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Representative Biodiversity: The Ecosystem of Cartoon Network

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of the Arts Film Studies

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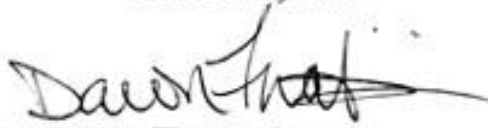
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Representative Biodiversity: The Ecosystem of Cartoon Network

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ABSTRACT

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by Carl Suby

As a capitalist organism the television program, as explained by Todd Gitlin, uses its slant to sell itself to advertisers with similar leanings on contemporary social issues to maintain its flow of revenue. However, this concept of slant does not account for the broader network, which, like the singular program, cultivates a catalog of programming into a singular slanted message becoming an ecosystem of shows relying on each other to maintain viewership. The successful televised ecosystem will then be home to programs who enjoy long runs and display an easily recognized shared slant. As an example of the televised ecosystem, this thesis explores seven animated programs from Cartoon Network including *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack*, *Regular Show*, *Adventure Time*, *The Amazing World of Gumball*, *Steven Universe*, *We Bare Bears*, and *Craig of the Creek*. Recognizing the programs ranging in release from 2008 to 2018, Cartoon Network's ecosystem is highlighted for its evolving display of progressive representations of race and gender and presenting them to a child audience.

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Introduction

Todd Gitlin's concept of slant, in which a network uses a show to sell advertising space to products that will be of a similar socio-political leaning, positions the program as a catalyst to create an ecosystem around itself (261-265). Seeking capital, the network will sell advertising space to products they believe relate to a given program's slant and cultivate continued viewership of the channel within Gitlin's conception. Considering this relationship between a program and its advertisements, it functions similarly to an ecosystem, as the two components interact with each other to ensure a program is able to maintain the viewers required to remain on the air and that the products reach their buying market. The term ecosystem, used here to define an interconnected network of capitalist business practices, echoes its biological underpinning, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as, "A biological system composed of all the organisms found in a particular physical environment, interacting with it and with each other" ("ecosystem, n"). With this importance placed on interconnectedness, the biological ecosystem sees its organisms relying on one another to survive as a television program relies on advertisers to remain on the air. However, Gitlin's definition of slant and the ecosystem it cultivates is focused only on the single program.

Shifting this conceptualization to the broader sense of an entire network, or portion of one, the programs themselves adopt this role, becoming an ecosystem in which, the shows rely on one another to maintain viewership and put forth a singular slanted message. As the programs rely on each other to present a singular slanted message and maintain revenue, the ecosystem is inseparable from the concept. Where Gitlin's conception of the use of slant relies on traditional broadcast television with

advertisers being the bulk of a network's income, expanding to the ecosystem allows for discussion of the topic in the traditional mode of television viewing as well as streaming services moving towards an erasure of commercials (263-265). In that, where a traditional network relies on advertisers to maintain capital, as Gitlin has stated when writing before the rise of online streaming services, many streaming platforms are commercial free as a standard (or a premium upgrade with examples such as Hulu) creating a stronger reliance on their catalog of programming maintaining a slant to retain their subscriber base. Considering a network or streaming platform as ecosystem, the programs exhibited rely on the others to maintain viewership to ensure the survival of themselves as individuals, and in doing so, allow the network or streaming platform to thrive. Thriving as a network, the success of an ecosystem is seen through its ability to cultivate programs who enjoy extended runs, as the number of seasons they receive is linked to their success, as Gitlin has outlined, and it should have an easily recognizable slant as the network or streaming service's programming will align directly with it.

In this thesis I will negotiate the animated ecosystem of Cartoon Network with its liberal slant and emphasis on representing and re-representing various cultural identity politics and how they are intersectional throughout its trajectory of programming. As an ecosystem with a recognizable trajectory, I am also placing an emphasis on Cartoon Network's industrial practice of internal promotion (five of the seven programs being discussed remain within a lineage of creatorship) leading to an evolution towards their current means to give visibility to cultural groups who typically wouldn't be seen on children's television. As an ecosystem successful in presenting its slant, Cartoon Network has been singled out for its ability to maintain programs, cultivating multiple programs

that have received runs of five or more seasons, each contributing to the established and easily recognizable slant. The slant of this ecosystem, while remaining throughout its trajectory, evolves from emphasizing the performativity of gendered identities to presentations of gender egalitarian cultures and the difference of experience between racial and cultural groups. *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* (Creator: Thurop Van Orman 2008-2010, 3 Seasons) begins this trajectory followed, in order, by *Regular Show* (Creator: J.G. Quintel 2009-2017, 8 Seasons), and *Adventure Time* (Creator: Pendleton Ward 2010-2018, 10 Seasons), *The Amazing World of Gumball* (Creator: Ben Bocquelet 2011-, 6 Seasons (ongoing)), *Steven Universe* (Creator: Rebecca Sugar 2013-, 5 Seasons (ongoing)), *We Bare Bears* (Creator: Daniel Chong 2015-, 4 Seasons (ongoing)), and *Craig of the Creek* (Creators: Matt Burnett and Ben Levin 2018-, 2 Seasons (ongoing)). Each of these programs take an active approach in the representations of topics, such as gender and race, and either subverts or realistically portrays these cultural identity politics in a manner for a child audience to negotiate. As each program takes an active approach in representation an overlapping discourse of identity politics emerges. With this, their depictions of identity become intersectional as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who, writing on the experience of black women, articulates the discrimination a black woman faces as directed at her for both her sex as well as her race thus being intersectional (“Demarginalizing the Intersection”). The Cartoon Network ecosystem, presenting a diverse cast of characters is able to represent the intersectionality of identity as they, through the use of varying characters (both human and nonhuman), establish and maintain cultural identities that include race, gender, and age most consistently throughout the programming. If we consider these

programs as part of an ecosystem, the identity politics of that ecosystem are bolstered via the interactions of the individual programs.

Presenting an evolving progressive slant that often emphasizes gender, Judith Butler's work on gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*) is key in understanding the construction of gendered traits and how they function to identify characters to gender groups. In that, the characters in the Cartoon Network ecosystem are animated figures and through their performance either conform or subvert all identity traits as they have been constructed through their contemporary cultures. Linked to their contemporary cultures and interacting with each other throughout their trajectory, the push towards progressive representation within the ecosystem is further understood through the production/reproduction model of television from Stuart Hall ("Encoding/Decoding"). Hall further creates a discourse of the instilling of constructed identity traits through this model of reproduction which aids in understanding how Cartoon Network represents issues of identity to its child audience and how it subverts the typical representations of cultural identities found within children's television. Considering Cartoon Network to be subverting what is typical representation in children's television, I am considering "typical" children's media as Dafna Lemish, writing on gender representations in the medium, states, "promote[s] restrictive ideologies of femininity and masculinity...and says little about the multifaceted aspects of girls' and boys' lives, capabilities, and potential contributions to society" (2). With Hall's discourse of television as a reproductive model, Jason Mittell's concept of narratively complex semi-serial programs presents its own form of reproduction ("Narrative Complexity"). Mittell's concept finds that certain programs have narratively complex modes of storytelling to allow for more

development of characters as its episodes are serialized to allow them to gain knowledge throughout the series run, while the individual episodes are able to stand alone as well. This narratively complex structure allows for a greater exploration of a program's contemporary social issues is linked to both the production/reproduction model and the ecosystem as each function to maintain viewership.

