

**Princesses, Bad Little Boys, and Normal People: Fluidity and
The Queer Body in *Adventure Time***

Journal:	<i>Critical Studies in Television</i>
Manuscript ID	MCST-2020-0036
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Adventure Time, animation, the body, fluidity, identity, queer theory

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

**Princesses, Bad Little Boys, and Normal People:
Fluidity and The Queer Body in *Adventure Time***

abstract:

Adventure Time is an animated series and bildungsroman, centered on the primary protagonist Finn and the normative prescriptions of identity as represented in his growth. The series evolves to offer nuanced and alternative representations of fluidity and the queer body, and the current research investigates queer potentiality in this speculative fiction/fantasy text. By weaving together extant understandings of bodies and animation with theories of the queer body, this analysis uses fluidity to examine queerness in *Adventure Time*. Further, it proposes that the body is one site— along with constructs of family, gender, and time— where fluidity may represent queerness.

keywords:

Adventure Time, animation, the body, fluidity, identity, queer theory

1
2
3 The importance of the body has been theorized by philosophers, biologists,
4 and social scientists, but even more relevant to this discussion is the *unimportance*
5 of the body. Butler (2011) argues that in order for some bodies to matter, other
6 bodies must not matter. Value, then, is not uniformly assigned to the human body
7 but is divided based on its binary opposition and social necessity, according to
8 Butler, to determine that some bodies must not matter. Examining the variety of
9 bodies featured in Cartoon Network's animated fantasy series *Adventure Time*
10 (2010—) offers one mode for understanding how queer bodies are valued .in The
11 Land of Ooo, where *Adventure Time* is set. Karavitis (2015) describes Ooo as "a post-
12 apocalyptic world where both science and magic exist" (p. 4), and the properties of
13 each of these belief systems figure heavily into the show.

14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29 In Season 2, Episode 1 "Trouble in Lumpy Space," Lumpy Space Princess
30 inadvertently bites Jake the Dog and gives him a condition called The Lumps, which
31 causes Jake's body to morph into bulbous and protruding tumors (Muto et al. 2010).
32 It also causes him to speak in an affected and stereotypically effeminate way like
33 LSP herself. The action of this episode takes place in Lumpy Space, where LSP
34 travels along with Jake and his friend Finn in order to find the antidote for The
35 Lumps. In Lumpy Space the residents' bodies as well as inanimate objects take on
36 the properties of the space around them (lumpiness), and this setting and early
37 episode narrative provides one of the many examples through which *Adventure*
38 *Time* deals with issues of gender and the body. The lumpy characters compare
39 themselves to "smoothies", and Finn searches for the antidote so that Jake can
40 return to smoothness. While it is a bit reductive and arguably a stretch to compare
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 smoothies and lumpies to heterosexual and homosexual characters, there are other
4
5 examples of queer coding that provide context clues to queerness. For example, the
6
7 colors and decorations (pinks and purples with stars and rainbows) feature subtle
8
9 to not-so-subtle queer symbolism, and the youth in Lumpy Space attend
10
11 Promcoming, a portmanteau of homecoming and prom. Social scientists have
12
13 examined prom as a typically heteronormative ritual (Morris, 2005) and as events
14
15 that are often painful for queer teens and subsequently staged later in life to various
16
17 attempts at capturing the fun and/or healing the pain of a queer childhood.
18
19 Watching the colorful teens of Lumpy Space yell out sassy comebacks laden with
20
21 vocal fry and dance together in big groups, bumping each other with their lumpy
22
23 bodies, shows semiotic markers of gay prom.
24
25
26
27
28

29 Looking at the body and the ways in which this animated series employs the
30
31 body in its narrative structure, visual storytelling provides a theoretical grounding
32
33 for understanding *Adventure Time* as a potentially queer text. Particularly there is a
34
35 focus on fluidity as a primary characteristic of the body— both human and non-
36
37 human— for *Adventure Time* characters, and the current research positions fluidity
38
39 as a manifestation of queerness. By weaving together extant understandings of
40
41 bodies and animation with notions of the queer body, this analysis uses fluidity to
42
43 dissect the queerness of bodies in *Adventure Time*. Further, it proposes that the body
44
45 is one site— along with constructs of family, gender, and time— where fluidity may
46
47 represent queerness.
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

The Queer Body

Through the examination of the body, gender scholars and queer theorists construct and deconstruct an array of binaries— male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, normalcy/deviance, important and unimportant. Knights (2015) further develops this argument that binary constructions of embodiment reinforce the value hierarchy around which bodies matter and which bodies do not and attempts to question the binary in order to create an “ethics of embodiment” (p. 3) that may challenge structures of discrimination. Because of the hegemonic forces that produce social expectations and cues rendering some bodies abject, those bodies defy heteronormative scripts that dictate bodily appearance and behavior.

Norwood (2013) explains that bodies in defiance of these scripts can be sites for “alternative inscriptions of sex and gender” (p. 68) and provides the example of Thomas Beatie, a female-to-male transgender man who became pregnant. The media coverage along with the visual and rhetorical representations of Beatie provide one such case of an alternative inscription that forces viewers and readers to grapple with preconceived notions of prescriptive relations between gender, sex, and the body. Beatie serves as an illustrative reconfiguring of what Knights (2015) calls a questioning of the binary and what Butler (2011) may have categorized as an abject body and therefore becomes a body that demands negotiation. Thus, Beatie exemplifies queer embodiment. The queer body “incites confusion..., creates a space for questions, [leads] us closer to a re-evaluation of sex and gender” (Norwood, p. 74).

1
2
3 Halberstam (2012) interrogates a “new normal”, where linkages between
4
5 “bodies, sex, and power” are reconfigured (p. 67). As social perceptions of sex,
6
7 gender, and the body change over time, thusly do the heteronormative prescriptions
8
9 of bodily expectation. Citing Butler’s complex explanations of embodiment, Weiss
10
11 (2013) focuses on the assertion that embodiment is grounded in prohibition and the
12
13 suppression of homosexual desire at both the societal level and in the individual
14
15 psyche, so the queer body is always already responding to oppression.
16
17 Understandings of the queer body are continually reshaped around changing
18
19 notions of queerness. Acceptance of binary dimensions also shift so that what is
20
21 considered obedient or deviant is in flux. The queer body is necessarily pushing
22
23 boundaries of acceptance and deviance, and historicizing the queer body over time
24
25 (and space) provides one way to chart the changes in heteronormative acceptances.
26
27
28
29
30

31 Capsuto (2020) provides an in-depth historical path of queer images on
32
33 television, offering many rich examples of the queer body as represented on the
34
35 small screen. Even prior to the televisual queer body, portraits of queer characters
36
37 on radio was possible, Capsuto reiterates, but the challenge largely fell onto the
38
39 shoulders of the writers and especially performers who had to “make queer
40
41 characters *sound* gay without *saying* they were” (p. 11), so that television presented
42
43 new possibilities for constructing the image of the queer body. The televisual turn
44
45 brings into focus the pragmatic question about the queer body. What makes a body
46
47 queer, and what makes a *queer* body? What are the signs, symbols, and signifying
48
49 practices of queer embodiment? Zebracki & Milani (2017) work toward establishing
50
51 a queer semiotics that emphasizes language, and their approach not only considers
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 use of queer “in group” or community language but also wider discursive practices
4
5 around and about queerness. Connecting queer identity to language as well as space
6
7 and place allows for the lived experiences of queer embodiment to be more fully
8
9 realized, examining both the “sites and expressions or ‘doings’ of sexuality”
10
11
12 (Zebracki & Milani, 2017, p 428).
13
14

