"Be Gay Do Crime: Community Building and Queer Solidarity in Cloudpunk and Motor Crush"

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Abstract
This essay uses queer theory to examine the videogame Cloudpunk and the comic series Motor Crush. Each of these texts use cyberpunk settings to tell stories about finding hope in community by following protagonists trying to navigate worlds where legal success is highly competitive and practically impossible, so they must therefore turn to community building, mutual aid, and criminal activity. This analysis views the texts through the lens of queer time and queer space making practices as outlined by Jack Halberstam and Jose Esteban Muñoz. Central to this article's exploration of these texts is the characters inability and/or refusal to fit into the worlds they inhabit, and how they must therefore find success outside of accepted channels. Success is only found by these characters through an attitude that can be summarised by the queer anarchist meme "be gay, do crime", which connotes a sense of mischief, solidarity, and standing up to authority.

Keywords: queer theory, dystopia, hierarchy, community, queer time, cyberpunk

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I N HYPER-CAPITALIST CYBERPUNK FUTURES, individuals are given a narrow set of criteria for success. Succeeding legally involves throwing oneself into a system designed to wring maximum value out of a person with minimal return, leaving a person isolated and unstable. The videogame *Cloudpunk* (Ion Lands 2020) and the comic series *Motor Crush* (Fletcher et. al. 2017-) both depict such grim, hypercapitalist futures, and use these settings as a backdrop to stories about finding hope in community building, sometimes a community that comes with illegal activity. In each text, an individualistic approach to success under a capitalist system is shown, repeatedly, to fail. The only time characters succeed is through community building and mutual aid and a lifestyle summed up in the queer anarchist activist meme from which I borrow my title, "be gay, do crime".

My analysis of these two texts rests on the concepts of Queer Time and Queer Space built by queer theorist and writer Jack Halberstam in his 2005 book *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. In Halberstam's view, "Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."[1] Essentially, queer uses of time and space occur when a person builds a life outside of a notion of success where one person works for the benefit of only themselves and their family, that family being a heterosexual couple and their biological children. The queer theory that Halberstam employs views queerness

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[1] J Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures: New Directions from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005): 1.

as an identity that "has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space."[2] The very existence of queerness calls into question the supposed naturalness of "the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction," and imagines futures "according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death." [3]In Halberstam's words,

> "Queer time" is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge…once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. "Queer space" refers to the place-making practices… in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.[4]

The protagonists of *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* are weighed down by external expectations. In defying these expectations, they create alternative temporal and spatial relationships in which they can imagine the future.

José Esteban Muñoz, academic and writer in the fields of performance studies, queer theory, and critical theory has built on Halberstam's conceptualisation of Queer Time in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In his book, he posits queerness as a fundamentally utopian way of life, as a means of striving for a better future. As he puts it, "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there."[5] Halberstam and Muñoz discuss lives lived outside of what neoliberalism considers "acceptable" and outside of legality in a way that relates to the experience of characters suffering in a cyberpunk future. As individuals attempting to succeed in a system that will not allow it, the protagonists of *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush*, Rania and Domino respectively, are crushed by the here and

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[2] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*: 2.

[3] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*: 2.

[4] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*: 6.

[5] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009): 1.

now. They are characters who begin their stories unable to escape the "quagmire of the present" because they are only looking to prescribed ideas of success. When they escape the crushing sadness of the here and now, it is by seeking ways to structure their lives in opposition to the expectations placed upon them by neoliberal capitalism.

The comic series *Motor Crush* follows Domino Swift, who by day is a Grand Prix racer working her way up the championship ladder. By night she competes in the "Cannonball", dangerous street races where the prize is a substance called Crush—an illegal and highly toxic fuel additive which is the only treatment for her rare medical condition. The crimes she commits to survive are not only dangerous in and of themselves, but if her employers—who can and do track her location—were to find out, it would threaten her career, her life, and her freedom. To disguise her life of crime and to succeed as a racer, Domino must perform a sanitised, advertiser-friendly version of herself in periodic livestreams. At any time, a "catball"—a flying self-contained TV studio—might appear and begin recording. When this happens, Domino must choose between giving a performance that could just as easily lose viewer interest as gain it, and shooing it away, which would threaten her income. Throughout the series legitimate success—the races, sponsorship deals, performing for fans—are shown to be not only a precarious path to success, but a stifling and frustrating one, while happiness and a more lasting form of success come in the form of community and connection, which she finds in the company of criminals and gang members.

