

Contact Zone Earth: Power and Consent in *Steven Universe* and Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

Emrys Donaldson

Stories of alien encounter tend to re-inscribe narratives of human prowess and success. Human victory over alien species reinforces our unique place in the cosmos, our own *sui generis* status. These victories support the idea that contact between two vastly different ways of being necessitates violent physical conflict. Rare are the stories of humans meeting aliens that engage with the difficulties of negotiating complex power relationships, particularly those pertaining to the navigation of consent. Rarer still are stories like this set on Earth. This chapter will focus on two Earth-based narratives, the television show *Steven Universe* and the novel trilogy *Lilith's Brood* by Octavia Butler, both of which center the stories of children who are the result of extended hybridity between humans and aliens, and who in their liminality must navigate the conflicting needs of two species. To put these works in conversation with one another is to engage with science fiction's complicated history of alien encounter vis-à-vis reproduction and hybridity. Consideration of these two texts in dialogue will demonstrate how humanity must grapple with questions of consent in inter-species power relationships, particularly over a long-term time horizon. The two texts present largely opposing depictions in how the aliens treat humans; therefore, productive conclusions can be drawn from putting the texts in conversation with one another.

How differing species treat the place of their meeting depends on how they perceive it and its inhabitants. When species meet one another, particularly companion speciesⁱ, the place of their meeting is a contact zone.ⁱⁱ In both of these texts, Earth is the contact zone. The difference between individuated experiences of consciousness is their *umwelt* (von Uexküll 2010, 215).ⁱⁱⁱ To share in the inter-species suffering of others is to acknowledge the validity of that suffering and to empathize with it across the difference in *umwelt*. Empathy depends upon recognition of the effects an action may have on others, which is contingent on the capacity to imagine how another

being emotes and experiences consciousness. In *Steven Universe*, three magical alien guardians known as the Gems parent a half-human, half-Gem child, the eponymous Steven Universe. In *Lilith's Brood*, Oankali aliens imprison what remains of humanity after a nuclear holocaust and force the humans to interbreed with them. Both texts illuminate narratives of alien salvation through a focus on reproductive futurity^{iv}, but their approaches to this salvation differ greatly. Whereas Butler's text navigates consent with a more traditional focus on human submission to alien species, *Steven Universe* offers hope for future narratives of inter-species meeting. I will address how alien-human interactions inform potential models for the diffusion of power in other types of cross-species relationships. Unimpeded two-way communication and a shared set of communication norms is a required first step for mutual consent, and the possibility of intertwined flourishing depends upon mutuality and respect.

To consider the possibility of intertwined flourishing, one must first consider how existence itself is predicated on inter-species symbiosis. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway (2007) discusses this symbiosis at the level of her own body. She notes that "90 percent of the cells [in her body] are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such...I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with many*" (4, emphasis in original). There can be no lone wolves nor single superheroes when survival depends on others. The process of *becoming with many* requires a complex negotiation with other species, whether that is at the cellular level within a body or at the level of discussing consent for many bodies. Consent matters in savior narratives. Humanity has to want to be saved from destruction, not merely dully expected to be grateful for it. To *assume* that humanity wants to be saved negates humanity's autonomy and ability to consent within interspecies relationships.

Although the Crystal Gems in *Steven Universe* conceive of humans as their companion species, they are dependent on humanity at least as much as, if not more than, humanity is on them. The Crystal Gems^v say that humans need them in Beach City to protect humanity from the villainous Diamonds, dictatorial rulers based on the Gem Homeworld who see the Earth solely as an exploitable natural resource. However, the Crystal Gems need humans to give themselves a sense of purpose as saviors. Most humans remain unaware of the presence of the Gems, who mostly work in secret, yet they are interdependent with the Gems. The Gems *become with* humans and are also dependent on them, despite viewing them as lesser beings due to differences in innate bodily capabilities. By underscoring the mutual dependence of human and Gem species, the writers of *Steven Universe* demonstrate the falseness of the idea of existing outside of a web of relationships.

The Gems conceive of themselves as superior in part because of their ability to perform and strict moral codes around the act of fusion. For Gems, fusion is the primary activity through which they negotiate consent. Rose Quartz, Steven's absent mother and the former leader of the Crystal Gems, calls fusion "love" ("The Answer"). Garnet, one of the Gems raising Steven and who is herself a fusion, calls it "not two people, not one person, [but] an experience" ("Alone Together"). Given the intimacy of the act, some critics see a direct correlation between Gem fusion and human sexual activity, but fusion represents *emotional* intimacy. Precisely how this intimacy translates into sexual activity matters less to the Gems, because they are not depicted as experiencing sexual love as humans do (see also Pitre, Chapter 2 and Cooley, Chapter 3). The science fiction critic K. Tempest Bradford has argued that fusion is not a 1:1 relationship to sexual intercourse, but rather that it represents a standard for any kind of close relationship

(Blauersouth et al. 2017). Insofar as emotional and physical intimacy are standards for close relationships, conceptualizing fusion as such a standard seems useful.

