Media Fields JOURNAL

Queer Futures in *Black Mirror*'s "San Junipero":
The Cloud: A Good Place to Die Inn

Allison Ross

By blurring the lines between virtual and real, present and future, the Netflix sci-fi/horror series *Black Mirror* (2011–) entertains questions of edges, boundaries, and divisions.[1] The series regularly portrays overt dystopian cultures and presents a fatalistic perspective on modern worlds where society isolates anti-normative lives and lifestyles and where the dominance of devices consumes people's lives. A typical episode, while promising a better tomorrow, depicts technology that constantly monitors and pervades social interactions. Inhabitants become victims of their own follies: their desires are manipulated by tools of surveillance that co-opt any pretense of agency.[2] The series's third episode, "The Entire History of You," presents a critique of personal data collection and information overload by playing out a scenario in which all people have access to recorders to capture every face they see in their lives, with nightmarish outcomes when they are unable to forget anyone at all. A later episode, "Nosedive," treats the conflict of individual reality and fantasy by creating a world where one's worth is determined by success and popularity on a social media app, with the consequence that people's identities are eclipsed by their electronic personas.

Consistent with these themes, "San Junipero," *Black Mirror*'s much-lauded Emmy-awarded installment, exploits current advances in computer cloud processing to portray an ideal digital afterlife, populated by upload

memories, where stored consciousnesses interact in perpetuity, "actualizing" mortal desires, long after their physical bodies—healthy, diseased, or disabled—have ceased to exist.[3] In sharp contrast to the bleak outlook that overshadows the majority of storylines in the series, this episode nuances its commentary on the future with cautious optimism: happy endings are possible in this virtual community.

The narrative embraces the interracial love story of two queer, disabled, and terminally ill protagonists, Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis). Kelly and Yorkie's romance is woven together with the themes of queer marital union and their respective desires for immortality without limitations. Working with an intersectional lens, I propose "San Junipero" presents a scenario where these barriers of race, sexuality, and ability do not compromise the experiences of its inhabitants, while simultaneously reminding us that these factors very much figure into the characters' choices, existences, and opportunities. My analysis, drawing upon Alison Kafer's work in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, problematizes assumptions concerning the limned boundaries between life and death, when dystopic and utopic visions of the afterlife intersect, when nihilism, queer futurity and what it is to be able-bodied are reimagined as co-constitutive and contingent.

Kafer suggests a queer and crip futuristic world without the concept of "disability," where people are not judged as "able" or "disabled." Social divisions give way to an inclusive cultural mindset where all abilities, races, classes, and sexual orientations are accepted and treated without bias. *Black Mirror*'s "San Junipero" both enacts and complicates this vision: the emphasis on the importance of individual expression and ability/ableism is challenged within the episode's "real world narrative." The episode questions ableist and "post-identity" (especially "post-racial" and "post-queer") depictions of utopia. Instead of using techno-futurism to create an environment without disability and discrimination, two simultaneous worlds are depicted—one utopic "fantasy," the other dystopic "reality," and the design of the episode allows for movement between these intersecting and fluid states of non-being and being while one is alive.

On Earth, Yorkie is rendered quadriplegic and has been in a coma for the past forty years, able to communicate only through a mechanical box. Kelly has been diagnosed with an unspecified terminal illness and given three months to live. In order to walk, she requires the assistance of a nurse. The retirement home where she resides is characterized by a sense of

desperation. Her husband and daughter, to whom she was and remains devoted, are dead. And because their respective passings occurred before the cloud community was conceived and launched, they were unable to "enter" San Junipero. Kelly is all alone and has no surviving family members. Yorkie's hospital room has white walls and floors which convey a utilitarian feel. Physically confined and emotionally isolated, she also is acutely aware of her parents' intolerance. Their religious and socially conservative grounded beliefs lead them to reject their daughter when she comes out to them as lesbian. Moreover, they refuse to visit her in the hospital and will not sign documents that grant her the right to be uploaded to San Junipero after she dies. To enter this Promised Land, the state mandates the deceased must have had authorization from a family member, or, absent that, they must have had approval from a spouse.

Having been rejected by her parents, Yorkie agrees to marry Greg, a nurse at the hospital. As her fiancé, he can arrange her passage, but their arrangement is purely on paper; Yorkie's true love is Kelly. When Kelly learns of the agreement between Yorkie and Greg, Kelly proposes to Yorkie. She does this not as an expression of commitment, but as what she later describes as "a kindness." As Kelly says, "Greg seems great, but why not [marry] someone you want to?" Under these circumstances, according to Kelly, it might as well be someone of Yorkie's choice. Now as Yorkie's intended spouse, before being permanently uploaded to San Junipero upon her death, Kelly is permitted to "visit" San Junipero for five-hour durations each week. Virtual life together in the afterlife is positioned as an attractive alternative, a place of endless possibilities and endless permissibility.

