

In the Spirit of Subtlety: The Reclamation of Queerness in *The Legend of Korra*

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Abstract: Throughout the 2012-2014 American fantasy series, *The Legend of Korra (TLoK)*, co-creators Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko used their platform to portray characters and situations that would cause viewers to challenge their social biases. In their series finale, they tackled the challenge of representing a queer identity in the genre of children's cartoon that had previously assumed it as too taboo. However, while the network airing the show was accepting of the possibility of the portrayal, they heavily censored how far this representation would extend. They would allow hints into the relationship between Korra and Asami, but an overt romantic gesture would not be allowed on air. Yet despite such discouraging news, DiMartino and Konietzko ultimately decided to work within these boundaries, using thoughtful scrutiny in the writers room during the finale's creation. In choosing direct parallels to heterosexual romances already present in the Avatar Universe and directly addressing audiences on their animation's intent, *TLoK* reclaims its queer representation as something more than a product of censorship. In doing so, the queer representation affirms its subtlety as a virtue beyond the constraints it was born from, ascertaining the subtlety as an artistic choice in portraying a more realistic and accessible representation of a queer identity. Though such accessibility was not understood in the culture of the show's creation, the show's later reclamation and the world's changed cultural view of the LGBTQ+ community now marks a new era of queer media that articulates a more complex identity beyond its queer representation.

As a child, I didn't understand the importance of gender. I wasn't ignorant of its existence—in fact, I was highly aware of it as I fought my mother dressing me in a jumper and tights each morning for school. I just didn't understand why those around me placed such weight on this one aspect of who they were. This has continued to follow me throughout my life, as I have remained reluctant to accept the assumption that people come with a predetermined list of traits all stemming from one simple aspect of who they are. For me, this has often come out most in how I represent myself within the gender binary. I don't want to be seen as feminine, but I don't want to be viewed as masculine either. Rather, I want to live in the nuances of the in-between with the core of who I am uncategorized by any sole aspect. However, it wasn't until I saw fictional characters portraying such nonconformity that I realized this reality within myself. When I stumbled upon a children's animation led by a traditionally masculine presenting female, I had no idea how pivotal her subtle and unacknowledged nonconformity would influence my identity.

The American fantasy series *The Legend of Korra (TLoK)*, which ran for four seasons between 2012-2014, follows a young woman named Korra in her journey of strength and perseverance. Throughout the series, co-creators Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko used their platform to portray characters and situations that would cause viewers to challenge their social biases. Through their series finale, they chose to tackle a view that had been previously assumed to be too taboo for children's animation: queer representation. While Korra was initially expected to end up in a long-term relationship with the male lead, Mako, the series unfolds to reveal a deeply loving relationship between Korra and one of her trusted friends, Asami. As the series came to a close, Korra and Asami share an intimate moment holding hands as they look into the future. However, due to concerns from Nickelodeon (the platform airing the show at the time), this scene does not portray any romantic gestures beyond this hand hold, leading some scholars to grow concerned over the censorship of the queer identity within the narrative. Yet, in later revisiting both the scene itself and communication from both co-creators following the episode's release, this show reclaimed its queer representation despite this censorship, offering a view of the subtlety as virtuous rather than solely constricting.

This then leads to two main questions: first, can we credit a text with the virtues of subtlety when that subtlety was imposed by censorship and second, if such a virtue can be accredited, how does this view of representing the queer identity fit into the representation seen in media today? I argue that while the subtlety within *TLoK* may not have been the original intent of the creators, the care paid to the narrative was not a product of coincidence or conformity. Rather, it was a deliberate attempt to normalize queer romance at a time when queer romance was not accepted by society. Through parallels both within the episode itself and with the show's predecessor, Korra and Asami's relationship directly reflects both previously established heterosexual relationships present in the narrative. While their scene was not punctuated by a kiss, I argue how the direct and deliberate similarities allow the creators to reclaim the queer representation the network originally tried to censor. In doing so, I then argue the reclamation has now led to one of the greatest qualities of Korra's coming out: though queer characters have long been ostracized both within the events of a narrative and within their own characterization, *TLoK* offers a queer representation that directly reflects reality by giving her an identity and storyline unrelated to her queerness. Though such accessibility was not possible in the culture of the show's creation, in light of the information that has surfaced in the past decade, the show has been able to reclaim its queer identity, marking a new era of queer media that articulates a more complex identity beyond its intended representation.

