

Non-normative Family on Children's Television

Queering Kinship, Temporality and Reproduction in *Steven Universe*

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Master's Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change

Master's thesis 30 ECTS credits

ISNR: LIU-THEME G / GSIC2-A-18/002-SE



Abstract

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to examine queer aspects of the animated television show *Steven Universe* (2013-present), created by Rebecca Sugar and produced by Cartoon Network. Situating *Steven Universe* in the context of Cartoon Network and children's animation in general, and drawing on queer theory, as well as feminist cultural studies and kinship studies, the thesis aims to contribute to understanding of non-normative family representation in children's entertainment. Through a close reading of the material, the thesis explores how *Steven Universe* queers the notion of family. It focuses on the show's depiction of kinship, temporality and reproduction, and examines how each of these aspects subverts reproduces different modes of normativity. In *Steven Universe*, the family of the main character, Steven, is depicted as socially unintelligible, and as a mixture of biological and chosen kinship, highlighting the importance of both. It places great emphasis on being accepted by one's family and community, and I discuss how this message can be both empowering and undermining. Steven's family mostly inhabits queer time and does not give in to chrononormative structures. However, I also explore and critically evaluate parts of the series in which queer temporality is provisionally replaced by chrononormativity and striving for maturity. Finally, *Steven Universe* queers reproduction, by defamiliarizing the notion of (hetero)sexual reproduction and providing other alternatives for reproduction and motherhood. In general, the depiction of family on *Steven Universe* is characterized by transgressing multiple dichotomies and by having a complex relationship to different modes of normativity, by both resisting them and engaging in them.

Key words: queer family, queer temporality, queer kinship, queer reproduction, normativity, *Steven Universe*, Cartoon Network, children's animation

Acknowledgements

First of all I want to thank my wonderful supervisor Tara Mehrabi for her constructive feedback and great encouragement, for repeatedly steering me in the right direction and for always finding time for me. I really could not have wished for a better supervisor.

A special thanks goes to Ariel, who first introduced me to *Steven Universe*.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my friends and members of my biological and chosen families for supporting me in diverse and innumerable ways: Andrea, Dagmar, Dana, Daniel, Julia, Kris, Manuela, Martinka, Mat'a, Miro, Zuzka.

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1 Introduction

“*Steven Universe*, the First Cartoon Network Show Created Solely by a Woman”

- LA Weekly (Ohanesian 2013)

“Steven Universe's Quiet Gender Revolutions”

- Bitch Media (Min 2016)

“Steven Universe: Cartoon Network's Most Feminist TV Series”

- Elite Daily (Carey 2015)

“3 things Steven Universe Teaches us about Poly Family Dynamics”

- Bitch Magazine (Teague 2017)

“*Steven Universe* Is the Queerest Animated Show on TV”

- Vulture (Brammer 2017)

These are just some of the headlines surrounding the contemporary animated television show *Steven Universe* (2013-present), created by Rebecca Sugar and produced by Cartoon Network. *Steven Universe* has also been called “The Best Cartoon Show On Television” (Khan 2015), “A Great Start For an Intersectional Feminist Children’s Show” (Plane 2015), and “The LGBTQ Representation We Need” (Kelley 2016).

The first time I heard of *Steven Universe* was not from the media though. It was from one of my best friends who recommended it to me with a justification similar to the wordings of the headlines above. “If you really want to get obsessed with a cartoon,” she said with excitement, “watch *Steven Universe*. You’re going to love it! It’s so feminist and so queer, I’ve never seen anything like it before!”. This was intriguing. I took her advice. At first, I was not too impressed - it looked just like any other Cartoon Network show, except maybe it had a higher proportion of female characters. But several episodes in, I understood what she meant. This show was different. It was unique. It was definitely queer. It is this queer aspect of the show that I wish to study in my thesis as an alternative mode of understanding the family from a non-normative perspective.

It is amazing to think that this show is primarily aimed at an audience of 12 year old children, and that it is broadcasted on the most popular children’s TV channel in the world. How could such a queer show make it to the mainstream? In some ways, it does have a lot of mainstream appeal - which might not necessarily be incompatible with queerness. But sometimes, it might. After I got over my initial excitement, I began to think about the show critically, concentrating on those moments when I was not a hundred percent sure about whether it was as unique as I had thought. Sometimes, it delivered the same old cliches I knew all too well from other cartoons. Sometimes it was ambiguous in its messages, or at least not as explicit as I would have liked it to be. Sometimes it just did not go all the way, to the limits of the

acceptable. In other words, there were moments when I was almost disappointed in it, because I was not sure whether it was as queer and radical as everyone said it was.

In any case, *Steven Universe* definitely managed to fill a gap in queer media representation. Even if it might not be perfect, it managed to do something no other show has done before. I believe that that alone makes it a phenomenon worth studying. But perhaps an even more interesting related question is to think about what people (media, fans, my friend and I) mean when they say that *Steven Universe* is queer, or even “the queerest show on television”.

Why is it perceived as queer? In what ways? To what extent? Are there limits to its queerness and if so, what are they? How can queerness be understood in its context? What makes it queer rather than LGBT-friendly? These are the questions that I have on my mind as I am trying to explore the tensions between the queer and norm-breaking aspects of *Steven Universe* and the more traditional and assimilationist ones.

Out of all the queer aspects of the show, I decided to focus on family. In *Steven Universe*, non-normative families are represented, but at the same time, some elements of normativity are present too. I am hoping to analyze both the queer elements and the seemingly normative ones, in order to figure out if they can really be categorized as normative, and whether the distinction between normative and norm-breaking is a useful way of thinking about these issues at all, or whether it is possible to instead reconcile the more radical parts with the more normative ones, trying to overcome the existing binary view.

1.1 Aims and Research Question

Thus, the aim of my research in this thesis is to explore queer aspects of *Steven Universe*. More concretely, I want to focus on the show’s depiction of family and approach the question from three different angles that I hope shall contribute to providing a better, more detailed picture of the topic as a whole - namely, I shall explore the topics of kinship, temporality and reproduction.

The research questions that this thesis aims to explore are: How does *Steven Universe* queer the notion of family? To what extent does its depiction of kinship, temporality and reproduction resist and reproduce normativity?

1.2 Thesis outline

In order to fulfill my aims, the text will be organised in the following way. First, I shall familiarize the reader with the subject by providing the necessary background: information about *Steven Universe*, about its producer Cartoon Network (including historical context),

and about other queer themes in *Steven Universe* that are not the main focus of this thesis. I shall discuss my choice of methods (close reading) and material (including the choice of episodes for analysis, as well as the place the show's reception and production have in this thesis), and I will situate myself in relation to the topic I am writing about. Next, in a chapter on Previous Research and Theory, I go through the main theories and concepts that informed my thesis, starting from Feminist Cultural studies as the overarching field to which this work aims to contribute, and the specific area of Children's Animation. Another overarching field to which my thesis belongs is Queer Theory, and the section dedicated to it contains the main theoretical concepts that I am using to define the overall aim of my thesis. The final three sections of the chapter are particularly relevant as they are dedicated to areas and concepts corresponding to the three main parts of my analysis (Kinship, Temporality and Reproduction respectively). The analytical chapter of the thesis is, thus, also divided into these three parts. Moreover, as a title of each of them, I chose the character(s) from *Steven Universe* that best represents this aspect and that will be the main focus of the discussion in that chapter. The final part of the text are the Conclusions, in which I summarize my findings and reflect on their relevance.

2 Material and Methodology

2.1 Background

Steven Universe revolves around the Crystal Gems - a team of magical superheroes protecting the Earth, consisting of three powerful alien creatures and a twelve year old boy called Steven Universe. The show follows their everyday life as a family, as well as their magical adventures, but later, as it progresses, a complex backstory is revealed to the viewers: Gems are an alien species that tried to colonize the Earth thousands of years ago. However, a faction of rebels - the Crystal Gems - formed and decided to stop the colonization and protect the Earth instead. A Gem called Rose was the leader of the rebellion. Thousands of years later, she fell in love with a human man, Greg Universe, and decided to have a child with him. That child is Steven. So, Steven is not exactly a human boy - he is the only half human, half Gem hybrid that has ever existed, gradually discovering his superpowers and his identity as the show unfolds. His mother, Rose, had to give up her physical existence in order for Steven to exist (instead becoming a part of him), which means that he has never met his mother. Instead, Steven is brought up by the rest of the Crystal Gems (Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl) and his father Greg. Of course, in the show, the viewers also encounter a number of other characters, such as Steven's best friend Connie and her parents, other inhabitants of Beach City, and other Gems.

2.1.1 Cartoon Network

The pilot episode of *Steven Universe* aired in 2013 on Cartoon Network's website. In order to better understand the show's background, I want to situate it in the context of children's TV animation and focus more specifically on its place within Cartoon Network.

Cartoon Network is an American 24-hour TV channel dedicated to animated cartoons, owned by Turner Broadcasting System (Fletcher 2002). It was launched in 1992 and since then until this day, it has been one of the most popular cable channels (Fletcher 2002: 73, Sandler 2003: 97). According to a recent press release by Turner, Cartoon Network's success is international, as it is currently broadcasted in 192 countries and seen in over 400 million homes worldwide (Turner 2018).

In a broader historical setting, animation can be divided into three main eras: cinematic, televisual, and digital (Stabile and Harrison 2003: 2). The emergence of Cartoon Network is part of the televisual era. In the beginning of this era of animation, before the appearance of cable and satellite television, cartoons were shown on TV mostly just on Saturday mornings

(Hunting et al. 2018: 116, Yoon and Malecki 2009: 246). However, with the arrival of the TV channels such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, the situation has changed, as cartoons are now available 24 hours a day on channels dedicated entirely to animation (ibid.). The number of channels specializing on cartoons has grown since then, and the three most popular such channels today are Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon (Hentges and Case 2013: 319, Hunting et al. 2018: 117, Yoon and Malecki 2009: 246).

When it comes to the audiences that these popular channels are targeting, studies show that Disney Channel targets girls, Nickelodeon is neutral (targeting both boys and girls), and Cartoon Network targets boys (Hunting et al. 2018: 124, Hentges and Case 2013: 320). Some studies suggest a correlation between Cartoon Network's focus on boys and its overrepresentation of male characters (Hentges and Case 2013). Furthermore, apart from being overrepresented, male characters are portrayed as aggressive and physically strong on Cartoon Network, while female characters are depicted as attractive (Ahmed and Abdul Wahab 2014). However, the latter is not unique just to Cartoon Network, as I shall discuss in more detail below under the section on Children's Animation.

The Cartoon Network shows that do have female leads (i.e. they manage to provide female representation), such as *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005), have sometimes been criticized as far from subversive. Although the show's protagonists are superheroines, which at the first sight suggests female empowerment and dismantling of gender stereotypes, some scholars have argued that its take on gender issues is problematic. For instance, according to media and culture scholar Joy Van Fuqua, *The Powerpuff Girls'* version of empowerment corresponds to consumerism (2003: 206). Moreover, psychologists Carole Baroody Corcoran and Judith A. Parker reveal further problematic aspects of *The Powerpuff Girls*: "The Powerpuff Girls have power only to the extent that they are complicit in supporting Professor Utonium's patriarchal laboratory world and only if they wield their superpowers in service of Townsville's official patriarch, the mayor" (2004: 32). In other words, the Powerpuff Girls do not, in fact, possess any real power or agency, and they are unaware of it. Furthermore, according to both Van Fuqua, Corcoran and Parker and other authors (Duvall 2010, Stockwell 2004), the show is set in a post-feminist world, where gender equality has seemingly been achieved, feminism has no place, and, as mentioned, empowerment is achieved through consumerism.

Even though Cartoon Network has traditionally been targeting boys, overrepresenting male characters, and reinforcing gender stereotypes, as I mentioned above, this might be beginning to change nowadays. In 2016, vice president of Cartoon Network Enterprises (CNE) North America, Pete Yoder, stated: "We really have the largest and widest portfolio we've ever had that hits pretty much all demographics - girls, boys, teens, tweens, young men and women" (Cioletti 2016 188). In that context, he also mentioned that the extremely popular show *Adventure Time* (2010-present), which I shall discuss next, is an important priority for Cartoon Network (ibid. 187, 188).

Targeting a more varied audience does not necessarily mean moving away from stereotypes, as the example of *The Powerpuff Girls* illustrates. There is, however, one show on Cartoon Network, other than *Steven Universe*, that manages to queer gender and sexuality, as well as truly overcome stereotypes: *Adventure Time* (2010-present). It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Rebecca Sugar was a writer and storyboard artist on this show between its first and fifth season, when she left it to focus on *Steven Universe*. As scholar of gender and technology Ema A. Jane argues, *Adventure Time* depicts gender and sexuality in a subversive way, by going “beyond the simplistic inversion of existing gender stereotypes” (2015: 231). She adds that it does so, among other things, through “non-stereotyped, and trans- and multi-gendered characters, as well as via cross-dressing, role play, and exaggerated displays of masculinity and femininity as performance” (ibid.: 243). I believe that *Adventure Time* has much in common with *Steven Universe* and can perhaps be seen as its predecessor at Cartoon Network when it comes to queering children’s television.

Steven Universe is, significantly, the first Cartoon Network show ever created by a woman (Amidi 2012). What is more, Rebecca Sugar is an openly bisexual woman, which is part of what inspires her to make LGBT themes as well as women’s empowerment an important part of *Steven Universe* (Sugar 2016). LGBT individuals are represented also among other people who are responsible for creating the show, for instance the storyboard artists Lauren Zuke and Amber Creg. The *Steven Universe* team is diverse also when it comes to other identity categories. Among the most notable facts is that People of Color are represented not just as characters on the show, but also as voice actors. For instance, Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl are all voiced by Women of Color - Estelle, Michaela Dietz and Deedee Magno respectively. “I’ve never been part of a cast that has so much diversity” (Burns 2016), says Shelby Rabara, one of the other voice actors on the show, who is herself a Woman of Color. In the same interview, she adds that the diversity is also true when it comes to the show’s artists (ibid.). The fact that the people behind the scenes come from marginalized groups has great significance. Namely, the fact that these groups *are represented* in children’s animation is not the only thing that matters - what matters too is *who* created these representations, and thus whose voice is actually being heard when the viewers are watching the show. This is what makes *Steven Universe* a good choice for my analysis.

2.1.2 Queer Themes in *Steven Universe*

In this thesis, I focus on how *Steven Universe* queers the notion of family. However, there are many other aspects of *Steven Universe* that represent a queering of children’s television. I shall introduce them shortly in this section, in order to provide a more comprehensive context for my analysis of its take on the family.

First, *Steven Universe* is a unique example of representation of gender outside the gender binary. Gems are aliens from a different world who do not have gender. Or body, for that

matter - they only created illusionary bodies for themselves while they are on Earth. As Pearl put it in *Last One Out of Beach City*¹, “My appearance is just a conscious manifestation of light”. The author of the show, Rebecca Sugar, explicitly confirmed that Gems do not have gender: “Steven is the first and only male Gem, because he is half human! Technically, there are no female Gems! There are only Gems!” (Sugar 2014). Apart from the Gems, the viewers also encounter the recurring character Stevonnie (first appearance in *Alone Together*²), whose gender is non-binary, whose appearance is gender non-conforming/androgynous, and who uses they/them pronouns. These characteristics are not presented as problematic in any way by *Steven Universe*.

