are only beginning to appreciate. In this chapter, I make an effort to begin that work and compel others to take the argument seriously.

From my perspective, academic work that takes the online expressions of youth with the appropriate rigor and intellectual honesty has been severely lacking. Frankly, I find that we tend to forget that teenagers and even children can and do have sharp political and cultural consciousnesses, which typically results in not taking their voices as worthy of sober and sincere engagement. This is a failure. Moreover, while plenty of work exists in relation to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, it is only recently that Tumblr has been treated with the same kind of tenacity and weight, by scholars such as Alexander Cho and Louisa Stein. This is an encouraging corrective, and it likewise suggests that until now, Tumblr, which has mostly been populated by various marginalized groups,[20] may have been ignored for political and ideological reasons. By

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[20] Jonno Revanche, "Tumblr was my saviour. It made me see I wasn't monstrous and unloveable," The Guardian, Aug. 23 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/tumblr-was-my-

bringing these under-theorized spaces together through a fluid configuration of queer fan

affect, this work intends to discover the changes taking place and look for the potential on

the horizon.

saviour-it-made-me-see-i-wasnt-monstrous-and-unloveable

1. Welcome to Beach City

1.1. A Different World

In the world of Steven Universe, no one is irredeemable. Antagonists do exist, but they are never beyond the potential arc of empathetic atonement. In the real world, it can be difficult to maintain that kind of optimism and positivity, which is what makes the Cartoon Network series named for this boy, who looks for the best in everyone he meets, all the more singular.

Steven is the son of Greg Universe, a rather bohemian musician and the owner of Beach City's car wash, and Rose Quartz, an alien who fell in love with Earth (and Greg) after rebelling against Gem Homeworld, ultimately leading to her death. When the series begins, Steven (who is therefore half-human, half-Gem) is desperate to join the Crystal Gems on their various missions, despite his inexperience and naïveté. Garnet, the group's de-facto leader following Rose's death, is respected and pragmatic, and usually encourages Steven to do his best and experiment with his burgeoning abilities. Amethyst, the youngest Gem, is a fiery and carefree spirit who struggles with a low opinion of herself, but is always prepared to indulge Steven's fun-loving side. Pearl, who continues to nurse an unrequited love for Rose, is extremely dedicated and a perfectionist, always intent on teaching Steven the right way of doing things. They call themselves the Crystal Gems, and have committed themselves to protecting Earth, their adopted planet, and its people.

Throughout its run, *Steven Universe* has received much praise (and some criticism) for its depiction of gender and sexuality, particularly as a show ostensibly intended for children. The physical Gems are, in fact, projections emanating from their gemstones.[21] They lack sexual dimorphism and are thus sexless, although most have human feminine physical characteristics, and happen to be voiced by female actors. They have no concept of gender (they reproduce through a process of artificial creation in facilities called Kindergartens), but do use she/her pronouns, seemingly arbitrarily. There are different types of Gems with their own specific attributes (Pearls, Rubies, Sapphires), and they have the special ability to "fuse" with each other in moments of need or passion, wherein they transform into another being altogether. Garnet, for example, is a fusion of a Ruby and a Sapphire who fell in love and have chosen to remain permanently fused, which is very uncommon. These aliens have been the site of explicit queer relationships and identities in a manner that is wholly unconventional and yet exists within a notable historical tradition of queer children's entertainment.

To understand the massive fandom around *Steven Universe*, we must first understand the series itself, and more importantly, the interventions that it has made culturally, socially, and politically. What has it actually accomplished for its queer fandom? In this chapter, I outline the various ways in which this is a queer series, by analyzing the queer and anti-normative elements of its animation, its authors, its narrative, and its politics. From there, some implications begin to take shape. My overall argument relies on an acknowledgement of *Steven Universe*'s unique queer appeal, an appeal that is related to the queerness of Tumblr and of fandom. As such, this chapter

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[21] They can technically project as anything (Amethyst, for example, often will play pranks on others by shapeshifting into strange beings or objects), but choose to take this form.

makes the argument that its conflux of queerness is exceptional and unique, so that we can move forward to its larger cultural reverberations.

The idea for the series originates from creator Rebecca Sugar's relationship with her brother, Steven Sugar (who is also a background artist on the show). Elements of Sugar's family, including her animation-loving graphic designer father, Rob, and her dance teacher mother, Helen, are peppered throughout the series and its characters, but the core was always Rebecca's feelings of affection and camaraderie toward her brother, harkening back to their days of collaborating on comics and other art as children. Sugar studied animation at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City, where she met her now-partner and *Steven Universe* writer/animator Ian Jones-Quartey, and several other team members on the series, such as supervising director Kat Morris and storyboard artist Paul Villeco. Subsequently, Sugar was hired as a storyboard revisionist on *Adventure Time*, and soon enough, the team came together to work on Sugar's pitch to Cartoon Network for her own show.

As a child, Rebecca Sugar was inundated with the full range of animation's possibilities, thanks in large part to her father, who showed Sugar and her brother everything from Looney Tunes to the unfinished version of *Beauty and the Beast* with storyboards and rough animatics. It was never a mystery to them how these cartoons were put together, and who was pulling the strings. She explains in *Steven Universe: Art & Origins*: "I suppose a big thing we learned from Dad was that cartoons aren't necessarily for kids….I felt like that was part of becoming an adult—understanding and appreciating

a very well-made cartoon."[22] Unsurprisingly, *Steven Universe* has been unafraid to tackle

adult themes and unconventional storylines for a children's cartoon.

The most significant example of this is the show's expansive embrace of

queerness. As Sugar said in an interview, "I think that by excluding LGBT content from

children's media, a clear statement is being made that this is something that should be

ignored, and that people who are feeling this, their feelings should be ignored, they

should be ignored. And I think that that is wrong."[23] As I hope I have made clear in my

introduction, I am moved by and interested in theories of queerness that interrogate the

confrontation between identity and politics. I will return to the many examples of how

this is expressed in the series itself, but for now it is equally crucial for me to explain how

I am approaching queerness, as portrayed in the introduction, as it relates to childhood.

Due to the fact that children are inherently unformed, I agree with theorists such as Ellis

Hanson who writes, "Children are queer. Their sexual behaviour and their sexual

knowledge are subjected to an unusually intense normalizing surveillance, discipline, and

repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority."[24] Writers like Hanson

are playing with matches when it comes to queering and sexualizing children. But aside

from misplaced and irrelevant fears that sexual identities can be 'learned' or 'taught', it is

worth wondering what it means to say that children are queer. Kevin Ohi understands that

"to argue that all children are queer, then, is not to argue that all children feel same-sex

desire (which, for all I know, they do). Rather, it is to suggest that childhood marks a

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[22] Chris McDonnell, *Steven Universe: Art & Origins* (New York: Abrams, 2017): 14.

[23] Corinne Segal, "Rebecca Sugar, Cartoon Network's first female creator, on writing LGBTQ stories for kids," PBS NewsHour, Sept. 4 2016. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/rebecca-sugar-steven-universe-lgtbq

[24] Ellis Hanson, "Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, eds. Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 110.

similar locus of impossibility."[25] This impossibility of (dis)identification is linked to the

availability of the child, as a figure, to be malleable and elastic. To call children queer,

then, is to call them oppositionally amorphous. They signify queerness, and "they do

what children are thought to do in their most romantic, if not cheesy, idealizations: they

are playful, they are imaginative, and they are suggestive."[26] Bring the child together with

animation, an equally formless and imaginative medium, and the possibilities are

limitless.

1.2. Queer Authorship and Animation

Rebecca Sugar has made it clear that *Steven Universe*'s queerness is not subtext—

it is unambiguously text. This assertive queer authorship is the first indication that this

series is sui generis in its queerness. To be clear, I am by no means arguing that we must

take an author's word for it—the rest of this chapter is devoted to articulating how this

queerness is actually present in the series, and how authorial proclamations are not

necessary to find it. However, since a significant part of my analysis focuses on how the

fandom relates to the series and its creators, it seems important to describe how the

creators relate to their art. At San Diego Comic-Con in 2016 (where Sugar also publicly

came out as bisexual), Sugar explained the show's dedication to queer themes:

> These things have so much to do with who you are, and there's this idea
> that these are themes that should not be shared with kids, but everyone
> shares stories about love and attraction with kids. So many stories for kids

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[25] Kevin Ohi, "Narrating the Child's Queerness in *What Maisie Knew*," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, eds. Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 82.
[26] Michael Cobb, "Childlike: Queer Theory and Its Children," *Criticism* 47, no. 1 (2005): 128.

are about love, and it really makes a difference to hear stories about how someone like you can be loved and if you don't hear those stories it will change who you are. It's very important to me that we speak to kids about consent and we speak to kids about identity and that we speak to kids about so much. I want to feel like I exist and I want everyone else who wants to feel that way to feel that way, too.[27]

Reading through fan content for the series, it is clear that the show has had Sugar's desired effect. People, young and old, write on blogs and social media of feeling seen in ways they have never been able to before, especially within an artistic space (animation) that tends to be more heteronormative and conventional.

But has children's animation really been so traditional in the past? While it is undoubtedly true that some groups (parents, religious groups, businesses, etc.) hold children's entertainment under tighter scrutiny in order to facilitate perceived moral growth in developing minds, it is also contradictorily true that animation intended for children has long been a space for queerness, sexuality, and difference to exist. Think of Bugs Bunny's frequent drag performances, playing with the fluidity of gender, or Pinky and the Brain's sexually-charged tit-for-tat dialogue. Roland Barthes argued that every image is capable of limitless meanings and that authors work to fix the signifiers as closely as they're able to. Jeffrey P. Dennis builds on this general concept by applying it to animation: "Signs are necessarily unfixed, especially in cartoons, which build on inference….In sophisticated eras, animators can introject, and audiences can decode, overt signs of same-sex desire, and even specifically gay-identified characters."[28] Naturally, these animators are working under constraints and limits on what they can get

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[27] Mey Rude, "Rebecca Sugar is Bisexual: 'Steven Universe' Creator Comes Out at Comic-Con," Autostraddle, Jul. 22 2016. https://www.autostraddle.com/rebecca-sugar-is-bisexual-steven-universe-creator-comes-out-at-comic-con-346094/

[28] Jeffery P. Dennis, "'The Same Thing We Do Every Night': Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Cartoons," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 31, no. 3, Fall 2003: 132-133.

away with, but the medium of animation seems especially attuned to handling these

signifiers.

Animation is inherently artificial, wholly diegetic worlds that are only as

representative as the artists choose them to be. Animation is therefore unfixed and

endlessly malleable. Even in an age of highly-detailed computer-generated images, these

animated characters must lack a certain subtlety to serve the rapidity of the story (to some

extent surely due to childrens' desire for excitement and disinterest in exposition). In a

way that seems heightened for cartoons, they put forward what Dennis calls "likely

meanings," vague contexts of presentation that are imprecise by design. As he writes,

"the very fluidity of the cartoon form allows the medium a unique place for the

subversion of not only gender but friendship, love, desire, and identity itself."[29] Think of

how often, for example, animated characters contort themselves in ways that living

creatures never could. Eyes bulge out of faces to express interest. Hearts burst from

torsos to signify desire, stress, or fear. The Gems in *Steven Universe* can fuse together to

form a new entity altogether, fluid matter mixing and creating and becoming.

Moreover, and further pushing the anti-normativity of animation, cartoon

characters of the same sex have often historically been placed into situations that

welcome queer readings, from sharing a living space or bed to participating in events as a

couple. Think of Yogi Bear and Boo Boo on *The Yogi Bear Show* (1961—1962), always

together and housemates, or Rocky and Bullwinkle (1959—1964), best friends and stable

partners. Dennis notes that Western cartoons in the 1970s and 80s became "aggressively

heterosexual," reflecting a conflicted cultural moment during the Reagan era in which it

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[29] Dennis, 133.

was in the interest of producers to defuse any possible queer readings (*He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* [1983—1985], for example). By the 1990s, this began to change, with subtexts both friendly (Pinky and the Brain, legitimately coded with queer erotic desire) and not (Ren and Stimpy, who parodize homosexuality for laughs). We ultimately reach the era of SpongeBob Squarepants and Patrick Star, long the basis of queer readings and internet memes (illustration 1).

Illustration 1 - Meme (creator unknown) implying SpongeBob and Patrick's homosexuality.

Like many pairs before them, SpongeBob and Patrick are never *explicitly* queer in the show, but have been at the centre of a small but vocal queer fandom. Heather Hendershot has said the show "parodies masculinity and features the most 'out' gay character on children's television," at least at the time, referring to SpongeBob.[30] Interpretation and representation is always fluid to some degree, but cartoons have been a fertile site for malleability.

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[30] Heather Hendershot, "Nickelodeon's Nautical Nonsense: The Intergenerational Appeal of *SpongeBob SquarePants*," *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids* (New York: NYU Press, 2004): 197.

Within this historical tradition comes *Steven Universe*, a series predicated on inclusivity, liberation, and understanding.[31] Since debuting in 2013, the show has grown bolder in its depiction of various identities and their instability. In an interview for *Steven Universe: Art & Origins*, Sugar explains, "The point of the simpler [character] models is that they allow for flexibility and inconsistency, which is what we want. We want the artists to be able to push the characters in different directions freely without being distracted by tracking the superfluous details of an over-complex design."[32] Without putting too fine of a point on it, the fluidity of the cartoon as a medium is the perfect territory for exploring the fluidity of identity, sexuality, and gender. This occurs in *Steven Universe* through this artistic inconstancy and the bright, buoyant art style, which recalls the colour palettes, vibrancy, and flexibility of Japanese anime and video games like *Yoshi's Island* and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.[33] The clearest example, though, is fusion, which treats the bodies of not only the Gems but potentially anyone as intrinsically transformable, with the capacity to merge and become an agender convergence of identities. In many episodes, at least two characters will fuse, showcasing the inconsistency of bodies and their ability to change. Each body has the potential for transformation.

