



# Representation in *Steven Universe*

*Edited by*  
John R. Ziegler · Leah Richards



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## PREFACE

In the summer of 2018, the editors of this volume were passing the time until a train to London with some overpriced breakfast in Cardiff Central station in Wales, when a young (late teens or early twenties) mixed-gender Welsh couple sat down at the next table and continued their conversation about Stevonnie and the Garnet figurine attached to the young woman's backpack—just another small testament to the boundary-crossing appeal of *Steven Universe*. Created by Rebecca Sugar, *Steven Universe* debuted in 2013, and today, with an extensive community of fans extending well beyond the children at whom it is ostensibly aimed, it arguably occupies the position of Cartoon Network's flagship original animated program, especially with the similarly acclaimed *Adventure Time* (2010–2018) having concluded. Over the course of its run so far, the science-fiction/fantasy- and anime-influenced *Steven*, which follows the adventures and emotional growth of a half-human, half-alien boy, and the aliens and humans who surround him, has amassed popularity and accolades not only for its progressive portrayals of queer desire and ways of being, including queer-coded relationships, fluid embodiments, and non-traditional family structures, but also for its representation of and engagement with issues including sexual consent, domestic abuse, trauma, racial or ethnic discrimination, caste systems, and imperialism. These thematic engagements, and the nuance and inclusivity of their implementation, are especially significant and unusual in an American animated children's television show, and its achievements have garnered multiple GLAAD Media Award and Primetime Emmy nominations (and one Emmy win to date), among other honors.

The politics of representation enacted in *Steven Universe* make it almost unique among comparable animated television programs, and it, along with Sugar herself, who publicly identifies as a bisexual and gender non-binary woman, has consequently taken a prominent place in the current cultural conversation, with media attention from an array of blogs, magazines, newspapers, and Web sites. However, in contrast with this widespread media coverage, the body of academic work on Sugar's creation remains in its early stages, and an extremely small amount of scholarship has so far been published. This project, *Representation in Steven Universe*, aims to remedy this lack by providing something like a collection of jumping-off points for advancing the scholarly conversation about this important work of contemporary television. *Steven Universe* offers fertile ground for academic analysis that invites a wide range of interpretive approaches, and this volume assembles what we intend to be a usefully suggestive rather than comprehensive or exhaustive selection of such approaches. Contributors employ lenses from fan, decolonial, and gender studies, race and queer theories, and ecocriticism, among others, in order to outline and explore some major avenues of analysis regarding *Steven Universe* in a manner that will ideally hold interest for students, fans, and scholars.

This collection considers the television series through the end of season 5, which concluded with the multi-episode "Diamond Days" arc. It bears noting, however, that we have been using "*Steven Universe*" in this preface to refer to the television series, but the series itself constitutes merely one element of a larger media ecology encompassing comics, books, video games, fan-fiction, social media activity by both fans and creators, participation in the "Dove Self-Esteem Project," merchandising, and so on. While this book does not examine most of these additional elements, we look forward to future work that extends and develops the critical conversation around both the rich *ur*-text of the television series and its paratexts and paratextual objects. In the meantime, the work of the contributors in the chapters that follow not only helps us to think about fandom, (children's) animation, and (representations of) queerness, power, and identity within the context of the *Steven Universe* television series, but also, in doing so, contributes to larger conversations in cultural and media studies as a whole.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

*John R. Ziegler and Leah Richards*

On July 6, 2018, two female-presenting aliens, one wearing a wedding dress and one a tuxedo, who had been in a committed relationship for 5750 years (and 8 months) that involved living as one body with two consciousnesses, married one another on a beach in what has been widely discussed as the first same-sex wedding in an American animated children's television show.<sup>1</sup> This unique union occurred in Cartoon Network's series *Steven Universe* (2013–), and whatever one's position in debates over same-sex marriage and homonormativity, these particular nuptials undeniably mark a milestone for queer representation. Created by Rebecca Sugar, an alum of *Adventure Time* (2010–2018), another Cartoon Network series that pushes the boundaries both formally and politically of what American animated television for children can be, *Steven Universe* holds the distinction of being the first Cartoon Network property created

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solely by a woman, and an openly queer woman at that: Sugar has publicly acknowledged her bisexuality and, more recently, her identification as gender non-binary.<sup>2</sup>