Moreover, even though Gems do not have gender and can take on any appearance at all, they all chose femininity: they look and sound like women, and they use female pronouns to refer to each other. I, as a fan, find this very empowering: the fact that these powerful beings make a conscious choice to perform femininity, even though they were not assigned it by the society like us humans. I believe that the kind of femininity that the Gems embody is “queer femininity” (Dahl and LaGrace Volcano 2008), i.e. femininity which is detached from its traditional links with heterosexuality and with the female body. Furthermore, diverse kinds of femininity are represented in *Steven Universe*: Women of Color, different body types etc. However, this is not something unique to *Steven Universe* as more and more shows try to do so nowadays.

Steven Universe also illustrates the concept of performativity of gender (Butler 1990), according to which gender is always a “doing”, rather than a fixed category. This is linked to the above description of Gems’ gender: it is quite explicit that Gems do not have any “essential” gender, so the performative nature of their femininity is much clearer than it is in humans. Moreover, Gems also have the ability to temporarily change their body/appearance at will (i.e. they can shapeshift), and this includes gender. For instance Amethyst sometimes takes on the role of Purple Puma – a masculine version of Amethyst, who also uses male pronouns. The episode *Tiger Millionaire*³ is dedicated to how she uses this alter ego to experience empowerment, freedom and playfulness. Thus, for Gems gender is not merely performative, but also fluid.

Not only femininity, but also masculinity is portrayed in a unique way on *Steven Universe*. Steven himself is a great example of this, as his behaviour does not correspond to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). He often cries, expresses his emotions, tries to resolve conflicts by talking rather than by fighting. Moreover, every Gem has their own magical weapon as well as their special superpower. Steven’s weapon is not a spear or a sword, but a shield - a tool used for defence and protection. His special power is healing - a skill most commonly seen in female heroes. As cultural critic Jonathan McIntosh (2016) argues based on these and

¹ Season 4 Episode 6 (Florida and Zuke, 2016)

² Season 1 Episode 37 (Florida, Mitroff and Sugar 2015)

³ Season 1 Episode 9 (Molisee and Villeco, 2014)

other characteristics, Steven represents a “subversive boyhood” - a kind of new masculinity very rarely seen in boy heroes nowadays. This is even more remarkable because, as McIntosh adds, *Steven Universe* is Steven’s coming of age story, and while coming of age narratives for boys usually focus on activities such as fighting, this is not the case in *Steven Universe*.

One of the most striking ways in which *Steven Universe* queers children’s television is its representation of lesbian relationships⁴. There are at least two lesbian couples among the main characters, and those relationships play a key role in their lives and identities. It is obvious that these stories resonate with the fans as well. According to IMDB, the highest ranking *Steven Universe* episode of all time is *Mr. Greg*⁵, which largely focuses on the relationship between Pearl and Rose. The episode *Rose’s Scabbard*⁶, which is also dedicated to their relationship, made it into the top ten as well. Number three on the list (and my personal favourite) is the Season 1 finale *Jail Break*⁷, in which the season culminates in the touching revelation that Garnet is, in fact, a fusion⁸ of two Gems, Ruby and Sapphire, who love each other so much that they choose to be fused permanently, for which they had been persecuted on the Homeworld, as it is regarded as extremely inappropriate there and thus forbidden.

In addition to all the queer aspects listed above, *Steven Universe* also questions the normativity of the nuclear family. In my analysis I will only focus on Steven’s family. However, Steven’s family is not the only one in the show that does not fit into the “mother, father and child(ren)” formula. The following are represented among other Beach City families: two nuclear families, four families with one parent (we cannot know for sure if they really are a single parent or if the other parent exists but does not feature as a character on the show - among these, there are: one with a single mother, two with single fathers, and one with a father and a grandmother). Finally, there is one blended family, in which one of the sons is from the mother’s previous relationship (his father is also introduced as a character).

Family relationships of these minor characters are quite often the focus of *Steven Universe* episodes, exploring topics such as tensions between siblings or between parents and children. Comparing himself to them gives Steven a chance to reflect on his own family relationships as well.

⁴ I realize that it is perhaps problematic to use the word “lesbian” here to refer to relationships between Gems, because Gems, as mentioned above, do not have gender and therefore they are not women. However, I chose to use this term anyway, as when it comes to the viewers’ perception, I believe that it is justifiable to use it to denote relationships between feminine-coded characters. My justification is that lesbian visibility is as important as queer visibility.

⁵ Season 3 Episode 8 (Johnston and Liu, 2016)

⁶ Season 1 Episode 45 (Molisee, Villeco and Sugar 2015)

⁷ Season 1 Episode 52 (Johnston, Liu and Sugar 2015)

⁸ In the world of *Steven Universe*, two or more Gems can “fuse”, i.e. create a “fusion”. Fusing means combining the physical, mental and emotional attributes of the original Gems, thereby creating one Gem who consists in combination of their characteristics. Fusion is described as a “relationship” or an “experience” in the show, while at the same time it is an embodied being who is more than just a sum of their parts.

In addition to the human families of Beach City, there is a couple that can be interpreted as another “family of choice” (I shall explain this concept under Kinship), consisting of the Gems Lapis and Peridot, who join the Crystal Gems in later seasons. The show does not suggest a romantic relationship between them (although there is a lot of fan art that does), but they do live together as a family.

Last but not least, *Steven Universe* also opens up the question of ethical non-monogamy. In normative families, the parents are expected to be in a romantic relationship. Even in non-traditional families, such as those involving more than two adults like in Steven’s family, at least two of them are assumed to be involved with each other romantically. This is not the case in Steven’s family. Taking care of Steven is the only thing Greg has in common with the Crystal Gems. The only other thing they share (which is actually the same, as Steven and Rose are the same person, in a way) is their past relationship with Steven’s mother Rose. In case of Pearl specifically, this is the romantic element that seemed to be missing. Namely, both Greg and Pearl were in love with Rose, for some time even simultaneously. This gives rise to an interesting discussion of non-monogamy. *Steven Universe* is ambiguous about the subject. In *Love Letters*⁹, it seems to reject the idea of non-monogamy, when the postman Jamie falls in love with Garnet and she rejects him because she “is already in a relationship” (Steven, referring to the relationship between Ruby and Sapphire) and “three’s a crowd” (Garnet). However, in later episodes focusing on Pearl and Greg, *Steven Universe* gives more space to the possibility of non-monogamy. When the two characters finally confront each other about their feelings for Rose in *Mr. Greg*, Pearl sings the song *It’s Over Isn’t It*, which starts with the line “I was fine with a man who would come into her life now and again”, which could be interpreted as Pearl consenting to Rose having other relationships. However, the exact nature of the relationship between Pearl and Rose is unclear, and some interpret Pearl’s love as unrequited, which would mean that non-monogamy was not practiced in their case. Another positive allusion to non-monogamy comes from Fluorite who is, like Garnet, a permanent fusion. When she is asked how many Gems she consists of, she replies “Six. Maybe more if we meet the right Gem” (*Off Colors*¹⁰). This suggests that non-monogamy is at least a possibility, although it is not fully explored in the show yet.

To summarize, *Steven Universe* is queer in multiple ways: its depiction of gender as fluid and performative, its positive representations of queer femininity and non-hegemonic masculinity, its portrayal of lesbian relationships, but also its representation of queer and non-normative families at the very centre of the show. However, I wish to contribute to the queer analyses of *Steven Universe* from a different angle - namely, through looking at kinship, reproduction and temporality, which are important but so far less commonly discussed aspects of queering the family on *Steven Universe*.

⁹ Season 2 Episode 4 (Abrams and Jo, 2015)

¹⁰ Season 5 Episode 3 (Abrams and Liu, 2017)

2.2 Methodology: Close Reading

The method I chose for my analysis is close reading. Close reading is a key method in literary studies (Love 2010: 373), but it transgresses disciplinary boundaries, as it is connected, among others, also with cultural studies, visual analysis and film theory (Straube 2014: 62). The term close reading has been defined broadly and can be understood to mean a variety of different approaches (Fleming 2017, Herrnstein Smith 2016). The way I understand and use this method is simply as a way of interpretation performed by means of analysing selected material (in my case episodes of *Steven Universe*) in detail, in order to deeply understand it and its relation to chosen themes (in my case, the depictions of family from a queer perspective).

I have established that close reading will be my main method of analysis, but as literary scholar Paul Fleming says, choosing the right material for analysis is as important as the analysis itself, if not more (Fleming 2017: 437). With four seasons of *Steven Universe* out there and new episodes of season five being released as I am writing this, I had to make decisions about which episodes I will choose to include in my thesis. Between the show's start in 2013 and the present day, more than 140 episodes have been broadcasted. Apart from these episodes, there is other material that can be considered canonical (in this case I am using the term "canonical" in the sense that the material has been created by Rebecca Sugar or produced by Cartoon Network), such as internet shorts, companion books, games, etc.

As a solution, I was considering restricting myself to, for instance only, Season 1, in order to narrow the amount of material available for analysis. However, in the end I decided against it, as there are many relevant episodes in the later seasons as well, and an advantage of focusing on those would be that it would reflect any evolution that the show has gone through since its beginning. Finally, I decided to choose two episodes for each of the three sections of my analytical chapter, with the exception of the section on Temporality which, in fact analyses three episodes, two of which I have clustered together because they are both birthday episodes and therefore share some similarities. All of these episodes are discussed in detail, while smaller examples are brought in from other episodes where relevant.

Apart from all the canonical material, I had to consider how much emphasis I wanted to put on the show's reception. It is not surprising that such a popular TV show has a whole array of blogs, wikis and YouTube channels dedicated to it, containing fan fiction, fan art, and fan theories (i.e. elaborate interpretations of the show, pointing out meaningful connections between seemingly random facts, and predictions of what is going to happen in future episodes based on them). I believe that the fan reception is extremely important in understanding *Steven Universe*. However, I decided not to dedicate any specific part of the

thesis to it, and instead only refer to it in several cases throughout the text when I find it especially relevant.

Another aspect of the show that I find similarly relevant was its production. The reason I think it is relevant is that in order to better understand any text, I believe its context should be taken into consideration. Namely, the researcher should be asking: who is creating the content, from what position, where? I did not integrate any of this information into the analytical part of my thesis, as I did with reception. However, because I do believe this information is important, I decided to include at least some brief but relevant discussion of it in the Background section of this chapter (see above) - namely, the positioning and contextualisation of Cartoon Network as well as the show's creators. By not omitting this information, I tried to avoid the danger of my methodology of choice - close reading - being too close to the New Criticism tradition of using close reading in a way that disregards any wider historical, social or political context (Lukić & Sánchez Espinosa 2012). This tradition does not go together well with feminist scholarship, which normally emphasizes the importance of, on the contrary, situating everything within the various systems of power, if possible. However, the two can be reconciled and close reading can serve as a useful and adequate tool for feminist analysis (ibid.). This is what I tried to achieve in my thesis, by providing the background information about the production of *Steven Universe*, as well as bringing in the context in other ways and showing how *Steven Universe* relates to contemporary discourse (especially on LGBT issues). So, even though I touched upon the production only briefly here, I believe that this type of information is relevant for the analysis (for example the fact that *Steven Universe* is the first show on the most popular children's animation channel written by a woman) and I think that if a more detailed study of *Steven Universe* were to be done in the future, information about its production would be a good contribution to the overall understanding.

2.3 Situating Myself

Situating one's voice is crucial in feminist research. I draw inspiration from feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Donna Haraway, who have contributed to the field of feminist epistemology by arguing for the importance of politics of location and situated knowledges. The term politics of location was coined by Rich who writes about "recognizing our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted" (1986: 219). To her, this recognizing and naming of one's location is a means of taking responsibility for it in the context of knowledge production. In the essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (1988), Donna Haraway redefines objectivity in a way that allows the researcher to avoid positivist as well as relativist epistemologies, by arguing instead for the importance of partial perspectives. This means that the researcher can achieve partial objectivity by writing from the specific location from which they can "see" the reality. According to Haraway, the

researcher is never separated from the reality and from the object of their research, they are always already positioned in relation to it: historically, geopolitically, materially. They can achieve accountability by acknowledging their situatedness in the context of the research. So, in order to take responsibility for my location too, I want to explicitly situate myself in relation to the topics of this thesis.

One way in which I need to situate myself in relation to *Steven Universe* is as a fan. I have watched some parts of the show more times that I want to admit. I spent hours discussing it with friends or following the different fan theories online. I have been marking the release dates of new episodes in my calendar to see them as soon as they came out. I have cried while watching some episodes. So, I am anything but neutral about *Steven Universe*. However, I believe that this is an asset, as it makes it impossible to ignore that the divide between subject and object of research present in traditional disciplines cannot hold in my case.

Another important way in which I should situate myself in relation to the material is as a queer woman. This might be one of the main reasons why *Steven Universe*, and its queer elements in particular, appeal to me so much. So, when in my analysis I am thinking about the queer ways in which families and kinships are constructed, or the ways in which queer subjects do not fit into normative temporalities, these are not some distant, abstract ideas for me, but rather problems that I think about not just in relation to the material I am analysing in this thesis, but also in relation to my everyday existence.

Let me now go back to the question of how I chose the episodes to include in my analysis. I have already decided that I will use a couple of episodes for each of the three sections. The question was, how to make sure that the chosen episodes would be the most interesting and the most relevant ones for the topic. What I did is I identified some points in the show where, for me personally, strong tension was created. By that I mean that, as a starting point, I tried to focus on the spots that were difficult: it was difficult for me to make sense of their meaning (i.e. how to interpret them in relation to the topic of queerness and normativity that I am researching), but they were also difficult to watch, as I feel strongly about the issues they touch. For example, when I first saw the episode *Gem Harvest*¹¹ that I discuss under the section on Queer Kinship, I hated it. Unlike many other episodes of the show, I had never rewatched it until I “had to” because of this thesis, as I found it upsetting and it made me feel uneasy. I thought that I did not like its ending and what I perceived to be the message that it tried to convey. The episode, as I understand it, was about reconciliation with one’s blood family and approaching the conservative people in one’s community with understanding and compassion, which is something that I am truly struggling with in my own life. In most of *Steven Universe*, I felt like I finally found a show that I can completely identify with. However, there were moments (*Gem Harvest* is just one of them) that I was not sure what to make of or that, for one reason or another, did not fit into the image that I had of the *Steven*

¹¹ Season 4 Episode 8-9 (Molisee, Villeco, Florido, and Zuke, 2016)

Universe as the perfect queer feminist show.

So, I thought that untangling these points would be a very interesting and challenging process, not only theoretically, but for me also emotionally. At the same time, this allows me to avoid the trap into which I could fall writing from my position as a fan - i.e. it is always difficult to be critical about the things we love, and I would not want my thesis to be a simple ode to how wonderful this show is.