Within the discourse of children's television, Cartoon Network can be considered within, what Amy Holdsworth and Karen Lury define as "television's 'duty of care' [which] is arguably heightened in its recognition of, and (anxious) responsibility for, the child audience" (185-186) with specific emphasis placed on the corporate forces that influence the network as well as its depictions of gender. As children's television, Cartoon Network is placed in dialogue with its peer networks of Nickelodeon and Disney Channel. Within this discourse, other children's television networks, like Nickelodeon, and the advertisers that support them have been criticized for developing anti-adult biases within their ecosystems while presenting characters who are overtly gendered with the purpose of exploiting the purchasing power of the audience (Schor 51-58). Noting the importance of portraying gender to children in a manner which is unrestrictive and egalitarian in its presentation, Lemish has stated, "Equality [of gender] is advanced when boys and girls are treated equally as well as offered equal roles and opportunities on television, all the while recognizing and respecting their differences" (125). With this, *Adventure Time* is the only program of those I am considering which has received prior academic attention, in which it was praised for its depictions of gender equality (Jane). Having received recognition of the progressive representation on *Adventure Time*, within the ecosystem the program is interconnected with the other programs, bolstering the slant

through the multiplicity of representations, creating a need for consideration of the broader Cartoon Network ecosystem.

Cartoon Network, consisting entirely of animated programs, makes use of characters who are aliens, anthropomorphized animals, and anthropomorphized objects alongside or in absence of human characters to code depictions of race throughout its ecosystem. Within the broader context of animation studies, anthropomorphic characters have been considered by Nicholas Sammond for their perpetuation of racist stereotypes in the early animated shorts of the 1920s and 1930s with particular emphasis on the characters like Mickey Mouse as a minstrel figure (217-234). Paul Wells further emphasizes the racist depiction seen in early animation; however, he begins to explore more contemporary animated animals (*The Animated Bestiary*). In his discussion of contemporary animated animals however, Wells only provides discussion of those who strictly retain their animality, in that, while they maintain some human traits, like speech, they are still heavily defined by their animal identity (175-202). With this restriction, as well as the exclusive focus on animal characters, the anthropomorphic characters in the Cartoon Network ecosystem, who are divorced from animality as a defining identity, don't receive discussion. Beyond discussions of race in animation, Kevin Sandler has stated, "anthropomorphism reiterates the schema of gender" (159), in that where previous scholars have noted the practice as a perpetuating force of racism, through the projection of gender onto animals, it reinforces gendered traits. Similarly, discussion of Disney animators using live actors as reference for their animation has been read as imbuing characters with the same gendered performance as the actors (Honesty Roe). Within animation studies the identity politics acted out by the animated characters are both a

visual display in the character's model as well as a performance created by animators, which in previous scholarship is remarked as reinforcing the racial stereotypes and gendered traits of the contemporary cultures, however, the Cartoon Ecosystem pushes against this.

For Ages One to One Hundred: Cartoon Network's Age-Free Slant

Amongst its competing children's television networks, Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, Cartoon Network has typically received attention for bringing televised animation out of the confines of specific time slots and presenting it to a wider audience (Mittell 2004, 79-93). Mittell, writing about the network in 2004, states, "Cartoon Network defines itself as *the* location for 24-hour cartoons," (2004, 90) praising its success in sustaining itself exclusively on animated content, however he delivers this praise more for the network's airing of licensed content over their (at the time) limited original programming (90). Dafna Lemish, and Juliet B. Schor, discussing Cartoon Network as children's television, place the network within a discourse against Nickelodeon and Disney Channel who both maintain live action programming alongside their animated content (117-123, 51-58). Programming animated content on a twenty four hour schedule exemplifies a basic interaction between the programs of Cartoon Network's ecosystem to maintain viewership and survive, albeit on a surface level that does not account for its slant. In that, the programs being exclusively animated, rather than being interspersed with live action content may be enough to persuade some viewers to remain tuned into Cartoon Network, maintaining a flow of advertiser revenue. Maintaining viewership of the network, the ecosystem should be thought of in the

reproductive mode of television that Hall states is “a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction” (2006, 128). With the Cartoon Network ecosystem, that which is produced then reproduced within the framework is, on the surface, the animated programs which maintain its audience and allow the network to thrive. Cartoon Network, having received the praise for the programming it has previously exhibited it will seek to reproduce content within the same slant.

While Cartoon Network’s twenty-four hour animated programming schedule is enough to differentiate it from its children’s television peers, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, a greater differentiation comes between the networks’ underlying manifestos. Of the three networks, Disney Channel and Nickelodeon have opposite manifestos while Cartoon Network becomes an outlier seeking to break the definition of a children’s network. Nickelodeon “tries to take the child’s perspective [positioning] itself as kids’ best friend, on their side in an often-hostile environment [leading to] an antiauthoritarian us-versus-them sensibility,” which has led to criticism of the network as potentially detrimental to a child’s relationship with the adults who surround them (Schor 52). Articulating these criticisms, Schor states that the ecosystem of Nickelodeon, with its anti-adult programming and the commercials that air alongside it teach “the lesson to kids...that it’s the product, not your parent, who’s really on your side” (55). Opposite Nickelodeon’s anti-adult slant is Disney Channel whose former senior vice president for programming, Rich Ross, has stated, “[Disney Channel] provide[s] situations where kids and families see themselves in a positive way” (Sterngold). Creating a positive view of family life is in direct opposition to the slant of anti-adultism held by Nickelodeon and

sets Disney Channel as a network which should lead to a better representation of adults as more than the often grotesque oppressors seen on the former. Despite Cartoon Network's being set against Disney Channel and Nickelodeon in the discourse of narrative of children's television, it has largely stood outside the debate of how it treats its audience.

Avoiding this discourse of anti-adult versus pro-family children's programming, Cartoon Network's manifesto is that "the channel does not specifically target its programming towards adults or children" (Mittell 2004: 84). Quoted by Mittell, Cartoon Network's former Senior Vice President of Original Animation, Linda Simensky, "describes the channel's target audience as a 'taste culture' or 'psychographic' consisting simply of 'people who like cartoon,' regardless of age" (2004: 84). While Simensky states the network is for cartoon lovers, Cartoon Network's demographics suggest that majority of its audience is still adolescent ("45% of the audience is aged 2-11, 15% are teenagers" (Mittell 2004: 84)), and the existence of its aptly named late night segment, Adult Swim, further promotes the former as safe for and marketed towards children. Looking directly at Cartoon Network, its manifesto of creating cartoons for animation lovers over an exclusively child audience can account for some of its slant towards progressive representation, with *Adventure Time* in particular having received previous academic attention for its progressive depictions of gender (Jane). Having received attention for its socially progressive mode of programming, Cartoon Network's ecosystem presents topics typically not given attention in children's media in a manner which is easily understandable for its audience.

Despite Cartoon Network's stance that it is for lovers of animation rather than exclusively children, the research by Davies et al. creates a narrative that puts forth the

idea that television that appeals to children generally relies on physical comedy or action and does not appeal to adults due to its crude nature. Davies et al. finds that for children “one of the characteristics that [is] seen to make television boring [is] *talking*,” and they are interested instead in the physicality of the characters on screen (19). Perceiving children to be broadly more interested in physical activities on television rather than the complex narratives echoes Schor, who states that even products marketed towards children set a schism between them and adults with the former seen enjoying gross out novelty treats for their “shock” or “cool” value (Schor 58-65). Davies et al. states, “children...need to see the world in simple binary terms before they can learn to understand its full complexity,” however, earlier in their article they find children enjoying the shows which the authors deem too “adult” and complex for them (21, 6). Citing the children who were studied for the article enjoying those programs which were not meant for them suggests Cartoon Network’s ecosystem of shows which are not specifically aimed at children aides in their reaching and informing this audience.