Initially, Kelly describes San Junipero as paradise: "Uploaded to the cloud. Sounds like heaven." There, consciousness spends eternity, young and beautiful, as a twentysomething version of itself. There, after death and for as long as one stays in the cloud, memories are maintained in perpetuity. And there, from a composite of residents' recollections, the afterlife is constructed. In the cloud, Yorkie's and Kelly's virtual bodies are ambulatory, a benefit of the episode's (ableist) utopia—a place without suffering, where they can move freely, dance, and even drive.[4] Based on a high school memory, Yorkie wears glasses and appears to pay little attention to her attire. She fits the type of the closeted lesbian character who naively enters a queer new world. Kelly represents Yorkie's confident, out counterpart.

In the real world, for Yorkie, (dis)ability and queerness are directly and thematically linked. Yorkie comes out to her parents and immediately afterward is paralyzed in an accident. Expression of her sexuality is linked to danger and to loss of mobility. In San Junipero, however, Yorkie's reservations are quickly put at ease. Though she is hesitant when Kelly asks her to dance, fearing the homophobia of onlookers, she is told that, in San Junipero, "no one is judging." This world is free of homophobic or racist reactions to Yorkie and Kelly dancing together, and in this world Yorkie's queerness is not tied to disability. Instead, she is able to express her desires without consequences: her virtual body is no longer paralyzed, enforcing the problematic trope of linking utopia to a world "free" of disability. However, in keeping with cinematic conventions and stereotypes which Lisa Nakamura refers to as racial optics, Yorkie, the character unfamiliar with the San Junipero landscape, is white, possibly Caucasian, and her guide through this space is non-white, possibly African American.[5] This narrative logic is consistent with the theme where white protagonists achieve mastery over a database when guided by racialized secondary characters.

As the episode progresses, in San Junipero's seemingly risk-free setting, the lesbian and bisexual protagonists finally are able to express their queerness. Yorkie, challenging her conservative religious upbringing and prior sheltered existence, gradually seeks out a series of firsts: her first sexual experience, her first love. Similarly, Kelly, after forty-nine years of traditional, "loving" heterosexual marriage, has her first relationship with a woman, newly able to act on her same-gender desires. In Kelly's words, "Everything [is] up for grabs." The love story unfolds in a beachside home where, through the magic of the cloud, each acquires flowing nightclothes suited to their idealized surroundings. Consistent with typical constructions of utopia, narrative locations like the bar and the beach house, products of data, provide the backdrop for the protagonists' "wish landscape."[6] Together these and other cues create an alluring palette where fiction is mutable, a theme associated with escapism. In San Junipero, unlike the reality of the 1980s, the two can have an openly queer, interracial relationship without stigma, violence, or the bounds of futility.

But not everything is possible: there are some limitations. This same utopia is marked by cinematic tropes and artifice, signaling its constructed nature. Built from the replaying of experiences, the afterlife offers nothing beyond a blending of stored bites and bytes, reconstituted to accommodate the inhabitants' desires. People dress as if they are characters in their own

Hollywood films. In Tucker's Bar, Kelly initiates a dialogue, asking Yorkie to pretend that she knows her when in fact they have just met. Yorkie is placed in the role of actor or performer as she assumes the part of Kelly's terminally ill friend. The scene between them is in effect staged. San Junipero is bounded by the remembrances of its inhabitants, an amalgam of their fantasies and histories.

Kelly later declares San Junipero a "fucking graveyard," emphasizing that this place of peace and perfection is inevitably tied to death. Kelly's conflicting descriptions exemplify the two depictions that reflect how we regard our relationship with technology. J. E. Reich writes, "Yorkie's and Kelly's hopeful future is not without consequences."[7] Upon reflection, when we examine the seductive, neon, aestheticized output that plays back to the residents their hopes and dreams, we discover perpetual existence potentially is divorced from the reality they both seek and desire in the afterlife. This perspective is aligned with the concepts posed by Lee Edelman's "no future" and Nakamura's racialized database.[8] "San Junipero" offers a more nuanced critique of questions of race and social class in the context of queer temporality. The queer relationality of Yorkie and Kelly only can be fully realized in a posthuman state embedded with the racialized dimensions of database portrayal which problematizes José Muñoz's queer utopia.[9] By Muñoz's measure, what their present existence lacks is more than offset by what San Junipero offers.[10]

Extending Edelman, Yorkie and Kelly's future appears less attractive when one takes into account that a visitor to San Junipero has limited time in the virtual reality landscape (five hours a week) until they die. Crip futurity also is invoked—in "San Junipero" Kafer's concept of "no future for crips" becomes a queer future indeed—one which necessitates death to produce its actualization. Importantly San Junipero's programmatic design belies any sense of humanity individuals may desire to retain in their afterlife, an implication which suggests that those who have chosen to "pass over" eventually become "zombies." Only after the finality of physical death can one permanently stay in this paradise, characterized by what some describe as a location of "lively dead people," Kelly's graveyard. In "San Junipero," utopic and dystopic visions intersect and complicate one another.