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[31] It's also worth noting that music plays a major role in the series as a storytelling device. Many episodes feature different characters singing, almost always diegetically, and oftentimes these songs have them sharing queer feelings that they otherwise hadn't expressed (such as Pearl's song "It's Over Isn't It" in the episode "Mr. Greg"). Further research should be done on analyzing the queerness of *Steven Universe*'s music.

[32] McDonnell, 81.

[33] Chelsea Stark, "Steven Universe creator's influences run from Zelda to Busby 3D," Polygon, Jun. 1 2017. https://www.polygon.com/2017/6/1/15722138/steven-universe-rebecca-sugar-interview-save-the-light

1.3. Queer Narrative and Politics

Steven Universe's narrative is a strong resource for queer analysis, with evolving characters and relationships meeting thematic concerns that all push for both familiar and unfamiliar queer changes. Recalling the formative work of scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Lee Edelman referred to in my introduction, Claudia Castañeda notes that "it is not simply that 'the child' is a sign, category, or representation that can be read in multiple ways. What is distinctive about the child is that it has the capacity for transformation."[34] Together with the other theories of queerness outlined in the introduction, I find this to be at the centre of *Steven Universe*'s ethos, with no use for Edelman's defeatist death drive. Steven himself acts as the clearest steward of this perspective. He is optimistic not only about life in general, but about everyone he encounters—even apparent villains. One of the show's driving forces and themes is this belief in redemption, rehabilitation, and goodness. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Sugar explained, "It's a fantasy show. I think it's a fantasy that no one is truly evil. I don't know if that's true in reality, but it's certainly true in my fantasy. Why wouldn't it be?"[35] In an interview with *Paste*, she explained how this point of view has evolved: "We're writing a story about how love conquers all, and how the support is necessary, but you can't tell that story without showing what is coming up against that….It's scary to start to explore where hate comes from in a show about love. It's a challenge to stay positive

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[34] Claudia Castañeda, "Introduction," *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 2.

[35] Eric Thurm, "'Steven Universe': How Rebecca Sugar Turned TV's Most Empathetic Cartoon Into an Empire," *Rolling Stone*, Jun. 7 2017. http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/rebecca-sugars-steven-universe-is-a-cartoon-empire-w485887

while exploring that. But that's a challenge I experience in life."[36] Most initial antagonists

on the series go through an arc of redemption, often encountering Steven's insistent

kindness and tolerance (and the love of his family and friends) and evolving from their

evil ways into more complex, encouraging characters. The figure of the (queer) child,

whether embodied by Steven himself or imagined in the show's audience, is available for

identification but also for metamorphosis and remaking.

Steven lives not with his father, but with the Crystal Gems in a spacious beach

house. Though his relationship with his father is somewhat complicated, there is clearly

mutual love between them, which makes Steven's living situation available for closer

reading. The Gems are Steven's chosen family, a common queer construct. A family of

choice exists counter to the dominant, heteronormative concept of family. And yet,

calling the Crystal Gems "chosen" implies that we witness Steven make a choice to live

apart from his father and with his alternative family instead, but we do not. This

arrangement is already in place when the series begins, and for all we know, has been the

case for as long as Steven remembers. For all intents and purposes, the Crystal Gems are

not Steven's chosen family—they *are* his family. In this way, Steven and the Gems are a

family beyond choice, living in what Samuel A. Chambers calls "relations of intimacy,

responsibility, support and commitment," as family is something that isn't chosen but

cannot be denied.[37] Thinking of the political implications of this conceptualization, I

would argue that *Steven Universe* is rejecting the heteronormative binary of blood-related

families and chosen, alternative families for a *queer family*. By this, I mean to suggest

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[36] Zach Blumenfeld, "Comic-Con: Rebecca Sugar on *Steven Universe*'s Emmy Nomination and Rejecting Gendered TV for Kids," Paste, Jul. 25 2017. https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/07/comic-con-rebecca-sugar-on-steven-universes-emmy-n.html

[37] Chambers, 156.

that rather than reify the binarism of family, *Steven Universe* is engaging in a queer

project of rethinking 'family' as relationships without question. The Gems can't help but

be Steven's family.

There are many queer relationships in the series, from Ruby and Sapphire to

Pearl's love for Rose. There is no assumption of any character's sexuality, with an

openness to more traditional (hetero) love stories, like that of Lars and Sadie, Steven's

human friends who work together at Beach City's donut shop. We see a variety of

relationships and their own specific dynamics, and a narrative which generally leaves

options open and allows characters to transform their sense of self. For example, in the

episode "Last One Out of Beach City," Pearl finally makes an effort to get over her

feelings for Rose by going to a rock concert with Steven and Amethyst, and subsequently

flirting with and trying to impress a human woman (who also happens to look like Rose

—baby steps).

This theme of transformation is central to the mythos of the series with the

concept of 'fusion'. Usually initiated by a dance or a moment of profound emotional

harmony (unless the fusion is not consensual), a fusion is the result of two Gems

transforming into an entirely new entity. As Garnet describes it: "First you need a gem at

the core of your being. Then you need a body that can turn into light. Then you need a

partner you can trust with that light."[38] It is an act of love and trust. While some fusions

are romantic, like Garnet, others simply represent whatever relationship exists between

the two Gems. The new entity is not two minds sharing one body, but instead a single

body and mind that is the expression and physical manifestation of the love and mutual

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[38] From the season two episode, "We Need To Talk".

understanding between the two original Gems. However, when a fusion is forced or is built on a foundation of hate, it is unstable and prone to being destructive. For example, Malachite is a fusion between Jasper, an evil Gem, and Lapis Lazuli, a benevolent Gem who only agrees to fuse to stop Jasper's wrath. Jasper coerces Lapis, and physically grabs her until she agrees to fuse. Because it is a fusion based in anger, their individual traits do battle for control of Malachite rather than merging together, and the visual result resembles body horror more than other fusions. Notably, there is a long history in horror cinema and elsewhere of queer desire itself being coded as monstrous, and some fusions are performing what Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris describe as making "the monstrous intelligible in creatively queer expressions of genders and sexualities and continue the project of disrupting the heteronormative centre in productively monstrous ways."[39] Malachite seems to reveal the potential for abuse within queer relationships, and interestingly she is introduced in "Jail Break," the same episode wherein Garnet is revealed to be a fusion of Ruby and Sapphire, perhaps offering intentional comparative examples of a strong, trusting queer relationship and a non-consensual, toxic one through the fusion of these queer alien bodies.

Sugar says, "It's exciting to be able to show kids the compelling, kinetic power of a really positive relationship….The series also portrays a variety of LGBTQIA+ identities, body shapes, and hues of skin in a colorful, sci-fi-magic display of diversity."[40] Animator and writer Lauren Zuke adds:

> When discussing gender expression and identity as it relates to fusion,
> the metaphor I'm going for is that for some people—not all, of course—

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[39] Stacy Holman Jones & Anne Harris, "Monsters, desire and the creative queer body," *Continuum* 30, no. 5 (2016): 519.
[40] McConnell, 128.

finding and accepting their gender is not a transformation with a defined end point, but an experience and a journey. That's what fusion is to me, at least. Personally, I'm happy to not have to think, "I'm writing a character based on my queer experiences." [*Laughs.*] That would be so hard! I'm just writing from my perspective, and I happen to be queer. I think that's what makes the show feel natural when it comes to that.[41]

Zuke and Sugar acknowledge that the themes that they are intent on exploring are informed by their own identities, so the show's characters and situations feel intuitive. Moreover, much of the show's queer politics and playfulness get expressed through fusion and its representation of relationships, as a deliberate strategy to explore LGBTQ+ themes in content for kids. In an interview with PBS NewsHour, Sugar said, "I'm glad that we've found a new way to talk about relationships that's letting us talk about those [LGBTQ+] relationships….What you learn as a kid when you don't see any of those stories or relate to any of those stories, is that you are denied the dream of love."[42] Fusion, in other words, is a science-fiction creation that acts as a narrative tool for investigating queer relationships. For example, the importance of consent is made clear, particularly through the aforementioned story of Malachite, which underlines how queer relationships, too, can be abusive and built on mistrust and aggression (Jasper begs Lapis: "I've changed!"). Fusion is also about open communication, and taking the time to always understand what the other person in a relationship is feeling. Sugar adds, "Our bond could be stronger, or weaker, depending on whether or not I care about what's going on and respect what's going on with my partner."[43]

In the early episode "Giant Woman," Steven sings a song by the same name (written by Sugar) which goes like this:

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[41] McConnell, 128.
[42] Segal.
[43] Segal.

> Oh I know it'll be great and I just can't wait to see the person you
> are together
> If you give it a chance, you could do a huge dance because you are a
> giant woman
> You might even like being together and if you don't, it won't be
> forever

He's trying to convince Pearl and Amethyst to fuse together after being told what fusion is. As Eli Dunn notes about this song, "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."[44] For Dunn, fusions represent how trans or (more specifically in this case) agender or genderqueer identities can *thrive* within the boundaries of a fantastical cartoon, laying the groundwork for a more universal understanding outside those confines. This queer project is completed through the complete separation of gender from sexual orientation and gender presentation through the Gems, as their physical bodies are not only able to shapeshift at will but are ultimately "only an illusion," according to Garnet.[45] As Dunn argues, *Steven Universe* takes advantage of the fact that viewers expect some amount of malleability in cartoon bodies in order to undermine any possible relation between gender identity and sexuality and presentation.

Garnet herself is the strongest example of this, as a romantic relationship lived as a single consciousness completely outside of any gender binary. It's worth noting that on Gem Homeworld, fusions are seen as abominations, an inappropriate misuse of Gems' non-corporeal essence. Perhaps this is due to fusion's inherent intimacy (when Garnet and Amethyst fuse in front of Steven for the first time, Pearl instinctually shields his

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[44] Eli Dunn, "*Steven Universe*, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnivalesque," *Gender Forum* 56 (2016): 44.
[45] As she says in the episode "Fusion Cuisine."

young eyes from their desirous synchronized dance). Or it may be a metaphor for deviant behaviour in general, helpfully coding fusion itself as queer, as a manifestation of "unnatural" relationships, further positioning the Crystal Gems as beings wholly independent from normative structures of gender and sex and central to the series' queer utopia.

1.4. Ebullient Youth: On Gender Norms

There is much to admire about Steven Universe, the boy. Positive, flamboyant, eager, excitable. These characteristics have been consistent, while others, such as his naïveté and self-consciousness, have evolved throughout the show's run. He often struggles with feelings of inferiority as he confronts the complicated legacy of his Crystal Gem mother, Rose Quartz. Rose was a formidable force of charisma and kindness, but she was also a warrior who led the Gems in their rebellion against Gem Homeworld and made some fateful decisions. After Rose and the other Crystal Gems escaped Homeworld and arrived on Earth, Rose became fascinated with humans, and with their natural individuality. On Homeworld, Gems have little control over their own identities and are forced into certain roles (sound like a metaphor?). While Homeworld Gems have unique personalities, individuality is not important there, as each Gem has their role to support the collective whole, though all in service of a quasi-authoritarian quartet of Diamond Gems. Rose was enamoured with humans' ability to be fluid, expressive, and constantly free to redefine themselves.

Illustration 2 - Steven performing in the season two episode "Sadie's Song" (Cartoon Network).

Her half-human son Steven is an expression of this fluidity. He embodies this in many ways (Rose literally lives through him, as he inherited her pink Gem), but perhaps chief among them is his gender-nonconforming behaviour and appearance (see illustration 2). He often acts with generosity and vulnerability, often letting tears fly freely and always encouraging others to share their feelings. He is committed to helping others reveal their true selves, and to the freedom of expression. Sugar has noted that children's television is traditionally (give or take a Bugs Bunny) extremely gendered. Certain shows are aimed at only one gender, and even on those that aren't tend to follow the same prescribed norms for characters and storylines. Sugar outlines the deliberate nature of her counter-approach:

> One of the things I really wanted to do as I went into this show was address how intensely gendered shows for children are and dissolve that. That was my first goal. And I think it came in large part because as a little kid, I always gravitated toward boys' shows and I felt extremely guilty about that. And I don't feel like my child self should've had to feel bad, but I understood that this is not really for me. And so when we went into this, I wanted no one to have to feel that feeling. I wanted everyone to feel like if they wanted to feel it, then this was for them. Especially in terms of it being gender-nonconforming as a show.[46]

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[46] Blumenfeld.

Steven both embraces femininity and subverts traditional masculinity, blurring the binary lines of gender norms. Steven is an example to young and old audience members alike that the project of the self is never complete and always in flux, and that his masculinity does not need to be normative. Robyn R. Warhol explains how important it is to make a distinction between sex and gender and how we talk about each: "My purpose is to…. detach the 'natural' connection between (bodily) sex and (cultural) gender. By 'gender' I mean the styles, the looks, the moves, the gestures, the postures, the inflections, and the touches that mainstream American culture has enforced and reinforced as appropriate to women's bodies or to men's."[47] For far too long, even in feminist and queer studies, gender and sex have been used interchangeably, or conflated, or thought of as inherently intertwined. It is not enough to simply suggest that gender is culturally constructed while sex is biological. Sex, as Warhol notes, can be constructed in the same way, and that gender is more of a "process" and an "effect of cultural patterning that always has some relationship to the subject's 'sex' but never a predictable or fixed one."[48] Warhol gestures toward the erasure of binarisms when discussing gender or sex in general, so as to more specifically describe effeminacy and better understand why weakness is associated with femininity, and how to rehabilitate this feeling from its derogatory status. I see *Steven Universe* operating under similar governing principles.