Within the Cartoon Network ecosystem, creating their programs for “cartoon lovers” over children specifically, Emma A. Jane has cited Pendleton Ward, the creator of *Adventure Time*, stating that his creative process concerns making the program entertaining for himself first while still being a children’s show (234). With this insight to the creative process, Cartoon Network reinforces “research revealing a longstanding tendency for children to prefer watching programs that are not specifically made for them” (Jane 234). *Adventure Time*, which concerns Finn the Human and his magical adoptive brother Jake the Dog traversing the post-apocalyptic Land of Ooo, takes part in the story telling mode of narrative complexity as outlined by Mittell allowing its

characters to gain social knowledge. Interrogating the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* (Creator: Matt Groening, 1989-), Mittell relates the program to live-action sitcoms like *Seinfeld* (Creators: Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, 1989-1998), in that it “generally embraces an excessive and even parodic take on episodic form, rejecting continuity between episodes by returning to an everlasting present equilibrium state of Bart in fourth grade and general dysfunctional family stasis [which] offers ambiguous expectations over which transformations are ‘reset’ after each episode” (2006, 34). Unlike *The Simpsons*, the programs in Cartoon Network’s ecosystem, beyond *Adventure Time*, do not reset after every episode allowing their characters to maintain the knowledge they have gained from an episode and better depict social issues as a result furthering the network’s slant. This use of a stronger episodic format shifts Cartoon Network’s programming away from the reset format of animation towards what Mittell defines as narratively complex television. In that, the narratively complex program typically “feature[s] some episodic plotlines alongside multi-episode arcs and ongoing relationship dramas [however] individual episodes have a distinctive identity as more than just one step in a long narrative journey” (2006, 32). This eschewing of the reset format for that of narrative complexity gives the programs in Cartoon Network’s ecosystem an increased ability to represent cultural identity politics. In that, allowing characters to develop throughout the course of a program, rather than remaining largely stagnant as they do in shows like *The Simpsons*, they are able to better represent cultural identity politics as they are granted the time to be explored and the characters can maintain the social intelligence they gain between episodes.

While the programs within the Cartoon Network ecosystem use narrative complexity to their advantage to more acutely represent cultural identity politics and further the network's slant, this works in conjunction with their most prominent feature, being animated. Lacking a physical set and actors, animation relies solely on representation, whether dealing directly with a real environment, or imbuing an imagined character with performance (Wood 27-46, Honess Roe, 69-79). Imbuing an imagined character with performance Annabelle Honess Roe recalls "animators at Disney us[ing] actor[s] as a frame-by-frame reference for how an animated character moved," breathing life into their fanciful characters (71). Using the real to create an imagined character, while creating a believable image for an audience, leads to the character becoming a representative model. In that, an animated character who appears as an African American man, for example, is imbued with the cultural identity politics which the hegemonic gaze places upon him, whereas a character who is a talking book is coded with its identity by the other characters' reactions to it. Seen within the ecosystem of Cartoon Network, the normalcy of animate candy people in *Adventure Time*, for example, are given this normalized identity by the other non-candy characters treating them with equality.

This choice to animate a character as a human or an anthropomorphic proxy character enters into a discourse of direct and indirect representation, with the human character being direct, and indirect being a proxy creature like a rabbit. Similar to the manner in which an animated character's performance is a representation of a real one, animation makes use of characters who stand in as proxies for real people having cultural identity politics grafted onto them to more abstractly comment on society. This practice of using proxies has been maintained throughout the history of animation, as Sammond

has stated, with “commercial Animation at the beginning of the twentieth century [for example] turn[ing] to the minstrel stage to produce...characters such as Felix, Krazy and Mickey” imbuing these characters with the same identity politics as the minstrels that came before them (218). With this reading of Mickey and Felix as minstrel characters they become proxies for blackface characters, carry the same racial identity, and perform the same racist caricature.

The proxies at play in the current catalog of Cartoon Network however, while continuing the tradition of indirect representation, put forth an opposite message to what was outlined in early twentieth century animation. Where these early twentieth century animated figures reinforce racist stereotypes, the characters of Cartoon Network seek to perform cultural politics such as race, gender, or sexuality and how they act intersectionally in a progressive way. With this, the catalog of programming on Cartoon Network does not exclusively use direct or indirect representation. *Craig of the Creek*, for example, is direct as it uses exclusively human characters and realistic performances throughout its series, whereas *The Amazing World of Gumball* is indirect with no human characters and a world which ignores the laws of physics. *Adventure Time*, *Regular Show*, *Flapjack*, *Steven Universe*, and *We Bare Bears* all maintain a hybridized sort of representation with proxy characters and human characters living amongst each other. Considering these seven programs as presenting direct and indirect representations of their society at large Gitlin’s concept of slant becomes directly concerned in the ecosystem producing a social ideology. Like the animation of the early twentieth century reproducing images of the minstrel Gitlin notes, “Commercial culture does not *manufacture* ideology; it *relays* and *reproduces* and *processes* and *packages* and *focuses*

ideology...from social elites and...active social groups and movements” (1979, 253). In that, the manner in which an animated character represents the cultural identity they embody is derived of the contemporary cultural consciousness from which the originate.

Getting Animated: Imbuing Animated Figures With Identity

An example of performing cultural politics, both in the real and animated world, is gender, in which an individual displays gendered traits within their culture as an expression of the gender or genders to which they identify. As a display of signs previously understood within a culture, the performance of gendered traits functions to conform to or subvert a hegemonic definition of gender. Discussing gender performativity Butler states, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity,” in that gender identity is performed to conform to the culture in which an individual is embedded (186). While cultural identity politics like gender are expressed as they have been inscribed on the body however, this is not to say that they are related to sex or given by nature. Examining how the representation of identity traits, like gender, may appear given by nature Hall states, “Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed...but to be ‘naturally’ given” (2006: 132). The repetition of codes that construct gender are so often repeated by a culture that they appear to be natural when they are not and function instead to conform to a preexisting gender identity. This “naturalization” of gender by a hegemonic

culture early in life can be seen in the class room studies of Davies et al., in which she notes “a group of girls cover[ing] their ears every time football [is] mentioned...self-consciously constructing their own [feminine identity] by rejecting the [masculine] world of football” (12). Noting these young girls seeking to define themselves as feminine against what is perceived as a masculine activity demonstrates the inscription of gendered traits. Believing the girls to have learned and mimicked this gendering from television bolsters the argument of the importance of doing away with the gender binary stereotypes so often presented in children’s television and is echoed by authors like Lemish and Jane.

Considering the actions of this group of girls, they are enacting a constructed code which “demonstrate[s] the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity...between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings” (Hall 2006, 132). In that, the group of girls’ reactions against football both places it outside the binary of their gender and cements its place within a masculine gender binary whilst bolstering their constructed feminine identity. Furthering this acting out of identity traits, gender is only recognized when it is enacted in conformity with the recognized binaries of its culture (Butler 22). Within the context of the child audience, and the children studied by Davies et al., they are seen being acutely affected by the desire to fit into identities which Lemish cites as often being perpetuated by children’s television (Lemish 1-7). With Lemish’s criticism of the portrayals of gender typical to children’s television she identifies a need for programs which display gender in an egalitarian manner. The animated programs at home in the Cartoon Network ecosystem, each with their fabricated cultures, are free to create their own gender traits.

