ALLEGORIES FOR COLONIAL TRAUMA IN STEVEN UNIVERSE

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Allegories for Colonial Trauma in *Steven Universe*

**Abstract:** Animation and ‘literary television’ are categories of television studies that have not been amply researched in academia. “Allegories for Colonial Trauma in *Steven Universe*” utilizes the program *Steven Universe* to establish and define parameters of the aforementioned genres. Additionally, it discusses the colonial and neo-colonial themes of the program by analyzing two of its characters as allegories for colonialism. The study’s methodology consists of close readings of the text as well as the use of theory, journal articles and podcasts to aid in the analysis of the program. This paper will serve as an example of the types of texts whose study would broaden the field of literary and media studies.

**Introduction**

Presently, contemporary literary studies have been diversified to incorporate other non-scribal texts such as film and television as literary texts. The process has led to new creative and reading paradigms that are intertextual and transdisciplinary. Intertextuality occurs across all genres; literature, film, and television echo and allude to each other, engaging similar narrative techniques. The study of text and textuality includes new fields and genres or sub-genres of mediums like film or television. Nonetheless, some of these new fields and genres are viewed as lowly; this is the case for animation. Animation is often considered unworthy of study as it is seen by many as infantile, incapable of addressing complex themes and, thus, unable to offer its audience material to analyze. Nevertheless, like all mediums, animation possesses a plethora of sub-genres that provide ample material for academic research.

In this essay, I examine the material presented in *Steven Universe*, an animated program, to explore the topic of colonialism and what its lingering effects do to a colonized people, and their land. Colonialism is the system through which a nation maintains control over another they
have conquered and invaded. In the colonial system, the conquering/invading nation (the colonizers) holds a position of domination over the conquered/invaded land and its people (the colonized). The colonizers forcefully establish a system of government that oppresses the colonized and allows the colonizers to exploit their conquered lands (colonies). Under colonial rule, the views and culture the colonizers choose are imposed on the colonized. Colonialism destroys and distorts the culture and identity of the colonized. The trauma of the ruination of collective and individual identity afflicts the colonized. I utilize colonial allegories present in the series Steven Universe to broach the topic of colonial trauma (the trauma experienced by the colonized due to colonialism).

Allegories express ideas about human existence using symbols. This paper proposes that Steven Universe is an allegory for colonialism. In the program, the Earth is colonized by an alien race and the show’s plot centers on how the characters navigate their traumas as they battle to end colonization. The struggles that the characters face mimic the struggles that humans in our reality undergo when they experience colonization and neocolonization. Although the series as a whole can serve as an allegory for colonialism, to limit the scope of this paper, I analyze the characterization of two characters: Pearl and Lapis Lazuli.

Engaging traditional formalist reading methodology (plot, character, setting, motivation, etc..) I look at the roles of the two characters in selected episodes to understand how colonialism affects people, their environment, and their responses to their colonized condition. However, this study would be very superficial without drawing ideas from Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin White Masks, Octave Mannoni’s Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization, and Albert Memmi’s The Colonizer and the Colonized, Mika’il DeVeaux’s “The Trauma of the Incarceration Experience,” and other psychological theories to explain the
traumatic consequences of colonialism and alienation. I also draw from studies on animation and literary television published in popular culture and film studies journals, interviews from *Steven Universe*’s official podcasts, reviews, etc., to enhance my reading. All this is done within a contextual frame of other children’s animation television programs that rise to the level of literary television.

The episodes selected from the podcast included: “Battle of the heart and mind;” “Homeworld Gems;” “Lapis;” “MiniRecaps: Raising the Barn (ep. 2);” “Pearl;” “Peridot;” “Steven Selects: Mirror Gem-Ocean Gem (ep. 3);” “The fantasy of *Steven Universe*;” and “The heart of the Crystal Gems.” These episodes offered insight into the creation of the program, characters, and episodes. Out of the 160 episodes in the series, 42 were selected, transcribed, and reviewed. After all the episodes were reviewed and annotated, 20 episodes were then selected in addition to the *Steven Universe* movie to form the primary texts for the essay. The episodes that were selected are: “Message Received;” “Back to the Barn;” “Sworn to the Sword;” “Keeping It Together;” “Now We’re Only Falling Apart;” “A Single Pale Rose;” “Friend Ship;” “Chille Tid;” “Mr. Greg;” “Jail Break;” “Rose’s Scabbard;” “Same Old World;” “Mirror Gem;” “Alone at Sea;” “Can’t Go Back;” “Back to the Moon;” “Steven’s Dream;” “I am my Mom;” “Gemcation;” “Cry for Help.”

**Literature Review**

In this paper, my main focus is to explore how colonial trauma is thematized and presented through the experiences of Pearl and Lapis Lazuli in *Steven Universe*. Pearl and Lapis Lazuli are gems, an alien race from a planet called “Homeworld.” Pearl is a formerly enslaved individual and current member of the rebel group “Crystal Gems.” Lapis Lazuli is a gem who is wrongfully imprisoned during war, abandoned, and isolated. According to trauma theorist, Cathy
Caruth trauma is an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (qtd. in Ward 177). Pearl’s experiences as an enslaved person and Lapis’ experiences of imprisonment cause distress and lasting negative behaviors that impair their daily functioning. Thus, trauma theory will be central to the analysis as well as colonial and neocolonial theory.

Mika’il DeVeaux utilizes testimonial narrative in incarceration in his paper “The Trauma of the Incarceration Experience” to discuss the impact incarceration has on an individual. He refers to DSM-IV to define trauma as an event that involves physical harm or that damages the person that witnesses, experiences, or learns of it. He divides trauma into two types. Type I: Trauma originates from a singular rare unanticipated event. Type II: Trauma originates from anticipated, ongoing, or multiple incidents over time. He insists that any variety of events can lead to trauma; what defines trauma is the person's reaction to the event rather than the event itself. It is said that a person is traumatized if they are rendered helpless or overwhelmed by the event. Thus, the conceptualization of trauma is created from the relationship between the person and the event.

In “Trends in literary trauma theory,” Michelle Balaev traces the historical progression of trauma theory in literary studies. Balaev identifies three major models often used to analyze types of trauma: the abreactive model of trauma, the intergenerational theory of trauma and memory, and the transhistorical model. The abreactive model of trauma proposes that trauma causes a dissolution of the self and that it necessitates a recreation of the trauma through narration. The intergenerational theory of trauma suggests that trauma is transmitted intergenerationally based on shared social, racial, or religious traits. The transhistorical model
states that a trauma experienced by a group in the past can be experienced by an individual in the future who did not experience the trauma first hand if that individual shares specific social, racial, or religious ties with the traumatized group. As Balaev discusses these three theories, she explains how they can be useful to look at specific instances of trauma in individuals or trauma novels, but that overall the theories tend to be reductive as they blur the lines between a person’s individual experiences and responses and that of a collective. Balaev then goes on to propose utilizing place as a way to study trauma literature by taking into account both the individual and cultural experience of trauma as relating to a particular place.

