

# Queer Forms

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I was a late addition to this roundtable, so while my abstract had less to do with queerness in a global context, I think there is a lot of overlap in my argument about the significance of the queerness of the Cartoon Network TV series *Steven Universe* within the world of queer television.

I'd like to briefly discuss the transformations that take place on *Steven Universe*, in which alien characters are able to merge their bodies into new queer entities called **fusions**. I think this animated series, ostensibly intended for children, is a prime example of an American TV series that is explicitly devoted to overcoming the supposed limitations of American televisual queerness.

Fusions function as physical manifestations of a collective existence, assertions of fluidity through the transmogrified body, which has only become more familiar for those of us who spend time within networked communities. Fusion shows me that there is no divergence between the self and the collective, there is only our experience of simultaneity. This is a political project precisely because it runs counter to (hetero)normative expectations of selfhood and identity, and suggests a powerful place for queer collectivity that is intimately relational. In other words, through this concept of fusion—which I admit to be placing a lot of theoretical weight on—this queer children's series is constructing a space that is making a stark claim for a communal queer identity based in the possibility of change.

This plays out in multiple ways. Aesthetically and visually, the series is animated in a buoyant and loose manner, inspired by Japanese anime and classic video game design, and specifically intended to maintain the flexibility and inconsistency of its characters. Without putting too fine of a point on it, the fluidity of the cartoon as a medium is the perfect territory for exploring the fluidity of identity, sexuality, and gender. Fusion treats anyone, alien and human alike, as intrinsically transformable with the potential for transformation. The show's narrative, of course, also reflects its queer politics, via queer relationships and episodes centred on topics like chosen families. Many of its writers and animators, including creator Rebecca Sugar, identify as queer and have spoken about the intuitive nature of the show's storytelling as a result. Fusion, which is further coded as queer via its reputation as an abomination back on the alien homeworld, is an assertion that genderqueer identities can thrive within the fantastical cartoon world of the show, and that there is a wide range of queer relationships depicted in all their complexity.

There's also something very interesting about the show's fandom, which is very vocal, passionate, and occasionally fraught with infighting, harassment, and abuse. I can talk about this more later if people are interested, but suffice it to say that the fluidity of our

digital selves has served this show's fandom well, with parallel preoccupations of playing with identity and defining one's queer selfhood in relation to a community.

What *Steven Universe* proves is that we should trust in the queer politics of animation, American television, and children's media—or, at least, that there is room for a series like this within that landscape, a series that I would argue is moving the needle forward in terms of televisual queerness both at home and globally. I know we're not really supposed to quote people, but Alex Doty wrote that "the more the queerness in and of mass culture is explored, the more the notion that what is 'mass' or 'popular' is therefore 'straight' will become a highly questionable given," and I think the popularity of this show among both children and adults alike is a strong testament to that prediction. *Steven Universe*'s power is not exactly that the audience can assume everyone's queerness, but the inherent *potentiality* and *fluidity* on display.

To conclude, *Steven Universe* radically articulates a space for queer futurity and utopia in a political and counterhegemonic project to disassemble the dominance of heteronormativity and uphold the primacy of transformational change. Queer youth in particular have found something deeply bewitching about this, which has led to the development of a tremendously animated and affective fandom. I think it's important to remember, as we talk about all of the diversity of queer experiences, that we owe it to them to take them seriously, to better understand who they are becoming and how that becoming is being manifested and performed in relation to the queer media they're consuming.