Regardless of what type of intimacy fusion represents, it requires sharing one's full self with another being. Perception, action, and emotion merge. To be fused is to exist in a consensual state of negotiated equilibrium, constantly checking and rechecking to ensure stability and mutual agreement. When any participant in fusion alters this equilibrium, the fusion ends. Take Garnet, a semi-permanent fusion of two separate Gems, as an example. While most Gems do not remain fused for long periods of time, Garnet represents a stable, loving, long-term relationship. The two Gems that compose Garnet demonstrate physical affection for/toward each other, and they appear to be romantically happy when dancing together and fusing. When Garnet becomes upset, this equilibrium is disrupted, as when the Gems discover the extent of Rose Quartz's true identity ("Now We're Only Falling Apart") and Garnet unfuses into Ruby and Sapphire. They recommit to their fusion with a traditional wedding ceremony ("Reunited") where they state intentions and vows before they fuse back into Garnet.

The Gems view humanity as lesser-than because humans (supposedly) cannot fuse^{vi}, a difference that separates how they conceptualize themselves from how they conceptualize humanity. For example, Pearl asserts that Steven's human father Greg cannot experience a deep connection with Rose, Steven's Gem mother, because "fusion is the ultimate connection" ("We Need to Talk"). Pearl sees Greg's inability to fuse as an impassable boundary. Yet this division between humans and Gems proves to be incorrect. Not only do Steven and Connie fuse into Stevonnie, but Rose and Greg fuse (in a different manner) into Steven Universe: Steven is composed of his mother's gemstone and his father's genetic material. Being a network television show marketed to children, *Steven Universe* does not examine the exact mechanics of

reproduction between Rose and Greg, but it is safe to say that their act of association encompasses the merger of physical material from the two of them and that it is an act of love.

Humans being able to fuse opens up new possibilities for sharing power and for equalizing an unequal power dynamic. Through the consensual dance of fusion, Gem aliens can share their magical abilities. The Gems' power to use magic is diffused when humans can also use that magic. Stevonnie, the fusion between Steven and Connie, represents a way to engage in power-sharing between someone with Gem powers and someone without. For Stevonnie, this means that Connie, a human, has access to Steven Universe's magical abilities, which include flight, his protective bubbles, and his shield. Because Stevonnie's *umwelt* differs from that of either Steven or Connie alone, their *umwelt* represents new and exciting territory within *Steven Universe* for how new forms of life can *be* in the world, as well as how humans can share power with Gems. Think of Stevonnie as a prototype for future Gem-human interactions.

In order to engage in fusion, the participants wishing to fuse must dance with one another. The dance represents a kind of greeting ritual, a form of communication through the physical boundaries of bodies. The space between two about-to-fuse beings flattens to the space where skin touches skin before it disappears completely. Similarly, Haraway characterizes her relationship with her Australian Shepherd dog, Cayenne, as a kind of emotionally intimate fusion. Referencing B. Smut, Haraway discusses greeting rituals as "embodied communication...more like a dance than a word. The flow of entangled meaningful bodies in time...is communication about relationship, the relationship itself, and the means of reshaping relationship and so its enactors" (26). Much like fusion, the embodied communication of a human-canine greeting entangles bodies. Due to the proximity of their bodies, the contact zone in which they exist flattens to near-nonexistence. This closeness, and a variety of species living

alongside each other, means that the negotiation of consent happens in a small space. Too, the act of fusion is an act of communication about the relationship between the two individuals who fuse. Steadiness in that relationship is required for the fusion to continue.

