**“San Junipero” in *Black Mirror* (2016)**

**Film background:** "San Junipero" is episode three of season four of the sci-fi drama anthology series, *Black Mirror*. (An anthology series presents stories of different characters in each episode, so it is not necessary to be familiar with previous episodes of *Black Mirror* to understand this episode.) "San Junipero" was written by Charlie Brooker (who is the showrunner of *Black Mirror*) and directed by Owen Harris. In general, *Black Mirror* typically focuses on the potential negative consequences of emerging technologies. "San Junipero" is a bit unique in the series due to the happy (or at least potentially happy) ending for the two protagonists.

**Plot summary:** As the episode opens, Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis) enters a nightclub in a California beachside town in 1987. She meets Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), who asks her to dance. As they talk, Kelly invites Yorkie to spend the night with her, but Yorkie leaves anxiously. The episode cuts to one week later, and Yorkie arrives at the nightclub again, eager to see Kelly. Kelly takes Yorkie home to her beachside house, and the two sleep together and share a bit of their lives. Yorkie reveals that she has never slept with anyone, and Kelly reveals that she has always known she was bisexual, but that she was married to a man for many years, although he "chose not to stick around," so Kelly is now eager to "have a good time" "before [she] leaves." The episode cuts to one week later. Yorkie cannot find Kelly; she hops to different time periods over the course of several weeks, before finding Kelly in San Junipero in the 2000s. Kelly reveals that she is afraid of getting too close to Yorkie. That night, Yorkie reveals that she is getting married to a man named Greg the next day. Kelly reveals that she is dying of cancer and has only a few months to live, and that she is not planning to spend eternity in San Junipero, as many do. Because her husband Richard died without staying in San Junipero, Kelly plans to do the same. Kelly asks to come see Yorkie in the present, and Yorkie reluctantly agrees. An elderly Kelly visits an elderly Yorkie in a nursing home, and meets Greg, a nurse, who explains Yorkie's history. At 21, she came out to her parents as gay. The family got into a fight, and Yorkie left, getting into a car accident that left her quadriplegic and unable to communicate (except via a new technological comms system). Greg plans to marry Yorkie in order to enable her to enact her wish to be euthanized and pass over into San Junipero. Kelly asks her to marry her instead. Yorkie agrees, and is euthanized and sent to San Junipero permanently. They meet the following week in San Junipero to celebrate. However, Yorkie tries to persuade Kelly to stay permanently when she dies, and Yorkie resists, explaining that she cannot because of her ties to her husband and daughter Allison, who has died as well. In the present day, an elderly Kelly debates this question, and ultimately decides to be euthanized and pass over to San Junipero. The final scene shows the pair enjoying a drive in San Junipero while their data is uploaded to a massive server farm.

**Content warnings:** "San Junipero" contains non-explicit references to sexuality.

**Running time:**1 hr, 1 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 1: Esteban Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* NYU UP, 2009. (Excerpt: pp. 1).
  + Day 2: Halberstam, Jack. *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies: Subcultural Lives.* NYU UP, 2005. (Excerpt: Introduction: Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies," pp. 1-11)
  + Day 3: Esteban Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* NYU UP, 2009. (Excerpt: pp. 19-32)

**Note:**

* Because this week is the beginning of the “Queer Utopia” unit, I am including two queer theory texts that we will continue to engage with throughout the unit, rather than one film criticism piece and one queer theory piece – excerpts from Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place,* and from Jose Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia.* Before the “day 1” class period, students will read the first page of *Cruising Utopia* to introduce this unit. Before “day 2,” students will read an excerpt from the introduction of *In A Queer Time and Place,* and before “day 3,” students will read Chapter 2 of *Cruising Utopia.* As always, feel free to re-arrange or cut this material in ways that would suit your class structure better.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scene and Unit Introduction:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis.
3. (4 min) Teacher-led close-reading and analysis. Re-watch scene of Yorkie and Kelly at the bar at Tucker’s. (5:35-9:06).
4. (6 min) Discussion prep. Students take notes on the following questions, both close-reading the scene and introducing the unit as a whole with the excerpt from *Cruising Utopia*. If time, have students share responses with a partner before moving into discussion.
   1. What do you notice about the formal elements of this scene? How do they relate to Yorkie’s experience at Tucker’s?

