

# LAPIS LAZULI. POLITICS AND AQUEOUS CONTINGENCY IN THE ANIMATION STEVEN UNIVERSE

---

ANDRÉ VASQUES VITAL

**Name** André Vasques Vital

**Academic centre** Centro Universitário de Anápolis,  
Anápolis, Goiás State, Brazil

**E-mail address** vasques\_vital@tutanota.com

## KEYWORDS

Water; Animation; Steven Universe; Eco-Queer Theory;  
Material Feminism.

## ABSTRACT

*Steven Universe* (2013-), the North American cartoon produced by Cartoon Network, has been receiving attention from the media, the public and academia for its break with the relative norms of programs directed towards child audiences. It is the first animated series created by a woman (Rebecca Sugar) on Cartoon Network, and one of the first to centralize queer character narratives, breaking

gender normative binarism. The present essay analyzes how the series further problematizes the questions of gender and sexuality by breaking with the binary norms related to the separation of nature and culture in Western ontology by means of the character Lapis Lazuli and her hydrokinetic powers. Mapping Lapis Lazuli's operation suggests that water emerges as an anti-colonial, eco-queer and posthumanist element, highlighted by her active power in the constitution of material and identity, breaking the dichotomies from the plurality. Water is the element that unites human and non-human bodies through material affinities, participates in the configurations of difference, and is the constitutive force of local and planetary space, beyond the fundamental contingency in the creation and destruction of ideas, political projects and feelings, furthering a more complex comprehension of its presence in everyday life..

## INTRODUCTION

*Steven Universe* (2013-), a fantasy/science fiction animation created by Rebecca Sugar and broadcast on the Cartoon Network TV channel since 2013, has revolutionized the cartoon world in different ways by establishing a radical break with gender norms, especially in regard to queer representations. A key feature of science fiction narratives is the imagination of different norms, realities, and future possibilities. In many cases, these confront the structures of contemporary life, presenting new ways of thinking about current issues related to science, technology, gender, race, and nature, among others (Badmington 2004, Melzer 2006, Pearson et al. 2008). In science fiction literature, the dissolution of gender and sexuality boundaries has been a reality since at least the 1950s (Pearson 2008: 97).

In cartoons, however, issues related to gender and sexuality are still approached less explicitly. According to Kat Ottaway (2016), who employs the concept of failure from theorist Judith Halberstam, *Steven Universe* fails completely in agreeing with social normalization or aligning itself with mainstream children programs, being dissident and anti-colonial (Ottaway 2016). Other authors follow the same line of thought, analyzing and showing that themes related to identity, sexuality, homophobia, gender relations and the representation of agendered and trans-women are approached in a complex and realistic way, provoking, in some cases, reactions and tensions on the social level (Dunn 2016, Bakker 2015).

Although these studies recognize the queer characteristics of *Steven Universe*, their analyses are restricted issues involving sexuality and identity. Other aspects of the series related to the breakdown of well-established binary colonial norms in modern social thought are less addressed. Ecofeminist studies from the 1990s, however, were already pointing to the colonial intersections among homophobia, sexism, racism and ecophobia, pointing out the colonial fear directed towards individuals associated with nature or the breakdown in hegemonic meanings of nature (Gaard 2015). Material feminists, through science studies, also point out the ways in which modern thought, forged in Cartesian realism, is responsible for the reinforcement of racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism and the current environmental crisis (Haraway 1991, Barad 2003, Barad 2007, Alaimo 2010). On the other hand, eco-queer authors have recognized that sexuality and the environment are entangled questions, where relations of gender and sex interfere in the production of the material world and vice-versa (Mortimer-Sandilands and

Erickson 2010: 5, Sbicca 2012: 34-5). In general, these studies deconstruct the world's binary relations in favor of recognizing that we inhabit a planet in common, marked by a plurality of forms of material existence and identity.

There is also a group of studies by ecofeminist and eco-queer authors, such as Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Chen and Janine MacLeod, who propose a so-called hydrological turn. For these authors, themes such as race, indigeneity, studies of science and technology, the environment, gender, and sexuality can be approached through a perspective that is less anthropocentric and colonial that includes water as an active agent. To think with water would allow a more relational form of analysis, rejecting the dichotomies that engender colonial forms of hierarchy and domination on the local and planetary levels (Chen et al. 2013: 11). The hydrological cycle, in this case, is conceived in a different manner, searching for the cultural and material human implications in the bodies of non-humans and vice-versa, by the element in common that circulates, passes through and unites all of these bodies on the planetary level: water (Neimanis 2017: 6).

In Donna Haraway's work, it is possible to identify how science fiction stories can function as political theory by identifying absences in the real world, imagining alternative presents, and promoting alternative ontologies (Haraway *apud* Grebowicz and Merrick 2013: 112-3). On the other hand, Merrick (2008) suggests how the image of the alien creature, with all the transgressions and strangeness that it promotes, can be an important ally for ecofeminism and queer theory, which understand gender identity as permanently unstable and connected to issues of race, economics, politics and the environment (Merrick 2008: 216-8). These are the main possibilities for analyzing *Steven Universe*, which promotes in its narrative several ways to rethink established patterns, mainly of gender and nature, from characters and events.

