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How Love Ought to Be: The Power of Sapphic Representation in Animated Children's Cartoons

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How Love Ought to Be:

The Power of Sapphic Representation in Animated Children's Cartoons

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DePauw University Honor Scholar Program

Class of 2022

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ABSTRACT

Though there has been a long history of LGBTQ+ representation across various forms of media, cartoons are uniquely suited to counter hegemonic teachings that privilege heteronormativity. Consuming media with LGBTQ+ characters not only has the potential to shape attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community and make them more positive, but cartoons have the unique power to teach children important lessons that they do not learn in school, including narratives about queerness. In the absence of discussions about LGBTQ+ identities in the classroom, children overwhelmingly end up priviling heterosexuality in their interactions. As such, cartoons then have the power to counter these teachings and portray queerness through their whimsical animation and themes about struggling against the masses. This thesis will analyze the sapphic representation in five animated children's cartoons, *The Legend of Korra, Steven Universe, Adventure Time, She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *The Owl House*, ultimately finding that this representation is crucial in the current anti-gay political climate to counter dominant cultural norms that favor heterosexuality.

DEDICATIONS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of so many amazing people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my entire committee, Dr. River Vooris, Dr. Sarah Rowley, and Jeanette Johnson-Licon for advising me through this difficult process and providing all the support (physical and emotional) I needed. I sincerely appreciate all of your thoughts and visions for this project to help it come to fruition.

Next, I would like to thank my parents, Krista and Joe Storz. Thank you for always being there for me and letting me be my weird self as a kid. Thanks also to my sisters, Madeline and Claire Storz, for watching *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* with me at least 100 times and many thanks to my brother, Jack Storz, for putting up with it.

This thesis, of course, would also not be possible without the brave creators of these show: Bryan Koneitzo and Michael Dante DiMartino, Rebecca Sugar, Pendelton Ward, ND Stevenson, and Dana Terrace. Thank you for fighting for the right to air queer representation.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the little girls who love girls and all the little boys who love boys. Your stories deserve to be told too. I promise you it gets better. We are fighting for you.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Representation Matters

When I was a little kid, one of my favorite movies was *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper*. I had two sisters, one older and one younger, and every opportunity we got we chose to watch that movie. We even had a movie player in a car that was almost constantly playing that movie, much to my brother's displeasure. My parents always joked that we had the movie and, subsequently, the soundtrack memorized, but I know for a fact that we had the entire thing memorized. In an attempt to save her people, Princess Annalise must marry King Dominic to unite their two kingdoms and bring more prosperity to them both. Before the wedding, however, Annalise is kidnapped and her new friend, Erica, must take her place while Annalise's tutor, Julian, finds her. Erica and Dominic end up falling in love while Annalise and Julian realize their true feelings for each other. The movie ends with a double wedding of the two couples after Annalise and Julian discover that their kingdom is full of geodes that will bring them great wealth.

I knew almost every single detail of the movie. I remembered the name of Erica's cat and all the words of the song she sang to Wolfy. I remembered the gold tooth of the villain, Preminger, who wanted to marry the queen and steal her wealth. I remembered Erica sitting in prison after they found out she was impersonating the princess and I remembered her stunt to escape from prison. I remembered how Dominic, her knight in shining armor, came to rescue her and ask for her hand in marriage. Most of all, I remembered the message of the movie: that true love conquers all and that good will always win in the end.

I often wish now that I am an adult that I could rewatch *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* through the eyes of a child just once more, to innocently watch as the characters I loved triumphed. Now, I find that I am almost never satisfied with stories like these. What used to make me happy, the guy gets the girl and they all live happily ever after, is not enough now that I know that there are so many more possibilities out there.

I think a lot about all of the subliminal messages I must have absorbed in stories like these and how every story like that delayed realizing that I was nothing like Princess Annalise or Erica in that I was never going to end up with a guy. Children are always watching and always learning and what I learned from watching *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* at least 100 times was that love only exists between men and women. As sparse as queer representation is now, it was practically nonexistent when I was a kid in the early 2000s.

In an honors thesis for the University of Tennessee, Carson Cook (2018) describes the history of LGBTQ+ representation in the media. She notes that from 1930-1983, both the Hollywood Production Code and the Code of Practice for Television Broadcasters effectively prohibited any depiction of homosexuality (Cook, 2018, p. 5). Following these codes, early depictions of homosexualty mostly presented LGBTQ+ people as child molesters, victims of violence, or drag queens (Cook, 2018, p. 5). Furthermore, the Hays Film Code almost exclusively prohibited the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters and any gay characters had to be punished (Lewis, 2021). In 1973, the Gay Media Task Force was founded, and their goal was to make sure lesbians and gays were portrayed fairly (Kutulas, 2017, p. 143). Networks slowly began to increase LGBTQ+ representation, some positive and some still negative. Since then queer representation has grown and is slowly becoming more positive. Beginning in 2005, the

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defemation, or GLAAD, began to keep track of LGBTQ+ representation in the media. During the first years, 2005 and 2006, LGBTQ+ characters only made up 1.4% of characters on broadcasted shows. This number has grown since then and LGBTQ+ character made up 6.4% of characters in 2017-2018 (Cook, 2018, p. 6). LGBTQ+ representation has come a long way since its prohibition in early Hollywood.

Though scholars like Cook (2018) believe in the power of LGBTQ+ representation, others question if this visibility is enough. In "All the rage: The story of gay visibility in America," Susanna Walters, a prominent gender, sexuality, and feminist theorist, questions the extent to which gay visibility in the media is helpful. She argues that while there has been an explosion of the representation of LGBTQ+ people across many forms of media like prime time television, cartoons, and newspapers, this visibility is not always helpful as "forms of bigotry sustain themselves and even grow in the face of public, cultural visibility (Walters, 2001, p. 12)". Indeed, though Walters (2001) believes that visibility is necessary for equality and social change, it does not necessarily erase stereotypes or guarantee liberation (p. 13). This book was written in 2001 when openly gay elected officials first rose to prominence and domestic partnership laws became more common in certain states, but at the same time Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act that restricted marraige to between a man and a woman and the Supreme Court ruled that organizations like Boy Scouts could discriminate against gay scoutmasters (Walters, 2001, p. 13). This pattern of one step forward, two steps back has continued into today. Though the Supreme Court ruled to legalize same-sex marraige across all fifty states and to prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ+ employees, Don't Ask Don't Tell, a policy that prohibited openly gay people from serving in the military, was repealed, and more television shows than

ever have openly LGBTQ+ characters, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments are at an all time high as well. Many states have moved to ban transgender girls from participating in sports and other states like Florida have prohibit instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in the classroom.

Walters (2001) also argues that visibility has also led to an acceptance of only select stereotypes and predicated modes of representation: an exotic but unthreatening "other" and gays as really just the same as straights after all (p. 15). This is harmful as gay identity is thus only acceptable though assimilation to these norms. As such, while the number of LGBTQ+ characters has risen, it still has drawbacks as many of the characters fall into harmful stereotypes and tropes that are ultimately harmful to queer visibility. Often times, gay male characters are reduced to the "boy-chasing, fashion-obsessed, show-tune-singing" stereotype like Jack from *Will and Grace* (Walters, 2001, p. 13). Aside from these stereotypes, early LGBTQ+ representation included documentaries that tried to explain homosexuality in horrifying ways (Kutulas, 2017, p. 140). Other popular culture depictions of gay life porported that homosexuality was caused by emotionally disturbing experiences, with more than half of Americans fearing queer people and seeing them as harmful (Kutulas, 2017, p. 140). These beliefs worked their ways into media portrayals of queer people, as companies like Disney have a problematic history of queercoding their villains, popular examples being Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, Scar from *The Lion King,* and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (Brown, 2021, p. 3). Media portrayals of queer people have not always been positive and in this case, they perpetuate damaging stereotypes.

Other harmful depictions of the LGBTQ+ community include the "bury-your-gays" trope, when LGBTQ+ characters, usually WLW (or woman-loving-woman) characters are killed

after expressing their queerness. In "Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics," Erin Waggoner (2017), a professor of communications, argues that this has a harmful effect on viewers, especially WLW viewers that identify with those characters. Out of 35 WLW characters in shows in 2015, 10 died on screen. Despite increased representation, Waggoner (2017) notes that it means very little if the representation falls into these tropes that are detrimental to LGBTQ+ viewers as "the message this sends to those individuals struggling with their identities is that WLW may find happiness, but it is short-lived and perhaps requires a bulletproof vest (p. 1879)." Increased representation is not always a good thing as in certain cases such as with the bury your gays trope, it ultimately ends up doing more harm than good.

Aside from tropes such as these, other media also engages in "queerbaiting," another harmful practice in media creation. Queerbaiting is a form of "gay marketing" that use tactics to draw in queer viewers and earn views or money without ever explicitly confirming LGBTQ+ characters or stories (Brennan, 2019, p. 2). Companies use subtle elements that target gay consumers that heterosexual viewers do not notice. Straight viewers may see characters as "just friends" while queer viewers are able to pick up on queer coding of the relationships that are never confirmed one way or the other. In "What was Missing: Children's Queerbaiting and Homoromantic Exclusion in *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*," Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter (2019), media study researchers at the University of Baltimore, describe the role queerbaiting plays in children's media, noting that it protects children from queerness as producers believe queerness is associated with homoeroticism and sex (p. 143). Queerbaiting is therefore justified for these producers who want to draw in adults who recognize the queerbaiting

while shielding children from these topics (Blodgett and Salter, 2019, p. 144). Queerbaiting has a long history in media creation in general, but plays a larger and more specific role in children's animated cartoons as producers believe explicit same-sex relationships are inappropriate for children.

LGBTQ+ representation in television has certainly faced many challenges not only in including queer characters but also in representing them in a way that is not harmful to queer viewers. Despite these challenges, it is increasingly important to produce meaningful queer representation, especially in the face of current anti-LGBTQ+ political movements. Cook (2018) argues that LGBTQ+ representation matters because it affects how viewers see the gay rights movement and it has a positive effect for LGBTQ+ viewers to see themselves represented. It can also "affect public policy positions on issues such as same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, non-discrimination protections, bathroom bills, or a transgender military ban (Cook, 2018, p. 9)[1]." Queer representation goes a long way in shaping perspectives about issues related to the LGBTQ+ community. Aside from being a crucial reference for queer viewers to see themselves represented, it also influences the opinions of straight viewers on gay rights issues. Harry Yan (2019), a media and communications researcher, studies the impact of consuming media with LGBTQ+ characters on overall attitudes towards lesbians and gays. Yan's 2019 study empirically demonstrates how consumption of media with LGBTQ+ characters impacts attitudes towards lesbians and gays, finding that those who have consumed media with LGBTQ+ characters are more likely to have positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians. As Yan (2019) states, "watching

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[1] These policies are very prominent today as a number of states are introducing legislation to ban transgender girls from participating in sports and debates continue in the Supreme Court over same-sex adoption and non-discrimination policies.

contemporary gay and lesbian storylines on TV has direct positive effects on changing people's attitudes towards gays and lesbians" (p. 864). Thus, LGBTQ+ representation is also a powerful force in shaping straight viewers' overall attitudes towards lesbians and gays.