Another trauma theory pertinent to my essay is Kerry Gagnon’s Betrayal Trauma Theory advanced in “Victim-Perpetrator Dynamics through the Lens of Betrayal Trauma Theory.” Betrayal Trauma Theory can provide greater clarity when evaluating the symptomatology presented by patients that have experienced betrayal in their close relationships. Victims that are in close relationships with their abusers in which they depend on their abuser for survival adapt to the abuse to maintain their relationships. According to Betrayal Trauma Theory, there are three ways that victims cope with or process the abuse: self-blame, shame, and alienation. Victims who turn to self-blame shift the burden of the abuse onto themselves, thus not perceiving the betrayal and maintaining the abusive relationship. Victims who feel shame from the abuse redirect the betrayal by feeling embarrassed or humiliated by the perpetrator’s actions rather than hurt. Victims who alienate themselves as a way to cope emotionally detach themselves from the abuse making it possible to remain in the abusive relationship.

As my essay also explores the theme of colonialism and its traumatic effects on the colonized, Abigail Ward’s “Understanding Postcolonial Traumas” provides a launchpad to examine the high incidence of identity personality disorders among the colonized, which
disorders continue as Colonial Stress Disorder and Postcolonial Stress Disorders or Syndromes. Ward explains that more recent Prominent theorists of colonial and postcolonial trauma include Octave Mannoni, Franz Fanon, and Albert Memmi, whom Ward singles out as crucial figures in early theory on colonialism and trauma. She explains that the common thread through all three theorists is the importance given to understanding the psyche of the colonized, how it is shaped by the colonizer, and the traumatizing relationship between the colonized and the colonizer.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on two chapters from Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*: “The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples,” and “The Negro and Psychopathology.” In these chapters, Fanon explores the psychology of the colonized. In “The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples,” he critiques Octave Mannoni’s idea of the colonial’s dependency complex. According to Fanon, colonial racism and oppression are not different or separate from other forms of racism or oppression. The inferiority of the colonized is not an innate trait; it is a characteristic created by the colonizer and their belief in their superiority. Fanon explains that the colonized rarely find themselves engaging in academic pursuits, but not for lack of skill, for lack of opportunities. Fanon states that an issue with Mannoni’s work is that he forgets that the Malagasy people are now intertwined with the colonial invaders and that it is not possible to study their traits in isolation from the colonizer’s influence. The colonizer’s arrival made psychological, economic, and cultural shifts in the Malagasy, and these cannot be ignored. Fanon also argues that the idea of otherness comes from the confrontation with the other. It is when the colonizer arrives and challenges the colonized’s personhood that they, in turn, begin to question it.

In “The Negro and Psychopathology,” Fanon expands on the effect of the arrival of the colonizer on the colonized. Fanon explains that people of color from childhood are taught to
view other people of color as savages, using the lens of the colonizer. The visualization of their peers as savages becomes a worsening problem for people of color when they attempt to integrate into white society and find themselves being categorized with their fellow people of color, thus losing the position of the ‘hero’ and becoming one of the ‘savages.’

The topic of the complex relationship between colonized and colonizer is extensively addressed in Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. In his text, Memmi explains that the colonizer creates a portrait of the colonized to justify his treatment towards them. The colonizer’s behavior towards the colonized, in turn, forces the colonized to behave in ways that reaffirm the myths the colonizers have created about them, thus ensnaring them in a vicious cycle. The relationship between the colonizers and the colonized is one that destroys the colonized’s society and impairs them from assimilating into the colonizer’s society. Thus, the colonized is left with two alternatives: remain petrified in the cycle of oppression or revolt.

The discussions of trauma, colonialism and colonial trauma are widely available. For example, theorist Cathy Caruth’s theories on the importance of verbalizing trauma are widely used as a basis of study. Other theorists’ works, like Dominick LaCapra’s studies on generational trauma and Frantz Fanon’s study of the effects of colonial war in *Wretched of the Earth*, have become key concepts for the analysis of literature. The field of trauma studies has grown vastly; trauma theorists have built on each other’s work to develop a holistic analysis of trauma looking at everything from whom trauma affects (the individual, the collective), how trauma impacts individuals (physical, psychological, cultural and social effects), the role or importance of memory in trauma, and the effect of trauma on identity. But because most of the literature on these topics have overwhelmingly been focused on scribal texts, it is pertinent at this point to
define and discuss what animation as literary television is, and how I use the theory developed in the field to read *Steven Universe*.

**Literary Television**

Literary television, sometimes referred to as complex television is a genre of television programs that “. . . employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode” (Mittel 18). Literary television features complex overarching narratives and typically fall into one of two categories: character driven or setting driven. In the case of character driven programs, the series focus on the characters themselves; thus, the characters will be complex and flushed out. The progression of the series explores the inner worlds of characters and transforms them over the course of the program. Setting driven series, as the name implies, focus on the setting of the story. These programs explore and enrich the setting rather than the characters. The key to literary television is complex overarching narratives, regardless of which aspects of the narrative are complex. Based on the above, I contend that *Steven Universe* deploys all of the characteristics of a complex narrative animation. For the purposes of this research, I have coined the term, Complex Overarching Narrative Animation [CONA] as a sub-genre into which I insert *Steven Universe*.

Programs within the sub-genre of CONA share similarities with literary television, complex overarching narratives plots, epic settings, and formal strategies such as foreshadowing and symbolism. CONA series focus on characters and their relationships with one another. Some examples of programs in this category include: *Avatar: The Last Airbender, Over the Garden Wall, The Legend of Korra, Star vs the Forces of Evil* and *Steven Universe*. They all explore themes of trauma, grief, relationship disorders, and healing practices. For example, *Avatar: The
Last Airbender explores the nature of trauma and abuse through the character of Zuko. When the series begins, Zuko is burned and exiled by his father. He is left with a deformed left eye. As the series progresses, Zuko tries to regain his honor and his father’s respect. Viewers are able to see Zuko struggle with his pain and desire to regain his honor and be accepted not only by his father but by society. Using CONA as a reading methodology, I explore the lives of Pearl and Lapis Lazuli in Steven Universe as allegories of colonial trauma, anxieties, and types of personality disorders pathologized in colonized peoples.

Colonial Allegories in Steven Universe

As indicated above, I read Steven Universe as an allegory of colonial trauma designed as a program for young television viewers. Thus, the series may superficially represent events on a mythical landscape, involving non-human and semi-human characters, but its colonial overtones suggest multiple critiques of human acts of colonization, resource exploitation, cultural deracination, racism, classism, and other socially engineered hierarchies by the colonizers that ultimately traumatize the colonized. Its narrative focalization is centered through Steven Universe, whose witness of events is facilitated and corroborated by his three gem guardians Amethyst, Garnet and Pearl. The show is told overwhelmingly from Steven’s perspective. The only times the viewer is able to witness something Steven does not is in the moments before Steven enters the scene or the moments after he exits the scene. These moments are very brief lasting less than thirty seconds. Due to this, the viewer relies on Steven to acquire information on the world and the characters.

At the series’ debut, Steven Universe is a thirteen-year-old boy who is the product of a union between a human and a gem. Gems are “a space-faring race” of aliens “designed to conquer other worlds,” according to Peridot’s own explanation in “It Could’ve Been Great.”
These alien creatures are gemstones who possess bodies composed of compressed light energy that act as if they are solid matter. If a gem’s body is injured, it retreats into its gemstone and reforms. But if a gemstone is cracked or shattered, the gem dies. Gems do not share any of the biological needs humans have because they are not biological creatures; instead, they are composed of minerals, similar to how gems are in our reality. As such, gems are made not born.