This essay asserts that the gender non-binary characteristics of *Steven Universe*'s characters extend beyond the boundaries between human and non-human, with this condition being the most visible in the form of water as it emerges from the character Lapis Lazuli, a Gem liberated from the mirror by the protagonist, Steven, in the episode "Mirror Gem (Part 1)". In *Steven Universe*, waters possess a diversity of forms that work by conforming bodies and places and affecting the world, challenging the current social notions of water as a social representation or as a naturally passive resource managed by humans. The scenes presented throughout the essay below help in following the waters in *Steven Universe*, identifying how this element acts contingently in

the political, material and identitarian configurations in the story, suggesting the need for a relational perception of space in the real world.

## 1. WATER AS A POLITICAL AND SOCIO-NATURAL FORCE

Steven is a Human-Gem hybrid child who lives in a place called Beach City. He is the product of the relationship between the Crystal Gem Rose Quartz and a human, Greg Universe. The Crystal Gems are inhabitants of the planet Homeworld, whose government had colonizing ambitions towards planet Earth. They are agendered aliens with inorganic characteristics that dedicated themselves to the protection of life on Earth. What materially defines them are their gems, which conform into illusory and malleable female bodies that can modify themselves and magically merge with other Gem bodies (Dunn 2016). Rose had to give her life to be able to conceive Steven, who has since then been living with three other Crystal Gems: Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl. The four live in a house on the beach in a distant location of the city. Despite this proximity to the sea, space and water acquire more relevant functions only with the appearance of Lapis Lazuli.

In the episode “Mirror Gem (Part 1)” (1.25), Steven is intrigued by the fact that his friend Connie is going to school and having summer vacation. Recognising that Steven would like to acquire knowledge, Pearl gives the boy a mirror found in another galaxy that can supposedly show historical events from the Gem universe. Pearl tests the power of the mirror in front of Steven but does not obtain any information from the artifact, subsequently concluding that it must be broken. Neither of them knows that, inside the mirror, there is an imprisoned Gem, Lapis Lazuli.

With the mirror in hand, Steven runs to the streets of Beach City’s shore when he bumps into a table at the cafe where his friends Lars and Sadie Miller work, knocking it over. Lars screams at Steven, and the boy explains that he is excited for the arrival of summer. Sadie Miller responds that she is excited to put more tables outside the café, waiting for an increase in store movement, something typical of this season. Miller interrogates Lars about her plans for the summer, and the youth responds that she is waiting for the young tourist women who will come to the city without their boyfriends. With the intention of provoking jealousy in Lars, Miller also shows interest in arranging a “new friend” among the tourists.

Still walking on the boardwalk of the beach, Steven is almost run over by the mayor of the city, Bill Dewey, who is driving his car on the pavement. This moment marks Steven’s first active contact with Lapis Lazuli, who, from inside the mirror, reflects the car and subsequently reproduces the image of Lars at the cafe, screaming things said moments before. Steven stops in front of the mayor’s sound-equipped car, which abruptly brakes. The mayor interrogates Steven with a megaphone as to what is his motive crossing his path. The boy responds by asking what the mayor was doing driving near the boardwalk since doing so was prohibited. In this moment, Bill Dewey emphasizes his position as mayor and that because he is a representative of the city, he can do what he wants.

Lapis Lazuli is on an involuntary tour in Beach City. Imprisoned in the mirror, she is only a passive object that interests Steven in that moment. The scenes allow a mapping of the economic and political activities carried out in the boardwalk of Beach City and the distribution of power, mainly expressed in the commerce that benefits from the tourism and in the city hall, which seeks visibility for its management. The interests at hand and the inequality are evident, which is the that business circulates to obtain profit from the arrival of the tourists. The mayor, Dewey, mobilizes his propaganda apparatus to promote his management, exploiting the movement of the economy leveraged by summer vacation. Steven emerges here as a marginalized individual in the local power relations, getting in the way of Lars and Miller’s job (representing private power) with his childlike ways and placing himself in Dewey’s path (representing public power), and he is reprimanded by both sides. However, the mayor is the only one to place himself above the others and any social contract by arbitrarily emphasizing a privileged position in terms of power. However, the authoritarian attitude of Dewey has its consequences. He is in full campaign for reelection and holds a rally at the beach. Still inside the mirror, Lapis Lazuli imitates the sounds made by Steven’s mouth, rattling Dewey’s speech. The sounds made by her and by Steven provoke an outburst of laughter in the audience, interrupting the rally.

Recently, some researchers have they attributed political agency to bodies of water. Is it possible to say that the waters can interfere in political projects, initiate debates, and strengthen or weaken certain groups in their claims? In the classic book *Rivers of Empire* (1985), for example, Donald Worster analyzes the emergence of a hydraulic politics in the western USA in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing water as the dominate resource by a certain political and

economic elite that, from this dominion over the region's water resources, exercised power over society (Worster 1985). Erik Swyngedouw (2004), on the other hand, conceives a continuum between flows of water and power, where scarcity or abundance of water is intimately tied to social inequality in cities (Swyngedouw 2004). In both cases, in distinct ways, the researchers are working with waters that have been targets for human intervention in the construction of space in rural and urban areas. However, some studies go further by drawing attention to the possibilities of understanding water as a political agent, comprehending that the intentions, the interests and the political transformations at play are also affected by the material conditions from whence they emerge. Jane Bennett (2010), for example, analyzes the necessity of mapping the force of the events and objects in the configuration of debates and intervention in political processes (Bennett 2010). A similar opinion is expressed by Cecilia Chen et al. (2013), who question more specifically if the dynamics of waters can also be understood as a socio-natural force that acts in the conformation of political decisions (Chen et al 2013: 5).