15 It is worth noting that what continues to be true about heteronormative
16
17 scripts is that white, cisgender, middle class, English-speaking, able, male bodies are
18
19 broadly valued. When those identity characteristics happen to be attached to a
20
21 homosexual person, these conditions lend a greater likelihood to the assimilation
22
23 perspective. In other words, the more that any individual or group aligns with these
24
25 heteronormative qualities, the less queer the body is perceived to be, and in the
26
27 earliest days of television representation, more queer was perceived as less
28
29 valuable. As with Thomas Beatie, the trans body has the potential to queer physical
30
31 gender codes both visually and aurally. Hladky (2013) further relates the queerness
32
33 of trans body and uses the docu-series *TransGeneration* as an exemplar of
34
35 representations of the queer body and also concludes that one of the more
36
37 progressive features of the show is its representation of transgenderism as
38
39 “physical, emotional and psychological” (p. 107). Coding the queer, trans body as but
40
41 one element of the transgender experience offers a more humanistic perspective
42
43 than the early portrayals of trans-ness on television that typify queerness as
44
45 residing only in the physical body.
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 In addition to the overall devaluing of the queer body, queer bodies that
4 could be coded as “gay male” as described above are generally constructed as
5 mattering, in the Butlerian sense, more than that of lesbian women. Halberstam
6 (2012) notes that while ideas of what has been referred to as compulsory
7 heterosexuality are giving way to more fluid notions (such as heteroflexibility), even
8 modern understandings of sexuality still favor heterosexual or heteroflexible
9 women to lesbian pairings. Halberstam’s “gaga feminism”— named so after Lady
10 Gaga and her explicit artistic confrontations with aspects of gender and sexuality—
11 is an umbrella under which emerging perspectives of gender and sexual fluidity can
12 be examined. Gaga feminism is concerned, as are other subsets of feminist theory,
13 with misogyny and homophobia and the ways in which these prejudices manifest in
14 popular and consumer culture. Capsuto (2020) also speaks about the historical lack
15 of focus on lesbians in the televisual sphere, even as more gay men were
16 represented in the 1960s mainstream media landscape. Both historical and modern
17 portrayals of lesbian embodiment are less frequent than their gay male
18 counterparts, but then there is another complication introduced when it comes to
19 categorizing lesbian representation.

20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43 Same-sex physical expression between women is not as automatically or
44 readily coded as “lesbian”, often for the reasons Halberstam explains. Fluidity—
45 both embodied and expressed as intimacy— is more commonly accepted between
46 women than men and is less often categorized as homosexual. Two women kissing
47 on television is more likely to be framed as experimental and/or as objectively
48 performative for male pleasure. From Mulvey’s (1989) assertions about the male
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 gaze in cinema to the many scholars that have since interrogated her work,
4
5 objectification of feminine pleasure is well documented (Kilbourne, 1994; Chaudri,
6
7 2006; Gill, 2009). Gill positions “the hot lesbian” as a modern figure recognizable in
8
9 Western and increasingly global, popular culture. The hot lesbian is conventionally
10
11 attractive by stereotypical standards of cisgendered femininity and is usually
12
13 represented in tandem with her hot lesbian double. Gill argues that the hot lesbian
14
15 couplings should not be evaluated as positive, progressive representation for queer
16
17 women without considering their frequent following of heterosexual scripts and
18
19 that conventions of femininity evidence conformity to the male gaze more than
20
21 illustrating queer visibility. Cheerleader couple Santana and Brittany from Ryan
22
23 Murphy’s *Glee* are a contemporary example of what Gill calls the hot lesbian and her
24
25 “other” (p. 152). The hot lesbian figure appears in pairs, rarely alone but staged in a
26
27 lesbian performance with another attractive woman that provides a choice or
28
29 feminine typology, a counterbalance to some feature or flavor of woman— such as
30
31 Santana’s brunette Latina to Brittany’s blond and blue-eyed, all American girl.
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 Potential queerness *in* and queering *of* the body is not limited to expressions
39
40 of sexuality, and many scholars call for an understanding of intersectional identities
41
42 in order to truly realize the potential of critical queer theory. Writer Kimberly
43
44 Foster (2020) asks, “Someone help me work through why I hate the phrase ‘black
45
46 bodies.’” The response threads reveal that many users see the word “bodies” as
47
48 being connected to the dehumanization of, in this case, Black people. Foster’s
49
50 Twitter thread offers insight into two conditions of identity and embodiment. First,
51
52 that the body can be “queered” into otherness, an objective doing unto rather than a
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 subjective agency of performance. Secondly, the queer body is not divorced from
4
5 any other identity aspects and, to the contrary, remains in dialogue with them.
6

7
8 Twitter user @bkapplepie (2020) offers this insight:
9

10 i think it's a very academic way of talking about the complex ways in which Black
11 people are received in society within white supremacy. Bodies are different from
12 labor, culture, etc. So it's a way of referring to our physical existing presence, which
13 is often reviled or rejected
14

15
16
17 Holland as cited in Lothian (2018) echoes this concern, warning that the
18
19 Black, femme, queer body has become a progressive trump card, used as an
20
21 immediate synecdoche of radical politics. This recognition of Black women is
22
23 double-edged, then, bordering on visibility yet reductively totalizing. Collins (2004)
24
25 merges Black feminist thought with a critique on body politics literature, and there
26
27 is no simple solution in the form of a model to quell this concern, but there is a call
28
29 for nuance in recognizing Western standards of beauty when projected onto the
30
31 othered Black and femme body, not to speak of LGBT, poor, Muslim, or disabled
32
33 identities. Recognizing both the importance of acknowledgement and the risk of
34
35 oversimplifying, Knights' (2015) proposal of shattering binaries accounts for this
36
37 nuance, as does Zibracki & Milani's (2017) approach; to reinforce the academic
38
39 pursuit of "referring to physical existing presence," using bodies, they argue that the
40
41 signs of symbols of queerness must not be relegated to individual, psychoanalytic
42
43 examination but should rather take into concern both the intertextuality of queer
44
45 semiotics as well as how queer signs/symbols "are used in social contexts... [and]
46
47 expressed as socially constructed by these interlocutors" (p. 428). In other words,
48
49 understanding queer embodiment requires an interrogation of the localized
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 contexts *and* the global, discursive practices; intersectional identities cut across
4
5 both these spheres. Historicizing the queer body as represented in largely Western
6
7 television provides a path through theories of embodiment that include recognition
8
9 of the many ways a body can be queer and can be queered including through the
10
11 semiotics of queerness, discursive and signifying practices, and intersectional
12
13 identities of sexuality, gender, and race.
14
15
16
17
18