While it isn't stated within Cartoon Network's own manifesto, the statement by Nickelodeon's Donna Sabino, "It's tough to be a kid in an adult world," (Schor 52) sets a binary between children and adults. Children, unlike adults, are more subjected to restricted viewing, with certain media, like Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Disney Channel, being *for* them while networks like HBO and Cartoon Network's own adult segment, Adult Swim, are not. This binary between the adult world and the child's world deems the former a hegemonic power, which in the case of Nickelodeon leads to an anti-adult slant. However, Cartoon Network, despite Adult Swim, does not take this approach in its regular programming, placing the network outside Nickelodeon and Disney Channel's concept of children's television. To reiterate, Cartoon Network states they are for people who like cartoons, despite age, gender, or race, whereas Nickelodeon and Disney Channel are stated as children's television, and other animation, such as *The Simpsons*, or *Rick and Morty* (Creators: Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon, 2013-), are programed or otherwise set outside of a child's reach. Cartoon Network's approach to programing, while still being children's television, functions as a microcosm of narrative complexity, educating its audience on topics like gender, sexuality, race and how they are intersectional through their serialized storytelling and interaction between programs in the ecosystem.

Appealing to their child audience, most of the programs in the Cartoon Network ecosystem have children as their central characters, with the exceptions of *Regular Show*, whose main characters are Mordecai and Rigby who are both 23 year old employees at a public park, and *We Bare Bears*, which follows a trio of young adult brother bears living outside of San Francisco. Existing in worlds which all maintain age as an identity politic,

the children and young adults who star in the programs, as animated figures with identities constructed upon them, enact age as a constructed identity trait similar to gender. Similar to gender performance as outlined by Butler, the proxy animated character performs all cultural identity politics since they are given all identity politics and traits through their performance and appearance as created by their animators. In that, if a character identifies as a lesbian African American woman, it is due to a conscious choice by the animators to both give the character the identity and instill them with the politics which are associated with said identity. However, while a character is performing identity politics, identity traits, such as race, which are fixed in the real world, remain fixed within the confines of the animated program (or so is the case for one seeking to create an accurate portrayal of those traits which are fixed, and is the case for the programs being interrogated in this thesis). Emphasizing the performativity of gender Butler notes “the performance of drag [as] play[ing] upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed,” and notes that the performance “reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (187). Applying this to the animated character, its performance of any identity politics is the imitation of how it functions in the real world.

As imitations, the genders, races, and ages depicted in animation echo how these cultural politics are acted out within the physical world. Commenting directly on the gendering of anthropomorphic characters in animation, Kevin Sandler states, “by repeating...imitation, the animators create the illusion of a talking gendered animal while reproducing the illusion of gender itself. Anthropomorphism reiterates the schema of gender” (159). As an imitation of gender, Sandler suggests that the anthropomorphic

character can only receive a gender which is preexistent within the physical world, in that, presentations of gender non-binary characters in *Adventure Time* (of which there are many) can only occur due to an increased knowledge of the gender in the real world. Presenting a greater quotient of characters who often eschew traditional gendered traits, as they do in the Cartoon Network ecosystem, demonstrates that, as Paul Wells states, “animators do not merely imitate but interpret,” (67) and work through the performance of gender to create a believable characterization. Beyond this, Wells states that, as with this gendering of animal characters and instilling them with other identity politics, it “points up issues of...’social embedding,’ exposing notions of consensus,” (175) such as the cultural construction of gender. Exposing notions of consensus, animation’s history of caricature is directly concerned, as proxy characters, not being directly human, are able to be inscribed with identity traits at the will of the animator. The proxy character is not bound by the same standard of beauty as the human character, allowing it to more easily break free of presentations like the “hyper-attractive, hyper-sexual, thin, and/or... clichés such as ‘the helpless blonde or the cheeky red-head’” (Jane 231) which children’s animation has been previously criticized for. However, Cartoon Network’s ecosystem does not include exclusively programs that are all proxy characters as most of the programs are a hybrid of human and proxy characters, with *Craig of the Creek* being the only program with exclusively human characters. With varying ratios of human and proxy characters, the interaction between the programs in the Cartoon Network ecosystem further the network’s slant towards progressive representation and the intersectionality of cultural identity politics.

Maintaining an ecosystem with varying usage of proxy characters, the Cartoon Network ecosystem is able to temper what politics and to what degree each program interacts with them. While all of the programs do deal with similar issues of cultural politics, their representational modes are linked to their animation styles. For example, *Craig of the Creek* and *We Bare Bears*, with the first having an exclusively human cast which is racially diverse, and the second creating a dichotomy between the human society and the brother bears, use their form to comment more on issues of racism, over *Adventure Time*, which maintains an extremely diverse cast of proxy characters, engages with issues of gender and sexuality more readily. This is not to suggest that *Adventure Time* doesn't tackle issues of race however, and that *Craig of the Creek* and *We Bare Bears* don't comment on representations of gender and sexuality, but only that through their varying use of proxy and human characters between programs certain issues come to the foreground more readily. Creating this broader understanding of cultural identity politics, the ecosystem, as a capitalist organism, maintains its slant to receive the viewership that sustains it while furthering its message. The varying proxy characters on the programs determining their levels of depiction of certain issues of cultural identity politics over others exemplifies the ecosystem's ability to create a broader understanding of cultural identity politics and how they act intersectionally for its audience through its multiplicity of representations.

Beards, Birds, and Bubblegum: Establishing and Eschewing Norms

The eldest program, being explored within the evolving ecosystem of Cartoon Network, *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack*, which ran from 2008 to 2010 and

received three seasons, is acutely concerned with the performance of cultural identity politics among its cast of characters. *Flapjack* follows its titular character, a young white orphan boy, and his caretakers, Bubbie, a female sperm whale, and a washed up sea captain, K'nuckles, on adventures at the docks of Stormalong Harbor. Exemplifying the program's interest with performativity of gender, the episode entitled "Beard Buddies," (2008 S1:E 18) follows Flapjack attempting to help K'nuckles win a beard growing contest to exemplify the latter's prowess as an adventurer. Linking the possession of a beard to one's prowess as an adventurer, *Flapjack* restricts adventuring to a masculine gendered binary, and the character models of the other adventurers further this gendering, as they are often crude, overly muscular, and covered in tattoos. Through this gendering, the adventurers who inhabit Stormalong are similar to the heroes in programs that target young boys who are "the embodiment of the "perfect" traditional man: most heroes are strong, brave, muscular, always on the lookout to defend the weak, undefeatable, active in the outdoors, full of adventure, and are adorned by females" (Lemish 16). While their appearance alone doesn't suggest the adventurers in *Flapjack* are "perfect" traditional men however, Flapjack's admiration towards them suggests otherwise, and perpetuates their overt masculinity and the gendering of adventuring.

