

# The Supernatural Necropolis of San Junipero: Technological Necromancy, Satire, and Frogs

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## Introduction

Understanding the literary role of San Junipero, the technological utopic afterlife presented by author and series producer Charlie Brooker in his speculative science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror*, requires a great deal of comparative analysis. The titular city of San Junipero presented within the episode is equal parts utopic, pastoral, and heavenly, though divorced from traditional theological connotation, except when aesthetics are occasionally implemented for purposes of metaphor. Most importantly for *our* purposes, however, San Junipero is also supernatural.

The tendency of speculative science fiction to follow the mandate of Arthur C. Clarke's poignant maxim that 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'<sup>1</sup> (Clarke 1962: 5) allows us to resituate San Junipero not as a crowning achievement of human technological endeavor, but instead as a supernatural necropolis through which communication with the dead is not only *possible* but *desired*, mirroring the typical Christian theological belief which situates 'heaven' not only as 'state' but, specifically, 'place.' (Zaleski 2003: 1). The reason this redefinition from technology to theology to, ultimately, supernatural city, is important is illustrated by recognizing the power of semantics within culture. The semantic label we administer to the place, albeit even a fictional one, is of utmost importance: 'Language is one of the main instruments by which children are socialized into the values, belief systems, and practices of their culture' (Goddard 2011: 2).

This article will articulate the argument that despite seeming to occupy a space within science fiction or perhaps even theological or ontological definitions of heaven or paradise, the city of San Junipero can simultaneously be idealized as a supernatural city populated by the

deceased, subject to necromancy and technological ‘magic,’ not at all unlike the supernatural cities found in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*<sup>ii</sup>, which also engages in a more traditional necromancy, and Aristophanes’ version of Hades in *The Frogs*, which does the same not through magic but geography. Although mechanically San Junipero can be understood as a computerized simulated reality system, our reinterpretation of the place and the arcane rituals that surround it instead document and call attention to its status as a supernatural city made possible by technological implement so advanced that it simulates, as Clarke terms it, *magic*. This is made possible by taking Clarke’s maxim to its logical conclusion, and reframing, as suggested by Habib, a ‘semantic template for supernatural places,’ including ‘*Heaven and Hell*’ (Habib 2018), a reframing which situates *Black Mirror*’s technological implements to the realm of arcane magical ritual, and thus transforms San Junipero itself from technological to supernatural.

The city of San Junipero, as presented within the fiction of *Black Mirror*, on first impression appears quite similar to the far more famous one found within the Wachowskis’ *Matrix* series, which sees human minds trapped within a simulated reality which they simultaneously cannot escape or even perceive. Contrary to this technological dystopia, however, San Junipero is presented as a utopian realm in which time and space have little to no meaning, seeming at once to be equal parts city and surrealistic dream world. Residence in San Junipero is highly desirable. So desirable, in fact, that a major narrative point from the episode revolves around the marriage of co-protagonists Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis) so that each may grant the other permission to enter the simulation posthumously,<sup>iii</sup> in addition to vying for euthanasia to accelerate the process of San Junipero residency. Each woman is shown in the episode to be capable of imagining perceptions of her own respective body different than those in reality. Both protagonists can freely travel through ‘time,’ changing setting and experience within San Junipero based solely on desire and can further travel from Yorkie’s pastoral seaside home depicted at the episode’s end to various arcades, bars, and meet-up spots<sup>iv</sup> with little more than thought. The surrealist nature of San Junipero is explained through the episode’s fiction as being simulated reality, whereas the true structure of the city is a massive, computerized mainframe housed in an unnamed facility, attended to by a series of who appear to be technicians working for the TCKR company. Kelly and Yorkie, and the other denizens of the city, exist there as ideations within the mainframe, able to retain consciousness

following the natural death of their physical bodies. The surrealistic nature of San Junipero is due to the ability of the computer code which they inhabit to shift and alter without regard to laws of physics or time.

Before proceeding, it is of utmost importance to discuss nomenclature regarding the status of Kelly, Yorkie, and others who occupy a space within San Junipero, as our reconstruction of San Junipero from technological to supernatural requires a semantic template upon which to fortify our redefinition of terms. As described by Habib, ‘no semantic template has yet been proposed for supernatural places,’ (Habib 2018: 3) first requiring us to invent one (as Habib does), but also simultaneously allowing for flexibility in our definition of supernatural, including one which is broad enough to allow Clarke to be a likely contributor. For example, Habib notes that ‘[Heaven] and [Hell] are concepts...which may be thought of as lexical converses, much like...*light* or *darkness*...[they] are in alignment with the notions of reward and punishment’ (Habib 2018: 5). As we will soon demonstrate, the establishments of San Junipero—Tucker’s and The Quagmire, respectively—are Heaven and Hell within the fiction. They are allegories of allegories.