Though LGBTQ+ representation is important across all forms of media in general, it is increasingly necessary when it comes to children's media, specifically animated children's cartoons. In "Animating Difference : Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children," C. Richard King et al. (2010) argue that cartoons have a unique ability to teach children valuable lessons wrapped in extraordinary or fantastical plots. The narratives embedded in animated cartoons "provide children with audio-visual reinforcement of ideologies concerning gender roles, the importance of conquering one's fears, the rewards of hard work, or the benefits of team efforts, making these stories powerful agents of socialization (King et al., 2010, p. 34)." In a sense, animated cartoons can teach children about different cultures and ideologies. Though this media has the potential to subvert dominant ideologies, the authors argue that it historically has been used to teach heterosexuality and heteronormativity. King et al. (2010) argue that

> "Despite a tenuous relevance, or an outright irrelevance, to the story lines, "heterosexuality" (in the form of heterosexual relationships, or heterosexually oriented banter) pervades most films for children. Indeed, if there is a purpose to these seemingly pointless scenes, the aim could be taken to be the "indoctrination" of children into "the heterosexual lifestyle (p. 43)."

The existence of a myriad of scenes in this media functions to lead children to view heterosexuality as the norm. Though they possess the potential to subvert these norms and

provide children with a worldview that accepts and celebrates queer identities, more often than not these stories end up "maintaining the status quo" by promoting heteronormativity.

Though animated cartoons often end up reinforcing heteronormativity, the important thing to note here is the potential that cartoons have to teach children counter-narratives instead of reiterations of dominant cultural norms. In *The Queer Art of Failure,* Jack Halberstam (2011), the director of the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University and queer studies scholar, argues that animated cartoons make "ample use of the wonderfully childish territory of revolt (p. 28)." As new animation includes heavier themes and narratives, Halberstam (2011) believes that this can include counter-narratives about queerness. Indeed, the whimsical nature of this animation "allows for the smuggling of radical narratives into otherwise cliche interactions about friendship, loyalty and family values (Halberstam, 2011, p. 43)." Themes in this animation commonly include narratives about a main character struggling against the masses, a theme that Halberstam (2011) argues is well suited for including themes about queerness that subvert traditional norms.

These counter-narratives that present LGBTQ+ representation are especially important for children's cartoons. For Halberstam (2011), they are a vehicle for presenting queerness in a way that challenges dominant norms. It is increasingly crucial that cartoons do include this representation, as without it, children perpetuate heteronormative ideals. In "Kissing brides and loving hot vampires: children's construction and perpetuation of heteronormativity in elementary school classrooms," Caitlyn Ryan (2016), a clinical social worker and a pioneer in research related to LGBTQ+ mental health, studies the impact of silencing discussions LGBTQ+ inclusive perspectives on children. Ryan (2016) collected data about elementary school children

to show how young children already support notions of heterosexuality in the classroom. Same-sex attraction is discouraged in various explicit and nonexplicit manners in classroom curriculum. Ryan (2016) finds that same-sex sexuality is explicity discouraged as students protest when they are implicated in same-sex romance and verbally denounce homosexual romance scenarios (p. 81). Implicitly, classroom curriculum silences queer identities as "heteronormativity was presented as a form of 'common sense', followed by silence (Ryan, 2016, p. 82)." Heterosexuality is presented as the only option and no queer alternatives are given. This is reinforced as plays and books read in class only involve straight narratives of love and nonfiction curriculum assign heteronormative family roles to humans and animals alike (Ryan, 2016, p. 82). As Ryan (2016) states:

> "The data indicate that not only do sex and sexuality circulate in elementary schools, but also the widespread presence of normative notions of (hetero) sexuality constructed and perpetuated through children's interactions makes classrooms heteronormative spaces (p. 78)."

Despite the efforts of many to make classrooms more LGBTQ+ friendly, heterosexuality is still prized in the classroom and reinforced through children's interactions with each other that devalue and discourage same-sex attraction. Schools do indeed teach sexuality, but it is just heterosexuality and "other expressions of sexuality that did not fall within these bounds, such as queer-inclusive or other nonheterosexual perspectives, were devalued through derision and silence (Ryan, 2016, p. 86)." Aside from in the classroom, parents also play a role in the socialization of children in a way that promotes heteronormativity. Emily Kane (2006) interviewed several parents of preschool children about their responses to children's gender

nonconformity. Though gender nonconformity was welcomed from daughters, parents with sons were more likely to discourage these behaviors and promote hegemonic masculinity. For seven of the twenty-seven heterosexual parents with sons, they feared that their sons would be gay or be perceived as gay when expressing gender nonconformity. Some of these parents then say that they would take action to "discourage homosexuality and accomplish heterosexuality (Kane, 2006, p. 163)". Even outside the classroom, young children receive messages from their parents that reinforce heteronormativity. Like animated cartoons, schools and parents have the power to teach counter-narratives that challenge dominant structures, though more often than not they end up socializing children to subscribe to heteronormativity.

Though this research demonstrates the ways in which heterosexuality is prized in primary schools, it also shows the importance of animated cartoons to teach children what they will not learn in the classroom, that LGBTQ+ identites can be accepted and celebrated. Heterosexuality is not and should not be the default. As such, animated cartoons with LGBTQ+ representation are a powerful teaching tool for children to learn about more identities than what is taught at school and be more accepting of queer identities that may even apply to themselves. If Halberstam (2011) is right about the power of animation to present counter-narratives, then animated cartoons are a perfect way to present themes of queerness in an easy way for children to understand. This way, they will learn that heterosexuality is not the only option and not necessarily default to it in their interactions.

In summary, though LGBTQ+ representation is often sparse and falls victim to harmful tropes and queerbaiting, it is has a positive impact in shaping people's attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and teaching children that heterosexuality is not the only option. Animated

cartoons are a prime example of media that has the power to reach both children and adults and present them with messages of acceptance that celebrate queer identities. LGBTQ+ representation in animated children's cartoons present them with a worldview that accepts queer identities and such representation even has the power to make adults have more positive attitudes towards lesbians and gays. To that end, this paper seeks to answer two fundamental questions: How has sapphic representation changed over time? Why does this representation matter? The present study will examine LGBTQ+ representation, specifically women-loving-women (WLW or sapphic), in five different animated children's cartoons: *The Legend of Korra, Steven Universe, Adventure Time, She-Ra and the Princesses of Power,* and finally, *The Owl House*. I will note how this representation has changed over time moving from more subtle to more obvious and then argue in the conclusion why the representation is important in the current political context for children to see as it increases acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using phrases like "television show," "cartoon," "show," and "animated cartoon" interchangeably to mean animated children's cartoon. Additionally, I will use the word "queer" as an umbrella term for any non-straight identity.

CHAPTER 1

***What's Going on Between These Two?: Queer Subtext in* The Legend of Korra**

On December 19, 2014, something remarkable happened: the series finale of Nickelodeon TV show *The Legend of Korra* ended with confirming one of the first gay couples in children's cartoon history. Korra and Asami, hand in hand, approached the spirit portal and gazed affectionately into each other's eyes before the screen faded to bright yellow, revealing the words "the end." That small gesture was one of the first in a long line of sapphic couples to

appear on children's television. Though the two characters only held hands, their relationship was later confirmed by the show creators who also stated that Nickelodeon was hesitant to allow them to even air that (Spencer, 2020).Their relationship was also later explored more fully in the comic book series of the same name, set after the show. Despite the limitations placed on the characters in the television show, their representation as queer characters in a time when not many others existed was groundbreaking in challenging heteronormative cultural norms and showing a diversity of identities to children.

In her master's thesis "The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer," Heather Wright, a graduate student in the Liberal Studies Department of the City University of New York, argues that cartoons are a uniquely suited medium to counter hegemonic cultural norms, including heteronormativity. Cartoons can be accessed and understood very easily by people from all walks of life, contrary to academic works that often times require formal training to fully understand. Though cartoons oftentimes present complex themes and nuanced worldbuilding, they are produced in a way that is more easily understood through simpler language and visuals. Cartoons also imagine new worlds with limitless possibilities that Wright (2018) argues are the perfect medium for LGBTQ+ praxis to teach kids about different identities in a friendly way that is easy to understand. Given the way cartoons can teach those who watch about culture, ideology, and history in a very simplified form, they have the ability to represent LGBTQ+ characters in a transformative way for children to see a worldview that is not heteronormative. By reimagining the world in a way that is more inclusive of queer identities, fantasy cartoons thus present worlds that mirror our own while simultaneously introducing new institutions and norms; the familiar

elements provide us a way to envision how we can take these different norms and apply them to our society.

The familiar yet different worlds presented in cartoons are thus well-suited vehicles for challenging dominant cultural norms. These shows "destabilize the hegemonic systems and ideologies that position those characters as other or lesser are at best flat and unconvincing, and, at worst, complicit in their subjugation (Wright, 2018, p. 5)." Viewing cartoons with queer representation allows the viewers to see "world building of fantasy, as a kind of queer intervention, allows us to see the seams in our restrictive ideologies and institutions, which facilitate a receptivity to new queer realities (Wright, 2018, p. 6)." These ideologies such as heteronormativity often impoverish queer people from knowledge about their identities. Dominant social structures exclude queer people from representation across various forms of media, including cartoons, and provide very little information about these identities. In a sense, then, all fantasy world-building has the potential to be queer as other definitions of the word "queer" include "to consider or interpret (something) from a perspective that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality (Merriam-Webster)." Queerness in the context of world building means creating "not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sex (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 548)." This includes a reorientation or reinvention of social institutions and norms that systematically exclude LGBTQ+ people and creating new worlds full of new possibilities for representation of queer identities and new social structures that are more inclusive. As such, fantasy cartoons engage in powerful acts of world-buiding that redefine queer realities.

One cartoon in which these identities are presented is in *The Legend of Korra*. The

Legend of Korra is a television show set in a fictional world where certain people can "bend," or

manipulate, one of four elements: water, earth, fire, or air. The world is divided into four nations

based on the elements, the Southern and Northern Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, the Fire

Nation, and the Air Nomads. One special person, however, can bend all four elements. This

person is known as the Avatar, the reincarnation of the light spirit Raava who fused with a human

10,000 years ago to bring balance to the world. When the Avatar dies, they are then reincarnated

into a bender of the next element in the cycle. *The Legend of Korra* focuses on Avatar Korra, a

teenager of the Southern Water Tribe, as she masters all four elements and learns how to make

her own path as the Avatar. Korra's journey as the Avatar begins when she arrives in Republic

City, a prosperous city where benders and non-benders of all four nations live in harmony. In the

city, Korra becomes friends with two brothers, a fire bender named Mako and an earth bender

named Bolin, and an inventor named Asami. Korra, Mako, and Asami, end up in a love triangle

during seasons one and two, but after the love triangle ends in the second season, the characters

decide they are all just better as friends.

In the final moment of the series, Korra and Asami have a romantic moment as they hold

hands and gaze into each other's eyes as they are transported to the spirit world. The creators of

the show later confirmed that the two characters were in a canon romantic relationship after that.