Gems hail from a planet known as Homeworld; however, their reign extends beyond their native planet to other solar systems and galaxies. The gems travel across space and colonize planets to create more gems. This is done by identifying a planet whose soil is rich with nutrients, traveling to it and creating kindergartens. Kindergartens are dig sites where raw material for making gems is shot into the soil using special injectors. The raw materials consume the soil’s nutrients until it creates a gem. Once a gem is created, it exits the earth leaving behind a crater. Kindergartens suck all the nutrients out of a planet’s soil; due to this, a planet becomes uninhabitable for all creatures except the gems by the time it has been fully colonized.

Gem society is ruled by a group of 4 gems known as the Diamond Authority. All gems belong to one of the diamond’s courts. White Diamond is the most powerful gem followed by Blue Diamond and Yellow Diamond, who are equals, and Pink Diamond, the youngest and least powerful member of the Diamond Authority. Gems are created with a purpose in mind; their society is highly restrictive because they are crafted rather than born. All gems are expected to behave according to their role and place in society, no matter how high their social ranking is. Thus, a gem’s identity is defined by their role, their ability to fulfill that role and serve their diamond. Furthermore, because gems are made, any gem that does not fit within the Diamond Authority’s standards for each gem type is considered defective and, thus, are systematically hunted and destroyed.
In gem society, only the diamonds are considered unique beings. Each of the members of the Diamond Authority is considered their own type of gem. If a sapphire is not blue, she would be considered off-color and defective. However, each of the members of the Diamond Authority is a different color and they are not ostracized for it. In addition, only the diamonds have names; all other gems are referred to by their gem type, and if further identification is needed, gems are identified using their cut information. An example of this can be seen when Peridot identifies herself before Yellow Diamond as, “[peridot] [f]acet 2-F-5-L, Cut 5-X-G” (“Message Received” 07:21-07:25). This lack of names impacts the development of identity and provokes gems to cling even tighter to their roles as their only source of self-satisfaction and identity.

In the world of *Steven Universe*, the gems colonize Earth approximately 5,750 years before the start of the story. The planet is chosen by the youngest member of the Diamond Authority, Pink Diamond, as her first colony. When colonization begins, Pink Diamond is excited to design and rule her first colony. However, after visiting Earth, Pink Diamond became enamored with nature and the native creatures who inhabited it. Upon realizing that colonization would lead to the destruction of Earth’s natural ecosystem, she decides she wants to stop all colonization plans. Pink Diamond initially attempts to reason with the other diamonds to stop colonization on Earth, but they disagreed with her views. Thus, in an attempt to force the diamonds to abandon Earth, Pink Diamond fakes her own death and assumes a new identity as the face of a rebellion against the Diamond Authority. Rebel gems who were dissatisfied with the Diamond Authority banded together with humans and raged war against the Diamond Authority for 1,000 years. The war culminates with the Diamond Authority evacuating the Earth of its people (gems) and using a bio-attack to destroy any rebels that remained on Earth. The Diamond Authority’s attack destroys all but three gems: Rose Quartz, Pearl and Garnet.
At the beginning of the series, three gems remain on Earth (to Steven’s knowledge):
Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst, a gem that emerges from the earth 500 years after the war and thus knows little of gem culture. Steven himself is the product of the joining between a male human Greg, and the gem Rose Quartz, who gave up her physical form so Steven, the first human-gem hybrid, could exist. As the story unfolds, a series of events leads the Diamond Authority’s interest in Earth to be renewed. These events include the integration of new gem characters into the program.

Gems possess no names; thus, although there are many pearls and lapis lazuli, I refer to the gems in my analysis as Pearl and Lapis Lazuli. Pearl and Lapis Lazuli are allegories for colonial trauma. Pearl embodies the historical trans-generational trauma of her enslaved gem community. As hinted above, I see her role as allegorical to human experiences of colonialism and enslavement. On Homeworld, pearls are created to be slaves. They are the only characters presented in *Steven Universe* who are considered to not have ‘gemhood’ (personhood). This is evident from the way Peridot chastises Pearl for acting like she is her “. . . own gem” (“Back to the Barn” 08:52-08:54). Pearls are viewed as objects; to own a pearl is a symbol of status in gem society. Peridot describes pearls as ‘made-to-order servant[s],’ ‘accessor[ies]’ and ‘shiny-toys.’ She says they are meant for, “standing around, and looking nice, and holding your stuff for you . . .” (“Back to the Barn” 03:03-03:07). Pearls are expected to serve their masters/owners. Pearls are not allowed to even imagine things without their master’s permission or at their request. Everything a pearl does, its very existence, is in service to the master. Pearls are made in a facility known as a ‘reef.’ This facility is shown in the mini-series *Steven Universe Future*, which serves as an epilogue to the main show. Besides making pearls, the reef provides masters with accessories for their pearls and also offers repair services. If a pearl experiences a severe
problem that cannot be repaired via the standard maintenance procedure, they are put through a process called rejuvenation. According to the reef, pearls will obey their master without fail after rejuvenation.

Pearls’ place in the social hierarchy as the enslaved is reaffirmed by studying their design. *Steven Universe: The Movie* depicts how Pearls come into existence. In *Steven Universe: The Movie*, a gem called Spinel uses a special weapon that, upon striking a gem, causes it to go through rejuvenation. The rejuvenation process essentially erases gems’ memories and restores them to the state they were in when they first emerged from the earth. Rejuvenation is not permanent, as is demonstrated in the movie when the gems that are rejuvenated regain their memories. However, the rejuvenations in *Steven Universe: The Movie* offer us insight into how pearls differ from other gems.

In the movie, four gems are rejuvenated: Ruby, Sapphire, Amethyst and Pearl. When Ruby, Sapphire and Amethyst reform after the rejuvenation, they do so in the same way we have seen them reform due to injury over the course of *Steven Universe*. Their gems levitate and a bright light forms in the shape of their physical form; the light then materializes into the gem’s physical form and the gem comes back down to the floor. However, after Pearl’s rejuvenation, her gem does not reform immediately like all the others did; instead, her gem levitates and becomes enclosed within a light blue hologram of an oyster. A robotic voice emanates from the pearl requesting its user/owner to identify itself. After a user has identified itself, the automated voice registers the user/owner and then asks it for its preferred customization options. If the user does not choose a customization option, the system will release the pearl with the ‘default’ settings. Afterward, the holographic oyster opens and the bright light in the shape of the gem
rises from inside it until it exits completely and takes the shape of the gem. The pearl then approaches its master/owner, bows down to them, and pledges their eternal servitude.

A pearl’s emergence, treatment and social standing compel us to ponder on the nature and victims of slavery. A slave is perceived as a kind of automaton with no agency or self-volition. The slave is comparable to the robot that is designed to obey commands without the ability to question, reflect, or resist. Pearls cannot easily be interpreted as either biological or artificial beings; I prefer to see them as organic creatures on the same footing as humans, deserving rights.