19 **Bodies and Animation**

20
21
22 To revisit the idea of embodiment and argue for animation as both having
23
24 embodiment and affecting an embodied spectatorship, comics can first serve as a
25
26 transitive medium. Fawaz (2016) examines queer potentiality in superhero comics,
27
28 with special attention to identity and the body. In one case study, Fawaz looks at
29
30 The Fantastic Four and how queerness is both embodied in this mutant, queer-
31
32 coded family and also causes reactive embodiment in its readers. Fawaz explains
33
34 that bodily queerness is a visceral expression in of the state of being queer and
35
36 details the ways in which body mutation is related to queerness in media portrayals.
37
38 Fawaz performs a queer reading of The Fantastic Four comics and offers myriad
39
40 ways their mutantness is queer-coded, both through narrative description and in
41
42 visual representations. Two-dimensional comics or cartoons are a different medium,
43
44 to be sure, than animated cartoons, but in the relationship to the body there are
45
46 many parallels. Fawaz's (2016) deep examination of the queer body in comic book
47
48 form lends itself to the further examination of the queer body in animation.
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Animation operates as both form and genre in which to explore the function
4 of the body. Capsuto's (2020) archival examination of LGBT television offers dozens
5 of examples of the queer body in animation; he traces (in)visibility in cartoons,
6 ranging from implicit homosexual cues to explicit queer narratives— from toxic
7 masculinity and gay-shaming in Looney Tunes to Smithers' gay evolution in *The*
8 *Simpsons* to gay references in later 90s adult animation such as *The Tick* and *The*
9 *Critic*. *Saturday Night Live's* Ambiguously Gay Duo was representative, Capsuto says,
10 of the wave of homoerotic, highly phallic, and suggestive humor during this era.
11 Most of the gay references revolved around either the “wink and nod” style of
12 double-entendre or flamboyant, over-the-top caricatures such as *South Park's* Big
13 Gay Al, and like all the aforementioned examples, animated representations almost
14 exclusively referenced gay males.
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30

31 More recent animation has provided queer representation that contrasts
32 these 90s trends in a few important ways. First, there is a wider range of genders
33 and sexualities represented in animation, and also arguably the queerest animation
34 on television is featured in children's shows. Cooley (2020) argues that *Steven*
35 *Universe* positions the cartoon body as ephemeral and “off-model” and that it
36 visualizes an “always-arriving queerness” (p. 47), echoing Lothian's (2016) vision of
37 the queer potentiality of science-fiction. Jane (2015) adds an analysis of *Adventure*
38 *Time* that offers many forms of gender stereotype subversion. Disney's new
39 *DuckTales* reboot has garnered some attention for its two gay dads, peripheral
40 characters that are the parents of a classmate of the main characters; an executive
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 producer and story editor from the show states that there are even more LGBTQ
4 storylines to come (Urbanski 2020).
5
6

7
8 Walden (2019) insists that “animation particularly foregrounds
9
10 embodiment” (p. 83). This is true not just in how animation can redraw the bounds
11 of bodily realism but also in the way that spectators see animation as meaning
12 transferred *from* a human creator that can also trigger embodied response *in* human
13 spectators. Husbands and Ruddell (2019) offer a paradigm for animation studies
14 that goes beyond animation as facsimile for reality to recognize the “radically
15 different ways in which animations engage the imagination and the body” (p. 13).
16
17 Animation’s diversity and richness also provides the potential for dialectical
18 conversation about embodiment in the text as it relates to spectator embodiment.
19
20 Husbands and Ruddell refer to Eisenstein’s notion of plasmaticness, or how the
21 “elasticity of animated bodies, objects, and spaces” (p. 13) in animation connect to
22 and affect the bodies of the viewers. Roe (2019) further explicates the connection of
23 embodiment to animation by reminding that actors, illustrators, writers, animators,
24 and myriad other artists are corporeally involved in the process of animation and
25 are therefore enacting the kind of discursive, signifying practices required for
26 meaning-making.
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 Denison (2019) adds that bodies in anime “challenge our conception of what
46 it means to be human...[and] contain so many anthropomorphizing, mutating,
47 transforming, displaced, and exploding bodies” (p. 273) that require us to question
48 what we know about embodiment and identity. Denison’s description here is
49
50 comparable to prior discussed understanding of what the queer body accomplishes
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 by interrogating expectations and norms around gender and sexuality by drawing
4
5 attention to those fusions and fissures of embodiment. *Adventure Time* is not
6
7 categorized as anime, but it can be linked to anime in several ways. First, there are
8
9 similar themes of fantasy/adventure displayed in *Adventure Time* that are common
10
11 in anime. Most of the seasons are animated by a Korean studio that has explicit
12
13 historical connection to Japanese animation, and Pendleton Ward, the creator,
14
15 points out his inspiration in Japanese art and anime. “Food Chain” is an episode in
16
17 the sixth season of *Adventure Time* directed by Masaaki Yuasa, a well-known
18
19 Japanese artists and anime director (imdb.com). So while *Adventure Time* itself
20
21 should not be referred to as anime, it can be compared to having similar properties
22
23 under the wider umbrella of animation. Denison (p. 263) also addresses children’s
24
25 shows in particular, and the frequent fascination with children’s animation to
26
27 reconstruct and fuse bodies. Examples of these different types of reconstruction and
28
29 fusion border on archetypal in animation and include the dichotomies of
30
31 insect/machine, human/tool, nature/technology.
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 One clear connection between comic book superheroes, anime, and
39
40 *Adventure Time* is their shared use of and contribution to science fiction/fantasy
41
42 genre. Operating within these genre conventions as well as through the creation of
43
44 animation, *Adventure Time* offers an expansive queer potentiality. Lothian (2018)
45
46 uses the term speculative fiction to describe future-imagining narratives and
47
48 positions this as the lens through which to compare the radical interrogative
49
50 potential of queer theory alongside science fiction/fantasy genres. Understanding
51
52 *Adventure Time* as speculative fiction provides opportunity for the examination of
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 existing structures and norms around the boundaries of the body and its
4
5 relationship to identity as described thus far.
6
7

8 **Fluidity**

9

10 Fluidity has been used across multiple fields, both academically and
11
12 creatively, to examine not just sexuality but also gender, race, ability,
13
14 cosmopolitanism and other facets of identity and belonging. Bloodsworth-Lugo
15
16 (2007) supposes that Western cultures exhibit a historical fear of the fluid and cites
17
18 race relations and The One Drop Rule as an example. What Bloodsworth-Lugo calls
19
20 “in-between bodies” belong to identities that do not readily categorize as one or the
21
22 other. Denison (2019) refers to the anime body as “impossible” (p. 257), and this
23
24 examination of the female body in anime focuses on mutability. The threads of
25
26 extant literature here so far, when considered together, help reinforce the
27
28 corporeality of the queer body and the multiple conditions that may co-exist in the
29
30 same body at different instances or sometimes all at once. Weiss (2013) explains
31
32 that the post-structural understanding of the body coalesces around paradigmatic
33
34 opposites, tracing back through the work of Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss which
35
36 fosters a social understanding that is “predicated on difference” (p. 75) and not
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
841
842
843
844
845
846
847
848
849
850
851
852
853
854
855
856
857
858
859
860
861
862
863
864
865
866
867
868
869
870
871
872
873
874
875
876
877
878
879
880
881
882
883
884
885
886
887
888
889
890
891
892
893
894
895
896
897
898
899
900
901
902
903
904
905
906
907
908
909
910
911
912
913
914
915
916
917
918
919
920
921
922
923
924
925
926
927
928
929
930
931
932
933
934
935
936
937
938
939
940
941
942
943
944
945
946
947
948
949
950
951
952
953
954
955
956
957
958
959
960
961
962
963
964
965
966
967
968
969
970
971
972
973
974
975
976
977
978
979
980
981
982
983
984
985
986
987
988
989
990
991
992
993
994
995
996
997
998
999
1000