Living alongside humans means that Gems must value equilibrium and balance in interactions with them, just as equilibrium is a prerequisite for them to remain fused. Garnet first defines her equilibrium via "Garnet's Song," when she fights with an anti-fusion Gem named Jasper.^{vii} She sings,

go ahead and try and hit me if you're able
can't you see that my relationship is stable
I can see that you hate the way we intermingle
but I think you're just mad cuz you're single
.....
and we'll always be twice the gem that you are. ("Jail Break")

Garnet further defines herself as a fusion by singing

I am their fury
I am their patience
I am a conversation. ("Jail Break")

Additionally, Garnet tells Blue Diamond that she is "the will of two gems to care for each other and protect each other from any threat, no matter how vast or how cruel" ("Reunited"). As she states this, an instrumental version of "Garnet's Song" plays as background music. Ruby, being more furious, and Sapphire, being more patient, converse and negotiate their relationship constantly while fused as Garnet. As a result of the steadiness of their conversation, they remain

in a state of equilibrium. Consent and emotional stability are required from each of them in order to maintain their fused self: without both of them consenting, moment by moment, to remain Garnet, they would break apart. Show creator Rebecca Sugar has discussed the importance of talking to kids about consent (Brown 2016) and examples in the show of fusions ending due to a lack of attentiveness or a lack of consent seem to be used didactically to explore the ramifications of consent violations in relationships between humans. These lessons not only teach children about consent, they provide case studies and examples.

In Season Two, the Crystal Gem Pearl persuades Garnet to fuse with her under false pretenses to mitigate a nonexistent threat (“Cry for Help”). In doing so, Pearl commits a severe act of emotional, interpersonal, and physical violence. Pearl convinces Garnet to literally give up her physical form under duress (Garnet believes, when doing so, that her family and planet are in grave danger). The extremity of this violation forces a break in Garnet and Pearl's familial relationship. Because there are so few Crystal Gems on Earth, and because Garnet dedicates herself to the mission of protecting Earth to the level of self-sacrifice, she does not walk away, despite the violation. While eventually Garnet decides to forgive Pearl and let go of her anger about the violence, the situation provides an opportunity for viewers to consider how a similar violation could be handled when it takes place between two humans..^{viii}

Yet the writers of *Steven Universe* complicate what may at first seem to be a straightforward victimization. After Garnet discovers Pearl's violation, she orders another Crystal Gem, Amethyst, to fuse with her to eradicate even the possibility of a perceived threat. Although Amethyst protests and Garnet seems to pressure Amethyst to consent, Amethyst is not on the receiving end of violence from Garnet in the same way that Garnet was from Pearl. At first, when Pearl is found out, Amethyst defends Pearl by telling Garnet, "You know, we're so much

weaker than you! Fusing with you is like our one chance to feel...*stronger!*" ("Cry for Help"). This interpretation not only elevates Pearl's feelings and emotions over Garnet's, but it's also an attempt by Amethyst to gaslight Garnet into acting as though the violation never happened: Amethyst blames Garnet for her own innate bodily capabilities, and uses them to defend Pearl's behavior, justifying the use of Garnet's body to make other Gems feel good, feel stronger, without Garnet's full knowledge and consent. With her Afro and skin tone, Garnet codes as Black and Pearl codes as white, and in defending the violation, Amethyst reinforces centuries of human racialized oppression by defending a white-appearing character's violence against a Black-appearing character (see Zolciak, Chapter 4 for further discussion of Blackness in *Steven Universe*).

At the end of the same episode, Steven and Amethyst watch the show-within-a-show cartoon *Crying Breakfast Friends*. In the episode, Crying Pear asks for forgiveness, which Sad Spoon gives. Then, Sad Spoon hugs Crying Pear. A clear correlation exists with Steven and Amethyst's hope that Garnet will forgive Pearl. Amethyst comments, "Man, it sure would be nice if things worked out the way they do in cartoons" ("Cry for Help"). Following this comment, Steven directs his television remote outward at the actual viewing audience of *Steven Universe*, and turns off the TV, which ends the episode of *Steven Universe*, breaking the fourth wall. One interpretation is that this is an *Inception*-style jest about layers of reality and which reality is the 'real world' or which is 'true.' However, I argue that this meta-commentary by the writers of *Steven Universe* is a critique of the idea that resolution of violations of consent is easy. To simply turn off the television is insufficient to address the complicated situation at play within the Crystal Gems, and it is analogous with a refusal to be present and to engage. It implicates the viewers not only of *Crying Breakfast Friends* (namely, Steven and Amethyst), but the viewers of

Steven Universe as well. Garnet returns to emotional safety not through a single action, such as the press of an OFF button, but through a process of apology and reconciliation. Amethyst desires a quick fix, similar to a child wishing that their parents would just stop fighting rather than work through a communication process. She seems to value the appearance of a lack of conflict over actual conflict resolution. However, things will not work out the way that they do in cartoons, not even for their characters.