3 Previous Research and Theory

3.1 Feminist Cultural Studies

Stuart Hall, a prominent cultural theorist, once wrote: "Cultural studies is not one thing; it has never been one thing" (1990: 11). This means, among other things, that cultural studies is not just interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field, but even anti-disciplinary (Nelson et al 1992: 4), as it draws on knowledges, methods and theories from any number of other academic fields. The same is true for feminist studies. Feminist scholar Nina Lykke calls feminist studies a "discipline which is not one" (2011: 147). She shows that feminist studies does not conform to the traditional strict divisions between different academic disciplines, and has thus been viewed as multi-, inter-, trans- and postdisciplinary by different scholars (Lykke 2011).

I am keeping with the inter- and transdisciplinary tradition of feminist (and) cultural studies in my work, by drawing on a wide variety of resources: the theoretical background I am using ranges from anthropology to queer studies, and the main method of analysis that I am using is textual analysis/close reading - a method originating from literary studies.

While feminist studies have focused on culture since the very emergence of the field, the gender perspective was missing, on the other hand, from cultural studies in its beginnings (Lykke 2008: 8). Although there have been some initial clashes between feminist and cultural studies (Skegg 2008), feminism has played a key role in the development of cultural studies (Hall 1996: 269) and nowadays the two fields are well integrated (Ambjörnsson and Ganetz 2013: 127).

Thus, historically, as well as at the moment, there has been a strong interconnection between feminist and cultural studies. The mentioned interdisciplinarity is just one part of it. Another aspect that the two fields share is their focus on marginalized groups and, related to that, an emphasis on being aware of existing power dynamics (During 2005: 1, Nelson et al 1992: 13, Sardar and Van Loon 1999: 9).

Let me turn to the role popular culture is playing within cultural studies. Cultural studies rejects the traditional understanding of "culture" as high culture (Nelson et al 1992: 4, Sardar and Van Loon 1999: 26). Instead, practices of everyday life are also understood to be a part of culture (Storey: 2014). But even when it comes to texts or art, the distinction between high culture and low culture (mass culture, popular culture) is critically reexamined, and the latter is considered a worthy object of academic study.

3.2 Children's Animation

The study of popular culture is thus an important part of cultural studies. There is, however, one area within popular culture that seems even sillier, even less serious, even more in contrast with high culture, than popular culture as a whole. But that is exactly why it has an even more powerful subversive potential. Namely, I am talking about popular culture aimed at children - more specifically, I will be focusing on children's animation.

First of all, I ask myself why focusing on children's animation is an important aim. A major part of the answer is that television has been crucial in disseminating ideas and influencing people's opinions ever since it became part of our lives (Ahmed and Abdul Wahab 2013: 44, Prot et al. 2015). This process starts already from the early childhood. Many of the scholars who have done research in the field of children's television justify its relevance by exploring the effects television has on children (Hunting et al. 2018: 118). Children's consumption of television has been high: Studies show that for example in the UK, children as young as 36 months of age are exposed to television for more than two hours a day (Barber et al. 2017: 5). In total, American children spend 2-5 hours watching television every day (Vandewater et al. 2006). It has been suggested that television has a great influence on children in a number of different areas. From a psychological perspective, Prot et al. state that "in the long term, media influence beliefs, perceptions, behavioral scripts, and affective traits, bringing about lasting changes in personality" (2015: 277). They continue to list the areas of socialization in which the influence of media has been shown, including, among many others, violence, education, civic engagement, multicultural awareness and identity development (ibid.: 278).

Among the things that children learn from television, it has been shown that the depictions of gender presented in mass media influence children's ideas about gender, and that these depictions are mostly stereotypical (Ahmed and Abdul Wahab 2013, Dietz 1998). This is true for a number of media and entertainment (e.g. computer games), as well as for a variety of television programs. However, in comparison with live action television, it has been shown that cartoons are more problematic when it comes to gender roles and heteronormativity, as well as racial representation (Smith and Cook 2008: 19).

Television plays a crucial role not just in influencing ideas about gender in general, but also when it comes to the question of family. In their book *Prime time animation: Television animation and American culture* (2003), gender and media scholar Carol A. Stabile and communication and cultural studies scholar Mark Harrison explain the role that (both animated and live action) domestic sitcom plays in reinforcing the ideas people have about the family:

More than any other genre, the domestic sitcom served to institute a particular myth about the nuclear family in popular culture. First, the traditional family includes a male dad, a female mom, and, ideally, a son and daughter. They are white, middle class and live in the suburbs rather than the city or country. African-Americans, immigrants of all ethnicities and races, and gay men and lesbians mainly do not exist within this vision. The father is the “breadwinner” (a word that did not exist before the latter part of the nineteenth century), the mom stays at home, the sons are strong, and the daughters are good. Within this kinship arrangement, the sexual division of labor is absolute, women’s unpaid labor is taken for granted, and paternal authoritarianism guarantees the reproduction of strong “moral” values. (2003: 7)

Stabile and Harrison thus show that the family that is imagined in the domestic sitcom is defined in a very narrow sense, which contributes to such limited understandings of the family also in the Western society in general. I believe, however, that these ideas are slowly changing nowadays, and that they could eventually be undone - what is more, they could be undone through the same manner in which they have been reinforced in the first place. Namely, providing the audiences with depictions of the family that differ from the model described in the quote above - such as the ones represented in *Steven Universe* - can play a role in changing the traditional beliefs about the family that are widely held in the society.

As I am approaching children’s animation from the perspective of queer studies, my biggest inspiration in this area has been queer theorist Jack Halberstam. More specifically, I will be referring to his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), in which the author keeps drawing on children’s animation, as he argues that this material has much potential for queer studies. There are several possible reasons why children’s animation has such relevance for queer studies. The more “cynical” possibility is that alternative and revolutionary ideas can predominantly be found only in this genre, rather than in serious literature and media aimed at adults, so that they can be easily dismissed and labeled as immature and irrelevant (Halberstam 2011: 23, 52). However, the queer reading “refuses to allow the radical thematics of animated film to be dismissed as ‘childish’ by questioning the temporal order that assigns dreams of transformation to pre- adulthood and that claims the accommodation of dysfunctional presents as part and parcel of normative adulthood” (ibid.: 31). In other words it questions the way in which certain ideas get assigned to childhood or childishness and others to adulthood, based on normative imaginaries. As a result, the messages contained in children’s animation should be recognized as powerful.

Halberstam argues that the sub-genre of children’s animation that has the most revolutionary potential is CGI (computer-generated imagery) animation, such as films produced by Pixar studios. He even coined the term “pixarvolt” to refer to the genre (ibid.: 29). Even though the animation style of and technology used for *Steven Universe* does not fit into the pixarvolt genre, I see many commonalities with what Halberstam describes in terms of themes and

content, such as the (partly non-human) characters creating alliances and rebelling against an oppressive order.

When it comes to children's film and television that does not belong into the Pixarvolt genre, most of the feminist discourse surrounding it is focused on the negatives, such as the ways in which the existing harmful gender stereotypes are being reproduced (see above).

The reason why out of the wide array of TV shows aimed at children I chose to focus on *Steven Universe* is that I believe that this show truly fills a gap in queer representation in television. Analyzing *Steven Universe*, which has often been labeled as feminist, or as queer (see above), will allow me to explore a positive case of a contemporary children's TV show.

What is so positive, and so queer, about *Steven Universe*? In film and television, queerness is often associated with the villains (for instance, many examples of queer-coded villains can be found in Disney films: Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, Scar from *The Lion King*, Jafar from *Aladdin*, and many more - see Putnam 2013). In *Steven Universe*, queerness (as well as femininity) is, to the contrary, seen as awesome superpowers, empowering the viewers who identify with these characteristics.

Recently, several children's TV shows have been praised for including LGBT characters - for instance, *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) or *Clarence* (2014-present). Although LGBT visibility and representation is important and every little helps, these shows and films tend to not go too far. They are either very implicit about it (i.e. the queerness of the characters is not confirmed but just assumed) or the characters that embody queerness are very minor (or both of those). On the contrary, *Steven Universe* takes queerness as the fundamental building block on which the whole show is built. What sets *Steven Universe* apart from the other "LGBT-friendly" shows is that rather than simply including same sex couples, it puts queerness at the very centre of the plot and of its imaginary world. It is not just an addition to an otherwise normative story taking place in a normative world - *Steven Universe* would not even work if you tried to take out the queer parts from it (this is what happens when certain parts of the show are subjected to censorship in some countries).

Steven Universe is thus a queer show in itself, not just a show containing queer characters or some queer elements. Moreover, I would like to emphasize that it is "queer" rather than simply "LGBT" – not including the LGBT Other for the sake of diversity, but disrupting the whole system and questioning norms, which is what I explore in this thesis.

3.3 Queer Theory

The term “queer” itself is, first of all, extremely difficult to define, because a resistance to fixedness is at its very core. Queer theory is an academic field that originates in the study of

relationships between gender, sex and sexuality (Jagose 1996: 3). But it is not the object of its study that characterizes it - indeed, nowadays queer theory can be applied to phenomena other than sexuality and gender. What makes queer studies different from, say, the more traditional LGBT studies is its approach consisting in challenging the taken for granted hegemonic categories, practices and identities by pointing out their inconsistencies and instabilities (ibid.). According to queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the ways in which queer can be characterized is as an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993: 7). If I were to make a distinction between the queer approach and the more traditional LGBT approach, I would say that, first, queer allows for more fluidity, openness and complicatedness, and refuses essentialist categories with definitive inclusions and exclusions. Secondly, queer studies focus on questioning heterosexuality itself, rather than simply exploring that which does not fit into the heteronorm. As queer theorist Michael Warner states, “the preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (1993: 16). What he means by the distinction between generalization and minoritization is that according to the former, sexuality is not just an issue of the non-heterosexual minority, but rather something that is relevant for everyone (see also Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990).

One of the key contributions of queer theory is the notion of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a belief system according to which certain sets of binary oppositions exist and are privileged: two genders corresponding to two sexes and desiring one another (Butler 1990, Rich 1980; Rubin 1984, Warner 1993). Heteronormativity simply put is the idea that heterosexuality (together with the values that are associated with it, such as monogamy, marriage, nuclear family etc - see Green 2010: 403) is normal - at the expense of queerness, which is not considered normal. In the context of the family, this leads to discrimination of LGBT families who often do not have access to the same rights, resources and recognition as heterosexual families.

Mirroring the term heteronormativity, the word “homonormativity” was coined by queer scholar Lisa Duggan. Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2003: 50). This means that homonormativity is applying the heteronormative privilege to those LGBT people who mimic heteronormative lifestyles. Homonormativity could also be termed assimilationist, as it reflects a politics of striving to assimilate LGBT people into the mainstream rather than a more confrontational politics (ibid.: 51). In the context of family, homonormativity can lead to representing LGBT families as though they are the same as straight families, the only

difference being that the family's core is formed by a same sex couple. The goal of such approach is to gain the normative society's acceptance and tolerance. An example of a real life political action corresponding to this way of thinking is, for example, changing the legislation to allow same sex marriage. This gives certain rights to homonormative families, but at the same time it ends up excluding those queer families who fail to live up to normative expectations. For instance, even after same sex marriage becomes legal, non-monogamous families would still not have access to the right to get married. Therefore, one of the criticisms of homonormativity is that it leads to a "hierarchisation" of certain forms of homosexuality over others, particularly privileging (but not limited to) the gay or lesbian, cisgender, middle-class, white, western, able-bodied, monogamous, family oriented, married couple" (Garwood 2016: 9). In other words, those whose lifestyle is closest to the heteronorm gain acceptance, at the expense of further exclusion of those who do not.

Some scholars, as well as some activists, see "queer" as the opposite of "homonormative", because they define queer as resisting normativity. According to queer theorist Michael Warner, one of the key characteristics of queer is that it defines itself "against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (1993: xxvi). This means that, unlike homonormativity, it does not attempt to simply focus on those that do not fit the norm. Rather, the goal of the queer approach is to question the norm itself (i.e. heterosexuality and its institutions). Its objective is not acceptance of the minority by the majority, but changing the society as a whole. Going back to the context of the family, this might mean, for example, that instead of including LGBT people in the institution of marriage, the focus could be on creating a brand new system in which everyone can have equal access to (economic, legal etc) rights without having to rely on marriage.

Even though I find it important to be able to recognize the difference between the queer approach and the homonormative approach as described above, I believe that seeing them as opposing each other might at the same time be problematic. Namely, making such a distinction seems to come back to a dichotomous way of thinking that queer theory tried to overcome in the first place.

The queer approach is undeniably useful as it allows for recognizing problems that would have been overlooked when using just the homonormative view (the fact that the inclusion of some leads to the exclusion of others). However, some suggest that the queer focus on always opposing the normal might create new problems. Namely, it might lead to the rise of new norms (LaGrace Volcano 2017, Lamont 2017). At this point it is necessary to make a distinction between using "queer" to refer to theory, politics or subjects. Even though some queer theorists believe that "queer" is inherently anti identity, some subjects do identify as queer (Pfeffer 2014). Thus, when I am talking about the creation of new norms, it is not something inherent in queer *theory*. However, such establishing of new norms is true in queer "practice", i.e. in certain queer spaces and communities.

So, apart from (or as opposed to) homonormativity, I would like to introduce the term “queer normativity”, which I borrow from queer artist and activist Del LaGrace Volcano (2017). I will use it to refer to the fact that even among the people who resist the heteronorm and what Duggan would call the homonorm, new norms are forming. Although “queer normativity might sound like an oxymoron (Siebler 2016: 27), those who define themselves as queer and thus as opposed to hetero- and homonormativity, also end up following certain rules. Even though these are very different from the hetero- and homonorms, they are, in fact, still norms, because they are expected from people in a certain part of the society. For instance, a queer person might be polyamorous, voluntarily childless, with a non-normative gender expression etc. Even though all these would be considered norm-breaking in relation to the mainstream society, in certain queer spaces they can become expectations, not conforming to which might earn someone a label of not being “queer enough”. The people who choose a lifestyle that is more acceptable by the mainstream society often seem to be excluded from queer communities and looked down upon, perhaps dismissed for giving in to the social pressure. To me, this contradicts the idea of queer being all inclusive.

As sociologist Ellen Lamont showed in an empirical study (2017) in which she interviewed 40 non-heterosexual respondents about their courtship practices, “in their effort to reject heteronormative practices and write the scripts themselves, queer people struggle with the paradox that liberation can itself become a constraining norm, as the pressure to contest societal-level norms translates into a pressure to always be radical” (2017: 644). She found that the subjects were conscious of the norms guiding heterosexual relationships, considered them to be “constraining, unimaginative, and heavily gendered, thereby promoting and celebrating gender inequality” (ibid.: 643) and actively tried to challenge them rather than mimic them. However, she also found that in the process of creating courtship practices free of such norms, they seem to have replaced them by new, queer, norms, characterized by conscious efforts to achieve more equality in the relationships. Lamont concludes that “the importance placed on these alternative norms in queer communities (...) contradicts respondents’ assertions that they can create relationships free from cultural constraints, demonstrating how emerging norms can breed their own pressures for conformity” (ibid.: 624). In other words, the queer norms were as constraining as the hegemonic ones.

