Tampere University

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# ”TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A CASE FOR EARTH!”:

## An Ecocritical Reading of Steven Universe

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# ABSTRACT

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In the face of the current environmental crisis the themes of nature and human/nature relationship have become extremely topical. They appear across media, and consequently extending ecocriticism to different media becomes ever more important. While some ecocritical work has been done on cartoons, mostly it has been on older productions. In this thesis I examine *Steven Universe* as an environmental cartoon, or enviro-toon in predominately American context. The show originally aired from 2013 to 2019, and as such is an example of a newer enviro-toon. *Steven Universe* is a fantasy/science fiction cartoon targeted at children, however, it has gained attention of both critics and audiences of all ages, and it has even attracted some academic interest.

I examine how *Steven Universe* constructs its environmental message through use of tropes from various different environmental discourses. Both the narrative and the technical features of the show contribute to the environmentalist message of the show. I use Deirdre Pike’s theory on enviro-toons as a starting point for examining how enviro-toons relay their messages. I demonstrate that the environmental philosophy of *Steven Universe* is quite different from that of typical enviro-toons. While enviro-toons traditionally have built their messages on mainstream American Environmentalism, the environmentalism of *Steven Universe* is more closely related to so called radical environmental philosophies, that question human/nature binary and find a connection between environmental and social problems. There are several different environmental philosophies that the show draws from, but most importantly it connects with ecofeminism.

A need for more diverse environmental philosophies is being recognized both in academia and outside of it. As a result more diverse enviro-toons have started appearing. Steven Universe is but one example of such cartoon, but it exemplifies how the problems traditional enviro-toons have are at least partially due to the environmental philosophy behind the narratives.

Keywords: ecocriticism, enviro-toons, Steven Universe, cartoons, human/nature relationship,

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämän hetkinen ympäristökriisi on tehnyt luonnosta ja ihmisten luontosuhteesta erityisen ajankohtaisia teemoja. Niitä käsitellään kaikenlaisessa mediassa, ja sen myötä ekokriittisen tutkimuksen ulottaminen uusiin ja erilaisiin medioihin tulee yhä tärkemmäksi. Jonkin verran ekokriittistä tutkimusta piirretyistä on olemassa, mutta se kohdistuu lähinnä vanhempiin julkaisuihin. Tässä tutkielmassa käsittelen *Steven Universe* –sarjaa ensisijaisesti Yhdysvaltalaisten ympäristödiskurssien kontekstissa. Sarja on esimerkki uudemmasta ympäristöteemaisesta piirretystä, sen ensiesitys tapahtui vuosina 2013-2019. *Steven Universe* on lapsille suunnattu fantasia/tieteisfiktiosarja, joka on kuitenkin saanut osakseen huomiota niin kriitikoilta kuin yleisöltäkin. Lisäksi sarjasta on tehty joitain akateemisia tutkimuksia.

Tutkin kuinka *Steven Universe* käyttää eri ympäristödiskurssien trooppeja rakentamaan ympäristöviestinsä Sekä sarjan tarina, että tekninen toteutus ovat osa sen ympäristöviestiä. Käytän hyväkseni Deirdre Piken ympäristöaiheisia piirrettyjä (enviro-toon) koskevaa teoriaa lähtökohtana tutkiessani kuinka tällaiset piirretyt välittävät viestinsä. Esitän, että *Steven Universen* ympäristöfilosofia on hyvin erilainen verrattuna tyypillisiin Amerikkalaisiin piirrettyihin. Tyypillisesti Amerikkalainen valtavirtaenvironmentalismi on ollut piirrettyjen ympäristöfilosofian pohjana. *Steven Universen* filosofia sen sijaan on lähempänä radikaaleja ympäristöfilosofioita, jotka kyseenalaistavat luonnon ja ihmisen kahtiajaon ja näkevät yhteyden sosiaalisten ja ympäristöongelmien välillä. *Steven Universe* ammentaa useasta filosofiasta, mutta tärkeimpänä mainittakoon ekofeminismi.

Niin akatemiassa kuin sen ulkopuolella on huomattu tarve monipuolisemmille ympäristöfilosofioille. Tämän seurauksena myös piirretyissä on alkanut näkyä ympäristöviestejä, jotka pohjautuvat eri filosofioille. *Steven Universe* on vain yksi tällainen piirretty, mutta oiva esimerkki siitä, kuinka piirrettyjen ympäritöviesteihin perinteisesti liittyvät ongelmat johtuvat ainakin osittain siitä filosofiasta, jolle tarinat pohjautuvat.

Keywords: ekokritiikki, piirretyt, Steven Universe, animaatiot, ihmisen ja luonnon suhde

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Living in the middle of an environmental crisis, there is a growing interest in both explaining the reasons behind it, and figuring out how to stop it. The theme appears across media, from news to popular fiction to advertisement. The way in which environment, or nature, is presented in media, is both indicative of our cultural understandings of human/nature relationship, and formative of them. Ecocriticism is a field of study that examines the relationship between texts and the environment, mapping the cultural understanding(s) of human/nature relationship. Like many other approaches in literary criticism, traditionally ecocriticism has had a preference for analyzing canonical Western texts, however, there has been a rising interest in including a wider variety of media in the study in the last few decades. Ecocriticism has expanded to consider not only different media types and genres, but also texts that are not explicitly environmentalist.

Nature has always featured strongly in media targeted at children, manifesting for example as anthropomorphic animals or plants, and settings of nature. For this reason children's media is an extremely fruitful place for looking for presentations of nature. In children's cartoons environmentalist framing of conflict has been mainstream for decades. However, partly because of the format, television animation has been stuck with simplistic representations of environmental problems. In the traditional (American) cartoon structure the setting reboots after every episode, and because of this there can never be any real change. However, pioneered by *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (first aired in 2005), new format of serialized cartoons started appearing on American television, and later streaming services. These cartoons have an overarching plot that gradually progresses throughout the entire series. Another defining feature of these cartoons, perhaps tied to the possibilities presented by the longer plot, is that they have an interest in more serious subject matter formerly mostly lacking from American children's cartoons, such as colonialism or, more recently, gender and sexuality. For enviro-toons this new format also offers possibilities for processing environmental questions in more depth and with greater nuance.

*Steven Universe* is one of the more influential American animated television series of 2010s. The show has gained the attention of both critics and audiences, and even some academic interest. The series was created by Rebecca Sugar for Cartoon Network, where the episodes aired on both web and television. It had its premiere in 2013 and the first major story arc was brought to conclusion at the end of the fifth season in early 2019. After this *Steven Universe: The Movie*, a feature length animated film, and a sequel series *Steven Universe Future* were aired. *The Movie* picks up the story few years after the events of the main show, and then *SU Future* continues from where *The Movie* ends. Both sequels have their own story arcs, but they heavily build on the events of the main series and also continue to deal with the consequences of those events.

*Steven Universe* follows its titular character as he, together with his friends and allies, fights against the threat of colonization of Earth by a space alien race called Gems. The Gems are magical sentient rocks that take a more or less humanoid visible form. Their society is technologically highly advanced, especially on the centre of the Empire, the Gems' planet called Homeworld. The highest Gem authority, the Diamonds, live on Homeworld and from there they coordinate all functions in the Empire. The Empire is ever expanding, as the Gems seek to colonize other planets to use them as a resource for producing more Gems for their army. Steven himself is half-human, half-gem, and the other characters are a collection of humans and Gems. Steven lives on Earth with three Gems, Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, who call themselves the Crystal Gems (as opposed to the Homeworld Gems). They were left on Earth millennia ago, together with their leader Rose Quartz, after a war following a Homeworld attempt to colonize the planet. It is later revealed, that Rose was Pink Diamond in disguise. She was the youngest of the Diamond Authority, and Earth was to be her first colony. She, however, grew attached to the planet and wanted to stop the colonization, which led to a war with the other Diamonds. At the beginning of the show Rose has been dead for several years. She was Steven's mother, and passed her gem to Steven, ceasing to exist. Rose's powers passed on to Steven with the gem, however, he is only just beginning to learn how to use them so that he can join the Crystal Gems. The Crystal Gems travel across the Earth, collecting shattered

and corrupted Gems left there in the battles fought in the war millennia ago.

In this thesis I will examine *Steven Universe* as an environmental(ist) text in predominately American context. The central questions here are first of all, what is the environmental philosophy of the show, and secondly how it compares with typical enviro-toons. I will explain how the show constructs its environmental message both in the narrative and on technical level. My analysis will focus on the episodes of the main series. I will not consider the cross-over episodes that have aired as a part of another series, and similarly any other material beyond the tv episodes will not be discussed. This is because even though *The Movie* and *SU Future* continue discussing the themes, the five seasons of the main series form a solid, self-contained, story arc. What is more, it is important to examine the message the show conveys through its main television episodes, without the additional content from other media, because this is the form in which most of the audience probably sees the show.

In chapter 2 I will start by a brief overlook of the environmental discourses and their progression in the west and especially in the United States. In addition to this general overview, I will also include a brief history of (American) environmental cartoons, or enviro-toons. This, most notably, concerns how nature has been presented in animation for children in both television cartoons and animated films. These are the contexts in which I place *Steven Universe*.

After this I will examine how the show actually constructs its environmental message. This analysis is in three parts. First in chapter 3 the Diamond Empire will be discussed as a centrist structure that proposes a dualistic worldview. The Diamond Empire as a (belief) system is the main antagonistic force in the show, and examining it reveals something of how the imperial logic works: what are the beliefs that support it, and the consequences of such logic. The fight against this system is divided in two: questioning the logic behind it, and imagining an alternative system. These are the focuses of chapters 4 and 5 respectively. In chapter 4 I examine how the show challenges the binaries on which the centrist logic is based on. Finally in chapter 5 the focus is on the alternative worldview *Steven Universe* offers.

# 2. CARTOONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

According to Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann enviro-toons "reflect the evolution of the environmental movement" (243). The environmental movement here refers to mainstream American environmentalism, which makes sense as Murray and Heumann write exclusively about American productions. It should be noted, however, that there are cartoon industries in other countries that undoubtedly make cartoons informed by different environmental philosophies. The environmental consciousness and intentions of the creators are not the only cultural context in which the cartoons form their messages. The audiences' worldviews also affect how they interact with the enviro-toons (Whitley 4). This means, for example, that topical messages are more likely to have an impact. In the face of the global environmental crisis the audiences are probably becoming open for new, more global messages. Ones that draw from environmental philosophies different from that of mainstream environmentalism. It would then stand to reason that these newer environmental philosophies, as they gain traction, would in turn be mirrored in enviro-toons.

Specifically American media landscape and environmental discourses are the context in which I situate *Steven Universe*. Even though the new cartoons are undeniably inspired by the Japanese anime and the media may have become more international (for a discussion on Japanese anime's influence on *Steven Universe* see Ziegler and Richards), there is use of markedly American tropes in *Steven Universe*, which is why I am discussing it as markedly American cartoon.

In chapter 2.1 I will give a rough overview of the development of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a varied and ever growing field, and I will not be able to address it extensively, which is why the focus will be on those approaches that help to place this thesis as an ecocritical work.

Ecocriticism both examines the environmental discourses and is molded by them. In chapter 2.2 the focus will be on these discourses, predominately in the Anglo-American context. This will then help me examine *Steven Universe* as an environmental text, or enviro-toon.

In 2.3 I will examine cartoons as a medium for environmentalist discussion. That section will look closer into the theories concerning enviro-toons. Although a brief history of the genre is needed, the focus will fall more heavily on examining how they convey their messages. This means taking a closer look at how the environmental philosophies discussed in the previous section manifest in the rhetoric of the cartoons, as well as theories of how the animation itself can be used to convey the message.

Finally, in 2.4 I will briefly examine science fiction genre's possibilities for environmental discourse.

## 2.1 Ecocriticism

There is no consensus between the ecocritics even about its "most basic interpretative methods [and] fundamental ideological concerns" (Huggan and Tiffin 2). Cheryll Glotfelty in the first collection of works on the field published in 1996 named *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* defined it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"(xviii). Since then "the primary role of literary analysis in ecocriticism" as well as the field's "relationship with the biological and environmental sciences" have been disputed (Huggan and Tiffin 12). What seems to still hold true to this day, however, is Glotfelty's notion that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). She further suggests that "[e]cocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture" and that "as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman"(xix). Even if reaching a singular and concise definition of the field is not possible, these assumptions capture what is central to it, without limiting either the critical theories that can be used, or the texts to which they can be applied. The absence of limitations is important, because, while much of the attention of ecocriticism has fallen on so called nature writing, as Huggan and Tiffin remind us ecocriticism should "be understood as a particular way of reading, rather than a specific corpus of literary and other cultural texts" (13).

There are two features of ecocriticism as it is understood today, that are covertly suggested by the preceding Glotfelty quotes, but perhaps need to be made overt. First of all ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary endeavor. Partly this is because of its late emergence. The other eco-humanties in the academia and the environmentalist movement had their beginnings decades before literary criticism caught up (Glotfelty; Huggan and Tiffin). Possibly because these neighbouring fields, such as environmental philosophy, have grown and developed in their own right, ecocriticism can turn to them to borrow theoretical tools for the analysis. This already leads the field towards interdisciplinarity. Another reason for the interdisciplinarity, and perhaps more important one, is the interconnectedness in the basic subject matter of the field, any reasonable tackling of which requires interdisciplinary approach.

The second feature is ecocriticism's drive for change. From the beginning the field has been interested in not only theorizing about the relationship between nature and culture, but also in advocating "real world" change. This is because what Glotfelty terms human culture's connection to the physical world can be understood not only in terms of theorizing about physicality, but also as a critique of academia's tendency to concentrate on abstract theories and forgetting the lived reality.