Waters, as socio-natural planetary forces, transform, create and destroy social and political aspects in any part of the world (Chen 2013: 277). The material presence of the water in the events in *Steven Universe* points to a larger vision of water's impact on social life, going beyond the anthropocentric conception of representation and of the utilitarian perception of water as a natural resource. Lapis Lazuli, still inside the mirror, distract the attention that the audience of Beach City is paying to Dewey by imitating the sounds made by Steven. Ridiculed, the mayor stops the rally. However, in this case, Lapis Lazuli is still inside the mirror and cannot use her hydrokinetic powers. Her powers will be realised only when Steven liberates her from the mirror, in the moment in which the Crystal Gems try to recover the artifact. Freed, Lapis Lazuli confronts the Crystal Gems, giving examples of her force. The waters of the ocean take different forms under Lapis' orders, where waves, offshoots, and the sea open. She is able to escape.

In the following episode, "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), the population of Beach City and the Crystal Gems are surprised by the drastic recession of the sea: the coastal city happens to be facing an immense drought, causing drama for the local population. With the ocean recession, the merchants and fishermen are apprehensive and demand action by the municipal government. The merchants fear a drastic fall in the number of summer tourists passing through the city. Ronaldo

Fryman asks who will buy his French fries, and another merchant asks about his pizza; others ask about the clientele of the theme park. Lars is sorry there will not be more girls from abroad coming for her to flirt with. Dewey despairs in front of the Crystal Gems. He cries on his knees, screaming into his megaphone that the coastal city has transformed into a desert and that no one else will come there for vacation, which could cause enormous economic damage.

With his apocalyptic discourse, Dewey seeks to share the merchants' feeling of being victim of a catastrophe beyond his will and power. It is something "magical" or "from nature", a phenomenon external to humans. It is important to note how this discourse of "natural disaster" works to shield any public power from being held responsible for such an event. Before the merchants can continue in their complaints, Dewey resumes his authoritative style and demands an explanation from the Crystal Gems, trying to blame them for the phenomenon. Bill Dewey knows that the water recession also represents a political catastrophe. In the following scenes, the mayor appears in tears, holding a hose that pours water onto the sand. Dewey's desperation is evident: sweaty and unkempt, with an unshaven beard and clashing suit, he is sorry for the probable end of the city's economy, of his administration and, consequently, of his personal political project.

The loss of the sea has the potential to destroy the city's economy, which is intimately connected to its coastal location and resources. Both private projects and Dewey's political project are threatened by this drastic reconfiguration of geography. The sea's recession materially affects Beach City in a way that resembles Astrida Neimanis's (2013) notion of dissolution. It is a contingency, an unknowable phenomenon completely beyond the expectations of different groups and individuals. In the story it concerns the disappearance of the sea. The effect generated by this event is contingent, mirroring with consequences of real phenomena involving large bodies of water, such as a tsunami, a hurricane, or the large-scale pollution of coastal waters.

Dissolution and unknowability are two "hydro-logical categories" that are ways in which bodies of water exist, have relationships, transform themselves and materially affect other bodies, according to Neimanis's (2013) material feminist perspective. Dissolution would be the high power of destruction, creation and socio-natural transformation associated with flooding, tsunamis, and hurricanes. Unknowability is the inability to know oneself, to foresee or control anything connected to the movement of water (Neimanis 2013: 30-1). The category of dissolution, from the perspective of this ar-

ticle, also works as an agentic swarm, which is Jane Bennet's definition for the major events that open debate and dramatic material and political reconfigurations. For Bennet, objects, human individuals, ideas and events are heterogeneous compositions formed by different entities, whether human or non-human. The compositions, however, do not possess a central point that determines their effect. The effect is always congregational and distributed in a continuum which is produced by and affects various locations and the locus of power, frequently in a contingent manner (Bennett 2010: 28). The diverse reactions and consequences of the ocean recession in Beach City emphasize the fractal and contingent condition of the event, molding a radical interdependency among groups, individuals, ideas, politics and waters.

Understanding of the ways in which large bodies of water shape political changes, challenges and opportunities has emerged in the last few years through studies of hurricanes, rupturing traditional ways of analyzing water as a natural resource or subject of representation. In his work *Sea of the Storm*, the historian Stuart Schwartz analyzes five centuries of political and social impacts related to the passage of different hurricanes through the Caribbean islands. Each of these impacts is very different from the others, depending on the political responses and interests in play (Schwartz 2015). On the other hand, Nancy Tuana recognizes the porosity and the material agency of storms in her study of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, and its capacity to foment political and social tensions (Tuana 2008). Both projects reject waters as a scenery of human actions but favor viewing these bodies as co-constitutive agents of material, social and political relations. In the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), this is illustrated in the way the ocean is presented as a co-constitutive agent of personal, economic, and political projects, by being part of the existence of the human and non-human inhabitants of the space. The water is an active participant in these projects, and the recession of the sea makes this condition more evident due to its dramatic and unpredictable consequences.

On the other hand, Lapis Lazuli's hydrokinetic power, by provoking phenomena of a dissolute and unknowable nature, bears similarities to an "alien science", marked as evil, manipulative, and magical in science fiction literature until the 1970s. This "science" is associated with the subjective and the feminine, forging a difference from the science and technology of humans, which is associated with the objective and the masculine (Melzer 2006: 8). It is not by chance that humans and non-humans share the consequences of the

sea's retreat. Although the Crystal Gems are also aliens, Lapis Lazuli emerges as the real threat to the planet through her hydrokinetic power. This fundamental difference remains the hallmark of the character, providing broader and deeper questions about the role of water in the planet and human existence.