* *Colors: Kelly and Yorkie’s clothing mirror the colors of Tucker’s that surround them – the electric lights that line the room and are used in the “Tucker’s” sign are the same neon pinks, purples and blues that one sees in their clothing in this scene and throughout several other scenes in San Junipero. Some have identified this color scheme as “bisexual lighting” since it picks up on the colors of the bisexual pride flag. This suggests a kind of unity between characters and setting, as if both Yorkie and Kelly are where they belong.*
* *Dialogue: Kelly tells Yorkie that her clothing doesn’t fit in with the over-the top outfits of everyone around her, but that she appreciates Yorkie’s authenticity (unlike everyone around them).*
* *Framing: A close up shot from Yorkie’s point of view on the dance floor reveals her desire for Kelly and the fear that it triggers. A second close up shot of Yorkie’s face highlights her paralysis and anxiety as she takes in this new environment and all of its possibilities.*
* *Dance: While Kelly’s dance moves seem perfect and perfectly synchronized with everyone around her, Yorkie stops dead in her tracks after Kelly pulls her closer. By standing still, she at odds with everyone who surrounds her. She seems to be stopped suddenly by her desire for Kelly, and by her sense that this desire will make her stand out. Kelly seems to be completely comfortable in this environment, which further illustrates Yorkie’s conflict over whether she belongs.*
* *Music: The song, “Fake,” by Alexander O’Neal, seems to highlight Yorkie’s insecurity. While the upbeat tone seems to put everyone else in a good mood, Yorkie fears the song’s claims about her: “the gig is up/ cause I discovered/ you’re a fake” it seems to scream at her, driving her from the dance floor. This could refer to her fears about disclosing the truth about her life and her past to Kelly, and does not reveal her story till the day before her death; it could also refer to her discomfort about revealing her sexuality to those around her.*
* *Themes: These elements highlight Yorkie’s questioning of whether or not she can fit in here. While there are elements, like the color scheme and her desire for Kelly that highlight what San Junipero offers her and why she fits in her, she fears being too different or being ostracized due to homophobia. She fears dancing with Kelly, afraid to stand out (largely due to fear of being seen dancing with another woman, as she mentions in the next scene).*
  1. What lines from page 1 of *Cruising Utopia* stand out to you? How does Muñoz describe queerness differently than what you’ve heard in the past? How does he discuss “the future,” “potentiality” and “new worlds?”
* *Muñoz describes queerness not as a stable sexual identity, but as an “ideality.” He examines how it can be “used to imagine a future” that “allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.” According to Muñoz, queerness “is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing….it is a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”* *Because of the pleasures, dreams and desires that queerness provides, we are pushed to build “new worlds” with “new and better pleasures.”* 
  1. The theme of this unit is “Queer Utopias” – we will be examining television, documentary, film and music videos through the lens of Muñoz’ queer utopia. What do you expect we will see?
* *Answers may vary, but students may note the presence of speculative modes, like science fiction, or the theme of escape from an oppressive society into a better world that provides opportunities for queer identities to flourish.*

1. (25 min) Whole class discussion.
2. (1 min) Remind students that we will be reading two queer theory texts this week that we will be considering throughout the rest of the course. Remind students that texts are challenging, and it is not necessary that students understand every sentence or every reference. Rather, they should consider which ideas they find moving, resonant, or relevant to “San Junipero.” The first five pages of the text are most relevant for our discussion tomorrow.

**Lesson 2: Examining “San Junipero” Alongside Jack Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place***

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Jot down notes:
   1. Did you enjoy watching “San Junipero?” Why or why not?
   2. If you could try the “San Junipero” experience, would you? If so, what time period would you choose? Why? If not, why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (6 min) Re-watch today’s clip. (41:30-47:57).
4. (15 min) Study groups [two study group sessions this week due to two queer theory texts, which are both somewhat challenging].
   1. Review p. 1-2. How does Halberstam explain what “queer time” is? How is the concept of “queer time,” (also referred to as “queer temporality” or alternative temporality” throughout the text) different from normative conceptions of time (or “straight time”)? You may also want to refer to p. 4-5 or p. 10 to see how Halberstam describes “reproductive temporality/”straight time.”