What makes ecocriticism worthwhile, then, is that by studying media we can not only examine the current environmental understanding, but media can also help imagine and distribute the alternative philosophies that many environmental philosophers argue are needed to battle the environmental crisis. Huggan and Tiffin, for example, recognize "writing and reading as 'worldly' critical activities, as modes of engagement that may not necessarily lead to direct action but raise consciousness of its possibilities and draw attention to the urgency of the causes they seek, however obliquely or even ambivalently, to present" (ix). Even though they never mention popular, or genre fiction, save for pastoral, there are immense possibilities there. Different forms of popular entertainment should not be left outside the texts studied, especially considering how many people they can reach.

Following Elaine Showalter's division of feminist criticism into three developmental stages, Glotfelty has identified three similar stages of ecocriticism. The first stage examines representations of nature in literature, identifying different stereotypes and recurring themes. The second stage is concerned with promoting nature writing as a genre, as well as "environmentally enlightened works" in mainstream fiction and bringing them to the reach of academic interest. The third stage is the theoretical phase. (xxii-xxiv) Now, more than twenty years after Glotfelty identified the stages, we are deep into the theoretical phase, forming new connections between disciplines to try and answer more and more complex questions. From the point of view of change, while the first two stages are mainly concerned with raising awareness, the theoretical phase, as its name suggests, is ready to take part in developing and trying out new theories.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is one of the newer approaches. Drawing largely from environmental philosophy, ecofeminism and postcolonial criticism, it argues that ecological problems and colonialism are tied together, and the critique aimed at them should take this into account. Postcolonial ecocriticism wants to bridge the gap between the concern for humans and for environment, arguing that both can, and should, be cared for at once. They are not, so argues postcolonial ecocriticism, two different problems after all, but connected in a fundamental way, both in cause and in effects. That is to say, environmental problems often disproportionally affect the (formerly) colonized, and are also caused by colonization. DeLoughrey and Handley explain four important areas of overlap in ecocritical and postcolonial theory.

> First, an ecological frame is vital to understanding how geography has been and still is radically altered by colonialism … Second, Enlightenment dualisms of culture/nature, white/black, and male/female were constituted through the colonial process … Third, the ecocritical interrogation of anthropocentrism offers the persistent reminder that human political and social inequities cannot be successfully and sustainably resolved without some engagement with the more-than-human world and with deep time. … Finally, the field of postcolonial studies has long been engaged with questions of agency and representation of the nonspeaking or subaltern subject, foregrounding the ways in which narrative and language effectively displace the production of difference and alterity. Consequently, postcolonial ecocriticism importantly theorizes the question of who can "speak for nature". (DeLoughrey and Hanley 36-37)

What bringing together postcolonial and ecocritical frameworks does, then, is underline the continuity and interdependence between human and more-than-human world. It widens the understanding of how colonialism works: it allows us to, for example, see the use of natural resources as colonialism and by extension "nature" as a colonial subject, but it also allows understanding humans as dependent on these natural resources. The environmental problems, then, cannot be successfully addressed without also addressing the colonialism behind them. There are several directions to turn to when seeking environmental philosophies that will allow caring for the environmental and human interests at once, or in other words, that understand that environmental interests *are* the human interests. DeLoughrey and Hanley point out that "postcolonial and decolonizing nations have debated these particular issues [of environmental and political conditions with immediate consequences for their lives] for decades in ways that firmly place the human in nature" (28), while in the West alternative philosophies have been theorized by, for example, ecofeminism. In the next section I will discuss some of these philosophies as a part of the environmental discourses in American context.

## 2.2 Environmental discourses

According to Victoria Davion "mainstream approaches to environmental philosophy can be divided into two basic categories, those that argue for environmental protection based on the instrumental value of the environment, and those that seek to extend intrinsic moral value to at least some non-human entities" (242). According to DeLoughrey and Hanley the American mainstream environmental movement's focus is on "wilderness and conservation" (32). This is, however, motivated not so much by seeing "wilderness" as valuable in itself, but rather it has been valuable as a counterforce to the problems of modernism. Countless instances of American nature writing have depicted "nature" or "wilderness" as an escape from the hectic life in the city, a respite. Another reason for conservation, but just as instrumental, is the finiteness of Earthly resources highlighted by the environmentalisms of 1960s and '70s (Murphy 2017, 20). Animal rights

movement is an example of an approach that wants to extend the intrinsic value to (some) non-humans. The problem with this comes from the reasoning behind the extension of value. Usually it is based on some feature that the non-human has in common with human, essentially granting some of the *human rights* to non-humans. What is more, Huggan and Tiffin "recognize that the very idea of rights, especially the granting or extending of rights to others of all kinds, may itself be regarded as in essence anthropocentric, since it is only the dominant (human) group that is in the position to do so" (19; see also Plumwood 11).

While these mainstream environmental movements have had a profound effect on ecocriticism and environmental philosophy, other approaches have been growing alongside them, even if their presence in academia has not been duly appreciated until recently. Green Radicalism is an environmental discourse that has in its heart the notion that an environmentally conscious life requires systemic changes, or changes in how we conceptualize our relationship with the environment. (Murphy 34) It is not a single environmental philosophy, but instead it includes different approaches with different focuses, for example ecofeminism, deep ecology, and social ecology. These approaches criticize mainstream environmentalism(s) for several reasons, such as replicating the nature/culture dualism, anthropocentrism, tendency to "separate issues of environmental ethics from questions of inter-human ethics", and "problematic assumptions about what it is to be human" (Davion 242-243).

Of the alternative environmental philosophies in the Anglo-American discourse deep ecology has gained perhaps the most attention. Indeed, DeLoughrey and Hanley suggest that "northern environmental discourse … has become synonymous with deep ecology", and because of this "it has become difficult to foreground the complexity of environmental thought in Anglo-American discourse"(34). Deep ecology sees the cause for the ecological crisis in the anthropocentrism that is both caused by and holds up the understanding of humanity as separate from (non-human) nature. The approach suggests that in order to resolve the current ecological crisis the human/nature divide should be demolished, and humans should understand themselves to be a part of nature. However,

deep ecology is not without its fallings, and has been accused, for example, of placing the environmental concerns higher than those of plighted humans (DeLoughrey and Hanley 33; Mathews). On the contrary, ecofeminism seeks to consider both the human suffering and environmental concerns together.

Ecofeminism is not by any means a single theory, but rather a collection of theoretical standings, that have in common that they see similarities between the human/nature and the male/female divide. Furthermore ecofeminism, at least in the form I use in this thesis, argues that while it is this human/nature divide that has led to the ecological crisis, it as well as the male/female divide is merely one in a series of dichotomies that make the basis for the (western) patriarchal hierarchies. These hierarchies have been used to explain and rationalize not only the human oppression of nature, but also the oppression of other humans in the form of sexism, racism, and colonization (Davion 235). There are several theories of the prejudice system that informs all others. For example Val Plumwood sees the dualism behind all other dualisms to be nature/reason. According to her this nature/reason duality has led to a "crisis of reason", where we fail "to situate dominant forms of human society ecologically" and "non-humans ethically"(2). Because of this we also forget our bodily realities, the ultimate cost of which will be the survival of our species, if this hegemonic culture is left unchecked. As another example Cary Wolfe argues that the prejudice system behind every other is speciesism. Speciesism assumes that one will always prioritize the wellbeing of (the members of) their own species. Because "in assuming a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale" (Huggan and Tiffin 5-6), human to human oppression cannot be ended without first ending the human oppression of other species. While there is a difference between speciesism and anthropocentrism in theory, in practice and in effects the two greatly resemble each other. The different forms of oppression work together, and uphold each other. In order to reveal these prejudices, questions can be asked such as what is human? What is nature? How are they related? On what basis are they separated? The workings of

the prejudice systems and centrist logic are further examined in chapter 3.

Once the prejudices have been brought under scrutiny, the next question is, how can we conceptualize being human without replicating the nature/human divide. The ecofeminists argue that "[t]he ecological crisis requires from us a new kind of culture because a major factor in its development has been the rationalist culture and the associated human/nature dualism characteristic of the west." (Plumwood 4; see also Mathews) If the solution to our current crisis must come from acquiring a new philosophy, the Green Radicalisms cannot be content with merely pointing out the problem, but it is another job for them to sketch out the new philosophy. Same goes for postcolonial ecocriticism: "[o]ne of [its] central tasks … has been to contest – also to provide viable alternatives to – western ideologies of development." (Huggan and Tiffin 29)

As an alternative for the western, hegemonic, philosophy of conquering, ecofeminism proposes a philosophy based on "dialogic relationships" (Plumwood), care and sense of kinship with not only other humans, but the non-human world as well. In such philosophy it is possible to at the same time recognize on the one hand the interconnectedness of the different things that make the world, and on the other hand the individuality of those things. In the postcolonial context this means being able to consider both global and local needs. In addition to understanding the world as community of beings, Mathews foregrounds the importance of seeing the good in humanity: "to recognize that our humanity is the wellspring not only of a consuming destructiveness but also of the precious compassion which will help to lead us out of the moral impasse created by the divorce between humanity and nature" (46).

## 2.3 Cartoon as a medium for environmental discussion

The term enviro-toon was probably first used by Jaime Weinman to denote a (children's) cartoon that has an environmental message, whether intentional or not, and regardless of if the delivery of the message is executed well or poorly (”Things That Suck”; ”A Good Enviro-Toon”). According to Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann "enviro-toons are animated shorts or feature films that address environmental concerns. Some may preach, but they all embrace an environmental message

that responds to their historical and cultural contexts."(2) This definition allows broader applicability than Weinman's original: not limited to cartoons, any production that includes any animation at all is viable. They put a great deal of weight on the cultural context of their creation, stating, that "beliefs about technology, consumerism, and the natural are reflected in, and sometimes critiqued by, enviro-toons." (Murray and Heumann 11) Deirdre Pike seems to be rather more picky about what the category of enviro-toon includes: leaving out the poorly executed deliveries, she describes an enviro-toon as "animation that, in its form and content, offers balance through often-comedic portrayals of complex environmental discourse … create[s] layers of perspective and offer[s] open-ended conclusions … [and] complicate[s] prefabricated talking points and, as a result, create[s] space in which to hold important conversations"(13). Even if the concentration on successful enviro-toons is not the best way to define the category, it is extremely useful in theorizing how they convey their messages. As ecocriticism should be able to consider any text, the term enviro-toon should refer to any animated film or series that takes part in the environmental discourse, whether intentionally or not.

Murray and Heumann have identified three central patterns or themes in the American enviro-toons: "the power of nature over the human world, the need for controlling human intervention and nurturing the natural world in order to strengthen their interdependence, and criticism of human exploitation of the natural world" (Murray and Heumann 5). The environmental attitudes in Disney movies, which they acknowledge as the role model for American cartoons, have been quite conservative and often replicate the human/nature dualism, which is typical for (American) mainstream environmentalism. (Murray and Heumann; Whitley) "In most later Disney films" Murray and Heumann describe, "nature serves to perpetuate the status quo, to help characters escape uncontrolled "wild" nature, and to enter a "garden" in which both nonhuman and human nature are controlled by the rules of domesticity" (140). This is not to say there is no variation whatsoever: "studios may resist or subvert the aesthetic and ideological orthodoxy associated with Disney" (Murray and Heumann 11). Even some Disney releases have environmental messages that

promote the interdependency between human and nature. However, more often Disney's portrayals have been seen upholding the orthodoxy. Benjamin Thevenin also acknowledges Disney's influence: that what he calls the dominant mode of children's eco cinema is descendant from Disney movies. Eco-cinema is a category wider than enviro-toons, on the basis that eco-cinema could, in theory, include live-action as well as animated cinema. Thevenin makes no comment on this, but every example he uses comes from animation.

According to Thevenin the dominant mode of children's eco-cinema "relies on melodrama's spectacle, moral polarity, and narrative conclusiveness" (166). He sees certain problems with the dominant mode. Audio-visually stunning performance may divert the audience's attention from the themes and the message the film tries to convey, while simplistic, morally black-and-white positioning of characters as well as neatly tied up narratives where the good wins in the end only offers a very limited perspective on the environmental discussion and makes for a passive audience (Thevenin 155). In the same vein, Murray and Heumann argue Disney animations do hold up the hegemonic views, making the children watching them passive consumers rather than thinking subjects capable of taking part of the environmental discourse (157-158). If a successful enviro-toon has to create a space for conversation, as Pike suggests, leaving the audience passive is not a success.

How can an enviro-toon succeed, then? And how do we assess the success? Does raising awareness of environmental issues count as a success, or should the enviro-toon lead to action? Is critical reading an action? While there can perhaps be no one clear-cut answer, we can begin the search for an answer with the help of Pike's three-fold method for examining enviro-toons. As "theoretical tools that help describe how animation communicates environmental themes" (16) she uses medium's temperature from Marshall McLuhan, Mikhail Bakhtin's monologic and dialogic text, and tragic and comic modes of literature as theorized by Joseph Meeker.

First of these, the medium's temperature ranges from hot to cool, where "hot medium is one that extends its audiences' senses in one direction so richly and in such detail that it leaves them passive,

willing to accept the constructed reality" (Pike 16). On the opposite end of the spectrum is cool medium, which is not too detailed, and so allows "an audience many points of engagement with the text and thus a chance to participate in the meaning-making process" (Pike 16). Secondly, monologic text offers a fixed narrative, that "must be accepted passively, memorized like a mathematical formula with unquestionable validity. It does not invite questions, let alone laughter" (Pike 15). Alternative is the dialogic text, which "employs multiple perspectives and many literary devices to pry open the fixed discourse" (Pike 15). Dialogic text can invite its reader into discussion instead of merely accepting a message, as well as allowing for an ambiguous ending. Thirdly, tragic and comic modes of literature are useful for examining the conflict in the narrative. According to Meeker the tragic mode of literature is based on a view that "assumes that man exists in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is" (Meeker 157). This leads to narratives with clear-cut divisions between good and bad, where the resolution has to come from one overpowering the other. On the other hand, "[w]hen faced with polar opposites, the problem of comedy is always how to resolve conflict without destroying the participants. Comedy is the art of accommodation and reconciliation." (Meeker 168)

The comic resolution already in itself speaks for an environmentalism that is compatible with the goals of ecofeminism, as it calls for community rather than individuality. Similarly the dialogic text echoes Plumwood's call for dialogic relationships. Pike's three scales methodology of examining enviro-toons, then, quite readily allows for recognizing varying and different environmental philosophies where they may inform the animation in question. According to Pike, an ideal enviro-toon is cool, dialogic and comic, as these qualities promote discussion. Thevenin, as well as Murray and Heumann, suggest that creating enviro-toons that successfully communicate their messages may come from breaking away from the dominant mode and adopting different environmental philosophies. So rather than simply asking if the enviro-toon is successful, perhaps we should ask if and how the qualities of the animation enforce the environmental philosophy behind its message.