Similar findings have been found in other studies focusing on different issues. For instance, queer and gender studies scholar Corrie Hammers (2015) explored the ways in which sexual acts can be radical and norm-breaking. According to her research, queer sex challenges normativity, but its “stress on sexual perversion/transgression contains its own normative logic - a kind of ‘queer-normativity’” (2015: 9), because only certain kinds of sex are seen as norm-breaking. Another example of queer normativity was described by feminist scholar Kay Siebler (2016), who explored it in the context of online queer communities. In blog comments and internet chat rooms, much of the content has a regulatory character - whether people are denied access to chat rooms because they are deemed “not queer enough or queer

in the wrong way” (2016: 27) or whether they are, on the contrary, praised “for being the right kind of queer” (ibid.).

In the light of the above findings confirming that alternative norms can be as limiting as hegemonic ones, I believe that using the notion of queer normativity can be extremely productive in the field of queer studies. I keep it in mind while analysing *Steven Universe*, alongside the concepts normativity and queerness. But when it comes to the latter, in the light of the discussion on queer normativity, it might be crucial to rethink the understandings of “queer” in the first place. Even if I settle on characterizing queer as an opposition to norms, do I mean all norms, or just hegemonic ones? I prefer the former, and subsequently I also want to deconstruct the binary thinking underlying the strict distinction between the normative and the queer. I used different views on same sex marriage as an example to demonstrate the different approaches. But real life experiences do not, in fact, fall neatly into one of the categories I described. Rather, empirical research also supports the idea of overcoming the existing binaries - for example, same sex marriages are shown to combine tradition and innovation (Green 2010) and queer relationships often rely on sometimes resisting hegemonic norms while at other times going along with them and reproducing them (Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz 2014: 16, Pfeffer 2012). My analysis of *Steven Universe* too confirm the impossibility of clearly and unambiguously labelling a family as either queer or normative.

In addition to the concepts queerness and normativity, which at the core of my analysis, I am also recognizing the different kinds of normativity described above (homo-, hetero- and queer normativity). It is important to clarify that when I use the terms “normative” or “normativity” in this thesis, it does not necessarily refer to either heteronormativity or homonormativity specifically, but rather to the set of values they are both associated with¹². This set includes monogamy, marriage and nuclear family (Green 2010: 403) as mentioned above, but also other kinds of normativity such as biological normativity, chrononormativity and reproductive normativity that will be discussed in subsequent parts of this thesis. Thus, the notion of normativity is in this sense related to all three parts of my analysis (kinship, temporality, reproduction). Queer theorist Michael Warner uses the term “reprosexuality” to describe this “interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction and personal identity” (1991: 9), clearly linking it to reproduction. However, he also points out that “reprosexuality involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission” (ibid.). Thus, reprosexuality is linked to temporality (generationality) as well.

¹² Queer normativity does not come up often in the text, but when it does, I specify that I mean *queer* normativity. Heteronormativity and homonormativity share the same set of values, but queer normativity exhibits completely different values (i.e. resistance to homo- and heteronormativity). When I use the term “assimilationist”, I am referring to homonormativity, because the term assimilationist describes homonormativity in its relation to heteronormativity.

Another theoretical concept that I use in this thesis is the notion of social intelligibility, introduced by queer theorist Judith Butler. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), she writes: “The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social” (2004: 42). Butler is, in other words, arguing that what can be intelligible or thinkable depends on the social norm. She continues to explain that even the subjects or actions that are outside of the norm are still understood and made sense of in relation to the norm. In the quote above, when Butler is talking about “the norm”, she means the gender norm. However, elsewhere (Butler 2002) she applies the concept of intelligibility also to the family, which is the area in which I shall apply it too. I shall therefore discuss the (un)intelligibility of the family in more detail under Queer Kinship.

Finally, one more concept that I use in parts of my analysis is “passing”. To understand this phenomenon, I am drawing on the work of legal scholar Kenji Yoshino. In *Covering* (2002), he identifies three ways in which non-heterosexual people assimilate: conversion, passing, and covering. Conversion is defined as a case in which “the underlying identity is altered” (2002: 772) - i.e. when someone changes their sexual orientation and becomes heterosexual. To pass means to hide this identity, rather than to alter it (i.e. when someone presents themselves as heterosexual), and finally, to cover is to downplay the identity. According to Yoshino, covering is about “how much individuals should assimilate into the mainstream *after* they have come out as gay” (ibid.: 838, my emphasis). In other words, it is not about being perceived as heterosexual, but about behaving in a way that is considered “normal” according to heteronormative standards. Yoshino adds that “the debate about covering divides normals from ‘queers’” (ibid.: 839), while he defines normals as non-heterosexual people who do not challenge mainstream values and practices, for example by trying to achieve marriage rights. In this, I see a link between covering and the notion of homonormativity (Duggan 2003) described above, because of this distinction between normals and queers, which is based on whether the subjects embrace the normative or reject it. Yoshino applied the concepts of conversion, passing and covering not just to sexual orientation, but also to other identities, such as race. In my thesis, I shall also apply passing to a slightly different context, namely to describe the ways in which Steven’s family passes (or fails to pass) as normative.

3.4 Kinship Studies

Kinship studies have been among the core topics studied within the field of anthropology since the 19th century. Back then, kinship was conceptualized around blood (consanguinity) and marriage (affinity) ties (Morgan 1871). Although this idea is still used today (Stone 2010: 5), the nature/culture division embedded in it, as well as the universality and centrality of kinship has been criticized. One of the notable criticisms has been formulated by American

cultural anthropologist David Murray Schneider. He claimed that the Western theories of kinships were ethnocentric and should not be applied to all cultures as universal (Schneider 1984). Furthermore, he questioned the assumption that “blood is thicker than water” that has often been taken for granted. This means that he did not think that blood ties were any more important, or any more natural, than other kinds of bonds (ibid.). Thus, he problematised the relationship between social and biological kinship. Nowadays, however, it is still relevant to question that relationship further, including the very distinction between cultural and biological kinship, which Schneider has not resolved (Carsten 2004: 22).

After a decline of interest in kinship studies in the 1970s and 1980s (Carsten 2004: 20), the field has experienced a recent revival of interest again, as a number of new phenomena have complicated the notion of kinship, including new reproductive technologies and other technological innovations, transnational adoptions, new theoretical and political ideas based on queer and feminist positions, etc (Butler 2002, Carsten 2004, Franklin and McKinnon 2001).

I would like to stress that the study of kinship has had a particular relevance for queer studies specifically. This is the case because queer relationships tend to defy traditional notions of kinship by their very nature. As Judith Butler wrote, queer studies try to “challenge the presumed link between kinship and sexual reproduction as well as the link between sexual reproduction and sexuality” (1997: 276). This means that in order to broaden the definition of kinship to encompass all types of families that do exist in real life, including non-heterosexual families, the centrality of sexual reproduction should be questioned.

One of the main works that I chose as a theoretical basis for my analysis is *Families We Choose* (2005) by anthropologist Kath Weston - a work in which anthropology of kinship meets queer studies. In this book, Weston explored how lesbians and gay men conceptualize kinship. It introduced the idea of “families of choice”, which can be described as follows:

Gay or chosen families might incorporate friends, lovers, or children, in any combination. Organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation, gay families have been defined through a contrast with what many gay men and lesbians in the Bay Area called "straight," "biological," or "blood" family. (Weston 2005: 27)

Chosen families thus do not require blood relationships or marriage-like contracts, like families do in traditional kinship studies. Their definition is much broader. Moreover, according to Weston’s subjects, a strict dichotomy exists between families of choice and their families of birth. Weston is concerned about this binary opposition:

Mapping biological family and families we choose onto contrasting sexual identities (straight and gay, respectively) places these two types of family in a relation of opposition, but within that relation, determinism implicitly differentiates biology from

choice and blood from creation. Informed by contrasting notions of free will and the fixedness often attributed to biology in this culture, the opposition between straight and gay families echoes old dichotomies such as nature versus nurture and real versus ideal. (ibid.: 38)

This shows that, in *Families We Choose*, Weston is trying to point out that this perceived dichotomy between straight (biological) and queer (chosen) families should be approached critically and overcome. This is a very relevant view for the material I am analysing, as a tension between, as well as a blurred mixture of, these two types of families is strongly present in it.

In *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?* (2002), queer theorist Judith Butler introduces the notion of intelligibility of kinship. She begins the text by stating that “kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognizable family form” (Butler 2002: 14). That is, in order to count as kinship, a relationship has to conform to certain predetermined norms of what it should look like. This kind of a “recognizable family form” includes, but is not limited to, marriage, as well as reproductive sexuality (ibid.). Those forms of families and sexualities that do not fit into the norms thus become unintelligible or unthinkable (ibid.: 18). Although this is often linked with negative consequences, such as lack of equal rights for LGBT people, Butler writes about the possible advantages of living in relationships that are considered unthinkable. Namely, she believes that they can be seen as “a site of pure resistance” (ibid.), existing completely outside the influence of the norm. Furthermore, Butler believes that kinship is more than just family, and that the distinction between terms such as family, friendship, community are unclear (ibid.: 38). These ideas agree with Weston’s anthropological findings mentioned above, and I will show that they are more fitting to describe the kinship forms depicted in *Steven Universe* than traditional understandings of family.

3.5 Queer Temporality

The concepts of time and family are interwoven on multiple levels, from our conceptualizations of history to the way our everyday lives are organized. For instance, there is a widespread idea of a linear, continuous progression of time, arranged around generationality and reproduction, in which having and bringing up children plays a central role (Freeman 2010: 21, Halberstam 2011: 74). Moreover, when we talk about a single individual’s lifetime, also here life tends to be prescribed as a linear path following certain events in a certain order (education, career, marriage, parenting, retirement etc - family playing a key part in it) and those who fail to fulfil this schedule “on time” are viewed as failures (Halberstam 2011: 15). On another level, every day in our daily life is also organized

as a set of routines happening at certain times. The family is where we as children first learn these routines.

Queer temporality means a way of conceptualizing time differently: All of the aspects of time mentioned above can be viewed critically, they can be uncoupled from heteronormativity, resulting in a mode of temporality that is privileging other characteristics than linearity, continuity and stability. As I will show in the section on Queer Temporality, *Steven Universe* provides examples of such temporal modes.

An important contribution to queer studies of temporality was made by queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), she introduces the concept of chrononormativity as “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life” (2010: xxii) or “a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (ibid.: 3). In other words, according to Freeman, chrononormativity governs lives of individuals, making them follow certain temporal norms, dictating the “right” time to perform certain actions in order to produce proper (capitalist, heteronormative) timelines of progress. These norms seem natural or given, but they are in fact a construct. Chrononormativity is one of the main concepts that I use in my analysis of *Steven Universe*.

My understanding of queer temporality is further inspired by Jack Halberstam’s book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005). He uses the term queer time to refer to “those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (2005: 2). This means that the dominant heteronormative time that is governed by a specific set of restrictions can be challenged by a different, queer, model.

3.6 Queer Reproduction

A key part of the discussions about both queer kinship and queer temporality is reproduction. One of the most influential works on this topic is Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In this work, queer theorist Edelman introduces the concept of “reproductive futurism” and positions himself against it. The concept is based on the figure of the Child who, according to Edelman, “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (2004: 3). In other words, the Child represents the future and its best interest needs to be kept in mind when taking actions in the present. The result of this is the “preserving in (...) the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (ibid.: 2). By this, Edelman means that keeping the Child in such a central position gives power to heteronormativity and, on the other hand, excludes subjects that do not conform to this norm,

those that fail to take part in reproduction and family. The solution proposed by Edelman is embracing the role that the queer subject has been cast in; embracing the present rather than the future. He associates queerness with rejection of the future and even with “the social order’s death drive” (ibid.: 3).

While *No Future* remains very influential, it has also been subject to criticisms, i.a. by other queer theorists. José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, offers a utopian vision of the queer future in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), directly reacting to Edelman: ‘I respond to Edelman’s assertion that the future is the province of the child and therefore not for the queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about hope and futurity’ (2009: 11). Muñoz’s view is thus quite opposite of Edelman’s, as it offers a much more optimistic take on queer temporality. While Edelman argues that there is no future (for the queer subject), Muñoz states that queerness *is* the future, as it allows us to break free from the limitations of normative temporality and find new ways of being.

Apart from the general call for a more optimistic view, some more specific criticisms have been voiced, based on distinct subject positions at intersections of certain identities. One such position is that of Queers of Colour. This issue was also touched upon in *Cruising Utopia*. On the back of the book, there is a blurb written by Halberstam, stating that “Muñoz insists that for some queers, particularly for Queers of Color, hope is something one cannot afford to lose and for them giving up on futurity is not an option” (2009). In other words, not everyone is privileged enough to be able to reject futurity. However, another way of looking at the position of Queers of Colour is possible. Cultural theorist James Bliss, who recognizes the negativity described by Edelman as related to the Black feminist experience, diverges from Muñoz and Halberstam, stating that the issue for black subjects is not that they cannot afford to give up futurity, but that they do not have it in the first place (2015: 86). He argues that black people’s reproduction is reproduction without futurity.

Queer theorist Jennifer Doyle also criticized *No Future*, stating that “this text is almost totally uninterested in female figures or questions of Femininity (...), as far as I can tell, this fact has not been taken seriously in any of the critical responses to Edelman’s book.” (2009: 27). More specifically than just femininity, also motherhood has been overlooked. Edelman writes extensively about the Child and about abortions, but not about mothers or about the female reproductive body. Doyle criticizes the fact that *No Future* is ignoring existing feminist scholarship on reproduction, which is a grave omission (ibid.: 35).

The relationship between motherhood and queer time was explored, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, for example by Lisa Baraitser. In *Enduring Time* (2017), she attempts to queer maternity, but without necessarily linking it to the death drive like Edelman does. She points out that maternal time can be viewed as associated with either reproduction and futurity - i.e. in opposition to Edelman’s understanding of queerness - or with the death drive through its cyclical, repetitive nature. However, Baraitser argues that maternal time is “resistant to

productivity” (2012: 235) because of its inherently slow nature. Thus, in this sense, reproduction can mean a powerful resistance to normative time, just like non-reproduction.

The problematization of meanings assigned to both reproduction and non-reproduction can be taken further. As Sophie Jones argues, “it is necessary to break down the conceptual opposition between reproduction and non-reproduction” (Jones et al 2013). She continues:

A feminist politics of (non)-reproduction recognises all the ways in which child-rearing might entail a refusal to reproduce the dominant order. Let's think, then, about reproduction as non-reproduction: the way having children exposes the absurdity and irrationality of our ways of working, bringing new people into the world who might want to change things. Let's think, at the same time, about non-reproduction as reproduction: about relations of care and affinity that flourish outside, or in defiance, of the nuclear family. (ibid.)

Note that Jones even uses the word “(non)-reproduction”, rather than for instance “reproduction and non-reproduction”, to show her refusal of the binary opposition between the two phenomena and to instead work with just one concept that encompasses a wider range of interlapping meanings contained in the complex relationships between reproduction and non-reproduction. (Non)reproduction can thus be understood to have different meanings. One can, for instance, have children and still resist reproducing the existing societal norms (i.e. reproduction as non-reproduction). This is just one of the ways of thinking about (non)reproduction as queer.