45 Metaphors of fluidity often draw from fluid as a property, like liquidity, and
46
47 point to specific fluids— water, blood, milk, seminal fluid. Halberstam (2012)
48
49 dissects the comedic use of fluid in the film *Bridesmaids* (2011) and how the viewer
50
51 can observe gender norms questioned through the use of food, alcohol, vomit, and
52
53 feces. The female characters are asserting a sense of agency by interacting with the
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 fluid elements in ways that are typically reserved for male characters; the same can
4
5 be said for Paul Feig's (2016) remake of *Ghostbusters* starring Kate McKinnon and
6
7 an all female crew (as cited in Lothian, 2018). Weiss (2013) centers "corporeal
8
9 fluidity" (p. 102) as a necessary element of recognition of female embodiment, and
10
11 distinguishes this from the aforementioned sexual fluidity that women are often
12
13 permitted or endowed with in the context of the patriarchal gaze. Weiss further
14
15 considers the relationship between corporeal embodiment and motherhood and
16
17 how the practices of mothering are discursively connected to the fluid-based
18
19 biological processes of fertilization, gestation, lactation. Other feminist critiques of
20
21 fluidity focus on particularly of the objectification of the feminine, and queer theory
22
23 has been questioned for what has been referred to as "fetishism of fluidity" (Epps,
24
25 2001). However, the queer theoretical paradigm as applied here does not discount
26
27 the impact of identity fixity, as discussed in previous sections, but rather allows for
28
29 the interplay of fixity and fluidity, what Bloodsworth-Lugo calls "both and". If the
30
31 gaze is a given, fluidity can nonetheless be a useful theoretical paradigm for
32
33 examining the queer body and applied critically when used as a force of
34
35 interrogation toward questioning embedded binaries in bodily understanding. The
36
37 post-structural turn in naming the corporeal body provides that fluidity does not
38
39 oppose identity; it allows for multiple identities, for multiple narratives within
40
41 larger discursive practices to exist across time.
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49

50 In other words, Knights (2015) so eloquently expressed, "if bodies are to
51
52 matter, binaries need to be shattered" (p. 2). An individual may occupy the same
53
54 body, for example, but occupies different identities at different points in the lifespan
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 and at different moments in life based on the signs, symbols, signifying practices and
4
5 shifting possibilities within the meaning-making, social world— hearkening back to
6
7 Collins' (2004) assertion that multiple subjectivities (race, sexuality, gender, class)
8
9 can and are shaping the other. Giffney (2004) described queer identity as fluid in the
10
11 way that it is not a status to possess but rather a space to navigate. Building on this
12
13 subjectivity and the extant literature around the queer body as well as the history of
14
15 bodies as expressed in animation and media writ large, fluidity can be a theoretical
16
17 grounding for challenging binary presuppositions and critically centering
18
19 queerness. Bodily fluidity and queer fluidity, in particular, may activate the agentic
20
21 queerness that pushes against the Foucauldian docility. *Adventure Time* as an
22
23 animated media text with a focus on mutability and bodily fluidity can be used to
24
25 examine the potentiality for expressing the queer body through fluidity.
26
27
28
29
30

31 Queerness in fluidity or queerness *as* fluidity, then, may be considered
32
33 particularly radical when that fluidity is not synonymous with femininity or
34
35 associated exclusively with the feminine. Bloodsworth-Lugo (2007) notes that
36
37 bodies aren't either/or but rather "both... and", meaning that embodiment is linked
38
39 to fluid identity as well as "the historical gravity of the body subject" (p. 66).
40
41
42 Irigaray's oft-cited metaphors of fluidity rely largely on assertions of feminine as
43
44 fluid (Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2007), and the concern of the potential loss of agency
45
46 when fluidity is simply mapped onto the feminine subject has been theorized across
47
48 many eras of sexual difference and understanding embodiment. Like Irigaray and
49
50 Collins (2004), Bordo (1993) takes up the critique of fluidity when it does not
51
52 question the established patriarchal situating of the body real and uses feminist
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 theory to assert a way of expanding the cultural imaginary to include “possibilities
4 for corporeal and intercorporeal transformation” (as cited in Weiss, 1999, p 66).
5
6
7
8
9

10 **“All My Favorite Parts”: Fluidity and the Queer Body in Adventure Time**

11
12 This examination calls back to the need for queer methodologies that take
13 into account both the signs and symbols of local cases (in this case, the text) as well
14 as the wider social semiotic landscape in which these bodily “doings” unfold. The
15 primary purpose of examining the queer body through a textual analysis of
16 *Adventure Time* uses fluidity as a theoretical lens, and this paper draws from two
17 primary methodological strategies— televisual studies and a critical queer
18 approach. Looking at the way these strands of interest are interwoven provides a
19 transdisciplinary understanding of the impact of the body. As Perkins (2014)
20 explains, the design and purpose of television can be a particularly fertile medium
21 for exploring signifying practices of the body. Though Perkins writes of live-action
22 narrative, many of the theoretical notions of what she calls “television of the body”
23 can be applied to the impact of the body in animated television. Using Iedema’s
24 (2001) televisual method of analysis, this qualitative exploration also relies on
25 semiotic understandings of queer embodiment.
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 Through the signs, symbols, and signifying practices earlier described
46 (Zebracki & Milani, 2017), this work examines meaning-making in *Adventure Time*
47 through representation, orientation, and organization. Adding Lothian’s (2018)
48 work on queer possibility in speculative fiction further grounds the investigation.
49
50 Lothian highlights three specific ways boundaries may be questioned: the
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 examination of 1) what is considered progress, 2) who benefits from that social
4
5 change, and 3) what it means to “have a future or be denied one” (p. 17). Mapping
6
7 these three probing questions onto the social semiotic analyses of *Adventure Time*
8
9 interrogates queer potentiality at the intersections of queer theory, animation, and
10
11 speculative fiction.
12
13

14
15 *Adventure Time* is essentially about a human boy (Finn) and his magical dog
16
17 companion (Jake) adventuring through the Land of Ooo, often completing minor
18
19 quests in each episode and ultimately tying together the series under the umbrella
20
21 of a larger Hero’s Journey. In both the micro-quests and the monomythic macro-
22
23 quest *Adventure Time* deals with good and evil, ethical dilemmas, and personhood
24
25 (though not necessarily human personhood). The current analyses also operate
26
27 under the assumption of telefilmic studies that, according to Iedema (2001),
28
29 narrative must be simplified to make importance and meaning through the
30
31 character actions and consequences. *Adventure Time* episodes are about 12 minutes
32
33 in length and so are understood as standalone narratives as well as sequences that
34
35 contribute to larger world-building within the show text. This research considers
36
37 the characters and narratives across adventures and particularly how queerness
38
39 manifests and social semiotics that may indicate queer potentiality. *Adventure Time*
40
41 is a bildungsroman with an overarching theme of Finn’s evolution from adolescence
42
43 to maturity. Subsequently the series begins clearly centered on the perspectives of
44
45 the protagonists and the normative prescriptions of identity that they represent and
46
47 over its run evolves into a much more nuanced text oriented toward alternative
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 representations of fluidity and the queer body, providing a case study of queer
4
5 potentiality in speculative fiction and fantasy animation.
6