Intimate violence erodes trust, violates physical and emotional spaces, and undermines kinship structures. The violence enacted against Garnet brings up the consideration of fusion as an act of power and control, rather than merely an act of spontaneous intimacy and love.^{ix} It also criticizes the idea that the person impacted by violence has an obligation to engage in more emotional labor and forgive the person who enacted the violence. The show writers critique both Amethyst's gaslighting of Garnet and her desire for an easy solution to complicated dynamics within her family. The complicated negotiation of consent must include resolution when violations of consent occur, whether the violations are within or across species boundaries.

The power dynamic of alien-human symbiosis, including the discussion of consent, typically skews heavily toward the alien species due to its more complex technologies and innate bodily capabilities: while, as described above, the Gems see this boundary as relating to their seemingly magical capabilities, the Oankali in *Lilith's Brood* see it as having to do with their scientific capabilities. Both the Gems and the Oankali perceive their own *umwelt* as more complex than what humans experience, and the difference in perceived complexity is read as an indicator that humans are a lesser species. How the Oankali treat humans without their consent—changing them genetically, impregnating them and stealing their offspring, performing surgeries on them—bears remarkable similarity to how modern humans treat animals on Earth.

The aliens' experience of humans as lesser beings means that they treat humans as though they cannot adequately make decisions for themselves. The Oankali completely ignore humans' autonomy and ability to fully participate in decision-making. They justify their behavior by conceptualizing their own abilities as far superior to those of humans. For example, in *Dawn*, the first book of the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, an Oankali named Nikanj patronizes the book's human protagonist, Lilith, by telling her that her bodily limitations prevent her from the broader range of Oankali experience. He instructs her to "Move the sixteenth finger of your left strength hand", which of course Lilith cannot, having two human hands with five fingers each. Lilith interprets this request as another "case of Oankali omniscience: *We understand your feelings, eat your food, manipulate your genes. But we're too complex for you to understand*" (Butler 1987, 225). This instruction of Nikanj's comes after Lilith demands that Nikanj share its^x feelings and *umwelt* with her, because it shares how she feels without her consent.^{xi} Humans lack the extra 'strength hand' limbs that Oankali possess, so they are unable to perceive their movement. Asking Lilith to move the sixteenth finger of her left strength hand underscores her human limitations. In the context of the novel, Nikanj and other Oankali weaponize these limitations to coerce Lilith and other humans into believing that forced human-Oankali hybridity benefits them due to Oankali genetic superiority. The Oankali designate themselves as superior beings so that they are better able to control humans. The Oankali believe that because they are more complex beings than humans, they are able to better understand human needs than humans themselves. Lilith's relationship with Nikanj is physiologically symbiotic. Nikanj alters her so that she is physically uncomfortable after being away from it for a while. She has no choice in the matter of her alteration, and the novel does not depict Nikanj asking for her consent. Any negotiation in which

Lilith participates takes place on Nikanj's terms, and Lilith has little power over him that does not also cause herself harm.

In addition to believing that (and trying to gaslight Lilith into thinking that) the Oankali are granted special provenance over humans by virtue of their genetic superiority, the language that Nikanj uses throughout the novels echoes the language of human rape and sexual assault. Nikanj impregnates Lilith without her consent. According to Nikanj, it is unable to control itself because it finds Lilith so appealing. When Nikanj describes how the Oankali felt about having to wait to be physically intimate with the humans assigned to them, it says that "most of us couldn't wait...It might be better for both our peoples if we were not so strongly drawn to you" (Butler 202). This language admits that the rape, sexual assault, forced captivity, and other horrors perpetrated by the Oankali against humans are negative for both species, but it does so in a way that attempts to justify the actions of Nikanj and the other Oankali. Curiously, Butler describes the third-gender aliens—the ooloi—as committing the largest violations of consent and as leading the other Oankali to do so. The male and female Oankali follow the lead of those non-binary aliens who enslave humanity to serve as their reproductive vessels.