Perhaps some of the newer approaches to inspire cartoons are postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism, which then produce enviro-toons where the environmental messages appear alongside, and are tied to, themes of postcolonialism and feminism. This is not to say such cartoons have not been created in the past: for instance Thevenin sees movies of the Japanese studio Ghibli as an example of animations that use melodrama in a way that invites the viewer to think. He sees the reason behind this difference the more pluralistic environmental discussions and philosophies in Japan compared to America. And while the environmental messages in the popular American productions have tended to be informed by mainstream environmentalism, some change can be seen taking place there as well. As mentioned before, after the turn of the millennium, probably at least partially inspired by the success of *Avatar: the Last Airbender* there has been a wave of American (television) cartoons with interest in examining various serious themes, such as colonialism, previously mostly missing from them. These new wave cartoons have continued their victory march through 2010s and into the new decade, new titles being released by both television networks and streaming services.

Ursula K. Heise argues that the discussion of environmentally conscious animation has been largely concentrating on the thematics, and the technical side of animations has not received enough attention. She suggests that it is the technical side in particular, the plasmaticness of the animated world, that makes animation the best medium for examining "the reification of nature and its possible alternatives in modern society" ("Plasmatic" 303). There is a special possibility for blurring of boundaries between animate and inanimate in animation, where everything is animate(d). She suggests that "[t]wo strategies that animated film deploys to this end are particularly salient … nonhuman actors and supernaturally flexible bodies" ("Plasmatic" 303). Thus animation "persistently confronts questions about what it means to be human, organic, or natural." ("Plasmatic" 304-305) What is more, she explains that "[s]peaking and acting animals, plants, and objects invite the viewer to see humans as only one of many manifestations of liveliness, intentionality, and agency" ("Plasmatic" 305). It can, then, be an example of what Bryan L. Moore

calls ecocentric personification, where human characteristics are given to the non-human "to show that natural things are imbued with a value similar to humans." (198) What is more, Christopher Holliday suggests that newer animations have a tendency to use anthropomorphism to examine the hybrid identity of anthropomorphized characters as both-and rather than either-or (250), which in turn allows representations of non-human subjectivity. I will return to the theme of subjectivity in chapter 4.

## 2.4 Science fiction as an environmental(ist) genre

If animation provides an excellent medium for environmental discussion, because of its possibilities for examining non-subjectivities, science fiction is an environmental(ist) genre par excellence for similar reasons. The relationship between Self/Other or Human/Other is a strong theme in science fiction. Michelle Reid sees the Other as a metaphor for a postcolonial subject: "Postcolonialism interrogates the complex Self/Other power relationships created by the colonial encounter. Sf imagines encounters with the Other (the alien, the strange newness brought about by change), typically from the perspective of the dominant Self." (257) Joan Gordon, on the other hand, highlights the possibility for imagining a non-human consciousness and subjectivity (331). Murphy explains the likeness between ecocriticism and science fiction in slightly different terms, however pertaining to the relationship between human and nature (non-human). According to him "[t]wo ubiquitous questions appear in both: what is nature? What is a human being?" ("Environmentalism" 373)

However, because the Other, often imagined as alien, is a fantastical creation it easily lends itself to several different readings, which in itself supports the ecofeminist theories that all dualist power relations are a reproduction of the same dichotomy, as exemplified by the theories by Plumwood and Wolfe mentioned earlier. Because of this it is easy to see how science fiction, with its many-faceted other, is capable of capturing several approaches at once.

The hypothetical and speculative Other is not without problem, however. Referring to Sherryl Vint, Reid points out there is a danger of ”loss of specificity in parables of racial and colonial conflict.” (262) This is, of course not a problem unique to the postcolonialist metaphors, but because the Other in postcolonial discourse are humans, and especially ones that have often been made into other by denying (some of) their humanity, the problem is perhaps more pronounced in that context. And indeed Mandy Elizabeth Moore in her postcolonial analysis of *Steven Universe*, criticizes the show for not considering the human perspective in general, and leaving out reference to any real world human on human colonization (209). While this is a problem that deserves to be noticed, I suggest it is less of a problem from ecocritical, rather than exclusively postcolonial, perspective. I will further demonstrate the effect of the environmental focus in chapter 4. Despite the potential problems, science fiction offers an excellent platform for imagining alternative philosophies, which is what ecofeminism calls for. Reid writes: ”[science fiction] is a means of playing out the consequences and alternative scenarios of imperialism, while drawing parallels with our own world and time.” (261-262)

In addition to thematic similarities, science fiction and environmental nonfiction share rhetoric strategies, such as estrangement, extrapolation and ”an attention to the sense of wonder, to the affective experience of the marvelous” (Otto 10-11). What is more, science fiction’s speculative scenarios offer a possibility for literalized metaphors (Gordon 331; Reid 260), which ecocentric personification and anthropomorphism can also be.

# 3. DIAMOND EMPIRE: THE EPITOME OF REASON

The centrist worldview allows the One in the centre to believe, that by spreading their hegemony and making the Other of the periphery more like them, they are actually doing the periphery a favor. This is how a hegemony can always justify its actions against Others. In the narrative of the hegemony, they are doing the right thing. In the world of *Steven Universe* this narrative is expressed through the Gem Empire.

The scene is this: Peridot opens a display that shows a blueprint for the Diamonds' plans for the Earth colony. The image of the completed colony shows a planet that has been covered with Gem architecture, and in the process completely hollowed out. A flow of some sort, possibly energy, out of the Earth, circling it neatly, suggests a total control of every process that happens on the planet. "Wow, look at this! … Efficient use of all available materials … It could've been great!" Peridot exclaims. "Completing this colony would have meant the extinction of all life on Earth!" notes Garnet. Peridot does not see the problem. "But think of the good it would have done," she argues, "The Gems that would have been made, our Empire expanded." ("It Could've Been Great")

In a later episode, as Steven and friends finally confront the head of the Empire, the White Diamond, Steven tries to explain to her how the imperialism is hurting not only Earth, but also her fellow Gems. White dismisses Steven's concerns by arguing that everything she does is to "make things better". ("Change your mind") It is evident that behind the Gems' colonialism is a belief that they are building a better world. In this chapter I will examine how this rationalization works and how it ties to some of the American (or western) Earth discourses and common environmental media tropes.

## 3.1 The centrist logic

According to Val Plumwood the centric system is based on the belief, that the One (the centre) has

the natural right to conquer the Other (the periphery), because the One is the superior being. (Plumwood 118) The essential features typical for dualisms that allow hegemonic centric logic to function are radical exclusion, homogenization or stereotyping, denial and backgrounding, incorporation, and instrumentalism. (Plumwood 100-106) Radical exclusion, or hyper-separation as Plumwood also calls it, frames the two sides of the dualism as lacking any continuity, which includes ethical continuity, meaning that only those in the centre are considered to have any ethical standing. (Plumwood 107) Homogenization reduces those on the periphery all alike, discounting their differences. (Plumwood 107-108) Denial is the denial of the One's dependence on the Other. (108) Incorporation means the Other is seen in terms of how it relates to the One, or what it lacks in comparison to the One. (109) Instrumentalism means that non-human nature is seen valuable only as a resource for human objectives. (109) Following these five features of the hegemonic logic, we can see how the Diamonds in *Steven Universe*'s world have constructed themselves as the centre.

The expansion of their Empire, and increase in the number of Gems are the standards by which "making things better" is measured for the Diamond Empire. This reasoning echoes the Promethean environmental discourse, which has been the position that has dominated the Western culture's relationship to environment (Murphy 2017, 17). Based on a cornucopian view of Earth's resources as infinite, nature in the Promethean view becomes nothing more than resources for humanity's growth and development, human welfare being the only measure for good in the world. The increase of human population naturally leads to increase in human welfare, for more people means more brains capable of sorting out problems. (Murphy 2017, 17-18; Garrard 16-17) Development, itself a concept harnessed for the use of rationalizing colonialism as we will see later, is understood as a natural progression of change, and environmental problems, if they are considered at all, are seen as circumstances encouraging human invention. (Murphy 2017, 19; Garrard 16-17) The Promethean discourse easily ties to the colonial mindset, where "undeveloped" lands and their "primitive" people as part of them, are just there as potential resources for the colonizer. (Murphy 2017, 17-18) This is an example of instrumentalism, as well as backgrounding.

The perfect world the Gems are building, as they see it, is one of strict rules and hierarchy, carefully calculated and rational, where order and reason, that is to say the Diamonds have control over chaotic nature. This hierarchical thinking is evident from how the Homeworld Gems speak about themselves and the Diamonds. For example, Peridot describes the Diamonds as "objectively better than us [the other Gems]". ("Message Received") In a hierarchy, where everything, Gems and non-Gems, is ordered by how closely they resemble White Diamond, the Gems see themselves as the highest order of beings, for whom everything else is a resource, and who have the right to use them. The lower tier Gems, similarly, are resources for the higher. This largely depends on homogenization of the Gems. The lower in the hierarchy the Gems are, the less they are allowed individuality, and they are considered only as a specimen of their type. When they refer to themselves or each other, they call themselves by their type name, which suggests that they do not even have names besides their type name, and the code signifying the location of their creation. In other words, the Gems do not have an identity besides their gem type. This is not because they lack personality, but because the system does not allow a personality for them. When Steven meets Blue and Yellow Diamond's pearls, he asks them what they like to do for fun. At first the pearls are perplexed by the question, because they do not know what fun means. When Steven rephrases the question as "is there something you really like to do?" the Yellow Pearl responds with "of course not! My feelings are irrelevant." This is besides the fact that she does, in fact, enjoy posing for drawing. ("Together Alone") Another example is when Garnet tells the story of how Ruby and Sapphire met. Before they met each other they were only a sapphire and her ruby guard. Even though, from seeing other rubies in the show, the viewer knows they all have a personality that is not tied to their Gem type, Ruby considers them the same. She says that before fusing with Sapphire she had only ever fused with other rubies, which was different because "whenever [she has] fused, it's always just been [her], but bigger". ("The Answer") The only ones that the system allows real personhood for are the Diamonds themselves.

The system operates on strict person/property binary (Plumwood), where the category of

person is extremely limited, making everyone else property. The Gems themselves also very clearly consider themselves the property of a higher Gem, who may be a Diamond or another higher tier Gem. Peridot, when she first meets Pearl, asks her who she belongs to. When Pearl says nobody, Peridot asks her "then, what are you for?" ("Back to the Barn") Even the higher tier Gems consider themselves the property of one of the Diamonds.

Not only property, but the Gems also consider themselves *resources*. This becomes clear, for example, from how various fighter Gem types, such as rubies and quartzes, consider themselves expendable and easily replaced, which is their purpose for the Empire. The lower the Gems are in the hierarchy, the easier they are to replace. Keeping the low-tier Gems easily replaceable is one of the striving forces behind the Gem colonialism, because in order for the Gems to stay expendable, there must be enough replacements, which means they need to find new resources for making Gems. The Gems themselves, then, become almost synonymous for natural resources, firstly because they are the only thing that the Gem Empire really needs to stay alive, and secondly, because the Gems are created from the natural resources. However, seeing as there would not be an Empire without the Gems, considering the lower tier Gems expendable is a form of denial. The Diamonds' denial of need for the other Gems, then, echoes the western denial of need for nature.

The basis on which the Diamonds are hyper-separated from Others, is their having rationality, order, and reason. Evident, for example, from how Peridot describes the Yellow Diamond as "the most perfect, the most reasonable, rational, efficient decider ever to exist in the universe". ("Message Received") Reason and rationality, then, appear as the qualities that raise the Diamonds above others. The Gems consider consciousness the only measure of innate worth of things, and reason its highest form. It is also the only feature that grants a subject position. Personhood, then, becomes subjecthood, and by extension everyone on the periphery are reduced to objects in subject-object relationship with the centre. Subject-object binaries are further discussed in chapter 4.

Reason or rationality, incidentally, is also the quality that has been used in the western (Christian) culture as a basis for the human exceptionalism. Anthropocentrism draws a strict line

between culture and nature, and posits them as hyper-separate (Nimmo 64-65) and nature is seen as beginning where the "control by human beings and their technologies" ends (Sax 32). As a result, "the intricate order of nature is perceived as disorder, as unreason, to be replaced where possible by human order" (Plumwood 109). The scientific revolution in Europe brought a view of the universe as something reducible to natural laws, that could be known in its entirety and thus reason and knowledge could give humans a total mastery over it. (Garrard 61-62) The celebration of reason, and its placement as opposed to nature, drives a culture, that sees as the highest human achievement enlightenment, rising above nature, all that which is material, and by extension bodily. Consequently in this discourse the bodily comes to stand for nature, as opposed to reason.

The science-fiction setting of *Steven Universe* allows for a vision of the separation of reason from nature that the western rationalism has sought for. The Gems are to varying degrees (seemingly) detached from bodily existence and thus nature. Pearl describes their bodies as mere illusions, their only actual physical existence being their gems. As beings without bodies they do not need to, for example, sleep or eat, neither do they sexually reproduce. Their relatively non-bodily existence is often contrasted with Steven's "organic", human existence. Framed like this, when the Gems consider themselves fundamentally different from organic life it becomes an instance of the reason/nature dualism.