Steven Universe, the boy, blurs the supposedly rigid distinction between presentation and physicality through his performance of masculinity and femininity. Meanwhile, the Crystal Gems themselves are defiant rejections. They present feminine

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[47] Robyn R. Warhol, "Introduction: Effeminacy, Feelings, Forms," *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop Cultural Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003): 2.
[48] Warhol, 4.

characteristics, but are sexless beings. As a species, they lack sexual dimorphism, with Steven as the only exception due to his humanity and maleness. As Sugar herself described during a Reddit AMA, "Technically, there are no female Gems! There are only Gems!"[49] I would argue that this frees the Gems to not only subvert gender expectations, but also to explore their feelings more seriously than most children's entertainment allows. For example, their queer relationships are not necessarily beholden to prescriptions of gender, meaning they have an uncannily unique ability to "question, problematise, or even disclaim the very idea of a fixed, abiding notion of identity," as Samuel A. Chambers described the aims of his own queer theory.[50]

For me, the fact of the Gems having no relationship to a "naturalness" of gender or sexuality affords them a greater queer meaning, the extreme outliers that exist outside of the binary norms we are accustomed to and radically disturb them. Indeed, if one looks critically at gay series such as *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006, 2017-) or *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000-2005), you would find that they are far less "queer" in this sense than you might expect. These series exist counter to a culture of heteronormativity, yet help to sustain it with their insistent opposition. While there is something to be said about undermining cultural phenomena "from within," so to speak, these series are not interested in truly upending traditional notions of representation or engaging in transformative cultural politics. *Steven Universe*, on the other hand, is explicitly about rethinking hegemonic concepts of inherent qualities and identities, and then presenting this reworking as unconditionally natural.

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[49] Rebecca Sugar, "I am Rebecca Sugar, creator of Steven Universe, and former Adventure Time storyboarder, AMA!", Reddit, 2014. https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2e4gmx/i_am_rebecca_sugar_creator_of_steven_universe_and/cjw8e1p/

[50] Chambers, 13.

1.5. Queer Implications

It's important to contextualize all of this by remembering that *Steven Universe* is

a children's cartoon, and not only nominally. Originally developed by Cartoon Network

as part of their core 8-to-12 demographic (within a timeslot in the evening that routinely

ranks as #1 on television for kids and boys aged 2 to 12), it is also abundantly clear that it

has a massive following that falls well outside of that marketing strategy, and this is

likely by design. It is also hardly a new phenomenon, as Karen Lury explains:

> 'Children's' programs may never have been formally restricted to the child
> audience, but it is clear that niche channels have been part of the process by
> which certain programmes openly attract late teen and adult audiences. Thus,
> the most popular characters are increasingly available to diverse audiences….
> This previously covert audience and market has become more visible,
> unabashed and acknowledged…. This can be seen in many of the
> programmes' 'knowing' or dual address.[51]

This dual address, at least when Lury was writing in 2002, tended to consist of guest stars

or references that would go over kids' heads (she mentions a Donny Osmond reference

on *Johnny Bravo* as an example) without taking them out of the experience or confusing

them. What Lury was noticing at the dawn of the twenty-first century, particularly with

the emergence and growing popularity of niche children's channels like Cartoon Network

and Nickelodeon, was what she describes as "the erosion of temporal and aesthetic

boundaries between children's 'television culture' and adult or teen viewing pleasure."[52]

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[51] Karen Lury, "A Time and Place for Everything: Children's Channels," in *Small Screens: Television For Children*, ed. David Buckingham (London/New York: Leicester University Press, 2002), 17.
[52] Lury, 15.

Fast forward by more than a decade and these boundaries seem to no longer exist, at least in practice, with greater choice and convenience, plus the blurring of video content divisions generally. For the most part, Lury was describing content and jokes in children's television that was supposedly intended to reach out to parents or guardians who may be watching along with their children. Now, this dual address has evolved to include older teenagers and adults who do not have children and are watching for their own enjoyment. These viewers have surely always existed, but what has changed is the address from both creators and marketers, along with greater opportunity for these viewers to voice and express their admiration, largely online.

As Jacqueline Ristola notes, Cartoon Network is rather unique in its aims as a network, as its "focus is on the specific art form of animation, a direction that has expanded its audience reach from just one demographic due to the elimination of the 'just for kids' mentality in regards to animation."[53] Particularly through the night-time programming block known as Adult Swim, which began in 2001 and targets teenagers and young adults, Cartoon Network has played a crucial role in expanding the appeal of animation to all demographics. As the network (and others) help to blur these lines, it becomes less clear which series are "intended" for whom. According to a fan poll conducted in 2015 on Reddit of over 1000 respondents, the average age of a *Steven Universe* fan was 22, while the youngest (again, out of Reddit users) was 13 and the oldest around 50.[54] 57.5 percent of respondents identified as male, and more than half identified as something other than heterosexual. And in press releases, Cartoon Network

[53] Jacqueline Ristola, "Maturing Animation on Cartoon Network," Animation Studies 2.0, Nov. 27 2015. https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=1318

[54] Reddit fan poll, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1BK5i--rLPDyZsYejyWG2jfUFMzuzMOB8A6DhAwdHDQY/edit#gid=1768959730

has regularly claimed that *Steven Universe* ranks at #1 in its time slot among targeted

kids and boys.[55]

Shows like *Steven Universe*, which is not an Adult Swim series, seem to exist as

liminal texts in terms of its audience and reception. However, its political and social

content must have something to do with its wide-ranging, demographically-agnostic

success. According to Lauren Maier, an animation and gender scholar, "Many

communities, feminist and queer communities in particular, embrace the show [*Steven

Universe*] partly because this is the kind of media they wish they'd had as children."[56]

This suggests that it may serve some kind of reparative function, as a corrective to the

sexist, heteronormative cartoons they grew up with instead. While this may certainly play

an important role, it still suggests that they view the series in the subject position of a

child, whereas I believe that teenagers and adults need not de-age themselves in order to

find value or perform identity work through a series like *Steven Universe*. Maier admits:

"*Steven Universe* does not talk down to kids or assume that any subject is 'too much' for

them to handle. [Rebecca] Sugar and her team trust that kids can deal with heavy, adult

themes and write accordingly, empowering younger audiences to engage with their

society and offering *fresh, new perspectives* to adults."[57]

As *Steven Universe* animator Lamar Abrams explains, "People let their guard

down when they watch cartoons….So maybe they're put in a place to be a bit more

receptive to what goes on on-screen. If a cartoon can challenge your perceptions or the

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[55] TV By The Numbers, "'Adventure Time', 'Regular Show', 'Uncle Grandpa', 'Steven Universe' & 'Clarence' Renewed by Cartoon Network," July 7 2015. http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/press-releases/adventure-time-regular-show-uncle-grandpa-steven-universe-clarence-renewed-by-cartoon-network/

[56] Lauren Maier, "The adult appeal of 'Steven Universe'," Animation Studies 2.0, Dec. 2 2015. https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=1325

[57] Maier, emphasis mine.

way you think about anything, then that's a good cartoon."[58] Ben Levin, a writer with the show, says that keeping everything within Steven's perspective helps to ground everything for them and the imagined audience. Many of the other (older) characters are dealing with complex issues and emotions, from abusive partners to post-trauma stress, so "by funneling everything through Steven's perspective, we can talk about those complexities in a way that makes sense to kids."[59] Steven, like many kids, treats every situation like it is the most important thing in the world. He takes everyone at face value and accepts them, almost as if he exists as the utopian ideal of human interaction. Moreover, the way the series treats gender and other issues is intentionally aspirational. The writers talk often about the show's idealized atmosphere, how it presents the world as it should be. Capturing the kind and gentle spirit of, say, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, children watching *Steven Universe* are immersed in Steven's positive perspective at all times, engaging imaginatively with his paradisal universe.

Taking this notion further, consider the recent history of queer and anti-normative sexualities in children's animation. "What Was Missing," an episode from the third season of Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time*, was co-written by Rebecca Sugar, who would soon go on to create *Steven Universe*. The episode stirred some controversy by strongly implying a past lesbian relationship between two of the main characters, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum. The resulting minefield of debate highlighted how children's entertainment is still held to a different cultural standard. Eventually, Marceline's voice actor, Olivia Olson, said that because the series airs in some regions where homosexuality is illegal, they were not able to officially confirm the relationship

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[58] McConnell, 85.
[59] McConnell, 115.

within the series.[60] Even if American writers want to engage with more identities on their

shows, they are faced with the excuse from their networks that their content must appease

all markets.

The Hub Network/Discovery Family series *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*

is another contemporary example, as a series more clearly and straightforwardly intended

for (primarily female) children having developed a remarkably intense older (male) and

sometimes queer fandom. Many older male fans, for example, identify as "bronies," a

group that at times appears to be ironic and at others to be entirely sincere, grappling with

traditional understandings of masculinity and heteronormativity. It's a project that is

queer in its rejection of these normative structures, but one that has been deeply

diagnosed and demarcated. Bronies have been the subject of mainstream cultural

coverage in a way that no other fandom normally is. In the same way that some people

only know of *Steven Universe* through the negative mainstream coverage of its fandom

and their activities, far more people know of *My Little Pony* purely through their

knowledge of bronies than anything about the show itself. Bronies capture public interest

because it's easy to characterize them not only as social misfits, but as potential sexual

predators (with some counter-coverage focusing instead on their genuine interest and

love of the show). There must be *something* wrong with them, right? As Anne Gilbert

explains:

> [H]ow bronies are framed in mainstream news coverage indicates that
> popular appreciation for fandom is constrained in ways that limit fans'
> value as cultural producers to a narrow range of normative identities.
> Outsider coverage of bronies provides a case study of how implicit
> preconceptions of media consumption, sexuality, masculinity, and

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[60] Bill Bradley, "'Adventure Time' Actress Confirms That Big Rumor We All Suspected," The Huffington Post, Aug. 15 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/15/adventure-time-rumor_n_5681894.html

children's media contribute to privileging particular fan identities and containing any subversive potential of alternate modes of cultural participation.[61]

These fans are pathologized by the media and divided up into two groups, normal or deviant. Gilbert notes that deeply feminized fandoms are usually ignored, and despite the many adult female fans of *My Little Pony*, the adult male bronies are the only reason the media pays attention. Undoubtedly, bronies challenge normative gender and sexual conventions, and their participatory community contributes to their sense of identity. But it seems problematic that the adult male fans, those used to being afforded power and capital in their cultural choices, are the only ones to engender this kind of phenomenon.

It seems regressive, in any case, for this kind of social response to remain attached to stories about fandom. Reading critiques of bronies reveals less about specifics than about broader biases against fan practices. Gilbert clarifies, "Bronies are, in effect, simply the latest case study of fan pathology."[62] Fans and their practices have long been treated in the mainstream as intrinsically deviant. Gilbert points to Joli Jenson, who argued that fans are pathologized as to be compensating "for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition," and that is commonly assumed that there is a "thin line between 'normal' and excessive fandom."[63] Bronies surely represent a rather unique fannish situation, but they also help to understand how fans are typically understood and how cross-generational fandom is routinely pathologized.

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[61] Anne Gilbert, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Bronies," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 20 (2015).

[62] Gilbert.

[63] Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis. London: Routledge, 1992.

Steven Universe, which has been far more explicit with its queer relationships
than *Adventure Time* or other cartoons, has also been at the centre of several
controversies of its own, including in early 2016, when Cartoon Network UK chose to
censor one of the show's more explicitly queer moments in the episode "We Need to
Talk" (which was also fully banned in Turkey). Pearl brazenly embraces Rose Quartz,
playing up their closeness by appearing to be nearly kissing, in a clear attempt to make
Greg jealous (illustration 3).

Illustration 3 - Pearl embraces Rose in the episode "We Need to Talk" (Cartoon Network)

After the censorship caused some of the show's fandom to criticize the decision and start
a petition against the choice, the network said in a statement: "In the UK, we have to
ensure everything on air is suitable for kids of any age at any time. We do feel that the
slightly edited version is more comfortable for local kids and their parents."[64]
Considering Cartoon Network's general commitment to the series and its inherent

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[64] Nick Duffy, "Cartoon Network 'censored' intimate lesbian dance from Steven Universe UK broadcast," Pink News, Jan. 5 2016. http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2016/01/05/cartoon-network-censored-intimate-lesbian-dance-for-uk-broadcast/

progressivism, this reasoning struck many fans as insufficient (perhaps exposing the capitalist underpinnings of even transformative media), if not outright bizarre.

Steven Universe has been banned completely in Kenya and some other markets entirely due to its LGBTQ+ themes.[65] Likewise, the episode called "The Answer," which tells Ruby and Sapphire's origin story, depicting how they fell in love, has never aired in Russia due to that country's position on LGBTQ+ issues. "Hit the Diamond," an episode in which Ruby and Sapphire kiss each other, however briefly, was censored in Malaysia, and some romantic dialogue between the pair was dubbed over in Sweden. There are countless other examples of edited versions in various countries around the world, all documented on the *Steven Universe* Wiki.[66] Although the show has never been censored in North America, groups like Focus on the Family and Parents Television Council (PTC) routinely rail against LGBTQ+ representation in children's entertainment. In a 2011 study on cartoons, PTC gave Cartoon Network a failing grade and wrote that cartoons "can potentially trivialize and bring humor to adult themes and contribute to an atmosphere in which children view these depictions as normative and acceptable."[67] This sentiment might sound wonderful to some, but terrifying to them. Children's animation remains a contested moral space throughout the world, and I would argue that *Steven Universe* possesses a unique synthesis of queer elements, profoundly rewriting not only

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[65] Jennifer Anyango, "Films board bans six TV programs 'for promoting homosexuality'," Standard Digital, Jun. 15 2017. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2001243666/films-board-bans-six-tv-programs-for-promoting-homosexuality

[66] Steven Universe Wiki, "Censorship in Foreign Countries." http://steven-universe.wikia.com/wiki/Censorship_in_Foreign_Countries#cite_note-0

[67] Parents Television Council, "Cartoons Are No Laughing Matter: Sex, Drugs and Profanity on Primetime Animated Programs," 2011. http://w2.parentstv.org/main/MediaFiles/PDF/Studies/Final_AnimationStudy.pdf

the ambitions of representational progressivism on television but also the political

reverberations of cultural texts and the routine pathologization of queer fandoms.