The show, set in fictional east-coast Beach City, Delmarva (a combination of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia), centers on the title character, Steven Universe, a fourteen-year-old boy who physically appears to be more like eight (“Steven’s Birthday”) and whose father is aging rocker and car-wash owner Greg Universe, né DeMayo. Accounting for the disjunction between his appearance and age is the fact that his mother, Rose Quartz, was one of a species of aliens called Gems, who sacrificed her physical form to create Steven. Thousands of years in the past, Rose also led a rebellion against the genocidal colonization of Earth by her own species, and Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, a trio of her fellow alien rebels, known collectively as the Crystal Gems, now serve as surrogate parents to Steven (Greg participates in Steven’s life but does not cohabit with Steven and the Gems) as he negotiates not only his personal life but also remaining and future threats from the Gem Homeworld.

Key to the conception of the Gem species is that their bodies, and therefore their race, gender, and sex, are merely projections of the gemstones from which the individual characters take their names, which are simultaneously the names of all other individuals in that class of Gem (i.e., the Pearl who lives with Steven is one of the innumerable Pearls). Sugar has underlined in an interview the representational significance of this conception for denaturalizing dominant ideas of gender and for providing points of identification for those who exist outside of those ideas:

One of the things that’s really important to me about the show is that the gems are all non-binary women...[and are] coming from a world where they don’t really have the frame of reference. They’re coded female, which is very important, and them being coded female, I was really excited because I felt like I had not seen this. ... They wouldn’t think of themselves as women, um, but they’re fine with being interpreted that way amongst humans. Um, and I am also a non-binary woman, which is, it’s been really great to express myself through these characters because it’s very much how I have felt throughout my life. (Sugar 2018)

The gems’ projected bodies, including but not only their apparent gender, are malleable, a quality that they share with animated bodies more



broadly, and can be temporarily destroyed or “poofed” without damaging the gems in which the individual self appears to reside, but the gems themselves can be corrupted, rendering the individual monstrous, or shattered, killing the individual permanently.<sup>3</sup> This mode of embodiment allows for a narratively and thematically central mechanic called fusion, in which two or more bodies can physically merge into a new, single being. Fusion usually occurs between or among Gems, but Gem–human hybrid Steven has at different times fused with Amethyst and with the human Connie Maheswaran; additionally, it is seen by the majority of Gem society as acceptable only for work or battle, but a minority, including the Crystal Gems, also employ it for affective purposes. Fusion thus functions as a libidinal act in the series, and it is often achieved through dance, itself long a site for the expression of desire. Ruby and Sapphire, for example, the two Crystal Gems who marry, live their lives as a fusion named Garnet, and Steven, the officiant, describes Garnet during the wedding as “their love, given form” (“Reunited”).

Gem embodiment, and fusion in particular, unsettles boundaries of self (an individual self and body are not coterminous), biological sex (the Gems have none), gender (male Steven and female Connie fuse into Stevonnie, who is either both genders or neither, or both *and* neither), and even species (Gems and humans can fuse or, as Steven’s existence suggests, seemingly produce hybrid offspring). Given such undermining of normative categories, queerness unsurprisingly figures prominently in the attention paid to *Steven Universe* by professional and academic writers and by fans.<sup>4</sup> Eli Dunn (2016) writes, “Not only is Steven Universe [sic] perhaps the queerest children’s show, it may be the most gender-progressive show on television” (55), and this assessment dovetails with supervising director Joe Johnston’s description of one of Sugar’s goals for the series: “Something that Rebecca has said time and time again is that we want the show to be ‘subversive in a positive way’” (McDonnell 2017, 224). Ruby and Sapphire’s marriage, for instance, can be read as subversive in the unapologetic queerness not only of its subject matter but of its presentation: The scene includes a passionate kiss between the female-presenting partners; the more traditionally feminine Sapphire, wearing male-coded clothing, literally sweeping the more traditionally masculine Ruby, wearing female-coded clothing, off of her feet; their fusion into Garnet; and then a shot of two flowers, each colored like one of the brides, washing up on the beach and sparkling with drops of moisture in what can be seen as overtly vaginal imagery.