As the episode began to gain notoriety, showrunner and writer Charlie Brooker stated that he set the cloud-based paradise in 1987 because the real-life restrictions on LGBT rights in the US at the time—namely restrictions on

the right to marry in California where the story is set—heightened the appeal of an alternate universe.[11] Rather than contextualize marriage as a mere symbol of a progressive attitude toward LGBT rights, "San Junipero" weaves a more complex relationship to the state institution which allows its protagonists to wed. Michael Warner describes marriage as a state certification which serves as a "constitutive event," forming a bond that was not there before, a bond tied to social and sexual benefits beyond those of domestic partnership.[12] In San Junipero, the wedding not only is allowed but also facilitates a deeper connection between the protagonists. When awareness of the "bury your gays" trope went mainstream and LGBT representation on television came under intense scrutiny by GLAAD as well as fan sites, this episode of *Black Mirror* suggested to audiences a ray of hope.[13] By offering its queer protagonists an alternative to living in a world that denies their right to be together, the episode both challenged and complicated contemporary media's pattern of killing off lesbian characters after they experience moments of happiness and liberation. That said, to fully actualize, this lesbian couple must assume positions that render them problematic and soulless, taking up personas that transcend their lived identities.

Additionally, Yorkie and Kelly do not regard the institution of marriage with the same significance. While Yorkie plans to spend eternity in San Junipero and sees marriage as an expression of love, Kelly views the ceremony as an artifact of an archaic system. Meeting in San Junipero, Kelly interrupts their eternal honeymoon by emphasizing that their wedding was "only a gesture" performed so the state would authorize Yorkie's passing over. While alive, Kelly visits San Junipero to escape her bounded reality. But upon her death and the dissolution of her physical body, Kelly does not intend to be digitized and join Yorkie in San Junipero. Kelly would rather assume the same fate as her deceased daughter and husband. When Kelly informs Yorkie of her decision, Yorkie exclaims, "You married me!" as if their wedding were symbolic of commitment. In this way, the storyline's relationship to marriage signals and signifies its larger commentary on dystopia and utopia—marriage as an institution is manipulative and state-mandated to achieve ability and immortality, and marriage as an ideal is an affirmation of desire.

I pose the queer utopia of the show is found not in the "graveyard" that surrounds Kelly and Yorkie but in the bond they forge with each other. They are able to make their own reality independent of the tropes of genre that influence their interpersonal connection. We also are led to believe that they

can opt out of this afterlife at any point in time. By verbally sharing stories of their pasts and interacting both in the real world and in San Junipero, the two protagonists break out of the strictures of the datafied world, which otherwise confines and defines them. In bending the rules to visit San Junipero for extra time or refusing to dress in a way that recalls cinematic tropes, Kelly and Yorkie express an individuality that preserves their humanity.

Keeping the virtual and real as bounded opposites which permeably can be traversed, the episode poses its alternate reality as a site of potentiality, and one which is not completely removed from the actualities of the present. "San Junipero" suggests a cautionary tale about the limited nature of a utopia free of historical contingency, but also allows for a reimagining of an alternate world in which utopic potentiality and grounded realism intersect. The reconciliation of a finite reality coexisting with virtuality relies heavily upon an appreciation of the dual temporality of this existence. By presenting two alternative presents in which the protagonists either die or live in a cloud storage populated with memories, the queer future of the episode's two main lovers comes across as both fundamentally impossible and curiously nostalgic. San Junipero may be a beautiful place where experiences are uplifting and memories can be sentimental, but these benefits must coexist with and rely upon a dystopic view of the reality to which it stands in opposition. In order for San Junipero to look good, the real world has to look very, very bad. From this tension, "San Junipero" derives its narrative engine, as well as a complex commentary on a queer future that negotiates between nihilistic fatalism and constructed idealism.

Notes

1 *San Junipero* belongs to a subgenre of dystopian science fiction, including shows such as *Mr. Robot* (USA, 2015–), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–), and others, which explores the psychological state of paranoia around technology, data collection, and surveillance.