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| --- | --- |
| **Queer time/alternative temporality** | **Straight time/reproductive temporality** |
| Key quotes:   * *“Queer uses of time and space develop…in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1)* * *“Queerness [has the] potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (2).* * *“Queer time…is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (2).* * *“Queer subcultures…[allow] their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2).* * *“For some queer subjects, time and space are limned by risks they are willing to take” (10)* | Key quotes:   * *“Respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” (4)* * *“We chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation” (4)* * *“The time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples” (5)* * *“Most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable” (5)* * *“Reproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs” (10)* |

* 1. Consider the scene we just re-watched. How do Halberstam’s ideas of queer time and normative time play a role in Yorkie’s life? How does “San Junipero” address “straight time” and “queer time?” How do formal elements throughout this scene underscore Brooker and Harris’ themes?

*Yorkie’s life:*

* *Greg’s description of Yorkie’s life story illustrates how as a queer subject, Yorkie could never function in the logics of reproductive temporality. It seems that her car accident was prompted by her family’s negative reaction to her coming out to them; read in that way, the heteronormativity of her family “disabled” her.*
* *Yorkie’s experience in San Junipero is an illustration of “the potentiality of a life unscripted” – here, her family’s expectations for her life cannot rule her actions. Halberstam’s suggestion that queerness offers queer subjects a life “outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience” is illustrated through Yorkie’s decision to marry Greg (or ultimately, Kelly) and to reject the normative temporality of traditional death, against her family’s wishes. It is notable that it is only through a family member’s consent that Yorkie can permanently pass over to San Junipero; the need for a family member or a spouse to sign off, and her family members’ control over her ability to be euthanized and uploaded to San Junipero, highlight the ways that reproductive logics govern central features of life. As Kelly and Greg discuss, “a spouse can override” a family’s control over Yorkie’s bodily autonomy. Therefore, although her marriage to Kelly could be read as a queer embrace of “homonormativity,” it is also a necessary tool to evade the control of her family and grant Yorkie control over her own decision-making. Yorkie gets married in the morning and is euthanized in the afternoon, disrupting the reproductive logics that situate marriage as a precursor to reproduction and child-rearing.*
* *A queer death/disassociation: While Halberstam points to longevity as a key marker of “straight time,” the longevity offered by San Junipero is presented as queer, and potentially dangerous since its pleasures exceed those offered by the “normal” world: “They ration it out. They don’t trust us with more,” Kelly explains of the 5-hour weekly limit. Greg adds, “They say you go crazy if you have too much of it. Don’t leave your seat, disassociate body and mind—” Kelly retorts, “Like that doesn’t happen in every senior home already.” While San Junipero is offered as a therapeutic treatment in limited doses, its pleasures are regulated and controlled so that people do not get lost in their desire for more, a desire that is suggested to be dangerous because of its potency. Furthermore, Greg explains that “the state’s got a triple-lockdown on euthanasia cases. You’ve got to have a sign off from the doctor, the patient and a family member to stop folks from passing over just because they prefer San Junipero flat out.” The regulation of life and death according to normative logics of family structure is a critical component of the state’s control over the queer pleasures that await those who seek out San Junipero.*

*This scene:*

* *Color: This scene uses color to convey the normative logics that rule most of this world, the world that San Junipero bends. While San Junipero is depicted in electric blues, pinks and purples, the hospital that Yorkie is at is a sterile space of white walls, floors and furniture. People are dressed mostly in brown and grey. Kelly is perhaps between worlds here; the yellow coat she wears is somewhat at odds with the clothing of those around her, but not dramatically so. When Kelly and Yorkie meet in San Junipero and Kelly proposes, they bring the “bisexual lighting” color scheme to the beach through their denim shorts and skirt and purple and pink tops.*
* *Sound: the slow, romantic music that scores Kelly’s proposal to Yorkie carries over into the scene that follows, which includes their marriage and Yorkie’s euthanasia. This highlights that Kelly and Yorkie are able to bring the queer temporality of San Junipero into their experience of marriage and Yorkie’s death.*
* *Blocking: the positioning of people in the frame (Yorkie in bed at the center, Kelly on the right, Kelly’s aide and Greg to the right of that, and the pastor/doctor on the left) is identical in the moments of marriage and Yorkie’s death. The only visual distinctions between the two scenes are the light outside the window and the person overseeing the marriage/euthanasia. This highlights the resistance to reproductive temporality that Kelly and Yorkie enact through their marriage.*
* *Symbol: As Yorkie sits on the beach, she puts her glasses down and abandons them, a symbol of the life she is leaving behind.*