When *Steven Universe* starts, Pearl is a member of the Crystal Gems. ‘Crystal Gems’ is the name of the group of gem rebels that start the war to free Earth from Homeworld. When the war ends, only three gems are left: Rose Quartz, Garnet and Pearl. Five hundred years later, when Amethyst emerges, she joins the rebel group. Up until her death, Rose Quartz acts as the leader of the Crystal Gems. After Rose Quartz dies bringing Steven into the world, Garnet takes over as the unofficial leader of the Crystal Gems. During the beginning of the series, Pearl and the rest of the Crystal Gems dedicate their lives to fighting monsters and protecting the Earth. Thus, a viewer’s first impression of Pearl is that she is a strong and powerful, albeit neurotic character. Nonetheless, as the series unfolds, it becomes evident that Pearl is deeply traumatized and still behaving as an enslaved individual.

Pearl’s first behavior that crosses the line and exposes her neurosis starts in the episode, “Sworn to the Sword.” Pearl teaches a human girl named Connie how to serve while undermining the lessons of servitude with lessons of resistance. She teaches Connie how to fight. She instills in Connie a devaluation of self, “Remember, Connie. In the heat of battle, Steven is what matters. You don't matter” (“Sworn to the Sword” 07:22-07:27). Pearl teaches Connie that
she holds no value, that her life is meaningless, and that Steven’s is of the utmost importance, “No, Steven. I understand now! Your legacy, your destiny, you are everything! And I . . . I am nothing . . . But I can do this for you! I can give you my service!” (“Sworn to the Sword” 08:05-08:17). Pearl instills in Connie the same inferiority complexes that facilitate the ethic of subservience demanded of every slave.

In “Sworn to the Sword,” Pearl’s inferiority complex is questioned by Steven during which he also raises issues about Pearl’s relationship with Rose Quartz, “I didn't mean to mess up your training, but all that ‘You're nothing’ talk was really freaking me out. Did Rose make you feel like you were nothing?” (10:35-10:44). While Pearl dismisses Steven’s concerns, her behavior demonstrates that Rose makes Pearl feel lesser. As Fanon argues in Black Skin, White Masks, the colonized develops an inferiority complex because of the white man:

. . . it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him . . . (74).

Gem society dictates that a pearl’s existence is meaningless, that its sole purpose is to serve. In Pearl’s case, though she is no longer living within gem society at the debut of the series, she still suffers from mental colonization, and her mind is not yet unshackled from the chains of servitude and inferiority placed upon her during her enslavement. Rose Quartz, Pearl’s former master, who although ‘freed’ her, continues to serve as leader and mentor in Pearl’s life. It is not until Rose Quartz dies that Pearl is finally separated from Rose Quartz’s grip and influence. Though freed, Pearl still must process and exorcise the thousands of years of subjugation, humiliation, deracination, alienation, and mental fracturing.
Pearl’s neurotic inferiority complex caused by the master-slave dynamic, qualifies her as a candidate to prove Fanon’s point that, “. . . every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation, every affective erethism . . . is the product of [her] cultural situation . . .” (Fanon 117-118). Observing Pearl’s behavior before and after “Sworn to the Sword,” it is clear her neurotic actions are a product of her former enslavement. In the episode, “Keeping It Together,” the Crystal Gems and Steven are observed folding Steven’s laundry. They are doing this task together because Pearl is doing all the housework alone, even though they had all agreed earlier to distribute the tasks equally. Pearl tries to excuse her relived subservient behavior by arguing that she really enjoys doing all the housework and Garnet indicates to her that it is better if they work together. Pearl is struggling to let go of the behavior and beliefs that have been ingrained into her. Her trauma is directly influenced by and influences her relationships.

One of the most crucial figures in Pearl’s history of trauma is her master, Rose Quartz aka Pink Diamond. Rose Quartz and Pink Diamond are one and the same as the identity of Rose Quartz is the one Pink Diamond assumes to escape from her responsibilities. When the series debuts, only Pearl knows that Rose Quartz is actually Pink Diamond. This is because Pearl is Pink Diamond’s personal slave and, as such, directly serves her from the moment Pearl is created until Pink Diamond dies. In fact, Pink Diamond’s final order to Pearl as her diamond is to keep quiet about her true identity. Thus, while to the other gems, Rose Quartz is the brave leader of the rebellion, to Pearl, she is her master. Just because the master is pretending to liberate Pearl does not mean she actually does. Rose Quartz continues to have an influential role in Pearl’s life and, as such, their master-slave dynamic remains untouched. This is why although at the debut of the series, thousands of years passed since Pearl is enslaved in gem society, she has not healed
from her trauma. She has only been freed from slavery for as long as Steven has been alive, 13 years.

Pearl idealizes Rose Quartz and is jealous of her because she is Rose Quartz’s personal slave and the sole keeper of the secret of her identity. “I was your mother's sole confidant— for the words she could share with no one else, I was there to listen” ("Rose’s Scabbard" 03:22-03:28). Keeping a secret as delicate as the truth about Rose Quartz’s identity, coupled with years of being her slave, makes Pearl believe that she is special to Rose Quartz. This creates a lot of pain for Pearl as she slowly realizes that she was not as special to her master as she thought; that her master does not care for her or hold any loyalty to her the way she does for her master. In an exchange with Steven and the Crystal Gems, Pearl becomes increasingly agitated and distressed as she is faced with hard evidence that her relationship with Rose Quartz is not what she thought it up to be:

No! Rose didn't have a lion because if Rose had a lion, I would have known about it! / Rose kept many things secret, even from us. / But not from me, I was the one she told everything! . . . YOU can't understand how I feel, NONE of you had what we had! ("Rose’s Scabbard" 05:47-06:05).

Pearl had thought that she was special to Rose Quartz. A natural psychological damage caused by her enslavement. Yet interestingly, Rose Quartz proved to be teaching Pearl ways to subvert her dominance over her. She encouraged Pearl to behave in ways that were forbidden to pearls. She encouraged Pearl to use her imagination to have her own opinions and to be ‘free.’

Notwithstanding this anomalous behavior by Rose Quartz, her encouragement of Pearl is fueled more by her curious nature and her desire to see what would happen. She wants to find out whether enslaved people, often portrayed as mentally inferior, have the capacity for
intellectual work that can equal that of the master. Rose Quartz’s priority is herself and her interests. Whenever Pearl talks about Rose Quartz, she always glorifies her and justifies her actions. For example, after the truth about Rose Quartz’s identity is revealed, Pearl tells the story of how Pink Diamond became Rose Quartz. During Pearl’s narration, Sapphire questions her and asks her why Rose Quartz did not do anything to stop the colonization on Earth if she cared about the planet which Pearl justified by saying that she tried to stop the colonization, but could not (“Now We’re Only Falling Apart” 08:02-08:46). Thus, Pearl’s stories or descriptions of Rose Quartz cannot be trusted because of the nature of her relationship with her. Rose Quartz’s selfishness can be identified when analyzing her actions towards others.