While "Beard Buddies" seems to present the bearded people, who are competing in the bearding contest to be physically men, the final moments of the episode reveal everyone in attendance, with the exception of Flapjack and K'nuckles, to be women. With this reveal, the performance of the women in drag acting out a masculine identity emphasize Butler's statement that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency" (187). In that, the bearded

women, speak in low voices, wear traditionally masculine clothes, and act aggressively, which is overturned when they are revealed to be women, as they all quickly adorn themselves with traditionally feminine clothing and calmly leave Stormalong Harbor. With this subversion, as well as many other costume gags throughout the series that act in a similar manner (characters who appear scrawny before removing their clothing to reveal they're actually thrice their size, men mistaken for women, and vice-versa on both accounts), a mobility of gendered performance is emphasized in *Flapjack*. However, the characters who are statically gendered remain strictly within the gender binaries of the program emphasizing the typical presentation of male and female characters in children's television purposed by Lemish.

The most notable female character in the program, Bubbie, Flapjack's adoptive mother, is defined exclusively on this binary, being passive to Flapjack and K'nuckles while offering them mothering care. Aside from Bubbie, Stormalong has few reoccurring women, and even fewer who receive dialogue, with another female character who receives a significant amount of attention being the inanimate Candy Wife. Candy Wife is the wife of the local bar's purveyor, who created her entirely out of candy for the sole purpose of being married, and receiving no further name, she is an embodiment of the male culture of Stormalong. While *Flapjack* has emphasized the mobility of gendered politics through performance of other characters, Candy Wife aligns with Lemish's assertion of traditional "women [characters in children's television] associated with "being" in the private sphere and are characterized, generally, as passive, emotional, caregiving, childish, sexy, subordinate to males, and of a lower social status" (2010: 2). In that, Candy Wife, essentially a mannequin, remains within the confines of her

“husband’s” bar, existing only for his pleasure and never interacting with male characters outside of the bartender, while Bubbie is defined by her role as a caregiver to Flapjack and K’nuckles. Aside from Bubbie and Candy Wife, the gender binary in *Flapjack* is further enforced, as the background female characters, opposite the overtly masculine adventurers, are often dressed as southern belles or flappers seeking the attention of the male characters in Stormalong. *Flapjack*, as the first program being considered in this trajectory, while emphasizing the performance of gender traits, establishes a distinct binary between genders like those criticized by Lemish.

Evolving towards gender egalitarianism, the next program within the trajectory of the Cartoon Network ecosystem is *Regular Show*, created by J.G. Quintel, who previously worked as a creative director on *Flapjack*, receiving eight seasons from 2009 to 2017. The program follows the two best friends Mordecai, a six foot tall blue jay, and Rigby, a raccoon, through their adventures in and around the park they work at. Differentiating itself from *Flapjack*, *Regular Show*’s mode of animation relies more heavily on hybridized representation, featuring a greater number of proxy characters with no human characters featured in the core cast. With this, *Regular Show* continues to distance itself from the previous program by increasing number of reoccurring female characters in the program. However, where *Regular Show* shows its most marked difference to *Flapjack* is through Mordecai, Rigby, and many of the other male characters in the program going directly against the definition of typical male characters in children’s television. Where Lemish finds the typical male character to be heroic, strong, and outgoing, which *Flapjack* enforces, the men of *Regular Show*, and particularly Mordecai and Rigby, are domestic, scrawny, and largely unmotivated. With this, the

typical male centric children's television program often features "storylines involving dominance and aggression situated in the context of conflict and threats [that] restrict young males' identity development and limit their ability to experiment with emotions and experience other possible social scripts" (Lemish 16). *Regular Show* subverts this typical depiction of male protagonists, with episodes like "Dumptown U.S.A.," (2015 S7:E1) "Yes Dude Yes," (2012 S3:E25) and "Rigby Goes to the Prom," (2016 S7:E27) that feature Mordecai and Rigby having to work through some sort of emotional trauma, such as processing a breakup or negotiating an estranged father-son relationship. Against Flapjack's idolizing of men who fit squarely within the mold of typical male heroes in children's television, *Regular Show* provides a subversive and alternative representation of male characters to those in *Flapjack* allowing for greater exploring of emotional issues within the Cartoon Network ecosystem.

Evolving the Cartoon Network ecosystem, *Regular Show*, aside from its alternative view of male characters, represents a turn towards increased visibility of female characters on the network. Unlike *Flapjack*, *Regular Show* gives a greater autonomy to its female characters, who enter and exit the series as they attend colleges or enter into relationships with the protagonists that span multiple episodes of the series. With this, *Regular Show* begins the Cartoon Network ecosystem's trend of serialized storytelling that aligns with narrative complexity as defined by Mittell "often oscillat[ing] between long-term arc storytelling and stand-alone episodes" (2006: 33). It is this long-term arc storytelling which allows *Regular Show* to depict, for example, the relationship dramas that Mordecai and Rigby face throughout the series, as, unlike a reset format, the relationships either remain or degrade between episodes, and any love or antagonism felt

by those partaking in a relationship also remains. Using long-term arc storytelling however, the episodes maintain their ability to stand alone, in that, while the characters gain social intelligence between episodes, they all follow the same basic, self-contained plot structure. *Regular Show* maintains linearity between its episodes to create characters who are capable of aging and learning and this practice can also be quickly seen through the permanence of objects in the series. For example, the episode “Eggcellent” (2012 S3:E17), follows Rigby’s quest to complete an eating contest and win a trucker hat that reads “I’m Eggcellent,” within the context of the episode this hat is merely the McGuffin, however, following episodes continue to portray Rigby wearing the hat, with it eventually becoming a sentimental object for him, as seen in the later episode “Bank Shot” (2013 S5:E10). As a stand-alone episode, “Eggcellent” provides the self-contained plot of Rigby seeking to earn the hat, however, the hat continuing to remain in the program and become a sentimental object for him demonstrates the long-term arc storytelling *Regular Show* enters into the Cartoon Network ecosystem.

Shifting to the long-term arc storytelling paired with stand-alone episodes of narratively complex television as defined by Mittell, along with its male characters receiving a more diverse mix of masculine and feminine gendered traits, *Regular Show* also begins to present female characters with greater autonomy. However, the female characters depicted in *Regular Show* remain secondary characters, with *Adventure Time*, as the next program in the evolution of the ecosystem, pushing heavily for gender egalitarianism. *Adventure Time*, created by Pendleton Ward who formerly worked as a writer and storyboard artist on *Flapjack*, received ten seasons and ran from 2010 to 2018, sets an almost equal ratio of male and female characters. Creating near gender

egalitarianism within its main cast, *Adventure Time* also presents a significant number of gender non-binary characters within the reoccurring cast in the first five seasons of the program where “45 of [the cast] are females, 55 are male, and 8 are of unknown or multiple gender/s” (Jane 244). Noting the significance of this distribution of gendered characters, Jane states in an article on the representation of gender on *Adventure Time* that the roughly equal number of male and female characters in the program along with the characters who are gender non-binary allows for the “subver[sion of] many traditional gender-related paradigms” (235). Aside from having an almost equal number of male and female characters, *Adventure Time* also demystifies gendered actions and traits, such as Jake the Dog occasionally wearing make-up and women’s clothing, or Princess Bubblegum having super human strength. Typically, feminine gender tropes of children’s television find “female characters appear[ing] between a quarter and a half as frequently as males, and are often presented as hyper-attractive, hyper-sexual, thin, and/or via clichés such as ‘the helpless blonde or the cheeky red-head’” to which Bubblegum and the other female characters in *Adventure Time* are almost entirely antithetical (Jane 231). In that, Bubblegum, having superhuman strength and a genius IQ is capable of saving herself while being able to avoid discourses of physical beauty as she is an anthropomorphic, human shaped, glob of gum. Refusing to depict women under the previously noted clichés, *Adventure Time* continues to evolve Cartoon Network’s ecosystem further towards egalitarian representations of gender.