2 "San Junipero" is also markedly different from other episodes of *Black Mirror*, as a *Hollywood Reporter* article from 2016 identifies. In most episodes of *Black Mirror* familiar technologies such as Facebook profile pages ("Nosedive") or mechanized gyms and exercise regiments ("Fifteen Million Merits") have nightmarish extensions. Jackie Strause, "'*Black Mirror*' Director on Trump's Win, Calexit, and the Resonating Optimism of 'San Junipero,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, 14 November 2016, www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/black-mirror-season-3-san-junipero-ending-trump-calexit-946960. In contrast, "San Junipero" presents technology as a way to access a nostalgic version of the past, which is, as one character says to another within the episode, "not a trap." There is no malicious undercurrent, and the episode does not

focus on technology's dangerous allure, but rather on the character-driven dynamic, enabled by the cloud, between the two leads.

3 In 2017, "San Junipero" was awarded Emmys for both Outstanding TV Movie and Outstanding Writing for a TV Movie. See Tracy Brown, "The 2017 Emmy Awards Was a Big Win for the LGBTQ Community," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 September 2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-emmys-2017-69th-emmy-awards-live-charlie-brooker-talks-the-anomaly-of-1505710212-htmlstory.html#.

4 Yorkie's opposition to cars is subtly hinted at early in the episode when she is invited to play the video game Top Speed. A slight jump cut emphasizes her jarred reaction when she sees a simulated car crash in the game. Kelly, on the other hand, references her fear of attachment by returning to the concept that she does not know "how much time [she has] left" before she dies.

5 See also Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visualizing Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

6 *Wish landscape* comes from Ernst Bloch, "The Wish-Landscape Perspective in Aesthetics: The Order of Art Materials According to the Dimension of Their Profundity and Hope," *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988), 71. Muñoz, in the introduction to his seminal book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), cites the "wish landscape" as a constitutive element of queer utopia and "queer futurity," suggesting that queerness is always constituted by future-looking potentiality (5). I feel this concept applies especially well to the temporality of the cloud sequences in "San Junipero," as, following Bloch, the aesthetic reality of these sequences is based in the wishes of the "users" of the cloud, rather than a classical conception of contemplation (Bloch).

7 J. E. Reich, "How *Black Mirror* Decided to Bury Its Gays," *Slate*, 27 October 2016, www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/10/27/black_mirror_upends_tv_s_bury_your_gays_trope.html.

8 In *Digitizing Race*, Lisa Nakamura describes the convention whereby white characters serve as "masters" of the database and characters of color are their guides through the database.

9 In using the term *relationality*, I refer to the interaction between individuals that disrupts structures of fantasy, following Lauren Berlant's definition. Significantly, Berlant describes relationality as necessitating "collaboration," emphasizing that interpersonal relationships are predicated on intersubjectivity, as opposed to individualized fantasy. See Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 111.

10 Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz's famous respective works *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* and *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity* often are taken as foundational texts defining an argument about the relationship between queer theory and futurism. Edelman offers a view in which the future often is contextualized as fundamentally procreative, or "kid's stuff" as his famous quote puts it, while queer life opposes this view of existence and therefore opposes a forward-looking view oriented around procreation. Muñoz, on the other hand, views utopia as a site of potentiality and posits queerness as always already being a futuristic state. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

11 Charlie Brooker has said that writing a love story between two women in 1987 "felt

much richer . . . And then, I don't know, I just sort of really liked the characters so much, I thought, Well, let's just give them the happiest ending I can think of." See Laura Bradley, "Inside 'San Junipero,' Black Mirror's Uncharacteristically Beautiful Nostalgia Trip," *Vanity Fair*, 28 October 2016, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/10/san-junipero-black-mirror-season-3-review-lesbian-couple-charlie-brooker-gugu-mbatha-raw.

12 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 123.

13 The "bury your gays" trope is a televisual cliché where a queer character is killed to further a plot centered around a straight or sexually fluid protagonist. These characters often are female and often are killed after experiencing happiness. In 2016, the death on *The 100* (CW, 2014–) of fan-favorite out lesbian character Lexa (Alycia Debnam Carey) brought this trope to the forefront. For a fuller description of the trope and more on the context of "bury your gays" in 2016, see Alamin Yohannes, "'Bury Your Gays': Why Are So Many Lesbian TV Characters Dying Off?," NBC News, 4 November 2016, www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/bury-your-gays-why-are-so-many-queer-women-dying-n677386; and "Where We Are on TV: GLAAD's Annual Report on LGBTQ Inclusion [2016–17]," GLAAD (2017), glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2016-2017.pdf.

Allison Ross, a third year Ph.D. candidate in Cinema & Media Studies at USC, researches transnational, feminist and LGBT+ documentary and *avant garde* cinema. Ross' work has been published in *Docalogue* (August 2018) and *Spectator* (forthcoming 2019). She is the Graduate Student Representative for the Documentary Studies SIG at SCMS.