7
8 Queer potentiality through fluidity in *Adventure Time* is represented across
9
10 four primary and often interrelated themes — home and family, time, gender, and
11
12 the body. Drawing on Lothian (2018) and using speculative fiction and genre studies
13
14 to explore queer possibility in alternative, space-time fantasies, each of these
15
16 themes is discussed below, considering its visual and narrative detail, with the main
17
18 focus of this analysis being the queer body. The two protagonists, Finn and Jake, can
19
20 often be read as normatively positioned— almost as the keepers of the hegemonic
21
22 status quo— while other characters around them are sites for oppositional readings
23
24 with the potential for queer temporality, non-traditional notions of home and
25
26 family, alternative gender and sexuality representations, and manifestations of
27
28 queer embodiment. This research operates from a social semiotic perspective and
29
30 focuses primarily on queer fluidity as manifested through the body, and the other
31
32 themes have emerged through repeated viewings of the series. Further, each other
33
34 theme (time, family, gender and sexuality) is analyzed here primarily *through* the
35
36 lens of the queer fluidity and how the body is represented, oriented, and organized
37
38 *within* that that theme.
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48 *Time*

49
50 Inside Finn and Jake’s tree house, a clock hangs on the wall that reads “Finn &
51
52 Jake - Timeless”. The clock reiterates that the title of the series is a pun about the
53
54 queering of time. First, it indicates that now is the hour for an adventure to
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 commence, and it also lets the audience know that they are operating under a
4 special, queer notion of time that is known as adventure time. It works in two
5 ways— **now** is the time for adventure and adventure is the **kind of time** that
6 applies.
7
8
9
10
11

12 Lothian (2018) discusses extensively the notion of time and queer
13 temporality in speculative fiction, and *Adventure Time* offers many narratives and
14 social semiotic spaces in which to examine the potential for queer temporality. The
15 break in timelines itself does not always constitute a queer temporality but rather
16 the representation and orientation of the storylines and how the characters function
17 within them may represent a queering of space time. One queer observance is how
18 certain characters “fail to synchronize with the narrative in which [they] are
19 situated” (Lothian, 2018, p. 94). *Adventure Time* as a series is uninterested in a
20 linear chronology, instead revealing bits of information and important meaning-
21 making signs and world-building narratives variously throughout its 10 seasons and
22 283 episodes (at the time of this writing). Within those non-linear narratives, the
23 characters themselves often struggle against normative timelines and temporal
24 normativity, and this is particularly true for the characters that will be developed in
25 this work as mostly operating within queer bodies— Marceline and Ice King, others
26 to a lesser extent. As the clock highlights, the heroes Finn & Jake seem to not be
27 constrained or oppressed by time as the other inhabitants of their world are. They
28 are frequently the masters of time, the keepers of time, wielding this special power,
29 while others are subjected to the structure of normative temporality.
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 The story of Marceline the Vampire Queen unfolds in such a scattershot and
4
5 piecemeal fashion throughout the series that it supports the argument of Marceline
6
7 herself as a victim of normalized temporality. Her story will be explored in more
8
9 detail throughout each theme, as the audience sees that Marceline is often permitted
10
11 to narratively “travel” through different timelines and that when she is called upon
12
13 to serve heroic duties, the laws of space time are suspended for her. In other
14
15 moments, she is bound by temporality in ways that Finn and Jake are not. Marceline,
16
17 then, often seems out of synch with her narrative timeline, and sadly, many of her
18
19 temporal pursuits involve looking for and ultimately losing love, relationships, and
20
21 companions. Marceline was born to a human woman and Hunson Abadeer, Vampire
22
23 King and one of *Adventure Time*’s most evil characters. Abadeer rules a hell
24
25 dimension called the Nightsphere and eats souls of living beings. Over the series it
26
27 is revealed (though not chronologically) that Marceline was orphaned as a child,
28
29 spent much time alone, and was informally adopted for a time by archaeologist
30
31 Simon Petrikov. During his archaeological pursuits, Simon finds a powerful crown
32
33 that transforms him into his evil(ish) alter ego Ice King, and Marceline is once again
34
35 alone.
36
37
38
39
40
41
42

43 Much later in the chronology in Season 8, Episode 1 “Broke His Crown”, adult
44
45 Marceline invites Princess Bubblegum to Ice King’s house for dinner. This episode
46
47 functions very much as a “meet the parents” trope. Both Marceline and Princess
48
49 Bubblegum are not in their regular outfits but dressed up instead, and Marceline
50
51 pleads with PB to be nice and try and get along with Simon; she also requests that
52
53 PB refers to him as “Simon” instead of Ice King. Throughout the course of this
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 episode, we see both the temporal theme and the family theme working in tandem.
4
5 While the girls are visiting, something malfunctions with Ice King's crown, and PB (a
6
7 scientist) creates a virtual reality portal that allows the girls to travel between
8
9 dimensions to investigate. They enter the portal and find Simon, who happily hugs
10
11 Marceline. Amidst other discussion during their reunion, Simon apologizes for past
12
13 wrongs and not prioritizing his relationship with Marceline. This inter-dimensional
14
15 portal allows adult Marceline to get emotional healing and closure that she did not
16
17 get as a child, and it later allows Simon to reunite with Betty (the love of his life) and
18
19 provides some emotional satisfaction for him. These temporal breaks and queer
20
21 dimensional jumps show both Marceline and Ice King— characters that often “fail to
22
23 synchronize” (Lothian, 2018) to the timelines in which they find themselves—
24
25 subvert normative timelines in order to gain personal and familial healing. Further
26
27 examples of non-normative familial structures are plentiful throughout this show,
28
29 with Marceline and Simon/Ice King, as well as other characters.
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

38 *Home and Family*

39
40 The origin story of Finn Mertens (or Finn the Human) positions *Adventure*
41
42 *Time* as a landscape filled with alternative families. As an infant, Finn was kidnapped
43
44 by and then later separated from his con artist father. He was orphaned and
45
46 discovered in the woods by Jake's (or Jake the Dog) parents Joshua and Margaret,
47
48 who adopted him into their home. After Joshua and Margaret die— and in the
49
50 primary *Adventure Time* timeline where most of the series actions takes place—
51
52 Finn and Jake live together in their tree house, along with a rotating cast of
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 characters who come in and out. Because they were raised as siblings, this dynamic
4
5 often comes across— with Jake being the older sibling— but also sometimes Jake is
6
7 more like a parental figure to Finn. Other times Jake and Finn are like parents to
8
9 their sentient computer BMO, and they operate as domestic partners in many ways.
10
11 The larger arch of the series shows the coming together of Finn, Jake, and BMO as a
12
13 chosen family and also, by the end, the coming apart of this family. All of these
14
15 patterns parallel Fawaz’s (2016) critical queer analysis of superhero fantasies and
16
17 The Fantastic Four, both in the sense of their mutant and mutable bodies
18
19 (elaborated upon in the final section), as well as in the manifestation of the chosen
20
21 family for queer communities and ways that non-biological ties and kinship often
22
23 become the pivotal nuclear and social relations for queer people.
24
25
26
27
28

29 In a further comparison of biological relations to chosen family, Jake has a
30
31 girlfriend called Lady Rainicorn, a rainbow unicorn chimera that— inexplicably—
32
33 speaks Korean. Jake periodically meets up with Lady Rainicorn and maintains their
34
35 relationship, but in S5 E6 “Jake the Dad”, they have a litter of pups (combinations of
36
37 rainbow unicorns and dogs with various transformational magic powers). With the
38
39 birth of the pups, Jake decides that he should live with Lady Rainicorn and the
40
41 children instead of with Finn and BMO. In order to be what he thinks is a good
42
43 parent, Jake dons a hat that his father wore and consults a book from his mother
44
45 called *Mom’s Manual for Raising Beautiful Children*. Most of Jake’s efforts at
46
47 parenting are comedic failures, and in the end, his children end up rescuing him
48
49
50
51 from a den of foxes. Jake decides that Lady Rainicorn and the pups can take care of
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 themselves and goes back to the tree house to live with Finn and BMO, where he
4
5 says he's "got a slammin' family right here, too."
6
7