One specific form of bodily existence are emotions. In animation emotion is often signalled by color, for example as cheeks blushing bright red in embarrassment, or green faces of disgust. *Steven Universe* plays up the connection of emotion to both color and materiality. In every other Gem White Diamond sees a deficiency that is explained by the physical character of their gems. "It's written all over their gems: insecure, dependent, obsessed," she tells Steven. All of the deficiencies she lists are some form of emotionality, and what is more, connected to their color. According to her, Yellow Diamond's "impurities absorb all the blue in her light," which makes her too attentive to Blue Diamond, whereas Blue Diamond's "impurities soak up all of the warmth in her spectrum", which is why "she thinks she needs [Pink Diamond]". Herself, on the other hand,

she describes as “every color of light” and thus “perfect” (“Change Your Mind”). As their color is somewhat the only thing about their appearance the Gems cannot change, White Diamond explicitly connects color with imperfection, which in turn is connected to both emotions and the bodily, material existence.

White Diamond, as the highest authority and purest form of the Gem existence is detached from emotions and this detachment is in turn reflected in the animation as a lack of color. When we finally see White Diamond for the first time, the scene is entirely in black and white, in stark contrast with the colorful style of the show. Her existence as a being of pure reason, perfectly neat and orderly, reflecting every shade of light, is thus shown in contrast with flawed existence of everything else, symbolized by color. As every color of light, light in its entirety, White stands for the perfection that is the separation of reason from nature. That is to say, she represents the idea of enlightenment. The Diamond Empire, as it is created in accordance to White Diamond’s orders, then, is a vision of the celebration of reason taken to its logical end.

## 3.2 Development

One of the central arguments, that allows rationalizing colonization, is that of development. The language of development is much used within the Diamond Empire. The areas, where Gems have resided are without an exception built environments of great technological feats, even if most of those we see are ancient and located in forgotten colonies, overtaken by organic life. The Homeworld planet’s surface, on the other hand, is covered with technology, with no organic life in sight. The Gems are shown to be technologically much more advanced than humans, and Peridot often calls human technology “primitive”. Greg Garrard explains that among all differentiations “the metaphor of “the primitive” is unique … because it transforms a geographical differentiation into an historical or evolutionary one, so that [others] can be seen as being behind … in an inevitable progression from natural to a civilised state.” (Garrard 125) Because development assumes a natural progression towards what the developed have, the non-developed societies or

landscapes are seen as behind, not yet having reached the state of development the more advanced societies have. As such, it can be reasoned that developing them is helping them. Here nature is used in two different ways at once: on the one hand nature is given as the inferior state compared to civilization, on the other hand it is used as a legitimation of the power-structure (for a discussion on the dual usage of nature, see Sturgeon). Either way, the concept of nature is central to the concept of development. Development, then, just as the metaphor of primitive, ties together the colonizing, hegemonic centric system and the concept of nature.

Development is defined by the colonizers, who get to decide what are the kinds of knowledge that count as developed, and because reason and rationality are chosen as the biggest virtues in the Gem Empire, they are the only basis for valid knowledge. It is not by chance, that it is technological and scientific knowledge, which the Diamond Empire is shown to appreciate over everything else. In the western culture development has meant exactly that, technological and economic development, based on emotionally disconnected and objective science. Together with the idea of primitive, objectivity, is a notion that the dominant groups can use to "pass their interests off as universal" even when it hurts others (Plumwood 44). These "hard" forms of science are coded masculine (Plumwood 52-53). Any other form of knowledge, on the other hand, is disregarded or seen as less developed, and coded feminine. Technology, as cultural and masculine, is pitted against feminine and natural, where nature once again is treated as inferior of the two. Here the nature/culture binary is joined by a gender binary. This is typical for the western environmental (and environmentalist) discourse, which has been heavily gendered, using the metaphors such as Mother Nature, or Earth as goddess Gaia. The nature-female connection has heavily featured on cartoons as well (see for example Bell, Haas and Sells).

And where does the development lead? For the Gems perfection means reaching a state of finished planning, a neatly organized Gem universe. Joseph Meeker has noticed similar tendencies in the hegemonic western culture. He describes this culture as "seek[ing] unity and fear[ing] diversity" as well as "demand[ing] that one species, our own, achieve unchallenged dominance

where hundreds of species lived in complex equilibrium before our arrival." (164) Meeker bases his theory on the concept of a climax ecosystem. A climax ecosystem is a state of maximum diversity, and because of this diversity also stable. He argues, that no human, but meaning by human those hailing from the hegemonic western culture, has ever been able to live in a climax ecosystem, as we have the tendency to change the ecosystem. (162) This conception of diversity bringing stability, Garrard explains, provides a seemingly "objective basis for criticising the impoverished, single-species ecosystems of modern agriculture", but in the light of the current biological knowledge, "stasis is unusual in natural ecosystems" and instead their balance is "characterised as much by change as by stasis". (57) Even though the idea of the climax ecosystem as ideal might be flawed, Meeker's theory is not without merit. In arguing that "survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than the environment" (168) the theory accepts change itself as something to embrace, not only as a way towards some pinnacle of development, be that a climax ecosystem or complete human control over the environment according to a plan. Change as a counterforce to development as an imperial project is further examined in chapter 5.

While the Gems regard themselves as developed, the Empire's strict hierarchy is shown as stifling growth and the stasis is explicitly described as stagnation. In a more subtle argument, the animation reflects this, in a feat of clever visual metaphor. When we first see her, White Diamond's, who as the head of the hierarchy stands for the entire Empire, background is static (white noise), rather than the usual diamond/glitter patterns used in the backgrounds throughout the series. The picture of TV static here stands for the Empire being static. In contrast Earth (and its humans) are described as naturally changing, which is presented as desirable.

If the western hegemony has seen development and civilization as more desirable than nature, environmentalism has turned the tables. Civilization and development in environmentalist texts have often appeared as unwelcome sources of change, compared to nature's stability. The alienation caused by development and technology has been a trope through different genres of environmental writing. As a counter force for the idealization of development, these texts have used this alienation

to promote nature as a healing and calming force. Nature in these depictions might take the form of either wilderness or rural habitation in a pastoral setting. Here nature shows up as a stable in comparison to the changing and hectic urban life. These depictions of nature are not, however, without their problems. First of all, they depend on the idea of nature as stable, which, as mentioned above, is not strictly factual. More importantly, they depend on the binary between nature/culture. *Steven Universe* uses these same tropes, but manages to address the nature/culture binary inherent in them.

Peridot becomes extremely distressed when she loses her technological augments. She is alienated from nature, and does not know how to function without these augments. What is more, nature (in the form of a rainstorm) scares her, because she does not understand it. She, however, finds a connection to a place and the planet Earth, which helps her become her own person without the augments. Here nature appears as a healing force. It is, however, Peridot's scientific knowledge, gained by her (former) technology that allows her to connect with Earth.

Another instance of the alienating force of development happens when Lapis Lazuli, as she returns to Homeworld after thousands of years, finds it so advanced she does not understand it anymore. Even though the alienation by advanced technology is not the reason Lapis does not think she can live on Homeworld, the technology is clearly alienating to her. She, as well, finally finds her place in a pastoral setting on Earth, living in a barn with Peridot, and even farming with her. Her journey to accepting the barn as home is one of the most telling about how the show understands Earth.

After Lapis is freed from captivity on Earth, she feels like she does not belong anywhere: she does not think she can return to Homeworld, but she also does not think she can stay on Earth. Steven, however, assures her that she can, and that there are a variety of different places on Earth. What follows is a montage of Lapis and Steven flying over different places Steven knows, as he explains them to Lapis. First they fly over a forest, where according to Steven "there's no noise, no rules, and", if Lapis were to live there, "it'd just be [her] becoming one with nature." The

description is clearly a nod to how wilderness is presented in American culture. Next they fly over Empire City, a metropolis of bright lights and tall buildings. “What happens in Empire City never sleeps,” Steven quotes a saying that immediately places Empire city somewhere between two American locations extremely prominent in popular culture: Las Vegas and New York. Then he describes life in the city to Lapis as “If you lived here, you could get a cool apartment, and be a single Gem taking on the big city. You’ll have a fun job at a local coffee shop and come home to a wacky roommate-” This description echoes not the environmentalist writings, but rather chick-flicks and TV comedies typical for American popular culture. After this they fly over an area covered in traffic and grey from the pollution. “You’d like it in Jersey”, Steven says, “The people here seem to hate the Earth, too.” After this they fly over the ocean, which is presented as beautiful and serene. (“Same Old World”) This montage is significant, because it depicts several different types of locations that feature heavily in different genres of American fiction, but it shows all of them as equal parts of the Earth, without giving a value judgement. At the same time it accepts genres other than nature writing as viable sources of images of nature. Thus “nature” and “civilization”, even in its uglier appearances including thoroughly polluted areas, become analogous, merely facets of one thing (the Earth) rather than radically different from and in contrast with each other. What is more, it is not stability of the so-called nature, but the ability to make a connection to a place, that brings peace. I will return to the idea of connectedness in chapter 5.

## 3.3 The effects of colonialism

While the most striking oppression of the hegemonic logic of centrism falls on those on the periphery, Plumwood notes, it is also restricting to the people in the centre. In the Diamond Empire, as discussed earlier, the centre is formed by the Diamonds, while the other Gems may occasionally get included. However, a group of Homeworld Gems called the offcolors, who by their physicality do not easily sit in the Gem order, and the Crystal Gems, who outright defy the hierarchy are always on the periphery. Plumwood writes, that property formation dictates, that the Other, if not

incorporated to the One, is either waste, or a resource. (111) Because the Empire does not accept the offcolors as resource, they become waste.

The effects of the strict hierarchy are, however, visible in the very centre of the power structure as well. Both Yellow and Blue Diamonds admit, though with difficulty, that the rules and expectations are making them miserable. When Steven suggests that they could fix it by talking with White Diamond, Blue responds with ”but in order to fix it, we’d have to admit that it’s broken”. This exemplifies how difficult it is even for the centre to let go of the mentalities they have grown used to. Later, when Steven finally reaches White Diamond and connects with her, he makes her face her own emotions. This horrifies her. “I can't have a flaw! I'm supposed to be *flawless!”* she exclaims. “If I'm not perfect, then who am I?” By making her aware of the continuity between herself and others, Steven breaks the worldview based on hyper-separation and stereotyping. (“Change Your Mind”) White Diamond, to whom the strictest expectations apply, above all, then shows how the homogenization/stereotyping affects the centre.

Colonialism is allowed by the remoteness of the centre from the consequences. There are several types of remotedness. (Plumwood) For the Diamonds the remoteness is both ontological (they are not strictly-speaking alive so the environmental destruction does not affect their being) and spatial (they are far away from Earth). They are, of course, not distant from the destruction of their own planet in spatial terms, but they are distant from any ill effects, because they do not need the planet for anything but as a place to reside.

TV static being a symbol for problems in the connection, aforementioned White Diamond’s white noise background also frames her as lacking connection. This is as much the connection to outside world, as well as to her own emotions. The reason/emotion dualism is heavily gender coded, and a typical environmental narrative is that of an emotionally intelligent female helping a man connect with nature. This narrative is a problematic one, because it assumes an inherent connection between women and nature, here once again reinforcing the culture/nature binary. In *Steven Universe*, the reason oriented Gems, including the White Diamond, are all female-coded. On the

other hand, Steven, who has the powers of empathy, healing and is all around emotional character, is a male. This alone breaks the stereotypically gendered narrative. There is further discussion on how *Steven Universe* breaks the binaries in chapter 4.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the Gem culture is one that celebrates reason and according to a centrist logic sees the world in very strict hierarchical binaries, where the subject position is granted only to those who have consciousness. The subject-object binary also works as a person-property binary. This bears a great resemblance to the anthropocentrist world-view that has been in the west used to rationalize humanity's colonization of Earth. The Diamond Empire so becomes an allegory for the anthropocentric worldview, stemming from the reason/nature duality, where Diamonds, and White above all, stand for the enlightened human, detached from nature. Even though colonialism is the most obvious form of the hegemonic centric logic the show sets its message against, as the Earth is literally called colony throughout the show, the oppressions based on centric logic in general are opposed. This is important, because it is typical for centric forms of oppression to feed and uphold each other, which is why the logic of binary oppositions and center-periphery itself should become the focus of the critique.

What is more, colonial and environmental violence cannot be separated, because colonial practices have environmental consequences. The environmental focus can, indeed, provide the viewer with a different view of how the show frames its anticolonial message. Mandy Elizabeth Moore critiques the show about that, even though it clearly has an anticolonial message, the narrative, however, reifies the colonial hierarchy by centering the experiences of the Gems (214). She argues that "gems do not have colonizers; they are colonizers", even though the effects of colonialism are visible in them (209). She, rightly, also notes that the "gem colonization did not radically alter the epistemologies, governments, social structures, histories, or subjectivities of human culture." (212) The humans do not carry the effects of colonialism, and this, she argues, means that the show does not give us the perspectives of the colonized. However, I would argue that placing the show in an ecocritical frame, and looking at it as a critique of anthropocentrism at

that, we can see that the Gems take the place of the colonized, as well as the colonizer. What is left for the humans, then, in this analogy, is to exist in the place that is usually given to non-human nature. They are a part of the environment. By this the narrative undoes the human/nature or culture/nature binary. While Moore's critique of the show's failings of decolonial rhetoric is valid, environmental focus can make the critique of colonialism in the show more tangible. She argues that the Gem colonial violence is barely visible on Earth, because humans do not remember it. However, it is visible in the geological makeup of the planet. This only underlines how important "listening to the earth" (Plumwood) is in order for us to understand past colonial violence. It also brings us back to what DeLoughrey and Hanley wrote about the important overlaps of ecocritical and postcolonial theory: "ecological frame is vital to understanding how geography has been and still is radically altered by colonialism." (36) Listening, or reading, the earth will be the focus of the next chapter, as I turn my focus to the environmental storytelling and the theme of subjectivity in the show.