Our semantic confusion extends further than Heaven and Hell, however. Thus far, I have attempted to use the word *consciousness* when describing Kelly and Yorkie within the simulation. This carefully selected word is an attempt to avoid use of the words *ghost* or *soul*. The word *soul* carries with it a host of theological connotations which this essay desires to avoid—despite the episode’s portrayal of San Junipero as a utopic, eternal paradise, made overtly clear by the soundtrack’s use of Belinda Carlisle’s ‘Heaven is a Place on Earth’—the punishment/reward function of various theological interpretations of afterlife is not this article’s focus. Similarly, the word *ghost*, while strongly, and perhaps more clearly, alluding to the nature of San Junipero as supernatural, likewise carries a series of negative connotations made tradition by two thousand years of ghost stories, often Victorian-era Gothic text. Truthfully, if we know anything about the term *ghost*, it is that we know only that we cannot conceivably know: ‘The question of spectres is therefore the question of life, of the limit between the living and the dead, everywhere it presents itself’ (Derrida 1994: 23); ‘[hauntings] are...an experience of the undecidable’ (Wolfreys 2002: xiv); ‘Can we speak of ‘ghosts’ without transforming the whole world and ourselves, too, into phantoms?’ (Rabaté 1996: 15).

Ultimately, the question of ‘what is a ghost?’ is one rooted in equal parts theological and semantic understanding. The theological question is far outside the scope of this article, but the semantic understanding of the conundrum is, paradoxically, both prescient and moot; understanding the status of our protagonists is perhaps important to the metaphysical question of whether or not they are ‘alive’ whilst in San Junipero, but the mere fact that such a mystery exists is a definition of the supernatural. A 2006 study by Norenzayan and Hansen demonstrates this paradox by describing whether or not “awareness of mortality intensifies belief in supernatural agents” (2006), ultimately concluding that “Mortality salience led to more religiosity, stronger belief in God...[and] increased supernatural agent beliefs even when supernatural agency was presented in a culturally alien context” (2003). This study illustrates the position clearly: without knowing the answer to the question (“What is mortality” within the study, versus “Are Kelly and Yorkie alive” in the fiction) is irrelevant; in each instance, evidence of the supernatural, and of religiosity, increased.

If the word *ghost* is to be employed as a definition of Kelly and Yorkie’s presence while in the San Junipero system, and the semantic primes detailed by Habib and Goddard are required for an accurate semantic definition to exist, perhaps a more apropos synonym would be that utilized by Shirow Masamune’s *Ghost in the Shell*, wherein a ‘ghost’ is portrayed as an independent consciousness, a self-awareness, within a technological system. The work, both Masamune’s original manga and the 1995 film adaptation by Mamoru Oshii, makes a series of rather opaque references to a ‘ghost’ as a consciousness, spirit, or memory inhabiting a ‘full-replacement cyborg body,’ the ‘shell.’ Individuals who have lost their original ‘ghost’ are called ‘puppets,’ and are manipulated by the film’s antagonist. To help prevent confusion regarding terminology, we will employ the use of the term *shade* going forward, for while it also potentially conjures negative literary allusions to more familiar, traditional ghosts and ghost imagery, it is the phraseology employed by Aristophanes and Swift, our respective comparative texts.

Note also that *shade* and *ghost* imply the lingering specter of one who has passed on; the characters of San Junipero are not necessarily dead in a traditional definitive sense of the term. In

one telling part of the episode, when Kelly and Greg (Yorkie's nurse) are discussing her imminent death and subsequent permanent residence in San Junipero, Greg tells Kelly that Yorkie is 'scheduled to pass over tomorrow.' Kelly immediately replies: 'Let's just call it what it is: dying.' This softened language on the part of Greg contrasts with the cynical viewpoint of the much older and infirm Kelly, demonstrating that even a populace that is familiar with San Junipero within their reality remains unable to fully articulate its meaning or ontological ramifications. Although a full philosophical discussion regarding the ontology of the state of death is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice to say that the supernatural nature of San Junipero relies on the assumption that the characters who have permanent residence within the simulation—Kelly and Yorkie included by the close of the episode—are no longer capable of life outside the simulation due to age, injury, or condition. Permanent San Junipero residents, a distinction I make because the simulation also allows for temporary visitation (i.e., technological necromancy, as compared to Swift's supernatural necromancy, which appears in our third comparative text), exist as consciousnesses within the system, *shades*, which retain full autonomy over their minds.