8 The exploration of family is complex across several other characters and
9
10 storylines, especially with Marceline and Ice King. After Simon becomes Ice King,
11
12 Marceline is alone again, save for a teddy bear called Hambo that Simon gave her. As
13
14 a young adult, Marceline makes her way to the Land of Ooo where she becomes a
15
16 protector for humans. At some point during Marceline's history she has an intimate
17
18 relationship with a magician named Ash, who treats her very poorly and sells her
19
20 teddy bear to a witch, and she also forms an intimate bond with Princess
21
22 Bubblegum, which becomes one of the central love pairings of the series. No one in
23
24 the show explicitly states their sexuality, but Marceline's queerness is one of the
25
26 functional aspects of the character relations as we see her in intimate pairings with
27
28 both boys and girls.
29
30
31
32

33 Marceline's tumultuous family life parallels a common experience for queer
34
35 people who have rocky relationships with their parents and other biological
36
37 relatives. Finn, despite his own unconventional family history, seems at first
38
39 unwilling to accept Marceline's rift with her father, Hunson Abadeer. In S2 E1, Finn
40
41 conjurers Abadeer in attempt to patch things up between the two despite
42
43 Marceline's protest, and the result is an in-depth, psychoanalytic examination of the
44
45 aforementioned family dynamic. Marceline repeatedly tells Finn that her father is
46
47 evil but also shows tenderness toward Abadeer. Marceline, a musician, sings a sad
48
49 song called "Daddy, Why Did You Eat My Fries?", recalling a childhood memory:
50
51
52
53

54 Daddy, why did you eat my fries?
55 I bought them, and they were mine.
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 But you ate them, yeah, you ate my fries...
4 And I cried, but you didn't see me cry.
5 Daddy,
6 Do you even love me?
7 Well, I wish you'd show it,
8 'Cause I wouldn't know it.
9 What kind of dad eats his daughter's fries,
10 And doesn't even look her in the eyes?
11 Daddy, there were tears there.
12 If you saw them would you even care?
13
14
15

16 As Abadeer grows stronger, he eats the souls of many characters including the Fluffy
17 People and some Marauders, whom he tells "I'm your mama" as he sucks their
18 souls— further pointing to the surreal, psychoanalytic tone of this episode. Because
19 of Finn's insisted reunion, he and Marceline must stop the evil they have released;
20 when she is forced to fight Abadeer, she yells, "I don't want to destroy you; I just
21 don't want you in my life."
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

32 *Gender and Sexuality*

34 To revisit Knights' (2015) call for the smashing of the binary, *Adventure Time*
35 exists in a paradoxical space that questions the notion of a gender binary while also
36 playing *within* that binary. Jane's (2015) examination of *Adventure Time* illustrates
37 progressive gender portrayals, while acknowledging that there is room for critique.
38
39
40
41
42
43
44 *Adventure Time* pushes the boundary of the gender binary without perhaps
45 shattering it, by Knights' delineation. There are many instances of reinforcing
46 traditionally masculine/feminine roles and traits. This section provides a systematic
47 look at how gender is represented in *Adventure Time* as well as the orientation and
48 organization of gendered characters and storylines, considered with queer
49 embodiment.
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Princesses factor heavily into the world-building of *Adventure Time*. Across
4
5 The Land of Ooo, there are many different kingdoms and different rulers that govern
6
7 those territories— such as with the Lumpy Space domain and Lumpy Space
8
9 Princess. Princess Bubblegum is the most prominent princess and presides over the
10
11 Candy Kingdom. Princess Bubblegum has a high-pitched and child-like voice, is
12
13 animated mainly in pink, purple, and yellow hues and is often displays typically
14
15 ingénue qualities throughout the storyline. Many interactions within *Adventure*
16
17 *Time* involve situations where Finn and Jake— the Adventurers— fulfill heroic
18
19 quests to save or help Princess Bubblegum, and various romantic tensions unfold
20
21 between Finn and Princess Bubblegum across the series. Finn and Jake are often
22
23 seen in “adventure mode” where they are physically active and aggressive while the
24
25 princesses and female-coded characters are generally less dynamic, passive and less
26
27 mobile.
28
29
30
31
32

33
34 Princess Bubblegum also has a slow developing, intimate relationship with
35
36 Marceline, and the pair align with Gill’s (2009) typography of the hot lesbian and
37
38 her other; both are generally femme-presenting, with PB embodying the chaste,
39
40 good girl and Marci her dark-haired, rebel other. There are many implicit cues to
41
42 their intimacy and a few explicit signs. In the early third of the series, the two are
43
44 considered rivals or perhaps “frenemies”, and then in S3, E10 “What Was Missing”,
45
46 their conflict is explored in depth for the first time. Marceline sings a song to
47
48 Princess Bubblegum entitled “I’m Just Your Problem”, where it is revealed that her
49
50 feelings for PB are complex and conflicted.
51
52
53

54
55
56 I’m gonna drink the red
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 From your pretty pink face
4 Oh... you don't like that?
5 Or do you just not like me!?
6 Sorry I don't treat you like goddess
7 Sorry I don't treat you
8 Like you're perfect
9 Like all your little loyal subjects do
10 Sorry I'm not made of sugar
11 Am I not sweet enough for you?
12 Is that why you always avoid me?
13 I must be such an inconvenience to you!
14 Well, I'm just your problem
15 ...I shouldn't have to be the
16 One who makes up with you
17 So, why do I want to?
18 Why do I want to?
19 I don't have a clue
20 (I'm asking you)
21 Why do I want to?
22 ...And baby that's
23 Why I wanna bury you with my sound
24 These feelings they cannot bloom
25
26
27
28
29

30 Here Marceline and Princess Bubblegum are on a quest with Finn and Jake, and the
31 foursome tries to use music to open a sealed door. This is another example— like
32 the song Marceline sings for her father— of Marceline's feelings surfacing through
33 song. As Marceline sings, the rest of the group is stunned. The door starts to open,
34 and Marceline suddenly feels self-conscious and begins to feign her dislike of
35 Princess Bubblegum; the door closes again. Finn, referencing the episode's title, says
36 that what's missing is the truth and that the door responds to Marceline's genuine
37 expression for PB. When the group succeeds in opening the door, they each get back
38 an item that is important to them. Finn finds a rock band t-shirt belonging to
39 Marceline and mistakenly hands it back to her, when Princess Bubblegum admits
40 that Marceline's t-shirt was actually *her* important item. Marceline is surprised that
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Princess Bubblegum still has the t-shirt, and Princess Bubblegum explains that she
4 uses it as a night shirt— a clear indication of intimate longing and the first real sign
5 to the audience of each girl’s feelings toward the other. When Marceline takes
6
7
8 Princess Bubblegum to meet Simon/Ice King— Marceline’s complicated father
9
10
11 figure— Simon talks to Marceline about her history of troubled boyfriends and
12
13
14 when she might finally meet a nice boy. This conversation takes place even as
15
16
17 Marceline visits with Princess Bubblegum in tow. This conversation echoes the
18
19
20 experience that many queer people have with their parents while still fully or
21
22
23 partially closeted.