Edelman’s notion of reproductive futurism has real life significance in social and legal views on how different individuals’ reproductive rights are (or should be) governed. This includes questions such as who has access to adoption or to assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as in vitro fertilization (IVF). In the field of bioethics, some scholars were inspired by Edelman’s rejection of reproductive futurism, claiming that the goal should not be to gain access to ART for LGBT people at all costs, as queers should embrace their non-reproduction, as Edelman suggested, rather than try to fit into the heteronormative framework of reproduction by mimicking it as closely as possible (Richie 2016). Others, however, claim that not reproducing should just be one of the *options* for queer people, alongside the option of embracing reproduction and futurity (and possibly queering it as I shall explain below), and having access to ART (Leibetseder 2017). As I have shown in the previous paragraph, the latter option does not necessarily mean a complicity with the heteronormative order.

In *Queering Reproduction: Achieving Pregnancy in the Age of Technoscience* (2007), sociologist Laura Mamo explored how lesbians seek to achieve pregnancy through the use of technology. One of her findings was that nowadays, the use of reproductive technology is becoming more and more normalised, even to the point of becoming an obligation: “If you

can achieve pregnancy, you must procreate” (Mamo 2007: 228). This can have different consequences:

While assisting reproduction can be read as a means of promoting childbearing at any cost and thereby strengthening the heteronormative family form, these technologies also challenge conventional notions of family formation and extend the field of possible procreators beyond the heterosexual married couple. (ibid.: 34)

In other words, Mamo found out that the heteronorm can be both reinforced and weakened by the fact that queer women have access to, and perhaps are even expected to make use of, new reproductive technologies to achieve pregnancy. Namely, if reproducing is becoming an expectation even for queer people, it can mean that they are pushed into once again conforming to normative family forms rather than challenging them. On the other hand, however, it makes it easier for non-heterosexual people to have children and form families. The family is being queered by this process in two main ways, which are interconnected. First, the meaning of family is expanded beyond the idea of a man and a woman having children. Second, especially when ART is used, more than two people tend to be involved in the parenthood, with third and even fourth parties providing biological materials (Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz 2014: 8). This results in destabilizing the taken for granted notions of what biological as well as social elements of parenthood are (I shall introduce these distinctions in more detail below).

While I consider Mamo’s arguments, it is useful to keep in mind the distinctions that I discussed in the section about Kinship. Namely, kinship does not equal family, does not equal having children. So, what Mamo is saying, is that having children is “one of the most durable social practices” (Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz 2014: 3). This is why it is taking the central stage of her research - it does not mean that other kinds of families that do not include children are less valid. But because having children is such a powerful social practice, queer people in many cases want to gain access to it, as well as use it to gain access to normativity or social intelligibility in a general sense, precisely *through* the practice of having children (ibid.: 1). Mamo’s statement that “biological reproduction includes one in more than the practice of reproduction, extending to belonging to society more generally” (ibid.: 16) highlights the role that having children plays in being considered a normal member of the society.

The idea stated by Mamo, that reproduction is becoming not only a choice for queer people, but more and more of an expectation (Mamo 2007), was confirmed also by anthropologist Sarah Franklin. In *Biological relatives: IVF, stem cells, and the future of kinship* (2013), she discovered that using IVF could be a new norm. What is more, the new norm does not necessarily involve *achieving* pregnancy with the help of IVF - in some cases, the most important part seems to be that the subjects are *trying* to become pregnant.

[The] responses [...] provide a counterintuitive (or not) example of women in IVF programs for whom “being seen to try” to procreate could provide an alibi for not doing so: being seen to be trying to have a baby could, to a degree, substitute for having one, at least temporarily — and possibly permanently. In vitro fertilization could even be a way not to have children (since it would probably fail), while at the same time avoiding at least some of the stigma normally attaching to such an outcome (by being seen to have tried everything), and nonetheless acquiring an achieved parenthood identity along the way. (Franklin 2013: 230)

Franklin’s findings, in other words, reveal that in some cases, IVF can be used not as a means of achieving pregnancy, but as a means of (or an excuse for) avoiding it. This, together with Mamo’s findings, would suggest, in my opinion, that one of the common reasons for people to engage in practices of having children (or trying to have children) could be the desire to be included in the society by fulfilling its expectations, rather than the simple desire to have children.

When we compare types of families studied by Mamo or Franklin with families of choice that Weston described, we can see that Weston’s focus is broader. She talks about family and kinship that do not necessarily rely on ART or on having children in general in order to count as kinship. However, the fact is that many queer subjects do choose to have children, which plays a role in their inclusion in the normative society. Even though opting for having children might seem like the more normative option, I want to keep in mind that it can not just normalize the queers, but also, to the contrary, queer the normative family. Or, as Mamo and Alston-Stepnitz put it, it can at least *expand* the notion, if it does not queer it (2014: 12). However, even though it is undeniably of crucial importance, one should not forget that biological reproduction is not a necessity or a desire for everyone, as kinship can be formed in other ways than just biological reproduction.

Finally, in her book *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood* (2013), feminist philosopher and queer theorist Shelley M. Park addresses the tensions that exist in the perception of “mother” as the ultimate opposite of “queer” because of its presumed inherent link with reproduction. Park coins the term monomaternalism which she defines as “the ideological assumption that a child can have only one real mother” (2013: 3). She shows how such an assumption is challenged by the lived experience of mothers in a variety of non-monomaternal families: adoptive, lesbian, blended, polygamous etc. One of the beliefs behind monomaternalism is monogamy. Another one is “domestynormativity” (Franke 2004: 117), which Park understands as the requirement that the family inhabits a single home together. Another belief behind monomaternalism is biocentrism, i.e. the assumption that motherhood is inseparably, essentially linked to biological processes such as pregnancy and giving birth (Park 2013: 4). Even though a discussion about biological and social aspects of motherhood (as well as biological and social aspects of kinship and parenting in general - Cahn 2013, Logan 2013, Mamo 2005) has been going on for a long time, recently, through

developments in technology, scholars have started talking about fragmentation of biological motherhood, i.e. the distinction that it is possible to make between its “various modalities” such as genetic motherhood, gestational motherhood, and mitochondrial motherhood (Gunnarsson Payne 2016: 483). I will show that according the criteria described by Park, Steven’s family resists the norm of monomaterialism.

Sometimes, Park applies the term “mother” quite broadly. She names “stepmothers, foster mothers, birth mothers, nannies, neighbors, relatives, friends, and lovers” as examples of “our children’s other mothers” (2013: 14). What all of the figures listed above have in common as mothers is that they are women who are caring for children. However, Park notes that in normative thinking a hierarchy exists between these mothers, with only one “real” mother on top. *Steven Universe* challenges such a hierarchy, as Rose, Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl play different, but equally important roles in Steven’s life. Moreover, I believe that this kind of conceptualization, that allows a single individual to simultaneously be categorized as “one of the mothers” and as a nanny/neighbour/friend/etc without it causing any contradiction, goes together well with the idea of queer families of choice as defined by Weston (2005), in which it is also possible for an individual to fluidly occupy multiple positions or functions. I will elaborate on this in the beginning of the following chapter.

Park continues to reveal the binaries that are present in our thinking about mothers and tries to deconstruct them - for instance, biological/social mother, heteronormative/homonormative mothers, breeders/queers, or good queer/bad queer. One of the central binaries, which is also relevant for my analysis of *Steven Universe*, is the “good mother/bad mother dichotomy” (Park 2013: 14), rooted in monomaterialism, which results in devaluing the mothers that do not live up to normative expectations of motherhood, labeling them as not real/true mothers. In accordance with traditional ideas, good motherhood is most commonly equated with biological motherhood (ibid. 5). However, if, for instance, a biological mother gives up her child for adoption, she can be labeled a bad mother, while the adoptive mother can be seen as the real and only mother, reinforcing the idea of monomaterialism. The category of bad mothers allows to write off some mothers as unfit for motherhood. It is interesting to think about how this kind of reasoning applies (or does not apply) to Steven’s mother Rose, as despite being absent, and despite the other Gems being available to replace her in her role, I will show that she is not perceived as a bad mother.

4 Analysis: Queering the Family on *Steven Universe*

In this chapter, I shall proceed with the analysis of the material (*Steven Universe*). The chapter will be divided into three parts, concentrating on kinship, temporality and reproduction respectively. Each section contains an in-depth analysis of selected episodes, which I chose because I found that they represented the issue in question particularly well.

Even though the chapter is divided into three sections for the sake of clarity, I wish to make it clear that the three aspects of family that I focus on in my thesis - kinship, temporality and reproduction - are all interconnected in multiple ways. Reproduction is one of the central conditions of kinship, and not just in the traditional understanding of what it means to be related: namely, thinking about queer kinship inevitably leads to reflections on queering reproduction. Temporality too is strongly linked to kinship and reproduction, on different levels. On the everyday level, the daily schedules of human lives are governed by the kinship structures we belong to, especially when they involve children (as Park puts it, “one cannot, it is presumed, rear children without succumbing to homonormative and domestinnormative practices, schedules, routines, and concerns” - 2013: 18). On the time scale of a human life, the normative life trajectories are centered around family and reproduction (childhood spent with one’s parents, marriage, and having one’s own children). Finally, on the largest scale, time is thought of in terms of generations - a concept inextricably linked with both reproduction and kinship. Thus, exploring kinship, temporality and reproduction makes for a complex but coherent study of the family.

4.1 Queer Kinship: Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl

In this section I will discuss Steven’s family, using queer theory, as well as an anthropological point of view on kinship by applying the concept of social intelligibility (Butler 2002, 2004) and families of choice (Weston 2005), in order to analyze the ways in which kinship is represented on *Steven Universe*.

Steven’s family is definitely not normative. He lives in Beach City with Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl - three (feminine presenting) Gems. He is also very close to his father who however does not live together with them, even though they are in contact frequently. It is worth noting that when Steven was young (before the events of *Steven Universe*), the situation was reversed: since his birth up until he moved in with the Gems, Steven was living with his father who brought him up as a single parent, with some help from the Gems who were not the primary caretakers at the time.

Initially, I was unsure whether “family” was the correct label for Steven’s social circle described above. It is one of the cases in which the form of the relationship is so “hybrid” that finding a clear name is impossible (Butler 2002: 19). Greg is biologically related to Steven, so their status as family is undisputed, but would it not be more accurate to describe Steven’s relationship with the Crystal Gems as a community, a friendship group, or a team? Steven himself describes them as “family” explicitly many times, for instance in the episode *Fusion Cuisine*¹³ that I discuss in detail below. However, he does use other terms occasionally (such as “best buds” in *Together Breakfast*¹⁴). According to anthropologist Kath Weston (2005), this is nothing unusual in “families of choice” which are often created by queer people. The boundaries between friendship, community, and kin are not clear. As she observed in *Families We Choose*, “discussions of gay families pictured kinship as an extension of friendship, rather than viewing the two as competitors or assimilating friendships to biogenetic relationships regarded as somehow more fundamental. It was not unusual for a gay man or lesbian to speak of another as family in one breath and friend in the next.” (2005: 118). Weston is saying that in queer families the distinction between who counts as family can be unclear and fluid. Similar conceptualization of family ties was expressed also by Judith Butler:

Kinship ties that bind persons to one another may well be no more or less than the intensification of community ties, may or may not be based on enduring or exclusive sexual relations, and may well consist of ex-lovers, non-lovers, friends, community members. In this sense, then, the relations of kinship arrive at boundaries that call into question the distinguishability of kinship from community. (2002:)

The quote above shows that the distinction between kinship and other forms of relationships is not clear and should not be taken for granted. That is exactly what Steven’s diverse word choices to refer to the Gems confirm.

In addition to Greg and the Gems, who I view as the core of the family, other people can sometimes be considered Steven’s family as well. For example Steven’s best friend Connie is normally referred to as a friend, but in many ways she functions as a family member too, especially in the later seasons: for instance, she is present at family events, she is accepted by Greg and the Gems and has an important place in their lives. This confirms the above statement that in families of choice, the boundaries of who counts as a family are not clear, but flexible and permeable. Similarly to Connie, other characters - Steven’s friends and the community of Beach City - can sometimes be in a role of family members. However, in this section of my thesis I want to consider the role of Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl as members of Steven’s family.

¹³ Season 1 Episode 32 (Abrams and Jo, 2014)

¹⁴ Season 1 Episode 4 (Jones-Quartey, Sugar, and Villeco, 2013)

As I have explained in the Theory chapter, one of the ideas that struck me the most in Weston's book is her will to go beyond the binary thinking of chosen families seen in opposition to birth families. Her subjects have often associated their chosen queer families with positive values such as creativity, while their "blood/birth/straight/biological" (all of these adjectives were used to describe them) families were linked with, for instance, rejection. Another perceived contrast in Weston's work was that between the subjects' "natural" desires and the "artificiality" of social norms that had to be followed, for example in order to pass for straight (ibid.: 5).

I believe that *Steven Universe* bridges this binary, as Steven's family is both biological (Greg) and chosen (Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl), just as Steven himself is a hybrid of human and Gem. This is significant because *Steven Universe* is not simply trying to depict the non-traditional, purely chosen family, but it goes further, beyond thinking in binary oppositions, occupying an in-between position. Doing this - dissolving the distinction between biological and chosen kinship - is even more radical than merely providing an alternative to the traditional biological family.

4.1.1 Fusion Cuisine: Unintelligible Kinship

Apart from the fact that blood ties are optional, families of choice (Weston 2005) are characterized by not necessarily corresponding to the traditional family structure (ie a family in which the caregivers of the children are their two parents - or potentially even a single parent). As I have established, this too is the case of Steven's family - to the point of its unintelligibility.

I am using queer theorist's Judith Butler's concept of cultural intelligibility that refers to the fact that only those forms of kinship that fit into a socially recognized pattern of what kinship should look like are acknowledged as kinship. Those that fail to do so are unintelligible or unthinkable (Butler 2002), which is the case in Steven's family, as I will show.

In *Steven Universe*, the unintelligibility often becomes an issue when Steven is faced with other, more human/less queer, families of Beach City. The most obvious example of this is the episode *Fusion Cuisine*, in which the parents of Steven's new best friend Connie want to meet Steven's parents.

Steven and Connie repeatedly try to lie to pretend that Steven's family is somehow "normal" (i.e. nuclear), as telling the truth is not an option - the truth is too unthinkable. The episode opens with Connie receiving a phone call from her mother while she is spending time at Steven's place. Connie's mother asks to talk to Steven's mother, which results in both the children panicking:

Steven: That's gonna be pretty hard since my mum gave up her physical form to make me.

Connie: I can't tell her that!

This sentiment of impossibility is further emphasized throughout the episode each time when Steven's actual situation clashes with what to tell Connie's parents. For instance after the phone call, when Connie announces to Steven that her parents will not let her see Steven again until they meet both Steven's parents in person, he exclaims "But... that's impossible!".

The fact that Steven's mother, Rose, is still part of the family - through being a part of Steven - even though she does not exist physically any longer, is only one part of the family's unintelligibility.