Faced with the apparent disappearance of the ocean, Steven, Greg, Connie, the Lion and the Crystal Gems travel in search of Lapis Lazuli. Along the way, one can perceive the desolation of the marine environment without the waters. Corals and plant life suffer from the absence of water, but no dead animals are observed on the trip. After a long journey, Steven and the Crystal Gems arrive at a large tower formed by the waters of the sea. Within it, numerous species coexist, imprisoned, as in a gigantic aquarium. Thus, the retreat of the sea, as an event, is an aqueous contingency, beyond the human political dimension, promoting the emergence of varied realities and consequences interconnected by the force of waters in the conformation of space and interference in the rhythms of different life forms.

## 2. HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN GROUPS AS BODIES OF WATER IMMersed IN WATER

Lapis Lazuli desires to return to her home planet, Homeworld, but does not know how to do so. Her gem stone was broken, and so she cannot form wings and fly there. A giant tower formed by seawater is created in the hope of making a path to her planet. In Lapis's desperate effort, the waters offer the possibility of communication between Homeworld and Earth.

Lapis Lazuli's hydrokinesis is a plural power that grants her strong mental control over the waters in liquid, solid and gaseous states, in other words, the three stages of the hydrological cycle. This control does consist in domination, but in the continuum between the body, the gemstone, and bodies of water. Lapis Lazuli is a quintessential body of water. Lapis's eyes, before her gems were fixed by Steven, are similar to clear waters, reflecting any image. To look in her eyes is similar to glimpsing one's own image in a water mirror, as in the myth of Narcissus (Figure 1). Her wings are made of water that sprouts from the gemstone on her back, the same way as her feminine body. Lapis Lazuli's slender body, with her hair and clothes in different tones of blue, furthers the confusion between her and the water that is under her control.





FIGURE 1. SCREENSHOT FROM “MIRROR GEM (PART 1)”, *STEVEN UNIVERSE* 1.25.

Some researchers draw attention to the malleability of the Gems’ bodies, which change form by merging themselves with other Gems in a magical ritual that involves intimacy, eroticism and romance, or which stems solely from their own magical powers, as in the case of the constant transformations of Amethyst (Dunn 2016, Ottaway 2016). Eli Dunn (2016) points out the queer characteristics of this corporeal malleability, which dissolves the material and naturalized restrictions of gender representation (Dunn 2016: 46). However, Lapis Lazuli does not modify herself solely by means of magic or by fusion with another Gem. The malleability of Lapis’s body is also associated with the expansion of the water present in the interior of her body and with the water that conforms the space, without any material mediation.

The magic in this narrative works similarly to a believable connector between different bodies of water and Lapis Lazuli, pointing to a material and discursive inseparability between the individual and the local and planetary space. Magic is also another dimension of an “alien science”, not associated with evil or manipulation but with a perspective of collabo-

rative engagement with the environment. At this point, the affinity of the alien power is evident with an eco-queer vision that challenges the hegemonic ontology largely raised in separation of the natural and the unnatural, expanding the interrogation of the naturalization of sexuality and gender, to defend hetero-normative standards, at the same time that

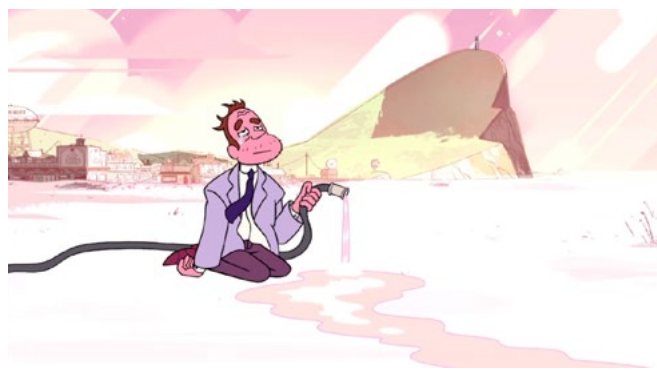


FIGURE 2. SCREENSHOT FROM “OCEAN GEM (PART 2)”, *STEVEN UNIVERSE* 1.26.

“naturalized” spaces and agents are colonized, exploited, and degraded as entities separated from the human (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010: 5).

This challenge is more explicit in the apparent counterpoint in relation to the control that the humans supposedly have over the water. Helpless in the face of the sea’s recession, Dewey cries as he pours fresh irrigated water from a hose onto the sand (Figure 2). The irrigated water is that over which humans possess some control, measured by the hose, a technical object. Although the hose appears only in this scene, it is possible for the viewer to deduce that it is connected to a faucet, which is the tip of a complex technological apparatus that forms a network of urban refueling for Beach City. The tears that fall down Dewey’s face and the sweat stain on his suit draw attention to the fact that he is also a body of water similar to any other kind of living creature. Nearly 65% of his body, as with any other human body, is formed by water. However, his relation with other bodies of water is measured by technical objects, demarcating the separation.

This is the contradiction of modern ontology, where nature and culture are separate poles, both measured by technology, although humans may be inseparably inserted into space and space into the human. Andrew Biro reminds us that humans are biologically bodies of water, residents in a space that is always a hydrographic basin, participants in a global hydrological cycle (Biro 2013: 175). On the other hand, the movement and presence of human and Gem intra-body waters remind us of the notion of trans-corporeality, which, according to Stacy Alaimo, presumes that the human and non-human bodies as disordered mixtures, contingents and emergents of the material world (Alaimo 2010: 11). According to Alaimo, the human body is always interconnected with the environment by being passed through and formed by non-human materialities, among them, water, toxic substances, bacteria, viruses, and other material elements also formed by water. The emphasis in many scenes of the episode “Ocean Gem (Part 2)” (1.26) is on the human and non-human body as being permeable and formed by water. Not only is water actively ingested when one is thirsty or mixed with food, but water is also present in its gaseous state in respiration and corporeal transpiration. Water also emerges as a common space for the materialization of the relations among different bodies.