# 4. CHALLENGING THE SUBJECT-OBJECT DISTINCTION

The choice of making most of the cast into humanoid rocks, in itself complicates what is means to be natural and alive. Stone is something that is usually considered devoid of life, and a part of the nonliving environment. In our culture stone has served as “an allegory for nature stilled into resource”. (Cohen 11) It has permanence and longevity, and it is perhaps the most “natural” or “earthy” of all materials. After all, it is common to refer to our entire planet as a rock. While the Gem characters retain some of the qualities associated with stone, for example they have extremely long lifespans, they also resemble humans in many ways. Their appearances are mostly humanoid and their sentience makes them more like humans than rocks. Giving these attributes to the Gems, then, immediately makes the world of *Steven Universe* into one that poses questions such as what it means to be alive, to have agency, and where the boundaries between subject and object reside.

In 4.1 I shall take a look at how the show, and especially the character design, complicates the idea of nature, and thus, rather than upholding the binaries, highlights the analogous relationships between natural and artificial or human and environment. I continue to examine the breaking of the subject/environment binary in 4.2, where I will look at *Steven Universe* from the point of view of environmental storytelling. Animation studies have woken up to the need for more attention paid to the backgrounds, much as environmentalism to the need for considering environment - the “background” of our lives. Making the background art an integral part of the show’s message, then, is an action that in itself questions the assumed binary between subject/object or subject/environment on a technical level. Finally in 4.3 I will further examine agency and materiality as ways to undo the subject/object binary.

## 4.1 Challenging the human/nature binary

While in the environmentalist tradition(s) nature has been used as a symbol for goodness and purity, in the anthropocentric tradition the duality appears the other way round: nature as that which is dark and unruly and must be suppressed in order to become civilized. This is, of course, the basic assumption of the rationalist nature/human dualism, that anthropocentrism is built on. According to Marti Kheel one of the most pervasive metaphors that makes this our relationship with nature, is that of the beast. "Beast is conceived as a symbol for all that is not human, for that which is evil, irrational, and wild. Civilization is thus achieved by driving out or killing the Beast." (245) The rationality coincides with humanoid form, while lack of mental capacities is associated with nature, signalled by an animalistic (beastly) form. In *Steven Universe*, the image of the beast and its anthropocentric implications appear as a starting point to negotiate the nature/human relationship.

The Gems' physical form corresponds to their image of themselves. Gems possess humanlike (or more than human) cognitive capacity, and their forms are more or less humanoid. However, corrupted Gems become animalistic, beastly, both in design and in behaviour. It can be inferred that the Gem Empire sees animalistic character as inferior from humanoid. What complicates the issue further is that, for Gems becoming animalistic is not devolution per se. There are no corrupted Gems in Homeworld and furthermore, the Gems have always been made as they are. There is no former developmental state of Gems that the corrupted Gems are reverting to. Rather, animalistic corresponds to what they expect the opposite of rational or civilized to look like. However, animalistic in Gems is not natural. It follows that the beastly, then, is not any closer to nature than humane is. The opposite is true as well, of course: humane and humans are just as close to the nature as animalistic and animals are. Furthermore, Steven himself never sees the corrupted Gems as worth less than those in possession of their full mental capacities. His behaviour towards them is greatly controlled by his desire to understand, to listen. He even teaches Peridot to understand, that the animalistic behavior of the corrupted Gems is neither erratic, nor irrational, but that rather they are trying to communicate in the only way they can.

Being animalistic in the show overall is not associated with being uncivilized. First of all, Amethyst, who has not been brought up under the Gem hierarchy and their normative understanding of what they should look like, shapeshifts more frequently and more freely than any other Gem. While other Gems might shapeshift into another humanoid form, Amethyst easily assumes animal, and even object forms, such as a helicopter. It seems that to her any form itself does not imply inferior status. Secondly, there is Steven's lion to consider. While Lion is magical and possesses perhaps greater cognitive capacities than a normal lion would, his behaviour is animalistic. However, Lion, in all his beastliness, is treated as an important character and a subject with agency, as much as any of the humanoids. Steven treats him much as he does any other character in the show, and what is more, his relationship with Steven is as equals, subject to subject. He will help Steven when he wants to, and he often does, but Steven cannot control him. Lion is a part of the community on his own terms. To be civilized, then, is not to kill or drive away the beast, but rather to allow them in, to understand and care for them.

In the environmentalist tradition natural appears as the preferable end of the dichotomy, the contrast being with artificial. This, too, the show sets out to question. The Gems are a blend of natural and artificial. They are artificial: the sentient Gems do not occur naturally but rather are made. The kindergartens, the sites of Gem creation, are framed as unnatural places of great violence that seems to disrupt the balance of nature. What is more, the injectors left in the kindergarten connect the process with high technology. The Gems themselves, then, become technologically created instruments of environmental devastation. However, the Gem making process is also compared by Peridot to that of growing vegetables and more generally farming. This forms an association between the organic lifeforms on Earth and the Gems. What is more, the Gems are made of natural minerals. This becomes most evident as Steven and Peridot confront a flow of peridotite as they make their way into the centre of the Earth. Peridot seems to feel some familial bond to the substance, and says "it's made of the same stuff as Peridots." ("Gem Drill"). The natural occurrence of gems as minerals is further evident from the large geodes that adorn some of the environments.

Artifical and natural, then, do not appear as polar opposites as they tend to do in mainstream environmentalism. Rather the audience is allowed to consider artificial as natural.

According to Freya Mathews, Understanding "artificial" as part of "natural" can help us form a more ethical coexistence with our surroundings. In order to overcome the anthropocentric worldview it is important to understand not only artificial, but especially "the [anthropogenic] instruments of ecological destruction" as natural, because those are the epitome of what mainstream environmentalism has posited as the opposite of nature that is pure and worth saving. "[T]o recognize our true identity with nature, is to recognize that these technologies are all instruments of the natural order". (Mathews 49) Similar concerns are found by Evelyn Ramiel, who connects the world of *Steven Univers* with the discourse of anthropocene. The world through the lens of anthropocene shows up as already fundamentally altered, destroyed even, by human actions. The challenge for ethics in anthropocene era is to learn to live and care for a world, where the pristine "nature" that mainstream environmentalism has spoken for so ardently, does not exist anymore. In *Steven Universe*, Ramiel argues, the world is a world of Crystallocene. "The world that Steven and the Crystal Gems inhabit, and defend, is permanently scarred by its encounter with cosmic forces of colonialism and industrial extraction." (Ramiel 179) Xey argues that the background design is integral to understanding the world of *Steven Universe*, and the show's message of care. According to xem, by the background designs the show frames "ideas of perfect efficiency and utilitarianism with a sinister air" (187) and that "[b]y consistently associating geometrically perfect and highly synthetic landscapes with foreboding, imperial colonialism, and harshness, the show's art design has chosen an environmental ethic favoring the rustic, inexact, and less-refined. "(178) It is not merely the peculiar lapidarian cast of the show, then, that blurs the line between the subject and object or character and environment: the very animation itself questions it as well by giving the environmental design a part in telling the story. In the next section I shall further examine how the show uses environmental storytelling.

## 4.2 Environmental storytelling

Environmental storytelling is a concept used in game-studies to examine the intersection of world design and narrative. Henry Jenkins likens it to a much older tradition of spatial stories, which he explains are stories more interested in creating a nuanced world than in the characters. Such stories, he claims, are abundant in fantasy or science-fiction genres. (122) The principle of environmental storytelling is that everything in the scene should work towards creating a story, and thus backgrounds need to be given as much importance as the characters. Environmental storytelling can work in various ways, but most important of those for my analysis here are the stories' ability to "evoke pre-existing narrative associations" and to "embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene". (123) Environmental storytelling draws our attention to the backgrounds, and how they should not be considered only as backgroung (backgrounded) but rather considered a part of the story. In this chapter I examine how the backgrounds in *Steven Universe* contribute to its environmental message first of all by utilizing certain culturally significant images, and secondly by leaving part of the story for the backgrounds to tell. It needs to be noted that, despite its name, environmental storytelling is not necessarily environmentalist. It is, however, a technique that lends itself readily to conveying environmental messages, because it draws the audience's attention towards the environment.

In *Steven Universe* the narrative and visual framings of the environments coincide. The perspective of the show is markedly Steven's: the environments are mostly limited to those that Steven is in and experiencing. Because of this, the viewer's understanding of the world expands place by place, as Steven, or in rare instances another point of view character, wanders in them. The understanding of the world such a perspective creates is local. Tim Ingold explains, that local perspective is one of lifeworlds, where the knowledge of the world is created through sensory experiences, a material connection to the world, where humans are understood not as existing outside the environment, but rather a part of it. (Ingold) Such bodily and "situated" knowledge creates place connectivity. (Heise, *Sense* 30)

The environments in *Steven Universe* can be roughly divided in two: the Gem sites, and the natural environments that have no visible marks of Gem history. The story starts on Earth, where on the one hand the natural environments bring familiarity to the audience: they are environments we can recognize from our own lives on Earth, and thus make the Earth of *Steven Universe* feel like our own. On the other hand, the Gem sites are defined by the (remnants of) Gem architecture or technology, or some other visible trace of Gem history and they make the audience aware of history different from our own. Often these features go unmentioned by the characters, and it is left for the background art to tell the story of the violent history of Earth's colonization. One example of such a background is a battlefield. Even though Pearl tells Steven it was a battleground, and that they cannot leave it as it is because it is dangerous, the explanation is on vague terms, and it is left for the watcher to discern from the background design the extent of the battle. The site is filled with giant weapons: swords and battle axes. It is, however, overgrown with strawberries, which are arguably the more prominent feature, and so the atmosphere is not malevolent, but peaceful and almost idyllic. The strawberries that cover the weapons make it almost possible to disregard the weapons altogether. Backgrounds like these tell a story of great violence that has shaped the environment and is undeniably a part of the history, but assures us that the violence is not the end of the place's history.

There is one notable exception to the silence: the Kindergarten. This is the one place that the Crystal Gems vocally recognize as a great feat of colonial violence. "Why here? This site has been damaged enough by the Gems that were incubated here 6000 years ago!" Pearl exclaims, when the Crystal Gems find the first signs of new extraterrestrial activity on the Kindergarten ("Marble Madness"). And not for nothing, as far as the environments on Earth go, the kindergartens are perhaps the most striking feature of environmental destruction caused by the Gems. Sites for growing Gems, where Gems are injected into the ground by alien injectors, and then use up all of the nutrients from the soil to grow. When the Gems then hatch, they leave exit holes. The entire area is an empty wasteland full of holes, where nothing can grow. There is a stark contrast between

the living environment, and the kindergarten, which is symbolized by skulls on the border, and absence of plants. Where the kindergarten begins, all organic life ends. The kindergartens, then, use the imagery associated with death to tell us about colonial violence. Most notably, these are Gem sites, where the Earth has not been able to take over after the Gem colonization.

The local perspective is contrasted with the global one. According to Ingold, in global understanding knowing the world comes from rational learning and cognitive work done upon the world, instead of bodily experience or "sensory attunement". (37) World, then, becomes an object to understand rather than an environment we are a part of. From this point of view it is an object for the collective humanity to own and look after. (39) This also sets humanity outside the world, concealing our dependence on the environment (Ingold 39), or in Plumwood's terms, backgrounding it. The global view of the world is always from the outside (Ingold) and the view of Earth from space separates the viewer from the Earth (Sturgeon 99). This is one way to create the distance, that allows for the centrist logic. The global images are sparsely used in *Steven Universe*, and when they do appear, they are connected with the Gem Empire's environmental destruction and colonialism, rooted in their Promethean perspective of the world.

The first time in the series when we see Earth from space, the first instance of a Whole Earth image, it is from the ancient Moon Base. This piece of Gem architecture was built on the Moon to allow the Diamonds to observe the Earth colony. When Steven and the Gems visit the base for the first time, they discover the technology there allows the user to view a holographic representation of Earth as finished colony. The picture is projected over their view of the planet Earth from the window, making it possible for the Gems looking at the screen to compare the planet and the plans, assessing the progression of the development. The planned end point of development is a completely hollowed out Earth. For Peridot this is exactly how she has always seen the Earth: a resource, a set of data, rather than a lifeworld. For her there is nothing disturbing in this image. This clues the audience in on how the Gem Empire sees the Earth: just a planet, a globe. As Ingold argues "[t]he image of the world as a globe is … a colonial one" because the world in this picture

appears as a “preformed surface waiting to be occupied” (38). The Whole Earth image creates a sense of being able to dominate the Earth (Sturgeon 42). The global perspective, then, is used to show the imperial mindset of the Gems. But if this perspective is common for a Homeworld Gem such as Peridot, for Steven and the Crystal Gems, who are used to seeing the Earth from lifeworld perspective, this sudden global scale for possible destruction is extremely worrisome.

But, it is not only colonial connotations that the Whole Earth pictures have: in the west these images were adopted most notably by the Environmentalist movements of 1970s and 80s, as signifiers of our shared planet. (Boes 167) There has been critique towards using these pictures as an environmentalist symbol, because they offer a totalizing picture of Earth that occludes the differences of lived realities of the inhabitants of Earth. (Boes, Ingold) What is more, images of Whole Earth depict the planet as “naturally harmonious”, which “inhibit[s] us from understanding the Earth as a dynamic, complex, interrelated set of entities enmeshed in both conflict and cooperation, an Earth in crisis.” (Sturgeon 42) However, these images helped to create the metaphor of “spaceship Earth” and to contest the prominent Promethean discourse of cornucopian Earth. Being able to see Earth as a contained body brought about the limits discourse (Murphy 2017, 21). Earth from this position is seen as limited and fragile, and everyone that lives on it is connected and united.

There are two photos in particular that have had a profound effect on the western environmentalist movement and have been adopted by the environmentalists. These are the photographs of Earth, taken from space as a result of the space missions. First is the *Earthrise* depicting Earth, still half in shadow, rising over the horizon of the Moon. Second is *Blue Marble,* a picture of Earth in its entirety, bright, surrounded by the vast emptiness of black space. Because of the continued association with environmentalist movements, these two images have entered the cultural conscious of the west as symbols of Earth under threat and in need of saving.