Steven proceeds to try different strategies to pass¹⁵ (Yoshino 2002) for a normal family. Even though it is extremely difficult for him ("How am I supposed to choose just one of you to bring to dinner? You're all so cool!"), first he tries to pick one of the Gems to pretend to be his mother. He wonders: "Which of you would make the best and most nuclear mom?" (Connie has just explained to him, that "nuclear" means "two adults and their child and/or children"). However, he finally decides to convince all three of them to fuse into a giant monster - which can, of course, hardly pass for normal, but which feels more right to Steven. The tension in this episode is between Steven's desire for honesty and authenticity, and conforming to (or at least passing for) the norm.

Connie: Steven, are you kidding me?! What is this... thing that you brought to dinner?!

Steven: It... It's my family. It's all of the Gems, fused together into a six-armed giant woman.

Connie: Why couldn't you just bring one of the Gems?

Steven: 'Cause that would be a lie!

Despite his desire for authenticity, passing is important for Steven because whether he and Connie are allowed to continue to be friends depends on it. In other words, failing to conform brings a punishment, in the form of Connie's parents not allowing the children to continue seeing each other if they are not happy with what Steven's family is like, to prevent any possible bad influence.

What I mean by calling Steven's family socially unintelligible means that people (characters, but also fans of the show) cannot make sense of it, as it does not even resemble or imitate

¹⁵ By passing, I mean not being identified by their surroundings as not being part of the norm. In this case, Connie told her parents that Steven "[has] a nuclear family" and "[lives] with [his] mother and father".

traditional family structure. They try to make sense of it by trying to make it fit into such a structure, but without success. For instance, in the end of *Fusion Cuisine*, when the conflict with Connie's parents is resolved, Connie's mother says: "I did not know what to make of the two of - excuse me, four of - you, but I see that you are responsible parents. Uh, caregivers? Guardians." Throughout the show, various characters refer to the Gems as Steven's sisters, aunts etc, sometimes stumbling on the wording similarly to how Connie's mother did. Outside the fictional world, on Internet forums dedicated to Steven Universe fandom, fans try to assign this kind of kinship roles to the Gems too, creating threads of theories about which of them is Steven's mother, aunt, big sister, little sister and so on (for example *How the Gems are like on Family Terms with Steven* 2016). There is no general consensus. Steven usually resists the normalizing tendencies, but as I mentioned, in this episode his friendship with Connie is at stake, so he too tries to fit his family into a normative framework or at least make sense of it in those terms, unsuccessfully: "Man, why did Connie have to say I have one mother instead of zero! (pause) Or three!".

As Butler writes, if kinship is assumed to be heterosexual, "those who enter kinship terms as nonheterosexual will only make sense if they assume the position of Mother or Father" (2002: 34). However, in the case of Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, it is almost always clear that they are not Steven's mothers: they are not perceived as mother by either Steven or others (mostly), and cannot fit into that category even if they try very hard, like they did in *Fusion Cuisine*. As such, in not being able to pass as a "normal family", the Gems queer the nuclear family and normative kinship through performing unintelligible kinship.

4.1.2 *Gem Harvest*: The Importance of Blood Family

Steven Universe manages to combine two seemingly contradictory messages about Steven's family: On the one hand, it shows that despite the non-normative number, gender and even species of Steven's guardians, they are a family just like any other, with their own difficulties and joys. On the other hand, it also shows the problems that arise because of how different Steven's family is from the norm - this happens in the moments when Steven is confronted with the world around him, such as with Connie's parents in *Fusion Cuisine*. In the end of *Fusion Cuisine*, Connie's parents and Steven's family bond over both wanting the best for their children, thus discovering that they have much in common. This message is very common in children's television (Jacobs 2014). Another, related, message that is that of being accepted for who you are. This is popular also in mainstream narratives of LGBT youth specifically (ibid.).

In season four, the idea of finding common ground with conservative people is explored further in the episode *Gem Harvest*¹⁶, in which Greg's cousin Andy returns home after many years of travels. Andy clearly represents conservative, traditional values, including American

¹⁶ Season 4 Episode 8-9 (Molisee, Villeco, Florido, and Zuke, 2016) - special double episode

nationalism - when Greg tells him that Rose and the other Crystal Gems are aliens, he misunderstands but he is still shocked: "They're illegal?! Aliens?! You couldn't even marry an American?!". Moreover, Andy explicitly expresses that family is a core value for him. So it is for the Crystal Gems, but Andy has a very strictly traditional view of what he understands to be a family. For example, he is, again, shocked, when he finds out that Greg and Rose were, as he put it, "not technically married". He loves tradition, and his personal conflict is framed in terms of staying the same versus accepting change.

The whole episode is about trying to reconcile Andy (Steven's "blood family", according to Weston's definition) with Steven's chosen family:

Garnet: Andy is a part of Steven's family. We should make an effort to get on his good side.

Steven: If he's my family then he's yours too.

Garnet: Gems don't have family. At least not before we came here. So for the sake of our family, tell us what to do.

Steven further emphasizes the importance of creating and maintaining ties with both his blood family and his chosen family: "I love the Gems but I'm a human too. I never had a chance to know that part of my family but now I do".

The fact that Steven finds both his parts of his family equally important is very significant, as it bridges the strict binary distinction thought to exist between families of choice and blood families. As I mentioned, according to Weston (2005), blood family has often been abandoned by her subjects in favour of family of choice, partly because of the lack of acceptance on the family's part (e.g. disowning the queer subject because of their queerness, revealing the "unconditional love" often traditionally associated with kinship ties to be, in fact, not so unconditional at all). In *Gem Harvest*, Andy managed, in the end, to accept all members of Steven's family for who they are. Like Connie's parents in *Fusion Cuisine*, he discovered that their similarities are more important than their differences.

However, Andy's love of his newly found family is still somehow "despite" their differences, rather than because of them, as is often the case in depictions of blood families' love for their queer children, as stated by literary scholar Jason Jacobs (2015: 346). A different reading of the episode is possible, based on Jacobs's observations. According to his queer analysis of the American television show *Glee* (2009-2015) aimed at teenage audiences, the focus placed on the importance of relationships with blood kin (namely parents) means that other, chosen, relationships get overlooked, even though they play a key role in a young person's life. In *Glee*, Jacobs identifies two queer characters that correspond to two different approaches: Kurt who seeks and achieves acceptance, and Santana who is "refusing to differentiate between homophobic and gay-positive attempts to hail queer people into identities that are acceptable by heterosexual standards." (2015: 341). In other words, unlike Kurt, she does not seek to be

accepted by the normative society. She refuses to define her identity - I would say that she prefers to remain unintelligible and enjoy it as a “site of pure resistance” (Butler 2002:18), instead of trying to fit in by using any established labels or conforming to homonormativity. The parallels I see in *Steven Universe* are that *Steven Universe* only provides the first type of narrative - the one about acceptance. It does so successfully and beautifully, going beyond oversimplifications (blood family versus chosen family). However, this kind of narrative is overrepresented in the show, with much importance placed on Connie’s parents’ and Andy’s acceptance. Even though Steven’s family does remain in the realm of the unintelligible (nobody knows what to call the Gems - Steven’s mothers, friends, sisters, guardians?), it is not entirely because they chose it, but because they failed to pass as anything else.

4.2 Queer Temporality: Greg

Steven Universe takes place in queer time. For example, the Gems are several thousands of years old and they do not age at all, which means, among other things, that they do not go through childhood, adolescence and other periods characteristic for human development. Their perception of time is completely different from the humans. For instance, when the Gems cause a power blackout in Beach City in *Political Power*¹⁷, Pearl reassures the mayor: “Oh, don’t worry about that, the power should be back on as early as tonight or as late as... never”. In *Keep Beach City Weird*¹⁸, she explains to Steven that unlike Gems, “humans just lead short, boring, insignificant lives, so they make up stories to feel like they’re a part of something bigger”, recognizing the constructed nature of generational narratives. Several episodes of the series are also dedicated to time travel, creating alternate timelines and paradoxes. In these ways, the show constantly challenges the viewers’ presupposed ideas about time. But even outside of any magical time travel plots, Steven and his family live outside of the normative time. So, rather than focusing on the Gems and magical time travel, I would like to explore the less obvious ways in which the human (and half-human in Steven’s case) characters inhabit queer time, by focusing on Steven and his father Greg.

One way in which they resist chrononormativity (Freeman 2010) is that Greg does not have a career (as discussed in more detail below), and Steven does not go to school. Indeed, in the episode *Mirror Gem*¹⁹, when Connie tells Steven, with excitement, that summer vacation starts, he does not know what “summer vacation” is. After Connie explains that it is “when school gets out for the summer”, Steven answers: “I’ve never been to this— how do you say— “school”. How does it work?”. Later in the episode Steven asks Pearl to simulate the school experience for him, but she, just like Steven, has no idea at all about what school looks like. Steven has no obligations and constraints regarding school like other children. Without any schedule, he spends all his time either engaging in different activities he likes or going on

¹⁷ Season 1 Episode 50 (Florido and Mitroff, 2015)

¹⁸ Season 1 Episode 31 (Molisee and Villeco, 2014)

¹⁹ Season 1 Episode 25 (Molisee and Villeco, 2014)

adventures with the Gems, which is an irregular and unpredictable endeavor. Thus, unlike Connie who goes to school and has a normative family life (e.g. her mother is never late to pick her up, as stated in *Storm in the Room*²⁰), Steven is not exposed to a chrononormative order in his everyday life.

There are a small number of rituals that Steven does follow - for example, he celebrates the New Year's Eve the same way every year. His everyday life, however, is completely unscheduled. Even when he occasionally tries to involve the Gems in some simple rituals, they end up caught in a complicated and unexpected adventure - like in the episode *Together Breakfast*, when Steven tries to gather the Gems to have breakfast together. First, Steven is waiting for the Gems to come home, but because of their lack of schedule, he has no idea about when they will show up. When they finally do, they keep coming in and out of the kitchen one by one, never at the same time, and Steven ends up getting lost in a series of magical rooms and fighting a monster before he manages to gather everyone in the kitchen. This lack of schedule contrasts with Halberstam's description of family life. He writes: "Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs." (2005: 5). This means that people who have families fall under a specific set of chrono-norms which are justified as being for the children's good. The show makes it clear that Steven's whole family does care about his needs a great deal. However, this in no way means that they restrict his freedom by imposing a chrononormative schedule. Connie, Steven's best friend, provides a stark contrast to Steven's way of life: apart from school, she has tennis practice, violin lessons and other activities, which give a rigid structure to her everyday life. Even the time she spends doing her homework is strictly scheduled by her parents, who (think they) know what she is doing at every moment of the day.

4.2.1 Greg the Babysitter

Greg works at a carwash. He is also its owner, but it is not a profitable business at all. For instance, two customers a day is considered a busy day: "Wow, two customers! The car wash hasn't been that busy since that mud tornado fifteen years ago," as Greg explains in *Greg the Babysitter*²¹. He also owns a van, in which he also lives, as he does not have a house or even a room of his own. On occasions when the weather is too cold to stay in the van, Greg has to temporarily stay with the Gems and Steven or with other friends (*Three Gems and a Baby*²²). On top of everything, his very appearance and manners are not perceived by other characters as those of a responsible adult. For instance in *Winter forecast*²³, Greg is about to meet Connie's parents for the second time, not wanting to wear the same outfit he was wearing last

²⁰ Season 4 Episode 17 (Howard and Liu, 2017)

²¹ Season 3 Episode 16 (Abrams and Mitroff, 2016)

²² Season 4 Episode 10 (Abrams and Mitroff, 2016)

²³ Season 1 Episode 42 (Abrams and Jo, 2015)

time, but it turns out he only has one “fancy shirt”. All in all, Greg is often perceived as immature.

In the episode *Greg the Babysitter* in season three, the viewers get a glimpse of Greg’s life before Steven was born, when he tells the story of how he started working at the carwash. When Greg first met Rose, he was a musician, but not a particularly successful or ambitious one, as apparent from the conversation he has with his old friend Vidalia:

Vidalia: So have you done anything lately, besides worship everything [Rose] does?

Greg: I've been working on some songs for my new album.

Vidalia: Oh, the same new album you've been working on for six months?

About a half of the episode is dedicated to the contrast between Vidalia who is now responsible (among other things, she has a baby) and Greg who is still immature. When Vidalia shares with Greg that she got a job at the T-Shirt Shop, he reacts by saying: “You sold out, V.”, to which Vidalia replies “Got to grow up sometime.” which in a way becomes the main moral of this episode, as Greg repeats it towards the very end of it, even twice: once to Vidalia just before the end of the flashback part and once to Steven when it cuts back to the present: “You know, people grow whether they want to or not, but growing up is something you gotta decide to do.” The main event that this “growing up” refers to is the fact that Greg found a job at the carwash.

Apart from the idea that one simply *should* grow up (and perhaps some indirect peer pressure from Vidalia’s side), another possible reason for Greg to find a job was a purely practical one: to have enough money to survive. In the song *I Think I Need a Little Change*, he sings “I guess I need to eat/that wasn’t in the plan” and picks up some half-eaten french fries from a bin on the street. Indeed, the only thing that he needs money for is food, as even after he started working at the carwash, his earnings are very modest, covering only the bare necessities. However, this is enough for Greg to be happy, and he does not have bigger ambitions. This could mean that Greg is not “growing up” - he is merely doing what he has to do in order to survive in the society and be able to continue his lifestyle outside the normative time with as little changes as possible. However, this reading is implausible, at least as this particular episode goes, because the theme of the need to “grow up” is present very strongly and explicitly as the main message of the episode.

Despite this clearly being the message in *Greg the Babysitter*, the rest of the show does not seem to conform to it. Yes, Greg does own a carwash now, but as I have mentioned, he still hardly makes any money there. He is still quite carefree and young at heart. In this sense, it seems like he did preserve at least some of his immaturity. In fact it seems like, with the exception of this one episode, he does not value maturity. Halberstam states that “in western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation” (2005: 4). According to this logic, adulthood,

accompanied by maturity and responsibility, should be valued over the adventures of youth and unalterably follow after it. In Greg's case, however, this process is not particularly desired or sought after. He prefers to still live in his van, play music and wear flip-flops on all occasions. This is his way of resisting normative time. In other words, normative time is disrupted as Greg refuses to fully conform to the norms of maturity and adulthood, which should normally follow, linearly, after a period of youth and immaturity.

Another interesting aspect of *Greg the Babysitter*, confirming the queerness of Greg's temporal existence, was the depiction of his relationship with Rose before he started working at the car wash. Based on it, growing up does indeed try to force him out of a queer mode of being, as the relationship was very clearly not conforming to traditional gender roles. In the song *I Think I Need a Little Change*, Greg sings: "And me/I guess I'm content to be/on the arm of someone who/is as incredible as you". The song is visually accompanied by scenes from the everyday life of Greg and Rose, which reinforce this idea: Greg waiting for Rose to come back from an adventure or Rose holding Greg and tossing him up into the air (she is physically stronger than him). Also later, when Greg helps himself to some cereal at Vidalia's place, she asks him if Rose does not know how to cook, to which he, with indifference, replies: "Nah, Rose doesn't really need to eat, but I do." This kind of an untraditional relationship - one in which the woman does not cook and the man is not the breadwinner - is thus associated with youth and immaturity. Such queer way of sharing a life is seen as something that is only possible temporarily, something that people are supposed to get over once they "grow up". However, the relationship is depicted as very happy and I would argue that Greg, as well as the other characters, continue to value and form such queer relationships.