2. How Should a Fan Be? The Collective Self

2.1. The Incident

On October 20, 2015 in Arizona, a then-20-year-old artist named Paige Paz posted on her Tumblr page a message that seemed to suggest she was going to commit suicide.

Based on videos she uploaded later, her attempt occurred in her kitchen, and she was subsequently taken to a hospital, and she avoided the internet for a few days while in recovery. Meanwhile, a firestorm brewed on Tumblr, widening to other social media platforms and ultimately into media stories by The Daily Dot, Motherboard, and even Breitbart News. The latter, a faux-journalistic beacon of white supremacists in the United States, is interesting, considering its headline: "SJWs Bullied A Young Artist Into A Suicide Attempt."[68] Indeed, while detailing her recovery process in a series of videos, Paz explained that after months of online harassment and bullying (mostly taking place on Tumblr), she made the decision to end her life.

The source of ire stemmed from Paz's fan art featuring characters from *Steven Universe*, and other cartoons. Paz would often restyle popular cartoon characters, and at times her versions were seen by the socially-conscious Tumblr community as problematic. For example, she would occasionally race-bend characters, like when she

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[68] SJWs, of course, referring to 'social justice warriors', a catch-all label meant (by them) to vilify liberal-minded people online or social activists.

made a pony from *My Little Pony* into a stereotypical Native American.[69] Motherboard

also notes a now-deleted piece of art where Paz apparently "stripped an afro off an alien

character perceived as black and replaced it with straight, blond hair," referring to *Steven*

Universe's Sardonyx, a fusion of Garnet and Pearl.[70] Perhaps most notorious, however,

was when Paz drew Rose Quartz as skinny.

The *Steven Universe* fan community on Tumblr, one of the largest fandoms on the

platform, was whipped into a fevered stir, arguing over whether this kind of interpretation

was appropriate. Paz received harassing messages daily, and over 40 blogs were created

to monitor Paz's activity on Tumblr and DeviantArt, a website for artists.[71] Some of these

blogs archived Paz's tweets, which the users considered to be politically incorrect.

Indeed, even after her attempted suicide, many users continued attacking her, and some

even accused Paz of faking it (Tumblr user yosakois in a now-deleted post: "why is the

'hospital bed' so poorly lit. why is she wearing scrubs???????? doesnt she kno its the

doctors who wear the scrubs not the patients j esus help me"[72]). The hysteria reached new

heights when former *Steven Universe* writer and artist Ian Jones-Quartey, according to

Fanlore, said in a soon-deleted tweet that artists should be allowed to draw what they

want.[73] Many people only know *Steven Universe* in relation to this incident, ironically

undermining the series' positivity, its utopian and tenderheartedness, with one of its

claims to mainstream fame being this horrible news story.

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[69] Paige Paz, Tumblr post. http://zamiio7o.tumblr.com/post/125515519690/satouusagi-zamii070-i-was-drawing-and-then-i

[70] Clinton Nguyen, "An Attempted Suicide Forced a Tumblr Community to Open Its Eyes About Bullying," Motherboard, Nov. 6 2015. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/3da838/an-attempted-suicide-forced-a-tumblr-community-to-open-its-eyes-about-bullying

[71] Nguyen.

[72] Nguyen.

[73] Fanlore, "Steven Universe," https://fanlore.org/wiki/Steven_Universe.

It didn't occur in a vacuum, however, and it would not be the only controversy to erupt within the *Steven Universe* fandom. For example, storyboard artist and writer Lauren Zuke once shared a piece of her own concept art which showed the characters of Lapis and Peridot to be romantically involved, and some of the fandom began harassing her. Some seemingly disagreed with that relationship in itself, particularly those invested in a relationship between Peridot and Amethyst, while others seemed angry that she was sharing that art without confirming it as canon or working it into the series itself (some accused her of queerbaiting). As a result, Zuke left Twitter in August of 2016 and, later, Tumblr. "I decided I don't want to be accessible to thousands of people who think because I work on a TV show that I owe them myself all the time," Zuke wrote in a now-deleted tweet, followed by, "remember that youre tweeting at a literal human being (thats what i am btw) and life exists outside of steven universe."[74] Around this time, rumours began to circulate within the fandom that Zuke and Rebecca Sugar hated each other. At some point in March of 2017, she posted a final message on her Tumblr which stated that four or five of her episodes were left to air, confirming that she had left the series.[75]

Online fandom is a world of disparate wants and uncontrollable emotions that can be difficult to fathom. *Steven Universe* offers a valuable text for analyzing how these (queer) fan networks negotiate identity and sociality, as one of the largest and most volatile fandoms. These are such dramatic spaces precisely because of how intimately fans associate themselves and their identities with their fan objects, so that they feel a sense of ownership over the text and their own interpretations and relationship with it.

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[74] Beth Elderkin, "*Steven Universe* Artist Quits Twitter Over Fan Harassment," i09, Aug. 13 2016. https://io9.gizmodo.com/steven-universe-artist-quits-twitter-over-fan-harassmen-1785242762

[75] https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/5ybyso/lauren_zuke_is_officially_gone_from_the_team/

Steven Universe is a text dedicated to inclusivity, and the fandom seems to occasionally struggle to match that pursuit, even when taking actions supposedly under that moral banner. Beyond that, however, communities built online grapple with the blurring between criticism and abuse, self and other, self and collective, creator and fan.

I argue that the eruptive passion of modern fandom, combined with its online expression, results in a variety of new identity formations and transformative methods of self-narrativization. Moreover, the way these dynamics play out in the online ecosystems of Tumblr, a rather unique and potent example, reveals much about the construction of the self, and the range of ardently impassioned audiences for what is ostensibly youth media. Though social policing occurs in other fandoms and on other platforms, this chapter is focused on rethinking how we have come to understand fandom, particularly in a Tumblr landscape that seems to offer greater freedom for young people to express themselves in often unfamiliar ways. By spending this chapter looking closely at precisely what the *Steven Universe* fans are up to on Tumblr, we'll come to see how this platform and this fandom have helped to shape the identities of many queer youth.

2.2. Theorizing Fandom

Drawing from a distinction first made by a user named obsession_inc on the website Dreamwidth, Jason Mittell wrote of two types of fans in his seminal book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, affirmational and transformational:

> Affirmational fans generally work to reinforce an author's vision (as they infer it) and canonical narrative content, fleshing out details through fan productions…. Transformational fans treat an original text not just as a canonical work to be appreciated on its own terms but also as the raw material for productive play, creating noncanonical extensions such as fanfic, fanvids, and other paratexts that frequently go against the presumed intentions of the original's creator.[76]

Of course, this binary, though useful in its clarity, is more complicated in practice, and this simplification has been criticized for allowing some fan scholars to explain a variety of frameworks through a riskily limited perspective.[77] On the other hand, one of the other dominant theories of fandom to this point is, perhaps unpredictably, psychoanalysis. Despite the general turn away from Sigmund Freud's theories throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is undeniable that psychoanalysis continues to pervade our culture and infect our social atmosphere. It makes sense to reckon with that convoluted and thorny legacy, as fan studies has, significantly through the influential work of Matt Hills. Hills reworked Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories to help explain fan attachments as multivalent, and to lead toward a more affective *psychosocial* understanding of what it means to be a fan. He uses this tactic to push *against* fan pathologization. Hills writes: "Psychoanalysis, in its Winnicottian and object-relations guise, has thus offered a way of taking seriously the emotional intensities of fandom without pathologizing them or, indeed, explaining them away as if they are the side

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[76] Jason Mittell, "Authorship," *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: NYU Press, 2015): 114-115.

[77] As explained in the various essays found in the edited collection *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity* (1998, Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, eds.), it has long been a function of fan studies to examine not only how fans express themselves, but why. Moreover, Harry M. Benshoff describes in his essay how "fannish activity… might [thus] be understood as nothing less than a microcosmic model of how society transforms itself," (217) which I think informs many of the theoretical frameworks discussed here.

effects of something else, e.g. identification, resistance, familiarity or pleasures of genre."[78] Hills argues that the process of Othering (with aggression) between different groups, and therefore different fan communities, has intensified in the digital age, and so "fandom's affective relations of love, hate and ambivalence - frequently dramatically performed via social media - offer one window on these psychosocial processes."[79]

This has a striking implication for the collective affect felt on social media, and specifically on Tumblr. According to Hills, the expressions of fandom found online communicate one's sense of self-identity, as well as shared constructions of fan identity. The use of Tumblr functions simultaneously as a personal and collective affect in archived digital form. He explains: "Fandom is both felt within the self *and* encountered, projected or imagined as a (communal/massified) audience for one's own affective relationships with specific media texts. As such, fandom can be compliant - a way of fitting in with prevailing cultural moods and trends - as well as strenuously resistant, not necessarily of mainstream media, but of other fans' voices."[80] The harassment and bullying that take place within these fan communities may seem absurd from the outside looking in, but keeping in mind the shared intimacy that routinely takes place, it makes sense that intense emotion is valued for its supposed authority within the fandom. For Hills, fandom infighting occurs when one feels that an Other is attacking their "beloved, internalized fan object - attacking, that is, the good, internal object of fandom introjected within the self."[81]

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[78] Matt Hills, "Always On Fandom, Waiting and Bingeing: Psychoanalysis as an Engagement with Fan's 'Infra-Ordinary' Experiences," *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click & Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018): 19.
[79] Hills, 19.
[80] Hills, 21.
[81] Hills, 21.

In an attempt to explain these fan relationships, which again may seem difficult to understand, we can turn turn to Rebecca Williams' excellent book *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative*, which explores how identities are formed over time through fandom. Williams addresses how fans create narratives for themselves, and offers great insight into the connection between identity and fandom, particularly in terms of the *ontological security* that comes with belonging to a fan community, and the concurrent intertwining of self and fan object. While Williams is specifically concerned with media texts once they have ended (post-object), it is her concept of ontological security that helps clarify the exaggerated and truculent fighting in these purportedly supportive spaces. The attacks threaten to destabilize the fan's ontological security, or rather, their sense of self-continuity that has become interwoven with the fan object, in a way that recalls the Winnicottian concept of the comfort object. In the same way that Williams explores how fans deal with the challenge to self-continuity that occurs when their fan object (say, a TV series) ends, Hills suggests fans can react to certain criticisms or presumed "attacks" to their fan object in the same fashion.

I do not completely agree with this psychosocial framework, as it is persuasive in its articulation of the intimate and deep bonds between fans and their fan objects, but relies too much on more traditional notions of affirmational and transformational fandom, and despite their claims otherwise, still risks falling into pathologization.[82] Nevertheless, it is common within fan studies to focus on the process of *becoming a fan*, with a clear

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[82] For example, Angela Nagle's popular book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (2017) is ostensibly about the online culture wars moving into the mainstream, but ultimately draws an equalization between alt-right neo-reactionaries on 4chan and the virtue signalling liberals of safe spaces and trigger warnings on Tumblr, dangerously describing a level playing field by pathologizing both sides.

distinction between before and after, utterly changing/transforming one's sense of self.[83]

Valerie Wee argues that social media platforms foreground intimacy and encourage

media self-production, and so "young people are using social media not merely to

consume entertainment but also as a vehicle for action, political engagement, and identity

formation. These digital innovations have supported and encouraged content users or

consumers to develop increasing expectations of playing a greater role in determining not

just their entertainment experience but also their sense of self and their place in and view

of the world at large."[84] The sense of ownership a fan feels over their fan object is a way

of taking ownership over themselves and the world around them.

Meanwhile, in what culture critic Molly Fischer calls the "Great Awokening," a

vigilant moral duty toward concerns of identity and representation has come to dominate

discussions among creators, critics, and fans alike.[85] The question is: how well does a

work fulfill our ideals? Who has the right to tell a story, who has the right to criticize it,

or remake and rework it? As Timothy Shary and Louisa Stein wrote in the introduction to

Cinema Journal's section on Youth Culture, "In today's ideological climate, young

people, who are denied the right to vote until their late teens, nonetheless persist as

change agents, working beyond their common interpellation as media consumers to

become more engaged as cultural citizens through their own media authorship."[86] These

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[83] Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[84] Valerie Wee, "Youth Audiences and the Media in the Digital Era: The Intensification of Multimedia Engagement and Interaction," *Cinema Journal* vol. 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 136.

[85] Molly Fischer, "The Great Awokening," The Cut [*New York* Magazine], Jan. 8 2018. https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/pop-cultures-great-awakening.html

[86] Timothy Shary, Louisa Stein, "Youth Culture - Introduction," *Cinema Journal* vol. 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 118.

young agents of change, though, are caught up in ecosystems that muddy their

perspectives, or at least position them as part of a decentred collective.

In practice, we can see how this has manifested through *Steven Universe*'s

reputation of possessing a "toxic" fandom. As discussed in chapter 1, the series is

explicitly dedicated to marginalized communities, representing queerness and various

forms of otherness as central, natural, and compelling. It is a truly political work that

welcomes the transformational possibilities of fannish production. It also maintains one

of the largest fandoms on Tumblr, a social platform that encourages and cultivates social

consciousness, identity formation, and freedom for young people, which tends to attract

queer youth and youth of colour in large quantities. And yet, it remains victim to the

same harmful discourse as any other fandom on any other platform. What is happening

here? While there is something persuasive about the power of ontological security

through fandom, connected to the self-transformation of becoming a fan, it seems

unlikely that the explanation is quite so simple.