For the purpose of this paper, the term “queer” will be used to refer to any identity or type of representation under the umbrella of the LGBTQ+ community.

Background on the Avatar Universe

Currently, the Avatar Universe is primarily explored through two different Avatars, Avatar Korra and Avatar Aang, in cartoons geared to young children and adolescents. In both shows, certain groups of humans, called benders, exist with the ability to control one of the four main elements: water, fire, air, or water. These benders live alongside nonbenders, those who do not have the ability to control any of the elements, in four/five separate nations: the Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation, Air Nomads, and (in *TLoK*) the United Republic of Nations. The Avatar, however, is a specific, unique individual born with the ability to control all four elements and enter into the Avatar state. This individual has existed since humans became benders and is continually reincarnated as the Avatar spirit is passed between the different nations. Within each newly incarnated Avatar, the previous experience as the Avatar is accessible to all who share the spirit. Each Avatar must follow the journey of learning to master the four elements and unlock the knowledge of their past lives. They are often aided by a core group of individuals that help them handle the challenges of their journey. Ultimately, each Avatar is trusted as the sole individual able to keep peace and balance between both good/evil and humans/spirits.

The first show in the Avatar universe, *Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA)*, aired on Nickelodeon for three seasons (referred to as books) from 2005 to 2008. The cartoon follows Avatar Aang as he learns to master the four elements and rediscover a world that had not had an Avatar for over 100 years. Due to Avatar Aang’s young age (12 years old), the show immediately hooked young watchers (ages 6-11) into the storyline and was often considered one of the top-rated animated shows for this demographic.

The second show, *The Legend of Korra (TLoK)*, initially aired on Nickelodeon, but was later moved to Nick.com due to concerns of viewership and show content. This cartoon follows a teenage Avatar Korra as she not only learns to master the four elements but also navigate keeping the peace Avatar Aang had fought to bring forth in the decades prior. Throughout her journey, Korra is aided by a group of both benders and nonbenders, one of which included her later love interest, Asami. Unlike *ATLA*, *TLoK* targeted a much older audience, primarily because the show's creators were looking to both mature the content of the cartoon and grab the attention of the now older audience they had established with their previous success. The show comprised four books in total and aired between 2012 to 2014.

Reflections of Reality in *The Legend of Korra*

As the characters in *TLoK* fought battles that threatened peace, harmony, and acceptance in the show, DiMartino and Konietzko used their platform to call attention to issues the real world was facing throughout this time. While they did not want to depict an overly dark or grotesque reflection of the real world, they wanted to avoid sheltering their now much older and more mature audience by pulling in darker elements that grounded the narrative outside of simple fantasy and action. For instance, Book One depicts numerous violent uprisings within a larger revolt, themes of oppression, and ultimately ends with Tarrlok, the brother of the uprising’s leader, Amon, taking both of their lives while trying to escape the fallout of the

failed revolt. Book Two highlights civil war, the power and danger of corrupt leaders, and the emotional and psychological toll of losing one's identity when Korra's injuries cause her to permanently lose touch with the previous Avatars. Book Three, arguably one of the darkest of the four books, follows Korra as she faces a terrorist group aiming to end her life and permanently end the lifecycle of the Avatar. Lastly, Book Four depicts a world overrun by fascism/authoritarianism and Korra as she struggles against the previous trauma caused by her near-death experience.