The refrain of the song that Steven sings while preparing for the wedding—“There’s an awful lot of awful things we could be thinking of / But for just one day, let’s only think about love”—could function as a kind of mission statement for the show. However, while the representations of gender and sexuality are important foci of that mission (Christian Ravela [2017], in fact, notes that the “many musical segments..., like in musicals, break the narrative and become a vehicle for expression of desire, especially queer desire” [390]), the “love” invoked is not restricted to those areas but often functions to resolve a variety of conflicts, and those awful things that Steven references also point us toward the nuanced and progressive handling of interpersonal relationships and sociopolitical issues that are as significant to the show as its sporadic musical interludes. As *Steven Universe* writer Matt Burnett puts it, “[I]t can’t hurt to shade the world a little grayer for kids” (McDonnell 2017, 225), and Steven here is using the song and the wedding itself, in part, to avoid thinking about, among other disturbing concerns, the recent revelation of his mother and Pearl’s long-standing deception regarding Rose’s identity: Pearl, who both acts as a surrogate parent and was also in love with Rose, concealed for millennia that Rose Quartz was actually Pink Diamond, one of the quartet of diamonds who ruled the Gem Homeworld and who had been given Earth as her own colony, faking her death and adopting a new identity in order to lead her rebellion. The episode thus “shades[s] the world a little grayer” in a manner representative of the series as a whole, by mixing the joyousness of the occasion with multiple instances of parental betrayal and connecting all of it to further sociopolitical questions. Ravela, who sees Steven as embodying “non-toxic masculinity” (392), usefully summarizes this approach:

Importantly, this celebration and thoughtful exploration of queer intimacy and masculinity is embedded in the series’s larger postcolonial narrative. This placement is not incidental but actually central to fusion’s other valence, specifically its narrative role in contrasting the Crystal Gem home world to the human world of Earth. As the series develops through its first three seasons, we learn that the Crystal Gem home world is a static, hierarchically stratified and instrumentally organized totalitarian society. Each Gem is born into a specific labouring class under the Diamond Authority and must forever live within this caste system. (392)

Under the umbrella of this postcolonial or, as Mandy Elizabeth Moore argues in Chapter 10, decolonial narrative arise considerations including but not limited to class, race, and the environment.

The recent episode “Together Alone” handily demonstrates this confluence of concerns. Rather than a wedding, “Together Alone” finds Steven, dressed like his mother and waited on by sentient pebbles, planning a ball on the Gem Homeworld in an attempt to gain a further audience with White Diamond, the uppermost Gem in the hierarchy. He soon finds that a ball on Homeworld is less a party than a rigidly controlled public display of deference to authority in which “everyone stays where they belong.” In addition, the Crystal Gems are allowed to attend only if Amethyst, considered defective by Homeworld Gems, wears “limb enhancers,” and if Garnet, whose wedding band is glimpsed in a close-up, un-fuses (Connie, meanwhile, is viewed as Steven’s “pet” and Pearl as his property). The ball itself features the first appearance of Homeworld Gems whose lower halves, suggestive of full skirts, are, in an obvious metaphor, shaped like cogs that interlock as they dance, while other Gems dance in uniform motions within rows of their own kind. When Connie convinces Steven to ignore the prohibition against his dancing and they inadvertently fuse, they, Garnet, and Opal (a fusion of Pearl and Amethyst) inspire two Jades in the crowd to fuse. After exclaiming, significantly, “I knew it! I knew I couldn’t be the only one!,” the symbolically newly out Jade fusion is immediately “poofed” by a furious Yellow Diamond, but as Pearl has told Steven earlier in the episode, he is “already changing the world.”

In her wedding vows, Sapphire speaks of how her relationship with Ruby allows her to see infinite possible futures that can be altered with the “smallest force of will” (“Reunited”). To be fair, she does possess “future vision,” but for the rest of us, *Steven Universe* still importantly helps audiences to themselves imagine other possible futures and ways of being, as well as their own ability to influence such alternatives. *Steven Universe* supervising director Kat Morris comments on this transgressive function: “We’re really lucky to be living in a time when people are able to tell stories that challenge society as it is now on a platform that can be seen by millions around the world” (McDonnell 2017, 224). The challenges proffered by representations of the fantastic, such as the portrayal of the rigid, decidedly un-queer/anti-queer, caste-bound, and hierarchical Homeworld, to existing society and its dominant ideologies fit comfortably within the tradition of science fiction media. With its alien beings

and worlds, *Steven* clearly draws on this tradition, the first of two media traditions within which this introduction will contextualize the series (the second being anime).