2.3. What Is Tumblr?

Our culture has changed irrevocably with digital technology and our plethora of

social media platforms, including those that have come and gone, those currently en

vogue, and those still to come. Indeed, even my own focus on Tumblr is significant for

the platform-specific qualities of its interface and users, but is not made obsolete if

Tumblr soon loses popularity.[87] It remains relevant because of the wider implications for online social life and theory.

Tumblr is a social media and microblogging platform that was introduced after the fall of LiveJournal, and it was originally intended to appeal to artists, creatives, and fandoms. It prioritizes the visual and disregards traditional notions of attribution or authorship, with a reblogging logic that makes it easy to lose track of where a post originated. As of April 1, 2018, there are over 400 million Tumblr blogs and over 30 million posts are shared every day.[88] Each user has their own Tumblr blog, and they follow others. It is free to use, and everyone from major celebrities to brands to public officials to not-for-profit organizations to teenagers have Tumblr blogs. Every post is organized into a user's "Dashboard," from which they can reblog posts they like, comment on them (though you tend to need to go looking for comments, unlike on other social media), or favourite them. Users have the option to upload text posts, images, videos, audio, quotes, or links. They can also organize a "Queue," spreading out their content and planning posts over hours or days. Posts are also commonly tagged via hashtags, a way to organize or find certain audiences. For example, if you want the general *Steven Universe* community to come across your content, you would tag it as #stevenuniverse and anyone who searches for that term will see it. Fandoms found much to like about Tumblr because of this ability to organize content in terms of audience, time, and type, making it easier to categorize fandoms while also facilitating trans- and inter-fandom expression. Likewise, the de-emphasis on comments and ambiguous

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[87] Though it should be noted that pronouncements of Tumblr losing steam have been made several times, including during the Yahoo and Verizon takeovers, there remains little evidence that this has had any lasting effect, judging by the Press Information in the following footnote.

[88] Tumblr, "Press Information." https://www.tumblr.com/press

attribution provides a safer space for fan art and fan fiction to run amok freely, within whichever constraints one wished to include (you could make your blog private, or target posts to certain groups via hashtags). Some Tumblrs also have messaging, either anonymously or by only allowing users to submit messages via their actual accounts. Since late 2015, Tumblr also has direct and instant messaging enabled, a move which has been met with some controversy.[89] Beyond these organizational elements, fans typically share all kinds of multimedia, and another appeal is certainly Tumblr's allowance for pornography, nudity, and sexual content. In fact, this is what many non-Tumblr users know about the platform, particularly since former CEO David Karp said in 2013, "it's just not something that we want to police."[90] Fans found a place that would allow them to be whatever version of themselves they wanted to be, and moreover, they could make multiple accounts, add however many or few self-descriptors they desired, and post content that would be considered taboo or even embarrassing on other social media platforms.

Tumblr was the first place online where I felt the freedom to be a version of myself that I wasn't ready to be anywhere else. It began with understanding that nudity was permitted, because that suggested a general willingness to allow what other social media platforms would not. It felt less surveilled than the institutionalized spaces of Facebook or even, to a lesser extent, Twitter. Moreover, it turned out that there were already plenty of queer people there, not making any attempt to hide that fact. On the

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[89] Some users balked at the idea in the Facebook comments of Tumblr's announcement that they would no longer be unreachable, since that is why they enjoyed Tumblr in the first place. Soon, Tumblr offered the option to only allow messaging between yourself and people that you follow.

[90] Megan Rose Dickey, "David Karp Went On The Colbert Show And Defended All The Porn On Tumblr," Business Insider, July 17 2013. http://www.businessinsider.com/david-karp-defends-porn-on-tumblr-2013-7

contrary, it was usually one of the very first things you found out about another user, either through their posts or their "About" page. I wasn't used to that. It didn't seem to matter that most users didn't use their real names, or connect their accounts with any other services or social media. I realized that I could explore parts of myself that had to be hidden otherwise, whether online or offline. I realized that there wasn't anywhere else like Tumblr.

By now, there has been excellent research into Tumblr as a platform. I aim to offer a compelling appraisal of Tumblr fandom for *Steven Universe*, documenting a platform's cultural heyday amid one of its most storied and active communities, and the passions that ran wild there. At this moment, it seems uncertain whether this heyday will continue for much longer. Since Yahoo, Tumblr's owner, was sold to Verizon in 2017, a default 'safe mode' was introduced to filter out porn, which led to non-sexual LGBTQ+ content being screened out; moreover, on November 27, 2017, Karp, Tumblr's creator and CEO, resigned, leaving the platform's future unclear. Alexander Cho, who has written extensively on Tumblr and fandom, mentions Paz's attempted suicide due to *Steven Universe* fan harassment and posits that "the aggressive policing of supposedly progressive identity politics on Tumblr is worthy of its own analysis,"[91] which is part of what I intend to do in the remainder of this chapter, and in chapter three, to pick apart this platform and what changes made to it might mean for the fandoms there.

A fandom, even within the confines of a single platform, is not monolithic or any one thing, and it would be foolish to think critically about it in that way. However, it is worth taking seriously these feelings shared by some that something specific happens on

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[91] Alexander Cho, "Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine," *New Media & Society*, Dec. 12 2017: 14.

Tumblr. Notably, the lack of rules and moderation that allow Tumblr users so much

apparent freedom compared with other social media may be the same structural

mechanism by which this harassment and infighting is able to fester and spread. As

Louisa Stein has said, "Each interface used by fans develops and maintains its own

community norms, expectations, and limits of code and culture."[92] Part of Tumblr's

norms is certainly the relative freedom afforded to anonymous users, but Stein argues that

it is also an accelerated space of multiplicity, in which the affect of one's self is

consistently measured against and within the affect of the community. We are constantly

led to understand that our affective orientation to the world is significant, only more so in

the digital age, and Tumblr seems to be a place where the self-making process of social

mediation is explicitly intended to represent a moral and ideological dimension.

To illustrate what this might look like, it has become fairly common for some

Universe fans to refer to the "SU Criticals," a group that seems to represent those that stir

the pot within the fandom through frequent criticism and moralizing (there's even a tag

dedicated to them, with contributions from "Criticals" themselves and their detractors).

As Tumblr user agray06 says, "So the new Steven Universe trailer just came out, and the

SU Criticals are already analyzing it frame-by-frame to find stuff to complain about. Do

these people ever get tired of being such losers?"[93] It should be clear that designating this

faceless group the "Criticals" may also be an attempt to limit any criticism whatsoever, in

a callback to the affirmational/transformational fandom split. I don't deny that some of

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[92] Louisa Stein, "Tumblr Fan Aesthetics," *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click & Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018): 86.

[93] https://agray06.tumblr.com/post/159845156237/so-the-new-steven-universe-trailer-just-came-out

these users are using this apparent critical "toxicity" as a way to further de-legitimize

"SJWs" (social justice warriors), even when the criticism is constructive.

One typical fervor develops when a fan artist is seen to have changed a

character's skin colour, something which usually happens with Garnet. For example, a

Japanese artist (Tumblr user gashi45) drew Garnet with a lighter colour palette than how

the character is normally depicted, which led to harassment. As a response, gashi45,

whose first language is not English, posted, "But the fact that I love the garnet and SU is I

want you to understand."[94] It appeared to be an act with no ill intentions, but the reaction

was swift and negative, as you can see in illustration 4, which is a small collection of the

debate that occurred (Tumblr reblogging works so that each line signifies a different

user's response, building on each other). One user responds, "explanatory post or

congratz you are anti-black as hell," and another accuses that user of jumping to

conclusions, and another says, "Um no. Garnet has an afro and dark skin, so you do not

make her lighter….I don't care if the artist is Japanese, all non-black people participate in
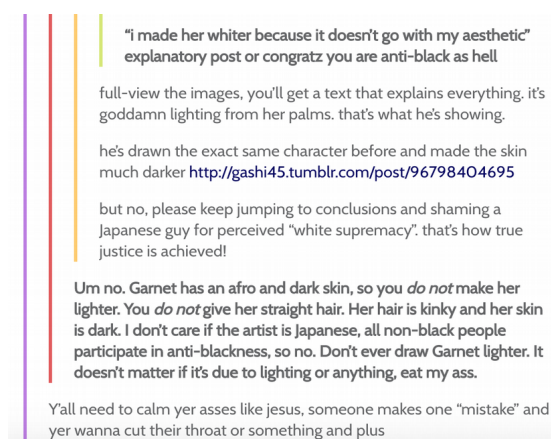
anti-blackness, so no."

Illustration 4, a snippet from a Tumblr debate about gashi45's fan art.

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[94] http://gashi45.tumblr.com/post/115581569650/i-was-not-going-to-drew-whiten-skin-of-garnet

Tumblr user renamok notes that it's this kind of art racism (and not the ensuing harassment) that is the antithesis of *Steven Universe* itself. They write, "How can these gross, ignorant assholes watch something as uplifting, representative, and progressive as SU and then look at an incredible character like Garnet and decide 'Hmm… She's too black.'"[95]

This happened in mid-2015, at what seems to be the height of incidents relating to *Steven Universe* fan hysteria, but this kind of discourse continues within that community and other fandoms. As Matt Hills notes, many fans have evolved past what fan studies used to consider as 'the formative fan' (a fan discovers an object and everything changes, with a clear before and after), into something more like what he calls trans-fandom, "people who are moving across different fandoms….most likely you'd be combining, moving across these different forms of fan knowledge."[96] As such, many fans are deeply invested in a variety of texts, leading to many comparisons like the *Universe* vs. *My Little Pony* supposed dichotomy, or others from *Uncle Grandpa* to *Adventure Time*. Despite the fact that many of these fans consider themselves members of these various fan communities, it is still common for hierarchies to develop, with different fandoms being characterized as more or less toxic, more or less generous.

The idea that a fan's actions do not reflect the spirit of the show, or the morality its characters encourage, is a particularly powerful argument for *Steven Universe* fans. Tumblr user agray06 wrote, in response to the crossover episode harassment: "Do you really think these are things Steven would do? You're all a bunch of selfish, entitled,

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[95] https://renamok.tumblr.com/post/115637751180/torukun1-cosmic-cyclosa-torukun1

[96] Matt Hills, Clarice Greco, "Fandom as an object and the objects of fandom," *MATRIZes* vol. 9, no. 1 (Jan/Jun 2015): 158.

elitist little shits. Steven Universe does not belong to you….But you all insist on claiming

it as yours alone, and you've made the fandom a hostile and unwelcoming place."[97] Later,

in response to another user's question, agray06 continues: "The message Steven Universe

teaches about embracing imperfection and accepting the differences of others means

nothing to these people. It's ironic that they want to claim the show for themselves, but

they don't understand the message it embodies."[98] Among other things, this posturing

serves to *use* the series in several ways, to support one's own interpretation, or to respond

to criticism. But most importantly, *to assert one's moral superiority*.

Within most social media systems, there is little incentive to speak to each other,

learn from each other, or forge meaningful bonds—or rather, if they do encourage these

things to occur, it is only as a byproduct. The design of these platforms tends to hyper-

individuate, so that it can learn each user's preferences to direct their attention to third-

party advertisements, or to sell this information itself to the same advertisers. The social

nature of these networks are not their focus, but their lure. We are encouraged to like,

comment, share, retweet, and generally communicate, to be sure, but all in the service of

developing marketable data that can be measured, archived, disseminated, and sold.

Tumblr, for most of its history, has been something a little bit different, as a space that

not only largely avoids ads (putting aside some brief interventions made by Yahoo) but

also blurs the individual with the collective. As such, it is somewhat strange that Tumblr

seems to function as a self-making destination for young people that is inextricably

caught up in moral/political/social jockeying. Part of what may seem "strange" at first,

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[97] https://agray06.tumblr.com/post/115621643257/to-the-steven-universe-fandom
[98] https://agray06.tumblr.com/post/115621643257/to-the-steven-universe-fandom

though, is that we so often forget that teenagers and even children have acute political consciousnesses, so it may not be so strange after all that these issues become such strong parts of their identities, and that these assertions of moral and emotional intelligence and affect are intended to reverberate into the community.

Of course, this enterprise develops bad actors, trolls (for lack of a better word) that can be found in any fandom on any platform, people debating in bad faith and intending only to harm or obfuscate. I certainly have grave concerns over giving them more air time, which may not only "legitimize" their behaviour but also could make it seem like they are the majority, or that we should spend time pathologizing them, or that fandom is bad is general. Instead, I seek only to better understand how this fandom operates and processes itself, in all ways.

For example, some of the more popular fan artists on Tumblr are often commissioned by other users (sometimes for money, sometimes not) to draw themselves or their friend group as Gems, in what can be seen as an act of community-building and identity expression through art and media.[99] A popular piece of fan art, with over 133,000 notes, depicts Greg, Steven's heavy-set and masculine father, with flowing locks of hair resembling Rose, Steven's mother (caption: "Both Rose and Greg had luscious locks, Steven cannot escape his destiny of fabulous hair.").[100] One of the most popular pieces of fan fiction (hosted on a fanfic website but often shared or referenced on Tumblr), entitled "How to Turn an Angry Space Alien Into Your New Aunt With the Power of Friendship or Whatever," is, though often silly like the series itself, about how difficult friendship can be to successfully maintain, and the struggles for people (or Gems) with difficult

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[99] http://anushbanush.tumblr.com/post/161218100679/i-was-commissioned-by-cllevergiirl-to-draw-her
[100] http://winters-shade.tumblr.com/post/116573915427/both-rose-and-greg-had-luscious-locks-steven

personalities or diverse identities to do so.[101] At 45,688 words and written over a 20-month period in 2015 and 2016, it is a monumental effort of fan work, dedicated to transforming familiar characters to play within the moral and thematic space of the series.