Cloudpunk is an adventure game released by Ion Lands in 2020, in which the player follows Rania on her first night of work in a semi-legal delivery company. Rania moved to the gloomy mega-city of Nivalis, leaving the relative peace of her life in the Eastern Peninsula, to seek work and pay off the debt she inherited from her mother. The stakes are set immediately when Rania is contacted by her dispatcher, known as Control, who addresses her by her employee number, 14FC. She learns that her predecessor, 14FB, died in a mysterious accident after nearly ten years of service, and 14FA didn't even survive their first night. On top of the corporeal danger her job poses, rent in Nivalis is paid by the hour, so Rania is constantly one bad night away from losing her home. Like any loner protagonist, Rania is only looking out for herself and her one friend, Camus, an artificial intelligence with the personality of a dog. Rania constantly complains about any deviation from her delivery route but is continually thrust into situations

where she helps the people around her. For Rania, success comes in the form of building connections with others in a system that only rewards selfishness and self-isolation.

Each text borrows aesthetically from well-known texts in the cyberpunk canon, such as the works of William Gibson, the tabletop roleplaying game *Cyberpunk 2020*, and the films *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999). *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* take place in dystopian future cities that look familiar to others of the cyberpunk genre: ecological damage has pushed humanity into crowded cities where resources are hoarded by a few powerful individuals, extreme competition for those resources push people to modify their bodies with potentially unsafe technology, and an ever-present surveillance apparatus is used to punish criminals but does little to make people safe. As I will discuss in further detail later, this aesthetic borrowing is a shortcut to the philosophical drives of such texts: the dehumanisation and exploitation of individuals under capitalism and how that is accelerated and intensified by technology.

In titling this piece "be gay do crime", I am borrowing from a tradition of activism and resistance as it is expressed in online anarchist spaces. The phrase "be gay, do crime" (sometimes "be gay, do crimes") has appeared sporadically online for at least a decade, and gained virality thanks to its 2016 discovery in graffiti in Marseille, France[6] and to a 2018 parody of a political cartoon posted to Twitter by artist and zine publisher Io Ascarium[7]. The cartoon Ascarium borrows was originally published in 1880 and features a cheerful skeleton brandishing a torch labelled "ANARCHY", while wearing a sash that reads "COMMUNIST" and a button on his hat advertising "FREE LOVE". In the original cartoon, the skeleton was holding a sign with a message pertaining to California state politics, but in Ascarium's version the sign instead instructs readers to "BE GAY DO CRIME!"[8] In an interview with David Hudson of Gay Star News, Ascarium said that the phrase

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[6] Matt Baume, "'Be Gay, Do Crime': Queer, Latinx Lawmaker Drops the Mic in Amazing Speech," News, them., December 11, 2020, https://www.them.us/story/new-zealand-parliament-ricardo-menendez-march-queer-latinx-lawmaker-speech.

[7] David Hudson, "What Does 'Be Gay, Do Crime' Mean?," Gay Star News, August 10, 2018, https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/what-does-be-gay-do-crime-mean/.