The image Pearl paints of Rose Quartz is a heroic and merciful one. Contrarily, the image of Rose Quartz that is created from the experiences she had with other gems casts Rose Quartz as a selfish, self-centered colonizer. For example, she is given Spinel as a gift to entertain her like a toy or a jester, and when she gets tired of Spinel, she lies to her and tells her they are going to play a game and instead abandons her and leaves her waiting for her return for thousands of years alone in a garden in space (Steven Universe: The Movie 52:57-56:50). Rose Quartz’s empathy only extends as far as it is convenient for her. Another example of this is the secret she forces Pearl to keep. Rose Quartz feels frustrated that the other diamonds do not listen to her wishes, so she decides to fake her own death and assumes the identity of Rose Quartz forever. She prohibits Pearl from telling anyone that she is Pink Diamond and that she faked her own death because she “. . . never want[s] to look back” (“A Single Pale Rose” 20:55-21:00). Rose Quartz disregards her position of power and the right of her fellow rebels to know the truth. She is one of the main sources of Pearl’s trauma besides the colonial system itself.
Rose Quartz pretends she has given Pearl freedom and makes Pearl believe she is special to her until the day she dies. When *Steven Universe* begins, Pearl’s trauma experiences as a slave are still fresh. When Steven moves in with the gems at first, Pearl tries to treat him like Rose Quartz and places him in the position of the master, “You shouldn't be anywhere near the fight! You're too important! . . . Why won't you just let me do this for you, Rose?” (“Sworn to the Sword” 10:00-10:10). However, Steven does not allow Pearl to place him in a position of power over her. Steven constantly shows Pearl through his words and actions that he is not his mother. In addition, Steven is half-human and was raised on Earth, meaning he has no preconceived notions of what Pearl is ‘meant’ to be. Steven is a highly empathetic person who works to help others and right his mother’s wrongs. Hence, Steven is one of the central characters that helps Pearl progress and heal from her trauma.

Garnet is one of the biggest supporters of Pearl’s progress to healing. Garnet is from Homeworld. She shares the experience of Homeworld culture and indoctrination that Pearl has lived. Furthermore, Garnet is the first member of the rebellion and the reason Rose Quartz decides to start a full-fledged rebellion against Homeworld. Garnet has known Pearl longer than anyone else, with the exception of her master, and, as such, is witness to her struggles with trauma. While others may dismiss Pearl’s actions as neurotic behavior, Garnet recognizes that Pearl’s actions are caused by thousands of years of enslavement. Thus, Garnet actively works towards helping Pearl heal by not enabling her negative behavior. For example, as previously mentioned in the episode “Keeping It Together,” all the Crystal Gems are folding Steven’s clothes because Pearl is doing all the housework herself instead of sharing the responsibilities with the other Crystal Gems. In this scene, neither Amethyst nor Steven comprehend the
significance of Pearl’s actions. However, Garnet does; she is the one who tells the others that they are going to do the folding together and the one who chastises Pearl.

Garnet operates as the unofficial leader of the Crystal Gems and Pearl sees her as strong and powerful. Garnet is the type of person Pearl would like to be, a gem who seems to be free from her ‘nature.’ In the episode “Cry for Help,” Pearl and Garnet fuse for the first time in a long time to destroy a communication hub. Pearl feels powerful and safe when she is fused to Garnet, “When we fuse, I can feel what it's like to be you. Confident and secure and complete. You're perfect . . . I wanted to be a part of that” (“Friend Ship” 08:01-08:14). Pearl thinks that she can never feel whole on her own, that she cannot escape her nature, “No matter how hard I try to be strong like you . . . I'm just a Pearl. I'm useless on my own. I need someone to tell me what to do” (07:45-07:54). Even though it has been thousands of years since the war ended and 13 years since her master dies, even though Pearl teaches herself science and how to fight, she still feels inferior. Although Pearl had defied expectations and done more than any other pearl, she believes that she could never be more than what she was born to be according to colonialism. Garnet does not accept Pearl’s statements; she rebuts them and tells Pearl that she is not perfect. She also goes beyond that and tells Pearl that she is more than her nature:

I struggle to stay strong because I know the impact I have on everyone. Please understand, Pearl. You have an impact too. There are times when I look up to you for strength. You are your own gem. You control your destiny. Not me, not Rose, not Steven.

But you must choose to be strong, so we can move forward. (08:33-8:54)

Garnet emphasizes to Pearl that she is the master of her destiny. She tells Pearl that she needs to move forward and stop trying to seek orders or direction from Rose, Steven or her. As Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, nothing stands in the way of Pearl, or any other colonized,
performing the same tasks as a colonizer “except that the people in question lack the opportunities” (71). Pearl is her own person; she does not need anyone to validate her. The only thing that held Pearl back previously was her enslavement. Now that she is free, she has the space and opportunity to be more than what she was. It is this hard exchange with Garnet that allows Pearl to confront her feelings of shame and self-loathing and, by recognizing them, she is able to try to work through them and begin healing. This is why her relationship with Garnet is so important.

Lastly, it is imperative to assess Pearl’s relationship with Peridot as Peridot enters Pearl’s life at a pivotal moment. When the Crystal Gems encounter Peridot for the first time, it arises concern and fear because she represents the return of the imperial powers. However, when Peridot is captured by the Crystal Gems and begins working with them, Pearl is forced to face the colonial ideas around whom she is meant to be. Previous to the episode “Back to the Barn,” Steven does not know there are more pearls besides Pearl and that she is meant to be enslaved. After the events of “Friend Ship,” where Pearl bears her heart to Garnet, she has not found herself in a situation where someone tries to impose on her the roles she had been perpetuating from her time under imperial rule. Peridot not only dismisses Pearl, but she also tries to take ownership of Pearl, “. . . who do you belong to anyway? . . . Well, you can belong to me for now” (“Back to the Barn” 03:40-03:49). This forces Pearl to make a decision, submit or revolt.

Peridot, as a representative of the colonial system, forces Pearl to confront how she is seen. In “Back to the Barn,” when Pearl and Peridot cannot reach an agreement to work together, Steven decides they should compete to see who is more capable. During this competition, Peridot insults Pearl, “. . . You're a Pearl! You are beneath me! I'll always be better than you and nothing I've seen today will ever change that!” (“Back to the Barn” 08:05-08:11). She reminds Pearl
what her rightful place in the colonial system is, what her ‘nature’ is. Pearl acknowledges her role under colonial rule, “That's right! I am a Pearl! . . . What you're saying may be true, but it doesn't matter! . . .” (“Back to the Barn” 08:58-09:08). When confronted with the colonizer’s ideals, Pearl is able to accept them and move forward without letting them impair who she is. She accepts the colonized being she has become and the traits which brought her shame and self-loathing become positive elements (Memmi 182).

Over the course of the series, a picture of the traumatized enslaved and those who inherit that trauma is painted through Pearl. At the beginning of the series, Pearl is suffering, but she has not recognized or verbalized her trauma. As the series progresses and Pearl has her confrontations with Garnet, and later Peridot, she is able to acknowledge her trauma and begin working on accepting herself. However, Pearl still has a lot of shame and self-loathing after these events. This is most evident in a song she sings in the episode “Mr. Greg,” entitled “It’s Over Isn’t it?” In this song, Pearl reiterates a sentiment she expresses at the beginning of her healing journey. “Who am I now in this world without her? Petty and dull with the nerve to doubt her” (“Mr. Greg” 06:55-07:01). Pearl states that she wonders who she is without Rose Quartz. This parallels her sentiments from the season 1 episode “Rose’s Scabbard” when Pearl tells Steven: “Everything I ever did, I did for her. Now she's gone, but I'm still here . . . What would she think of me now?” (09:35-09:51). Despite the progress she makes, Pearl still holds Rose Quartz in high regard. She has lived all her life for her master. As Memmi argues in The Colonizer and the Colonized, “[l]ove of the colonizer is subtended by a complex of feelings ranging from shame to self-hate” (165). Pearl idealizes her master and obsesses over her to cover the pain Rose Quartz causes her. Additionally, Pearl experiences shame regarding her nature as a Pearl and self-
Shields Cruz

Shame and self-loathing are coping mechanisms that abuse victims utilize to survive within an abusive relationship:

. . . by blaming themselves, victims remain unaware of betrayal in the relationship and are able to maintain the necessary attachment to the perpetrator . . . Shame may stem from feelings of defeat and helplessness within the victim–perpetrator relationship; the victim is dependent on the perpetrator, and therefore, is unable to escape the abuse. (Gagnon 376)

Pearl is Rose Quartz's slave; she cannot escape the abuse and suffering that her master puts her through. Thus, to cope and continue their bond, Pearl exercises shame and self-blame. Like Fanon and Gagnon argue, this self-blame and shame, and the love towards the colonizer are just ways of coping with trauma. Pearl is still idealizing her master and abiding her final will. This appears to be the final piece towards true healing.