Similar to bodies of water, each human and non-human is an ongoing materialization that shapes its difference from the other, even if its water is a common element in relation to other bodies. This condition is evident in the battle of the Crystal Gems with Lapis Lazuli in front of the large water

tower. Lapis feels the presence of Steven and the Crystal Gems and starts attacking them with water replicas. The powers of the replicas show themselves to be completely identical to those of the Crystal Gems. The difference is that the copies produced by Lapis Lazuli do not get hurt in the attacks: the water replicas dissolve and reshape themselves. Their bodies are more liquid and malleable than those of the Crystal Gems; they divide and unfold themselves in the air, and any attack against them shows itself to be useless. Even with these differences, Pearl blurts out how difficult it is to fight with herself. The Crystal Gems recognize themselves in the replicas, which are bodies without the limitations of the material and discursive interdependence with other, more solid forms that compose the bodies of humans and Gems.

This powerful hydrokinesis does not mean that Lapis Lazuli has power over the bodies of humans and Crystal Gems because they are also bodies made of water. Lapis is able to simulate bodies but cannot control the body of her target. Therefore, both Steven and the Crystal Gems recognize that they themselves are bodies made of water while maintaining a material and identity difference. This difference is only material and discursive time, occurring in relation to other bodies of water (although these bodies may be replicas). On the other hand, the replicas represent bodies whose identities are profoundly entangled with the space, making these forms more fluid and contingent.

The hydro-logic of differentiation formulated by Astrida Neimanis concerns the materialization and production of identity, which helps in thinking of the conditions of the characters as bodies of water in this scene (Neimanis 2013). According to Neimanis (2013: 31), despite the circular water in the planetary form, this circulation does not occur in a uniform manner, having differences in its constitution, movement and orientation in time and space. Bodies of water can be systems up to a certain point, given the examples of a lake, a river or even a protozoan. What differentiates them are the distinct flows and mixtures with other particles and substances, forming or gestating a closed system that communicates with other bodies by means of water with other emergent dynamics of circulation (Neimanis 2013: 31). The materiality of bodies made of water is therefore always emergent and relational, producing multiple differences in the continuum with the planet by means of the aqueous constitution of everything.

Differentiation goes beyond thinking of the world as an interactive connection; it also involves understanding bodies as permanent processes of conformation in an intra-action. Intra-

action was the conclusion reached by the feminist theorist Karen Barad in a dialogue with the ideas of Niels Bohr's quantum physics in regard to thinking of the scientific and social practices immersed in the universe of things. The intra-action comes from the presumption that bodies do not pre-exist in an independent form, with borders and inherent characteristics, but are the results of the primary relations that configure and reconfigure the limits and properties of the material itself, producing a difference in both material and discursive time (Barad 2003: 816). It is from the intra-actions that the separation and differences that place individuals, animals, and things in conditions of exteriority to one another emerge (Barad 2012: 77). All matter is similar to this, an ongoing historicity, and agency emerges as its very own reconfigurations, including time and space (Barad 2007: 179-80), mold the world. This condition of differentiation from intra-active processes seems more adequate for thinking of the relation among bodies of water in the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26).

The battle between Lapis Lazuli and the Crystal Gems finishes with Steven using his magic shield, making the replicas disappear. The boy demands a conversation with Lapis and is addressed. Different from the Crystal Gems, Lapis Lazuli does not want to follow the mission to protect humanity. She wishes to return to Homeworld and was using the ocean for this reason. Steven then reveals his curative powers. In the episode "An Indirect Kiss" (1.24), the boy discovers that his saliva cures humans and has the power to fix gemstones. It is the power that he inherited from his mother, Rose Quartz, who possessed curing tears. With his hands full of saliva, Steven touches Lapis Lazuli's gemstone, fixing it. After having formed the water wings on Lapis Lazuli's back, she flies to her home planet, and the water tower undoes itself in many gelatinous blocks that melt, forming the ocean again.

With the return of the ocean to its previous state, the economic activity in Beach City returns to normal, Bill Dewey's political project is saved, and the Crystal Gems return home. These circumstances emerge from the intra-active relationship among an aqueous substance, Steven's saliva, and Lapis's gemstone. Only Steven's secretion, in its condition as part of a

single system with its own relations born and inherited from his mother, could meet Lapis Lazuli's desires, another body made of water with hydrokinetic power. The limits between water and humans or between water and non-humans are completely imploded here, similarly to the dichotomies between nature and culture or between the environment and society. The dichotomies dissolve themselves in favor of a plurality of material-discursive forms both aqueous and transcorporeal on a common planet formed by water.

### 3. LAPIS LAZULI AND THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF WATERS

Lapis Lazuli is an alien who brings light to the complex meaning and feelings that emerge from the function of water in everyday life. There are a multitude of contradictory meanings that are situated from the experience of the characters' interaction with Lapis and her powers of hydrokinesis. The feelings generally involve the sublime, engendering postures very distinctly connected to perplexity, the terrible, melancholy, the marvelous, empathy, fragility, protection and fluidity in the dilution of borders. On the other hand, radically distinct visions of the commonalities of water emerge from Lapis Lazuli's positions in regard to herself and her own powers.