San Junipero may perhaps best be understood as a 'permanent cloud of consciousness,' resembling a technological afterlife which may be visited by friends and family members. In this, its supernatural nature begins to be revealed: it is inhabited by shades of the deceased, a surreal realm that defies the laws of physics and nature, which permits temporary travel into its borders for purposes of visitation. According to Habib, in the traditional semantic sense:

English *heaven* refers to a supernatural place which seems to be perceived as the habitat of God and deceased good people. It appears to be perceived as a place of ultimate happiness, and it seems to be imagined as being very far above earth. Also, it appears that someone in this place can do good things to people and prevent bad things from happening to them. (2018: page ref required)

San Junipero may be understood to be much the same: it is a 'technologically supernatural' place which exists outside the bounds of our understanding; it is perceived as a place of ultimate happiness, and it is very far from typical Earthly existence. People in San Junipero can do both

good and evil things to people (this topic will be explicated further in section three). The only guiding principle, and the one that divorces San Junipero from traditional iterations of heavenly places, is a lack of a divine God, though the episode takes pains to demonstrate that human free will substitutes for this missing figure, as will also be discussed further in section three.

Habib ultimately describes her template for semantic understanding of supernatural places, including seven criteria: 'Category, Existential Status, Typical Attributes, Inhabitants, Nature of the Place, Location, General Description' (2018). San Junipero closely mimics Christian theological Heaven in five of the seven, a likely narrative choice plainly illustrating the symbolism within the episode. In Category, both are afterlives; in Existential Status, both contain shades of human consciousness; in Inhabitants, both contain the shades of the righteous; in Nature, both are surreal; and in General Description both may be illustrated to be paradisiacal abodes of the deceased. Only in Typical Attributes and Location, ultimately a product of aesthetic imagination of the traditional Christian belief and geography (including frequent references to the 'Gates' surrounding the place) do the two differ. Though the episode never shows it, perhaps to not make the metaphor *too* overt, it would not be surprising to see white gates at the entrance to the storage facility housing San Junipero's mainframe, though this is speculative.

If we were to draw upon the most contentious component of the argument, and the one which this article is attempting to directly address, it would be the status of San Junipero's inhabitants as 'dead' (Existential Status). Certainly, San Junipero's permanent residents fulfill the clinical definition of death, which requires no heartbeat, but this is quite insufficient. Instead, by utilizing a nebulous and fractionated definition of 'death,' wherein consciousness outlives physical form, we are left with our semantic issues of *soul*, *ghost*, and my chosen term, *shade*. This inability to clearly define the terms is, in and of itself, supernatural (and certainly uncanny). Ultimately, despite a clear semantic definition as to the 'living status' of San Junipero's residents, it is a moot argument, as the episode goes to great lengths to portray this nebulous existence as technologically manifest obscurity, and, if we apply Clarke, supernaturally manifest obscurity.

Comparative connections begin to appear here to a ‘realm of the dead’ found in other fictions, realms which often see protagonists descend to battle great evils, learn long-forgotten secrets, or visit with those who have passed. Early examples, chosen because they precede Christian theology and therefore help us in disassociating a *realm of the dead* from *heaven* or *hell*, and therefore more able to view San Junipero as *supernatural* rather than *sacred*, include Odysseus’ travel to the underworld to meet the deceased seer Teiresias, his mother Anticlea, Greek hero Achilles, and his deceased crewmate Elpenor (Homer [~800 BCE] 1996: 251–70). Another early example, which we will examine in much greater detail, is the depiction of a realm of the dead—Hades or The Underworld—found within Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*. This text is chosen for three primary reasons: chiefly, it is one of the few pre-Christian texts that depict the afterlife not as suffering but rather jovial (nearly identical to the upside demonstrated by San Junipero). Second, like San Junipero, the play’s protagonists are necromancers, engaging the arcane to speak with the dead. Third, as previously stated, its status as a pre-Christian text helpfully allows us to better differentiate between *afterlife* and theologically common depictions of Heaven and Hell, if by different names (as described by Habib 2018).