### STEVEN UNIVERSE AND THE SCIENCE FICTION TRADITION

Some scholars, it should be acknowledged, might object to categorizing *Steven Universe* as sci-fi. Donald Palumbo (1999), for instance, writes of comic books that their “science fiction components are usually only a superficial guise for fantasy, as comic book narratives generally exhibit no interest in extrapolating from—or basing their worlds’ divergences from reality upon—any sound, organized body of scientific knowledge or principles; rather, they use ‘science,’ not to explain, but to explain away” (loc. 2565).<sup>5</sup> His claims here might justifiably be applied to *Steven Universe*, in which the explanation of Gem bodies seems less than scientifically sound and the fusion of Steven with Connie conveniently ignores the rules of human biology. Palumbo’s further claim that some “characters possess abilities and wield artifacts that can most accurately be described as magical, despite the ostensibly ‘scientific’ origins of many of them” (loc. 2575) could equally be talking about the Crystal Gems’ ability to materialize weapons from their gems or Steven’s ability to project his consciousness across interstellar distances into a sentient anthropomorphic watermelon. Darko Suvin (1979) similarly complains of “gobbledygook” that “mimic[s]” science fiction but treats science “as a metaphysical...activity” (23). Other scholars, however, argue for a more capacious understanding of science fiction. Citing David Seed, Sandy Rankin and R.C. Neighbors (2011) assert “that sf is, and has been a ‘multigeneric field,’ inclusive of, or at least often containing moments of fairytales, horror, myth, bildungsroman, the Western, mystery-crime, realism, surrealism, poetry, etc., *and* fantasy” (loc. 65). Ultimately, while it may be more accurate according to some definitions to categorize *Steven Universe* as science fantasy, science fiction studies nevertheless provides a productive framework for examining the series.

Rankin and Neighbors sketch the intersection of children’s television, science fiction, and ideology:

Children’s film and television, like any media or cultural artifacts, represent certain beliefs, ideas, and practices as natural, and conversely represent certain beliefs, ideas, and practices as unnatural, as questionable, impossible, or

unthinkable, by their absence if not by their circumscribed or negated presence. Indeed, presence *and* absence, affirmation and negation, can delight, fascinate, instruct, interpellate (children or adults as subjects), irritate, alienate, and shock. These are ideological and anti-ideological functions that science fiction (sf), perhaps better than any other genre, serves. (loc. 25)

As a result, science fiction can be conceptualized as “a living and popular art form of identity, which is to say that the alternative worlds of science fiction are continuous with our world,” and such imagining of alternatives “engages with contemporary language and culture, historical materiality, social and scientific processes, philosophy, religion, psychology, [and] anthropology” (loc. 79). Within such alternative imaginings, the “aliens,” a spectrum ranging from “monsters” to “simply differing strangers,” operate as “a mirror to man,” and “not only a reflecting one” but “also a transforming one...: the mirror is a crucible” (Suvin 1979, 5). A primary mechanism by which science fiction’s engagement with and transformative mirroring of the world occurs is termed by Suvin, in his seminal work on literary sci-fi, the *novum*, “a strange newness” or “domestication of the amazing” (4). Sandy Rankin (2011) glosses the *novum* as “the central imaginary novelty in a science-fiction text” (loc. 2110) and Farah Mendlesohn (2009) as “the idea or object that creates the rupture within the world as we understand it” (10). The *novum* may, Mendlesohn continues, be “a robot, a new vaccine or disease, or a change in the social structure,” and its “role...is to be ‘tackled,’ either defeated or encompassed within the world order” (10). It is “so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic—or at least the overriding narrative logic” (Suvin 1979, 70). *Steven Universe* contains a number of ruptures with our contemporary world—aliens, *Star Trek*-esque transporter pads, a living pumpkin dog—but the *novum*, we would argue, the point of rupture toward which the series as a whole is oriented, is fusion. According to Rankin, a true *novum* “has as its directive not art for the sake of art but art for the sake of hope, which is to say that a true *novum* has radical real-world ethical-political potential” (loc. 2110), and fusion evinces such potential. Fusion lends interpersonal relationships, romantic and otherwise, additional sociopolitical resonance and, since it can involve humans as well as Gems and human-Gem hybrids, “encompasse[s]” the modes of difference that it makes possible subvert a range of dominant contemporary heteronormative and neoliberal ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