1. (25 min) Whole group discussion.
   1. Review p. 1-2. How does Halberstam explain what “queer time” is? How is the concept of “queer time,” (also referred to as “queer temporality” or alternative temporality” throughout the text) different from normative conceptions of time (or “straight time”)? You may also want to refer to p. 4-5 or p. 10 to see how Halberstam describes “reproductive temporality/”straight time.”
      1. **Additional questions, if necessary:** Draw the chart depicted above, with the headings at the top. Ask students to look for key descriptions of queer time and reproductive time, and rephrase those descriptions in their own words.
   2. Consider the scene we just rewatched. How do Halberstam’s ideas of queer time and normative time play a role in Yorkie’s life? How does “San Junipero” address “straight time?” How do formal elements throughout this scene underscore Brooker and Harris’ themes?
      1. Consider the part of this scene in which Greg and Kelly discuss Yorkie’s past and the opportunity San Junipero presents. How does her experience illustrate Halberstam’s concept of queer time?
      2. How does San Junipero seem to be perceived by doctors, lawyers, and Yorkie’s family? Does it conform to or subvert the logics of “straight time?”
      3. Think back to our discussion yesterday of color and costumes. Consider the colors throughout this sequence. What do you notice? How might these color choices relate to Halberstam’s ideas?
      4. Consider the score that begins during the scene of Kelly’s proposal. What mood does it set? Why does it continue into the scene that follows?
      5. Consider the blocking in the scene by Yorkie’s hospital bed. What do you notice about it? Why might Harris and Brooker have chosen this blocking?
   3. **Extension question:** What other moments in “San Junipero” relate to Halberstam’s ideas? How does Kelly’s life relate to Halberstam’s ideas?

*The closing scene, in which Kelly is euthanized and lowered into the ground while “Heaven is a Place on Earth” plays, highlights the disruptive nature of queer temporalities; while this would normally be a sad or tragic moment in a film, in this case, Kelly’s death is a new beginning, in which she can experience things she has never had the opportunity to before because of the expectations of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. (We will spend more time on this scene tomorrow.)*

* 1. **Extension question:** Does Halberstam’s idea of queer time resonate with you personally? Why or why not?

*Answers may vary.*

* 1. **Extension question:** What do you think about “San Junipero’s” approach to disability? Do you think Yorkie’s story is problematic, in its extreme presentation of disability and its suggestion that disabled lives are less fulfilling, or do you think the narrative of her life is an effective way to examine heteronormativity as “disabling?”

*Answers may vary.*

**Lesson 3: Examining “San Junipero”** **Alongside Jose Esteban Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia:***

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast:
2. Compare “San Junipero” to another film we’ve studied in this course. Consider the narrative, characters, mise-en-scene, themes, etc. What similarities or differences do you notice?
3. (5 min) Discuss.
4. (7 min) Re-watch today’s clip (54:15-1:01:00).
5. (15 min) Study groups. Groups will work on the following questions.
6. What key points does Muñoz make? What terms does he use repeatedly that are important to his claims?

* *Stepping out of “straight time” into a better, less linear, and queerer world:*
  + *“Straight time tells us that there is no future but there here and now of our everyday live” (22)*
  + *“Queerness’ time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (25)*
  + *“To live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer” (26)*
  + *“Queerness is…not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now” (28)*
* *Looking to the past (or the “no-longer-conscious”) as a guide to create a better future:*
  + *“The desire that propels Schuyler’s “A Photograph” is born of the no-longer-conscious, the rich resonance of remembrance, distinct pleasures felt in the past. And thus past pleasures stave off the affective perils of the present while they enable a desire that is queer futurity’s core”*
  + *“It is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that…the past does things” (27-28)*
  + *“Bloch invites us to look to this no-longer-conscious…these ephemeral traces, flickering illuminations from other times and places…assist those of us who wish to follow queerness’ promise” (28).*
  + *“The here and now has an opposite number, and that would be the then and there. I have argued that the then that disrupts the tyranny of now is both past and future” (29).*
  + *“A turn to what Bloch calls the no-longer-conscious is an essential route for the purpose of arriving at the not-yet-here. This maneuver, a turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity” (30).*
* *A queer utopian future is not completely knowable, but still worth working towards:*
  + *“To access queer visuality, we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (22)*
  + *“Queerness as a utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. The desire is always directed at the thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise” (26).*
* *A queer utopian future is understood as “ecstatic”* 
  + *“Moments of queer relational bliss, what the poet named as ecstasies, are viewed as having the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life” (25)*
  + *Queerness’s ecstatic and horizonal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (25)*
  + *“To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present or future” (32).*

1. How do these key points relate to the final scene of “San Junipero?” Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.