Although Pearl makes much progress through the series, she is not able to fully heal until she breaks the final order her master gives her. Throughout the series, whenever the conversation steers towards Pink Diamond or her shattering, Pearl covers her mouth. Every time Pearl does this, she exhibits extreme distress through her body. There are at least five notable incidents of this in the series. The first one is in the episode “Back to the Moon,” in this episode when Pink Diamond’s murder is mentioned Pearl covers her mouth with her hand and starts trembling, her eyes are wide open and staring at the ground. The second instance is in the episode “Steven’s Dream,” Steven asks Pearl if a drawing that he found has something to do with Pink Diamond. In this second instance, Pearl covers her mouth with her fist, momentarily closes her eyes and lowers her head and then turns and looks at Garnet for support. During the entire scene, she keeps her hands in front of her mouth. The third incident occurs in the episode “I am my Mom,”
on this occasion, Steven admits to a crime he did not commit and Pearl whispers Steven’s name as tears start streaming down her face and she covers her mouth with both hands. The fourth instance occurs in the episode “Gemcation,” here, Pearl attempts to tell Steven about the Diamonds and when she does one of her hands covers her mouth and with her other hand, she battles to pry it off. The final incident occurs in “A Single Pale Rose,” in this episode, Steven confronts Pearl and asks her if she shattered Pink Diamond. Pearl responds, “I” before both her hands go over her mouth. She then mumbles into her hands and tries to pry them off of her face, but they keep forcing themselves in place. Her eyes are shut tight and it is evident that she is fighting hard to speak.

The final order Rose Quartz/Pink Diamond gives Pearl continues to humiliate Pearl. Out of the five major instances when Pearl covers her mouth, in at least the last three, she desperately wants to break the silence. During incident number four, Steven is taking the blame for Pearl’s crime. Pearl is the one who ‘shattered’ Pink Diamond, but Steven is taking the blame for it and is about to be taken to court on Homeworld. Pearl cries in desperation as she is unable to say the words that would save Steven, someone she loves. In the final two instances, she physically and visibly fights to speak, but her body betrays her. “Silence is painful—we might infer that it is absolutely necessary to talk about trauma . . .” (Lyotard qdt. in Ward 177). The silence harms Pearl and impedes her healing. Pearl is still under her master’s yoke even though her master is dead, and she has worked on healing from her trauma. Rose Quartz’s dominance over Pearl lives on through Pearl’s silence.

Pearl must break the silence and express her trauma to be free of her master’s influence on her life. However, Pearl cannot verbalize her trauma, “[there is] an immense chasm between what needs to be expressed and what can be comfortably accommodated within the existing
limits of language. Phrases which exceed or transcend those limits necessitate the development of new modes of expression” (Lyotard qtd. in Ward 177); hence, she requires a different mode to communicate her pain. In the case of traumatized individuals in reality, a new mode may be through some form of artistic expression. In Pearl’s case, because of her abilities, she is able to express her trauma by sending Steven into her subconscious and allowing him to explore her memories.

Steven’s journey into Pearl’s subconscious offers insight into trauma and coping mechanisms. When Steven first enters Pearl’s subconscious, he encounters a figure that looks just like her, an inner Pearl. This Pearl is controlled; she suppresses everything. She tells Steven that there are many inner Pearls, but she has ensured that none of them are at the forefront of Pearl’s consciousness. She keeps them all deeply repressed. Inner Pearl explains to Steven that she is very good at compartmentalizing and that is why she gets “... to be surface, and [the others] have to be put away” (“A Single Pale Rose” 15:46-15:49). This is how Pearl has been coping with her trauma by suppressing it and not allowing herself to reflect on it, feel it or address it. When Steven requests to see the other Pearls, Inner Pearl tries to dissuade him and convince him to stay where they are. Pearl does not want to disturb the delicate balance that holds her together. However, Steven opts to delve deeper into Pearl’s subconscious. At Steven’s request, Inner Pearl allows him to dive deeper into Pearl’s subconscious and witness her traumatic memories.

The memories Steven views in Pearl’s subconscious represent some of her worse memories of her traumas. The first memory he sees reiterates the pain Pearl has verbalized, “What am I going to do when she [in reference to Rose Quartz] disappears?” (“A Single Pale Rose” 16:46-16:49). He witnesses Pearl’s fear of uncertainty and of what will become of her life
when she loses her master as she sits in a fetal position and sobs. She then sends him into a
deep memory, the one that marked the moment she lost everything. In this new memory,
Steven is on a battlefield in the middle of the gem war. He sees Pearl looking dazed and numb,
“We’re the only ones left . . . Homeworld . . . They were all leaving. We thought we’d
won...There was a bright light and everyone was . . . Why did I do it?” (“A Single Pale Rose”
17:46-17:58). Pearl falls to her knees and shakes her head as Steven attempts to get her to
explain what she means. This scene is significant. Pearl does many tasks for her master, but in
this instance, she witnesses the grave consequences of her actions. What happens that day on the
battlefield is what causes her to regret the memory she cannot verbalize. Rather than explain to
Steven what happened and why she is so upset, Pearl sends Steven to witness the memory for
himself. In this new scene, he sees what appears to be Rose Quartz crying as she gazes off to the
side Steven sees that she has a Pearl on her forehead and Pearl’s eyes; she looks back at him and
shows him a Pink Diamond. Afterward, he is launched into another memory. He sees Pearl
speaking to Rose Quartz inside Pink Diamond’s palanquin. In this final memory, Steven finds
out the truth about Pink Diamond’s shattering (murder).

The memory of the day Pearl is ordered to keep silent illustrates Rose Quartz’s
selfishness. Rose Quartz tells Pearl that faking her own death is going to be easy and the best
way to handle the current situation. Pearl tries to reason with her to find another way; she tells
Rose Quartz that the plan is crazy and that it will change everything. Rose Quartz responds
enthusiastically; she finds it exciting. She tells Pearl that after this moment, they will both be free
(“A Single Pale Rose” 19:26-19:44). However, Pearl will not be free because she will still be
working for her master and Rose Quartz was never trapped to begin with, “A white man in a
colony has never felt inferior in any respect” (Fanon 68). Before Rose Quartz has Pearl
shapeshift and fake Pink Diamond’s murder, she gives her a final order, “No one can ever find out we did this, I never want to look back . . . let’s never speak of this again. No one can know” (“A Single Pale Rose” 20:46-21:10). Rose Quartz does not want the others to learn that she is a diamond, one of the imperial lords. She wants to exist without consequence, without taking responsibility for her actions, her role or her position of power. As she gives Pearl this final order, she takes Pearl’s hands and lays them both over Pearl’s mouth. Afterward, she walks out of the palanquin and Pearl turns to look at Steven. She apologizes for making him go through all her memories to break the silence. After this, Steven exists Pearl’s unconscious and she uncovers her mouth with tears in her eyes. He tells her that he knows, and she tells him that she has longed to tell him for a long time.

