

## **Rated Q for Queer: *The Legend of Korra* and the Evolution of Queer Reading**

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Queer spectators have long looked to film and television as spaces that fail to represent them, and so they search for opportunities to appropriate characters and relationships for themselves. In other words, though it may not be directly within the text that two characters are gay, ‘queer reading’ is the act of recruiting certain signifiers present in the text to be read as subtext for a queer implication. As D.A. Miller describes in reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), the intention of queer reading is to turn these connotations into denotations, so that queer spectators can feel represented. There has been too little consideration of texts that are intended for children being inflected with queer connotation, such as the Nickelodeon animated series *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014), as well as to what extent seasons-long television narratives can evolve from connotation to denotation. Thinking, too, of Jacqueline Bobo and the mutability of spectatorial perception and reception, we can better understand how marginalized groups bend narratives to their will, and perhaps with enough force to change them. I will analyze the connotative queer elements of *Korra*, in time leading us to the contentious series finale, wherein the relationship is confirmed, in contrast to a series like *Steven Universe*, whose queer elements are consistently more explicitly denotative. I argue that *The Legend of Korra* not only suggests a growing place for queer subversiveness in children’s animated entertainment, but also that it depicts an evolution of connotation to denotation that is indebted to the power of oppositional queer reading as championed by Alex Doty in his own analysis of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

*The Legend of Korra* was a spin-off of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and it ran from 2012 to 2014. Its visual style is heavily influenced by anime, and it has a broad and active fandom, even today. The series follows Avatar Korra, who is the only person in the world that can “bend” (control) all four elements: air, fire, water and earth. As such, she is responsible for maintaining balance in the world. *Korra* and *Steven Universe* are very similar in terms of their subversive representations of gender and sexuality, but *Universe* more often traffics in denotation while *Korra* tended to remain in the realm of connotation, at least until the very end of the series. Recall Miller’s distinction between connotation and denotation:

Connotation, we said, excites the desire for proof, a desire that, so long as it develops within the connotative register, tends to draft every signifier into what nonetheless remains a hopeless task. Hence the desire assumes another, complementary form in the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, would become denotation.<sup>1</sup>

The dream of queer spectators is that, somehow, these connotative signifiers will become denotative. Doty refers to a general cultural heterocentrism that enforces the necessity of queer reading practices, which places the burden of “proof” on us to appropriate straight texts for ourselves. For example, Doty felt that he couldn’t be the only one that felt, in watching *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy was on her way to lesbianism, and but that this was emblematic of how queer spectators “find that they must develop their skills in exhaustive close reading if they are going to make any serious impression at all.”<sup>2</sup> Doty acknowledges that everyone may find themselves having to defend their interpretations of texts, but that he feels like he is often forced to defend his identity and his very *existence* as a queer spectator that queerly reads externally straight texts. Nonheterocentrist interpretations are seen as delusional, Doty says—therefore, the dream of denotation lives on. Doty’s rather radical argument is that all straight texts are *just as* queer as they are straight, even (or especially) those in the mainstream. As such, “there is no need for queer canons that are marked as alternative or subcultural because queerness can be anywhere, in any canon you care to set up.”<sup>3</sup> Doty intends to establish the vehement power of the queer gaze as a practice of viewing that is just as inherently immediate as the dominant straight gaze.

Queer subtext surely plays an even more precarious role in children’s animation. Consider the controversy surrounding the episode, “What Was Missing,” from the third season of Cartoon Network’s *Adventure Time*. Co-written by Rebecca Sugar, who would go on to create *Steven Universe*, the episode strongly implies a past lesbian relationship between two of the main characters, Marceline and Princess Bubblegum. The internet, naturally, was ablaze with opinions and reactions. Eventually, Marceline’s voice actor, Olivia Olson, said that because the series airs in some regions where homosexuality is illegal, they were not able to officially confirm the relationship within the series.<sup>4</sup> This is a common occurrence in recent years, as these children’s series air all over the world and are typically forced to “water down” queer content to appease all markets. Similarly,