This enslavement traumatizes the humans confined for forced breeding with the Oankali. Later in the book, Lilith tells another character that the Oankali never gave her a choice to run away from them, as some of the other humans were able to do after being sterilized while kept in captivity by the aliens (273). Decades after Nikanj violated her by impregnating her without her consent, she experiences normal human reactions to trauma and captivity, although she describes them as "flares of bitterness" (274). She admits that despite wanting the child she delivered, she never asked for nor consented to him, saying that "if I had the strength not to ask, it should have had the strength to let me alone" (274). After Nikanj impregnates Lilith without her consent, it

tells her that it's what she wanted all along, but would never ask for. This response to a violation of consent—gaslighting the survivor—echoes the *Steven Universe* episode in which Pearl violates Garnet, as discussed above. Because Lilith is not free to refuse decades of captivity by literally having her genes altered so that she experiences discomfort if away from her forced Oankali family, the relationship between the Oankali and humanity is one of abuse. When, at first, Lilith experiences horror at the physical presence of Nikanj, it keeps her prisoner, refusing to let her out of her cell on the alien spaceship until she tolerates it. This lack of freedom echoes how humans treat some species of intelligent life on earth, especially cetaceans: ours for captivity, reproduction, and greedy enjoyment.

Steven Universe's Crystal Gems do not attempt to change life on earth as the Oankali do. While the Oankali argue that they protect and alter life on Earth to save it, the savior narrative of the Gems focuses on treading lightly and interfering as little as possible. The Oankali not only impregnate Lilith without her consent, but they also change her genetically while she's asleep. While at first she appears to be grateful for some of these changes—like removing a tumor that would have killed her—in time, she becomes bitter about the relationship and thinks of herself as a lesser form of life compared to the Oankali. When the ooloi Jdahya first tells Lilith that the Oankali have made voluntary changes to her genetic structure, including increasing her strength, Lilith

let the silence lengthen until she was certain he would not answer. This was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good. "We used to treat animals that way," she muttered bitterly. "What?" he said. "We did things to them—inoculations, surgery, isolation—all for their own good. We wanted them healthy and protected—sometimes so we could eat them later." (33).

Throughout most of the trilogy, Lilith operates under the assumption that the Oankali do not eat humans because they do not kill them and take them away. They experiment on the more violent humans, and they manipulate them and study them in every possible way, but to Lilith there exists a definite line in the sand between doing this and killing them for consumption. Butler explicitly writes that these changes are "supposedly" for her own good—Lilith cannot know whether what the Oankali tell her about cancer is true, or whether they have used her as a breeder. For Lilith, to predate on humans to satisfy immediate physical needs, rather than intellectual ones, is to cross a boundary into treating humans as animals, with little to no autonomy over whether they live or die. Crossing such a line goes outside the realm of what Lilith will tolerate.

However, the boundary set and understood by Lilith as outside what the Oankali do to her is incorrect. In a later conversation between one of Lilith's ooloi children, Jodahs, and her ooloi partner/co-parent/abuser Nikanj, the reader discovers that the ooloi do actually consume humans. Jodahs narrates,

I had once heard my mother say to Nikanj, "It's a good thing your people don't eat meat. If you did, the way you talk about us, I think you would eat us instead of fiddling with our genes." And after a moment of silence, "That might even be better. It would be something we could understand and fight against." Nikanj had not said a word. It might have been feeding on her even then—sharing bits of her most recent meal, taking in dead or malformed cells from her flesh, even harvesting a ripe egg before it could begin its journey down her fallopian tubes to her uterus. (680)

By being food for the Oankali, humans engage in further labor for the Oankali without their consent or even their knowledge. At least they know about their pregnancies and the children that result. The Oankali keep the knowledge of the feeding from the humans, because to feed on humans seems to be a boundary that most humans would not cross, a boundary that evokes monster myths. Instead, the Oankali use coercion and manipulation to make humans like Lilith lack firm and continued resistance. Coercion and true consent cannot coexist.

In the novel, Butler echoes and parallels the historical crimes perpetuated in the U.S. against people of color, especially Black people (Lilith is a Black American woman) in the name of medicine. Nikanj and the other Oankali are species supremacists. As eugenicists, the Oankali eradicate human babies born without Oankali features. Yet despite the Oankali treating humans like lesser beings, the reason they give for merging with humanity is that humans contain the genetic complexity of cancer, which the Oankali lack and which they desire. While engaging with these historical crimes is outside the scope of this essay, plenty of scholarship exists on the subject.^{xii} Coercion, a lack of informed consent, and thefts both physical and psychological permeate the historical narratives, as they do Butler's fictional work.