Once Pearl breaks her silence and verbalizes her trauma, she is able to truly heal and move forward. From this moment onward, Pearl faces the other diamonds and even finds herself temporarily forced into her old role of servant to the diamonds, but she is no longer affected by it. Pearl shows surety over who she is. She fearlessly faces the diamonds in battle. In the Steven Universe: The Movie, it is confirmed that Pearl has been able to heal and move forward. At the beginning of the movie, Pearl verbally acknowledges that Rose Quartz did not free her and that she continued to be subjugated: “Once upon a time, I only lived to be of Pink Diamond's service, till the day the two of us snuck down to be on this planet's surface. We became our fantasy, and I was sure she set me free. But in the end, I guess I never left her side” (06:46-07:12). She goes on to talk about her sadness and struggle and how she finds herself in a new place now, “And after love and loss and all the tears that I cried, I find that here we are in the future” (Steven Universe: The Movie 07:13-07:19). Pearl is able to heal and move forward after verbalizing her biggest trauma. Pearl will always have her past, but she can move beyond that. The most significant
message illustrated through Pearl is that the essence of the colonized is not their colonized condition. Pearl may have been enslaved and developed a dependency complex because of that, but that does not mean that it is in her nature to be dominated and enslaved: “I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world . . .” (Fanon 73).

In *Steven Universe: The Movie*, when Pearl is ‘rejuvenated’ by Spinel, she reverts to her original state. The only way to restore Pearl’s memories after the ‘rejuvenation’ is to remind her of something crucial to her identity. At first, Steven thinks that what Pearl needs to regain her memories is her master, so he has Amethyst shapeshift into Rose Quartz. When their attempt to get Pearl to remember who she is fails, Steven tries to get Pearl to rebel with his father, who accidentally registered himself as her master. Steven thinks that if seeing Rose Quartz is not enough, maybe Pearl needs to rebel with her master like she did during the gem war. This also does not work, especially considering that while Pearl was ‘rebelling,’ she was still serving her master and being subjugated; therefore, she was not actually rebelling. Finally, Steven realizes that what Pearl needs to be herself again is freedom. In other words, the thing that defines Pearl’s identity is not her master, and it is not her enslavement; it is her independence. When Steven realizes this, he fuses with his father and sings a song about becoming independent. As Pearl listens, she starts to tap her foot and when Steven says, “What do you wanna do?” (*Steven Universe: The Movie* 47:43-47:45) Pearl has a physical reaction to it. Something goes off in Pearl’s chest and she gasps. After Steven completes his first verse, Pearl sings, “Nothing is holding me back now. No one can push me around. What do I wanna be? I’m the master of me . . .
.” *(Steven Universe: The Movie 47:55-48:13)*. As Pearl sings, she looks at her hands, starts smiling and extends her arms outward, an important reference to the biggest thing that held her back before: the order to remain silent.

While Pearl represents the trauma of the enslaved and their descendants, Lapis Lazuli embodies the trauma of the imprisoned colonial. Lapis exemplifies what is often categorized in trauma theory as Continuous Traumatic Stress Disorder (CTSD). Continuous Traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health condition that is triggered by a continuous experience of trauma. Victims of CTSD not only experience one or multiple traumatic events, but they are also in a state where the threat of future violence and danger is real and ever-present. The main preoccupation for individuals who have this type of trauma is the future rather than the past. At the debut of the series, Perl lives in a safe place; contrastingly, over the course of the series, Lapis repeatedly finds herself under threat of violence and imprisonment. Throughout the series, Lapis is imprisoned four times. Each imprisonment is influenced by the previous one adding to her struggles and trauma. Imprisonment of any kind is an extremely difficult experience; it leaves individuals, “... utterly helpless about the degree to which [they can] protect [themselves]” under the constant threat of violence (DeVeaux 265). For Lapis, each of the imprisonments further increases the mental and physical repercussions of her trauma as she attempts to establish a life for herself under a constant state of danger.

Lapis’ first imprisonment occurs during the gem war when Homeworld soldiers mistake her for a rebel. When the soldiers mistake Lapis for a rebel, they capture her and imprison her in a mirror. Afterward, they interrogate her and try to get her to give them information on the rebel base and leaders, but Lapis could not respond. When the soldiers are given the order to retreat, they forget about Lapis and trample the mirror, crack her gemstone, and abandon her on Earth
next to the Galaxy Warp. The Galaxy Warp is a special device that allows gems to teleport to Homeworld and the other gem colonies. When Lapis describes this experience to Steven, her eyes become like glass, no pupils, no irises, just a sheen silver surface. This is the same way her eyes appear when Steven first frees her from the mirror, and she is physically injured. It is as if the memory of her imprisonment is so painful that it temporarily reverts her to that state. Lapis describes this memory with pain, “And there I stayed. Freedom in my sight, but out of reach for ages, until I was found” (“Same Old World” 09:14-09:21). Lapis is isolated beside the warp pad that could take her home, so close yet inaccessible from her prison. Lapis is abandoned by the warp pad for thousands of years and, after she is found, she spends hundreds of more years stored within Pearl’s gem, isolated. According to the Correctional Facility:

The psychological effects of punitive isolation are well documented . . . [C]onditions in lockdown can cause such symptoms as perceptual distortions and hallucinations, massive free-floating anxiety, acute confusional states, delusional ideas and violent or self-destructive outbursts, hyper-responsivity to external stimuli, difficulties with thinking, concentration and memory, overt paranoia, and panic attacks. (qtd. in DeVeaux 274)

Lapis spends thousands of years in isolation and upon being freed, she finds herself imprisoned three more times. Throughout the series, Lapis experiences anxiety, violent outbursts, paranoia, and panic attacks, clear results of her time in the mirror.

After Pearl finds Lapis’ mirror, she labels it as a tool. When Steven asks Pearl to teach him more about gem culture, she gifts him Lapis’ mirror. Pearl tells him that the mirror can reveal anything it has witnessed. Pearl orders the mirror to show Steven the Galaxy Warp and nothing happens. Pearl becomes irritated with the mirror and concludes it must be broken. Steven, with his childlike wonder, appreciates the mirror for what it is even though it does not do
what Pearl claims it should and decides to keep it. Steven goes about his day with the mirror until he is nearly run over by a van and the mirror warns him to move. Afterward, Steven becomes excited and begins talking to the mirror, asking it what it means to be a mirror. Lapis responds that as a mirror, “you work!” (“Mirror Gem” 04:33-04:34). When Lapis is in the mirror, she can only communicate by taking pieces of the things others say in her presence and assembling them together. Steven treats Lapis like a person even though he thinks she is a magic mirror and does not know she is a gem imprisoned in the mirror. Contrastingly, the Crystal Gems know that Lapis is trapped in the mirror and treat her like an object.