While the notion of the novum aids in consideration of the series overall, the discussion by Michael M. Levy (1999) of young adult science fiction novels helps to further contextualize its title character within the science fiction and associated genres. Levy positions these sci-fi novels as belonging to the lineage of the *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age narrative in the “traditional male version” of which “the hero, as a young man, struggles to achieve a position of independence from which he may decide the terms on which he will accept engagement with the world” (loc. 1877). The young hero’s father is “entirely or largely absent,” and the hero partly resembles those of folklore and romance (loc. 1574). Greg, supportive but not a primary caregiver, would seem to meet the requirement of being “largely absent,” and Steven’s struggle certainly features elements, as discussed above, that would be at home in fantasy or romance under the canopy of science fiction. “Science fiction,” Levy argues, “with its emphasis on change, the discovery of new knowledge, and the conquest of new worlds, is a logical medium for the *bildungsroman*. Together the two forms create a powerful vehicle for the symbolic portrayal of many young readers’ most cherished hopes for the future” (loc. 1889). Steven, of course, grows more independent over the course of the series, both in his actions (one can compare the Crystal Gems’ reluctance early in the series to involve Steven in anything dangerous to his initiating and insisting on traveling to Homeworld in the most recent episodes) and in his personal and moral identity. Levy notes that the *bildungsroman* hero’s increased mastery most commonly results from increases in practical knowledge “of how the world works” and moral knowledge, or “understanding of the implications of his own actions,” which, in science fiction, in turn result from movement to a more technologically advanced community (loc. 1846). For Steven, these changes occur within the context of his proximity to more advanced alien culture, whether on or beyond Earth, and of his shifting knowledge of his family, particularly his mother, and the Gems more broadly. His eventual discoveries, for example, that the corrupted Gems are victims of Homeworld retaliation for Rose’s rebellion and that they might potentially be curable motivate his insistence on traveling to Homeworld to appeal to White Diamond; the evolution of his identity and ethics involves defining himself in relation to Rose, both the positive and negative aspects, and the others around him, his father, surrogate mothers, friends, and enemies.

## STEVEN UNIVERSE AND THE ANIME TRADITION

In addition to and overlapping with science fiction, anime, a style of animated media that originated in Japan, represents the other tradition with the most direct and pervasive influence on *Steven Universe* and therefore the most useful in relation to which to situate the series.<sup>7</sup> Aside from some aesthetic touches, such as the way that pupils can become enlarged stars to show extreme happiness or that characters cry oversized tears, and aside from direct references to specific moments in anime and manga (comics created in Japan), *Steven* shows the influence of anime in how it presents both its protagonists and antagonists. It can be viewed as a spin on the magical girl and the much less prevalent magical boy subgenres, in which protagonists employ some sort of magical power to combat evil forces. Characters often have signature weapons, as we see with Steven and the Crystal Gems, and the hero is not uncommonly an average person who gains powers by various means, much as Steven discovers different powers as the series progresses and maintains something of a separate “normal” public identity, especially earlier in the series. Transformation sequences are another staple of the subgenre that finds echoes in *Steven Universe*.

Anime more broadly has also historically been more willing to depict genderqueerness and queer desire (170). “North American TV,” in contrast, “has worked hard to avoid the unexpected appearances of gay, cross-dressing, or otherwise wildly gender-bending characters” in imported anime, through cuts or changes via dubbing, if necessary (Levi 2009, 171).<sup>8</sup> In the same way that *Steven Universe* works against this tendency, it also eschews the black-and-white division common to animated American children’s television between its heroes and villains or monsters. Anime is populated to a greater extent than American television animation with monsters whose “power does not automatically make them ‘bad’” (West 2009, 21).<sup>9</sup> Fred Patten (2009) calls such “‘friendly monsters’” one of the “nuances of Japanese culture” evident in anime series such as *Pokémon* and adds that the word *monster* in Japan “signifies any imaginary or fantasy creature” (51), a definition under which the Crystal Gems themselves would fall. Western monsters are often powerful but evil or powerful but “untamed creatures that need to be domesticated” (West 2009, 21), whereas in *Steven Universe* they are just as likely merely misunderstood or in need of empathy. While there are battle scenes and violence, almost all enemies—corrupted Gems, Gem enemies from Homeworld, even the potentially-world-destroying “Cluster” of Gem shards—can be

understood and reasoned with or appealed to, frequently even joining or aiding Steven and the Crystal Gems in the end.