What is important to note here is that the creator, Bryan Konietzo, did originally believe that the

moment shared between Korra and Asami would be sufficient to signal their romantic feelings

for each other under the constraints of the network in what they were allowed to produce

(Robinson, 2014). Konietzko also said that Nickelodeon would not allow them to air a same-sex

kiss, stating that it was an unspoken understanding that they would not be allowed to air explicit same-sex relationships on screen, an understanding that was later confirmed when the studio limited them to more subtextual representation (Robinson, 2014). Though there is much debate surrounding queer representation and what it takes for it to be meaningful, I believe that it is crucial to understand that in the case of the *Legend of Korra*, the creators made the final season with this romance in mind and fully meant for it to be a canon couple but were unfortunately constrained by their network, thus making the representation fall short. For instance, Wright (2018) argues that since there is only one scene in which romance is heavily implied but never fully explored on screen, the show thus falls short in its representation. Viewers are left with a sense of curiosity as to what ends up happening as it is not shown in the television show. Additionally, since it is a subtle form of representation, younger viewers without much exposure to romance might not even pick up on the blossoming relationship between Korra and Asami and mistakenly believe they are simply really good friends, as is the case with many sapphic relationships. As a whole, despite the good intentions of the creators to create the relationship, it ultimately succumbed to the constraints of an unaccepting network and was thus a relationship of subtext rather than explicit representation.

Furthermore, Wright (2018) argues that the final moments of the series do little to counter normative conceptions of sexuality and queerness, while the comics that take place after the series end engage in queer world building that does more to challenge heteronormative cultural institutions (p. 21). Wright (2018) describes the differences in queer representation in *The Legend of Korra* and the comics that take place after the end of the series, *Turf Wars*. Their relationship is made much more explicit in the comics as they kiss multiple times. They are even

shown exploring their relationship and even telling all their friends and family about them. What is interesting to note about their relationship in the comic books is that they never use any LGBTQ+ terminology to describe themselves; rather, they simply state that they are in a relationship without using any LGBTQ+ terms. So, even where there is explicit representation, they do not use modern language to describe it which may act as a barrier for children who may feel the same but continue to lack the appropriate language to describe themselves.

Figure 1: Korra (left) and Asami (right) kiss in the comic Turf Wars that takes place after the series ends. This is only one example of their relationship shown explicitly throughout the course of the comic series.

Though there are many shortcomings with the representation in the series, the third and fourth seasons include a subtle build up to their relationship. In season three, the two are shown spending more time together. In the episode "A Breath of Fresh Air," Asami teaches Korra how to drive. Later, in "The Earth Queen," the two travel together to collect taxes for the Earth Queen and fight together when they are attacked by bandits. When they are subsequently captured by the Earth Queen's soldiers for defying her orders, they work together to break out. After all this time spent together, by the end of the season, they are shown to be very close in many instances.

First, when Korra is leaving to fight Zaheer, the main villain in season three, she and Asami hug before she goes. Asami is the only one she hugs out of all her friends. Then, after Korra is poisoned by Zaheer and almost dies, Asami is the one who takes care of her when they are back in Republic City. Before a special ceremony, Asami helps Korra get ready and soothes her when feels bad that she is still not better. Asami gently places her hand on Korra's shoulder before kneeling down to look her in the eyes and tell her it is okay. She then grabs Korra's hand and squeezes it. Asami later offers to leave her business just to go with Korra when she leaves for the Southern Water Tribe to help her heal. These soft, sentimental moments indicate that something more than friendship is blossoming in their relationship.

Figure 2: In season 3 episode 13, "Venom of the Red Lotus," Asami (left) gently puts her hand on Korra's (right) shoulder as she tells her that everything will be okay before squeezing her hand.

At the beginning of season four, Korra returns to the Southern Water Tribe alone. What was meant to be only a short trip back lasted three years, during which her friends tried to keep contact with her by writing letters. Korra only ever wrote back to Asami, and she even said "it is

easier to tell you about all this stuff." This small moment indicates that Korra and Asami have a deep relationship that may be more than just friendship. When Korra finally returns to Republic City, she meets up with Asami and Mako for lunch to see them after all that time. When she arrives at the restaurant, she first sees Asami and the two hug before Asami compliments her new short hair. Korra blushes and tells Asami "you're looking snazzy as always." Their relationship progresses over the course of the season until the final episode in which their relationship becomes canon. At the end of the final episode, Korra and Asami sit with each other after the wedding between two of their friends. Korra apologizes to Asami for having been gone for so long and the two tenderly hug. They then both state that they need a break and Korra offers to go on a vacation with Asami anywhere she wants. Asami says that she wants to go to the Spirit World and Korra is ecstatic to take Asami there. The two leave the wedding and head to the portal to go to the Spirit World. Korra and Asami stand in the portal as the show ends.

Figure 4: In season 4 episode 7, "Reunion," Korra (left) and Asami (right) finally see each other again after 3 years. Asami compliments Korra's hair which causes her to blush and Korra replies and tell's Asami that she looks good as well.

Figure 3: Korra and Asami hug in the final episode of the series before leaving for their vacation to the spirit world.

The final moment carries heavy romantic implications. The soft and sentimental music sets the tone for romance as it slows when the characters face each other and hold hands. The last four notes of the song lightly move down the scale, a musical feature similar to that of "Avatar's Love" that plays in *Avatar the Last Airbender* when the two characters kiss in the finale. Additionally, Korra and Asami's pose mimics the positions of characters Zhu Li and Varrick at their wedding and even the positions of characters Aang and Katara at the end of the previous series, *Avatar the Last Airbender*. Both of these pairs are in romantic relationships that end with a kiss between the couples. The difference, however, is that while the heterosexual characters Aang and Katara kiss, Korra and Asami do not and the viewers are left with the implications of intimacy without it being explicit. The scene still carries weight as the implications of romance

as well as the later confirmation of their relationship make them one of the first canon sapphic couples in children's television cartoons.

Figures 5.1 and 5.2: In the final episode of the series, "The Last Stand," Korra (right) and Asami (left) are transported to the spirit world for a vacation. The two stand with hands held and stare intimately at each other as they are transported into the other world. This is a direct parallel to the final scene of Avatar the Last Airbender when Aang (left) and Katara (right) share a similar moment before kissing.

Furthermore, for the time in which the television series aired, this representation, though subtle, is much more radical than it may seem. The series originally started airing in 2012 and the finale aired in 2014. This was over a full year before same-sex marriage was federally legalized. This representation of queer affection came at a time when gay rights were an ongoing salient political debate and by exploring themes of queerness in a children's show at that time, it was a radical move to tackle and challenge these norms. Furthermore, Lauren Chochinov (2012), a communications and literature professor and researcher of queer representation in popular culture, states that Korra was one of the first queer characters in animated television as an all-ages cartoon. She argues that many fans pushing for increased queer representation in the media inspired Korra's queerness and pushed the creators to more fully explore her queerness in the comics after the show (Chochinov, 2012). As a whole, despite the fact that the representation

may have been very subtle, it was still groundbreaking for its time and even inspired a push for more representation.

Other elements of the show also make this representation very meaningful. In "The Discursive Implications of Sexuality in the Final Scene of The Legend of Korra," Greg Langner (2015), professor of communication arts, examines the cultural and transformative implications of the same-sex romantic relationship in the *Legend of Korra*. Langner (2015) argues that because of the wide reach of the show that appealed to many different demographics, the show had potential to transform animation and cartoons with respect to queer representation. He notes that since the show was more of a realistic reflection of our world with less fantastical elements like other fictional cartoons, it was better suited to portray social awareness and challenge cultural norms. *Legend of Korra* offered commentary on many salient issues, from terrorism to civil wars to genocide to government corruption; it was not afraid to portary dark themes and show gruesome on screen deaths and suicides. Langner (2015) argues that the final scene of the show was an intentional act that is a tool for generating change that challenged social norms, noting that "the final scene in *The Legend of Korra* demonstrates through story the fluidity of gender and sexuality. A new discourse is generated. Never before has a character, let alone a lead female character in a mainstream children's television series, held hands so closely and looked so intimately into the eyes of another character of the same sex (p. 30)." The reality of the *Legend of Korra* made it a well-suited show to explore these topics and embrace queerness as a way to challenge social norms and show the wide variety of identities that exist. This serves as a good introduction to young viewers exploring queer representation and related topics.

The early representation of queer characters presented in the *Legend of Korra* was groundbreaking for its time. The show faced many challenges in pushing for this representation and as such, romance was heavily implied rather than being explicit. Additionally, the biggest romantic moment happened in the last moment of the series and the relationship between Korra and Asami was explored later in comic books that take place after the series. Though this is true, the sapphic representation that aired is still important to challenge heteronormative structures in children's television to show different identities, but perhaps only for those that are actively looking for it. Actual children watching this show, for instance, might fail to notice the romantic implications laced in the series if it is not something they have previously been exposed to as children have less experience with romance, let alone same-sex romance. Those that have an understanding of queer culture, however, can more easily pick up on these themes and the subtext of the romance between Korra and Asami. It is like creator Bryan Konietzo said: "If it seems out of the blue to you, I think a second viewing of the last two seasons would show that perhaps you were looking at it only through a hetero lens (Robinson, 2014)". For those that have the ability to analyze this show from a queer perspective, it challenges gender roles and heteronormativity. For the rest, however, viewing the show through that hetero lens can indeed obscure the true representation. Nonetheless, the small gesture in the finale of *The Legend of Korra* went a long way in providing groundbreaking sapphic representation.

CHAPTER 2

"The Queerest Episode of a Children's Cartoon:" Queer Fusions and Same-Sex Weddings in
Steven Universe

Shortly after the finale of *The Legend of Korra*, something else remarkable happened in animated children's cartoons: the season one finale of *Steven Universe* featured an emerging sapphic relationship. Though the relationship between Korra and Asami was much more subtextual in *The Legend of Korra*, the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire in *Steven Universe* eventually becomes much more open and explicit as the series progresses, ultimately culminating in a wedding between the two. Two Crystal Gems, Ruby and Sapphire, are separated and when they reunite, they embrace each other and transform into Garnet, a fusion that is the embodiment of their love for each other. One fan even called this episode "one of the queerest episodes of a children's cartoon in the history of television (Blodgett and Salter, 2019, p. 152)." Their interactions with each other are explicitly queer throughout the series when they are not fused, but the culmination of their relationship occurs when they get married towards the end of the series which is incredibly useful to subvert heteronormativity in children's cartoons.

*Steven Univers*e follows a part-gem part-human young boy named Steven Universe. He lives with three Crystal Gems, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, a group of extraterrestrial beings who protect the Earth. The Gems are quite literally gem stones with physical forms that resemble humans. Steven is the son of Rose Quartz, the former leader of the Crystal Gems, and Greg Universe, a human musician. Rose Quartz ultimately had to give up her physical form so that Steven could exist, with herself integrated into half of Greg's self to form Steven. From the beginning, *Steven Universe* challenges traditional heteronormative structures. The first instance

of this is in his family structure. Steven is raised by three mother figures, Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, as well as his father, Greg. Though none of the Crystal Gems fit the traditional role of a mother figure, Steven considers all of them to be family and does not want to leave any of them when he goes to dinner with his best friend, Connie, and her parents. Though Connie's parents initially disapprove of Steven's family structure, the episode ends with the acceptance of this nontraditional family. Her parents see that Steven's family, though untraditional, still deeply care for each other and applaud his guardians as responsible caregivers. As a queer family that all love and support each other, Steven and his parents portray an important structure that challenges the rhetoric surrounding LGBTQ+ families and anti-gay politics that believe families should be a certain way, that being the traditional nuclear family with one mother and one father.