Yet despite the violence and trauma that the Oankali inflict on Lilith, she does not view them as evil. Due to the length of her confinement and continual emotional abuse from her alien captors, Lilith's view of how she views the Oankali's relationship to humanity changes. Her Stockholm Syndrome is a result of psychological re-conditioning and long-term grooming: if she ever seems seriously uncooperative, the Oankali force her to sleep again, for a period of months or years, until they believe that, when awakened, she will again demonstrate cooperation with them.^{xiii} Lilith's Stockholm Syndrome impacts how she seems to think about consent, as evidenced by the change in how she talks about the Oankali to other humans. At first, she talks

about humanity as being owned, saying that the Oankali "owned the Earth and all that was left of the human species" (59). Later, she changes her definition of the Oankali as she wakes up more humans, calling the Oankali first "our captors" and then immediately correcting herself by calling them "our rescuers" (129). As she navigates the relationships between the Oankali and humanity, she defends the Oankali to them, telling them that "We're protected from one another... We're an endangered species—almost extinct. If we're going to survive, we need protection" (141). Over time, and with additional exposure to other people, Lilith changes her views about the Oankali from thinking about them as an oppressive force to thinking about them as a protective force. This change demonstrates how pervasive and severe the Oankali violations of her consent are, and how much they refused to negotiate with her.

It is only through Akin, a human-Oankali mixed-species being, that Lilith sees the symbiosis of her relationship with the Oankali as potentially progressive. Given the presence of coercion in her relationship with the Oankali, she is unable to freely consent, but still, her decision to not actively engage in resistance against the Oankali makes her culpable and brings up the question of whether a 'right' way to survive exists. Too, the problem of communicative responsibility arises. The extent to which, when communicating across species' boundaries, one needs to assure understanding from the recipient of communication is dependent on the level of understanding expected from a member of that species. For example, the Oankali do not expect humans to be able to understand the motivations behind their decisions, although the Oankali-human mixed-species children are able to understand the thinking and justification of both species. Akin realizes that his Oankali parents control his human ones. He thinks, "Of course. You controlled both animals and people by controlling their reproduction—controlling it absolutely. But perhaps Akin could learn something that would be of use to the [human]"

resisters" (447). Eventually, awareness of the abuse in this relationship leads Akin to advocate for humans to have their own planet, Mars, on which to grow and reproduce. The people who have both human and Oankali heritage end up best able to empathize with human experience, primarily because they are part human. Given an imbalanced power dynamic where consent necessitates equality in power, the part-human people, like Steven Universe and Akin, can advocate for humanity.

The *umwelt* of Steven Universe's and Akin's experiences define new spaces within what it means to have consciousness. Their experiences and perceptions, including how they interact with the environment and with other beings within their environment, are vastly different than those of any previous being, whether human or alien. They are new, and in their newness, everything about them is also exploratory. The posthuman selves of Akin, Jodahs, and Steven bridge not only human-alien cultural divides, but human-alien genetic divides too. Through reproduction, species fuse and newness emerges. Haraway writes, "Where reproduction is at stake, kin and kind are torqued; biographies and systems of classification, warped" (139). The definitions of who counts as a Gem and who counts as an Oankali—of who counts as kin and kind—expand to include Steven and Akin, whereas previously the definition may not have included them, freshening previously stagnant modes of being, introducing new beings and destroying stolid, binary thinking. It allows for the power differential between two species to change into something more equitable. While, in theory, empathy with humanity should be possible regardless of one's own self-identification as a human being, mixed-species children translate the experience of being human in both *Steven Universe* and *Lilith's Brood*.

When life forms multiply, complexity and resilience increase. Through blurring the alien/human binary, the children of inter-species interactions produce novel biological variation.

Steven Universe, Akin, Jodahs, and the other part-human part-aliens from their fictional universes are inter-species contact zones made physical. Because their existence and experiences are new, no being in either fictional universe knows its limitations. And because of this hybridity, Steven Universe and the Oankali-human constructs represent more complex life forms than a single Gem, Oankali, or human. Haraway terms the life forms that arise from warped and new categories of being as "emergents." She writes that emergents "require attention to process, relationship, context, history, possibility, and conditions for flourishing. Emergents are about the apparatuses of emergence, themselves braided of heterogeneous actors and action in torqued relationship" (136). By being able to advocate for the human halves of their ancestry, the new beings not only experience consciousness differently but they also map new spaces in the terrain of the *umwelt*. Through this new experience of consciousness, they represent potential solutions for issues of power, control, and consent between their parent species. For example, Steven convinces Gems Lapis Lazuli and Peridot to join the Crystal Gems by impressing them with the possibilities of life on Earth. In *Lilith's Brood*, Akin creates a path for humans to reproduce without Oankali interference if they move from Earth to the planet Mars. Yet, for both of them, these qualities are not innate: they required significant immersion in the world of humans—Steven in his relationship with his father and in his daily treks around Beach City, Akin during his abduction to the human resister village Phoenix. He straddles the line between Oankali and human, blurring that binary, in his navigation of the resisters' desires. When he begins to organize the plan to have the Oankali allow humans to settle on the moon, Akin self-describes as "Oankali enough to be listened to by other Oankali and Human enough to know that resister Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescension" (Butler 404). He sees it as inevitable that the Oankali will use up the earth when their Lo ships are ready to depart, so he

focuses on convincing the humans to leave rather than fight the Oankali. As Akin expresses it, the future is certain: the constructs will interweave with life on Earth, and future hybridized generations will explore the universe together.