Part of what allows for empathetic engagement as the primary solution to the conflicts in *Steven Universe* is another attribute that it shares with a great deal of anime: serialization. Especially in a series with episodes that run approximately 11 minutes each, serialization permits character and narrative development to take place over multiple episodes or even seasons. Peridot's conversion to the side of the Crystal Gems, for instance, and her subsequent relationships, particularly her living with Lapis Lazuli, gain weight and impact from her having spent more than half of a season as a committed antagonist. Nicoloe Farrell (2009) contrasts the episodic nature of most animated American series with the serialization of an anime such as *Inu Yasha*, which, beyond "violence and action," has "a *plot* that focuses on relationships, both romantic and otherwise, and a story that links all episodes together, not to mention intense characterization" (240). An effect of this difference in structure is that anime "characters are seldom static" and "American characters usually are" (241). *Steven*, again, with its emphasis on character and relationships and its overarching, unifying narrative, displays its divergence from much of American television animation for children and its indebtedness to the anime tradition. To date, American animated children's series *Adventure Time*, later-stage *Regular Show* (2009–2017), *Gravity Falls* (2012–2016), and *Summer Camp Island* (2018–) have embraced serialization to varying degrees, making *Steven Universe* a member of a very exclusive group; all except *Steven* and *Summer Camp Island*—created by Julia Pott, another *Adventure Time* alum—have ended their runs. While serialization is one of the defining characteristics of what critics have termed the "Golden Age" of American live-action adult programming beginning in 1999 and overlapping with but distinct from the "peak TV" era ushered in by the rise of streaming services such as Netflix (Brennan 2018), most animated children's television fare continues to resemble the Cartoon Network series *Teen Titans Go* (2013–), which, while it can be smartly satiric, hews to a traditional episodic structure in which changes, including to character, do not carry over from one episode to another. Anime series can be very long running, and they can use this length to create very detailed, complex narratives and diegetic mythology. The serialized *Dragon Ball Z* (1989–1996) television series, for instance, comprises 291 half-hour episodes. In a claim that brings together some of the threads of this discussion, Dennis concludes that more detail, in "biographies, kinship networks, spatial



structures,” results in a greater degree of heterosexualization, but this is most certainly not the case in *Steven Universe*, and perhaps part of that difference from the main body of American children’s animated television stems from the influence of anime.

## “SERIOUS STEVEN”: *STEVEN UNIVERSE* SCHOLARSHIP HEREIN AND LOOKING FORWARD

*Steven Universe*, then, occupies productive intersections of science fiction, children’s television, and anime, a nexus within which the show develops a rich, progressive, even subversive tapestry of theme and character that is ripe for scholarly analysis. The contributors to this volume trace various threads in that tapestry. In doing so, they sometimes offer differing interpretations of elements of the show such as fusion or racial coding, but while we have aimed for a certain level of cohesion among the chapters, we also believe that such differences productively speak to the textual richness of the series and the corresponding richness of the discussions that may take place going forward. In Chapter 2, Jake Pitre probes the interaction between *Steven Universe* and expressions of queer identity by its fandom, particularly on Tumblr. Lincoln Geraghty (2015) reminds us that “technologies of interaction shared by producers and audiences must also be considered as valuable” (7) to the study of media franchises, and that “fan commentaries online are paratexts in and of themselves” and “another level of meaning-making” (8). As Pitre discusses, *Steven* has built an extensive and demographically diverse audience with an active online presence, and he looks at both the toxicity and the construction of individual and collective (queer) identities enabled by online fandom. In doing so, Pitre follows Jonathan Gray’s (2015) reasoning that “the paratext is always part of the text” (231) and that the “text’s interaction with its environment” (230) is vital to the study of the text itself. In Chapter 3, Kevin Cooley approaches the queer force of *Steven Universe* through the political potential of the specific qualities of the animated body to materialize a queer future. Through his analysis, Cooley suggests that through fusion and futurity, the series theorizes a world beyond its own narrative dimensions that is also beyond the dominant heteronormative paradigm of reproductive futurity outlined by scholars such as Lee Edelman. In Chapter 4, Olivia Zolciak extends the consideration of queer identities and *Steven Universe*, focusing on the ways in which the intersections of gender, sexual, and ethnic coding in the series confer unequal