Steven's family unconditionally supports him and the series follows Steven as he learns how to be a Crystal Gem and fight alongside the other Gems to protect Earth from other Gems that wish to destroy it. The story is about Steven growing up and learning about not only the Gems, but also about family, friendship, and love. One of the most surprising things that Steven learns in the first season is that Garnet is actually a Fusion of two Gems, Ruby and Sapphire. After they are separated in a fight with a hostile Gem, Steven helps Ruby find Sapphire and when they reunite, the two embrace each other and Sapphire kisses Ruby's forehead before the two then fuse into Garnet. Fusion is where two or more Gems dance with each other before physically morphing into a completely new form. Each Fusion has its own separate identity and different abilities and skills from the Gems that comprise the Fusion. In essence, Fusions represent relationships and the ultimate physical and emotional connection between Gems. Fusions usually occur only between Gems of the same type and thus amplifies the power of the

Gems that comprise the fusion. The Fusion of Ruby and Sapphire, however, is not a Fusion of practical use to amplify abilities. Instead, Garnet represents "an entirely new kind of fusion formed, not for power, but for love (Wright, 2018, p. 34)." Garnet herself is a relationship, and a queer relationship at that, and is a representation of the love Ruby and Sapphire share for each other.

Figure 6.1 and 6.2: In Season 1, Episode 53, "Jailbreak," Sapphire and Ruby embrace each other when they are reunited after being separated. Sapphire then kisses Ruby's forehead.

The existence of Garnet as a main character in the series is important as she is the physical representation of the loving relationship between Ruby and Sapphire. It is also relevant in demonstrating how Ruby and Sapphire behave when they are unfused: they appear lost and always try to find their way back to each other. When they re-fuse, their Fusion is almost immediate and more romantic than other fusions in the show, which is important as

"the physical confirmation of the relationship through the romantic reunion is a canonical representation of lesbian love that echoes the norms of heteroromantic depictions. The scene also emphasizes the depth of their relationship and their concern for one another,

while also presenting some questions about their ability to function outside a relationship

(Blodgett and Salter, 2019, p. 152)."

Though Ruby and Sapphire remain fused throughout the majority of the series, when Ruby and

Sapphire are unfused, they are always portrayed as being visibly in a relationship. In one

episode, "Keystone Motel," Ruby and Sapphire have a disagreement that causes them to

separate. They are angry at each other throughout the episode, but at the end, they finally make

up and mend their relationship, where Ruby picks up Sapphire in a move that mirrors the

tradition of a groom carrying his bride. The two then re-fuse to form Garnet.

Figure 7: In "Keystone Motel," Ruby and Sapphire make up after their fight where Ruby then picks up
Sapphire bridal style.

Another prime example of the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire happens later in

the show. In "Hit the Diamond," the two must separate so the Gems can form a baseball team[2] to

play against Gems trying to capture a Gem. Ruby and Sapphire are on opposing teams, but

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[2] Though this is a baseball game, I find it humorous that it bears a striking resemblance to softball games, which is a
stereotypically lesbian-dominated sport.

throughout the game, Ruby and Sapphire are too distracted by each other to play well. They keep flirting with each other and leaving their teams to talk to each other. At one point, Ruby even brings Sapphire a flower and gives it to her, which makes both of them blush. By the end of the game, the two teams are tied and Sapphire needs to hit a home run. She misses the ball twice and tells Ruby that she wants to hit the ball, but says that all she wants to look at is Ruby. Ruby then tells her that she can look at her when she runs to home base. This inspires Sapphire to hit a home run and as she approaches the base, Sapphire lunges towards Ruby and the two immediately fuse into Garnet even though they were supposed to stay unfused as Fusion would give away their identity. Their actions in this episode once again affirm the strength of their relationship as they both find it too difficult to stay apart and fuse even when it is a danger to their mission.

Figure 8: In Season 3, Episode 5, "Hit the Diamond," Ruby and Sapphire find it too hard to stay apart and fuse once again after embracing each other at the end of the episode.

If these moments alone are not enough in overtly demonstrating that the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire is more than just friendship, moments at the end of the series will confirm this. In "The Question," Ruby and Sapphire separate as Ruby wants to explore her own

life outside of Sapphire. She goes on an adventure with Steven and the other Gems but still ends up missing Sapphire. At the end of the episode, she returns and proposes to Sapphire, asking her to marry her so that even when they are separate, they are still together in another way.

Figure 9: In Season 5, Episode 21, "The Question," Ruby returns after spending a day away from Sapphire and proposes to her so that they will always be together.

They spend the next episode together planning the wedding and they end up getting married in the episode after that, "Reunited." This episode portrays the entire wedding, with Steven officiating as Ruby and Sapphire stand together. Their outfits in the wedding are also important to note as Sapphire is wearing a suit and Ruby is wearing a dress, which mirrors traditional butch/femme lesbian outfits. In the 1950s, butch/femme roles emerged as working-class lesbian subculture flourished. These roles were a way to express lesbian social identity, but in some places like New York City, these roles were strictly enforced. In "Butches, Femmes, and Kikis: Creating Lesbian Subcultures in the 1950s and '60s," Lillian Faderman, an LGBTQ historian describes the butch/femme roles and the prominence they had in the 1950s and 60s. She notes that lesbian relationships modeled male-female relationships as butches were

more masculine while femmes were feminine (Faderman, 1991, p. 167). To this extent, these roles were strictly enforced to be a part of working-class lesbian subculture and it was expected that relationship pairings would be between a butch and a femme rather than two butches or two femmes. Butches mimicked male behaviors, like doing husband-type chores, courting, protecting, being chivalric while femmes mimicked female behaviors like cooking, standing behind a butch, yielding, and being softer (Faderman, 1991, p. 169). It is, however, important to note that this style has been contested by later generations that had different ideas about what comprises lesbian identity. For instance, Annelise Orleck (2014) notes that:

> "Despite these acts of bravery and sacrifice, working-class butch-femme couples who came of age in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were often dismissed by lesbian feminists a generation later. These young women saw the butch-femme style of older lesbians as a retrograde emulation of heterosexual norms. Claiming androgyny as the style of the 1970s feminist revolution, young lesbians missed the ways that the butch-femme gender play of the older generation had been radically transgressive at a time when masculinity and femininity were fetishized and strictly enforced (p. 174)."

Despite this, traditional butch/femme roles and styles have still remained a symbol of lesbianism, this symbol being what shows up in the styles of characters in these cartoons. Style-wise, Ruby wears a dress and Sapphire wears a suit, which follows this tradition as they mimic a butch/femme relationship. Personality-wise, their outfits are the complete opposite. Up until this point, Ruby was more masculine as she is a soldier and is very protective of Sapphire and eventually is the one who proposes. Sapphire, on the other hand, was more feminine and wore a dress except in the wedding. While the two mirror a butch/femme relationship throughout the

series, their roles are reversed in the wedding. Though this is not something that was very common in 1950s lesbian subculture, it is interesting to note in the portrayal of this sapphic relationship given the other forms of lesbian style and identity in America that emerged in later decades.

Figure 10: In Season 5, Episode 24, "Reunited," Ruby and Sapphire get married. The entire wedding is shown, including the kiss at the end.

At the end of the wedding, the two kiss and then fuse into Garnet. This relationship provides meaningful representation of a sapphic relationship that culminates in marriage. Ruby and Sapphire's relationship as well as Garnet's existence as a Fusion represent powerful ways to subvert ideologies. The first time Ruby and Sapphire fuse was on Homeworld and happened by accident. Their Fusion was met with outrage as the Gems said it was disgusting and unheard of. Homeworld is the home planet of the Gems and there are rigid rules that guide Gem behavior. One such rule prohibits Fusion between different Gems; those that participate in this Fusion are cast out from society. Gems in the Homeworld are "socialized to believe that fusion between different gems is a revolting, punishable offense" and those that participate in Fusion "harbor a

deep sense of shame (Wright, 2018, p. 36)." This is very similar to the feelings that are common among queer people who often learn that same-sex relationships are not acceptable (Ryan, 2016). The treatment of Fusions in the world of Steven Universe directly mirrors attitudes many people have towards the LGBTQ+ community and acts as a way to call attention to the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community.

Aside from merely calling attention to these inequalities, the portrayal of Fusions also serves as a way to subvert traditional norms about gender and sexuality. In one episode, Steven struggles while learning how to fuse and he is unable to fuse with Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. When he sees his human friend, Connie, the two dance and end up fusing, becoming Stevonnie. Stevonnie uses they/them pronouns and is one of the first characters in television to do so. The portrayal of Stevonnie as neither a man nor a woman undercuts traditional gender norms. This in turn presents a less-represented queer identity and even celebrates the inherent genderqueerness of Stevonnie as Garnet voices her excitement at the Fusion. Stevonnie is an important character in this show as they challenge gender norms and teach that gender is fluid.

Aside from subverting gender norms, Fusion is also a way for Gems break away from the dominant ideologies of the Homeworld. In a sense, all Fusions are inherently queer as they represent "an imaginative outside to compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurity, connoted here by Homeworld's Imperial reproduction (Cooley, 2020, p. 45)." Fusion is the process of creating something entirely different from the restrictions on Homeworld and this creation of something so new that defies traditional norms is inherently queer. Additionally, the portrayal of Fusions in this manner mirrors our own world and the organization of sexualities into systems of power that encourage some activities while punishing and suppressing others

such as same-sex relationships (Wright, 2018, p. 36). Though Fusions are initially punishable on Homeworld, Garnet finds acceptance from Rose Quartz and the Crystal Gems that celebrate her Fusion rather than condemning it. Furthermore, Steven and the Crystal Gems later change the way Homeworld operates so the Gems see themselves and other Gems in a more positive way and come to accept all Fusions. The path to the acceptance of Fusions and eventually creating a world where they are celebrated portrays a world where all identities can be accepted. As mentioned in the introduction, Halberstam (2011) argues that cartoons provide powerful counter-narratives that subvert traditional norms; the way in which Fusions are portrayed moving from condemnation to inclusion demonstrate a way in which our own world can change to accept and celebrate queer identities. This portrayal is quite different from the other shows as it includes more complex representation that eventually is accepted by entire communities and families where it is always accepted and celebrated in the other shows. Once again, cartoons are harnessing their role in teaching children moral lessons through the construction of the antagonistic forces in the show. In *Steven Universe*, to be anti-queer is to be villainous, and only by accepting all Gems and Fusions, which represent queerness, are the antagonists welcomed by the heroes.