24 In “The Enchiridion” episode, the paradox of gender dynamics continues.
25
26 After Finn rescues Princess Bubblegum from falling out of a tower, she calls him (for
27
28
29 the first of many times) her hero and sends Jake and Finn on a quest to retrieve The
30
31
32 Enchiridion, a handbook for heroes. Throughout this quest episode, the viewer is
33
34
35 reminded that only righteous heroes can possess the Enchiridion, and all the
36
37
38 keepers and empowered figures in this episode are male, while most of the
39
40
41 characters who need saving are traditionally female, like the “old women” Finn and
42
43
44 Jake rescue from evil gnomes. A gendered rule that *Adventure Time* continually
45
46
47 grapples with is the question of who gets to be an adventurer. The two protagonists
48
49
50 are the primary adventurers, and we see other adventurers who are men or boys.
51
52
53 Concessions are sometimes made for female adventurers, such as when Jake invites
54
55
56 his girlfriend Lady Rainicorn on an adventure because he wants Finn and Lady to
57
58
59 get to know each other better. Finn tells Tree Trunks— an older female character—
60
that she’s not an adventurer, but she ultimately proves her worth when she distracts

1
2
3 a monster by flirting, in an episode that shows a strange vacillation between highly
4
5 sexualized and grandmotherly.
6

7
8 Finn completes quests and performs heroic deeds to save princesses across
9
10 The Land of Ooo. In “Prisoners of Love” Jake and Finn save seven princesses from
11
12 Ice King, a complex character who is often functionally a villain. While the episode
13
14 positions Finn and Jake as the heroes that must rescue the princesses, there is also a
15
16 subtext of gender fluidity and identity. First, the seven princesses represent
17
18 different kingdoms and all have different body/identity makeups: along with Lumpy
19
20 Space Princess, the episode introduces Slime Princess, Wildberry Princess, Hot Dog
21
22 Princess, Ghost Princess, Emerald Princess, and Raggedy Princess. While Princess
23
24 Bubblegum is the most stereotypical Western, Disney-esque princess in terms of
25
26 animation, the others showcase a vast spectrum of Ooo’s representation of the
27
28 feminine.
29
30
31
32

33
34 Early episodes reveal the way gender is set up and who gets to adventure
35
36 and also leads to opportunity for queering gender that happens more explicitly in
37
38 later episodes. The show manages to reinforce gender stereotypes while
39
40 simultaneously poking fun at them. The heroic tome is guarded by Mannish Man,
41
42 also known as the Manly Minotaur, a character that spoofs overt gender dynamics
43
44 with his extremely muscular, body builder physique, booming voice, and warrior-
45
46 like septum piercing. Once Finn gets the Enchiridion, the viewer gains access to
47
48 some information contained within the guidebook for heroes such as “How To Kiss
49
50 Princesses”, and Jake ribs Finn about the latter’s crush on Princess Bubblegum. S1
51
52
53
54 E10 features a group of burly men called the Marauders that upset Mountain Man, a
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 sensitive character, with their roughhousing. All the Marauders are large, muscled,
4
5 bearded, and physically strong and aggressive. Finn has an idea to show them how
6
7 nice it can be to pet each other instead of roughhousing.
8
9

10 There are subtle notations throughout the show of a recognition of gender
11 and sexual fluidity, even in the context of children’s programming. In S1 E3 Finn
12 tells the Princesses that he wants to rescue them from Ice King’s captivity so that
13 none of them have to marry Ice King and can instead get together with “whatever
14 sweet thing y’all wanna be married to.” A monstrous flesh wall is referred to as “him
15 or her” and covered in rainbow stickers by a character unsure of the flesh wall’s
16 pronouns. Jake says he wants to make both Finn (his best friend) and Lady
17 Rainicorn (his girlfriend) jealous with Tiffany, who has long hair and is mistaken for
18 a girl when seen from the back but is ultimately identified as a boy. Lumpy Space
19 Princess, as previously discussed, introduces some aspects of confusion into the
20 gender binary of Ooo. LSP is pink and loves to talk about boys (making out, dating,
21 etc.) but also has a deep voice. LSP is also one of the most overtly sexual characters,
22 often comparable to a teenager. It’s no coincidence that Lumpy Space with its lumpy
23 bodied youth and queer prom ritual is LSP’s home kingdom.
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 *The Body*

46
47 A clear concert of gender and the body happens during a few episodes that
48 occur under either the narration of Ice King or Marceline, in which some main
49 characters appear gender flipped. Marceline tells a story where she becomes
50 Marshall Lee, Finn becomes Fionna, and Jake is Cake. In “Bad Little Boy”, Marshall
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 Lee (voiced by Donald Glover) sings a song— as Marceline often does— discussing
4 being a bad little boy, contrasting Fionna’s “good little girl” persona. Marshall Lee is
5
6 Marceline’s masculine representation, who gets to finally be a bad boy as Finn and
7
8 Jake are always permitted to do, and Fionna and Cake are conscripted into the
9
10 behavior of good little girls, a role that does not feel comfortable to Marceline.
11
12
13

14
15 Clearly much of the show’s gender symbolism is linked to the notion of
16
17 gender *as* represented in and through the body, but genderqueerness is not the sole
18
19 area of queer embodiment in *Adventure Time*. Many of the more binary-shattering
20
21 semiotic displays in *Adventure Time* are interpellated through it’s non-human
22
23 characters that offer challenges to normative prescriptions of embodiment. In line
24
25 with Denison’s (2019) argument that children’s animation heavily emphasizes the
26
27 fusion and fluidity of the body, Jake the Dog has an extremely transformative body
28
29 that he can shrink, grow, and shape shift at will into almost any object. Like many of
30
31 the established rules, Jake and Finn are often the establishing rules for the body and
32
33 what it can or can’t do, and in Finn’s case, his is the only fully human body in The
34
35 Land of Ooo. This contrasts to what then become marked bodies, bodies of the other,
36
37 or queer bodies that the audience reads in contrast to Finn’s human boy body.
38
39
40
41
42

43 All the princesses and their various bodies have identifying features that tie
44
45 them to the specific lands that they govern or reside in. The King and Queen of
46
47 Lumpy Space, where the queer potentiality has been identified, share one body.
48
49 Fluidity as liquidity is also highly represented in *Adventure Time*. Like a cartoon
50
51 Willy Wonka, Princess Bubblegum rules over Candy Kingdom, which boasts many
52
53 sugary rivers. Several princesses of other territories have fluid, liquid bodies—
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 including Lumpy Space Princess, Slime Princess, and Wildberry Princess. During one
4
5 rescue, Ice King threatens to squish Wildberry Princess into juice before Finn saves
6
7 the day.
8
9

10 Connecting to Bloodsworth-Lugo's (2007) idea of "both and" bodies and to
11
12 Giffney's (2004) notion of queer fluidity as a navigational space, agency is often
13
14 represented in the fluid, and the viewer can glean power dynamics through who
15
16 controls the fluidity of their own bodies as well as those around them. Ice King's
17
18 powers involve, naturally, the freezing of water into ice, and we see both his power
19
20 and the queer potentiality of Ice King's character manifest often through this
21
22 dynamic. Similarly one clear exception to the ingénue pattern with traditionally
23
24 feminine-presenting characters is Marceline. The gender, power and body linkage
25
26 mostly does not hold true for Marceline, who is both primarily female-coded and
27
28 also one of the most powerful figures in Ooo. Marceline, like Ice King, goes through
29
30 many good/evil dilemmas throughout their series arcs. Both serve on multiple
31
32 occasions as foes to heroes Finn and Jake.
33
34
35
36
37