Alongside these somber themes, DiMartino and Konietzko also grounded the character of Korra in a more mature light. Unlike Aang, who remained a child throughout *ATLA*, Korra is a teenager trying to let go of her childhood dreams and expectations of being the perfect Avatar. The viewer watches her progression of maturity as Korra toughens herself against the expectations of the world and against her lack of knowledge within her role as the Avatar. As scholar Greg Langer points out in his essay "The Discussive Implications of Sexuality in the Final Scene of *The Legend of Korra*," Korra "is strong-willed, determined, enthusiastic, at times judgmental, and at other times necessarily or overly self-reflexive" (2015, p. 26). Unlike Aang, who often took on a younger, more fantastical approach to his storyline, the co-creators allowed Korra to misstep and have bad judgment to make her "human" and "identifiable" (Langer, 2015, p. 26)—an example important for adolescents to see as they are learning to navigate their own world alongside her. Korra's qualities as a deeply troubled adolescent allows viewers to relate to her; they will not see her as just another cartoon character, but rather, a character they can see themselves in and learn alongside from.

Initial Constraints and Concerns with Censorship

To depict such mature themes to a demographic that was often seen as not mature enough to understand them was ultimately what led the creators of *TLoK* to spring into the uncharted territory of queer representation. At the time of the series finale in 2014, same-sex marriage was not a legally protected right in the United States (Willaims & McClam, 2014, para. 14), and most media, especially for children, was not concerned with debating this issue in their programming. Even within *TLoK*, the prospect of queer representation was originally not in the minds of the creators; in fact, romance itself was planned to be notably absent in Book Three and Four. Looking back, Konietzko remarks how "frankly, we wanted to set most of the romance aside for the last two seasons ... we didn't want Korra to *have* to end up with someone at the end of the series" (2014, para. 5). DiMartino and Konietzko were tired of endings in which the male and female leads end up together. Still, they couldn't help but wonder if there was more they could do to push the boundaries of social acceptance once more.

The co-creators revisited the romance narrative under a different scope; if their true intention was to push people to think about the world differently, their first step was ultimately to push themselves out of the comfort zone they had become accustomed to while animating. In doing so, however, Konietzko found himself struck by the newness of trying to animate two queer characters. It wasn't that anyone had ever explicitly told them that queer representation was banned; it was that queer representation had just never been considered: "It was just another assumption based on a paradigm that marginalizes non-heterosexual people" (Konietzko, 2014, para. 9). They understood clearly that if they wanted to see change in the world, it meant deliberately choosing to dismantle the normalized narrative, challenging both the viewers and other animators at the time for what was possible within the media.

This determination led them to approach Nickelodeon for permission to portray an explicit queer romance between Korra and Asami. However, when asked about how the conversation went, DiMartino and Konietzko were upfront, stating that "while [the network was] supportive there was a limit to how far they could go" (Konietzko, 2014, para. 10). The network would allow hints into their relationship, but an overt romantic gesture would not be allowed on air. Yet despite such discouraging news, DiMartino and Konietzko ultimately decided that such restraints would not deter them from pushing the normalized boundary as far as they could. While the relationship between Korra and Asami could not be punctuated in the exact same way as previous romantic relationships in the Avatar Universe, namely Aang and Katara in *ATLA*, they were not deterred from subtly packing the narrative with queer reflections and symbolism, going so far as directly mirroring the Avatar Universe's previous odes to romance. Though the show's publication still marked a time when queer representation was largely censored within the narrative, DiMartino and Konietzko's choice to stand against the assumed heteronormative expectation sparked a future where explicit queer romance became more widely accepted.

However, the narrative's censored quality leads it to a prominent question: can we credit a text with the virtues of subtlety when that subtlety was imposed by censorship? While the narrative's subtlety can now be accredited as a more realistic and graceful move into queer normalization within media, this was not the original choice made by the creators at the time of airing. In fact, Konietzko expressed his disappointment at his lack of choice when he addressed the fans of *TLoK* a week after the episode was released: "Was it a slam-dunk victor for queer representation? I think it falls short of that" (2014, para. 11). In the years that followed, scholars such as Heather Wright and Sarah Busch also expressed disappointment and concern regarding the potential glorification of the censorship. For instance, in her dissertation "'The Childish, the Transformative, and the Queer': Queer Interventions as Praxis in Children's Cartoons" Heather Wright notes how the prominent absence of direct romantic gestures and official confirmation within the show could leave the audience with a view that misrepresents the representation: "As viewers approach the opportunity to glimpse into a queer world, the show ends, leaving them to fill in the ending as they see fit" (2018, p. 21). Due to the show's censorship, the scene may lack the necessary implications to portray a queer romance, too easily overridden by the differing perspectives of the audience. Busch articulates a similar view, noting in "Retrospective Queering: LGBTQ Representation in *The Legend of Korra* Television Series and Comics," how leaving the existence of queer relationships ambiguous can harm the queer community—especially queer youth learning to grow up in a world that has struggled to accept them throughout history—because censorship has always been such a prominent aspect within queer representation in media (2025). Audiences would be inclined to see queer romance as something that still must be cautiously dealt out to them, potentially permitting erasure even at a time when queer romance is more widely accepted and expressed.

