

# INTARSIA

UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF QUEER & FEMINIST INQUIRY

## Generative Graveyards and Lesbian Futurity By Graziella Pierangeli

So often, lesbians are invisible. They are coded into text, not written. They are frequently on the outskirts of their birth families, their churches, and history. The unfortunate reality of the patriarchy is that proximity to men places women in the spotlight, so lesbians exist in the shadows. It would be logical that a lesbian ghost, as an immaterial, transparent, haunting figure, is a continuation of the marginality and invisibility of lesbian existence. However, an alternate reading of the apparitional lesbian would be that the lesbian occupation of post-mortem spaces does not simply represent their exile from normative structures and time during life, it also demonstrates a reclamation of queer temporality that actively resists heteronormativity. Instead of reducing herself down to a standard, palatable form, the lesbian ghost boldly exists in a unique location in which she may experience time and space on her own terms, aligning herself with eternity, immortality, and circularity. Through this lens, death itself, the most natural part of human existence, is conquered by a marginal, subversive, liminal subjecthood. This essay reexamines the queer relationship with death, time, and futurity through a specifically lesbian perspective that sees the apparitional lesbian subject as generative, regardless of her immateriality or lack of reproductive capabilities. The form of the lesbian ghost is not a continuation of the lesbian's relegation to the margins, it is a rebirth into a space that centers her spatiotemporal

experience. This essay will perform a reading of Stuart Phelps' "Since I Died" to understand the connections between death and queerness, before analyzing Charlie Brooker's *San Junipero*, to interrogate the temporal and positive futuristic results of that connection.

The two pieces of media that are being analyzed both feature lesbian couples who are grappling with death, although they do so in very different ways. Phelps' 1873 short story is a tale of haunting that is told by the ghost. The narrator is briefly tethered to the material world by her connection to her lesbian lover. The perspective of the speaker, as a lesbian who is accepting her own death, provides a strong entry point into the conversation about how the afterlife may be an opportunity for queer women to be centered. *San Junipero* is an episode in the TV show *Black Mirror* that follows the story of two lesbians who are collectively transitioning from life into death together.<sup>1</sup> This futuristic narrative investigates the complicated dynamics between life, death, queerness, and temporality in a way that complements and extends the themes present in "Since I Died."

The concept of 'recentering' is the key to this argument. It is true that lesbians are pushed to the sidelines of heterosexual structures; it is true that they face oppression and exclusion; it can appear true that, as Terry Castle writes, "the lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Brooker, "San Junipero," *Black Mirror*, 2016.

somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost Soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away and she is dire.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is important to pose the questions: to whom is lesbian existence marginal? To whom are lesbians invisible? From Sappho’s fragments to flagging techniques such as clipping one’s keys to their pocket, it seems that lesbians have always been able to see each other. In public spaces, such as lesbian bars and pride parades, or in the private spheres of lesbian homes and queer communities, the lives of heterosexuals are as marginal to gay women as lesbianism is to those who are living the man-woman-two-and-a-half-kids-and-a-white-picket-fence lifestyle. Just as lesbians are marginal from the straight perspective, death is unreachable, unknowable, and often devalued during life. As such, for the living, the dead are on the margins. This is a matter of perception, rather than an objective state of affairs. By centering both lesbianism and death, and therefore taking them on their own terms instead of in comparison to their opposites, the two cease to be a form of exile. Instead, they become a space where creation, unbound by the limitations of normative structures, is possible. The lesbian affiliation with death can be read as an escape from the restrictions of a material world grounded in heterosexuality.

The narrator of “Since I Died” is a dead lesbian, and as such she serves as a strong case study