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” *Representations* 32 (1990), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Doty, “My Beautiful Wickedness: *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy”, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Doty, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Bradley, “‘Adventure Time’ Actress Confirms That Big Rumor We All Suspected,” *The Huffington Post*, Aug. 15 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/15/adventure-time-rumor\\_n\\_5681894.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/15/adventure-time-rumor_n_5681894.html)

in early 2016, Cartoon Network UK chose to censor one of *Steven Universe*'s most explicitly gay moments in the episode "We Need to Talk," wherein Pearl, a feminine genderless alien, embraces Rose Quartz, another feminine alien, to make a human male jealous.<sup>5</sup> The network said in a statement: "In the UK, we have to ensure everything on air is suitable for kids of any age at any time. We do feel that the slightly edited version is more comfortable for local kids and their parents."<sup>6</sup> In light of recent cases like these, it seems likely that the final moments of *The Legend of Korra*, while making the relationship canonized, would have been censored in these markets if this confirmation had been more explicit, and the show's creators have suggested as much (Bryan Konietzko wrote on his personal blog: "We never assumed it [a same-sex relationship] was something we would ever get away with depicting on an animated show for a kids network in this day and age."<sup>7</sup>).

*The Legend of Korra* is a series that I believe thoughtfully, if imperfectly, bridges the gap between pure connotation (like that found in *The Wizard of Oz*) and explicit denotation (like that in *Steven Universe*). Recalling Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding, and Jacqueline Bobo's problematising of that conception, we must ask whether these operations change when applied to children's animated entertainment. Who is the intended audience, and who is actually watching? Encoding is how an author constructs a text, while decoding is how the audience interprets it. Hall's framework is crucial because, for him, audiences are inherently active rather than passive, and that audience engagement is dependent on the spectator's own identity. For Hall, there are three ways of viewing: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. In many ways, the dominant cultural order organizes spectatorial experience through their preferred interpretations: "The domains of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture', the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions."<sup>8</sup> Oppositional viewing occurs when the viewer decodes a text through an entirely alternative framework, while a negotiated position "operate[s] through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power."<sup>9</sup> Though queer

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Thurm, "Steven Universe censorship undermines Cartoon Network's LGBTQ progress," *The Guardian*, Jan. 12 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2016/jan/12/steven-universe-censorship-cartoon-networks-lgbtq> Full disclosure: I am quoted in this article.

<sup>6</sup> Thurm.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Konietzko, personal Tumblr post, Dec. 22 2014.

<http://bryankonietzko.tumblr.com/post/105916338157/korrasami-is-canon-you-can-celebrate-it-embrace>

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, 102.

reading is usually the result of a negotiated reading that they must settle for, the boundaries between these modes of viewing are often blurred or unclear.

A children's TV series like *Korra* exists within this hegemonic framework, but can tease out connotative decodings. Still, why couldn't Korra and Asami have kissed, like Avatar Aang and Katara did in the very last moment of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*? Are queer spectators just "settling" for a negotiated positioning? I think Doty would say, not quite: "But since I don't see queer readings as any less there, or any less real, than straight readings of classic or otherwise 'mainstream' texts, I don't think that what I do in this book is colluding with dominant representational or interpretive regimes that seek to make queerness 'alternative' or 'sub' straight."<sup>10</sup> In other words, Doty (like myself) see these queer readings as inherently *present*. Similarly, Jacqueline Bobo builds on Hall's encoding/decoding framework to appreciate context more appropriately. She discusses the compelling idea that each filmmaker creates using their own knowledge of the world and of previous texts, and that each spectator likewise understands each film based on their knowledge of the world and previous texts. Speaking about black women's responses to *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985), Bobo writes, "It is crucial to understand how this is possible when viewing a work made according to the encoding of dominant ideology....Not only is the difference in reception noteworthy but Black women's responses confront and challenge a prevalent method of media audience analysis which insists that viewers of mainstream works have no control or influence over a cultural product."<sup>11</sup> This (re)constructed meaning can be used to engender empowerment, or at least a focused oppositional experience. She, like Doty, is captivating in her assertion that this oppositional practice holds great power when acting under a system of oppression that extends to a culture's representations. It is a form of perceptual control, which situates Bobo and Doty as key to understanding the tangled reception of *Korra*.