### **San Junipero, The Frogs, Rebirth, and the Wisdom of The Past**

First produced and performed in 405 BCE and presented as a comedy, *The Frogs* tells the story of the god Dionysus who, despairing the state of Athenian culture and art, descends to the underworld of Hades to find ancient wisdom from previous playwrights. His specific goal is to revive Euripides, though ultimately, after a contest at the table of Pluto, ruler of the underworld, Dionysus instead returns to Athens with the shade of Aeschylus, another playwright, who bested Euripides in the contest of poetry, wisdom, and insight. In short, Dionysus engages in necromancy, via geography (as the entrance to Hades in the play is revealed to be across a lake, a physical abode to which the God may easily travel) to revive the dead. At the time the play was produced, the Peloponnesian War<sup>v</sup> was ongoing in Athens, and the play makes numerous references to the conflict.<sup>vi</sup> By the time the play ends, Dionysus’ true goals are revealed; rather than a mere reinvigoration of Athenian art, his motivation in retrieving the literal words from the

past (and the playwright that wrote them) are that the old ways are superior to the new, and are the only viable way he sees to save the city.

This is most strongly exemplified during the contest in the underworld when Aeschylus is presented as having ‘weightier’ lines than does Euripides; quite literally, in fact, as one of the measures of judgment within the contest is Dionysius’ use of a balance scale, into which each playwright speaks. Euripides states that the method to save Athens is to ‘Mistrust those citizens of ours / whom we now trust, and those employ whom now / We don’t employ, the city will be saved’ (Aristophanes [405 BCE] 1952: 581), which may be interpreted as a path to peace. In contrast, Aeschylus speaks like a conquering king and strategizing general, going so far as to extoll the value of a strong navy, stating ‘When [Athens] shall count the enemy’s soil their own / and theirs the enemy’s: when they know that ships are their true wealth, their so-called wealth delusion’ (Aristophanes [405 BCE] 1952: 581). Rather than succumb to compromise with her enemies, Aeschylus urges Athens to crush Sparta and the Peloponnesian League beneath the might of her navy. This ultimately proves to be the arcane wisdom Dionysus was seeking, and he returns to the world of the living thanks to the blessing of Pluto with the victorious playwright in tow.

Further evidence for the political purposes of the play, additionally described as a plea for the recovery of lost heroes<sup>vii</sup> or heroism to aid Athens during a time of crisis, may be found within its parabasis,<sup>viii</sup> uniquely situated between Dionysus’ comedic journey to Hades and the contest between the two deceased tragic poets, and described by Sir Kenneth Dover as ‘urging [citizens of Athens] to turn back to men of known integrity who were brought up in the style of noble and wealthy families’ (Dover 1997: 33), rather than those ‘upstarts of foreign parentage’ (33). This insight is precisely the wisdom Dionysus descended into Hades to seek, and mirrors the supernatural knowledge availed to citizens of San Junipero, not necessarily in function (victory in war) but instead in motivation (redemption of self or state). As noted by Tarkow, ‘the death and resurrection of Dionysus...is a necessary step in his, and his city’s, quest for self-identity and rebirth’ (1982: 12). The deity’s quest in *The Frogs* is akin to Kelly’s own quest for self-identity, and each quest is fulfilled via the acquisition of knowledge from ‘the other side,’ for Kelly also engages in necromancy (though hers is technological rather than geographic) to

discover arcane knowledge. Dionysus' goal was to save Athens, while Kelly's, evidently, is to save herself—or, at the very least, discover herself.

In the text of *San Junipero*, Kelly is the best allegory for Aristophanes' figure of Dionysus, as she is the necromancer descending into the supernatural world of shades to discern knowledge. Like Dionysus, she is resolved of one conclusion—resistance to join the eternal youth in the simulated world—but by the conclusion of the episode, much as Dionysus changes his mind as to the target of his mission, Kelly ultimately relents and joins her new wife in technological supernatural paradise. While Kelly is presented as exploring the virtual space following the death of her husband, we quickly recognize that she is there because she is searching for meaning to her life. She is not there to fulfill a hedonistic desire for engagement before her inevitable passing a few months hence, but instead seeks to find a reason to continue, perhaps a justification for her decision to join her husband in death (whom, the episode makes clear, is *not* a resident of *San Junipero*). The knowledge that Kelly gleans from her liaison with Yorkie is a realization that the desires she felt for much of her life, hinted within the episode as being bisexuality, is embodied within the younger woman.