4.2.2 *So Many Birthdays* and *Steven's Birthday*

There are two episodes focusing on Steven's birthday: *So Many Birthdays*²⁴, in which he turns thirteen, and *Steven's Birthday*²⁵, in which he celebrates his fourteenth birthday. In *So Many Birthdays*, Pearl says to Steven that "birthdays are for human children". He immediately reacts by saying that birthdays are for everyone and "you're never too old". However, a moment later he comes to a realization: "What if birthdays are just for little kids? What if even I'm too old?". Subsequently he is overcome by feelings of guilt about liking childish things: for instance, he thinks that he should not be interested in childish games.

A similar situation repeats itself in *Steven's birthday*, when Steven realizes that perhaps he, just like the Gems, cannot age. He is terrified when he imagines that Connie will age, and he will stay stuck at fourteen for ever: "I can't stay a kid forever. When Connie grows up and

²⁴ Season 1 Episode 13 (Molisee and Villeco, 2014)

²⁵ Season 2 Episode 23 (Abrams and Katie Mitroff, 2016)

becomes president, what is that gonna make me, first boy?". He tries to fix things by shapeshifting his body into looking just a little bit older, to match Connie's age. This, however, is unsustainable and harmful, as shapeshifting should be practiced only for short periods of time (Amethyst: "Steven, you can't just keep stretching forever. If you hold it too long you can really hurt yourself.").

The fact that Steven does not fit into normative time is accompanied by his actual age and body not following the normal speed (and direction) at which the human body ages. What the two birthday episodes have in common is that in both, Steven experiences abnormal changes of his age, magically caused by his gem "reacting to [his] state of mind". In *So Many Birthdays*, when depressed, he goes through puberty, adulthood and old age in just one evening. In *Steven's birthday*, he faces the opposite problem: Steven's prolonged state in a shapeshifted body results in him turning into a baby. In both cases, the situation is resolved when his loved ones reassure him that they like him no matter what, that it is okay to be himself. In the latter case, it even turns out that the fear that Steven's body would not age was perhaps unjustified, when the episode concludes by Steven growing his first facial hair, suggesting that he will be able to age. It is important to notice that the cause of Steven's unusual transformations was, in both cases, his feeling out of place: in the first case because of his mental age (he felt bad because his interests were too childish) and in the second case because of his bodily age (he thought he looked too young for his age, which would have consequences for his social life). In both cases, the materiality of Steven's body refused to conform to the norms of the aging process, but in the end it safely returned to them.

The main message of the birthday episodes appears to be that Steven learns it is alright to be the way he is even if the society tells him that he is supposed to be more grown up. This seems like a positive message supporting alternative modes of being and encouraging Steven (and the viewer) to not conform to social pressure. However, for me there is a great tension contained in these episodes. Namely, the question is whether this message truly validates alternative ways of navigating time or whether it is one of many ways to express the typical neoliberal "be yourself" message, advocating individuality, that is so often present in children's television (Halberstam 2011: 21). It is ambiguous, but the fact that the ending of each episode was a neatly tied conclusion, after which the momentary deviance of Steven's body can be forgotten, makes the latter more probable.

4.3 Reproduction: Rose

In the previous section, I discussed Greg's resistance to chrononormativity. I argued that chrononormativity consists in a sequence of life events predetermined by societal expectations (including growing up, pursuing a career, getting married, having and bringing up children) and that Greg did not manage to fully live up to these expectations. It is, however, important to add, that those expectations that are connected to family and children

are very different in their magnitude and nature depending on whether the subject in question is a man or a woman. First, the pressure to have children is greater for women than for men (Ashburn-Nardo 2017). Second, their roles differ too. The father is expected to provide his son with material and financial support, as well as to be a masculine role model (Hodges and Park 2013: 194). However, he is expected to play a smaller role than the mother in terms of emotional support and providing care in the day-to-day situations in the home. In Greg's and Rose's case the situation is slightly different: not only because, as I have shown, Steven's family is more complex/numerous than a normative nuclear family, but even if this were not the case - if Steven would only have his biological parents - he would not have a mother, which might cause a change in what is expected of the father.

Furthermore, the mother is said to have a stronger connection with the child because a *bodily* connection (formed through pregnancy and lactation) is assumed to exist on top of the social one. Such statement, of course, assumes a definition of mother to mean *biological* mother (Park 2013: 4). In the case of Rose, it can be said that a very strong bodily connection between her and Steven does exist. It sounds paradoxical, as Gems do not have real bodies. Their bodies are only an illusion, their gemstones being their only real material part. And it is exactly the gemstone that Steven inherited from his mother. Here, "inherited" does not mean that he shared her genes, but that literally the same stone around which Rose formed her illusionary body became the base around which also Steven's half-human flesh-and-blood body exists. Sharing the very same gemstone is the explanation of the fact that Steven is not just Rose's son, but Steven is Rose.

Although Rose did not exactly die, as she continues to live in Steven, the fact is that she cannot and does not exist as a separate, living individual at the same time as Steven. Steven's feelings about his mother are explored throughout the show: he does feel a certain sadness about never knowing her ("I just wish... I knew a little more about her" - Steven in *Lion 3: Straight to Video*²⁶). However, the show avoids some common tropes about absent mothers. Two of these tropes are that of a mother who left her child (it was her decision and so she is blamed by the child for abandoning him, for not having loved/wanted him enough), or a mother who tragically died (was "taken from" the child, the universe is to be blamed for being unfair). Rose is neither. Steven does not blame her for leaving him, but at the same time, the end of her physical existence is clearly and explicitly her own conscious decision, and this is known by all the people who were close to her, including Steven. Despite being physically absent, she has never been deemed "unfit" for motherhood (Park 2013: 6) by any of the show's characters.

In this chapter I will explore the role reproduction plays in *Steven Universe*, and I will do so through an analysis of Rose's reproductive choices, as well as of Gem reproduction in

²⁶ Season 1 Episode 35 (Johnston Liu and Sugar, 2014)

general. I will demonstrate that the show manages to put into question the divides between natural and artificial, biological and social, human and non-human, queer and normative.

Kinship, as well as sexuality, is normally thought to be centered around reproduction: producing children and bringing them up (Franklin, and Ragoné 1998). In the Western society, this is often discussed as being “natural”, as opposed to the “unnatural” - i.e. either sexuality without reproduction (such as queer sexuality - this is what the idea that queer people do not have access to kinship stems from) or “unnatural” ways of reproduction (e.g. with the use of technology) that are often met with negative reactions and fear in the general public (Butler 2002: 21). In a way, the manner in which new Gems are born is comparable to human artificial reproductive technology, which is associated with new kinship as well as with queer families specifically.

Gems are inherently queer not just because they do not conform to heterosexuality or to the gender binary, as I have mentioned, but also because they do not reproduce sexually. This has been alluded to in the show (e.g. in *How Are Gems Made* which I shall discuss below), as well as confirmed by the show’s creator Rebecca Sugar (Sugar 2014). What emphasizes the Gems’ queerness even more is their feminine appearance: in the human world, a feminine body which is nonreproductive is perceived as though there is something wrong with it. Namely, it is associated with “infertility”, stigma, not fulfilling its “natural” purpose. Such attitudes often lead to different kinds of social exclusion of the childless women (Turnbull et al. 2016).

How do Gems come into being then, if not through sexual reproduction? New Gems emerge from the ground already adult. They do not experience childhood (in fact, they do not age at all) and they have no parents.

I shall write about Gem (non)reproduction in general first, and then turn to the unique case of Rose, who defied its rules by giving birth to Steven.

4.3.1 How Are Gems Made?

The process of Gem “(non)reproduction” (Jones et al 2013) is best summarized in the short titled *The Classroom Gems: How Are Gems Made?*²⁷, published on Cartoon Network’s website. The short features Amethyst explaining - as the title suggests - how Gems are made:

Okay, first, when a mommy Gem and a daddy Gem love each other very much...
Psych! Haha! There's no such thing as a mommy Gem or a daddy Gem! We're rocks,
and rocks are made, not born, ha!

²⁷ Season 2 Short (Florida 2015)

Notice that the explanation is built in a way that deliberately puts it in contrast with human reproduction. I would even say that it is mocking the human sexual reproduction by imitating the stereotypical way in which it is explained to human children (involving the conflation between sex, reproduction, love, and even heterosexuality), and subsequently subverting it. The second, related, notable aspect of Amethyst's lecture is that she explicitly identifies Gems as non-human (rocks) and not having a gender binary ("no such thing as a mommy Gem or a daddy Gem").

As Amethyst continues her clarification, the viewers find out that the Gems' non-humanity lies not just in their connection to (non-living) nature (i.e. rocks), but also to technology. Namely, Gems are made with the help of injectors - huge machines that plant Gems in the ground, from which they emerge fully grown after a kind of a "gestation" period, lasting several hundreds to several thousands years (the length of the period is not specified in the show). Injectors are composed mostly of machine-like elements (such as a drill), even though they also contain a part in the centre which bears resemblance to organic matter. In their general appearance, injectors resemble bacteriophages - viruses that inject their DNA into bacteria.

Fans (*Injector Symbolism Theory* 2017, Swaggy Thunder 2017, Williams 2016) have speculated that this could represent the fact that Gems, like viruses, are somewhere in the grey area between the living and the non-living. Also, like viruses, they reproduce by traveling from planet to planet, injecting their own "DNA" into them, and destroying them in the process. It is confirmed that the process of growing new Gems does indeed destroy the site. It can be best observed in the episode *Back to the Kindergarten*²⁸, where the Crystal Gems visit the place where Amethyst, among other Gems, has emerged from the earth. They confirm that nothing can ever grow there again (Amethyst: "I've never seen anything growing here, and I've been hanging around this joint for 5,000 years"). They try to change it by planting a field of sunflowers, but when they check on them the next day, the flowers are all dead. This destruction is caused by the growing Gems utilizing all of the natural resources, leaving the place depleted. As Amethyst explains in *How Are Gems Made?*, "we suck up all the good stuff from the ground so we can pop out all big, and strong". Pearl immediately adds:

We understand that Gem production was extremely damaging to the Earth, and we deeply regret our involvement in this process. The era of Gem production on Earth is over, and while we've left scars, please know we've done everything we can to counteract the damage that was done to here.

²⁸ Season 5 Episode 8 (Mitroff and Villeco, 2017)

I have shown that there is a symbolic connection between the Gems' (non)reproduction and the notion of threat, destruction, and death. One way of thinking about it is the virus analogy described above. However, another way is to think about it as a process of colonisation, and Pearl's statement does suggest a possibility of such interpretation. Gems are a powerful alien race with superior technology, who, wishing to expand, invade other planets, use their resources, and destroy them in the process.

In any case, whether we think of the Gems as viruses or colonizers, the theme of danger and destruction is linked to their (non)reproduction. This analogy could be taken even further by suggesting that it is the *queer* nature of their (non)reproduction that is associated with these negative characteristics. One could find a parallel to this in the real world, where queer subjects are often perceived as threats that are about to destroy traditional values such as family and national culture (Ayoub 2014).

These negative characteristics attached to Gems are, however, only true about the Homeworld Gems. The Crystal Gems, on the other hand, are presented by the show to be in opposition to them. The Crystal Gems are seen in a positive light, i.e. as (to an extent) assimilated into the Earth society - they are "good queers", while the Homeworld Gems are "bad queers", to use Park's terminology (2013: 14). The colonization of Earth took place thousands of years ago, but the Crystal Gems know better now than to continue with it. To the contrary, they repent their involvement in it (see Pearl's speech above), and that is also the reason why they rebelled against the Homeworld Gems and why they are protecting the Earth now. Furthermore, they take care of a half-human child, Steven. Out of all the Crystal Gems, Rose is the best among these good queers, because she is the leader of the rebellion against the Homeworld, and also because she not only refuses to continue to participate in the virus-like (non)reproduction like the other Crystal Gems, but even changes the whole paradigm of Gem reproduction by having Steven, sacrificing her own physical existence in the process.

Steven is the only existing exception from the Gems' (non)reproduction, the first and only half-human half-Gem. Thus, Rose is the only Gem that has ever become a mother in the biological sense (I am using the term "biological" here in the sense that distinguishes her from Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl who *could* be considered Steven's mothers if only the social and emotional ties were taken into account, as discussed in the section on Kinship).

I view Rose's choice to have a child as a great paradigm shift in Gem (non)reproduction. One way to approach it is through comparing it to an equivalent in human reproduction. Human reproduction has historically been seen as sexual - more precisely, heterosexual. Women who were not participating in reproduction have been stigmatized, whether they were voluntarily or involuntarily childless heterosexual women or queer women. It has become the goal of (at least certain strands of) feminism to remove the stigma, and many women find it empowering to resist the obligatory role of becoming a mother (Leibetseder 2017: 139). Others, on the

other hand, who wish to have children, but cannot achieve pregnancy through the normative sexual reproduction, can do so with the help of assisted reproductive technologies. In this case, however, a conscious effort on the part of the woman is required. Furthermore, sometimes there is still a certain stigma even about using ART (Layne 2006). So, both those women who choose not to have children and those who become mothers with the help of technology, are participating in an innovative and norm-breaking practice.

Rose's case followed a similar trajectory as the cases described above, except its start and end point were completely reversed. For Gems, sexual reproduction is not possible. However, Rose broke the Gem (non)reproductive norm - we could even say she broke the laws of Gem "biology" - because she wanted to have a child. Human women break a norm when they decide not to have children, while Rose broke a Gem norm by deciding to have Steven. When it comes to similarities to the emergence of ART, Rose was the first Gem who shifted Gem (non)reproduction from an non-sexual process aided by machines to a process just like traditional human reproduction. Meanwhile, humans have achieved a shift in the other direction, by reaching a stage when it is quite widely possible to procreate with the use of technology and without the need of heterosexuality.

Gem reproduction in general, as well as Rose's subversion of it, can be viewed through the lens of defamiliarization. According to Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917), defamiliarization is a literary device by which familiar phenomena are viewed from an unusual perspective, which makes them strange and new in the readers' eyes. Viewing human reproduction from the Gems' point of view exposes it as not as natural and taken for granted as it usually is. This, for me, is exactly what "queering" means - exposing the norm as a construct, rather than focusing on the minority issue as something divergent. For Gems, human reproduction is far from normal - on the contrary, it is something strange and incomprehensible for them. When Steven was born, Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl had great difficulty understanding what a baby is and how it works - for instance, in *Three Gems and a baby*, they bring baby Steven gifts that he is too young for (a razor, adult diapers, and a dictionary - because they know he needs to learn to speak), because they cannot understand that a baby is different from an adult. In *Greg the Babysitter*, Rose admits explicitly that it took her a long time to understand the difference: "You're both human. You have to admit, it's a little confusing. You're big and can talk, and he's small and can only make noises. How was I supposed to know you were the same species?".