The idea of coming together to prepare for the future is used in both texts as a way to excuse violations of consent. The false equivalency of children with the future and the tendency to see a path toward this future only through reproduction and coupling are not questioned in either text. In *Lilith's Brood*, the acts of violence committed against humans by the Oankali are undertaken for the sake of 'the future,' a vague idea at the nexus of physical reproduction, preparation, and purpose. The future is defined, and seems to the characters to feel inevitable, yet in each episode of *Steven Universe*, the future seems uncertain and surprising. Perhaps this difference is due to the number and planning of the Oankali, which are accessible to the constructs such as Akin and Jodahs, whereas the Crystal Gems, being rebels in exile, are kept out of the other Gems' planning. Through the character of Steven Universe, half-human and half-Gem, the Gems see a new future for the planet Earth and for their family^{xiv}. Likewise, the Oankali see their future in a 'gene trade' between themselves and humans that results in mixed-species offspring like Akin and Jodahs. Even to a human resister in *Lilith's Brood*, the future still equals children (albeit 'fully human' children)^{xv}. The focus in both stories is on reproductive futurity via the creation of new mixed-species beings who lead humans and aliens alike toward new and unpredictable futures.

Additionally, the biological variation introduced to human and alien species by the inter-species children remains essential to the continuance of a species and pivotal for balance and equilibrium in the spaces between and within species. Haraway quotes Margulis and Sagan as saying that "Attraction, merger, fusion, incorporation, co-habitation, recombination—both

permanent and cyclical—and other forms of forbidden couplings, are the main sources of Darwin's mission variation" (32). The reproductive fusion of Rose and Greg, once thought by the other Gems to be a form of forbidden coupling (although their coupling was completely consensual), provides the variation needed for members of humanity to possess the knowledge and innate skill to fight Gems from Homeworld and prepare to defend Earth in the future. Prior to Steven coming into existence, humans themselves would have no way to fight back against an exterior threat without outside help, if they even knew they were being targeted before it was too late. Similarly, prior to Akin, the humans in *Lilith's Brood* had no way to advocate for themselves among the Oankali.

The Crystal Gems provide a positive relationship model between aliens and humans. Although their interactions are imperfect, their actions demonstrate a valuation of human consent whenever possible^{xvi}. In contrast, the Oankali use humans like a natural resource to be managed. Mutual emergence into new contact zones necessitates navigation of consent. Across chasms of time, media, and space, ideas about how best to move through this emergence, and how to move through contact zones with other species, point toward diffusion of power and equitable relationships as the way forward. Envisioning a future where many species communicate with one another to express their needs and have their needs met by other species in a shared stewardship of common spaces is not only possible, but necessary. The confirmed presence of extraplanetary life may not ever happen, yet at present, despite resources with the potential for developing two-way communication, humans generally treat non-human people (such as cephalopods and cetaceans) similarly to the way that we treat non-sentient life. Together, humans must move forward in tandem with other species and negate our own sense of human

exceptionalism. *Steven Universe* and *Lilith's Brood* show potential paths forward, but it is up to humanity to begin the work.

References

- Blauersouth, Ty, K. Tempest Bradford, J.P. Fairfield, Seth Frost, and @thingswithwings (2017). "Steven Universe and Consent." Paper presented at Wiscon 41, Madison, WI, May.
- Brown, Tracy (2016). "'Steven Universe's' Rebecca Sugar shares why LGBTQ representation is personal." *Los Angeles Times*. July 24. Accessed September 01, 2017.
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-hc-comic-con-updates-steven-universe-s-rebecca-sugar-talks-1469218639-htmlstory.html>.
- Butler, Octavia E. (1987). *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Warner Books.
- Edelman, Lee (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. (2007). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- von Uexküll, Jakob (2010). *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: with a Theory of Meaning*. Translated by Joseph D. O'Neill. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Episodes Referenced