* *Kelly’s car crash:*
  + *Kelly anxiously fears the disruption of straight time; she plans to die with finality as she has promised her husband she would. However, in crashing her car and flying out of the front of her Jeep, she untethers herself from the expectations of straight time. This is a moment that aligns her with Yorkie, whose car accident decades earlier untethered her from the expectations of straight time’s linear march forward. In this way, she “steps out of the expectations of straight time” (25) and begins to imagine a queer future. Furthermore, this moment of connection to Yorkie, is an example of “queer relationality” (25), in which Kelly can relate to Yorkie’s untethering from linear time and mortality, and therefore help her envision a future.*
  + *Several cues in this scene highlight the ways that San Junipero points to the usefulness of the past to see a utopian future – the 1980s wedding dress and the synth-heavy score highlight how both characters—throughout this episode—call back to the affective pleasures of their youth and “look to the no-longer-conscious” in order to “follow queerness’s promise” (28).*
  + *This scene highlights the potentiality of Kelly’s utopian future – she reaches out her hands to meet Yorkie’s, but in that instant, she disappears. She cannot fully see or access the futurity that San Junipero may offer her, because it is just out of view.*
  + *In the series of shots that follow this scene, an elderly Kelly looks out repeatedly on the horizon, suggesting the “not quite conscious” “realm of potentiality” (21) that awaits her beyond it. After a series of these shots, she tells her aide, “I guess I’m ready…for the rest of it.”*

*Final sequence:*

* *For the first time, Yorkie is in the driver’s seat of a car. This may indicate that, with her mortal life of “straight time” behind her, she is able to imagine new possibilities, and new pleasures of driving, that are untethered from her past trauma.*
* *Kelly’s euthanasia and the lowering of her casket into the ground signals her choice to step out of straight time and experience a future beyond the here and now, and beyond the nuclear, heteronormative family whose names are listed on her tombstone. The quick cuts and the opening notes of “Heaven is a Place on Earth” (another call to the past as a guide to the future) suggest that this is not a tragic moment, but a new awakening.*
* *As Kelly and Yorkie kiss while Yorkie drives (unbound from the mortal risks of car accidents due to inattentive drivers), the song lyrics echo their experience: “In this world we’re just beginning to understand the miracle of living/Baby I was afraid before/I’m not afraid anymore.” Untethered from the fears and constraints of heteronormativity that limited their possibilities and futures, both women can now revel in the pleasures of the queer utopia. They ride off into the sunset and the horizon.*

1. (20 min) Whole group discussion.
2. What key points does Muñoz make? What terms does he use repeatedly that are important to his claims?
3. **Additional questions, if needed:** Look for key phrases that emerge throughout this chapter, such as “no-longer-conscious,” “ecstatic” or “straight time.” What are some significant sentences in which these ideas come up? What key points is Munoz making about these concepts?
4. How do these key points relate to the final scene of “San Junipero?” Reference specific details from the scene and specific lines from the text in your response.
5. Why might it be symbolically significant that Kelly crashes her car in this scene, and yet doesn’t die due to the conditions of “San Junipero?”

ii*.*  Consider some of the 1980s elements of this scene, such as the music and costumes. Why is it important that the world of “San Junipero” that Kelly and Yorkie inhabit is a fantastical world built out of the imagery of 1987? What would Muñoz argue is powerful about that?

iii. What is the mood established through the shots of Kelly’s euthanasia and burial? How is this mood established? What does this moment symbolize, and how does that relate to *Cruising Utopia?*

1. **Extension question:** Consider the role of the TCKR Systems server farm we see in the second to last shot. How does this shape your understanding of the meaning of this episode?

*This shot raises many questions – how is this company profiting from an apparently infinite experience? How is it possible? Who is this service available to, or not? This casts a shadow over the utopian formation that Kelly and Yorkie experience, as it seems to raise questions about corporations, profits, and morality.*

1. **Extension question:** Like many *Black Mirror* episodes, “San Junipero” features a racially diverse cast but does not directly address racism, which perhaps stands out given its direct address of homophobia. What do you think of this choice?

*Answers may vary.*