An excellent depiction of Kelly's quest for self-identity is found within Isra Daraiseh and M. Keith Booker's 'Unreal City: Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Posthumanity in "San Junipero",' (2019) which expertly traces the pop culture references invisible to Kelly, including a movie poster for *The Lost Boys*, and a passing visage of *Max Headroom* on a nearby television. The poignant lyrics of the questionably diegetic soundtrack which includes the aforementioned Belinda Carlisle, and even a setting (a simulated version of 1987) which is only three years after the release of William Gibson's masterpiece *Neuromancer*, a text which essentially originated the cyberpunk genre *Black Mirror* occasionally shares, and one in which the separation of mind and body via technology is integral to the plot (2019: 7). These references are, functionally, likely either 'Easter Eggs' to the audience to discover on a second viewing, or they may be foreshadowing as to the true nature of *San Junipero*, but each, in its own way, emulates the lines spoken by Aeschylus: they are the 'arcane knowledge' that Kelly desires.

Carlisle's lyrics, for example, state that 'In this world we're just beginning / to understand the miracle of living,' a clear indication (aside from the song's title) that a 'new life' is dawning, and perhaps our definitions of death described above require rethinking. Further, it also establishes the episode's soundtrack as vital to the presence of the arcane knowledge available to Kelly (and to the audience if they are looking closely enough). Other lyrical references, in a parallel to the lyrics espoused by both Aeschylus and Euripides, include Robert Palmer's 'Addicted to Love' and INXS' 'Need You Tonight,' clearly portraying knowledge of what will bring about salvation. For Athens, of course, the mechanism was victory; for Kelly, it is love; for both, the method to discover this knowledge is travel to a supernatural realm via necromancy. Daraiseh and Booker continue by noting that:

...the references to music, film, and television in the episode can also be seen as metafictional, suggesting the sort of heavily mediated environment in which we all live, immersed in a constant stream of manufactured images that makes the distinction between 'real' and 'virtual,' on which the episode apparently hinges, extremely blurry and unstable. (2019: 14)

This depiction of reality, both within the world of San Junipero and as a metafictional element describing our own life, serves to reinforce the supernatural nature of the necropolis, quite like the Derridean definition of the ghost, which simultaneously incorporates both 'life' and 'death,' or, in this case, 'real' and 'unreal.' This depiction of an afterlife, however, is quite different from the usual aesthetic upon which supernatural cities, usually posthumous ones, are typically built.

San Junipero, therefore, is not in any way a rewriting or reimagining of *The Frogs*. Rather, Aristophanes' version of the afterlife—itsself an iteration of the supernatural, including magic, necromancy, return from the dead, and shades of the dead populating the 'traditional' supernatural city of Hades—mirrors the one presented within San Junipero, and fulfills four out of Habib's seven criteria betwixt the two. Hades, as presented within *The Frogs* is an afterlife (Category); it is populated by shades (Existential Status); the shades are the righteous and famous of those that passed before, including the temporally-recently deceased Sophocles (Inhabitants); and both are quite surreal (Nature).

We now turn to another pre-Christian depiction of an afterlife, one likely more closely associated with the supernatural because of its emphasis on the uncanny and despair, and because San Junipero contains a (relatively minor) depiction of *this* version of afterlife as well within The Quagmire bar. Homer's depiction of Hades in *The Odyssey* is equal parts chilling, terrifying, and supernatural, and serves as an excellent counterpart to the literal party illustrated by Aristophanes. Depictions of the afterlife within ancient text is often styled in tone according to plot and goal of fiction, serving a narrative function rather than a moral or theological one, whilst aesthetic design of the afterlife is often styled according to pre-Christian religions of various disparate religious groups. Homer's afterlife is therefore chilling and unsettling to demonstrate the gravity and fear of Odysseus' journey, whereas Aristophanes' is situated within a comedic play, and takes on an appropriate tone. Both tones are found within San Junipero, so for the sake of completeness, allow us to examine both.