Not only do Fusions challenge dominant ideologies in Homeworld and show how to move towards acceptance of queer identities in our own society, but the wedding between Ruby and Sapphire itself is important as it goes beyond just dating and portrays a worldview that accepts same-sex relationships in all forms. As previosuly mentioned, Ryan (2016) finds, in the absence of inclusion of queer identities in education curicullum, children overwhelmingly conform to heteronormative worldviews. In her research, Ryan (2016) describes a game that

some of the children at school played where one student went up to several boy/girl pairs and pushed their heads together saying "you may kiss the bride!" Though this game seems innocent enough, it is still built upon assumptions about sexuality that privilege heterosexuality (Ryan, 2016, p. 77). Children like the students in this study reproduce norms about heterosexuality and perpetuate actions that disparage queer identities. In the absence of any discussion about queer couples and subsequent same-sex weddings, children continue to act in ways that only include heterosexuality. This can be disparaging to many students but "especially those who do not fit strict heteronormative expectations, including children from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ)-headed families (Ryan, 2016, p. 78)." Heteronormativity in schools thus has many harmful effects on children as they learn what sexualities are acceptable and what sexualities end up being silences, which is especially harmful to queer students and students with queer families. Additionally, the representation of same-sex weddings within cartoons is quite sparse, which makes the wedding in *Steven Universe* more important for kids to see and know that there are more options than just straight. Instead of reinforcing heterosexual norms, the wedding in *Steven Universe* normalizes queer identities and shows children a world that celebrates queerness rather than disparaging it. Seeing a wedding like this may even lead to students playing a game similar to the one above but with more options than just boy/girl pairs.

CHAPTER 3

"The Fun Will Never End:" Lifelong Sapphic Partners in **Adventure Time**

Airing in roughly the same era as *Steven Universe, Adventure Time* also portrays a canon sapphic relationship. Both shows are a product of Cartoon Network and both shows challenge heteronormativity and present stories that celebrate queer identities. Though the relationship

between Ruby and Sapphire in *Steven Universe* is more explicit and shown throughout much of the series, the relationship between Marceline and Princesses Bubblegum in *Adventure Time* progresses much more slowly. Despite this, Marceline and Princesses Bubblegum confess their feelings for each other and kiss in the series finale. Their relationship is later explored in the HBO Max follow up series *Adventure Time: Distant Lands*. Though *Adventure Time* does not have representation to the same extent as *Steven Universe*, Marceline and Bubblegum's relationship is still important in portraying a queer couple and thus challenging heteronormative standards in children's cartoons.

Adventure Time takes place in the fictional post-apocalyptic land of Ooo where the human Finn and his shapeshifting dog and best friend Jake go on surreal adventures as they fight against evil. Ooo is filled with magic and fantastical creatures like the Ice King, a sentient video game called BMO, Marceline the vampire queen, and Princess Bubblegum, the ruler of the candy kingdom. They frequently team up with characters like Marceline and Princess Bubblegum, the two leading female characters in the show. The first time Marceline and Princess Bubblegum interact is in Season 2, in "Go With Me" where Marceline repeatedly ruins Finn's attempts to ask Princess Bubblegum out. The first real indication of the two characters' feelings for each other happens in Season 3 in "What was Missing." In this episode, each of the characters have their favorite item stolen from them and locked behind a door that can only be opened by singing the truth. The door opens after Marceline sings " I'm sorry that I exist, I forget what landed me on your blacklist. But I shouldn't have to be the one that makes up with you. So... why do I want to?" to Princess Bubblegum. When they get their stuff back, Jake initially thinks that Marceline's t-shirt was her stolen item, but Princess Bubblegum says that the shirt is

actually hers, and Marceline gave it to her as a gift a while ago. Bubblegum then states "I wear it

all the time… as pajamas," which causes Marceline to blush. Later, in "Sky Witch," Bubblegum

is once again wearing the shirt and smells it deeply before putting it in her closet where there is a

picture of her and Marceline. Then, she and Marceline team up to retrieve Bubblegum's teddy

bear, which she is able to trade for the t-shirt since the witch who had the teddy bear notes that

the shirt had much more sentimental attachment. These interactions are the first to hint that

someone deeper than friendship happened between the two in the past.

Figure 11: In Season 5, Episode 29, "Sky Witch," Princess Bubblegum wears Marceline's t-shirt once
again and later is able to get her teddy bear back as the shirt has much more sentimental value.

Though these two interactions alone do not confirm that the two have romantic feelings

for each other, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum have many more subplots in this show after

this episode. The episode "Varmints" explores Marceline and Bubblegum's past with each other

as they fight varmints in the Candy Kingdom. The two used to hang out a lot and spray paint

underground tunnels. Eventually, they stopped because Bubblegum felt she needed to focus on

ruling the Candy Kingdom. Bubblegum then apologizes for pushing Marceline away and at the end of the episode, even falls asleep on her shoulder. Later in season 7, there is an eight episode arc that focuses on Marceline's backstory. In the first episode of this arc, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum talk about removing Marceline's vampire essence so Marceline could live a mortal life. When the two go to the lab to test how to do this, Bubblegum stands close to Marceline with her hand on her shoulder and says "Marceline, I am so very, very, very…" Princess Bubblegum then pauses, but between the placement of her hand and Marceline's highlighted eyes, their position mirrors the set-up for romantic declarations of love in many animated shows, which Blodgett and Salter (2019) argue includes large highlighted eyes, soft facial expressions, facing each other, and having their hands on each other (p. 148). Princess Bubblegum then turns around and instead says she is excited to start the tests. Marceline's face then falls, revealing she was expecting Bubblegum to end that sentence differently.
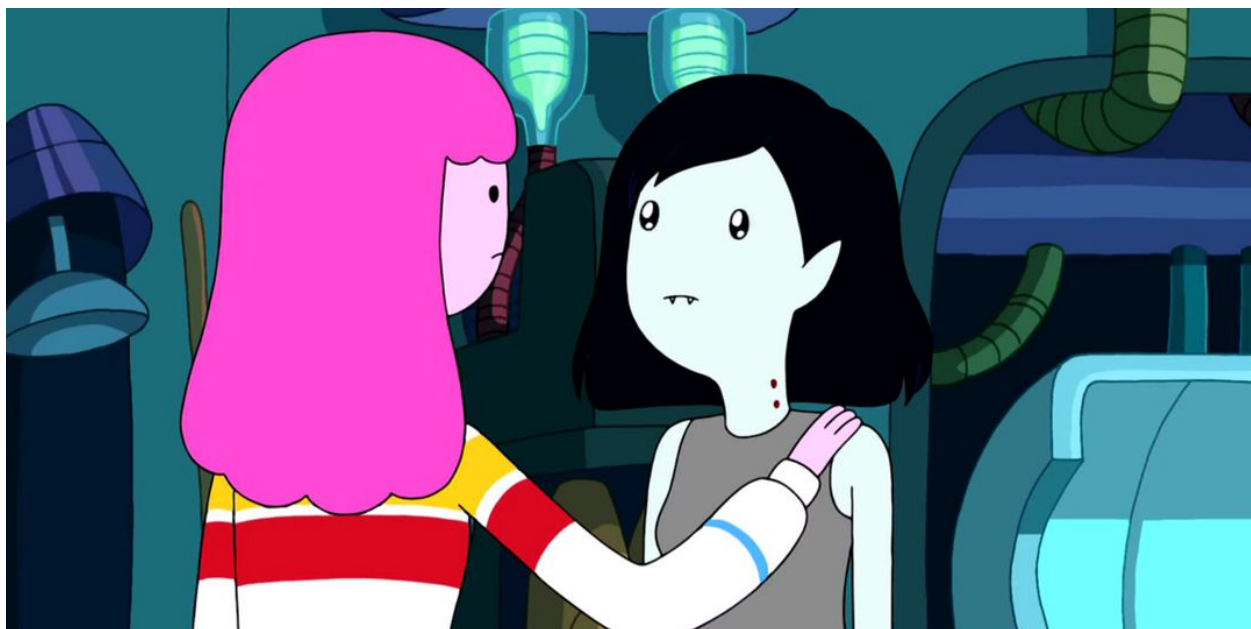

Figure 12: In Season 7, Episode 6, "Marceline the Vampire Queen," Princess Bubblegum and Marceline stand together in a position that mirrors romantic declarations of love in other animated shows.

Later, in "Take Her Back," Marceline hallucinates an alternate life in which she lived her whole mortal life with Princess Bubblegum. At the end, Princess Bubblegum kisses an aged Marceline's head. This parallels romantic gestures between couples that have known each other for a very long time. In the final episode of the arc, "Checkmate," Marceline says "I love you" to Princess Bubblegum after she brings them dinner, a confession that could be either Marceline referring to romantic love or simply being happy to eat. Their relationship continues to grow, though it is unlabeled until the final episode of the series where Marceline confesses her feelings for Princess Bubblegum, stating that she doesn't want to lose her again. The two then kiss and as the episode concludes, the two are shown to be cuddling on a couch.

Figure 13: In Season 7, Episode 11, "Take Her Back," Marceline imagines a whole different life in which she spent it all with Princess Bubblegum who kisses her head.

Figure 14: In Season 10, Episode 16, "Come Along with Me," Marceline and Princess Bubblegum finally confess their feelings for each other and kiss. They are later shown to be cuddling.

After the events of the finale, *Adventure Time* continued in the HBO Max original

Adventure Time: Distant Lands. This four episode mini series was released in 2020 and 2021 and

the second episode, "Obsidian," focuses on the current and past relationships between Marceline

and Princess Bubblegum. In a flashback, it reveals that the two had indeed dated in the past but

broke up after an intense argument. The episode then cuts to the present, set years after the

events of the original series finale, where the two are in a happy relationship once again. The

episode includes many romantic moments between the two as they protect the Glass Kingdom

from a dangerous dragon. While the original series did not explore their relationship in depth as

they did not become a couple until the finale, this episode provides a glimpse into their future

and depicts their lives together, featuring many domestic moments and showing how they

interact while also including more romantic moments between them as they kiss several times in

the episode.

The relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum is important for a number of reasons. As previously stated, many sapphic relationships in television shows have ended in the death of one or more of the characters (Waggoner, 2017). By portraying Marceline and Princess Bubblegum as long term life partners that are quite literally immortal, this relationship breaks the harmful bury your gays trope, showing that these relationships can last a lifetime. Aside from breaking away from this harmful trope, this representation also has the potential to change attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Again, as Yan (2019) and Cook (2018) find, viewing media with queer characters has the potential to make the viewers have more positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. This is certainly the case for *Adventure Time* and those that see the relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum may then hold more positive attitudes towards lesbians and gays.

Finally, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum's relationship as long term partners is important considering the history of female relationships. Their relationship is well-established and is the most long lasting relationship presented in the series and it lasts well into the future. Historically, this type of love between women has often been considered as mere friendship. In *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies,* Deborah Meem et al. (2010) note that "middle- and upper-class women had long participated in socially sanctioned romantic friendships, characterized by love letters and poetry, emotional intimacy, and even physical affection (p. 20)." Though women engaged in these romantic friendships still had a deep love for each other, they were allowed to openly express this love as it was considered beneficial and asexual (Meem et al., 2010, p. 21). Indeed, the main view at the time was that without a penis, sex did not exist so women were allowed to form these relationships without being viewed as "sexual deviants."

This romantic friendship era culminated in "Boston marriages" where unmarried women could form same-sex "marriages" with other women that then allowed them to attend college and pursue a career (Meem, 2010, p. 21). The idea that relationships between women are inherently asexual benefited women who wished to form romantic relationships with other women in the nineteenth century, but this idea has persisted and can be detrimental to present representation of WLW relationships. Due to these beliefs, many see the relationships between female characters merely as friendship unless they are explicitly made a romantic couple. The relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum, however, mirrors these romantic friendships as it positions them as lifelong partners but then explicitly confirms their romantic relationship and portrays them as more than friends.