Parallelism and Retroactive Reclamation

However, in further reviewing the portrayal of queer representation in the time that followed the show's initial release, both the audience and creators have since reclaimed the representation as something more than a flashy attempt to show queer characters at a time when there was almost no representation present. While DiMartino and Konietzko were quick to reveal the previously mentioned constraints set by the network, they were also explicit in describing their thoughtful scrutiny in the writers room during the finale's creation. In the final moments of

“The Last Stand,” the series finale of *TLoK*, Korra and Asami are seen reflecting on their newly won battle and the state of their new world. They embrace as Asami reflects on her relationship with her father in their final moments and her joy at having Korra back in Republic City. Previously, after recovering from the attempt on her life in Book Three, Korra was notably absent from the world, only writing letters to Asami during this time to keep her updated on her condition and mental state. As they look forward, Korra asks “so, what now” (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2014, 21:17-21:19) to which Asami replies that she “could use a vacation” (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2014, 21:25-21:27). The pair ultimately decide to travel to the Spirit World, a place far away from the decimated, yet recovering nations. As they walk through the spirit portal, they are hand in hand (seen in Figure 1), surrounded by spirits as they walk towards the portal, and the scene fades into the distance as they look longingly into each other’s eyes.




Figure 1: Korra (right) and Asami (left) are seen hand in hand as they enter the Spirit World following the final battle of the series. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”

While this final scene was not concluded by a romantic gesture beyond a hand hold, the creators were quick to note the attention paid to the narrative’s animation. Though the subtlety within their representations were born of censorship, a close reading of the scene grants the show a chance to reclaim its queerness, allowing the queer identity to hold meaning as it’s normalized and placed on the same playing field as other heterosexual romances. In his address to *TLoK* fans on Tumblr, which at the time was his main form of mass communication with fans of the show, Konietzko reclaimed both control over his creation and intent behind its staging. He describes in detail many of the steps taken behind the scenes to ensure the representation would be more clearly understood by the audience. For instance, while the animators had always wanted to portray Korra and Asami as close, Konietzko described how they deliberately chose to mirror other romantic poses already present in the episode:



“It was originally written in the script over a year ago that Korra and Asami held hands as they walked into the spirit portal. We went back and forth on it in the storyboards, but later in the retake process I staged a revision where they turned towards each other, clasping both hands in a reverential manner, in a direct reference to Varrick and Zhu Li’s nuptial pose from a few minutes prior” (2014, para. 10).

While the intimacy of the hand hold between Korra and Asami (Figure 1) was always planned, this scene was later changed to further explore their relationship in view of the audience. It directly reflects the posture of the wedding party in the scene prior (seen in Figure 2); with the wedding as the most recent scene remembered by the audience, the hand hold between Korra and Asami takes on an even deeper, more intimate meaning. The mirrored nature of the scene



normalizes the queer relationship for the audience just as it does for the heterosexual relationship. Their posture is not simply a coincidence of closeness, but rather, a deliberate choice in its queer romantic reflection.