### **Disrupting Supernatural as Synonymous for 'Unsettling'**

Homer describes existence in the underworld through the words of Achilles as he speaks to Odysseus: 'No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus! By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—than rule down here over all the breathless dead' (Homer [~800 BCE] 1996: 265). He further states that 'The House of Death [is] where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home' (265) and, when Odysseus attempts to embrace his mother Anticlea, 'three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her, three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time the grief cut to the heart' (256). Homer makes it obvious from these sorrowful, ephemeral depictions of the denizens of Hades that death is worse than any pain felt in life. Even a life of servitude and poverty is preferred by Achilles to lordship in death. This line is of course inverted by Milton's character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who famously muses that 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!' (1667).

Neither Milton, nor Homer, however, despite their insistence on a supernatural abode of the dead, share the relative presentation of Aristophanes, who depicts Hades not as a tragic realm

but instead as a comfortable, even comedic one in *The Frogs*. The contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, for example, takes place not in a desolate, ephemeral, supernatural cavern as is presented by Homer, but rather at Pluto's dinner table. Each playwright even has his own chair, whose position is representative of their relative fame and quality of verse while in life, with the play closing on a joke (both at the expense of Euripides and in honor of the recently deceased Sophocles), which finds Aeschylus leaving Hades with Dionysus.

I draw the comparison between *The Frogs*, *San Junipero*, and *The Odyssey* to illustrate that although all three are supernatural afterlives, *San Junipero* shares far more in tone, theme, and ultimate design with Aristophanes' presentation than it does with Homer's. The term 'supernatural' tends toward negative perceptions, like the 'ghost' or 'haunting,' while when the supernatural is invoked with a deliberate positive spin, the result is often *comedy* (Aristophanes), *satire* (Swift, to whom we will return momentarily), or *surrealism* (*San Junipero*), as opposed to *tragedy* (Homer). This is to say that neither tone, theme, nor genre should be substituted for an analysis of aesthetic or mechanism, the categories to which *supernatural* belongs. Whether laughing and teasing contemporaries at the dinner table of Pluto, grasping at the ephemeral shade of your own deceased mother, or leaping through time with your new wife, the supernatural is undeniably present, and the places in which these events occur are simultaneously supernatural cities. Homer's depiction of the supernatural afterlife checks all of Habib's criteria, save for its inversion from 'heavenly' to 'hellish'.

*San Junipero* even takes pains to stress the reward/punishment motif of Christian theological afterlife, simultaneously echoing the mournful, painful version of Hades presented by Homer. We first meet both Kelly and Yorkie at a dance club, Tucker's,<sup>ix</sup> where Belinda Carlisle and INXS play in the background, reinforcing the episode's redemptive measures of rebirth and 'found love.' However, one week later, on Kelly's second descent into the supernatural city, she is unable to find Yorkie at Tucker's, and instead travels to The Quagmire, a bar that seemingly caters to fringe hedonism, violence, and sexual exploitation. When she first arrives, she is nearly run down by a group of motorcyclists. The atmosphere is dark and smoky, and, just to drive home the point that this is referential to Christian Hell, a woman, a clear allegory to Eve from Genesis, appears holding a snake, allegorically Satan.

The Quagmire is far more like the Homeric depiction of Hades than the one portrayed by Aristophanes, though neither Greek goes so far as to name Tartarus<sup>x</sup> within the work, instead opting for a more ‘holistic’ presentation of the afterlife. Unlike Homer, however, where souls are trapped in dismal eternity, *San Junipero* emphasizes the power of the characters’ free will, able to freely travel to and from The Quagmire to Tucker’s, amongst other virtual simulated locations. Whereas later writers like Dante would focus on the geography and structure of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*, Brooker presents The Quagmire as simply another place, unconnected to time and unbound by physical law, which may be entered and exited at will. The ability to freely traverse between Heaven and Hell after death is unique to San Junipero, and transcendently reinforces its supernatural identity. San Junipero, the episode seems to be telling us, exalts personal choice and freedom, so much so that it breaks the bonds of traditional theology—quite likely an allegory for Yorkie’s same-sex attraction ultimately proving her liberation from her homophobic family, whom the episode never presents except as obstacle.

Dionysus, for his part, also seems to exert quite a bit of free will and mobility within death, acting as the necromancer within *The Frogs*. He travels to Hades (across a lake, on the advice of Hercules), situating it as a tangible, concrete place that may be entered and exited freely, like the technological necromancy practiced by Kelly in *San Junipero*. This act of necromancy, the calling and speaking to the dead for council or company, appears in a multitude of literary texts, but the one most relevant to that presented in San Junipero is the one described by Lemuel Gulliver in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*: the fictional realm of Glubbubdrib.