Many users also use *Steven Universe* as a way to help articulate their identities, particularly within their "About" pages (where users typically tell visitors something about themselves). For example, when I typed "steven universe" into Tumblr, one of the first accounts to show up belonged to mametchi, who owns the URL stevenuniverse.me. In a typical formulation (providing their name, location, age, pronouns, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality), their About page reads like this:

> hello i'm myles
> florida | 18 | they/them
> nonbinary, cuban, & gay as fuck[102]

Myles says that this used to be a *Steven Universe* fan blog, but it now has many other interests, as though the blog is changing along with them. Another user, jasker, is an artist. Her About page looks like this:

> ♀ | she/her | 24 | scorpio | Very Lesbian | PST
> i am currently not accepting commissions or art trades[103]

She does normally take art commissions, however, and she has a long FAQ section devoted to what she will and will not draw (for example, she doesn't draw "gemlings"—children of two adult Gems). She also provides links to her "gemsona" (herself as a Gem), and a *Steven Universe* fan comic she drew. Another user says "'Sup, my name is Bee and I LOVE Steven Universe. I'm 17, and I'm nonbinary. she/her or they/them pronouns are cool with me," then there are posts underneath that show their favourite

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[101] http://archiveofourown.org/works/3542825?view_full_work=true
[102] http://stevenuniverse.me/about
[103] http://jasker.tumblr.com/post/133942207121

character (Lapis) and their primary ship (Rupphire—Ruby and Sapphire).[104] To be clear, this isn't a curated sampling of *Steven Universe* fan accounts on Tumblr. These are the first three that came up when I searched "steven universe". There are countless others that use the series to help explain their identity, who also happen to be *very* queer.

These are startlingly positive and community-based efforts of passion and devotion that are intrinsically (whether consciously or not) part of a socially-minded project of political, queer, and affective knowledge. This is not simply an exercise of juxtaposing positive and negative examples of *Steven Universe*'s fandom. Instead I am arguing that it is all, together, part of this project. These young people have found ways to push a community-based social/political sensibility and alertness through the digital prisms of fan investment and identity formation. It can turn ugly, of course it can, and it can be used as an excuse for other agendas and operations, but as danah boyd says, "teens have grown sophisticated with how they manage contexts and present themselves in order to be read by their intended audience. They don't always succeed, but their efforts are phenomenal."[105]

2.4. Intense Emotion, Fan Fury, and Imagined Communities

Much of the fan art that can be found on Tumblr or elsewhere for *Steven Universe* is built around expanding the show's queer relationships. Several already exist canonically on the show, but fans are interested in imagining new pairings, which offers

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[104] http://crystalgemjammin.tumblr.com/aboutme

[105] danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014): 43.

some insight into how they are struggling and embracing their own identities. As a queer series invested in subverting norms and insisting on the comfortable fluidity of identity, it follows that fans relate to this project and express it in their art and appreciations. *Steven Universe*'s creators have made it clear that these fan paratexts do not "go against" their intentions, lightly pushing back against the affirmational/transformational split discussed earlier in fandom. In some sense, this tolerance and acceptance of fan interpretation and creation is an allowance to younger (as well as older) fans to re-fashion their own identities and selves through these characters, pairings, and identities. Tumblr is very much a space of transformational fandom, for radical reinterpretations and metamorphic discussion. *Steven Universe* fans share art, fan fiction, videos, full or partial episodes, remixed media, personal reviews and narratives, and much more. They comment back and forth on each other's posts, theorizing, speculating, arguing, suggesting, reacting, creating. For the most part, it seems to be a constructive and inclusive space for creativity and fan authorship in individual and collective frameworks. At times, as we have seen, it can be contempible (search "Steven Universe fandom" on Google and most of at least the first three pages are various articles with titles such as "Why The Steven Universe Fandom Is The Worst Ever"[106]).

As Whitney Phillips argues in her book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, "trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the trolls 'most disruptive behaviors. Ultimately, then, *this* is why we can't have nice things, and is the point to which the title gestures: the fact that online

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[106] John Guth, "Why The Steven Universe Fandom Is The Worst Ever," Odyssey, Nov. 2 2015. https://www.theodysseyonline.com/why-am-no-longer-steven-universe-fan

trolling is par for the mainstream cultural course."[107] For Phillips, this phenomenon is built into the very systems and interfaces of social networking, the same designs that we earlier found to be particularly welcoming to teens and young people. In a sense, trollish behaviour isn't anomalous, it is a common symptom of the networks we use everyday, behaviour that any of us can succumb to. As Tumblr user todesfurscht wrote after Paz's attempted suicide: "The most mind blowing thing for me is this; social justice warriors (aka majority of Tumblr) have good intentions, but they lose those good intentions as soon as they insult/belittle/attack/harass/etc other people. They don't care if they make a 'privileged' individual cry or hurt themselves. You want to change things? Don't put someone down to bring someone higher. That is not equality."[108] At the same time, user matriarchalmuffin responded, in part, to one of Paz's posts: "I hope you fucking die…. You're the reason blacks are being gunned down in the streets….And AS FUCKING SOON as PoC and LGBTQ communities are represented positively you have to come and turn each and every one of those characters into fucking racial caricatures straight out of the 1920s. Honestly, you deserve to die."[109] I am presenting these comments not to pass judgment on any particular user, which would not be in the spirit of this analysis, but to help us analyze the heightened affective responses of these young fans and the identity work being performed. We cannot discount the political aspects of these debates and comments, but neither can we disregard the formal architecture of these platforms which help determine the nature of its discourse. To help illustrate this, I'll refer to Tumblr user

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[107] Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015): 11.
[108] Nguyen.
[109] https://stopmakingliberalslookbad.tumblr.com/post/132176596610/matriarchalmuffin-zamii070-tomorrow-i-have

midopyon, who posted on October 24, 2015 (at least partially in response to the

attempted suicide controversy discussed previously):

> For many other artists this is the place where they come to be who they
> really are, in this site they've met the friends that had kept them going
> when things were hard in school or in their homes. This was their
> favorite site, a place where they could take a break and have fun,
> without being judged for liking ponies or homestuck or whatever.
>
> But look at what you've done. You've made a social network made for
> artists and fans a [social justice warrior] circlejerk where you get to
> choose who stays and who is a racist ableist cis scum that deserves to be
> harassed to death. Well done.[110]

Of course, we may say that some binarism is operating here, with social justice warriors

on one side and an opposing side of relatively unclear makeup, other than a shared belief

in the sanctity of the artist's presumed will. Still, this recalls what danah boyd wrote of

how on social media, teenagers' "self-representation is constructed through what they

explicitly provide, through what their friends share, and as a product of how other people

respond to them….Impression management online and off is not just an individual act;

it's a social process."[111] They act both as individuals and as part of a collective,

confounding traditional notions of the subject as such and inviting an emotional or

affective vividness in their responses.

boyd argues that youth are always passionate about finding their place in society,

but social media has brought this desire for social connection into networked publics.

There is something inescapably novel about an imagined community (as conceived by

Benedict Anderson) operating and navigating through these networked technologies.

Wholly unfamiliar social dynamics emerge. boyd argues that "rather than eschewing

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[110] http://midopyon.tumblr.com/post/131811593155/i-might-get-a-ton-of-hate-out-of-this-but-as-an
[111] boyd, 49.

privacy when they encounter public spaces, many teens are looking for new ways to achieve privacy within networked publics," and doing so is an act of agency.[112] In this way, boyd adds later, they are like *digital flâneurs*, sharing content as a part of the (public) community but choosing (especially on Tumblr, mind you) just how public they wish to be. "Most [teens] are focused on what it means to be a part of a broader social world. They want to connect with and participate in culture, both to develop a sense of self and to feel as though they are a part of society. Some even see publics as an opportunity for activism. These teens are looking to actively participate in public life in order to make the world a better place."[113] As a result, the strong investments in fan objects, communities, and identities are engaged with in tandem with progressive politics. It seems that socially-mediated expression is a self-making process through the public or semi-public sharing of a moral orientation to media, or others' expressions, on Tumblr.

The transformational self-narrative is queered on Tumblr as the platform's emphasis on affect and social consciousness makes it a semi-private space for expression that builds the self but also contributes to a collective experience. As such, these young fans are part of a complicated, overlapping, sticky web of cultural/social/political engagement, mediation, and emotion. This process is constituted within the very architecture of Tumblr itself. This is not only productive in shedding light on how fandom operates in the digital age, but for revealing the peculiarities of the *Steven Universe* fandom in particular. The affective morality of this platform and this fandom has potentially significant implications for the young people that populate them, providing the opportunity for political and cultural action in way that is intimately tied to

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[112] boyd, 76.
[113] boyd, 206.

one's own (always forming, always fluid) identity. In the next chapter, I will continue to wrestle with not only these complexities, but how their machinations specifically resonate in light of a queer series like *Steven Universe*.

3. How Should a Queer Be? Privacy, Affect and Politics

3.1. Public/Private

In an environment where the political and social implications of media are given

priority, while the boundaries between affect and expression, self and collective, all

continue to blur, it is no surprise that the responses engendered on social media can be

unproportionally aggressive and/or passionate. But as Allison McCracken notes, Tumblr

fandom reveals how media reception is always in a state of flux in relation to a fan's

shifting identity, and moreover, "Tumblr offers young users an essential, largely

protected 'private' public space in which to express social critique and to learn from it,

but it also extends that critique beyond the individual, where it can continue to live and

resonate with others."[114] I don't necessarily agree unequivocally with this wholly sunny

outlook, as chapter 2 may suggest, but I do find it useful for understanding what is queer

about Tumblr and what form queerness takes in these spaces. Bringing together my

analyses of *Steven Universe* and Tumblr fandom, in this chapter I argue that the queer fan

affects that proliferate on Tumblr and the *Universe* community are enacting a politics that

upends traditional conceptions of identity through queer collectivity. In other words, as

queer youth find something queer to love within Tumblr and within *Steven Universe*, they

engage in a *shared emotional authorship*, Louisa Stein's term, which resonates through

the semi-public processing of private, intimate emotions. In this chapter, I make a case

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[114] Allison McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," *Cinema Journal* vol. 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 161.

for the significance of this as a political project worth considering seriously as a critical,

seemingly invigorative channel for queer youth in the era of social media.

Melanie Kohnen has developed the useful concept of the 'closet-as-screen,' which

helps to explain how queerness in media texts is managed in relation with queerness in

our lives. She writes: "Much like the epistemology of the closet regulates knowledge of

(queer) sexuality, the closet-as-screen regulates which types of queerness become visible

in the media and which ones remain invisible (or at least harder to see)."[115] The closet-as-

screen functions by perpetuating a form of homonormativity through representations in

mainstream texts. I'll come to what this has to do with our larger discussion in a moment,

but it's important to understand the implications of these circumstances. Kohnen argues

that the queer characters in these popular texts, such as Cam and Mitchell on *Modern

Family*, do not challenge heteronormativity because they are intended to explain to

straight audiences that gay and lesbian couples essentially have the same problems as

they do. As a result, any other types of queerness, perhaps ways of being that challenge

normative straightness, are filtered out, and further, these scenes of white domesticity

cement the interdependence of whiteness and mainstream queer visibility. As Kohnen

explains, the 2003 United States Supreme Court decision *Lawrence v. Texas*, which lifted

the ban on sodomy and legalized consensual same-sex acts within the privacy of the

home, has had unfortunate repercussions thanks to the cultural understanding of the

decision: "The concession that the state should not interfere with same-sex acts that

happen in private is therefore implicitly balanced by a condemnation of similar acts in

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[115] Melanie Kohnen, *Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television: Screening the Closet* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 12.

public."[116] This legitimizes people with the attitude of stating they are okay with homosexuality, as long as they don't have to see it. The task instead, in light of this, should be to question what form queerness is able to take, in what spaces, at which times, and for whom. The idea of "coming out" begins to break down, too, as it becomes clearer that queerness itself cannot be thought of as either visible or not, which highlights the privileging of certain types of queerness, or the ways in which queer expressions may be legible to some and not to others.

Moreover, this public/private split in terms of queer sex acts extends to the realms of social media and fandom. It is a privilege afforded only to some to be able to decide which parts of yourself and your life to keep private, particularly with race, class, and citizenship factors determining who can achieve reliable and sustainable access to privacy. Likewise, it is a fallacy to assume that the government or other forces cannot reach into the private sphere (legislation, for one, has always done so, as the *Lawrence* case itself exemplifies), and it follows that the public and private spheres do not operate separately, at least not for all. Kohnen explains that "by extending the right to engage in certain queer sexual acts in private, queer subjects are both welcomed into the nation and asked to support its normative race and class structures,"[117] thus cynically implicating them in the project of maintaining the heteronormative, white supremacist, economic status quo.

All of this further describes the particular conditions that queer people, including and perhaps especially young queers, live under. Put simply: the stakes are higher. The public/private dance is familiar and oppressive, and it is painstakingly recreated online

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[116] Kohnen, 157.
[117] Kohnen, 157.

through the networks and structures of social media, which are inevitably informed and governed by larger social and cultural forces. This is manifested in countless ways, from the community that establishes cultural norms for online spaces to the racial and gendered dynamics of online trolling and harassment and the failure of these networks to properly manage them. More specifically for our purposes, though, are the ways these networks not only recreate but exacerbate the distinctly queer dilemma of privacy. It has been well-established that social media users post and share with an imagined audience in mind (especially on platforms like Facebook and Instagram), as they are continuously crafting a self-performance to meet certain criteria, whether imposed by themselves, others, or the platforms. This is our common, shared reality on social media. As Alexander Cho expands on this, though, we find that some social media platforms "contain a heteronormative understanding of user and audience built into their design."[118] In effect, users turn to different social media to serve different purposes, as discussed in chapter 2 (Facebook may be for more professional content, while Snapchat is only for close friends).