Korra and Asami	Zhu Li and Varrik
 <p data-bbox="212 753 789 863">Figure 1: Korra (right) and Asami (left) are seen hand in hand as they enter the Spirit World following the final battle of the series. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”</p>	 <p data-bbox="833 753 1409 863">Figure 2: Zhu Li (right) and Varrik (left) on their wedding day as they exchange vows. This scene is directly before Korra and Asami leave for the Spirit World in Figure 1. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”</p>



Furthermore, this final scene cleverly mirrors the concluding scene of the earlier series, *ATLA*. Just as Korra and Asami stand waiting to step into their future after their final battle, Aang and Katara can be seen in this same pose under the same circumstances in the final episode of their series. As the Fire Nation celebrates their future of rebuilding following the terror-filled reign of Fire Lord Sozin, Aang and Katara can be seen separating themselves from the crowd, looking into the distance. Just as Asami walks up to Korra (Figure 3), Katara can be seen walking up to Aang (Figure 4). In both scenes, the characters are isolated from the large distant crowds celebrating the new beginnings of the world following decimation. Both couples also

Korra and Asami	Aang and Katara
 <p data-bbox="212 1698 789 1827">Figure 3: Asami (right) is seen approaching Korra (left) away from the crowd celebrating the wedding of Zhu Li and Varrik and the chance of rebuilding the five nations. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”</p>	 <p data-bbox="833 1698 1409 1827">Figure 4: Katara (right) is seen approaching Aang (left) away from the crowd celebrating the crowning of the new Fire Lord Zuko and the chance of rebuilding the Fire Nation. This image can be seen in the series finale, “Sozin’s Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang.”</p>

share an embrace (Figures 5 and 6) before their intimate moment together, marking a close relationship that continues to develop as the scene progresses. In both scenes, this hug is the final form of contact they share before officially declaring their relationship with one another. While these details may appear subtle in their scale, once again the mirroring final moments before official declaration keeps the relationships evenly matched for the audience. The queer romance does not need more explanation simply because it is different from the straight romance; rather, these terms are treated equal, even in the moments leading up to them. Though in the end, while

Korra and Asami	Aang and Katara
	
<p>Figure 5: Korra (right) and Asami (left) hugging before looking into the future with each other. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”</p>	<p>Figure 6: Katara (right) and Aang (left) hugging before looking into the future with each other. This image can be seen in the series finale, “Sozin’s Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang.”</p>

Korra and Asami’s moment is marked by a hand hold (as seen in Figure 1), Aang and Katara’s moment is marked by a final kiss (as seen in Figure 7), these scenes still duplicate how the main couple becomes the center focus of the screen before moving off to the distance behind them, in a symbolic gesture of moving forward, into a life that will unfold off-screen. As the music in these scenes mimic one another in their soft, sentimental nature, the audience can see a future of these characters together, no longer faced with the destruction of the universe.

Korra and Asami	Aang and Katara
	
<p>Figure 1: Korra (right) and Asami (left) are seen hand in hand as they enter the Spirit World following the final battle of the series. This image can be seen in the series finale, “The Last Stand.”</p>	<p>Figure 7: Katara (right) and Aang (left) are seen facing each other after they embrace following the final battle of the series. This image can be seen in the series finale, “Sozin’s Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang.”</p>

Through each of these examples, the audience can clearly draw parallels that bring meaning to *TLoK*’s subtlety, despite the censored environment that created them. This virtue of subtlety—the power the narrative holds *because* of the subtlety, rather than despite it—allows

the narrative to normalize a relationship with its queer nature. These scenes do not jump out to the audience as something out of the ordinary, treating both romances as normal and deserving of equal treatment. The show reclaims its queerness as something to be celebrated in its own way. While it may not directly mirror other examples of queer romance in the children's animation that followed *TLoK*, such as *Steven Universe*, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, and *The Owl House*, it still portrays a queer romance that can be directly claimed from the scene itself, rather than simply from the paratext surrounding it.