In the episode "The Message" (1.49), Greg reveals to Steven his new musical project, called "The Waterwitch". The cover of



FIGURE 3. SCREENSHOT FROM "THE MESSAGE", STEVEN UNIVERSE 1.49.



the CD is an image of Lapis Lazuli in front of the water tower (Figure 3). The events that occurred in “The Ocean Gem (Part 2)” (1.26) inspire Steven’s father to produce a song in a heavy metal style. A snippet of the lyrics of the musical theme of the CD reveals the idea of Lapis Lazuli that Greg had in that moment: “She’s a rip tide queen, and she’s so funny!”

Greg’s negative perception of Lapis Lazuli is justifiable; during the battle in front of the water tower, his car was destroyed, and his leg was broken. The waterwitch is therefore a cruel and terrible entity, almost causing the destruction of the world, inspiring a musical wonder with many guitar riffs, following a heavy vocal. The sublime in Lapis Lazuli’s powers acquires a feature of the terrible that now possesses connotations of cruelty and insanity and now promotes confusion and perplexity. In the third season, after Lapis Lazuli’s decision to reside on Earth, Steven invites her on a boat trip with Greg in the episode “Alone at Sea” (3.93). Even though Greg may be open to better understanding his past dislike of her, his discomfort is visible when she demonstrates her powers while fishing. Although Lapis Lazuli is no longer viewed as a threat, her powers still cause perplexity and fear due to the memory of what she did in the past.

In “The Message” (1.49), Lapis Lazuli shows her friendship with Steven by warning him of Homeworld’s plans to send an expedition to Earth. The Gem warns that Homeworld has become a terrible place, with extremely advanced technology based on its old standards and for the current human standards on Earth. This demonstration will not be sufficient to undo the distrust of the Crystal Gems in relation to Lapis Lazuli. When Lapis Lazuli decides to merge with Jasper to imprison her in the depths of the sea in “Jail Break (Part 2)” (1.52), in a moment of martyrdom, Garnet makes explicit her perception, emphasizing the cruelty of the act in itself in the context of the fusion, even though she also may have done so to save them. The Crystal Gems fear Lapis Lazuli due to her great powers and her unpredictable attitudes, which will give rise to a cautious posture when the water Gem later resides on planet Earth. There is also the perception that Lapis Lazuli blames the Crystal Gems for having her kept imprisoned in the mirror, helping in the maintenance of this distancing.

However, there is another possible interpretation of this distancing and fear. Lapis Lazuli represents “the other” in different aspects. She is the alien holder of an occult science that causes deep normative disturbances. She is “nature” because she is profoundly and intimately entangled with water in various levels. However, given both their material fluidity and material identity, her body, her powers and the water rep-

licas defy any static norm for bodies and identity identified with the material. As Gaard (2015) states, the ecofeminists point out that colonialism segregated individuals by race, gender, sexuality and other aspects, attributing them closely to “nature” but at the same time degrading the environment and accusing queer individuals of going against this same “nature” (Gaard 2015: 29). Lapis Lazuli represents the radical antithesis of this condition, being more associated “with the other” and “with nature” but at the same time profoundly going against the binary hegemonic and static categories of what is considered “human” and “natural”. To some extent, these binary notions still seem to be present, in a subtle form, in the thinking of the Crystal Gems and mainly in Greg’s human mentality.

Jasper will be another character who will have an extremely negative experience with Lapis Lazuli. The Crystal Gems were highly perplexed when the water Gem decided to merge with the villain Jasper to imprison her in the depths of the sea. This fusion, according to the creator Rebecca Sugar, represents an abusive relationship, extremely toxic, that creates a relationship of dependency between both of them that will last for some time, even after the separation (Asarch 2016). Malachite, the result of the fusion, is a gigantic creature, powerful, full of rage and misshapen due to her incessant fighting with herself in a mixture of contradictory desires that involve the desire for freedom and permanence. In the third season episode “Alone at Sea” (3.93), Jasper goes to implore Lapis Lazuli by resuming the fusion, after being separated since the episode “Super Watermelon Island” (1.79). Jasper creates a toxic emotional dependency on Lapis to the point of being humiliated by the return of Malachite. Jasper, however, warns Steven that Lapis Lazuli is a monster and that the boy should fear her above all else. This time, more than the contingent condition, Lapis’s character of extremely violent behavior is highlighted, enlarged in the metaphor of monstrosity.

Lapis Lazuli is a body made of water where extremes meet each other, and borders are diluted. Melancholy is a practically omnipresent trait in Lapis, contrasting her immense hydrokinetic power. This sentiment is intimately associated with her memory of home, with the references to the loss of Homeworld and to the suffering that she caused other beings with the manifestations of her powers. This existential dilemma made her fear herself and her powers (Asarch 2016). The memory of the catastrophic consequences of the ocean recession is constant. It is a melancholy that finds some parallel in what Mortimer-Sandilands (2010: 333) refers to as a continuous memory of the presence of death in the creation process, furthering the desire for and an ethic of preserva-

tion of different forms of existence. However, this constant reminder is not sufficient to placate her impulses. Lapis Lazuli is water, creation, and life but, at the same time, represents destruction and death, a condition that seems inescapable.