As Steven and his friends land on the Moon Base we are treated to background designs depicting Whole Earth, including animated replicas of both the *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* images.

This is in the same episode where the blueprint of the Earth colony, depicting how the Diamond Empire would have destroyed all life on Earth, is introduced. The first view of Earth from an outside (Gem Empire's) perspective coincides with the look at the planned destruction of the planet. Together with the background designs that evoke strong environmentalist connotations, this frames the threat of violence posed by the Gem Empire as not only colonial, but also environmental.

There is one significant difference, however, in the *Earthrise* picture compared to the original: the Moon Base. Instead of the barren moonscape that takes up the foreground in the original photograph, in the *Steven Universe* version there is a spire of Gem architecture, high technology and clearly alien in its shape, that is always visible whenever the Moon's surface is shown. In the place of plain natural landscape undisturbed, there is a constant reminder of how the Diamond Empire has conquered this space. As with the various Gem sites on Earth, the Gem architecture goes unmentioned by the characters, but the environment on the Moon tells us a story about colonization. People on Earth might have forgotten about the Gems, but the proof of their colonialism is clearly visible in the environment.

Earth is the first planet we see from the global perspective, but it is not the only one. While *Steven Universe* introduces both Earth and Homeworld planets from a surface perspective first, thus underlining the importance of lifeworlds and place connectedness, global views are employed as a way to draw attention to environmental destruction the Gem Empire has caused across the universe. When Steven and his friend Connie crash land on a moon they do not know, they get a glimpse of a broken planet in the sky. From this sight alone they are able to discern that they have landed on a former Gem moon base before they find any Gem architecture on the moon itself. Planetary destruction, then, is so heavily connected with the Gem Empire that seeing a destroyed planet alone is enough to mark it as a (former) colony.

The closer the planets are to Homeworld, the centre of the Empire, the stronger the traces of colonial violence become, and the culmination comes in a form of a global perspective on Homeworld itself. The image is perhaps the most striking background in the entire show: a

completely shattered planet. In a setting, where shattering rocks is the greatest act of violence imaginable, shattering an entire planet suggests an enormous amount of (environmental) violence. This sight is even more impactful, because the destruction is not visible from the surface of the planet. If the picture of Whole Earth first brought to our attention the possibility of destruction of the planet and its fragility, here as well we need the outside perspective to see and understand the scale of violence the planet has suffered.

The environments of the show contribute to the world building, but that is not their only significance. *Steven Universe* also creates heavy associations between characters and environments, blurring the line between characters' stories and environments. On the one hand this can be understood to stand for a character's place connectedness. This sits in the tradition of American Environmentalism that sees locality, developing a relationship with one's immediate surroundings, and rootedness as important ways to conceptualize our nature relationship and to reconnect with nature, to oppose the problems of globalism. (Heise, *Sense*, 29) There will be further examination of the forms of connectedness in chapter 5. On the other hand the associations blur the boundaries between character and environment in a way that questions the subject/object relationship. It is typical for the western culture to understand environment only as a backdrop for human activity. Drawing attention to how the environments shape characters, once again, promotes the backgrounds into a position where they are allowed a part in telling the story. Next I will take a look at how environments are used to establish characters.

We learn about Homeworld like we learned about Earth: when we first see the planet we are brought onto its surface. We are inserted in the lifeworld of the Homeworld Gems. From this perspective Homeworld appears as a technologically advanced place, symbolized by the geometrical shapes and somewhat futuristic colors of the backgrounds. The place is devoid of organic life, however. This first look at Homeworld is associated with Yellow and Blue Diamonds, who Steven meets there for the first time face-to-face, in a court hearing, where absolutely everything passes according to their orders. Yellow and Blue, as well as the entire Empire, are

marked as organized beings, who have already completed the feat of suppressing the chaotic organic life. Steven escapes before the Gems can subject him to a punishment. As he is running from the Diamonds, he ends up in the Homeworld kindergarten, which resides at the core of the planet, long forgotten. While it is just as devoid of organic life as the city above it, it is much less technological, made of nothing but rock and the exit holes of Gems made there long ago. The kindergarten is home to the Offcolors. As they have been rejected by the Empire, these Gems are both metaphorically and literally below the Gems that live in the city. Much like the kindergarten they inhabit that cannot produce any more Gems, they are useless for the Empire, and just as forgotten.

Even the iconic shattered planet image of Homeworld is associated with a character. When we finally get the global perspective on the Homeworld we are given this view of the planet in the same episode where we first meet White Diamond, the highest order of the hierarchy. This ties the destruction of Homeworld to the Diamond Authority. The colonial violence, for surely their own planet was the first victim of their colonial project, takes the form of environmental destruction, and it is impossible to separate one from the other.

The heaviest association between a character and an environment is that of Amethyst and the prime kindergarten, however. Amethyst herself connects with the place, to the extend that she sometimes thinks she is the place. She feels guilt about being a proof of the Gem destruction on Earth. The fact that she quite literally is part of what we would expect to be part of the environment: a piece of the stone that makes up the site, further blurs the boundaries between the character and setting.

The environmental storytelling promotes listening to the Earth, and promotes environment to the equally important position with the characters. Thus the importance of listening to the environment is mirrored in the animation itself. The background art can tell us things the characters cannot. Similarly environments should be considered an important part of our lives, rather than just a backdrop for our existence. We have to look at the environments —the backgrounds of the

animated frames— to see the full extent of the colonialism, and the preference of local perspectives in itself works against a rationalist worldview.

What is more, the characters and environments do not exist separate from each other, but rather they are in constant interaction and mutually affect and shape each other. This blurring of character/environment is further accomplished by the choice of characters. By making most of the cast out of rocks, *Steven Universe* takes what are usually considered part of the natural environment and gives them subject position. In the next section I will take a look at how the show complicates what is considered alive, and what this suggests about subjectivity and agency.

## 4.3 Subjecthood

In the anthropocentrist tradition, human and nature exist in a subject-object relationship, where nature is never given a true subject position. To counter anthropocentrism, then, we need to question on which grounds we grant subject positions. This worldview that values reason above all else, associates subjecthood with having a consciousness. One pervasive image on the anthropocentric worldview is that of "nature as mindless matter" (Kheel 246). This image makes treating nature as instrumental, and in highly hierarchical terms, permissible for humans. Contesting this image is a great starting point for countering anthropocentrism. To do this the two operative words, mindless and matter, must be taken apart and scrutinized. Firstly, is having a mind (or consciousness) the only way to attain a subject position? And more over, can the world be separated neatly into those with a mind and those without? Secondly, is it possible to appreciate matter in its own right, regardless of if it has a mind or not?

Using life as a metaphor for agency, *Steven Universe* shows us that connecting agency with sentience is not straightforward. Steven is able to give sentience to plants. For the first time he does this by accident as he grows a group of watermelons that look like himself. When the watermelon stevens are brought to life, it is at their gaining of sentience that Steven exclaims "they are alive!" The Gem characters, on the other hand, as already mentioned, are a blend of humanoid and

lapidarian. They are not organic, and biologically speaking they are not alive. However, they consider themselves alive, as is evident from the fact that they often refer to their lives. All this would suggest that what it means to be alive is to have sentience. However, the corrupted and shattered Gems lose some of their cognitive capacities, sometimes to the point where a question can be raised whether they are truly sentient anymore. For example, the Diamonds have made Gem experiments, where they have artificially attached shards of different Gems together. These experiments seem to lack any cognitive capacities, but they are animate, can move, and are considered alive. What is more, strictly speaking plants are alive even when they are not sentient. Making sentience the measure of being alive, and by extension having agency, does not quite hold up.

One alternate way of conceiving agency, is as materiality, theorized by for example Jane Bennett. In this approach life is also used as a metaphor for agency, as is clear from the very term vital materialism. According to Bennett the vitality of of matter, which she also terms thing-power, is "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle"(6). There is no requirement for consciousness of the effects caused. Materiality thus becomes agency, which blurs the lines between subject/object. Here we come back again to the idea that as much as the character (subject) has an effect on the environment, the environment has an effect on the character (subject). Materiality as agency is a powerful message against the hyper-separation of matter/mind. Characters are not subjects that live in an object environment, but rather characters and environments exist in a network of relationships, where they affect each other. All lives, human and non-human, "are to a large extent determined by inanimate forms of matter that do not have nervous systems" (Conty, 84).

Heise acknowledges animation "as an aesthetic framework in which [materialist] visions of nonhuman agency have been playfully explored since long before new materialist theories arose." (Heise 2014, 308) Holliday recognizes cartoon as a medium, where it is typical for the questions of subjectivity to be processed through anthropomorphism. He sees a "synonymy between animation

and anthropomorphism as artistic models. Both are rhetorical strategies in the service of characterization: invested in degrees of personification, the impression (and impassion) of consciousness, and the presumption of subjectivity." (Holliday 249) But as I mentioned earlier in regards to environmental storytelling, animation has also the possibility of highlighting the importance of the environment by giving agency to the background designs. As such, it is important to include the background/environmental design itself into the discussion of characterization, not only acknowledge the possibility of picking elements of environment and turning them into characters.

The materiality of the Gem characters indeed forces the audience to consider the human and stone of all things as a continuum. The Gems see their existence differing from that of humans on the basis that humans are organic. The Crystal Gems do not quite understand Steven's needs, because he is "half organic". Steven needs to eat and sleep, and can get bodily hurt, all of which are features the Gems do not share with him. However, as the show progresses it becomes clear that the Gems and humans are not all that different. First of all, they are able to have offspring, which suggests that there is some fundamental similarity to their (material) existence. However, at the same time the Gems are clearly stone as well. Peridot seems to feel some connection to peridotite because it is the same material she is, even when that material appears without consciousness. Through her the audience is asked to care about this mineral in the crust of Earth. Indeed, anthropomorphizing matter can be used to "act against dualistic ontologies" and "reveal the similarities and symmetries existing between humans and nonhumans." (Iovino and Oppermann 8) Anthropomorphism can "provide an alternate worldview to … the anthropocentric paradigm." (B. Moore 3) If we understand materiality to be what makes the relationships that the world is made of, the importance of reason based agency is diminished. Understanding materiality as life bridges the ontological gap and brings the non-living closer to our existence. Or as Bennett puts it: "[i]f matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated". (13) Connectedness is further examined in

chapter 5. The answers to the questions I asked at the beginning of this section seem to be tied together: we can conceive subjectivity beyond consciousness, if we can appreciate materiality on its own right as agency.

# 5. IMAGINING A BETTER WORLD

In the previous chapters I have examined how *Steven Universe* questions the dualistic human/nature relationship and the imperial mindset behind it. However, to question the discourses of the hegemony that lead to environmentally destructive mindset and behaviour are only one of the purposes for an environmental text. Another is to imagine an alternative world. It is not enough to dismantle the Empire, the work continues as we have to also build that which comes after, to imagine the world without the Empire. In this chapter, I will examine the vision of a world without the Empire that *Steven Universe* offers.

The resolution of the conflict reveals something of the values the show carries. The narratives of enviro-toons often present the environmental threat as a simple battle between good and evil and the story ends when good conquers evil. As I have discussed before, the framing of environmental threat in such simplistic terms is problematic in itself. However, even if the conflict itself were suitably multifaceted, a neat resolution will leave the audience with a feeling that there is no more work to do (Thevenin). According to Thevenin one of the features of a successful enviro-toon is that the ending leaves room for the future work. However, it is not enough to merely look at the resolution to understand the values the show promotes. In the show the culture on Earth, as I have mentioned before, is in contrast with that of the Empire, and can thus offer an image of a world without the Empire. This is to say, that the narrative suggests that there are other things that are important, besides the conflict. This is a story where conflict is not the main feature. In this chapter I shall examine what are the values of such a world and how they connect to the environmental discourse(s).

First of all 5.1 will address how in *Steven Universe* change is a positive trait and a value in itself. Appreciating change can lead to a more healthy relationship with our environment. What is more, change ties in with the resolution of conflict. The work does not end where the conflict is resolved, rather it is only the first part of the characters' journey. The Homeworld Gems are allied

one by one, and the path is not always straightforward. The continuous work is one of the main themes of the show's decolonial/environmental message.

Secondly in 5.2 I will examine connectedness. As I have mentioned before, one of the things that allows the centrist logic to work, is remoteness. Connectedness, as its opposite, is then almost self evidently part of the non-centrist worldview. In *Steven Universe* connectedness takes many forms, but ultimately they all point to the same direction: that the world is thoroughly connected.

Finally 5.3 will be dedicated to the resolutions of the conflicts, and what they tell us about the values of the show. This includes, most importantly, the show's stance on justice. However, the conflicts and their resolutions are not a matter separate from everything else, which will be clear from how the former principles, change and connectedness, shape the conflicts. Care for others, and consequently the peaceful resolutions of conflicts form the core of the (environmental) ethics of the alternative world.

## 5.1 Change

As explained in chapter 3, one of the core ideas of imperial logic is that of development: the Empire strives towards some set, static, end goal. Accepting change as a way of existence can counteract this idea of development. Change as a counter force for development is connected with the idea of comic time (Garrard) or comic mode (Meeker). Garrard describes tragic time as "predetermined and epochal, always careering towards some final, catastrophic conclusion", whereas "comic time is open-ended and episodic."(Garrard 87) Meeker explains that "[l]iterary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed unnecessarily, the comic mode seeks to return to normal." (159) This does not mean, that everything will continue as before the conflict, but rather that by changing and adaptation we can find a way to continue to live. There is no trait that is worth keeping, if it means our destruction. "Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than the environment, and upon his ability to accept limitations," explains Meeker. (168)

The Gem Empire, on the other hand, in their mindset of development is static, stagnant and has an unhealthy nature-relationship. While the Gem Empire has advanced technologically (developed), their rigid social order is thousands of years old and depends on unsustainable use of resources. The environments of the Gem Empire stifle growth, as seen from the kindergartens where nothing can grow. This is reflected by the background designs as well. In the design "geometrically perfect and highly synthetic landscapes" are associated "with foreboding, imperial colonialism, and harshness". (Ramiel 178) In other words, the Empire's ideal of development, in the form of perfected landscapes, is associated even on the level of art with negative nature-relationship. The imperial worldview is stuck to a phase, where they see themselves as the highest order in the world and are trying to make order in the chaos of nature. From the point of view of development as an imperial project careening towards a preset end goal, ongoing change is chaos. Earth, on the other hand, is a place where change and growth can take place, and as such is an alternate to the Gem Empire. In *Steven Universe* change presents in two forms, as character growth and as the natural change on planet Earth, which includes weather, seasons and even history.