It is clear that perception and reception are intricately mutable, and TV spectatorship only more so. Ongoing narratives that change along with their audience results in an inevitable fluidity, and I am interested in whether marginal/oppositional audiences have enough power to actually change these narratives, to force connotation into becoming denotation, through Bobo's proposed influence. Doty also envisions this somewhat utopian idea: "In the context of a heterocentrist (homophobic, sexist) culture, close reading often becomes a social and political strategy: perhaps through overwhelming details and examples we can make what is invisible to so many visible and what is denied possible."<sup>12</sup> The case of *The Legend of Korra* is particularly interesting considering its paratextual context and narrative progression. It often

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<sup>10</sup> Doty, 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deirdre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Doty, 55.

deployed conventional techniques of ‘queerbaiting’ throughout its run, leading to a rabid queer fandom. Queerbaiting is the act of writers wooing queer fans with inflections but not actively depicting queer relationships (a series like *Supernatural* is the epitome of this practice).

These spectators were able to claim certain signifiers and nuances and build a fan community, who took it upon themselves to draw up queer fan art, or write queer fan fiction, especially between Korra and Asami, who is introduced in the first season as a non-bender whose father hates benders, but she joins Korra’s team and rejects her father. In the first season, they are involved in a stale and unmotivated love triangle with another male character, Mako. They clearly respect each other, but are stuck within a clichéd storyline that failed to connect. The conflict feels contrived and irrelevant, and separate from the strong season’s propulsive narrative. Ultimately, they become friends, and only spent more time together as the series went on.

A key (connotative) moment in “Korrasami” (the fan-formed nickname for the pair later adopted by the show’s writers in interviews)<sup>13</sup> was the revelation that Asami was the only person that Korra wrote to during her years in the South Pole in the third and fourth seasons, leading to their warm reunion in the fourth season episode, appropriately named “Reunion”. As explained by series co-creator Bryan Konietzko in a post on his personal Tumblr blog, “Once Mako and Korra were through, we focused on developing Korra and Asami’s relationship. Originally, it was primarily intended to be a strong friendship....The more Korra and Asami’s relationship progressed, the more the idea of a romance between them organically blossomed for us.”<sup>14</sup> They included allusions to this friendship possibly becoming romantic in the second and third seasons, through dialogue that could be understood as queer or through certain gestures. In the season three premiere, for example, Korra calls Asami her girlfriend (used platonically by her), and Asami’s reaction can be read as surprised, and looks as though she is about to say something, but is interrupted. Their correspondence through letters while Korra is in the South Pole seems to be the clearest indication of these romantic feelings being expressed for the first time. Asami writes to Korra: “I miss you. It’s not the same in Republic City without you.” Korra writes back:

I’m sorry I haven’t written to you sooner, but every time I’ve tried I never knew what to say. The past two years have been the hardest of my life....Please don’t tell Mako and Bolin that I wrote to you and not them. I don’t want to hurt their feelings, but it’s easier to tell you about this stuff. I don’t think they’d understand.

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<sup>13</sup> Katherine Tendra Costa, “Legend of Korra Creators Confirm that Korrasami Is Canon,” i09, Dec. 23 2014. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/legend-of-korra-creators-confirm-that-korrasami-is-cano-1674384152>

<sup>14</sup> Konietzko, Tumblr.

This certainly sounds like it could be read as a “love letter,” compounded by her acknowledgement that Asami is the only one she has communicated with while she has been away.

The very last moment of the series finale, “The Last Stand,” seems to finally confirm a romantic relationship between Korra and Asami, as they hold hands and look lovingly at each other, preparing to enter the portal to the Spirit World (figure 1). The show’s creators, Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, later said this was their intention. In Konietzko’s Tumblr post, published a few days after the finale was released, he wrote (using the fan-created nickname),



Figure 1: Korra and Asami at the end of “The Last Stand” (frame grab).