Lapis Lazuli's movements are generally calm, outlining the tranquility of a river that follows its tortuous course; however, her personality varies, mainly from the melancholy of calm lakes and crystalline waters to the indifference of a passing cloud and to the rage of a tsunami. This fluidity is another strong point in Lapis, and her appearance enhances the queer state of the Gems and the inversions of performed gender throughout the cartoon. Even with the extreme femininity of her body and clothes, Steven nicknames Lapis Lazuli "Bob" in the episode "Ocean Gem (Part 2)" (1.26), a diminutive form of the masculine name "Robert". Initially, the water Gem rejects the name given by Steven, but she seems to adopt it in the episode "Hit the Diamond" (3.83). On the other hand, Ottaway draws attention to the fact that Lapis Lazuli, with her fragile and feminine body, is the abuser in the relationship with Jasper, whose body is big, muscular and masculinized. In this case, for her, there is an evident deconstruction of the ideology surrounding the dynamics of power in relationships, where the masculine figure is portrayed as the only one that can abuse the female figure, given their corporal differences (Ottaway 2016). There is another evident condition in this case, which is water in its material form. Although viewed as a fragile degraded element by humans who think of themselves as the dominators of nature, it possesses an intrinsic force in their relation with the world, and hence must be respected. Therefore, Lapis Lazuli seems to incorporate the main characteristics of water, which are fluidity, the ability to change physical states and the ability to dissolve limits, making it possible to provoke reflections about gender and nature.

Other feelings, however, emerge in characters' relation with Lapis Lazuli. In the episode "The Message" (1.49), for example, Steven seeks to convince his father, Greg, of Lapis's motives for making the ocean recede. She is not malign, much less cruel, but a Gem who was imprisoned for thousands of years on Earth inside a mirror, against her will, and who only wanted to return home. The analysis of Lapis Lazuli that Steven performs comes from an experience of intimacy and affection with her, generating music in a melancholic tone:

She was trapped in a mirror,  
and it couldn't be clearer.  
She wanted to leave this place,  
and get herself back in space.

And dad you might think she's a criminal,  
but her friendship comes through subliminal.  
Lapis Lazuli,  
you fled into the bottom of the sea.  
Lapis Lazuli,  
you were so mad, but then you came around to me.

Steven wants to believe that Lapis Lazuli demonstrated feelings of affection and friendship. Not only does he desire to believe in the friendship, but he also wants to protect Lapis from the negative views and disapproval that emerged after the recession of the ocean. Despite the short amount of time, Steven's closeness with Lapis Lazuli was intense and connected to the sublime of the hydrokinetic movements. The intimacy with the magnitude of Lapis Lazuli's powers, the monumental form of the water constructed and her intense desire to return home does not provoke fear or perplexity but an enchantment and profound respect that intensified the desire to protect the Gem.

Lapis Lazuli is a metaphor for water that can also be understood in its relation to Peridot, who generates a completely different condition. Peridot belongs to a race of Gem scientists dedicated to the area of technology and to serving Homeworld, and she begins to have problems with the Crystal Gems when they try to fix the dimensional gates on Earth. She was responsible for Lapis Lazuli's imprisonment in Homeworld by Jasper, who was brought to Earth in the episode "The Return (Part 1)" (1.51) because she had knowledge about the planet and about the Crystal Gems. With the failure of Jasper's mission, Peridot decides to live on Earth in a barn that belongs to Greg's family. Peridot initially maintains very troubled relations with the Crystal Gems, given her feeling of superiority. She develops empathy for Lapis Lazuli because she is also a refugee from their home planet. Initially, Lapis behaves aggressively towards Peridot, rejecting any bond of friendship. However, with Steven's help, they both grow closer and decide to live together, spending their days caring for an immense corn and pumpkin farm and producing works of art.

It is possible to visualize the union between Lapis Lazuli and Peridot as the junction between water and the technical in the emergence of agriculture and the arts, two important aspects in human development. Peridot's treatment of Lapis Lazuli is very much connected to the notion of protection. Although her powers may be very limited compared to those of Lapis, it is evident that Peridot cares for the water Gem's well-being. This worry comes from two motives: Lapis Lazuli was the Gem who suffered the most in the series, having

been imprisoned in the mirror and, afterwards, in the depths of the sea with Jasper. On the other hand, Peridot is vain and considers herself to be mentally and emotionally superior to the other Gems. She possesses knowledge and mastery of technique, which is quintessentially the representation of science. Examining the history of the relations between the two, one can observe Peridot's dominance over Lapis in their relationship, with Jasper's mediation, in the beginning. Subsequently, there is a reconciliation, with a posture of otherness, where Peridot recognizes the importance of the water Gem for her life on Earth and continues to hold feelings of care. The last stage of coexistence between the two of them can easily be associated with science and the technical in communion with waters and in communion with the planet.

## CONCLUSION

Lapis Lazuli and her hydrokinetic power, with all the transgressions and strangeness that it promotes, offers the possibility to think of the waters in the constitution of humans, identities and relations in planetary space, suggesting a less anthropocentric and more relational view of the world. Lapis is the typical alien creature of the science fiction genre who says a great deal about who we are today while proposing future possibilities for thinking about the relationships among science, gender and the environment. In this sense, Lapis Lazuli is one of the main allies for ecofeminist and eco-queer analyses for promoting a more fluid view of gender while at the same time complicating relations among sexuality, politics and the environment by understanding them in a co-constitutive form.