Compared to the female characters present in *Flapjack*, both those who appear in the background and the limited number of those in the main cast, typically remain strictly within their gendered roles. Tracing Cartoon Network’s evolution to *Regular Show*, while

it doesn't reach a level of male and female character equality as great as *Adventure Time*, it does begin to present more female characters, who eschew typical gendered roles. However, with *Regular Show* there is a quandary in regard to definition of how female characters traditionally appear in children's media, as a majority of the female characters in the program are not human, their attractiveness, not being visually signified, is understood through the male characters' discussion of them. In that, appearing less often than the male characters of the program, when Mordecai and Rigby discuss, for example, Margret, a six foot tall robin, her physical attractiveness is often regarded, and due to her absence in a majority of the episodes, this becomes one of her defining traits. Unlike Margaret, the only reoccurring human female main character in *Regular Show*, Toothpick Sally, goes against the gendered roles Lemish attributes to the typical female character in children's television, as she is a highly competent soldier with large muscles, tattoos, and a gruff attitude. Outside of Sally however, the other, non-human, female characters remain within traditional gender norms in children's media, with their defining features often being how attractive the male characters find them and their romantic relations. Considering the female characters of *Flapjack*, *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time* in their order of release already demonstrates Cartoon Network's ecosystem pushing towards progressive social consciousness within the realm of gender representation, with the latter beginning to provide visibility to non-cisgendered characters.

Adventure Time, like the previous two programs, uses a hybrid style of representation of proxy and human characters, with a majority of the figures being candy people. Within the story world of *Adventure Time*, the land of Ooo, there is an almost equal distribution of male and female characters and a significant number of gender fluid

characters, all sharing equally distributed gendered character traits leading to an overall sense of transnormativity. Subverting gendered stereotypes to create a sense of transnormativity, *Adventure Time* is interacting with what Hall conceptualizes as a subversion of positive and negative images, by “invert[ing] binary opposition, [and] privileging the subordinate term” (1997, 272). Within the context of gender, the positive and negative image is, (in no order) feminine and masculine traits, and the inclusion of an opposing trait within a gendered identity subverts its meaning. *Adventure Time* is “greatly expand[ing] the *range* of [gender] representations and the *complexity* of what it means to be [gendered]” (Hall 1997, 272-273) within its story world through this practice. In that, both masculine and feminine gendered characters in *Adventure Time* enact a mix of traits and actions typically attributed to their opposite gender creating a more complex representation of genders. Bubblegum, for example, while displaying her femininity in dress and mothering of her subjects, complicates her gender through her physical prowess and tendency to flatulate while she remains overall feminine. Beyond being an example of complex gendering on Cartoon Network, Bubblegum is also one member of the first lesbian couple, of her and Marceline, on the network, which sees no stigmatization from their story world’s culture, further promoting the ecosystem’s slant towards progressive representation. In the Cartoon Network ecosystem then, *Adventure Time*, against the stricter gender binaries of *Flapjack* and *Regular Show*, interacts to create a broader range of gender representation.

Making use of animal and other proxy characters, *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time* subvert the use of these types of characters as providing the backgrounds to act out racial caricatures and reinforce stereotypes as they had in the past (Sammond 217-234).

Unlike the proxy characters of the past, the programs create a plurality of characters who lack definition into a unifying race and resist the creation of dichotomies. However, ignoring differences in race, *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time* still create commentary on gender in their interaction and evolve to a more progressive depiction of the topic in the ecosystem. Lacking dichotomies of race *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time* have created societies that are too pluralized, with many characters being the sole member of their race and the cultures openly accepting them, to comment on issues of racism. These racially egalitarian societies in *Adventure Time* and *Regular Show* create an idealized image similar to that in Jim Jenkins *Doug*, where “the array of color[ful characters] came to symbolize the irrelevance of race” (Duca). The plurality of the characters in these programs works similarly in eschewing issues of race and creating an importance in learning who a person is before judging them but doesn’t articulate the harm caused by racism. In order to comment on issues of racism, other programs to come within the Cartoon Network ecosystem, particularly *Gumball* and *Bears*, establish dichotomies through their use of proxy characters to create distinct races in their story worlds. Through the establishments of dichotomies, while continuing discourses of gender, these programs are also able to better comment on a broader range of identity politics, where characters are no longer defined by two or three identifying traits, but a greater range including more direct representations of race to aid in greater depictions of intersectionality.

Animating Prejudice: Dichotomies of Race

The only program in the Cartoon Network ecosystem that is produced outside of the United States, created by Cartoon Network's European branch in London, England, Cartoon Network Studios Europe, *The Amazing World of Gumball*, created by Ben Bocquelet beginning its run in 2011 and currently having six seasons, consists exclusively of a diverse cast of proxy characters. Containing the greatest number of proxy characters, and lacking human characters, *Gumball* creates its own dichotomy between the characters through its use of both two and three dimensional characters who are anthropomorphized plants, animals, and objects. *Gumball* follows its titular character, Gumball Watterson, a blue cat, whose family consists of his mother who is also a blue cat and his sister and father who are pink rabbits, as well as his adopted brother and best friend Darwin, a goldfish with legs, as they live in the surreal city of Elmore. Using its proxy characters to create racial dichotomies *Gumball* acts like the animated animal films interrogated by Paul Wells, in which he states, "the animated animal...constantly becomes the school by which measure of the animal is played out as the barometer of human activity and foible: the status of the animal acknowledged as a center of a social universe, the benchmark by which humankind is seen, known, and understood" (181). As such, the Wattersons, being multispecies, are identified as a biracial family, however the program still racially codes them along its stricter binary of two and three-dimensional characters. Along this binary, Gumball occasionally refers to the prejudice two-dimensional characters receive from those who are three-dimensional, "2D-ism," in which "flat" becomes a derogatory term for those characters that are two-dimensional. While this "2D-ism" is repeatedly referenced by Gumball throughout the series of the

program however, it remains latent, only receiving reference as being a negative ideology.

While “2D-ism” as a form of racism remains on the periphery of the series, Gumball’s own insensitivities come to the forefront in episodes such as “the Awareness,” (2018 S6:E27) which follow Gumball as he feigns understanding the life experience of a plant as he tries to prove to Leslie, an anthropomorphic flower, that he is not biased after Leslie heard him making disparaging remarks about plants. Throughout the episode Gumball seeks to prove that he understands plant culture while refusing to put in the proper effort to research it and has to apologize to Leslie at the end of the episode for his ignorance of plant culture. As a “barometer of human activity and foible” as stated by Wells, Gumball’s ignorance of plant culture functions like ignorance of cultures in the real world, and his seeking to prove his knowledge of Leslie’s culture suggests his own position of privilege believing himself to be above the need to put in the research. The broader “2D-ism” hinted by Gumball throughout the series paired with his own ignorance towards cultures emphasizes an array of prejudices within the program, as both are dismissed as being negative and based in a lack of understanding of other culture. Much like the plurality of characters in *Adventure Time*, and *Regular Show*, the multitude of characters in *Gumball* similarly presents a push towards egalitarian depictions of race. Since the prejudices hinted at in *Gumball* remain mostly latent throughout the series, while “the Awareness” presents the most acute reading of ignorance of culture, much of the program instead depicts the characters, regardless of dimension, species, object, or plant, acting in harmony. With this, Gumball’s parents, unlike the other parents depicted in the series, are the only couple shown to be of different species, a blue cat and a pink

rabbit, who, through this visual dichotomy, are coded as a biracial couple. Furthermore, Darwin, Gumball's adopted brother, is voiced by a black voice actor, while the rest of the Wattersons are voiced by white actors, creating an aural difference between him and the family, furthering the multiracial identity of the family.