### **Necromancy: A Door to the Supernatural Afterlife**

A caveat must be made here that Swift is a satirist, and *Gulliver’s Travels* is of course taking aim at political and social figures of his day, as, ultimately, the entire purpose of Gulliver’s visit to the island is to demonstrate that even those revered as intellectual and moral giants from the past were just as foolhardy, corrupt, and immoral as modern politicians. Nevertheless, the supernatural, as previously discussed, can find a home within any genre, and nowhere is it more clearly represented in Swift than in the description and depiction of this tiny island nation.

Swift's introduction notes that 'Glubbudrib, as nearly as I can interpret the word, signifies the island of sorcerers or magicians' ([1726] 2010: 178). He spends a paragraph or so discussing the politics of the place, but then returns to the supernatural nature of the city clearly:

'The governor and his family are served and attended by domestics of a kind somewhat unusual. By his skill in necromancy he has a power of calling whom he pleases from the dead, and commanding their service for twenty-four hours, but no longer; nor can he call the same persons up again in less than three months, except upon very extraordinary occasions.' ([1726] 2010: 178–9)

The role of this necromancer within the text is as a mechanism through which Gulliver may speak with and seek the knowledge of the deceased—like Kelly's actions when entering San Junipero—and Gulliver spends the rest of his time at Glubbudrib calling forth and discussing politics and philosophy with various spirits. Further, the literary 'rules' under which Swift's necromancer may summon a spirit, as detailed in the above quote, demand that the spirit may only remain in Glubbudrib amongst the living for a maximum timeframe of twenty-four hours and may not be summoned again for three months. This timeframe, which suggests at once both the rarity of the necromantic skill and the power of the summoned individuals by way of an artificial scarcity—both hallmarks of the supernatural—is reflected in San Junipero in a less arcane, but no less mechanically important methodology. Visits to the technological necropolis for those who have not yet 'passed over' are limited to five hours a week, and although the episode utilizes this narrative ticking clock to create drama, the in-universe explanation makes rational sense; essentially too long a time within the paradisiac realm of San Junipero will cause addiction and difficulty returning to normal life. How this timeframe is established is never fully explored, but the limited visitation informs the viewer of the magnitude of the event, not a journey to be taken lightly, and further adding to the arcane, supernatural nature of the city by way of its intermittence.

Gulliver, of course, invokes the skill of the necromancer in the governor's mansion in an attempt to emulate the motivations of Dionysus in *The Frogs*: he seeks to uncover great wisdom from ages past, specifically stating his motivation as 'Having a desire to see those ancients who

were most renowned for wit and learning' (Swift [1726] 2010: 181). Because the political situation in which *The Frogs* was produced meant the play served as both entertainment and as rallying cry for Athens during wartime, Dionysus' sought wisdom is ultimately successful in the confines of the play. In contrast, the wisdom brought forth by the necromancers of Glubbdubdrib is thoroughly useless. Despite calling upon various figures like Homer, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Descartes, Brutus, and Julius Caesar, Gulliver ultimately declares that:

I was chiefly disgusted with modern history. For having examined all the persons of greatest name in the courts of princes, for a hundred years past, I found how the world had been misled...How low an opinion I had of human wisdom and integrity, when I was truly informed of the springs and motives of great enterprises and revolutions in the world, and of the contemptible accidents to which they owed their success. (Swift 1726 [2010]: 183–4)

Swift is skewering what he perceives to be the corruptions of power in his own present day, though his invocation of past wisdom to serve his satirical aim *also* serves to illustrate that the supernatural power of necromancy is insufficient to overcome human fragility. It is highly cynical, but it is also quite consistent with Swift's typical view of reality. Aristophanes treats this differently, as closing lines from Pluto to Aeschylus indicate as he leaves Hades:

Farewell then Aeschylus, great and wise,  
Go, save our state by the maxims rare  
Of thy noble thought; and the fools chastise,  
For many a fool dwells there. (Aristophanes [405 BCE] 1952: 582)

Aeschylus, the embodiment of past wisdom in *The Frogs*, becomes the savior of Athens, while the endless line of summoned spirits in Glubbdubdrib do little but reinforce Gulliver's perception that nobility is accidental and human nature unchangeably doomed. These disparate perceptions of the usefulness and power of past wisdom are uniquely combined in San Junipero, which does not follow either tract exclusively, but rather integrates aspects of each within. Kelly and Yorkie each deal with social obstacles (Kelly, her resistance to act on her bisexual feelings out of loyalty

to her husband and social stigma; Yorkie, her tragic accident as a result of doing what Kelly was unable: coming out). The cynical Swift would recognize and portray these human obstacles, if they had been summoned at Glubbubdrib, as more spirits containing useless knowledge, suggesting that within *San Junipero*, Swift is correct: humanity, irrevocably and eternally, shoots itself in the proverbial foot. However, *San Junipero* also integrates the optimism espoused by Aristophanes, demonstrated by the arcane knowledge of ‘true self’ and the overcoming power of companionship and identity within the rebirth and new goals of Kelly and Dionysus, respectively.