for this proposition. She is able to view the material world but is unable to reach it or her lover. Naturally there is a sense of loss that comes along with her new spatiotemporal location, however, her understanding of death becomes more positive once she is no longer imagining it from the distant perspective of the living. She says “so often and so anxiously we have talked of this thing called death, now that it is all over between us, I cannot understand why we found in it such a source of distress. It bewilders me. I am often bewildered here. Things and the fancies of things possess a relation which as yet is new and strange to me.”<sup>3</sup> It is losing her lover, not losing her life, that is causing her distress at this moment. Her experience of death parallels the position of queerness in relation to heteronormativity. The narrative of separation and acceptance of one’s new situation is akin to coming out narratives in which a gay person is severed from their old way of life and of self-definition, as they simultaneously reconcile with the fact that while their distance from what they had is painful, embodying queerness is not, by nature, a source of distress. A critical part of the project of recentering both lesbianism and death is acknowledging that there is an inarguable divide between life/death and queerness/heterosexuality that brings forth unique and often painful challenges, while simultaneously refusing to see them as a part of a binary opposition in which they are the lesser of two options. Lee Edelman proposes a “queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, “Since I Died,” in *The Literature of Lesbianism: A Historical Anthology from Ariosto to Stonewall*, ed. Terry Castle (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 501.

structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition” as a replacement for the reproductive futurity that he feels the queer subject cannot access.<sup>4</sup> The combined force of queerness and death, both of which carry the history of being othered and feared, may be able to combat the hierarchical nature of these oppositions.

Of course, the proximity of lesbianism and death has often been used as a tool of oppression. Terry Castle aptly points out that lesbians are often “defined as ghostly” in order to “drain them of any sensual or moral authority” so that they can be exorcized.<sup>5</sup> She provides an expansive list of presumably non-lesbian authors, including Hemmingway, Diderot, and Boudiere, who have engaged in the literary practice of stripping lesbians of their lives in order to deny them of humanity. She then references the lesbian tendency to ‘self-ghost’ and gives the example of the ‘generative’ homosexual apparitions at the end of *The Well of Loneliness* in which “through the very imagery of negativity lies the possibility of recovery.”<sup>6</sup> She continues this argument by hoping for the rematerialization of the lesbian. This essay questions if rematerialization, and thus reintegration into normative society, is the only, or best, method for challenging the homophobic deployment of the lesbian ghost, while posing the reclamation of the apparitional lesbian in her entirety as a possible alternative.

Phelps’s “Since I Died” is narrated by a lesbian ghost who is attempting to communicate with her living partner, but is unable to reach her. In order to recenter the ghostly lesbian in “Since I Died”, the position of the narrator must be seen as equally valuable as that of her living partner. Often ghost stories, such as W.W Jacobs’ *The Monkey’s Paw*, focus on a living character attempting to bring back a loved one from the dead, in which the resuscitated character is often portrayed as evil or inhuman. Alternatively, they feature a terrifying ghost who is attempting to kill the living. Either way, the dead are fairly consistently portrayed as a threatening presence because they oppose life. In contrast, the narrator of “Since I Died” is portrayed in a highly sympathetic light. She is the one who is able to perceive and remain connected to her lover, who in turn, cannot see the narrator. She is the one who is left to reach desperately for her partner. Yet, in this tale of haunting, there is a desire for death that is rooted in queer love. The narrator thinks “I told you I would come. Did ever promise fail I spoke to you? ‘Come and show me Death,’ you said. I have come to show you Death. I could show you the fairest sight and sweetest that ever blessed your eyes. Why, look! Is it not fair.”<sup>7</sup> It seems that, rather than attempting to rejoin the living, the narrator is wishing that her lover would join her in the afterlife, which is, in her perception, beautiful rather than frightening. Her partner seems to be willing to consent to the outcome of dying together. This is to say that rather than focusing on rematerializing the lesbian ghost in this story,

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Phelps, “Since I Died”, 501.

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it might be a more productive path to dematerialize the living lesbian.

The nonliterary equivalent to this form of metaphorical lesbian death would be entry into a version of queerness that accepts and embraces the elements of abjection that Edelman introduces. He argues that the queer subject exists outside of the symbolic order, claiming that it could, as conservatives fear, lead to “the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than holding what Edelman claims is the left leaning belief in the endless capabilities of the social fabric to expand to include a queer identity, it is crucial to understand the ways in which assimilation, particularly through the phenomenon of rainbow capitalism, is counterintuitive to the position of queerness. Just as the dichotomy between life and death in “Since I Died” must be reconceptualized to accept death as a viable outcome, the revolutionary potential of queerness should be seen as a positive force, in spite of the danger that it poses to the heterosexual status quo.