3.2. Tumblr Is Queer

In contrast with the ways in which heteronormativity is able to operate in society invisibly, queer people and queer youth seem to flock to Tumblr to be able to perform and express queerness invisibly, so to speak. There seems to be something distinctly queer about Tumblr itself. Following the controversial end of LiveJournal, fandom

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[118] Cho (2017), 3.

needed a new place to congregate online. Luckily, in 2007, Tumblr was created and

began to fill that need. Soon enough, it became the dominant fan space online. One

reason Tumblr seemed to appeal to fans and fan culture, according to Cho, is its

public/private split being built directly into its design. Cho explains how it works

differently than other social media:

> It evades indexing; it privileges affective and evocative exchange of
> imagery and the cultivation of a sensibility rather than giving primacy to
> literal interaction (though it allows for that too); it did not for most of its
> history allow for one-to-one direct messaging between users; it does not
> assume or require connections to extant offline networks and does not
> insist on a singular, permanent, 'authentic' user identity; it is seemingly
> OK with porn and flouts copyright, among other interrelated design and
> policy choices.[119]

In other words, it has been a freer space than platforms such as Facebook or Twitter,

where you are encouraged to use your actual identity, share as much information about

yourself as possible (largely for the benefit of advertisers), maintain a SFW ('safe for

work') personality, and to connect with other platforms and services, both online and off.

Cho, building from danah boyd, refers to this as their "default publicness," which is a

belief that user experience should be structured around being public, most plainly by

hewing to state-validated identities (using your real, legal name on Facebook, for

example) and sharing your actions to as many people as possible without your

knowledge. "A design bias toward default publicness presumes that being-in-public

carries little to no risk, that all bodies are legislated by state and social/informal policing

equally," Cho notes, while dismissing the centuries of established policy and norms that

privilege the publicity of white heteromasculinity.[120]

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[119] Cho (2017), 3.
[120] Cho (2017), 2.

This poses serious and sinister danger to all social media users, but young fans, especially queer ones (and queer youth of colour, more so), found comfort in Tumblr for the way that its interface and design challenged the norms of surveillance and monetization on other social media. Julian Gill-Peterson, who studies queer youth and digital cultures at the University of Pittsburgh, told Mashable in 2016 about the platform's anonymity: "It moves fast and it doesn't require everything to be attached to your name and face. That seems to me to be an advantage for LGBTQI youth who are not interested or comfortable being more public about their online presence."[121] In 2016, The Daily Dot said that Tumblr was the #1 safest spot online for LGBT youth to hangout. They quote Selma, a high school student in DuPage County, Illinois, who says: "Seeing other LGBT teens who were actually happy with themselves and their identity caused to me realize that I could actually do [the same]. It was also on Tumblr that I first came across terms like 'bisexual' and 'non-binary,' which was fundamental in shaping my identity."[122] Another student mentions the importance of anonymity on the website for LGBTQ+ youth. Their pseudonymous names, which can be changed anytime, and, frankly, the steep learning curve of Tumblr (with its convoluted internal logic, fairly impenetrable interface, and the organization of the dashboard and other mechanics), seemed like the ideal space for queer youth to, well, find themselves. Cho argues that there can be severe consequences for them in revealing their identities on platforms like Facebook, with examples of teens who had been inadvertently outed because of Facebook and disowned by their families as a result. In tangible ways, the

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[121] Heather Dockray, "Too young for Tinder, LGBTQI youth find love through Tumblr," Mashable, Jan. 17 2016. https://mashable.com/2016/01/17/lgbtqi-tumblr-love/#ug1NI1GBYgq2

[122] Renée Fabian, "6 of the safest spaces for LGBT youth to hang online," The Daily Dot, May 11 2016. https://www.dailydot.com/irl/lgbt-youth-safe-spaces/

heteronormative assumption of hyper-publicity and the social surveillance on Facebook is a dangerous game for queer youth. Tumblr, then, is an attractive space. Louisa Stein, too, highlights how Tumblr's reblogging logic resonates "with fan practices of return, recirculation, and transformative reworking," helping to signify Tumblr as the ideal fan space.[123] Stein also offers a way of understanding Tumblr's rejection of default publicness, referring to it as a "*coded public*, in which individual authorship was subsumed into the collective, and within which transgressive meanings could hide in plain sight."[124] Allison McCracken refers to Tumblr as a "formation of *counterpublic* spaces for marginalized millennial communities."[125]

Regardless of one's chosen terminology, Tumblr's lack of a default publicness provided a social space for queers and others to perform identity work and expression relatively free from larger norms and forces they regularly encounter elsewhere. The *Steven Universe* fandom taps into this availability, their affective confusion and intensity reflecting a desperate need for being open about their emotions, identities, and uncertainties. As it becomes more and more difficult for young people to escape parental or institutional surveillance not only in the modern physical world, but in other online spaces, their use of Tumblr became a way for them to assert some control over their personal space and identities. Though their content can likely still be monitored by advertisers, or reported by other users, they can more or less operate outside adult supervision. Users are aware of this double life, wherein they can curate the content on their blog fastidiously while allowing it to be amalgamated into a larger community,

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[123] Stein (2018), 88.

[124] Stein (2018), 87-88. Emphasis mine.

[125] McCracken, 151. Emphasis mine. McCracken is, presumably, using Michael Warner's term knowingly.

usually through hashtags. Hashtags often function as yet another method of making one's content private-in-public, with bloggers using them to limit their audience by making very specific hashtags that only those in-the-know would even have the thought to search for, whether referring to a subsection of a fandom or even a specific user.[126] It seems clear that the ingredients that make Tumblr a platform readily available for counterhegemonic expression are the same circumstances that would be destroyed by any attempts to capitalize on or monetize its users.

The fact that users are pseudonymous makes it far more difficult for them to be policed, leading McCracken to compare personal Tumblrs to "the customized affective bedroom spaces" most often associated with teen girl culture.[127] While platforms like Reddit and 4chan share some characteristics with Tumblr, including anonymity in a way that sets them all apart from most social media, Tumblr offers a space distinct from those more chaotic and harsh environments. Tumblr youth become extremely savvy media consumers (and producers), epitomizing the "personal is political" doctrine. This Tumblr-specific social awareness (along with the platform's abundance of young users with a variety of gender and sexual identities) tends to be stronger than anywhere else. McCracken says, "Because Tumblr foregrounds the relationship of affect, identity, and social justice in this way, its young users are more likely to be aware of and/or engaged in subcultural critical practices than they are in many other spaces, *either on or offline*."[128] As I argued in chapter 2, Tumblr seems to structure activity and participation through affect and social critique, hierarchizing the political stakes of media consumption and

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[126] Stein (2018), 90.
[127] McCracken, 155.
[128] McCracken, 161. Emphasis mine.

representation within a coded public that gets caught up within the parallel machinations of fan culture. It all operates through the queer affect intrinsic in the platform's architecture. As Marty Fink and Quinn Miller wrote about trans and gender nonconforming people on Tumblr for the period of 2011 to 2013, "people collectively oriented in opposition to dominant discourses of gender and sexuality used Tumblr to refashion straight cisgender norms and to create everyday art in a hybrid media space."[129]

Louisa Stein spoke of Tumblr as an affective space for intimate and private emotions that don't necessarily remain private, which results in a shared emotional authorship, which then operates through what Cho calls the platform's *queer reverb*, a pulsating affect that envelopes each user. We may not be able to tease out precisely how Tumblr's queer affect developed and evolved, originating in specific design choices and transforming through the many ways in which young queer people made the space their own, but these are key ideas for my intention to put forward an understanding of these queer fan and platform phenomena as an *intertextual, affect-driven queer political project*. In other words, the collective processing of private emotions expressed by young queers in conjunction with the growth of an acute political consciousness is a powerful force that is operating, I would argue, most visibly through *Steven Universe* and its community. This project will surely outlast Tumblr itself. This is the crux of my argument, but in order to make it felt as deeply as I hope to, I must speak more directly to how fan culture intersects with these ideas, and how *Steven Universe* can help us illustrate them.

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[129] Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011-2013," *Television & New Media* vol. 15, no. 7 (2013).

3.3. Queer Fan Affect

Tumblr, then, is a queer space in itself, tightly connected to how fandom and Tumblr each traffic in affect. So much of contemporary queer affect analysis centres around shame, failure, and death (see Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2011; Halperin and Traub, 2010). This affective turn, though certainly worthwhile at times, has had the adverse effect of pushing aside other, more open conceptions of modern queer affect. Tumblr, Cho argues, "favored communication through image, mostly without attribution or caption; they relied less on text and more on the felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic."[130] Fandom, too, seems to explicitly trade in affect, as Stein terms it "feels culture" and explains how much overlap exists between queer communities and fan communities generally. "In feels culture, emotions remain intimate but are no longer necessarily private; rather, they build a sense of an intimate collective, one that is bound together precisely by the processes of shared emotional authorship."[131] This resembles how we experience Tumblr, as a never-ending flow of visual information, a collective archive of permeable affects. In other words, a perfect storm of queer fan affect resides on Tumblr.

Affect is many things, but most current theorists agree that we are always in a state of *becoming*, encountering a web of embodied and imagined forces that outline the intensities (emotional or otherwise) of our lives (see Massumi, 2002; Ahmed, 2004). On

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[130] Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," *Networked Affect*, eds. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015): 44.

[131] Louisa Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015): 156.

Tumblr, the act of personal curation have aesthetic and affective qualities, certainly in

relation to the blurring of self and collective that occurs there. Fandom on Tumblr

cultivates a collective affect, through its design and visuality, yes, but also because one

exists there and participates as a semi-private, semi-public member of a community.

Queer fans experience this shared marginality and shared emotional authorship on

Tumblr, marking the design and interface of the platform itself as somehow queer. The

context-less "recollection-images" on Tumblr help us understand how Tumblr lets fan

authorship be(come) queer. It is an affective soup of reblogging and rearticulation and a

lack of accreditation, within which Cho finds "a nonlinear, atemporal rhizomal exchange

of affect and sensation, a 'queer reverb' of repeat and repeat; and there may be a

possibility for this sort of transmission to buoy an antinormative or resistant politics."[132]

This form of cultural and digital engagement is a queer mode of expression that lends

itself handily to counterhegemonic communication.

Henry Jenkins describes a participatory culture as "a culture with relatively low

barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and

sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known

by the most experienced is passed along to novices."[133] The queer fan affect of Tumblr

seems to fit parts of this description, though the steep learning curve and lack of support

for many creations shared there suggests a queering of Jenkins' description would mean

expanding it into more uncomfortable or provocative areas. The last part, though,

referring to "informal mentorship," is of particular interest in fandoms like that of *Steven*

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[132] Cho (2015), 47.

[133] Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Chicago: MacArthur, 2007): 3.

Universe. Allison McCracken perhaps inadvertently compares Tumblr to what is surely the prototypical adult-designed 'place for children'[134]: the classroom. "For many youth, Tumblr has become an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness."[135] This seems to me to be intimately tied to the affective bursts of both positivity and negativity that occur on the platform.

There is something both phenomenally exciting and chillingly foreboding about young people creating digital classrooms of their own. McCracken again: "In an era in which traditional educational institutions have faced the narrowing of their curriculum in the areas of critical thinking, the arts, sex education, and progressive politics, it is in social media's spaces of community and contestation that many young people develop their critical skills, engage in creative work, and construct a sense of themselves as desiring individuals and social actors."[136] It may be relatively obvious to us colloquially that the internet and social media have replaced certain parts of our former lives, but here McCracken is directly suggesting that some platforms (Tumblr chief among them) are actually replacing the physical space and function of the classroom for young people. Inevitably, perhaps without the adult supervision of a traditional classroom, these interactions can be highly charged and intense, revealing the potential perils in what McCracken calls "the convergence of affective investment and progressive politics."[137]

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[134] Kim Rasmussen, "Places For Children – Children's Places," *Childhood* vol. 11, no. 2 (2004): 155-173.
[135] McCracken, 152.
[136] McCracken, 153.
[137] McCracken, 160.

3.4. The Power of Fandom

Interestingly, the *Steven Universe* team has a close relationship with Tumblr. Many of the artists and writers run personal Tumblr blogs, most of which began far before their employment by Cartoon Network, and some often interact directly with fans. Writer Ben Levin mentions how at the beginning, they could keep up with the fandom and its major players,[138] but after the Garnet reveal in "Jail Break" (in which it is revealed that she is a permanent fusion of Ruby and Sapphire), "it seemed like I could refresh Tumblr and there'd be something new every time."[139] Artists have even been discovered on Tumblr, most notably storyboarder Amber Cragg. Cragg believes she has a particularly close relationship with the show's online fandom, because she started out as a part of it. She said in an interview for *Steven Universe: Art & Origins*: "The day the pilot was released online, I posted fan art of Pearl to my Tumblr….and through early 2014, I was drawing fan comics for the show….It's incredibly weird to cross to the other side of something like *Steven Universe*, but it changed the way I see and value things online."[140] All creators are fans, and Cragg's shift from one world to another is emblematic of *Steven Universe*'s celebration of fandom itself (it's worth noting that former writer and storyboarder Ian Jones-Quartey, who first contacted Cragg, also went on to criticize the Tumblr community in now-deleted tweets that said "let people draw whatever fanart they want" and then "anyway...my 'let people draw whatever fanart they want' tweet is gonna

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[138] McConnell, 77. Fan outrage was part of the fandom's fabric since after the pilot aired, when a poster showcasing a slightly-altered animation style for upcoming episodes angered some fans who accused the team of selling out.

[139] McConnell, 229.

[140] McConnell, 228.

get screencapped and weaponized as part of some tumblr drama"[141]). *Steven Universe* was founded on an ethos of fandom's power and possibility. As Rebecca Sugar explains, "The idea started branching out to the stuff that Steven [Sugar, her brother] and I used to like— the video games, comics, and animation we loved. I wanted to do something with similar themes, but also make it about the fact that we liked that stuff."[142] The series is intended not only to revere the things the Sugars were fans of, but also to *exalt their fandom itself*.