The importance of change is apparent from the final episode title: "Change Your Mind". The title refers to the resolution of the show's final confrontation between White Diamond and Steven and his allies. Of course, since changing White Diamond's mind happens in the very last episode, there is unfortunately little time to explore the process, and so the character growth gets turned into a simple and quick change from one mindset to another. This lack is, however, somewhat amended by the fact that the show has shown the character growth process in more detail before, with different characters, presenting growth as gradual, ongoing, and without a set endpoint. Perhaps the most extensive study can be made of change in Peridot.

Peridot is the first Homeworld antagonist Steven together with the Crystal Gems turns into an ally, and the audience can witness her entire ethical/ontological journey, as she abandons the Homeworld's imperial centrist logic, in favor for the more equality based worldview of the Crystal Gems. The switch is not easy for her, nor is it straightforward. When she first comes to Earth, she

does not care about the fact that she is helping to destroy it. As she spends time on the planet, however, at first stranded there against her will and later by choice, she slowly comes to understand it as valuable in various different ways.

Peridot's first reason for wanting to save the Earth is clearly resource oriented. "The organic ecosystem creates resources unique to this world, we can't sacrifice all that potential," she tells Yellow Diamond, convinced that her reasoning will make the Diamonds spare Earth. She is confused when Yellow Diamond's reply is that she does not "care about potential or resources" and actually wants the planet destroyed. ("Message Received") This does not fit the extremely rational image of the Diamonds that Peridot has, because she genuinely believes saving the Earth for its resources is the most reasonable course of action. If her relationship before being stranded on Earth was clearly promethean, now she has assumed a form of scarcity thinking: the planet is not just one of the endless resources available for the Empire, but rather worth saving for the resources it has, because those resources are unique and thus will run out. From there on, as she spends more time on Earth, her relationship with the planet changes further.

"Why protect this useless shell of a planet?" Jasper, a Homeworld warrior, asks her in a later episode. "It's not a shell, there's so much life," Peridot replies. "Living here, that's what I'm doing!" She exclaims, and finishes her speech with: "The point being, Earth can set you free."("Earthlings") Compared to the Homeworld, where she lived before, on Earth she feels free. Here she recognizes how the environment and the change in her relationship with Earth has changed her as well. Earth is a place where the strict, stagnant imperial rules do not exist, and Peridot herself is free to grow, to change. This is somewhat reminiscent of Mainstream American Environmentalism where Earth and nature traditionally have been seen as being good for people, and for this reason worth saving.

Later still, Peridot seems to develop a genuine emotional connection with Earth as her home. "We should fight for this life we've built", she tells Lapis Lazuli, who wants to flee the planet as the probability of Diamond invasion of Earth grows higher. "Earth is our home now. Isn't it worth

fighting for?" Peridot asks. ("Raising the Barn") Earth is not just a place that is good for her and allows her to be free, but rather she cares about it for itself, and feels responsible for it. She will rather perish with Earth than abandon it. From the fact that she refers to herself as an Earthling, a term that contains Earth in it, it would seem that she now considers Earth a part of herself, and herself a part of Earth. Her relationship with Earth has grown to one, where she does not necessarily see Earth and herself as separate. This kind of connected relationship is typical for radical environmental philosophies, such as ecofeminism or deep ecology. Connectedness will be further discussed in 5.2.

As I have demonstrated above, Peridot's changing relationship with Earth and nature follows different environmental ethics or attitudes that have developed in the West in the last 50 years or so. The fact that Peridot's attitude change is not straightforward, but rather goes through different stages, and is constantly evolving suggests that there is no one easy switch from a "bad" attitude to a "good" one. For the Gems the reason for the change of heart is not their own survival, but learning compassion and care for others. While in real world human survival can never be completely forgotten from the reasons for saving the planet (see Plumwood), the fantastical frame of *Steven Universe* offers a resolution that is not tied to survival. Saving the planet does not have direct connection to the wellbeing of the Homeworld Gems, instead they come to understand that the planet is worth saving for itself, and for the life on it including humans. However, in this argument humans are just one natural feature of the planet. The show, then, presents an argument for saving the planet that is curiously non-anthropocentric.

Compassion for others is not, however, the only reason for the Gems' change of heart. While their survival does not work as a reason for change, being able to be free to express themselves does. On Earth the Gems are allowed to exist outside of the roles imposed upon them by the Empire. They are allowed to form interpersonal connections and have emotions, and they are allowed to change. In other words, when the stasis brought by the rationalism and scientific knowledge of the Empire is set against the emotional wellbeing and knowledge supported by the

culture on Earth, the Gems choose Earth. However, it is noteworthy that the Gems are not persuaded to leave their technological advancement for a more primitive lifestyle. Instead, they are persuaded to acknowledge that various forms of knowledge can be valuable. *Steven Universe*, then, successfully avoids the pitfall of setting technology and nature as opposites, thus reinforcing the nature/culture binary. Instead it shows technology as a part of (Gem) culture, that is not in itself either good or evil. While the show's environmental philosophy seems to steer towards a radical direction, that advocates for caring for Earth for itself, it does not offer one clear cut answer to what a healthy relationship with nature should be like. Rather it suggests that learning to coexist is an ever ongoing process.

Even if change is not always for better —for example the Gems have altered Earth in a very destructive manner— change itself is still an opportunity, because there is always the possibility for further (positive) change. The ongoing nature of change is reflected in the narrative: while the main series has a neat ending that almost seems like an end from the point of view of character growth, *The Movie* and *SU Future* underline that it is as much a beginning of something new as it is an end. While analyzing the sequels is not in the scope of this thesis, it must be noted that change is a theme that carries on to the sequels.

Peridot is exemplary of the change in Crystal Gems, but the theme is brought up by other characters as well, and most notably put into words by Pearl. She tells Steven it comes naturally to humans, but is not natural for Gems. She connects this with physical growth and change in humans, however what she laments is not that Gems are not capable of physical change, but that emotional change and character growth is difficult for them. This is because she believes the Gems are defined by the categories the Empire has put them in. Steven, however, argues that the Gems are just as much capable of change, it just does not manifest as physical growth. This discussion not only highlights the imperial logic being against change, but also connects change as character growth and change as a natural fact.

Change in nature, and change as character growth are further connected because, as was

mentioned earlier, the environments and characters themselves are profoundly connected, and affect each other. It would be impossible to change one without changing the other. One strikingly clear comparison of the two comes from Steven, as he explains the Earth to Lapis Lazuli. Lapis is temporarily convinced that she could find a place to live on Earth, but becomes disheartened when she is reminded of the time she was held prisoner there. This leads to her feeling trapped. “I’m still on Earth”, she laments. “But nothing is still on Earth,” responds Steven, “Everything’s always changing.” This is accompanied by observing the autumn leaves turning yellow. And to make his point clearer still, he argues “this isn’t the same world that held you prisoner, not anymore, and I know it doesn’t feel like home but maybe that can change too.” (“Same Old World”) Steven makes a connection between the constant (physical) change the Earth goes through, the relationship Lapis has with Earth, and by extension the character growth Lapis goes through.

The episode’s title “Same Old World” offers another hint at the importance of change. The juxtaposition of the stasis suggested by the episode title, and the content of the episode, that celebrates the changing of Earth, and the possibilities such change brings, draws attention to the fact that change itself is the natural state of the Earth. Garrard notes, that “ecosystems do maintain a kind of equilibrium, but it is characterized as much by change as by stasis.” (57) As the Earth changes, and as the characters change, their relationships change too, always in search for existence that is most acceptable to maximum amount of participants. This is curiously close to the type of story, that Ursula K. LeGuin terms the life story, which “cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.” (153) The life story offers a certain kind of ethics, and I will return to the topic in 5.3. In a world characterized by change there is no certain end point, where the world is finished and has reached its peak, but rather what its inhabitants are striving for are healthier relationships not only with each other, but with their environments as well. Earth then, is given as an example of a healthy ecosystem, and the life on Earth an example of having healthy relationship with nature. It may even be said, that a healthy ecosystem is a healthy relationship, or a network of relationships. In the next section I will

examine this connectedness and importance of relationships in more detail.

## 5.2 Connectedness

Connectedness in the American environmentalism especially has been understood as place connectedness. Heise explains that this "ethic of proximity" appears in several different environmentalist perspectives, that "emphasize a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for environmental awareness and activism" and "associate spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and "care."" (Heise, *Sense* 33) Such environmentalism(s) assume(s) that only small and "directly experienceable spatial and communal framework will yield affective attachments and ethical commitments." (Heise, *Sense* 45) From this point of view, it is extremely easy to end up seeing environmental problems as a symptom of remoteness brought by modernization with its ever larger cities and populations. As easy is to offer return to simpler times and living closer to nature as an antidote to these problems, once again reproducing the nature/culture duality. However, there are different forms of remoteness, such as spatial, consequential, communicative and epistemic, temporal, and technological. (Plumwood 72) It follows, then, that there must also be different forms of connectedness, and ways of understanding connectedness. According to Kheel ecophilosophers have aimed at re-conceptualizing the relationship with nature by a phenomenology that allows understanding nature and human as connected. (250) So even though the mainstream understanding of connectedness as spatial is rather simplistic and might lead to the aforementioned reproduction of nature/culture duality, connectedness seems to be a central factor in producing an environmentally conscious worldview.

The trope of network has gained traction as a new way to represent the Earth, that take into account the cultural heterogeneity and connectedness, as well as the constant change and growth of ecosystems (Heise, *Sense* 65). Network promotes belonging not based on a place, but on relationships. Some other pervasive images (or metaphors) of connected human/nature relationship

are those of community, organism and expanded self. (Kheel, 250) Which of these metaphors is used depends on the genealogy of the philosophy: for example, community is typical for ecofeminism, while expanded self is typical for deep ecology. The "interconnectedness thesis" is fundamental in both deep ecology and ecofeminism, according to Mathews, even though they come at it from different vantage points. She suggests that instead of choosing one, "both of these viewpoints need to be taken into account in our attempt to determine how we should relate to nature"(45).

While *Steven Universe* does not address connectedness specifically in regards to human/nature relationship, connectedness is at the very core of the show. One of Steven's defining character traits is his compassion for, and ability to connect with others. To underline the importance of it, one of his superpowers is also being able to emotionally and mentally connect to others. The resolutions to conflicts in the show come mainly from Steven forming a friendly relationship with the antagonists. Plumwood writes that upholding the centric worldview and the belief in the right to conquer others requires "insensitivity to the Other's needs, agency and prior claims" (118) in other words upholding the separation and distance between One and the Other, which may be physical as well as emotional. Steven, then, with his power and tendency to connect, is an antithesis to such world order.

Another feature of the show that highlights connectedness is the fusion mechanic. It allows for explicit examination of relationships and interpersonal connectedness. A fusion is a power that the Gems have, where two or more of them are able to combine and form a new entity. Steven, being half human, is also able to fuse with humans. The fusions are relationships made material. Garnet explains that a fusion is a conversation, and that they are not just a combination of their participants, but rather something more than a sum of their parts. Another important feature of fusions is that they are dialogic, all parties must want to fuse and uphold the fusion. It is, however, possible to uphold a fusion for unhealthy reasons. What is more, according to Aquamarine, another Homeworld Gem, fusions become emotional — physical connectedness prompts emotional

connectedness.

Even though not all relationships in the show are fusions, and the characters that form a fusion also have a relationship outside that fusion, a fusion allows us to understand a relationship as a concrete thing. The fusion mechanic, then, highlights relationships themselves as entities. While the relationship cannot exist independently without its participants, it does exist as something more than just the participants. This is further supported by seeing relationships as something capable of change, that change their parties as much as are changed by them, as examined in the previous section. This is an important first step in order to understand the world as made of relationships. There are several theoretical approaches that emphasize the importance of relationships as constituents of the world, such as Actor Network Theory, that explains the world as being formed of networks of relationships that are greater than sum of their parts. As mentioned before, network is one of the newer metaphors for connectedness of the world. Material ecocritics also highlight the importance of relationships between things: that nothing can exist as separate from its surroundings, but instead gets its meaning from how it affects the world around it, and is affected in return. No matter how it is called, a world made of relationships is a thoroughly connected one.

Fusion of different Gems is not only an instance of interpersonal connection, but also of material. Such fusion is strictly prohibited in the Diamond Empire, and no wonder, since it does not only question the social hierarchy, but also the material one. Seeing such fusion as a possibility, a dialogic relationship between two different materialities (as opposed to fusion of same gem type, which are, as Ruby explains, “just more of me”) goes against the neatly divided worldview of the Empire, and unravels its foundations by suggesting similarities, and (material) connectedness. If seeing such fusions then prompts understanding of a world connected, the show seems to suggest that such understanding can completely alter the worldview and inspire dismantling of the centrist system. This is apparent from Rose Quartz’s story. While she was already fighting for Earth, seeing Garnet (a fusion of Ruby and Sapphire) is explicitly mentioned as her reason for fighting for the freedom of Gems in addition to for Earth.