The difference in the portrayal of the relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum in the original series compared to *Distant Lands* also matters in the analysis of the importance of this representation. As mentioned, King et al. (2010) and Halberstam (2011) both argue that animated children's cartoons have the potential to present counter-narratives for children in a way that is easy to understand. This applies to the presentation of queer identities as LGBTQ+ representation can subvert doninamt heteronormative ideologies. Ryan (2016) affirms that without such representation, children will still conform to heteronormative ideals and denounce same-sex relationships. Though the finale of *Adventure Time* does indeed provide children with a glimpse of a same-sex relationship through a kiss that actively challenges heteronormativity, that is all it does in its portrayal; the in-depth exploration of their relationship does not occur until years later in *Distant Lands* and as such fails to show what sapphic relationships look like as they develop. Many children had access to the original *Adventure Time*

series as it aired on the major television channel, Cartoon Network. Fewer children have access to HBO Max as a separate subscription is required and many of the shows in this service are catered towards adults. Those who saw the original series may not even be aware that this follow up series exists and thus may not have seen the episode that explores the relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum more fully.

Additionally, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum's romantic relationship was the only one that remained unconfirmed until the final moments of the original series. While various other heterosexual relationships formed throughout the course of the series, the only queer relationship was confirmed in the finale when there was no risk of losing viewership. As mentioned in the introduction, Blodgett and Salter (2019) argue that this "places the homoromantic pairing on a lower tier of representation." While every other heterosexual relationship was confirmed and explored in the series, the queer relationship was not thus giving them less representation. They ultimately note that:

> "The setup of relationships within the series shows that only same-gender couples must remain canonically unacknowledged, leaving queer children with no obvious point of reference to help shape their own development toward adulthood (Blodgett and Salter, 2019, p. 150)."

Sapphic representation in *Adventure Time* is meaningful, but it does fall short in that the queer relationship was not more fully explored in the original series. This means that while children are presented with a small glimpse of an LGBTQ+ counter-narrative, it stops before it more fully shows them what these relationships look like long term. *Distant Lands*, however, makes up for this as the long term relationship is addressed. It even parallels the historical idea of "romantic

friendships" but then goes a step further to create a canon sapphic relationship. For its time, *Adventure Time* still presents a sapphic relationship that has the power to change perspectives about the LGBTQ+ community and teach children about non-heteronormative world views.

CHAPTER 4

**She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*: A Queer Retelling of a 1980s Classic*

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power is a reboot of the 1980s original *She-Ra: Princess of Power*. The two series follow roughly the same plot, the hero Adora must save the planet Etheria from the Horde. One huge difference between the original and the reboot is the representations of gender and sexuality within the series. While there were numerous queer characters of various identities in the Netflix reboot, the original lacked such representation as none of the characters in it were queer. In the series finale of the Netflix reboot, Catra finally confessed her love to heroine Adora. The two then kissed and teamed up to save the planet from evil. This moment came at the end of a five season build up of the two beloved characters. Aside from Catra and Adora, several other secondary characters throughout the series were shown to be in same-sex relationships. Contrary to the original, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* more fully explored themes of gender and sexuality as a way to break the traditional hero archetype that excludes queerness as heroes more often than not are portrayed through a heteronormative lens.

The 2018 series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* takes place on a planet called Etheria where Adora is at first a member of the Horde, a military group that believes their colonization of the planet saves it from the damage caused by the princesses. After Adora finds a magical sword that transforms her into She-Ra, the princesses of power, she learns that the Horse was lying about the princesses. She must leave behind the Horde and her best friend, Catra, in an

attempt to save Etheria from the Horde's destruction and restore magic to the planet. Through much of the first three seasons, Adora and her two new friends, Bow and Glimmer, build the Princess Alliance to help fight against the Horde. In this, Adora frequently runs into Catra and the two fight, but neither of them are willing to destroy the other. Catra and Adora's feelings for each other are hinted at during various moments of the first seasons. For instance, in the episode "Princess Prom," the two dance with each other in a couple's dance, a scene that heavily implies romance. In this scene, Catra is dressed in a suit, which defies traditional gender norms and adds to the queerness of the scene. Once again, a sapphic relationship is portrayed in a way that mirrors butch/femme roles from 1950s lesbian subculture. In this scene, Catra wears a suit and is more butch while Adora wears a dress and is thus more femme. Catra is the one leading the dance and at one point dips Adora, a move that follows a traditional butch role as butches enacted idealized male behaviors (Faderman, 1991, p. 170). During this dance, the two share several moments with their faces just inches from each other. Their closeness during this scene is one of the first indications that their feelings for each other are more than just friendship.

Figure 15: Catra dips Adora during their dance in the episode "Princess Prom." This takes place during a couple's dance and their close proximity to each other heavily implies romance.

After a new enemy, Horde Prime, appears in seasons four and five, Catra eventually switches sides and fights with Adora and the Rebellion after saving Glimmer. When Adora, Bow, and Glimmer go to rescue Catra from Horde Prime, Catra is gravely injured. In her grief for her friend, Adora transforms into She-Ra for the first time since breaking her sword. After embracing Catra, Adora then uses her powers to heal Catra and escape Horde Prime. It was quite literally Adora's love for Catra that allowed her to finally become She-Ra again and save her friend thus allowing the squad to escape. After this episode, Adora and Catra begin to repair their relationship and Catra makes amends with the rest of the Rebellion.

Figure 16: Adora, while crying, embraces Catra after she is gravely injured in their fight with Horde Prime in the episode "Save the Cat." Adora then uses her powers to save Catra. This is the beginning of their renewed relationship.

Later in the season, as the Rebellion's conflict with Horde Prime escalates, Adora must risk her own life to save the planet Etheria. As She-Ra, she must carry the failsafe to stop the Heart of Etheria weapon from destroying the galaxy. Catra is furious at Adora for continually

risking her own life and happiness which would entail leaving her again and attempts to stop

Adora from activating the failsafe. After she fails to persuade Adora against it, Catra goes with

Adora to activate it. On their journey to the weapon, the failsafe and thus Adora is corrupted by a

virus from Horde Prime. Catra asks Adora what she really wants, and Adora then has a vision of

how she imagines her future. This vision takes place several years into the future on the day of

the next Princess Prom that Adora and Catra are attending together along with Glimmer and

Bow. This scene implies that they are both attending as couples, suggesting that Adora wants to

be with Catra well into the future. Additionally, Catra is once again dressed in more

stereotypically masculine clothing while Adora wears a dress, hinting at their queerness again as

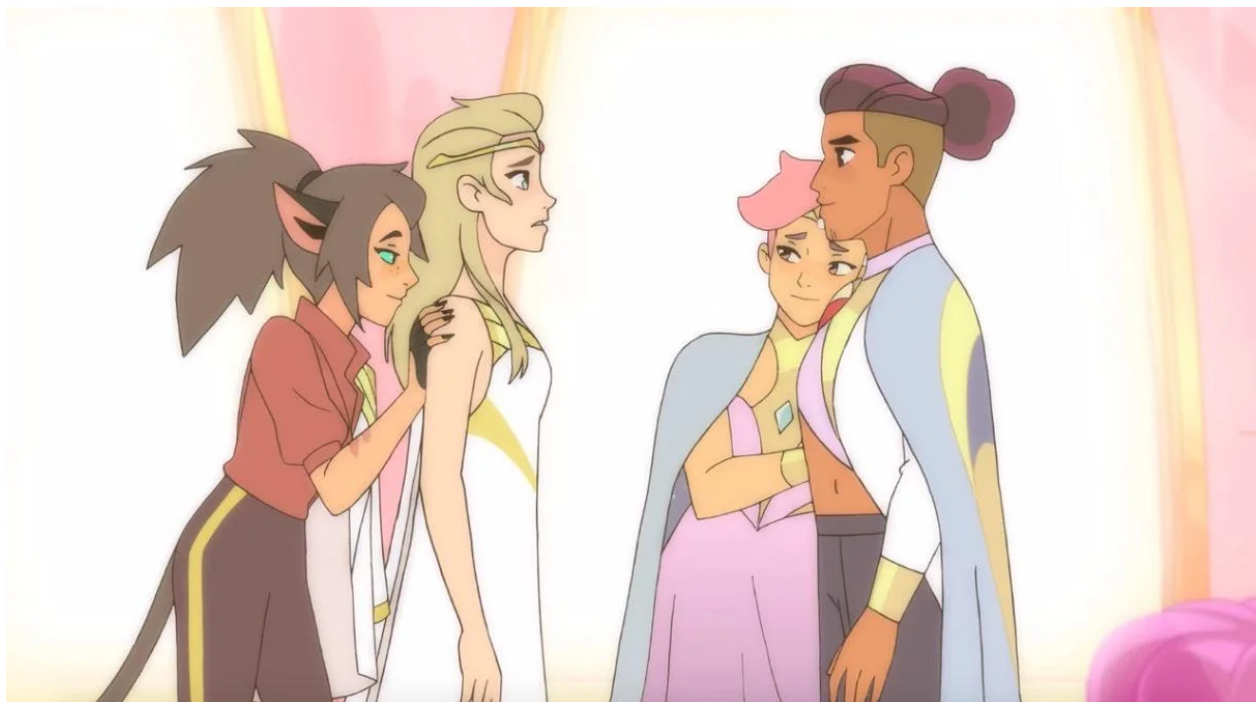it mirrors traditional butch/femme pairings.

Figure 17: In Season 5, Episode 13 "Heart Part 2," Adora envisions a future in which she and Catra are together and attend the next Princess Prom along with Bow and Glimmer.

In the series finale of the show, Adora meets Mara, the She-Ra before Adora. Mara had to sacrifice herself to save the planet Etheria and she then advises that Adora does not have to do the same. When Adora says that she is going to do it regardless, Mara suggests to Adora that love is the key to saving the universe. To this end, the love between Adora and Catra is what ultimately saves the entire universe. As Catra and Adora enter the Heart of Etheria, Adora is in rough shape as the virus is making her weak. As Adora nears death, Catra angrily berates Adora for always sacrificing herself and leaving Catra alone. Then, Catra finally professes her love for Adora, saying "don't you get it? I love you! I always have, so please just this once, stay!" This confirms Catra's past and present feelings for Adora, a declaration that brings Adora back from the brink of death. Adora responds that she loves Catra too and the two then kiss, a kiss that destroys the virus and allows Adora to transform into She-Ra and activate the failsafe that disarms the weapon thus saving the universe.

Figure 18: In Season 5, Episode 13 "Heart Part 2," Catra and Adora kiss after Catra professes her love for Adora, a move that results in Adora saving the universe.

The queer representation in this series matters for a number of reasons. To begin, there are a myriad of queer major and minor characters throughout the series. The first confirmed LGBTQ+ characters in the series are two of the princesses in the Rebellion, Netossa and Spinerella, are in a sapphic marriage. They both call each other "darling" and are shown to be in a very loving relationship throughout the series. In one episode, Netossa attempts to celebrate their anniversary. Additionally, in Season 2, we are introduced to one of the main characters, Bow, two dads Greg and Lance. They also make various appearances throughout the series and help defeat Horde Prime at the end. What is interesting about these couples is that even though they are same-sex couples, they are always treated equally rather than opposed to the straight couples in the show. By presenting same-sex and straight couples on the same level, this representation counters many of the biases present against same-sex couples that view them as less than straight couples. In a sense, the equal presentation of all relationships challenges homophobic societal norms and presents a new world in which anyone can love anyone without judgement (Wright 2018). In this way, the small but canon same-sex couples sprinkled in the show subvert heteronormative worldviews and provide meaningful representation of LGBTQ+ relationships.