Fandom, like queerness, has usually been theorized as possessing a distinct inflection point, a 'coming out,' when the fan discovers a cultural object and is transformed by it somehow, revealing a part of themselves and hooking them to it, making it into a major (public) part of their identity. Many in fan studies continue to use language and theory like this, which builds directly from the problematic binarism we've discussed between transformational and affirmational fandom. It is an appealing construction, but we've established its faults. As Matt Hills has said, "the typical notion of *becoming a fan* has been this discovery of falling in love with something, which completely changes the sense of self, meaning there's a very clear *before and after*," emphasis in original.[143] Just as we know how the coming out myth applies to queers, the same principle applies to the fan epiphany (moreover, it should go without saying that the implications for fans are far less severe than those for queers). There are many ways of becoming a fan, and many are fans of multiple texts simultaneously, and they may or may not waver in their fandom over time, and so on. This lays further doubt to the primacy of ontological security as an explanation, discussed in chapter 2. All this said,

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[141] http://gaygemgoddess.tumblr.com/post/131929630221/wow-you-know-what-would-be-great-if-we-stopped

[142] McDonnell, 24.

[143] Hills & Greco, 158.

fan communities tend to prioritize outsized affective expressions, which can complicate the narratives of becoming a fan, staying a fan, and performing being a fan. These young individuals are questioning who they are and who they want to be both as individuals and as part of a group. As such, it is only by studying fans as individuals, as collectives with particular practices, and as creators and users of networks can we properly understand how they fit within the modern media environment.

First, we must recognize and understand the ways in which fandom culture today is imposed by massive media corporations, a mighty force that can make the actual practices of fans (even more) difficult to parse. To what extent, for example, are fans working in normative conjunction with these corporations to celebrate the very fact of fandom rather than any particular property, and how can we then separate fan actions that are independent and organic versus ones that are corporately-encouraged? For example, while recognizing the sense of community fans experience, Valerie Wee notes that modern fandom can also "nurture in young people the specific habits and ideologies that support the dominant, corporate-constructed discourses and behaviors that revolve around the consumption of mainstream media texts and, by extension, the inherent values and messages structured around capitalist, consumerist concerns."[144] In fact, we can make a somewhat startling connection between this celebration of hardcore fandom itself with Rebecca Sugar's own admission that *Steven Universe* began as a way for her to celebrate the fandom of her own past. Regardless, we would do well to keep in mind that the act of being a fan occurs within these structures, including, significantly, within the design frameworks of social media and online networks. We must take the mediation of the self

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[144] Wee, 138.

seriously in our analysis of fandom, while acknowledging how those selves are shaped and constituted within various powerful cultural architectures.

Fans, and those that study them, are inevitably shaped in part by the collaborative networks they engage in, along with their individual experiences of media texts—they are consumers, producers, and community members. It is therefore crucial that we carefully consider how power is distributed and moderated within these systems. Social media facilitates the ability for young people to see themselves as part of an imagined community, collectives that can be narrowed down into the smallest of fandoms. But, as we established earlier, it is not an equal playing field, as most networks are structured to encourage and celebrate the default to publicity. Cho explains, "This design bias includes baked-in normativities that rehearse a standpoint that being-in-public is somehow neutral, low-risk, unraced, ungendered, and unsexed."[145] This reflects the aforementioned higher stakes that young queers and people of colour must routinely negotiate online (as in real life). It is a fraught, high-risk situation in which contexts are webbed and can disintegrate, under decidedly non-neutral circumstances. But teens and other young people, particularly queers, have always found ways of repurposing and recontextualizing these networked publics for their own (potentially resistant) intentions and uses.

In fact, while it is important to consider the negative trollish behaviour that I've discussed previously, I believe that young queers are most resistant through their futurity. As José Esteban Muñoz memorably explains in his theory of *queerness as collectivity*, "queerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always on the horizon."[146] This is a direct rejection of Lee Edelman's queer death drive, in which he

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[145] Cho (2017), 8.
[146] Muñoz, 11.

asserts that the future is inherently the realm of the child, and therefore the future is not for queers. Muñoz, on the other hand, offers a useful and frankly more coherent theory of queer's potentiality, a challenge to embrace utopianism. Drawing on French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, Muñoz brings forward a remarkable link to these networked publics we have been discussing. Nancy describes "being singular plural," which Muñoz recounts as "the way in which the singularity that marks a singular existence is always coterminously plural—which is to say that an entity registers as both particular in its difference but at the same time always relational to other singularities,"[147] a queer collectivity, a blurring of self and community.

Steven Universe's concept of fusion is particularly useful in light of this concept, and can help us make some sense of how these seemingly disparate threads will come together.

3.5. What Fusion Is

Fusion is the merging of two (or more) Gems into a single entity which shares a consciousness but retains each individual Gem's identity. Developed primarily as a way of exploring different types of relationships, fusion has been utilized in *Steven Universe* for great metaphoric purpose. As mentioned in chapter 1, it is important to remember that normative Gem culture back on Homeworld looks at fusion generally as a perversion, or even a crime (except when Gems of the same kind fuse to perform certain tasks). This

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[147] Muñoz, 10-11.

rather powerfully codes fusion itself as inherently queer, and key to the show's depiction of a queer utopia. Garnet, a permanent fusion of Ruby and Sapphire representing their love for each other, is the clearest and most powerful rejection of Homeworld's oppressive rules. It is only in "Jail Break," the finale of the first season and the fifty-second episode overall, that we discover Garnet is a fusion, and it's not until the twenty-second episode of season two, "The Answer," that we find out how they came to be together. In short, 5,750 years ago on Earth, after the Crystal Gems rebelled against Homeworld, Ruby and Sapphire were being attacked by Pearl and Rose Quartz until accidentally fusing when Ruby attempts to save Sapphire. Later, Blue Diamond (one of the leaders of the Gems on Homeworld) decides to shatter (kill) them for their deviance, but they escape to Earth and realize they have fallen in love. They vow to stay together in the form of Garnet, and join the Crystal Gems, who eagerly accept them as they are. Before fusing into Garnet, though, they sing a song together called "Something Entirely New," which explains, simply, how fusion works, at least for them:

> I think we made something
> Entirely new
> And it wasn't quite me
> And it wasn't quite you
> I think it was someone
> Entirely new

This seems to gesture toward Nancy's concept of "being singular plural," with fusions functioning as physical manifestations of a coterminously singular and plural existence, a form of existence that has only become more familiar for those of us who spend time within networked publics and communities. Garnet is the prime example for me, then, as this phenomenon is further coloured by the affective intensities of a fan collective that I find to be attendant within Garnet's love (in contrast with, say, platonic or toxic fusions

present elsewhere in the series). Fusion is a powerful concept that I believe can hold the great analytical weight I am placing upon it, as a way of better understanding the processes of fandom and the network of Tumblr.

At this point it's worthwhile to reiterate the importance of *Steven Universe*'s medium to the potency of its message. As McConnell explains in *Art & Origins*, "A cartoon is an ideal vector for transmitting ideas. Cartoons' abstraction of reality allows viewers to empathize with characters, or even in some ways to become them—the simple, idealized features reflecting the self on an unconscious, universal level."[148] A process of becoming through fusion? Supervising director Joe Johnston reaffirms this analysis: "Something that Rebecca has said time and time again is that we want the show to be 'subversive in a positive way.' So, what better medium than animation (a medium that is mostly watched by children) to try to make a show that does that?"[149] In other words, it is an intentional move of their part to subversively represent positive themes and ideas through the means of a medium that connects most easily and efficiently with young people. Regardless of intention, though, *Steven Universe* is clearly working on a distinctly political level that corresponds with its socially-conscious fandom. It is this fact —a keenly politically-minded young (queer) fandom—that makes *Steven Universe* into a particularly compelling and persuasive window through which to consider the affect-driven queer political project that I have identified to be performing more broadly. This project manifests itself as an anti-normative politics that embraces the fluid affects of social and cultural consciousness in a way that rethinks traditional notions of collectivity and identity.

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[148] McConnell, 85.
[149] McConnell, 224.

Continuing with our understanding of fusion as a representational message of "being singular plural," I want to make a connection now between the ways I have been understanding politics and fandom. Steven Duncombe rather succinctly captures the not-so-surprising links therein:

> Scratch an activist and you're apt to find a fan. It's no mystery why: fandom provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate according to different norms, laws, and structures than those we experience in our "real" lives. Fandom also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture. This ability to imagine alternatives and build community, not coincidentally, is a basic prerequisite for political activism.[150]

Political activists must be able to envision and imagine alternate realities, and tend to be invested intimately through their emotional processing, both tools that also operate within fandoms. It has been well-established in previous fandom work the ways in which fans can come together to enact change, from the letter-writing campaign in the 1960s to keep *Star Trek* on the air to various social justice campaigns instigated by "Nerdfighters," a fandom devoted to the online personas of John and Hank Green. Fans have long been able to slip smoothly between their communities and political involvement. While fandom certainly does not *have to* confront political issues, it has also long been characterized (both by scholars and fans themselves) by a push against heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalist neoliberalism, and other hegemonic cultural forces.

Alex Doty wrote that "the more the queerness in and of mass culture is explored, the more the notion that what is 'mass' or 'popular' is therefore 'straight' will become a

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[150] Steven Duncombe, "Imagining No-place," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 10 (2011).

highly questionable given in cultural studies - and in culture generally, for that matter."[151]

While it may have been difficult for Doty, in the early 1990s, to imagine the extent to

which queerness has been popularized and thus commercialized by the mid- to late-

2010s, it is striking how much has changed for queer tolerance and how little has changed

for queer acceptance. Significantly, though, a series like *Steven Universe* has been at least

effective enough at challenging the heterocentrist plots Doty recognized as holding

queerness back from disclaiming the cultural assumption of straightness. Unlike a show

like *Queer as Folk*, on which straight and gay audiences alike could feel comfortable in

presuming everyone's gayness, part of *Steven Universe*'s power is not that the audience

can assume everyone's queerness, but the inherent *potentiality* and *fluidity* on display. It

is no wonder that a platform like Tumblr, where you can become and perform many

versions of yourself, has become a community of queer youth dedicated to *Steven*

Universe, coming to terms with themselves and their sense of what to do about the

individual and the group. The political dimension, then, is crucial to these processes,

contextualizing the form and tenor of these performances and practices.

   Fusion can also help us understand the possibilities opened up by the unfolding of

the shared affective authorship found on Tumblr. Perhaps in the simplest sense, it is

shared between the creators and the fans themselves. *Steven Universe* is the fan object,

but the creators themselves have welcomed the non-canonical re-interpretations, have

repeatedly made statements to the effect of insisting on fan culture's autonomy and

legitimacy. In other words, it's not always entirely clear where the show ends and the fan

work begins, or to what extent the distinction matters. More complex, though, is the

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[151] Alex Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 104.

shared affective creation and expression that thrives within the fandom. This community, located primarily on Tumblr, intensifies and dearticulates the lived experience of a networked public through a design-influenced focus on the plurality and fluidity of identity. In a more profound sense, though, there is the shared emotional authorship of the self, which is not unrelated. As fusion makes clear, there is no divergence between the self and the collective, there is only our experience of simultaneity. This is a political project precisely because it runs counter to (hetero)normative expectations of selfhood and identity, and suggests a powerful place for queer collectivity that is intimately relational. This is something entirely new, indeed.

Fusion can and should be seen as a way to explore various forms of queer relationships, but more fundamentally it is a pure expression of this assertion of potentiality and fluidity through the transmogrified body, the potentiality and fluidity of not only gender and sexuality, but identity itself. We are all being singular plural. To put it bluntly, we are all fusions.

Conclusion

This process began with a fan who wanted to better understand the thing that he loved. Over time, the project mutated and went in some unexpected directions. Most significantly, it became evident that more work must be done on queer youth interacting with each other and expressing themselves on social media, particularly in under-theorized spaces like Tumblr. Queer youth have distinct and remarkably powerful experiences there, and I hope that I've made an honest and appreciably effective attempt at considering their investments and encounters with critical sophistication and respect. They deserve it.

Alex Doty, whom I can return to endlessly and find something new each time, also wrote that queerness "doesn't stand outside personal and cultural histories; it is part of the articulation of these histories."[152] If nothing else, this project on *Steven Universe* has proven this to be true. The assemblage that this series has constructed along with its fans and their community on Tumblr is queer, political, and intimately personal. For the queer youth that have been at the centre of it, it may be even more than that. As danah boyd explains, "the networked publics [teens] inhabit allow them a measure of privacy and autonomy that is not possible at home where parents and siblings are often listening in….Teens may wish to enjoy the benefits of participating in public, but they also relish intimacy and the ability to have control over their social situation."[153] What this

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[152] Doty, 15.
[153] boyd, 19.

community provides, then, is a uniquely private-in-public experience that successfully queers conventional notions of identity, sociality, and politics.

Steven Universe radically articulates a space for queer futurity and utopia in a political and counterhegemonic project to disassemble the dominance of heteronormativity and uphold the primacy of transformational change and fluidity. Queer youth in particular have found something deeply bewitching about this, which has led to the development of a tremendously animated and affective fandom that has made a home for itself on Tumblr. While only a small fraction of that world has been analyzed here, and much work remains to be done on this convergence of cultural phenomena, I think the shared emotional authorship of this community is a metamorphic evolution for today's queer youth, the implications of which remain to be fully seen.

It seems unsatisfactory to me that it is only recently that spaces like Tumblr, sites for intense affective passions and monumental acts of self-making and identity formation, have been theorized and studied in this way, having been ignored for too long. I hope to have provided a persuasive account of the political and cultural work occuring there, and moreover, the key contexts through which we can parse its magnitude and meaning. So many critical and transformative queer experiences are happening there, held up in high definition through a fandom like that of *Steven Universe*, and we must take them seriously. We must understand who they are becoming, and how that becoming is being manifested and performed. We owe it ourselves, and to them.

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