[8] Ascarium, Io. Twitter Post. June 3, 2018, 1:26 AM. https://twitter.com/bum_lung/status/1002934418854633473?s=20&t=ASzimG8GLl4I1Sjhv-vEYw

"belongs to nobody", that it was "pulled from the chaotic ether" of anti-assimilationist queer slogans.[9]

The crime and doing thereof does not necessarily refer to breaking the law, especially in malicious ways; rather, it is a challenge to authority, and a reverence for the history of LGBT activism, much of which was done in defiance of authorities that criminalised homosexuality. "Given the rise of the far-right in the US, a new generation are discovering that resistance may sometimes require breaking the law," writes Hudson, acknowledging that, while the phrase is often mischievous or fun, some activists have a deep and justified mistrust of authority.[10]

Crime as activism has a history beyond the mischief implied by "be gay do crime." Halberstam writes in a 2001 essay on queer resistance and anger about the successes of HIV/AIDS activists in the 1980s and 1990s, whose criminal activity could be seen as performing radical acts of love. "This is the postmodern tactic of ACT UP—the burning of effigies, the carnival protests of art and images that drive the scientists and religious creeps into panic mode. ACT UP chooses symbolic weapons that reconstitute the shape and contours of the real."[11] ACT UP used criminal activity to make the AIDS crisis impossible to ignore. The "scientists and religious creeps" Halberstam refers to are those who were content or even excited to let the AIDS crisis continue to kill thousands of people as long as they existed on the margins of society. By committing crimes such as vandalism, destruction of property, and disturbing the peace, ACT UP made the AIDS crisis impossible to continue ignoring. As Halberstam describes it, these actions were not just criminal but loving. These are examples of criminal activity with the explicit intention of creating a community and a future for others.

Queer uses of time and space are an acknowledgement of a system that was not designed to work for everyone. *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* present characters who begin their stories attempting to participate in the institutions that define success in their societies by find

[9] Hudson, "What Does 'Be Gay, Do Crime' Mean?" Para 11.

[10] Hudson, "What Does 'Be Gay, Do Crime' Mean?": Para 41.

[11] J. Jack Halberstam, "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance," in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in Film*, ed. Martha McCaughey and Neal King (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2001): 262.

they cannot. The focus of my work on these texts is on the ways in which the protagonists abandon their attempts to assimilate with the normalised institutions of their societies and instead create gleefully anti-assimilationist spaces in which to thrive.

The Cyberpunk Genre and Queer Encounters With Hostile Infrastructure

Where it is important to examine *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* as cyberpunk texts is in the infrastructure of the worlds and the rigid hierarchies maintained by the technological advancements of these worlds. Each text depicts worlds where social and economic inequality maintains and is maintained by the structure of the city, and protagonists who must find ways to fit around an infrastructure that is hostile to them. *Cloudpunk* wears the history of the cyberpunk genre on its sleeve, proudly and deliberately positioning itself in conversation with the science fiction that came before it. This is clear in character names such as those belonging to the insufferable wealthy couple Mr and Mrs Octavius-Butler (named for science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler), or the android employees of Anderson Financial, who are all named either Mr Anderson or Ms Anderson in reference to Thomas Anderson/Neo (Keanu Reeves) of *The Matrix*. *Cloudpunk* and the texts it references portray "spaces of decay and the subcultures who inhabit them on the margins of technologically advanced societies."[12] The people who live in these subcultures have been excluded from their society's mainstream of successful professionals and, in the cases of the texts under discussion here, must turn to each other to find alternate forms of success.

Like many other post-apocalyptic narratives, cyberpunk narratives "can be framed as an incomprehensive view of the fragility and transience of anything that could be referred to as a human situation" and are "a narrative claim that human lives are not sites of redemption and transcendence, but simply vistas for processes of survival, witness, and chance."[13] Post-apocalyptic stories are ones where the

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[12] Myerson, "Global Cyberpunk: Reclaiming Utopia in Japanese Cyberpunk Film," 366.