Aside from the various minor queer characters portrayed throughout the series, the canon relationship between Catra and Adora powerfully subverts heteronormative expectations of heroes. In "*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* as a Queer Monomyth," Paul Thomas (2021), a researcher at the University of Kansas, argues that Adora's journey as a hero defies heteronormative understandings of heroics. According to Thomas (2021), heroic journeys are often monomythic, or following the same basic structure, where an "ordinary" person discovers

they possess exceptional gifts and after facing many obstacles, overcomes them to save the world (p. 4). This is the same basic structure that *She-Ra* follows, but the main difference is that *She-Ra* defies some of the heteronormative tropes within the hero's journey. Though a monomyth at its foundation, this show pushes back on a lot of the heterosexism present in these stories. At the most basic level, Thomas (2021) notes that within most monomyths, the hero is male. By presenting She-Ra as a female hero with both feminine and masculine traits, the first way in which this show reimagines the monomyth is by pushing back on traditional gender roles and showing that there can be strong female heroines too (Thomas, 2021, p. 11). Aside from gender, sexuality as presented in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* also reimagines the monomyth. Thomas (2021) notes that heroes traditionally end up falling in love with someone of the opposite sex. Usually, this is a male hero rescuing a "damsel in distress," but in the case of She-Ra, the female hero falls in love with another female. This act "rebukes heterosexism directly, showcasing a female hero who woos another woman, Catra (Thomas, 2021, p. 13). While female heroes are rare, female heroes who fall in love with another woman are even rarer. Rather than playing into traditional heteronormative tropes that cast a female hero with a male lover, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* portrays a relationship between two women. In doing so, it is a powerful message for audiences that a hero can be whoever and love whoever they want.

The explicit queer representation presented in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* holds a lot of power in subverting dominant ideologies that position queer people as lesser. As mentioned before, Wright (2018) argues that cartoons with queer representation allow viewers to see these restrictive ideologies by reimagining a world without them. While certain shows like

The Legend of Korra were subtler in their representation and did not push back as much on these ideologies, meaning that many viewers, especially younger viewers, were likely to miss the romantic implications in the final scene, other shows like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* had more overt queer relationships and thus created a world for all to see without restrictive ideologies. Even though the portrayal was somewhat limited and the same-sex kiss appeared in the last few minutes of the series, the explicitness of the queer relationships in the latter made it much more suited for all viewers to see the "seams in our restrictive ideologies and institutions, which facilitate a receptivity to new queer realities (Wright, 2018, p. 6)." Presenting a world in which queer relationships were not only present, but celebrated and even capable of saving the universe went a long way in challenging heteronormative world views and ideologies that demonize queerness and demonstrating that it is possible to have a world where all queer identities are welcomed.

The differences in representation between earlier shows like *The Legend of Korra* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* could be a result of a number of different factors. For one, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* was a Netflix show whereas *The Legend of Korra* was from Nickelodeon. Netflix is known for leading the way when it comes to the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters (Opie, 2019). Indeed, streaming services like Netflix have more LGBTQ+ characters than all major US networks combined (Opie, 2019). Early popular LGBTQ+ stories on Netflix proved successful and since then, they have included more queer characters to have more diverse content (Opie, 2019). Furthermore, Netflix has more flexibility to create more types of stories with more LGBTQ+ characters as it producers a vast number of original series each year and it is built on the foundations of experimentation whereas networks like Nickelodeon are more

constrained to create shows only for children, and LGBTQ+ relationships are often stereotyped as being "inappropriate" for children (Opie, 2019). Aside from the network of the shows, it may indeed just be that *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* was produced later than *The Legend of Korra*. The finale of the *Legend of Korra* aired in 2014 compared to the finale of *She-Ra* that aired in 2020. By 2020, gay marriage was legalized in all 50 states and the Supreme Court ruled that businesses cannot fire openly gay or trans employees just for being LGBTQ+ (Bostock v. Clayton County, 2020). The gay rights movement made a lot of progress from 2014 to 2020 that may have paved the way for television shows to portray LGBTQ+ characters as the acceptance of queerness grew. Whatever the case, the representation of queer relationships in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* strongly subverted heteronormative standands and reimagined a world in which queer identities are accepted and celebrated.

CHAPTER 5

***Sapphics on Screen: Current Queer Representation in* The Owl House**

The final television show with canon sapphic representation that I will be discussing is *The Owl House*. This show is currently airing on Disney channel and follows the story of the young Luz Noceda after she is transported to the Boiling Isles, a world of magic. While on the Boiling Isles Luz makes many friends and enemies as she attempts to become the first human to learn magic. By the middle of the series, Luz and one of her friends on the Boiling Isles, Amity, develop feelings for each other and eventually start a romantic relationship. Though the build-up to their relationship is subtle like in *The Legend of Korra*, they explicitly ask each other out in one episode and hence subvert heteronormative tropes about the relationships between female characters where they are just really good friends. This relationship not only provides sapphic

representation, but it does so on a widely watched cable television network (Dean, 2022). As many kids, teenagers, and adults watch this channel, the relationship between Luz and Amity is something that has the potential to be seen by many and thus does the work of challenging heteronormative world views.

The Owl House begins as the main character, Luz Noceda, is about to be sent to a juvenile detention summer camp called Reality Check Camp. Luz's overactive imagination often got her in trouble at school, so her mom and the principal of her school decided she needed to go to the camp to become less of a troublemaker. Luz did not fit in with people in the human realm and was somewhat of an outsider. This all changed after she chased an owl through a magical portal that transported her to the Boiling Isles, a magical realm in another dimension. Luz is taken in by Eda the Owl Lady and her talking demon King. Luz eventually starts going to Hexside School of Magic and Demonics, a school on the Boiling Isles that teaches magic, and quickly makes friends with two of the students, Gus and Willow. Initially, the trio are bullied by Amity and her friends but Amity has a change of heart and starts hanging out with them in the middle of the first season.

The story progresses as Luz and her friends get into lots of mischief trying to find a cure for Eda's curse that periodically turns her into an owl beast and stop the Emperor of the Boiling Isles from destroying wild magic. Throughout all their shenanigans, Amity first developed feelings for Luz. This is shown after Amity blushed countless times after interacting with Luz. For instance, the two both like the same book series and after Luz suggests they form a book club, Amity blushes. In another scene, Luz suggests that she and Amity work together on a project and after Amity agrees, Luz hugs her which makes Amity immediately blush. These

small scenes are the first real indication that something deeper than friendship is going on between the two. Their feelings become more apparent throughout the first season.

Figure 19: In Season 1, Episode 15, "Understanding Willow," Luz (right) hugs Amity (left) after Amity agrees to help Luz on a project. Here, Amity is blushing as she frequently does after interacting with Luz, a fact that is the first indication of her feelings towards Luz.

The relationship between Luz and Amity progresses in "Enchanting Grom Fight" during the school's Grom celebration, a dance similar to prom where one student is chosen as Grom Queen to fight the Grometheus demon that shapeshifts into their greatest fear. Initially, Amity is chosen, but Luz offers to fight in her place as Amity is very nervous to take it on. The two attend Grom as friends and Luz then goes to fight the demon. Luz, however, is unable to defeat the demon and Amity shows up to help Luz. The two perform a very close dance and eventually vanquish the demon. This dance closely mirrors traditional romantic dances between partners at

school dances like proms. Between their hand placements that mimic those of traditional partner ballroom dances and the soft instrumental music in the background, the dance strongly implies romance. Additionally, similar to Catra and Adora in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power,* the outfits of Luz and Amity in this scene mirror traditional butch/femme pairings. Amity is in a dress while Luz wears a tuxedo top and a tutu over a pair of pants, which is similar to traditional lesbian styles, but also demonstrates the wide variety of lesbian style as Luz is also wearing a skirt (Faderman, 1991). Finally, before the demon disappears, it transforms into Amity's greatest fear, rejection from somebody she was too afraid to ask out to the Grom, by taking a note out of her pocket and ripping it up. It later shows that the note was her asking Luz to be her date to Grom. Between their intimate dance and Amity's note asking Luz to be her date, this episode provides more concrete evidence that the two had feelings for each other.

Figure 20: Amity and Luz dance with each other in Season 1, Episode 16 "Enchanting Grom Fight" at a school dance in a style that mirrors traditional partner dances at school celebrations. Later, it is revealed that Amity wanted to ask Luz to be her date to the dance.

After the events of the first season, the relationship between Luz and Amity becomes even more romantic and is shown to develop more in the second season. In "Escaping Expulsion," Luz blushes for the first time after interacting with Amity at school. Amity then blushes back and her entire face turns red. The two have various interactions like this throughout the course of the season. Later in the season, the portal that Luz uses to travel between dimensions is destroyed. In an effort to find another way back home, Amity helps Luz search the library for any information about other portals that may exist. They found the information, but they had to break into an off-limits section of the library to find it. When the librarian discovers the two of them, he revokes Amity's library card and fires her from her job at the library. Crushed by this, Amity leaves Luz at the library and goes home. At the end of the episode, Amity confides with her older siblings about her feelings for Luz who tell her that it is a good thing because she is much happier. Luz then shows up at their house after having convinced the librarian to return Amity's library card and job. To thank Luz, Amity kisses her on the cheek which flusters both of them as they both blush. This gesture is another strong indicator of the two's feelings for each other. They move from simply blushing at each other to Amity kissing Luz's cheek, demonstrating the progression of their relationship from simply friends to building feelings for each other.

Figure 21: In Season 2, Episode 5, "Through the Looking Glass Ruins," Amity kisses Luz on the cheek after Luz gets her library card back. After this, Luz's eyes get wider and they both blush and become very flustered.

After this episode, Luz and Amity become increasingly flustered around each other. A few episodes later, Luz accidentally says that she wants to make her way into Amity's heart. Hooty, an owl demon that lives with Eda and Luz, overhears this and decides to help Luz ask Amity out. Hooty creates a tunnel of love and brings Amity to the house so Luz and Amity can through the tunnel of love together. The tunnel is filled with hearts and romantic messages that Luz initially tries to hide from Amity because she is afraid that Amity will make fun of her. This causes Amity to think that Luz is uninterested in her so when she starts to leave, Hooty and Eda insist that Luz ask Amity out. Luz approaches Amity and says "I have no idea what my future holds, but it would be so cool if you were in it, so–" but before she can finish the sentence, Amity cuts Luz off and asks if Luz wants to go out with her. Luz then asks Amity back if she wants to go out with her, to which Amity replies with an enthusiastic yes. The two then hold

hands and when the scene zooms out, the two are standing in a heart-shaped hole. If the previous interactions between Luz and Amity were not evidence enough that the two have romantic feelings for each other, this episode demonstrates that the two like each other given that they explicitly start dating.

Figure 22: In Season 2, Episode 8, "Knock, Knock, Knockin' on Hooty's Door," Amity and Luz ask each other out after going through a tunnel of love. After this, the two hold hands while standing in a heart-shaped hole in the ground.