“Korrasami is canon. You can celebrate it, embrace it, accept it, get over it, or whatever you feel the need to do, but there is no denying it.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to explain that this was not always their endgame for their arc, but “that’s how writing works the vast majority of the time. You give these characters life and then they tell you what they want to do.”

But did *Korra*’s queer fandom impact the evolution leading to this ending? Interestingly, Konietzko claims to have been the “first Korrasami shipper” (*shipping* is when fans root for characters to get together), but that in the writer’s room, they “never assumed it was something we would ever get away with depicting on an animated show for a kids network in this day and age.” Evidently, the reluctance lies in the show’s intended audience, despite the long history of animated shows for children being able to subversively “get away with” certain taboos, like Bugs Bunny’s drag performance exploring the fluidity of gender or the sexually-charged dialogue between Pinky and the Brain. Jeffery P. Dennis recalls Roland Barthes, who argued that every image is capable of limitless meanings and that the author works to fix the signifiers as closely as they’re able to. “But signs are necessarily unfixed, *especially in cartoons*, which build on

<sup>15</sup> Konietzko, Tumblr.

inference...In sophisticated eras, animators can introject, and audiences can decode, overt signs of same-sex desire, and even specifically gay-identified characters,” (emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Konietzko goes on to say that not everyone is queer, but at the same time, not everyone is straight. In setting up the finale, he writes (tactfully), “We approached the network and while they were supportive there was a limit to how far we could go with it,” but, “if it seems out of the blue to you, I think a second viewing of the last two seasons would show that perhaps you were looking at it only through a hetero lens.”<sup>17</sup> Though cartoon signifiers are, as Dennis argues, particularly inconstant, the *Korra* team were deliberate in their decisions — Konietzko also describes choosing the correct kind of romantic music, and changing the animation so that they look at each other, mirroring the wedding of two other characters in an earlier scene from the same episode.

Importantly, Konietzko addresses the queer fandom who had been shipping Korrasami all along. “There is the inevitable reaction, ‘Mike and Bryan just caved in to the fans,’” and he argues that the decision was made for themselves, but also, “for all our queer friends, family, and colleagues. It is long overdue that our media (including children’s media) stops treating non-heterosexual people as nonexistent, or as something merely to be mocked. I’m only sorry it took us so long to have this kind of representation in one of our stories.”<sup>18</sup> From the beginning, the series was accused of engaging in an excess amount of fan service (making narrative decisions based on appeasing the desires of fans), when they chose to have General Iroh voiced by the same actor as Zuko from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Some fans felt this was patronizing to the audience, by giving Iroh the exact same voice as such a beloved character.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the choice to end the series with Korra and Asami together was likewise felt by some fans to be a step too far.<sup>20</sup>

The opinions of the authors may be irrelevant analytically-speaking (we are well aware of auteur theory’s faults), it remains a compelling question whether the fact of this narrative being ongoing *and* enveloped by a kinetic queer fandom influenced its canonizing ending, and to take stock of how much attention the writers paid to their fans. Konietzko, for his part, suggests a great awareness: “There were plenty of Makorra shippers out there, so if we had gone back on our decision and gotten those characters back together, would that have meant we caved in to those fans instead?....Trust me, I

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffery P. Dennis, “‘The Same Thing We Do Every Night’: Signifying Same-Sex Desire in Television Cartoons,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 31.3, Fall 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Konietzko, Tumblr.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Fan Service: Too Much of a Good Thing?” Lady Geek Girl, Aug. 24 2012.

<https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2012/08/24/fan-service-too-much-of-a-good-thing/>

<sup>20</sup> Emily Asher-Perrin. “Legend of Korra’s Finale and the Problem With ‘Fan Service’,” Tor, Dec. 22 2014.

<http://www.tor.com/2014/12/22/legend-of-korras-finale-and-the-problem-with-qfan-serviceq/>

remember Kataang vs. Zutara.”<sup>21</sup> He is referring to multiple fan nicknames for shipped romances (between Mako and Korra, and Katara & Aang and Zuko & Katara in *Avatar*). This is a world he knows well. In an interview a year after the series concluded, he addressed concerns over how explicit they could be: “That was where we were wavering. Not like, ‘Oh I don’t know, I saw a Tumblr post, we should do this at the end of the show.’....We are not so easily swayed.”<sup>22</sup> Here, he is pushing back against the idea of the fans impacting their story decisions (as a writer is wont to do), but it is clear that the pair were well aware of what the fans were up to and what their desires were.