## Conclusion

If *The Frogs* is an optimistic view of the inhabitants of a supernatural city and *Gulliver’s Travels* a pessimistic one, then *San Junipero* occupies a space firmly between the two, neatly mirroring the presence of both heaven and hell (Tucker’s and The Quagmire) within its supernatural boundaries, the only dividing line between them human free will. Aristophanes exults courage, artistry, and ingenuity, and Swift exults intelligence, integrity, and honesty, though both illustrate the inevitability of death and the afterlife, as well as its meaning. In keeping with its tendency to overcome inevitability, *San Junipero*’s supernatural nature simultaneously transcends both death and human inevitability, whether it be through social stigma or theology, and its status as ‘supernatural city,’ even if narratively driven by technological means achieved within the genre of speculative science fiction, is cemented.

Though we may speculate, perhaps endlessly, on the nature of life, death, and afterlife—as is the domain of religious philosophy—the fact remains that when the lines become blurry the supernatural begins to infringe upon the tangible, the surreal upon the real, and the shade into consciousness, fiction which examines this twilight is ultimately worthy of study. Whether magical or technological, such transgressions are supernatural, and it is perhaps only a symptom of genre theory that we seek to categorize one as “science fiction” and one as “magical realism” or “The Gothic,” etc. In this article I have sought to apply Habib’s semantic template for defining a supernatural place, linguistically speaking. There is little doubt that this template will change, as will its contents, depending upon the rationale, narratology, and aesthetic choices made by the

critic. What does not change, however, regardless of criteria, is the recognition that the existence and possibility of such a conversation, the unsettled nature of the debate between *heaven* and *hell*, *alive* and *deceased*, *magic* and *technology*, or other ontological and teleological systems of understanding can only be the result of the *supernatural*.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Clarke's 'Third Law of the Future,' an adage he first proposed in his 1962 essay *Profiles of the Future*.

<sup>ii</sup> Specifically, the city of Glubbudubdrib.

<sup>iii</sup> Absent their marriage, families are asked to consent for those unable to consent for themselves, and Yorkie's family, both strongly Christian (and therefore believing in a theological afterlife) and strongly against her LGBTQ identity, refuse to grant permission. Yorkie's family is described in the episode as "conservative."

<sup>iv</sup> Continuing to utilize the theological connection to afterlife with narrative aplomb, the two meet-up spots shown in detail (Tucker's and The Quagmire) symbolize heaven and hell through their respective aesthetics. Kelly and Yorkie, fittingly, first meet at Tucker's.

<sup>v</sup> Fought between Athens and Sparta for hegemonic control of ancient Greece and the Aegean. Sparta ultimately emerged victorious following Persian support against Athens.

<sup>vi</sup> Most notably through the presence of the figure of Alcibiades, an Athenian general.

<sup>vii</sup> As suggested by Tarkow's comparison of the figure of Aeschylus within the play to that of Achilles.

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<sup>viii</sup> The parabasis is a unique part of Greek drama in which the chorus addresses the audience directly, thoroughly shattering the fourth wall. Playwrights often used this technique to reinforce political or cultural sentiment within the play’s narrative, in an attempt to be overtly clear about the purpose of the text. Tarkow, amongst others, notes that the parabasis of *The Frogs* is where much of the relevant historical context regarding the Peloponnesian War, and the figure of Alcibiades, may be found. (1982: 6).

<sup>ix</sup> Tucker’s is a reference to the company which builds and controls the San Junipero simulation: TCKR.

<sup>x</sup> The Greek afterlife equivalent of Christian Hell, which sees individuals punished for eternity. Famous residents of Tartarus include Sisyphus, cursed to roll a boulder up a mountain for eternity, and Tantalus, cursed to forever be unable to reach the food and water seemingly in close proximity.

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