While “Since I Died” is an example of how death is accessed, and can be prioritized, by lesbians, Charlie Brooker’s *San Junipero* is a stronger representation of the radical potential of the combination of death and lesbianism. In many ways, the revolutionary force of this unity is rooted in the ability of the queer protagonists to fully inhabit a non-linear, non-reproductive version of time that defies the narrative of progress, production, and demise that is typical to heterosexuality. By nature, San Junipero

forces all of its citizens, regardless of their sexuality, to engage in traditionally queer elements of relationships and existence. This essay will analyze the movement that the TV episode makes towards accepting a uniquely lesbian futurism that is generative, in spite of its lack of reproduction.

San Junipero, the episode’s titular city, is an 80s-themed party town that the two protagonists, Yorkie and Kelly are both visiting. Yorkie, a young, lesbian virgin, encounters the alluring, beautiful Kelly in a bar, where Kelly makes a pass at her. Yorkie, overwhelmed by the prospect of having a lesbian relationship, politely turns her down and the screen fades to black. In the next scene, it is clear that some time has passed. Yorkie is looking for Kelly but cannot find her, then the screen cuts to black again. Yorkie is told that she should look for Kelly in another era, so she searches through the 70s, 90s, and 2000s versions of the same town until she finds Kelly and sleeps with her, then, once more, the screen cuts to black. At this point, because of the constant interruptions in the plot, and because Yorkie is able to travel through the decades, the viewer will have likely surmised that San Junipero is not entirely real. In fact, it is a virtual reality created for the dead and dying. The sick and elderly are able to visit San Junipero for five hours a week, which is why the screen kept fading to black between scenes. When people do die, they are given the choice to upload their minds to San Junipero permanently with no time limitations.

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<sup>8</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 14.

While Yorkie and Kelly both appear to be in their twenties while they are in San Junipero, in the real-world Kelly is seventy-three and dying of cancer. Yorkie is a similar age, but has been paralyzed since her twenties, when, after coming out to her family, she drove her car off the road because of their rejection of her. While Kelly had a husband and a daughter, both of whom are dead but are not in San Junipero, Yorkie's life was largely put on hold after her accident. Yorkie is excited to be uploaded to the virtual reality in order to have a new chance at a life unbound to a hospital bed. Eventually, Kelly comes to visit Yorkie in the real world, and finds out that Yorkie is planning to marry her doctor, Greg, so that he will have the power as her spouse to greenlight her assisted suicide. Kelly offers to marry Yorkie instead, and with her legal permission, Yorkie passes over to the virtual afterlife. The next time Kelly is in San Junipero, Yorkie asks her to stay permanently after her death. Kelly had always been quite upfront about the fact that she had no intention of passing over to San Junipero after her death. In a heated argument, Kelly reveals that her husband made the choice not to be uploaded on the grounds that their daughter, who died tragically young, did not have the opportunity to store her consciousness. Kelly does not feel that it would be permissible to stay when the rest of her family was dead. Kelly drives away and crashes her car. Yorkie reaches out to her to help her up. The screen fades to black. Then, Kelly changes her mind, opts for an assisted suicide, uploads to San Junipero, and the final scene shows her in the passenger seat as she and Yorkie drive away.

In the analysis of this text, there are two forms of queer temporality that need to be explored. One is simply queer, the other is lesbian. Castle notes that it is essential to differentiate between the experience of lesbians and gay men. She claims that as soon as the two are grouped together, lesbians become obscured by the presence of men. She argues that this form of lesbian invisibility can be understood as “ghosting through assimilation. As soon as the lesbian is lumped in—for better or for worse—with her male homosexual counterpart, the singularity of her experience (sexual and otherwise) tends to become obscured. We ‘forget’ about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men. Such forgetting can even occur, ironically enough, at the very instant the lesbian is asserting herself most vehemently.”<sup>9</sup> While there is an inarguable value in solidarity and presenting a united front against oppressive structures, it is important to keep in mind that the lesbian subject is distinct and worthy of a study that considers her unique position.