Through the lens of defamiliarization, I read the story of Rose's motherhood as a double subversion. It subverts both kinds of reproduction - the human/"natural" as well as the Gem/"artificial". She decided to give birth to Steven, even though this is an unprecedented event for Gems. By doing this, Rose shows that reproduction can be queered, as she subverts the reproduction that was normative for her species (even though it might not seem normative to us, humans). On the more obvious level, we see her turn toward sexual/human/natural reproduction instead of the asexual/Gem/artificial. At the same time, if we keep in mind the

parallels described above between Rose's path and that of human women who decide to use ART or to not have children, we can read Rose's story as an allegorical account about human reproduction. The latter is further strengthened by the very fact that normal Gem reproduction can be viewed as an alternative to human reproduction.

So, Rose became the first Gem who gave birth to a child. Still, is it possible to say that Rose experienced motherhood, if she ceased existing in the very moment when she actually became a mother (i.e. when Steven came into being)? Rose surely IS Steven's mother but she does not get a chance to DO mothering, as the actual practice. However, in the next section I want to discuss a way in which Rose does perform mothering, even though the circumstances are harshly limiting her options.

4.3.2 Lion 3: Straight to Video

Although it might, at the first sight, seem like Rose only experienced pregnancy but not motherhood itself, in some cases the viewers can see her performing motherhood. The way she does it, however, is out of place in a temporal sense. The strongest of these moments is when Steven watches a tape Rose left for him. Thus, Rose's mothering is both temporally asynchronous²⁹, and mediated by technology (video).

In the episode *Lion 3: Straight to Video*, Steven gains access to one of Rose's secret hiding spots, where he finds several different objects connected to his mother: among Rose's sword, a T-shirt that Greg gave her, a portrait of Rose and Greg, and other objects, Steven finds a VHS tape labeled "for Steven". When he watches it, he discovers that it contains a message that Greg and (pregnant) Rose recorded for him before he was born. The culmination of the message is the following monologue by Rose:

Isn't it remarkable, Steven? This world is full of so many possibilities. Each living thing has an entirely unique experience. The sights they see, the sounds they hear. The lives they live are so complicated... and so simple. I can't wait for you to join them. Steven, we can't both exist. I'm going to become half of you. And I need you to know that every moment you love being yourself, that's me, loving you and loving being you. Because you're going to be something extraordinary. You're going to be a human being.

Steven, who has been painfully aware of his mother's absence from his life, is obviously touched by the tape's content. He feels connected to his mother through it, despite the temporal gap of more than ten years that exists between the time when Rose recorded the

²⁹ Freeman (2007) conceptualizes asynchronicity as the queer phenomenon of being out of sync with the normative time.

video and the time when Steven first watched it. They were able to form an emotional link, and thus the medium of video was able to bridge the temporal gap and reconfigure time - fold it so that those two moments, years apart, could meet. In other words, the time, in which this interaction between Rose and her son happens, is shifted, thanks to video technology.

The role of video in queering time is not surprising, as video as a medium lends itself naturally to reconfiguring time. This has been well explored by queer theorists: both Freeman (2010) and Halberstam (2005) analyse video material in their books about queer time, because video has the ability to disrupt linear time and rearrange it - through editing in the making of the video, but also through the viewer's ability to pause, fast forward, or rewatch the same material countless times. Indeed, we see Steven rewatching Rose's video in *Lion 4: Alternate Ending*³⁰ - three seasons after *Lion 3: Straight to Video*.

The relationship between mothering and technology has been explored by Park in *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood* (2013). Inspired by Donna Haraway (1991), a prominent feminist scholar of science and technology, Park talks about the use of "cyborg mothering" (2013: 165). This means that in cases when the mother and the child do not inhabit the same physical space, they can interact through sharing the same virtual space. Park also uses the term "technologies of co-presence" to refer to communication technologies (ibid.: 156), to emphasize the fact that it is not merely the ability to communicate that we gain from technology, but also the ability to form and maintain intimate relationships. She argues that all technologies of co-presence change the way we navigate space and time (ibid.: 181). In the book, she discusses mostly technologies such as phone, e-mail, or social networking. I want to expand on her ideas by adding video to them - I think that video transgresses space in the same way the other technologies do, but compared to them, it disrupts time to an even greater extent.

So far I have shown that Rose not only queers the norms of reproduction itself, but also those of motherhood, by mothering in a queer time and with the help of technology. Finally, I shall consider Rose's motivations to have a baby.

It is important to think about why Rose decided to have a child. It has been obvious throughout the show that she was fascinated with the Earth and admired human beings for their unpredictability and constant change - unlike Gems, who come into being as fully developed adults with a pre-determined purpose, humans keep changing and can become anything, their possibilities are endless. Because of this love of the Earth and humanity, she rebelled against the Homeworld and decided to protect the Earth from it. The show implies that her decision to have Steven was, too, motivated by her love of humanity, as well as her love of Greg. These reasons have been questioned though - both in show by Steven, and outside of it by fans. In *Storm in the Room*, Steven confronts an image of his mother,

³⁰ Season 4 Episode 21 (Florido and Villeco, 2017)

accusing her of having ulterior motives: “Did you just make me so you just wouldn't have to deal with your mistakes?”, referring to a number of very bad choices Rose had made. However, immediately after voicing the accusation, Steven makes peace with Rose again and the issue is settled. Another possible motivation for Rose to have a baby was suggested, for instance, by the YouTube channel Channel Frederator in their series *Cartoon Conspiracy*. In an episode titled *Is Steven Universe a Weapon Made by Rose Quartz?* (2016), they present a theory according to which Rose made Steven as a tactical decision to defeat the Homeworld. They argue, for example, that Rose’s love of humans is of an anthropological interest, and that Steven would be the perfect weapon, as he is immune to much of the Gem technology thanks to being half-human. However, they also present counter-arguments and the theory is not universally accepted. So, even though Rose’s motives to have a child were questioned briefly speculated to be something other than out of love, this questioning, at least in show, was not very prominent. All the other possible reasons (making a weapon, not wanting to deal with her problems) were portrayed in a negative light, as selfish. On the other hand, neither the “child of love” theory is confirmed explicitly in the show. Of course, the alternatives being extremely negative, this option ends up being the most acceptable.

Gems had what some might consider a superior way of reproducing (i.e. reproduction that does not require heterosexuality), and Rose was willing to give it up, because, supposedly, there is something special and unique about human reproduction and motherhood. To me, this idea can be viewed as reproducing and reinforcing discourses about the importance of biology, and against the use of technology or against the idea of heterosexuality not being a necessary part of reproduction.

Rose’s decision to have a baby was, on the other hand, truly her choice. She definitely was not forced into it by the society or by her body, as it is literally impossible for Gems to have children. In order to have Steven, she had to do something that has never been done before and give up her physical existence as the price for it. Thus, her decision had to be not just conscious, but extremely determined. This can be understood as an empowering message about the importance of each subject’s self-determination when it comes to choices concerning their body, their life, and their reproductive rights. For some humans, this might mean using ART or not giving birth at all, but for Rose, it could mean having a child despite the many obstacles.

5 Conclusions

In this thesis, I analyzed the animated series *Steven Universe* from a queer perspective, in order to explore how it queers the notion of family and to what extent its depiction of kinship, temporality and reproduction resist and reproduce normativity. Using close reading as my main method allowed me to engage with the material directly and in a detailed way, while still linking my findings to the overarching theme of queer representation and setting the analysis in the broader context of children's animation. I used queer theory as my main point of departure, and contributed to the body of knowledge in feminist cultural studies, more specifically in the area of children's entertainment, by exploring how normativity and non-normativity can be represented and negotiated in cartoons. I did so by analyzing *Steven Universe*, because it is a show that has generally been considered a positive example of queer representation on television - I believe that it deserves scholarly attention, because it can provide insights into what makes a good queer representation and subsequently perhaps serve as an inspiration for other television shows in the future. I hope that *Steven Universe* is just a beginning of a new wave of creativity in portraying non-normative families in children's animation, and that the discussion that this thesis contributes to will continue.

In my analytical chapter I have thus attempted to show how *Steven Universe* queers the notion of family. I did so in three parts, focusing on kinship, temporality, and reproduction, and showing how each of these aspects relates to different modes of normativity, including biological normativity, chrononormativity, and reproductive normativity. I shall provide a detailed overview of the findings below.

In the first section of my analytical chapter, I focused on how kinship is depicted in *Steven Universe*. Looking at it through the lens of Kath Weston's *Families We Choose*, I discovered that from the beginning, Steven's family is not a pure family of choice, but a mixture of blood family and chosen family (consisting of both Greg and the Crystal Gems), exhibiting a fluidity and flexibility rather than dichotomous thinking. Steven's love for all parts of his family, and their importance in his life, are emphasized throughout the show - not just when his biological father Greg is concerned, but also when his more distant relative Andy shows up. *Steven Universe* thus makes it clear that chosen family and blood family are equally important, combinable and not necessarily viewed as opposing.

The second remarkable quality of Steven's family is its social unintelligibility (Butler 2002), which becomes apparent when confronted with the outside world, such as Connie's parents or uncle Andy. What makes Steven's family unintelligible are several of its aspects, such as his mother not having a physical existence even though she is not truly dead; no clear nameable relationships between the family members (e.g. is Pearl Steven's mother, sister, friend, or even boss?); too many guardians (i.e. more than two), some of which are biological while

some are not, some of whom share a household while some do not. Sometimes, like in *Fusion Cuisine*, the family tries to pass for normal, but it does not work, because of its utter unintelligibility.

Even though they were unable to achieve intelligibility, they could, in both cases that I analysed, gain acceptance. Both of the analysed episodes end happily, with mutual understanding. However, as Jacobs (2015) shows, there are multiple possible narratives about queer families: there is the one of acceptance, and then there is the one of resistance and intentional remaining in the state of unintelligibility. *Steven Universe* only provides the first type of narrative, and fails to show that not finding a common ground with your biological family or with your best friend's parents or with society at large is also a reality, also a valid experience, and what is more, it could even be an empowering one.

In the section about queer temporality, I have shown, by viewing their lives in relation to chrononormativity (Freeman 2010), that both Steven and Greg inhabit a magical queer time together with the Gems. Throughout the show, they queer temporality through the ways in which they choose to relate to others and organize their daily lives. This usually happens completely casually, mostly in the form of banalities in the background of virtually every episode - except for a few concrete moments, in which the show decides to explore the themes of growing up in a more explicit manner. In these moments, the characters who otherwise live a happy queer existence, ignorant to chrononormative structures, are confronted with the idea of not being mature enough - physically, emotionally, or even economically. The conflicts created by this are resolved in different ways. While Greg realizes growing up is necessary and decides to get a job, in Steven's case the resolution is achieved, on the contrary, by Steven returning to his previous state of existence, after he is reassured that despite his doubts it is perfectly acceptable. This difference between how Greg and Steven are treated might be due to the fact that Steven is, after all, still a child. Therefore, it is acceptable for him to grow up at his own pace, because there is an underlying assumption that in the end, he will get there (it is significant that in the birthday episodes, the resolution involved Steven's body returning to its normal - *almost* right for his age - state). At Greg's age, such flexibility is not acceptable any longer. This suggests that normative ideas about which bodies are allowed to be immature and which are not, found their way into this show that otherwise manages to queer just about anything. The very fact that the portrayal of time is different in the episodes focusing on it than in the rest of the show is also telling: namely, queer ways of being seem to be acceptable if they are only implied. When, however, it comes to more explicit lessons offered by *Steven Universe* to the viewers, queerness might sometimes be too much, and more normative ideas tend to come forward.

In the final section of my analytical chapter, I have discussed Gem reproduction in general, as well as the specific case of Rose having Steven: the reasons for her decision, the significance of its execution, and the nature of her mothering. *Steven Universe* provides an interesting take on the issue of reproduction, starting from the fact that Gems do not reproduce sexually. I

have shown that their reproduction is associated with phenomena such as the reproduction of bacteriophages, colonization, or assisted reproductive technologies. I believe Gem reproduction provides an excellent point of contrast against which human reproduction can be viewed. Namely, it destabilizes the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, and defamiliarizes (Shklovsky 1917) any established ideas that the audience might have about reproduction.

Rose's specific case also fits into this defamiliarization, further emphasizing it and putting it into a more personal context. Moreover, Rose contributes to the show's exploration of reproduction, as she queers the understanding of both human and Gem reproductive norms, by going great lengths to manage to have a baby the human/natural way despite Gems not being able to reproduce biologically, even at the price of not being able to live at the same time as her son. Rose's decision to give birth to Steven can be interpreted in two ways. One possible reading is that she did all this to conform to the human/heterosexual norm: reproducing biologically so that the child has a mother and a father (notice that this makes Steven map onto intelligible kinship forms slightly more neatly - his mother is absent, but at least he does have biological parents). However, a more optimistic interpretation could be that Rose simply wanted to have a child, and managed to fulfill her wish despite what her (i.e. Gem) culture and biology dictated.

Moreover, this final section revealed further connections between reproduction and both kinship and temporality, through Rose's mothering. She is physically an absent mother (Park 2013: 16), which contributes to the unintelligibility of Steven's kinship as a whole (as discussed in the section on Kinship), but despite not existing physically at the same time as Steven, she manages to perform (cyber)motherhood, in a temporally asynchronous way (Freeman 2007).

What does *Steven Universe's* depiction of kinship, temporality and reproduction tell us about its take on the queer family then? Steven's kinship structure, as a mixture of biological and chosen elements, is unintelligible to the rest of the society, but it is accepted. However, a great importance is attributed to acceptance, and no other alternative is offered. The temporality of the show is mostly queer, but not at all times, as Greg had to, at least partially, accept the inevitability of normative time and "grow up". To Steven, who is after all still a child, such strict rules do not apply yet. Gem reproduction - not biological or sexual, but mediated by machines - queers the human ideas about reproduction. Rose, however, chooses to reproduce as a human in an ambiguous act which can both transgress and conform to reproductive norms - Gem and human ones respectively.

If I were to define queer as transgressing hegemonic norms, *Steven Universe* would fall short in its queerness, and represent a to an extent assimilationist perspective: Steven's family found a common ground with those conservative people who were initially reluctant to accept them; Greg decided to get a job because he understood that as a responsible member of the

society, he cannot stay childish forever; and Rose gave birth to Steven because she recognized that biological motherhood is superior to any other form of reproduction. But do these moments - which *can*, but do not have to be - interpreted as normative really mean that *Steven Universe* is somehow not “queer enough”, not “as queer” as I thought it would be? That would mean that I am indeed measuring it against some new normativity, a queer normativity (LaGrace Volcano 2017), that requires every single act to be radical and in opposition to the hegemonic norm. That would mean that there is a clear, strict criterion of what queer means. I do not see it that way. Actions can be interpreted in multiple ways and seemingly normative ones do not somehow cancel out the rest of the show, they do not erase its queerness. Yes, *Steven Universe* is sometimes ambiguous in whether it attempts to appeal to assimilationist sensitivities. But the fact that Greg has a job does not suddenly make him normative and Rose giving birth to Steven does not mean she is any less queer than the other Gems. Rather, the characters on the show, just like real people, are each a complicated mixture of different elements, relating to various norms in complex and tricky ways which can in different context and positions end up both disrupting and reproducing them. I believe that what *Steven Universe* tries to do is not labeling characters, actions or families, not putting them into categories, but allowing them to be always fluid and always complicated, not just one thing or the other. And that is what makes it queer.

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