In the mirror, Lapis is removed from her personhood. When Steven shows the mirror to the Crystal Gems, they show surprise at learning that the mirror is talking to him. They say the mirror should not be talking to him, that it should only obey orders. They say the mirror is a tool and that it is incapable of wanting anything. The treatment of Lapis within the mirror reflects the process prisoners undergo in prison when they are assigned a number to identify them, “This numbering was part of the process to strip me of my humanity, my dignity, and my self-respect... The expectation was that we would go along with this demotion from human to animal” (DeVeaux 270, 271). The Crystal Gems know Lapis is imprisoned in the mirror, but they do not care. As Lapis herself says upon being released from her prison, “You three knew I was in there, and you didn't do anything. Did you even wonder who I used to be?” (“Mirror Gem” 10:04-10:14). Lapis is imprisoned and in the Crystal Gems eyes, that means she is a tool now, not a gem.

When Lapis exits the mirror, she is incapable of attempting assimilation. When Lapis is freed from the mirror, she is distrustful of the Crystal Gems and Steven, upon learning he is one of them. Steven is saddened by Lapis’ negative reaction towards him. Steven does not experience
colonialism or imprisonment and does not understand why they cannot get along if they are all gems. However, for the colonized, it is not that simple, “automatically distrustful, [the colonized] assumes hostile intentions in those with whom he converses and reacts accordingly” (Memmi 184). After the Crystal Gems leave her to rot in the mirror rather than free her, Lapis could not trust them. The rebels are the reason the Homeworld soldiers imprison her in the first place and when the rebels find her, rather than show mercy, they leave her in her prison.

When Lapis is imprisoned a second time, she loses hope of ever being free. After Steven heals Lapis’ gem, she leaves Earth and flies to Homeworld. When Lapis returns to Homeworld, everything is different and the gems there take her back to Earth to lead them to the Crystal Gems. When Jasper, one of the gems that brings Lapis back to Earth, tries to hurt Steven Lapis defends him and they label her a traitor to Homeworld. Lapis is then put in a cell on Jasper’s ship along with Steven and the Crystal Gems. Steven is able to escape his cell and goes around looking for the others to free them. When he encounters Lapis, he tries to free her, but she has resigned to her situation, “No! I don't want your help. Things are bad enough as it is. I've already made too much trouble. Once we get back to Homeworld, they're going to decide what to do with us . . . If we do everything they say they might go easy on us.” (“Jail Break” 02:52-03:11). Steven tells Lapis that the people they are dealing with are bad because they imprisoned them, and Lapis replies that them being imprisoned is exactly why they should not fight back. “The fact is that the colonized does not govern. Being kept away from power, he ends up by losing both interest and feeling for control” (Memmi 139). After being subjugated for so long, Lapis has lost the fire to fight.

The third time Lapis is imprisoned, she makes the choice to be in that situation as a way of taking back control. After the ship she was imprisoned on crashes, Lapis tries to fly away and
escape, but Jasper stops her and tries to manipulate Lapis into joining forces with her and fusing to attack the Crystal Gems, “These Gems, they're traitors to their Homeworld. They kept you prisoner. They used you. This is your chance to take revenge! Come on, just say yes” (“Jail Break” 09:22-09:34). As Jasper talks, Lapis looks at the Crystal Gems focusing on Steven. Her face appears to be pensive and sad; after a moment of reflection, her gaze hardens. Lapis then extends her hand and fuses with Jasper. She then proceeds to use her powers over water to create chains using the ocean. She wraps chains around her fusion and drags them to the bottom of the ocean, “I'm done being everyone's prisoner. Now you're my prisoner! And I'm never letting you go! . . . Let's stay on this miserable planet . . . together!” (“Jail Break” 10:28-10:36, 10:44-10:48). Lapis decides to fight back. If Lapis cannot have her freedom, then she will have control over her imprisonment.

During her third imprisonment, Lapis turns to the model of her oppressors in an attempt to regain control: “The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him.” (Memmi 164). When two gems fuse, they share a body and coexist in the same consciousness. To keep their fusion imprisoned at the bottom of the ocean, Lapis needs to actively suppress Jasper. While Lapis and Jasper are fused, Lapis keeps Jasper submerged in their shared subconscious held by chains that are attached to her hands. Lapis must pull the chains and concentrate to stay in control. She must focus on the present and could not look forward, “[to the colonized] planning and building his future are forbidden. He must therefore limit himself to the present, and even that present is cut off and abstract” (Memmi 146). In this state of imprisonment, she does onto Jasper the things the colonizers did onto her. Both Jasper, “You can't lie to me. I've seen what you're capable of. I thought I was a brute, but you . . . you're a monster” and Lapis, “I was terrible to you. I liked
taking everything out on you. I needed to; I hated you. It was bad!” confirm her violent behavior ("Alone at Sea" 09:09-09:18, 09:54-10:01). Lapis’ violent reaction and her acceptance as cruel is part of her process to rebel against the forces that oppress her. “Briefly, the rebellious colonized begins by accepting himself as something negative. A second point is that the negative element has become an essential part of his revival and struggle . . .” (Memmi 182). After her time with Jasper, Lapis is more prone to outbursts of rage, usually at the expense of Peridot, with whom she shares living quarters.

Lapis’ final isolation is self-imposed as she struggles with her fear and trauma and her desire to move forward. “I was so sure the Diamonds would destroy my new home, that I did it myself. It's like I'm back inside the Mirror, except . . . I put myself here” (“Can’t go Back” 07:07-07:17). When Lapis learns that there is a possibility that the Diamond Authority will come to Earth, she attempts to run away. She makes it out of the Milky Way before she turns around because she feels lonely. However, she could not bring herself to return to Earth and instead hides out on the Moon and watches over her friends using an ancient observation device. “[the colonized] has been torn away from his past and cut off from his future, his traditions are dying and he loses the hope of acquiring a new culture . . . Assimilation being abandoned, the . . . liberation [of the colonized] must be carried out through a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity” (Memmi 172). Lapis tries to adapt to life on Earth despite her initial hesitation, but her fears and trauma are too much, and she has to leave. Steven attempts to reason with Lapis and convince her to return home. Nonetheless, her trauma is too great, “I-I'm not like you and your friends, Steven! I can't just let go of what happened to me. I can't go through that again” (“Can’t go Back” 10:28-10:34). Lapis wants to move forward, but she is not ready yet. She needs to process what she has experienced.
In summary, Lapis Lazuli and Pearl’s experiences echo those of people who suffer colonial trauma. The argument that Pearl and Lapis are allegories for colonial trauma is sustained by the trauma and colonial theory cited throughout the paper. Allegories present human issues through symbols. Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon’s theories on colonialism are written about real colonial situations and these explain Pearl and Lapis’ behaviors.

The experiences of Pearl and Lapis are two examples of the colonial struggles depicted in *Steven Universe*. Despite being an animated program, *Steven Universe* is thematically complex. The program examines trauma, politics, gender, race, and disability in an in-depth manner through its setting, characters, imagery, and dialogues. *Steven Universe* offers ample material for viewers, academic or otherwise, to explore human understanding of Continuous Traumatic Stress, Dependency, colonial trauma, etc. Thus, *Steven Universe* can be studied as literary television on par with a more traditional style of text.
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