38 In S4 E9 "Princess Monster Wife", Ice King's villainy is on display as he steals
39
40 body parts from several different princesses. When Finn and Jake investigate this
41
42 mystery, it is revealed that Ice King used these body parts and magic from his crown
43
44 to create a Frankensteinian companion for himself. The tone of this episode is a
45
46 blend of crime and horror and also of Ice King as a sympathetic villain when viewed
47
48 through a critical queer lens. This episode also nicely illustrates the dovetail
49
50 between family, gender, and the queer body. Ice King has certainly committed vile
51
52 offenses by stealing body parts but also becomes emotionally vulnerable in his
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 prolonged quest to have a companion and intimate, familial love. He tells his new
4 wife that she is made up of all his favorite parts. When Jake and Finn become
5 literally stunned by the grotesqueness of Princess Monster Wife, Ice King places
6 their torpid bodies at the dinner table to have a family meal, and later the foursome
7 sit on the sofa and watch television. As they watch a family of four onscreen, Ice
8 King says, "We're normal, just like the normal people are." His monster wife cries
9 that she feels like a freak, her body an identity an amalgam of stolen parts, and Ice
10 King tries to reassure her, "We're both normal."
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

22 Through this representation, orientation, and organization of narrative,
23 character identity, and semiotics of both Marceline and Ice King, the most ethically
24 ambiguous characters also end up reading as the queerest. Given the argument this
25 research centers about the queer body and how meaning is made through and with
26 it, the queerest characters in *Adventure Time* are also among the most fluid. That
27 Finn and Jake are not only the protagonists but also both rather traditionally
28 identified in their gender as male-coded further supports the argument developed
29 in the first sections that **less** queer bodies matter **more**.
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

References

- Alvares C, Krijnen T, and Bauwel SV (2011) *Gendered Transformations: Theory and Practices on Gender and Media*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Bloodsworth-Lugo MK (2007) *In-between bodies: Sexual difference, race, and sexuality*. SUNY Press.
- Butler J (2011) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Taylor & Francis.
- Capsuto S (2020) *Alternate Channels: Queer Images on 20th-century TV*. Ballantine Books.
- Collins PH (2004) *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge.
- Cooley K (2020) Drawing queerness forward: Fusion, futurity, and *Steven Universe*. In Ziegler J and Richards L (eds), *Representation in Steven Universe*. Springer International Publishing, pp. 45–67
- Denison R (2018) Anime's bodies. In Dobson N, Ratelle AH, and Ruddell C (eds) *The Animation Studies Reader*. Bloomsbury, pp. 45–67.
- Fawaz R (2016). *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination Of American Comics*. NYU Press.
- Foster K N (2020). 11 May. Available at <https://twitter.com/KimberlyNFoster> (Accessed: 19 May, 2020.)
- Foucault M (1988). *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Ghaziani A and Brim M (2019). *Imagining Queer Methods*. NYU Press.
- Giffney N (2004) Denormatizing queer theory: More than (simply) lesbian and gay studies. *Feminist Theory* 5(1): pp.73-78.

- 1
2
3 Giles F (2005) The well-tempered breast: Fostering fluidity in breastly meaning and
4
5 function. *Women's Studies* 34(3-4): 301-326.
6
7
8 Gill R (2009) Beyond the sexualization of culture: An intersectional analysis of sixpacks,
9
10 midriffs and hot lesbians in advertising. *Sexualities* 12(2): 137-160.
11
12 Halberstam, J (2012) *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, And The End Of Normal*. Chicago:
13
14 Beacon Press.
15
16
17 Harradine D (2000) Abject identities and fluid performances: Theorizing the leaking
18
19 body. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 10(3): 69-85.
20
21
22 Hladky, KN (2013) The construction of queer and the conferring of voice: Empowering
23
24 and disempowering portrayals of transgenderism in *TransGeneration*. In Campbell J
25
26 and Carilli T (eds) *Queer Media Images: LGBT Perspectives*. Lexington Books, pp. 101-
27
28 110.
29
30
31 Husbands L and Ruddell C (2019) Approaching animation and animation studies. In
32
33 Dobson N, Roe AH, Ratelle A, and Ruddell C (eds) *The Animation Studies Reader*. New
34
35 York: Bloomsbury.
36
37
38 Iedema R (2001) Analysing film and television: The case of the St Vincent's hospital
39
40 (Melbourne) documentary. In van Leeuwen T and Jewitt C (eds) *Handbook of Visual*
41
42 *Analysis*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 183-204.
43
44
45 Jane EA (2015) "Gunter's a woman?!"—Doing and undoing gender in Cartoon Network's
46
47 *Adventure Time*. *Journal of Children and Media* 9(2): 231-247.
48
49
50 Karavitis J (2015) The Finn-losophy of *Adventure Time*. In Michaud N (ed) *Adventure*
51
52 *Time and Philosophy*. Popular Culture and Philosophy Series. Chicago: Open Court.
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 Knights D (2015) Binaries need to shatter for bodies to matter: Do disembodied
4
5 masculinities undermine organizational ethics? *Organization* 22(2): 200-216.
6
7
8 LaFountain P (2016) "Darkness, waiting, without speaking": Fluidity, subjectivity, and
9
10 utopian space in Bachmann's *Der Fall Franza*. *Utopian Studies* 27(1): 77-92.
11
12
13 Li-Vollmer M and LaPointe ME (2003). Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated
14
15 Film. *Popular Communication*, 1(2), 89–109.
16
17
18 Lothian A (2018) *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction And Queer Possibility*. NYU Press.
19
20
21 Lovelock M (2019) *Reality TV and Queer Identities: Sexuality, Authenticity, and Celebrity*.
22
23 Palgrave Macmillan.
24
25
26 Morris M (2005) Queer life and school culture: Troubling genders. *Multicultural*
27
28 *Education* 12(3): 8-13.
29
30
31 *Adventure Time*. (2010—) Cartoon Network. Frederator Studios/Cartoon Network
32
33 Studios.
34
35
36 Norwood K (2013) A pregnant pause, a transgender look. In Campbell J & Carilli T (eds)
37
38 *Queer media images: LGBT perspectives*. Lexington Books, pp. 65-75.
39
40
41 Perkins C (2014) Dancing on my own: Girls and television of the body. *Critical Studies in*
42
43 *Television* 9(3): 33-43.
44
45
46 Stephens E (2014) Feminism and new materialism: the matter of fluidity. *Inter/Alia: A*
47
48 *Journal of Queer Studies* 9: 186-202.
49
50
51 Urbanski D (2020, April 1 "Gay dads" appear on Disney's kids' cartoon "DuckTales";
52
53 producer says "relevant LGBTQ+ narratives" are in the works [WWW Document],
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 disneys-kids-cartoon-ducktales-producer-says-relevant-lgbtq-narratives-are-in-the-
4
5 works (accessed 5.23.20).
6

7
8 Walden VG (2019) Animation and memory. In Dobson N, Roe AH, Ratelle A, and Ruddell
9
10 C (eds) *The Animation Studies Reader*. New York: Bloomsbury.
11

12
13 Weber S (2013) Born this way: Biology and sexuality in Lady Gaga's pro-LGBT media In
14
15 Campbell J & Carilli T (eds) *Queer media images: LGBT perspectives*. Lexington Books,
16
17 pp. 111-121.
18

19
20 Weiss G (2013) *Body Images: Embodiment As Intercorporeality*. Routledge.
21

22
23 Zebracki M & Milani TM (2017) Critical geographical queer semiotics. *ACME: An*
24
25 *International e-Journal for Critical Geographies* 16(3): 427-439.
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60