Brittany Warman applies a queer reading to the live-action ABC series *Once Upon a Time* and the character of Red Riding Hood (Meghan Ory), which opens “up space for a compelling reading of Red’s werewolf nature as a coded depiction of her then latent but later confirmed bisexuality.”<sup>23</sup> This “latent but later confirmed” characterization reflects Korra and Asami’s arcs, and fan response to the show’s lack of denotation appears to have directly influenced *Once Upon a Time*’s narrative. Warman explains, “Seemingly largely in response to the outpouring of support for that relationship, Adam Horowitz and Edward Kitsis confirmed soon after that season five would feature a romantic same-sex relationship,” which ended up being Red and Dorothy Gale (Teri Reeves). For Warman, this means that we must re-evaluate the earlier seasons as potentially richer for unconventional (read: oppositional) readings, just as Konietzko encouraged viewers of *Korra* to do. In this scenario, just as with *Korra*’s ending, the canonization of the queer relationship does *not* validate the earlier queer readings, but instead offers an *opportunity* to more actively conduct queer readings of the same and other texts.

These readings, in other words, are always equally valid, as Doty argued. As Lee Edelman notes in *Homographesis*, the more queerness and non-hetero sexualities are dismissed and avoided, the more “culture has been eager to read a vast array of signifiers as evidence of what we now define as ‘homosexual’ desire.”<sup>24</sup> Homosexuality is increasingly understood as being available for signification as it becomes a more powerful force in the social landscape, to the point that it “becomes subject to a metonymic dispersal that allows it to be read *into* almost anything.”<sup>25</sup> Edelman provides a framework for understanding Warman’s somewhat strange articulation of non-validation but opportunity. Though every moment is *available* to a queer reading, there

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<sup>21</sup> Konietzko, Tumblr.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Berg-Johnsen. “The Legend of Korra: An Interview with Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino,” *Sequart*, Apr. 19 2015. <http://sequart.org/magazine/56585/legend-of-korra-interview-bryan-konietzko-michael-dante-dimartino/>

<sup>23</sup> Brittany Warman, “I Am the Wolf: Queering ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and ‘Snow White and Rose Red’ in the Television Show *Once Upon a Time*,” *Humanities* 5.2, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Lee Edelman, “Homographesis,” *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

remains an eminence to the moment of unequivocal affirmation. It's an understandable desire. For Edelman, this moment, "on closer inspection, can be seen as the point at which what is 'recognized' is also constituted and produced, the point at which an act of retroactive interpretation finds expression as an act of visual or perceptual 'clarification'."<sup>26</sup> This imparts some insight into how the confirmation can simultaneously perform the function of recognition and configuration. This moment has little canonical relevance to previous queer readings, but supplies some opportunity to read the text oppositionally. However, the force of a queer fandom complicates this, particularly in the modern context wherein the authors of ongoing narratives have direct and consistent access to it.

Konietzko and DiMartino, like Horowitz and Kitsis, were always well-aware of the queer fandom around their show, and knew what it wanted. The difference being, of course, the lingering fear about queering an animated children's series. The fact of the TV narrative's ongoing essence appears to allow this (queer) fan influence to have a powerful impact, and naturally allows the creators to eventually bring the narrative to "taboo" places that may not have been possible early on in its conception. Korrasami was not always the plan, but it did become so over time, purely a function of the medium's evolutionary and continuous fundamental quality. Moreover, this move toward more explicit queer denotation in children's animation (taken even further by *Steven Universe*) suggests not only a clear indication of oppositional viewing leverage, but also that there is fluidity and mutability in the construction of encoding and decoding, particularly in the case of unfixed cartoons. What remains most instructive, however, is still Doty's assertive belief of queer reading's eternal and deep-rooted truth.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.

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