While racial prejudices are only hinted at in *Gumball* with ignorance only becoming a significant concern in a few episodes, it does begin to steer the ecosystem towards a greater awareness of the issues, retaining the use of plurality amongst its proxy characters to depict a largely racial egalitarian society like those in *Regular Show* and *Adventure Time*. However, *Gumball*, unlike *Adventure Time*, which depicted the lesbian couple of Bubblegum and Marceline, avoids discourses of sexuality with the only relationships shown in the program being heterosexual. Lemish, speaking on issues of sexuality in children's television, states, "The representation (or absence) of homosexuality in children's TV can be seen as a form of hegemonic regulation, an informal control mechanism that reinforces the taken-for-granted nature of heterosexuality. It assumes that the binary distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is natural, total, and universal" (2010, 88). Taken out of the context of the ecosystem, if depictions of homosexuality are absent from a singular program, as they are in *Gumball*, *Regular Show*, and *Flapjack*, it reinforces the construction of the naturalized status of heterosexuality and others homosexuality. Out of this context then, *Gumball* sets this binary distinction within its series through its absence of homosexuality, however, within the Cartoon Network ecosystem, it, and the other shows that don't depict homosexuality, bolster the understanding of other topics they comment on and allow their issues to become intersectional through their juxtaposition with the other programs. With

these first four programs, *Flapjack*, *Regular Show*, *Adventure Time*, and *Gumball*, the strength of the ecosystem that puts forth their progressive slant, is their interaction with one another that evolves toward gender egalitarianism, depictions of destigmatized homosexuality, and presents the negativity of racial and cultural ignorance and biases.

The Socially Conscious Ecosystem: Social Consciousness as a Mode

Flapjack, *Regular Show*, *Adventure Time*, and *Gumball* rely heavily on the ecosystem to present a broad understanding of the cultural identity politics they discuss, as each show avoids the discussion of certain issues. *Flapjack*, as the originator of the mode, which would begin to present more egalitarian images of race and gender, only works to point out how cultural identity politics are performative. *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time*, each present a racially egalitarian setting, with *Regular Show* pushing towards gender egalitarianism and *Adventure Time* taking this trend further and beginning to include depictions of homosexuality. *Gumball* does away with this racial egalitarianism, while the characters do mostly exist in harmony, to comment on issues of racism. The latest shows being discussed however, *Steven Universe*, *We Bare Bears*, and *Craig of the Creek*, do away with this practice of avoidance. These three latest programs all present images of different races, sexualities, and religions (as much as this can be visibly represented) to varying degrees, with limited to no use of proxy characters. The final three programs being discussed in the Cartoon Network ecosystem outline the moment of reproduction in the process of “production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction” (2006, 128) as outlined by Hall, emphasizing the capitalist mode of television. In this moment of reproduction, the programs in this second

phase are representative of the capitalist tendencies Gitlin ties to slant, as they directly continue to put forth the same stance on representation as the shows that came prior. Directly continuing the mode of representation, unlike *Regular Show*, and *Adventure Time* who established the image of gender egalitarianism after *Flapjack*, these later three, *Steven Universe*, *We Bear Bares*, and *Craig of the Creek*, as reproductions of the ecosystem's slant are no longer focused on establishment and are instead refining Cartoon Network's progressive message. In that, *Regular Show*, *Adventure Time*, and *Gumball* (establishing a means to discuss issues of racism and cultural ignorance), cemented, in their interaction, the ecosystem's slant, which *Steven Universe*, *We Bare Bears*, and *Craig of the Creek*, now continue to exemplify. Furthermore, *Steven Universe*'s creator, Rebecca Sugar, is a symbol of the creation of this slant as an industrial practice for Cartoon Network as she created the program after working as a writer and storyboard artist on *Adventure Time*. Similarly, Matt Burnett and Ben Levin created *Craig of the Creek* after working on *Steven Universe* as story editors and writers. With this, the ecosystem of Cartoon Network is emphasized by the network's industrial practice of using their existing staff to produce new programs that further its slant.

Steven Universe, created by Sugar, began its run in 2013 and currently has five seasons, follows the titular Steven Universe who is a hybrid being of a crystal gem, an alien race with super natural powers, and a human, as he seeks to understand more about his culture as a crystal gem and learn to control his powers. *Steven Universe* remains within the mode of representation outlined by *Adventure Time*, continuing to present an almost equal number of male and female characters, with the female characters outnumbering the male characters within the main cast (four females, two males).

Featuring Steven as the leading character, however, suggests that *Steven Universe*, like *Adventure Time*, focusing on male characters who attend adventures seeking to fight for the greater good, can be fit into a genre of television for young boys, but both programs' push towards gender egalitarian casts and an equal distribution of gendered traits negates this. Instead, both programs allow for their female and male characters to maintain a mix of feminine and masculine gender traits leading to the overwhelming gender egalitarian slant that places these programs outside of the binary of being for a male or female audience cementing the ecosystem's message.

Continuing the trend of *Adventure Time*, which brought a lesbian couple to the Cartoon Network ecosystem in the form of Marceline and Bubblegum, representations of lesbian women are plentiful in *Steven Universe*. The alien women who raise Steven, the crystal gems, come from a species who is entirely female warriors similar to the amazons of Greek mythology, who exhibit romantic relationship between each other throughout the series. One of the gems who raises Steven, Garnet, is actually a fusion¹ of Ruby and Sapphire (who are also women), who, as separate beings, get married late in the series (2018 S5:E23-24) marking the first same-sex marriage on children's television (Henderson). At Sapphire and Ruby's wedding each visually displays a typical "butch" and "femme" identity respectively, using the "replication of heterosexual constructs in [a] non-heterosexual frame [to] bring into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original," (Butler 43) which is emphasized as several episodes prior Ruby acted out a traditionally masculine role as a cowboy before donning a wedding dress

¹ Fusion in *Steven Universe* is an ability the crystal gems have to meld physical bodies and consciousness into a singular being, this is also an act love only possible through harmonious emotions

opposite Sapphire's tuxedo at the ceremony (2018 S5:E21). With this performance of gendered traits Ruby and Sapphire display a fluidity in their gender, choosing to display a predominantly masculine or feminine trait. When fused, Garnet further exemplifies the equal dispersal of gendered traits in the series as she is both the strongest warrior of the crystal gems as well as the gem who displays the most affection and care for Steven as a mothering figure throughout the program. Garnet, both as a separated being and a fusion, cements the ecosystem's slant, echoing the destigmatized relationship of Marceline and Bubblegum, while exemplifying the equality with which gendered traits are distributed within the context of *Steven Universe* furthering the representation of gender egalitarianism on the network.