However, this reclamation of romance through the subtle moments of parallelism did also extend into paratext as it extended into social media as both co-creators directly addressed their audience. In his 2014 Tumblr post, Konietzko deliberately confronts both his and DiMartino's choice in stepping into the realm of queer representation. He directly states in the first few sentences: "You can celebrate [the representation], embrace it, accept it, get over it, or whatever you feel the need to do, but there is no denying it" (2014, para. 1). DiMartino offered a similar sentiment on his website, which was his main method of mass communication at the time: "Korra and Asami have romantic feelings for each other. The moment where they enter the spirit portal symbolizes their evolution from being friends to being a couple" (2014, para. 4). Through their sentiments, both co-creators reclaim the representation that had been previously called into question due to its constraints. Though their initial view may have been constrained by censorship, the ending publication's craft allowed them flexibility to portray the relationship with finesse. They weaved strands of the romance into the narrative, blending it seamlessly with what was already present, rather than leaving the audience with a forced romance for the sake of some representation. Their craftsmanship within the scene allowed a view that normalized the queer identity the same way any straight romance is portrayed, enabling it to find power through its subtlety. Despite early constraints, the virtues of their planned subtlety still holds firm, permitting the show to portray a representation of a queer identity even without an explicit claim within the show itself.

Present-Day Legibility

From the view of 2026, a time when queer stories have reached a more mainstream level, Korra and Asami's relationship now marks a more substantial move into representation. With the reclamation of the representation despite its initial constraint, the queer characters in *TLoK* are marked with subtlety, rather than an overdramatization. In this view, not only can queer characters be seen as commonly as any other type of character, but also their identity is accepted as so common that it no longer needs to dominate the story for further consideration. By revisiting *TLoK* in this new light—one where the show's subtlety brings power to the narrative, rather than a hindrance to its representation of a queer identity—what was once seen as the show's greatest obstacle becomes one of its greatest strengths. It brings a new form of representation so embedded into the narrative, it becomes more accessible and realistic to the queer community living outside the narrative.

While queer characters are no longer rare, depictions of queer characters whose story does not focus solely on their queerness is still highly uncommon. Queerness is often the dominating tension within the narrative—examples such as *Heartstopper*; *Red, White, and Royal Blue*; *Heated Rivalry*; *Young Royals*; etc. each portray how the queer character must come to terms with their queerness, the queer character must come to terms with acceptance/unacceptance in the world around them, the queer character becomes ostracized and

isolated simply for this one aspect of their identity, etc. However, for Korra, a full coming out would likely feel disconnected from the story the co-creators wanted to tell. Even further, “Korra and Asami shouldn't have to kiss for kissing's sake” (Leon, 2014, para. 9). While both *ATLA* and *TLoK* are reliant on relationships throughout the Avatar's journey, ultimately, it is not romantic love that punctuates their stories. In Korra's story in particular, romance for the character was almost entirely absent (Konietzko, 2014), as the co-creators put their focus on “difficult subjects such as genocide, child abuse, death of loved ones, and post traumatic stress” (DiMartino, 2014, para. 2). In using the subtle parallels discussed in the previous section, *TLoK* avoids treating Korra and Asami's queer identity as something that must dominate the story's main plotline, rather allowing it to exist as just a part of their greater identities as characters.

In addition, while the series once stood out as the only queer romance amid a sea of heterosexual representations, the now more heavily present representation in media allows viewers to revisit *TLoK*'s queer representation with a new perspective. In other stories, the queer character must face adversity and emotional upheaval in the face of their newly discovered identity, and this culminates in a coming out that establishes their journey through a queer lens. This pattern of pain throughout the coming out story, and a need to come out in the first place, perpetuates a belief that queerness can only stem from turmoil and trouble. In her article, “The Classic Coming Out Novel: Unacknowledged Challenges to the Heterosexual Mainstream,” Lies Xhonneix describes how “when the coming out novel is solely concerned with the protagonist's celebratory assumption of visible gay or lesbian identity after a painful period of hiding in the closet, the genre is said to miss the opportunity to fundamentally question the system that forces homosexuals into invisibility in the first place” (2012, p. 94). It perpetuates the narrative that queerness exists in competition with heterosexuality and in conjunction with pain, rather than something that can harmlessly exist alongside heterosexuality. This leads many shows to fall into a pattern of inaccessibility and fear; those watching it will attribute the continual patterns to the queer identity itself, rather than see it as a byproduct of how the queer storyline has often been portrayed.