The romance between Luz and Amity does not stop after they ask each other out. In the episodes following this, Luz and Amity spend more time together. When Luz gets sick with the common mold, the magical equivalent of the common cold, Amity states that she will use it as an opportunity to prove that she is an awesome girlfriend. Throughout "Eclipse Lake," Amity repeatedly affirms that she is the best girlfriend on her quest to find a substance that will allow Luz to create a portal and travel back home. Additionally, Luz keeps sending texts to Amity that she initially thinks are random combinations caused by Luz's delirious state, but when she

rotates the phone, they are messages from Luz calling Amity "pretty" and "rad." Between Amity's insistence on proving that she is the best girlfriend and Luz's romantic messages to Amity, this episode does more to show the relationship between the two and their dynamic as girlfriends.

The portrayal of a healthy sapphic relationship between Amity and Luz in *The Owl House* does a lot in providing meaningful representation. This representation occurs in the middle of the series, making it one of the first canon sapphic relationships to develop well before the end. While the buildup between Catra and Adora in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* was more subtle at first before kissing and starting a relationship in the finale, Luz and Amity started dating well before the finale of *The Owl House*, leaving ample room to explore their relationship in more depth throughout the rest of the second and third seasons. Additionally, the buildup for the romantic relationship between Luz and Amity was more overt compared to other shows. The two repeatedly blushed at each other, Amity kissed Luz on the cheek, and Luz stated she wanted to make her way into Amity's heart. These moments are tell-tale signs of a crush and more overtly hint at their feelings for each other compared to the subtler buildup in other shows. The larger portrayal of the relationship between two female characters in this television show demonstrates a more inclusive world with rich representation of queer identites. It allows the viewer to see new worlds that accept and celebrate queer identities and redefine queer realities, thus challenging heteronormative world views and the demonization of queerness. No one ever looks down on the relationship between Luz and Amity and the acceptance of their relationship by all their friends and guardians demonstrates a world in which queerness is easily welcomed.

The other relevant aspect of this representation is the network on which it airs. *The Owl*

House is a Disney Channel original show and new episodes air on Saturdays at 9:00 AM. Reruns also play on Disney Channel at various times throughout the week and all episodes are available on Disney+. Disney is a major network targeted towards children and it has a large reach of who will see the show, including people other than children. This represents an accessible way to teach children and adults about more inclusive worlds and highlight the limitations in our own world views. Once again, as King et al. (2010) argue, animated cartoons are "agents of socialization" and are capable of teaching different ideologies. Cartoons "possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning (King, 2010, p. 36)." Portraying a relationship between two female characters that is celebrated teaches children and their parents alike that queer identities can be accepted. Though cartoons usually teach heteronormativity, in the end, *The Owl House* has a wide reach in teaching non-normative world views that challenge dominant structures and ideologies like heteronormativity.

Aside from nearly teaching children and adults alike about non-normative world views, representation of LGBTQ+ characters in television has a real world impact. Yan (2019) studies the impact of consuming media with LGBTQ+ characters on overall attitudes towards lesbians and gays. Again, Yan (2019) ultimately finds that those who have consumed media with LGBTQ+ characters are more likely to have positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians. As Yan (2019) states, "watching contemporary gay and lesbian storylines on TV has direct positive effects on changing people's attitudes towards gays and lesbians (p. 864)." The implications for this study are vast. This highlights the importance of shows like *The Owl House* in their portrayal of same-sex relationships. This show has the power to change people's attitudes about LGBTQ+

people. Not only does it teach children about a world where queer identities are accepted, but it also has the potential to make all viewers view the LGBTQ+ community more positively.

Though this representation is important, it has been limited in its scope. Despite the positive representation portrayed in this show, it ultimately did not fit the Disney brand as Disney announced that it was cut short and only getting a four episode third season rather than continually renewing it. So, even when there is positive representation of queer relationships, these shows still face many difficulties in continuing to air. Additionally, though creators on Disney have fought have queer representation in their shows, other shows with more violent themes have had no trouble airing. For example, the show *Amphibia*, also currently airing on Disney, has portrayed many violent scenes. This includes a 12-year-old character, Marcy, getting stabbed through the chest and nearly dying on screen. Though the two shows are produced by the same network and meant for the same audience, while creators like Dana Terrace had to fight to include LGBTQ+ representation in their shows, another show was easily able to portray a child being stabbed. Though the producers of *The Owl House* were able to create more explicit representation and portray a romantic relationship between two female characters in much more depth than its predecessor, *The Legend of Korra*, this does not mean that the challenge in creating more visibility is over.

CONCLUSION

Political Backlash to the Gay Rights Movement

The importance of sapphic representation in children's cartoons like the ones described here cannot be overstated. There is a dire need in this moment for positive and accessible representation of queer identities to teach counter-narratives about worlds in which queerness is

accepted and celebrated. The current political climate in the United States is one in which queerness is under attack. Though the gay rights movement made significant progress in advancing the rights of the LGBTQ+ community after momumental victories that legalized same-sex marriage and secured employment nondiscrimination rights, anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes have intensified in recent years. Various bills have surfaced across America that marginalize the LGBTQ+ community. The Florida state legislature just passed the Parental Rights in Education Bill, more popularly known as the Don't Say Gay Bill, that prohibits classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. Republican Danny Burgess says that "the bill simply says that there should be an age limit on certain discussions, it's not a new concept, nor is it radical (Sopelsa et al., 2022)." What this bill does is essentially teach children that discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity are innapropriate and harms children by silencing discussions about the LGBTQ+ community. Given the way Ryan (2011) studied the impact of the silencing of these discussions in a time before they were legally prohibited, this bill is likely to have a larger impact on disparacing queerness within the classroom.

Aside from the bill in Florida, Republican Governor Greg Abbot of Texas issued a letter to state health agencies that says providing gender-affirming health care services to transgender children constitutues child abuse under state law. This directive also requires doctors, nurses, and teachers to report parents who help their children receive this care to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (Sharrow and Sederbaum, 2022). Texas is not the only state that has moved to restrict the rights of transgender children. Aside from preventing transgender children from recieving gender affirming health care, other states have recently passed bills that

prohibit transgender girls from participating in sports. Under these laws, only cisgender females

are permitted to compete on female sports teams (Gerlock, 2022). Though this law has more to

do with gender rather than sexual orientation, it is still relevant to examine these anti-trans bills

as they relate to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

In additional to legal backlash against the LGBTQ+ community, other social institutions

in America continue to marginalize queerness. In 2020, the American Library Association

released a list of the top 100 most banned books of the past decade. Of the top 20 books, those

with queer themes and LGBTQ+ characters made of half of these books. Out of the entire top

100, books with queer representation made up a quarter. The message this sends is that LGBTQ+

themed books are deemed inappropriate for children and thus erases any discussion about the

LGBTQ+ community. Daniel Villarreal (2020) argues that "such books are particularly important

to young people who are still forming their identities and beliefs about their gender and sexuality,

because these works can demonstrate possibilities, lives and issues that these young readers may

not see in their immediate surroundings." Banning books with LGBTQ+ themes silences

discussions about queer identities and prevents children from learning about the breadth of

gender identity and sexual orientation.

This censorship does not only happen in books, but also on television. Though networks

like Disney have made progress in portraying queer relationships, that has not stopped them from

creating a number of barriers in airing these relationships. Employees from Disney have recently

called the producers out for their hypocrisy surrounding the Don't Say Gay Bill in Florida.

Though they released a statement that condemned it, it does not change the fact that they donated

to the politicians that authored the bill (Riedel, 2022). Additionally, other employees have called

attention to the fact that producers throttle queer representation, saying "nearly every moment of overtly gay affection is cut at Disney's behest, regardless of when there is protest from both the creative teams and executive leadership at Pixar (Riedel, 2022)." Despite the fact that one beautiful sapphic relationship has aired on Disney, other meaningful stories have been cut. After Disney merged with Blue Sky Studios in 2019, they inherited the movie *Nimona*, a film based on the graphic novel by ND Stevenson about a young shapeshifter who teams up with a knight to take down the corrupt government. Though the film was 75% complete, employees said that Disney did not approve of the same-sex kiss between two male characters or the genderqueer main character, so they cancelled the production of the movie (Clark, 2022). Even with the relationship between Luz and Amity in *The Owl House* almost did not happen: creator Dana Terrace said in an interview that Disney executives initially barred her from creating a sapphic storyline, and they only changed their mind when she stormed out of the room (Riedel, 2022). This continued censorship and financial support to politicians that are actively harming the LGBTQ+ community stifles discussions about LGBTQ+ identities.

Given the intense political backlash against the LGBTQ+ community, cartoons have the power now more than ever to teach children counter-narratives about queerness. These cartoons present worldviews in which queerness is normalized and not under attack like it is in the United States. As Wright (2018) argues, "put simply, there is a need for an access to and engagement of those who are most different from ourselves; we need to bridge the gap. For this objective, we should be looking at the imaginative, positive, restorative, and subversive messaging of children's cartoons (p. 50)." To this end, it is in the power of cartoons to teach children outside the lens of heteronormativity and show them how queerness can be accepted. Since *The Legend*

of Korra series finale aired in 2014, there has been a great increase in sapphic representation in children's cartoons that has become more obviously queer and the portrayal has come earlier in the series as is the case in *The Owl House*. It is especially valuable in today's political climate to have these relationship and teach children that queerness can be accepted and celebrated and each of the shows described in this thesis plays a vital role in this acceptance. Starting with *The Legend of Korra*, though subtle, the representation in this show was one of the first LGBTQ+ couples in animated children's cartoons and seemingly kickstarted a sapphic renaissance. After this, *Steven Universe* included the portrayal of a queer family and same-sex wedding which challenged traditional family structes and heteronormative institutions. Shortly after, *Adventure Time* and the follow-up series *Adventure Time: Distant Lands* both portrayed a long term sapphic relationship between Marceline and Princess Bubblegum. Then, through the various queer couples throughout the show as well as the kiss between Adora and Catra in the finale, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* demonstrated a world where queerness literally saved the universe. Finally, Luz and Amity started a relationship towards the beginning of the series *The Owl House* which explored in depth what a healthy queer relationship looks like and modeled it for children. Each of these series provided a crucial, positive aspect of LGBTQ+ representation that challenged the political context and anti-gay backlash of this decade.

In "Last Words of a Shooting Star," Japanese-American indie pop singer Mitski sings "you learned from movies how love ought to be." This song speaks of the "requirements" of the love between partners: doing things in a certain way will result in happiness and realization of ultimate love. Something about this love, however, seems rehearsed and performed, as if learned from a movie. Though this song is ultimately about a toxic relationship, I believe that this

specific lyric applies to the role the media plays in shaping who we become. This is especially true for children. It is truly as Ryan (2011) argues: in the absence of discussions about LGBTQ+ identities, kids overwhelmingly subscribe to heteronormativity and discourage same-sex romance. When I think about my childhood, I think back to *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* and I remember how I learned love ought to be. I think back to how long it took to learn that love did not have to look exactly like it did in my favorite movies. Finally, I think about how much of a difference it would have made to have queer representation in the animated movies and television shows that I consumed. No, I did not get to see myself represented in the shows that I watched but I am so indescribably happy (albeit slightly jealous) that a new generation of children have television shows such as the ones analyzed here to teach them that despite what any law says, love ought to be any way you want.

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