Steven Universe's gender egalitarianism does not extend to depictions of race however, with a binary set between the crystal gems and the townsfolk of the program's setting Beach City. Unlike *Gumball*, in which its racial prejudices are only hinted at for a majority of its series, *Steven Universe* leaves the crystal gems segregated. The gems are segregated based on the binary of humans and aliens, with the townsfolk often referring to them as "those weird women," and crystal gems lacking an understanding of the human's culture, with Steven, as the only hybrid, working as a mediator in many situations. *We Bare Bears*, created by Daniel Chong formerly of Pixar Animation Studios, began its run in 2015 and currently has four seasons, similarly sees its protagonists, the three brother bears, Grizz, Panda, and Ice Bear, segregated from the human society of San Francisco. Like the binary created between the crystal gems and the humans in *Steven Universe*, a racial binary is established between the Bears and the human society. Unlike the crystal gems however, who the human society has little

conception of as they typically avoid any contact, the Bears are subject to racial prejudice based on stereotypical ideals of bears that previously existed in the human culture.

Hall notes, “stereotyping is...a ‘power/knowledge’ sort of game. It classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as ‘other,’” (1997, 259) the Bears, as outside the norm of the human society, become othered, which forces them to live outside the human society. This othering the Bears face manifests throughout the program as they are seen consistently being excluded from human society as they are not believed to be as refined as the San Franciscan human culture. Noting “stereotyping as a...practice...central to the representation of racial difference,”(Hall 1997, 257) the Bears are often asked by humans why they don’t act like normal bears, with the episode “Grizzly The Movie” seeing Grizz asked to scare people “like a bear would” (2017, S3:E1). “Grizzly The Movie” follows Grizz as he is cast in a horror film in which a Grizzly bear is the monster, however, when he attempts to act scary for the film he pretends to be a ghost or pirate, stating that that is how he, as a bear, would attempt to scare someone. The director reacts to Grizz’s poor attempts to frighten people by creating a CGI bear to do the job instead, which offends Grizz as the fabricated bear presents a negative stereotype about his species, prompting him to quit the film. Throughout the series, these negative stereotypes, as portrayed by the film Grizz was acting in, are seen to have an effect on the Bears as they will often become scared at the prospect of meeting other bears, suggesting they have internalized the stereotypes the human society of San Francisco projects onto them. Furthermore, the enforcement of these stereotypes, force the bears to live outside of the city limits in a cave as that is where the human culture believes they ought to live. Displaying the harm of the racial stereotypes on the Bears,

We Bare Bears continues within the mode of *Gumball*, furthering depictions of racial difference within the Cartoon Network ecosystem.

Presenting a greater focus on the racial interaction between the Bears and the human society however, *We Bare Bears* does not reach the same extreme of representing homosexuality as *Steven Universe*, in which almost half the cast is identified as lesbian, but it continues to present images of homosexuality in its story world as normative. As previously stated, these latter three programs of the Cartoon Network ecosystem, do not avoid the identity politics the other programs heavily depict, seeking to represent groups within their milieu. With that *We Bare Bears* adds to the ecosystem's diverse representations with hijab clad Muslim women who can be seen in the background when the Bears are in San Francisco.

The latest show being discussed in this thesis, *Craig of the Creek*, created by *Steven Universe* story writers and editors Matt Burnett and Ben Levin, which started its second season on March 18, 2019, follows *Steven Universe* and *We Bare Bears* in presenting an increasingly diverse range of characters. Following Craig Williams, a nine year old African American boy, and his best friends Kelsey Bern and J.P. Mercer, who are both white, on their adventures as they play in a local creek near their suburban homes in the Baltimore area. *Craig of the Creek* is a departure from the representational models presented by the previous programs in the ecosystem as it eschews reliance on proxy characters for exclusively human ones. With this, the program continues to depict the racial differences between the characters, but with a greater sense of realism as it no longer asks human traits to be placed on bears or aliens. A notable example of this is the Junior Forest Scouts, who act as the creek's self-appointed police force, regularly

vilifying Craig and the other black kids in the creek. With this, *Craig* begins to address issues of intersectionality within its own context with examples like “Jessica Goes to the Creek” (2018 S1:E3), which sees Craig bringing his younger sister, Jessica who is also African American, to the creek. Throughout the episode Jessica is discriminated against for both her younger age by her older brother, as well as her race by the Junior Forest Scouts. Facing discrimination for her age and race demonstrates the intersectionality of Jessica’s identity. Discriminated against based on her age and race, Jessica “experience[s] discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by [people her same age] and Black men” (Crenshaw 149). In that, Jessica is pursued by the Junior Forest Scouts due to her blackness, like Craig, however, she is repeatedly spoken down to and left to sit out of activities in the Creek due to her younger age both by her brother and other children in the creek. With this, Jessica represents the intersectionality of the politics of age and race in *Craig of the Creek* and offers to the Cartoon Network ecosystem a display of intersectionality that does not rely solely on its juxtaposition with other programs.

Similar to the other programs within the ecosystem, *Craig of the Creek* maintains diverse representations, including a hijab clad Muslim girl who attends the creek, as well as children who appear to be from different ethnicities regularly interacting with each other. *Craig of the Creek* continues to display homosexual relationships, with a young adult lesbian couple who sneak into the creek to avoid their parents, and two homosexual boys from the other side of the creek, whilst continuing, like *Adventure Time*, *Steven Universe*, and *We Bare Bears*, to equally distribute gendered traits across both the male and female characters of the program. Being the latest program considered in the Cartoon

Network ecosystem for this thesis, *Craig of the Creek*, continues the representational trends established by the previous programs and further pushes its representation to depictions of intersectionality and further cements the ecosystem's slant.

Conclusion

Recognizing Gitlin's conceptualization of slant and its function within a televised or streamed ecosystem as first and foremost a capitalist practice, it is still able to deftly present progressive representations of gender and race, with programs relying on one another to create a broad understanding on the topics and how they are intersectional. Ranging from *Flapjack* to *Steven Universe* to *Craig of the Creek*, the animated ecosystem of Cartoon Network succeeds in presenting a socially progressive message while maintaining multiple programs who enjoy(ed) lengthy runs on the network, with *Adventure Time* having ten seasons. Outside of the Cartoon Network ecosystem, this slant is seen to have an effect on other children's television, such as Disney Channel's *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016) featuring a gay couple, and Netflix's *Hilda* (2018-) presenting a gender egalitarian society as well as featuring multiple Muslim women as background characters throughout the series. While neither of these programs reach the same level of representing these peoples as the Cartoon Network ecosystem does however, it exemplifies Western children's television seeking to provide visibility to those who traditionally wouldn't receive any.

Outside of the programs that have been interrogated in the Cartoon Network ecosystem, an ad campaign from *Steven Universe* emphasizing body positivity and anti-bullying ads using Cartoon Network characters that air on the network further its

progressive slant. With this, Cartoon Network's progressive slant is gaining further recognition with *Steven Universe* becoming the first ever animated program to win the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Kids & Family Programming. Furthermore, if gender "equality is advanced when boys and girls are treated equally as well as offered equal roles and opportunities on television, all the while recognizing and respecting their differences" (Lemish 125) then Cartoon Network's consistent reproduction of gender egalitarianism, equal distribution of gender traits, and characters who remain distinctly masculine and feminine reinforces this sense of equality for its child audience. Looking to the latter programs in the Cartoon Network ecosystem including *Steven Universe*, *We Bare Bears*, and *Craig of the Creek*, it is observed as seeking to create this sense of egalitarianism, with female characters being granted a far greater array of roles in the programs and the male characters showing a greater range of emotional expression than in typical children's television.

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