Material connectedness, and materiality as connectedness, not only in fusions, but in their relationships with the environment are a central part of the Gem characters. Peridot recognizes peridotite as same stuff as she is made of. What is more, Peridot can tell great many things about Gems just from seeing their kindergarten exit holes. The materiality of the Gems is quite obvious. However, the Empire does not recognize their own materiality. Before Steven and the Crystal Gems confront them, the Diamonds have never considered the environmental consequences of their efforts. Their material consequences can go unnoticed, because these consequences have little effect on the Gem existence. It is only after they connect with Steven, an organic lifeform who is connected to the Earth through completely different materiality, and forming an emotional bond of care with him, that they come to care about the environmental destruction. Steven in bringing the consequences to the Diamonds, to Homeworld, and later taking the Diamonds to Earth with him, does away with both emotional and spatial remoteness.

One form of spatial connectedness is place connectedness, which as was mentioned before, has a special place in the (American) environmentalist discourse. Place connectedness is perhaps most clearly articulated in the idea of home. Home as a place is, however, questioned in *Steven Universe*. The characters do seem to have some emotional connection to the place of their emergence. It is not by chance, for example, that the Gem planet is called *Home*world. The Gems that have emerged there, but are not able to return, such as the Crystal Gems, see not being able to return as a sacrifice. Peridot also notices, that "it is hard not to have some connection to the place where you were made". What Amethyst calls her home on Earth is the kindergarten, where she emerged, rather than the house she lives in. A material connection to a place can produce a feeling of home. However, as I have examined in 5.1 Peridot's identity changes from a Homeworld Gem into Earthling, because she feels part of the group on Earth. This suggests that belonging, and the feeling of home, does not have to be tied to a place. What is more, Amethyst's relationship with her home in the kindergarten changes as well: at first she sees the place of her emergence as defining her. She sees herself as evidence of the Gem destruction of Earth, because that is what the

kindergarten is. She later meets other amethysts made in the same kindergarten, and this changes her relationship with the place. She starts associating it with people instead of loneliness and destruction. The kindergarten does not become less important for her, but her connection with the place comes to include connections with other people as well. The show seems to suggest that home does not have to be the place, that it can be in relationships instead.

For the question of place connectedness in *Steven Universe*, ”Earthlings” is an episode title worth paying attention to, as one of the central questions of the episode seems to be, what is an Earthling? In this episode there is a notable showdown between Amethyst and Jasper, two Gems that were made on kindergartens on Earth. However, Jasper is clearly a Homeworld Gem, while Amethyst thinks Earth as her home. What is more, in this episode Peridot also defends Earth against Jasper, which means that even though she was not made on Earth, she might well be an Earthling. This, again, points to the fact that the relationships between the characters and places change, and these relationships are more tied to emotional connection than physical facts of where one was born. A place connection, then, is not unimportant, but it is not a prerequisite for caring either.

Place connectedness and notion of home is not the only form of connectedness *Steven Universe* complicates. Instead of the typical environmentalist take of technology as nature’s opposite, the show offers a more nuanced world, where technology and connectedness have a multifaceted relationship. The Homeworld Gems’ relationship with the world around them is mediated by technology to a great degree. At first Peridot thinks she is nothing without her technological augments that connect her to the Homeworld. To her the world is the scientific and unembodied knowledge that exists in the Homeworld network. When she is ripped off that network, she has to learn a completely new way of thinking about the world and herself. What is more, there is no need for the Diamonds to visit the colonies because they can easily surveil them from afar. When Pink Diamond then visits her colony, against the Empire’s custom, and experiences the planet, she immediately feels a connection with it. This results in her wanting to save it. In these instances technology is clearly distancing, as opposed to experiencing and gaining a sensory

knowledge of the world. However, in a later episode Lapis Lazuli uses the very same surveillance technology, that has helped keep Diamonds distanced, to keep an eye on her friends on Earth, which strengthens her connection with Earth. Furthermore, it is the high technology of Homeworld —in the form of warp pads and super fast space ships— that allows the Gems to experience the different places in the first place. Here technology becomes a tool for acquiring local embodied knowledge of different places. Technology, then, can be seen as creating distance as well as connecting. There are no moral connotations for technology. It is not in itself "good" or "evil", but rather something that plays a part in the network of relationships.

As these examples show, the different types of connectedness can enforce each other. One type of connectedness can help foster another kind and they all work in tandem to create the relationships that the world is made of. Different kinds of connectedness are tied together in various ways. The connectedness appears as a network of relationships, always changing. Seeing world as connected also has an effect on how conflict is resolved in the show. This is what will be examined in the next section.

## 5.3 The resolution

The way the conflicts are resolved in the show is a central part of the alternative world it is imagining. Time and again the conflicts on the show get resolved by Steven talking with the antagonistic force. Often this is preceded by someone else expecting him to fight, and so he is not just resolving the conflict peacefully, but making an active decision to do so. When in the end of the series Steven goes to Homeworld to meet the Diamonds and talk with them, he brings the consequences to them. By this he both eliminates the (emotional) distance that allows them to uphold the centrist worldview, and brings them to dialogue with the rest of the world. An important part of how Steven connects with others is that he is able to listen and understand. The extent of his capability for understanding is highlighted by the fact that he is able to understand even the corrupted Gems, that everyone else thinks have lost their cognitive capacities. The connections

Steven forms, then, are not Steven imposing his beliefs and worldview on others, but rather Steven seeing others as subjects on their own right, with their own needs and wants, and thus opening up the possibility of dialogic subject-subject negotiations of a relationship.

As the world is thoroughly connected, the relationships are not formed only between two characters. Instead, the new allies come to understand themselves as a part of the network of connections, as a part of the community. Steven Universe is an untypical superhero narrative because it operates on the principle of restorative, rather than retributive justice (Ramsy). In restorative justice "harm is understood as damage to relationships and community harmony" (Ramsy, III c) and so the resolution cannot come from punitive measures, but from figuring out how to repair the damage done to the relationships. Among media mainly promoting retributive justice, Ramsy states, that "*Steven Universe* offers a mapping to alternative worlds—ones where the restorative justice principles of healing, forgiveness, and dialogue-based communication guide our responses to conflict and harm." (Ramsy, IV)

According to Ramsy, in the resolution of a retributive justice narrative "both hero and villain remain static in their moral worldview, largely unaffected by outside world events or life experiences" and "viewers are likewise encouraged to espouse these rigid paradigms." (Ramsy, II b) This sounds curiously similar to how Thevenin describes one of the typical problems with the mainstream enviro-toons: he accuses them of the simplification of environmental "issues to conflicts between morally polarized characters, and concluding with tidy narrative and ideological resolutions"(155). What is more, as I have explained before, there is a connection between the static, rigid, dualism of the Empire, and the environmental destruction. It seems, then, that retributive justice is not only typical for the texts of the superhero genre, but to the environmentalist texts (for children) as well. Meanwhile in the restorative justice setting "the person who was harmed is encouraged to express willingness to forgive the person who caused harm and show them respect as a human being generally capable of redemption and moral transformation." (Ramsy, III a) Restorative justice mindset, then, is a logical framework for a world that builds on appreciating

connectedness and change as character growth.

Using restorative instead of retributive justice framework has a profound effect on the environmental ethics of the show, and the position it takes in the environmentalist discourse. As Ramsy notes, *Steven Universe* imagines an alternative world, and this extends beyond its take on justice. How we see human beings is important. If we expect humans to be aggressive and self-oriented, then competition is "natural". If, however, we expect humans to be co-operative, care and compassion for others is what is "natural". (Kheel 255-256) Because of this, changing the heroic narrative into a more caring and gentle one, that appreciates our connectedness, has been a part of environmental radicalism for a long time. These are the "life stories" LeGuin has called for, where conquest is not the greatest human achievement, but rather the lives are appreciated in their entirety. While the heroic narrative has a conflict at its core, if there is conflict in the life story it is only one feature among many. Thus the life story is in stark contrast with the heroic, violent narratives we are used to, and in order to find a way to coexist peacefully with our environment and each other, it is paramount that we learn to appreciate the life story instead of "the killer story". (LeGuin)

Competition between human and nature is also one of the main points by which Meeker differentiates comic and tragic modes of writing. Writes Meeker: "We seem to have used our enlarged brain in order to reduce the number of choices facing us, and we have sought the simple way of destroying or ignoring our competition rather than the more demanding task of accommodating ourselves to the forces that surround us." (164) According to Meeker, the comic mode of storytelling is about changing ourselves, rather than forcing change on our environments. In the comic sense "morality is a matter of getting along with one's fellow creatures as well as possible." (Meeker, 167) The complexity of comic narrative is also noticed by Garrard: "human agency is real but flawed within the comic frame, and individual actors are typically morally conflicted and ambiguous." (Garrard, 87) All of this is to say, that conflict-based violent narratives are easier, simpler. However, environmental ethics that understand nature to be important in its own right must be able to appreciate complexity. To that end it is important that we tell stories that can

mirror that complexity. Instead of competitiveness, what should be promoted is cooperation.

Incidentally, cooperation is at the core of the resolution of the final conflict in *Steven Universe*. The dismantling of the system would not be possible without the allies. When they are only planning on talking to White Diamond, for Steven's plan was always to speak to her, rather than confront her physically, Steven makes clear he wants to bring his friends with him. In arguing for that, Steven also comes to summarize the entire environmental ethic of the show. "Together we can make a case for Earth!" Steven tells Blue Diamond ("Together Alone"). He acknowledges, that he might not be able to convince White Diamond alone, but he is confident that with the help of his friends it can be done. And truly, it is not Steven alone, that is able to bring White Diamond around, but actually every former antagonist turned ally plays a role in the final showdown. Thus the resolution itself underlines the importance of cooperation.

The complexity is also present in the conclusion in another way: the resolution is not neat and final, it cannot be, because there is no end point, there is no world that is ready and finished, complete. The progress does not end. The work of restoring the community must continue beyond the initial resolution of the conflict, in this case turning White Diamond to an ally. In *Steven Universe* in the very end of the final episode there is a montage where Steven and the Diamonds travel around the (former) Empire, healing the corrupted Gems. Even if the audience never gets to see it, the ending points at the beginning of a new era, the structures of which will have to be built, showing that the conflict is not where the story ends.

# 6. CONCLUSION

*Steven Universe* uses several tropes that are well known in American (environmental) discourse. By evoking well-known images and metaphors of human-nature relationship through ages, from the scientific revolution and the birth of (American) environmentalism all the way to the metaphors typical for the present day environmental discourses, the show positions itself in the environmental discussion.

*Steven Universe* ties its environmental message closely into a postcolonial one, where colonialism and environmental destruction are shown to go hand in hand, and saving the Earth and battling environmental destruction requires dismantling oppressive regimes of both thought and practice that colonialism has established. The show's discursive position, then, to use Murphy's terminology, is that of green radicalism, because it requires a radical change of the hegemonic cultural and institutional structures. Green radicalism is a collection of various environmental philosophies, but it is perhaps the closest label the environmentalism of *Steven Universe* can be given, as the he show is not clearly based on one environmental philosophy. Rather, it ties together different approaches, perhaps most notably those of ecofeminism and environmental justice. *Steven Universe*, then, is an enviro-toon, that does not follow the traditional stances taken by the enviro-toons, that have largely followed in the footsteps of mainstream environmentalism.

In chapter 2 I introduced Pike's theory of enviro-toon as a starting point for assessing how a cartoon can succeed in presenting its environmental message. I also asked, how the presentation of the message can reflect the environmental philosophy behind it. Even if there is no way of definitely determining if the enviro-toon is successful, we can at least make some evaluation of whether the form supports the message. What is more, on the three scales of measurement (the comic versus tragic mode, the dialogic versus monologic conclusion, and the hot versus cool medium) Pike's preferred end, the comic-dialogic-cool pairs quite readily with green radicalism. *Steven Universe*, as an enviro-toon with a non-mainstream environmentalist philosophy exemplifies

this.

First of all, a typical problem for enviro-toons, according to at least both Pike and Thevenin, is to fall into a monologic conclusion, because their world is framed in a black and white way where the environmental problems are a battle between good and evil. This connects to the philosophy of mainstream environmentalist movement in America, which has tended to draw boundaries between pure and virtuous nature and corrupting and destructive culture. Green radicalisms, on the other hand, have the idea of dismantling the binary distinction of nature/culture at their core. As I have demonstrated with *Steven Universe* in this thesis, the dismantling of the binary depends on allowing the Other a subject position, and understanding different forms of knowledge as important. What is more in a restorative justice framework dialogue becomes the resolution for the conflict.

Secondly, the mainstream environmentalism has had a tendency towards the tragic mode, and heroic narratives. This means centering a conflict and competition, be it between humans or human and nature. The comic mode, on the other hand promotes cooperation and care for others.

Thirdly, because the conflict is resolved in a peaceful way, there are fewer action packed showy scenes in the most important points of the story. This leaves the watcher with more to think about, and more time to do that with. This is exactly why the temperature of the media is important according to Pike. What is more, as I have demonstrated in 4.1, background art can be used as a part of the story as much as the characters. Placing importance on backgrounds, instead of only characters, both serves the dismantling of subject/object binary, but also leaves more space for the audience to make the connections.

Perhaps at least part of the problem with the so-called unsuccessful enviro-toons, then, is the environmental philosophy behind the narrative. *Steven Universe,* too, seems frustrated with the narrative of mainstream envionmentalism. This is almost outright pointed out by Pearl, according to whom humans “want to blame all the world's problems on some single enemy they can fight, instead of a complex network of interrelated forces beyond anyone's control.” (“Keep Beach City Weird”) The discussion around enviro-toons and their problems reflects a larger need for more

diverse environmental philosophies, and stories based on those philosophies. Environmental problems are seen more and more in connection with problems in other areas of life, and ecocriticism must be able to account for this. For example postcolonial, and feminist theories can strengthen the understanding of environmental messages, and on the other hand an environmental frame may be necessary for understanding how they discuss other forms of oppression.

The appearance of enviro-toons that are based on environmental philosophies more radical than mainstream environmentalism in itself also speaks for the growing need and want for more diverse stories. Because enviro-toons reflect the attitudes of their target audiences, this suggests that the audiences have become more open to such environmentalisms.

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