Waters emerge from different forms in *Steven Universe*, with at least three highlighted aspects. The first is the political, which comes from the active participation of water in economic organization as well as social and cultural projects by being a co-constitutive element of the space where human business develops. The second aspect is linked to water as a conforming element of the human body, which links humans in affinity with all of the other beings who inhabit our planet. This corporeal affinity, however, is the connection that also makes evident the formation of material and identity differences through the distinctive rhythms and characteristics of beings as immersed bodies of water in an aqueous space. Finally, the most evident characteristic in the previous cases is the contingency of water, the difficulty of foreseeing its movements and having any kind of effective domain over it, the dramatic transformation that can operate on the lo-

cal and planetary level simultaneously, beyond the sublime aesthetic that helps in the dilution of borders, hierarchy and forms of domination.

On the other hand, Lapis Lazuli and her personality are confused with waters. Perhaps for this reason, she remains the alien whose intimacy with waters prompts anxieties that make her "the other" to be feared or the embodiment of untamed "nature". Her hydrokinetic power is constantly associated with destruction, with the unpredictable and even with evil. To a large extent, this condition is due to the normative instabilities that the abilities of water provoke in the foundations of modern thought. However, the presence of Lapis Lazuli also prompts dissent and debate over the nature of her powers and personality, notably opposing Steven and Peridot to the antipathy and fear that other characters have acquired.

The characteristics of the water detected in the narrative implode the binary ontology of humanism, the promoter of colonial forms of relation with the other. This points to a plural space of difference and suggests more horizontal forms of relationship between the inhabitants of the planet and waters. Thus, it is possible to state that Lapis Lazuli and her body, behavior and connection are a hydrological process where the eco-queer and posthumanist dimension flourishes in *Steven Universe*.

## REFERENCES

- Alaimo, Stacy (2010). *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Asarch, Steven (2016). "'Steven Universe's Creator Rebecca Sugar on 'Here Comes a Thought', dealing with loss and the toxic relationship of Lapis and Jasper". *Player One*. Oct. 17 2016. <http://www.player.one/steven-universe-creator-rebecca-sugar-here-comes-thought-dealing-loss-and-toxic-563481> (last accessed 29-09-2017).
- Badmington, Neil (2004). *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bakker, Sarah (2015). *I'm made of love: An analysis of the censorship of homosexual themes and online response to the French translation of Steven Universe*. Bachelor's monograph. Adelaide: University of South Australia.
- Barad, Karen (2003). "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3): 801-831. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>

- Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Barad, Karen (2012). "Intra-actions (interview of Karen Barad by Adam Kleinman)". *Mousse Magazine* 34: 76-81.
- Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Biro, Andrew (2013). "River-adaptiveness in a globalized world." In: *Thinking with Water*, edited by Cecília Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, 166-84. Montreal & Kingdom/ London/ Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Chen, Cecília et al. (eds.) (2013). *Thinking with Water*. Montreal & Kingdom/ London/ Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.
- Chen, Cecília et al. (2013). "Introduction: Toward a hydrological turn?" In: *Thinking with Water*, edited by Cecília Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, 3-22. Montreal & Kingdom/ London/ Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Chen, Cecília (2013). "Mapping waters: thinking with watery place." In: *Thinking with Water*, edited by Cecília Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, 274-98. Montreal & Kingdom/ London/ Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Dunn, Eli (2016). "Steven Universe, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnavalesque". *Gender Forum: an internet journal of gender studies* 56: 44-57. <http://genderforum.org/transgender-and-the-media-issue-56-2016/> (last accessed 16-09-2017).
- Gaard, Greta (2015). "Ecofeminism and climate change". *Women's Studies International Forum* 49: 20-33. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.02.004>
- Grebowicz, Margret and Helen Merrick (2013). *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Haraway, Donna (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Melzer, Patrícia (2006). *Alien Constructions: Science Fictions and Feminist Thought*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Merrick, Hellen (2008). "Queering Nature: Close Encounters with the Alien in Ecofeminist Science Fiction". In: *Queer universes sexualities in Science Fiction*, Edited by Wendy Gay Pearson, Verônica Hollinger and Joan Gordon. 216-32. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona (2010). "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies". In: *Queer Ecologies: sex, nature and desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, 331-58. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson (2010). "Introduction: A genealogy of queer ecologies". In: *Queer Ecologies: sex, nature and desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, 1-49. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson (Eds.) (2010) *Queer Ecologies: sex, nature and desire*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Neimanis, Astrida (2017). *Bodies of Water: posthuman feminist phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Neimanis, Astrida (2013). "Feminist subjectivity, watered". *Feminist Review* 103: 23-41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2012.25>
- Ottaway, Kat (2016). "Steven Universe: A Queer Television Show Analysis". *Screen Squinty Blog*. July142016. <https://screensquinty.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/steven-universe-a-queer-television-show-analysis/> (last accessed 23-09-2017).
- Pearson, Wendy Gay et al. (2008). "Introduction: Queer Universes". In: *Queer universes sexualities in Science Fiction*, edited by Wendy Gay Pearson, Verônica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon. 216-32. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Pearson, Wendy Gay (2008). "Toward a Queer Genealogy of SF". In: *Queer universes sexualities in Science Fiction*, edited by Wendy Gay Pearson, Verônica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon. 72-100. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Sbicca, Joshua (2012). "Eco-queer movement(s): challenging heteronormative space through (re) imagining nature and food". *European Journal of Ecopsychology* 3: 33-52.
- Schwartz, Stuart B (2015). *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Swyngedouw, Erik (2004). *Social power and the urbanization of water: flows of power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuana, Nancy (2008). "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina". In: *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo, and Susan Hekman, 188-213. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Worster, Donald (1985). *Rivers of Empire: water, aridity, and the growth of the American West*. New York: Pantheon Books.

## TV SERIES CITED

*Steven Universe* (2013-)