TLoK, however, does not follow this pattern of competition and turmoil. The series introduces the queer romance using the same surrounding effects, tone, music, blocking, etc. as the heterosexual relationships that have already been established both within the episode itself and within the Avatar Universe. The series' last scene immediately follows a heterosexual wedding, copying the posture of the characters without forcing them to compete for screen time or attention; queer terms are absent from their dialogue, creating relationships that are seen as equal, rather than something that needs to be dictated as other to be on the same playing field as the heterosexual romance in the show; and their relationship is treated the same as the one between Aang and Katara in *ATLA*, creating a parallel within the story that does not dictate either identity as better than the other. In doing so, *TLoK*'s subtle weaving portrays a queer identity that is not immediately isolated as something to be othered or hidden to avoid harm. As Katelyn O'Brien reflects in her Master's thesis, “Queer Kids Are Not Alone: Searching for 2S-LGBTQIA+ Representation in Children's Animated Television,” this integration helps to maintain the “ecosystem of storytelling media that connects and explores the myriad of identity in an authentic, organic manner that centers the voices of those whose story is being shared” (2024, pp. 53-54). It “decentralizes the white, cismale, colonial gaze as an act of protest against hegemony” (O'Brien, 2024, p. 14), while not falling into the stereotypes of a typical queer story. Though narratives focusing on coming out and navigating through the newness of a queer identity are certainly still necessary in media, *TLoK* offers another take on the coming out story,

one where queerness does not need to be an isolating factor for the characters both within their own world and within the real world where the story is viewed.

With both a lack of focus on the queer identity within the narrative itself as a central/major tension and within the characterization of the character, *TLoK*'s deliberate, yet subtle queer identities becomes a more realistic and accessible representation for audiences. As the viewers feel a connection with the realistic portrayals of the characters—ones who make mistakes and live a life beyond fear and isolation—they can begin to see an approachable representation for an identity that has still yet to be fully accepted in society. For many adolescents, whose attention has been a focus of the creators, *TLoK* may be their first indication that same-sex attraction exists as a possibility. With the show's subtlety, even mainstream articles such as Jake Pitre's "How *Legend of Korra*'s Queer Ending Changed Cartoons Forever" on *them*, describes how it "helps normalize something that *is* fundamentally normal" (2020, para. 24). As they explore the possibility of a queer identity, they can see an example not marked by fear, but rather, by joy and hope, a point that is especially important in adolescent shows where "homophobia has long manifested in the pervasive idea that portrayals of LGBTQ characters is something that kids are 'too young' for" (Millman, 2020, para. 5). DiMartino and Konietzko create a narrative where queer romance does not need to be entirely hidden or absent, but rather, treated with great care and compassion to be naturally and subtly weaved into the already existing narrative. *TLoK*'s characters ultimately provide a space to see queer representations that reflect the real world; while queerness is one aspect of one's identity, there is still much more to be explored alongside this.

Conclusion

Though Korra's story and the subtlety with which it was crafted was not originally planned by *TLoK*'s creators, DiMartino and Konietzko worked within the narrative to ensure proper care was paid to the characters and the newly portrayed aspects of their identity. They not only chose to work within the scene itself, but also work in the outside world to reclaim the romance beyond the censorship it had found itself born from. Now, at a time when queer representation is more widely accepted in the media, this reclamation for their subtle portrayal of Korra and Asami's relationship marks a significant movement towards normalcy. Through this example, adolescents watching the show can see a more accessible representation of the queer identity, one where not only are queer characters as common as any other, but also their identity is accepted as so common that it no longer needs to dominate the story for further consideration. For me personally, I understand looking back that much of the person I came to be stemmed from Korra's presentation of what it means to hold many identities at once. She's a queer woman that walks the line between masculinity and femininity in mind, body, and spirit. She holds both realities at once, allowing all aspects of herself to shine through, rather than become overshadowed by one identity over the others. Her story creates a view for queer romance to simply exist as it would in reality. Just as each part of the scene works together to bring the queer romance to light, each component of a person brings to light who they truly are. While the queer identity deserves celebration, there is still much to each person that still deserves to remain unshadowed.

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