That being stated, there are elements of the queer experience that tend to run across the various identities of the LGBT community. As Edelman points out, the inability of queer people to have children in the way that straight people do alters their understanding of the future. More specifically, it prevents them from viewing “history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through time...far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from

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<sup>9</sup> Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 12.

perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity."<sup>10</sup> The removal of any queer relationship from the ultimate goal of reproduction changes how time is experienced, and in turn, how meaning is formulated. Of course, upon their entrance into *San Junipero*, Yorkie and Kelly are experiencing a twofold removal from reproduction as a result of their lesbianism and their death. The space that they are occupying by the end of the episode would be particularly prone to outside hyper-fixation "on what we [queer people] do with our genitals but also of what we *don't* do: a function, that is, of the envy-, contempt-, and anxiety-inducing fixation on our freedom from the necessity of translating the corrupt, unregenerate vulgate of fucking into the infinitely tonier, indeed sacramental, Latin of procreation."<sup>11</sup> This is because there is no element of their relationship that is intended to ensure reproduction, production, or progress. When they sleep together in the virtual reality, it is only for the goal of having sex. The fundamental difference between this kind of queer sex in *San Junipero* and in real life is that in a postmortem virtual reality, non-reproductive sex becomes normative. Anyone who has sex does so without the intention of creating a new future. In this sense, it remains logical to embrace the nature of the apparitional lesbian, because in the realm that she occupies, everyone who has a relationship must do so on queer terms, centering queer people in effect.

Where Edelman proposes a highly theoretical vision of what it means to be queer, Jack Halberstam brings in a more embodied reading of queer time. Halberstam notes that the traditional milestones of coming of age are warped for gay people. Adolescence is delayed and is often extended, longevity is frequently either unobtainable or deemphasized, and the maturity associated with marriage or child rearing is less accessible. Yorkie's experience of extended adolescence, since her paralysis stops her from gaining any of the experiences that are typical to adulthood. Through *San Junipero*, she is going through the traditional 'coming of age' narrative while simultaneously existing in an elderly, disabled, dying body. Her chronological narrative is both delayed and overlapping, her movement through the normative timeline circles and reverses in on itself. Yorkie epitomizes the 'alternative individual timeframe' that Halberstam takes to define queer temporality.<sup>12</sup> It is entirely her queerness that is facilitating her weaving movement through time. Her attempt to live an openly lesbian life led to her paralysis, which trapped her in a space where time stood still. Although she was unable to experience any form of relationship with a woman during this period, she also was excluded from heteronormative time. Every day was the same, she had no hope of having children, or of progressing towards a recovery. Her access to *San Junipero*, which allows her to experience a unique version of the bildungsroman, is facilitated by her marriage to Kelly. The act of queer love that was Kelly's marrying Yorkie and

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<sup>10</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 187.

signing off on the assisted suicide that her homophobic, conservative parents denied her, allowed Yorkie to both enter a lesbian relationship and the version of endless, immortal time that exists in San Junipero.

*San Junipero* further centers the lesbian experience through the universal exclusion of everyone who lives there from the fully human. Halberstam notes that the inability to access normative timelines makes queer people 'liminal subjects.' Liminal subjects, he implies, those who are excluded from "the norms that govern the recognizability of the human," are sacrificed to maintain coherence within the category of the human."<sup>13</sup> Mel Chen notes that "both 'nature' and 'the natural' have long been waged against homosexuals."<sup>14</sup> Queer people have long been othered and denied the title of human in order to preserve normative structures. Yet, in any kind of post-death society, all the citizens are, by nature, excluded from the definition of the human which is heavily grounded in concepts such as materiality, mortality, and life. Whether one is a ghost, like the narrator of "Since I Died", or a computer chip storing human consciousness, like Yorkie and Kelly, their existence is oppositional to and excluded from the accepted version of the human. As a result, even the fully heterosexual people who inhabit San Junipero are doing so on the terms that have long defined the conditions of queer existence. The combination of death and lesbianism draws queer experience into the center. Instead of lesbians existing on the outskirts of normative modes of living, all people

become entrenched in the core tenets of the lesbian experience.

Castle's mandate that lesbian positionality deserves its own, unique consideration may be necessary in order to explore death as a counterintuitively generative state of being. Beyond the desire to draw the lesbian perspective into focus, the position of dual marginalization of lesbians, as both women and queer subjects, means that their experience of the world naturally differs from that of their male counterparts. While Edelman, a leading voice in the study of queer temporality and a gay man, has noted some elements of temporality that are common to lesbians because of the shared experience of living in a queer body, he does not fully capture what happens when the queer experience of time encounters women's distinct temporality. The unique relationship between women and reproduction means that the way that lesbians perceive their place and time outside of the boundaries of reproductive futurism will naturally be different from that of a gay man.

