

This Is Me Now: Queer Time and Animated Childhood

Katie Barnett

Animated sitcoms have a complex relationship with time. These are worlds where a character can remain 10 years old from 1989 to nowadays (as is the case for Bart Simpson in *The Simpsons*), a pregnancy can last seven television seasons and over 100 episodes (as is the case for Bonnie Swanson in *Family Guy*), and numerous Halloweens, Thanksgivings and Christmases can be celebrated without characters aging a day.

Animated sitcoms deal in seriality and repetition, and like their live-action counterparts tend to adhere to a well-worn episodic structure that prioritizes narrative closure. No matter the revelations, upheavals or injuries of the previous episode, by the beginning of the next, the equilibrium is reset and order is restored.

This apparent triumph of equilibrium, however, should not detract from the subversive potential of animated sitcoms and, specifically, the *queer* potential rooted in the rejection of linearity and temporal progression. 'Queer time' rejects the logic of (hetero)normative time and the related demands of continuity and reproduction (Needham, 2008; Halberstam, 2005). Characters who refuse aging, birth and death can open up this queer space—that Mark Simpson (1996) might call “a world put out of order”—none more so than the animated children who resist the permanency of adulthood.

Lee Edelman (2004) identifies the child as the ultimate symbol of the future, revealing the constant drive forwards around which society is constructed. Edelman calls this heterosexual, heteronormative order of generational progression “reproductive futurism”. The children of animated sitcoms, however, can be an important foil to the linear logic of reproductive futurism. Gene Belcher, the eleven year old son of Bob and Linda in *Bob’s Burgers* (Fox, 2011-present), is a good example.

Gene is a queer kid. Fans have embraced him as genderfluid and potentially pansexual. H. Jon Benjamin, who voices Bob, suggests that Gene “may be a gay man someday”. The irony of this statement, of course, is that *someday* for Gene—particularly the someday when he is a man, as opposed to an 11 years old boy—is perpetually declined in favor of a continuous present in which Gene is neither one thing nor the other, or, indeed, one thing *and* the other. Gene, like numerous other animated children, exists in a queer time and space, unthreatened by adulthood and the fixity that accompanies it. In addition to this, Gene’s identity can be read as queer, without the demands of confirmation that might come with his entry into adolescence and adulthood.

Gene’s conception of his own gender is one example of how he resists easy categorization. Gene is consistently identified as a boy by all the other characters, with the exception of his sister Louise, who suggests that Gene may be the “good daughter” of the family. Gene, however, has sometimes referred to himself as a girl. In the episode “Bob Fires the Kids”, he has this discussion with Bob and Mickey:

Gene: We're working girls now!

Mickey: You're a girl?

Gene: Yes!

Bob: He's not.

Gene: Tell that to my vagina!

Although Gene's default appearance is short dark hair, blue shorts and a yellow t-shirt, in numerous episodes he chooses to wear girls' clothing, whether it be a sparkly purple evening gown (and a long dark wig) (see figure 1), a bathing costume, a Queen Latifah outfit or a sweatshirt emblazoned with the name 'Jessica'.

Just as Gene's gender identity appears to be fluid, his sexuality is similarly undetermined. In part this is due to him being an 11 years old boy, for whom a fart is still the most exciting bodily function. However, he does briefly have a girlfriend, although he is ambivalent towards her and, when listing her virtues, names "your dad and his stuff". He is baffled by his friends' interest in breasts, and his first apparent sexual response is directed towards a female-presenting manatee puppet called Marilyn, operated by Herman the ventriloquist.

Gene's primary interests are performative: he is a keen musician; enjoys fashion and design (once entering a competitive table-setting contest); excels at cheerleading and synchronized swimming, whilst being singularly terrible at baseball. Gene's rejection of traditional masculine pursuits is notable, and combined with his willingness to declare himself a girl (the above conversation is one example, but there are a number of others) is suggestive of a certain fluidity and queering of the

norm. Yet, it is not absolute. In the episode “Beefsquatch”, Gene takes to wearing a Sasquatch costume, proclaiming indignantly that “This is me now!” when asked to remove it by his parents. A flashback reveals that Gene has responded in a similar way on numerous other occasions when he has adopted a new identity:

[Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCt0mfue8ao>]

The fact that, in animated sitcoms, it is always (and never) “now” reveals a space in which characters are not compelled to progress forwards in time. For the children who do not need to grow up, there is a freedom from the weight of the future in favor of a rather more queer present. For kids like Gene, the possibilities are as endless as his childhood.

References

Edelman, L. (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP.

Halberstam, J. (2005) *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: NYU Press.

Needham, G. (2008) “Scheduling Normativity: Television, the Family and Queer Temporality,” in Davis and Needham (eds.), *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*. London: Routledge.

Simpson, M. (1996) *It's A Queer World: Deviant Adventures in Pop Culture*. London: Vintage.