- "Alone Together" (season 1, episode 37, 2015)
- "The Answer" (season 2, episode 22, 2016)
- "Cry for Help" (season 2, episode 11, 2015)
- "Gem Heist" (season 4, episode 13, 2017)
- "Jail Break" (season 1, episode 52, 2015)
- "The New Lars" (season 3, episode 10, 2016)
- "Super Watermelon Island" (season 3, episode 1, 2016)

“We Need to Talk” (season 2, episode 9, 2015)
“The Zoo” (season 4, episode 14, 2017)
“Now We’re Only Falling Apart” (season 5, episode 19, 2018)
“Made of Honor” (season 5, episode 22, 2018)
“Reunited” (season 5, episode 24, 2018)

ⁱ Haraway (2007) uses the term *companion species* to refer to creatures that are kin in terms of love, shared goals, and closeness. Examples of this dynamic include dogs as human companions and humans as Gem companions. Generally, the companion has less power in the relationship.

ⁱⁱ The places where the humans meet non-human others are "contact zone[s]" (Haraway 4): interstitial locations where the boundaries between one species and another remain porous. Whether spaceship, exoplanet, or right here on Earth, the place where species meet informs their encounter. For example, for cetaceans or cephalopods, a contact zone might be the ocean or an aquarium.

ⁱⁱⁱ Uexküll’s idea of the *umwelt* characterizes the complicated ways that individuals experience their own perceptions and experience of being in the world. A new definition of this term originated in his early twentieth-century texts and was later popularized by the semiotician Thomas Sebeok.

^{iv} The reason behind an action being for the sake of a child, the child being “the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (Edelman 2004 2).

^v Because the Crystal Gems come from a society in which their social status and profession are decided from birth via a rigid caste hierarchy, the freedom found on Earth appeals to them.

^{vi} The (at first) accidental fusion of Steven and Connie into Stevonnie proves the falsehood of the assertion that humans are incapable of fusion (“Alone Together”).

^{vii} Homophobic undertones exist in this scene, as Jasper seems disgusted that Garnet is a composed of two different gems in romantic love with each other, rather than being composed of many gems of the same type working together in a collegial relationship.

^{viii} In “The New Lars,” when Steven takes over Lars’s mind without his consent, Lars does not accept his apology and, in fact, rips his apology card in half.

^{ix} In “Jail Break,” Lapis Lazuli fuses with Jasper into Malachite as a way of imprisoning Jasper under the ocean. Their fusion is held together by mutual anger and hostile feelings toward each other, although Jasper and Lapis appear to take turns controlling Malachite rather than making unanimous decisions. They stay fused until “Super Watermelon Island,” when Alexandrite (the fusion of Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst) finally separates them with the force of an arrow from Opal’s bow.

^x In the *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy, all third-gender Oankali aliens, known as the ooloi, use "it/its" pronouns.

^{xi} The Oankali can manipulate even the most private, internal realms of human experience, like emotional processing and digestion.

^{xii} See, for example, Harriet A. Washington (2008), *Medical Apartheid* (New York: Anchor Books) and James H. Jones (1993), *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: The Free Press). See also Ruha Benjamin’s (2013) *People’s Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) for a compelling argument about democratizing scientific research.

^{xiii} This seems to echo both the Sleeping Beauty and Beauty and the Beast fairy tales. As Sleeping Beauty, Lilith sleeps for long periods of time before being awakened by an Oankali 'prince.' As Beauty, she is forced to live with her captor in a household for a long period of time.

^{xiv} In *Steven Universe*, the Crystal Gem Bismuth tells Steven directly that “someone is making them [the Crystal Gems] believe in the future, and it’s you!” (“Made of Honor”)

^{xv} Of course, the triadic couplings that human couples form with the ooloi Oankali could be read as suggestive of human polyamory. And, of course, there’s the question of whether physical intimacy with an alien is itself a queer act (a question which is outside the scope of this essay).

^{xvi} In “The New Lars,” Steven accidentally takes over Lars’ body as an act of wish fulfillment (see also viii). While he spends an entire day in Lars’s body without Lars’s consent, he did not originally intend to control Lars, and the Crystal Gems as a group do not take over human bodies for their own uses. While Blue Diamond maintains Pink Diamond’s zoo of captive humans (as seen in “Gem Heist” and “The Zoo” and described in the former episode by Holly Blue as “specimen containment”), the Homeworld Gems as a group do not seem to enter human bodies in order to control them, nor do they reproduce with humans. The ability to enter others’ minds also forms a central part of Butler’s *Patternist* series, where Patternists use this talent to control non-Patternist humans (referred to in the series with the derogatory term ‘mutes’).