Exclusion from normative teleology is not something that is unique to queerness. Exclusion from the forward pointing linearity of history is something that is also held by colonized, working class, and women subjects. In order to fully comprehend the state of the protagonists of *San Junipero* and "Since I Died", this must be taken into consideration. Julia Kristeva writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015): 187.

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality ... On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word 'temporality' hardly fits.<sup>15</sup>

While Edelman is arguing that queerness is antithetical to futurity, Kristeva is claiming that women are aligned with eternity and reproduction. In the case of many women, it is not their lack of reproductive capacity that leads to their exclusion from linear chronology, but rather their ability to carry and birth a child, and how that capacity alters their placement in society. The contradiction between queer time and women's time points to the need for a specific form of lesbian temporality that can be both generative and eternal.

Lesbians' relationship to womanhood is complex and troubled. While lesbians are stepping outside of one of the primary roles of womanhood—being the wife of a man—they still experience the misogyny that plagues the lives of all women, straight or otherwise. While feminist philosophers such as Monique Wittig may argue that lesbians are not truly women,

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In *San Junipero*, Kelly's character epitomizes this contradiction. It is an important disclaimer that though she ends up in a lesbian relationship, she is bisexual and did have a genuine, loving relationship with a man. The movement, from heterosexuality, life, and progressive time, to homosexuality, death, and eternal time is part of what makes her a strong case study for queer time. Throughout Kelly's life, she never slept with or had relationships with women, all though she admits to having female crushes. She moved through time in the normative way. She got married to a man, had a daughter, grew old with her husband, and lived to a reasonable age before developing cancer. Her timeline matched the typical, reproductive markers that are expected during life. It is only during her trial period in San Junipero, as she is approaching death, that she

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<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva "Women's Time. *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1981): 16.



is able to begin exploring her sexuality. Her relationship with Yorkie is what spurs her to question her decision to follow her late husband into a natural and permanent death. As she fights with Yorkie, about whether or not she will upload herself to San Junipero, she says: “You want to spend forever somewhere nothing matters? End up like Wes; all those ... lost fucks at the Quagmire, trying anything just to feel something? Go ahead. But I’m out. I’m gone.”<sup>16</sup> This view of death would align itself clearly with Edelman’s understanding of the queer, which lies outside of symbolic meaning, if Kelly had decided to die naturally.

Instead, Kelly drives a car off the road, just as Yorkie did after coming out. When Yorkie finds her and reaches out a hand to help her up off the road, Kelly decides to stay. In doing so, she steps away from the linear chronology that guided her heterosexual relationship and plunges into the eternal circularity that will manifest in her queer afterlife. In the final scene, Yorkie is driving a car, with Kelly in the passenger seat. Both characters have accepted eternity so fully that Yorkie is able to reclaim the space that robbed her of a normal life in the heterosexual world. Kelly is able to fully enter society as a queer subject, openly in love with a woman after years of ignoring her attraction to women. They transition into a stable relationship with one another in a time and place where the heterosexual narrative of what life ought to be is deprioritized.

In essence, when the notion of being ‘generative’ is only tied to having children, it may

be the case that lesbian’s circular time is not generative. However, when the lesbian ghost is centered instead, she becomes generative in and of herself because where the eternity she finds through death becomes a space where she may be reborn and fully realized. Both “Since I Died” and *San Junipero* understand the lesbian subject on her own terms, allowing her to make meaning out of what was once considered to be abjection. By moving away from the concept that reproduction and ‘the future’ are epistemologically necessary—as is the case within heterosexual norms—and then proceeding to view queer women and their death drive as a novel source of creation, not as an escape from meaning, the ghostly lesbian begins to set norms, rather than assimilating to them or being subjugated to them. Embracing lesbian time means that the eternity that comes with death ceases to be “somewhere nothing matters” and instead is a place where the lesbian subject defines what ‘meaning’ is. Within the eternal, circular, iterative, temporality of a lesbian ghost, the possibilities for generating new meaning are endless.

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<sup>16</sup> Brooker, “San Junipero,” *Black Mirror*, 41:32.