privilege upon different female characters. “Throughout its history, ...the sf genre as a whole has been exclusively white” (Olson 2011, loc. 995), and while *Steven* includes a number of characters who are or are coded as people of color, Zolciak finds that it simultaneously reinforces and complicates racially inflected gender stereotypes. In Chapter 5, Jacqueline Ristola highlights a different intersection in *Steven Universe*: that of queerness and anime. Ravela identifies fusion as “a standard Japanese anime trope” (390), and Ristola traces in detail the impactful influence on *Steven* of the oeuvre of anime director Kunihiko Ikuhara as it manifests in queer representation, embodiment, and fandom.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus away from queerness, as John R. Ziegler and Leah Richards argue that Ronaldo Fryman, in his appearances on the television series as well as in the paratexts of “his” blog and book, both titled *Keep Beach City Weird*, provides a site for satirizing multiple forms of media content. The satire of Ronaldo as a conspiracy theorist, they conclude, serves to underline the commonalities among conspiracy theories, tabloid celebrity media, and online fan paratexts. In Chapter 7, Justin Saret focuses on another secondary character, the enigmatic Onion. Saret examines Onion as a surrealist trickster figure whose silence and blankness place him in ambiguous opposition to the series’ ideology of empathetic connection. In Chapter 8, Emrys Donaldson considers cross-species hybridity, empathy, and consent by putting *Steven Universe* in dialogue with Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy of novels, in which the alien species includes male, female, and non-binary genders, all of whom can manipulate humans on genetic and cellular levels and interbreed with them. Donaldson demonstrates how this juxtaposition helps to develop and evaluate models of equitable cross-species interaction. In Chapter 9, Evelyn Ramiel concentrates on the background art of *Steven Universe*, observing that this significant element of animation receives less scholarly attention than it merits. Ramiel uses this analysis of the series’ background art to excavate the layers of how *Steven* engages ecological and geological narratives, both within and outside the show, as part of an ethic of care that extends to a damaged planet. In Chapter 10, Mandy E. Moore adopts a decolonial perspective to explore the show’s portrayal of the Gems’ colonial legacy. She observes that while *Steven Universe* is clearly anti-colonial, it nonetheless focuses on the long-term effects of that legacy on other Gems rather than on the Earth’s human inhabitants. Finally, in Chapter 11, Ellery Thomas closes out this collection with an inquiry into the ways in which memory is multidirectional

in *Steven Universe*, constantly being created and recreated by the tension between personal and cultural narratives. In portraying the synthesis of official and vernacular memories, Thomas concludes, the show offers a model for healing cultural trauma.

As the contributors to this volume make clear, in *Steven Universe*, not only is the personal the political but also the domestic is the intergalactic. Rebecca Sugar's creation stands out from and pushes back against "the reassuring conservatism often characteristic of children's literature and film" (Kennefick 2011, loc. 1398), engaging in counternormative representational practices that find reflection in the communities and paratexts of its fans. It is with a comment about these paratexts that we will conclude this introduction. The chapters in this book concentrate on the television show itself and, to a lesser extent, its online fandom. However, the television series can be regarded as the "source" in what Thomas Lamarre (2018) designates a "media mix," in which the source "imparts a distinctive tone" and "trajectory" to the mix but each "media instance is supposed to be equivalent to other instances as a point of entry into the series" (loc. 6393). Future directions for the study of *Steven Universe*, then, in addition to moving forward the types of conversations represented in this volume, might include scrutiny of a wide range of paratexts such as comics, multi-platform video games, advertising for or using the show, official or fan-created social media and other web content, and even merchandise or para/textual production and distribution.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, our contributors have placed a few more blocks in the foundation of what we expect to be an ongoing and fruitful scholarly appraisal of *Steven Universe* and its media ecology.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Rude (2018).
2. *Adventure Time* executive producer Adam Muto told interviewers that the evolution of the relationship between female characters Marceline and Princess Bubblegum, who shared a romantic kiss in the series finale, owed much to Sugar fighting for a more complex relationship during her time on the show (Pulliam-Moore 2018).
3. Jeffery P. Dennis (2003) writes of the malleability of animated bodies that "animated beings move between, merge, and ultimately deconstruct the divisions of human/animal, naked/clothed, child/adult, and male/female," and that "fluidity allows" for "transgressive readings of