[13] Briohny Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination," *Thesis Eleven* 131, no. 1 (2015): 100.

audience "bear[s] witness to the apocalyptic logic that underpins capitalism itself."[14] Unlike other apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic sub-genres, cyberpunk narratives do not involve an event or events that ended life as the audience knows it; rather, the apocalypse was a slow process of corporate interests taking priority over human lives. The apocalypse of these texts is a system that has been proven again and again not to work but has never been replaced, where technology that could help people is instead used to oppress and exploit. This is the apocalypse that sociologist and utopian studies theorist Ruth Levitas warns against in *Utopia as Method* when she writes, "what really is impossible is to carry on as we are, with social and economic systems that enrich a few but destroy the environment and impoverish most of the world's population. Our very survival depends on finding another way of living."[15] In *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush*, characters are unable to succeed through official means because those means were never meant to let them succeed. Not only are these official channels to success ineffectual, they are isolating—pitting individuals in direct competition with each other for a finite resource. The only success the protagonists find is through activity of questionable legality and community building, often at the same time.

The relevance of the cyberpunk genre to my work is that it depicts the fragility and transience of the human situation through protagonists who are at odds with highly technological environments. The relevance of queer theory arises in the way the protagonists interact with a world that is not designed for them and is at times hostile to them. *Cloudpunk* takes place in the gloomy mega-city of Nivalis, where class is strictly delineated by altitude. Control explains to Rania that HOVAs (the flying cars the player will spend the game driving) are limited in altitude by "Vert Fields", so different neighbourhoods are accessible only by using "Ascenders". This conversation has the practical function of telling the player how they will navigate the city but also reveals the rigid class structure built into the city's architecture. Rent is more expensive in higher levels of the city, so while most people can only afford to live in the crowded lower levels, where critical maintenance is seldom done, wealthy people have more space in the higher levels. Some can even access the "Spire", the only level of the city that is not clouded by thick smog.

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[14] Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination.": 101.

[15] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): xii.

Nivalis is a system of interconnected bodies, technologies, and social structures that do not fit together as smoothly as they purport to. People in the Spire enjoy an unobstructed view of the sky and can feel as though the city works as it should, while people like Rania must make their way through a series of obstructions. The city was designed, as digital media theorist Robert Payne puts it, to "presuppose a normative arrangement of parts that only recognises certain articulations," and therefore, "minoritised subjects are often made to feel *inarticulate* in the specific sense of how they fail to articulate within normative systems, both by feeling disjointed and struggling for expression in the systems' representational logics."[16] The way that people in the city are included or excluded from Nivalis's "representational logics" is made clear in two missions in which Rania interacts with the medical system.

In the first mission of the game, the player must deliver a package to a man named Erwin, who lives in the lowest level of Nivalis and whose parents have recently died. Erwin believes that the package is his inheritance, which he plans to spend on expensive surgery to fix his eyesight. Instead, it is a box of his old toys and a letter from his parents explaining that they've spent their life savings to travel to an off-world colony where job prospects are better, and that they hope to start sending him money soon. However, their shuttle exploded on take-off and Erwin will likely never have the operation he needs.

This is the first delivery of the game and sets the stakes of life in Nivalis. Technology exists to fix Erwin's eyesight, but that technology costs more than he could hope to earn in a lifetime. Erwin's parents attempted to get him the money he needed during their lifetime, but in doing so gave up the chance to leave him money in the event of their death. The unfairness of the system is made clear immediately and is then emphasised later in the game during a mission in which the player must deliver a 3D-printed heart for transplant. The heart is not life-saving, it is cosmetic, designed to beat to the tune of a popular song. In the world of *Cloudpunk*, technology exists to 3D-print organs, making it possible to deliver life-saving organ transplants in a way that bypasses the complications of human organ donation. However, few lives are saved by such a technology because the surgeries

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[16] Robert Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure," *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 531. Emphasis in original.

are prohibitively expensive. Instead, these hearts are going to people who can afford to have organ transplants as a status symbol.

Rania, Erwin and people like them, who are suffering in extreme poverty in the world's most technologically advanced city, cause friction when encountering the city's infrastructure. Payne uses the term "lossiness" to describe such an encounter. His use of the terms "lossy" and "lossiness" adapts terminology from computer science to describe what is lost in the so-called seamless transmission of data. In computing terms, "loss" refers to data that is removed from a file so that it can be transmitted, such as pixels that are removed from a digital image so that it can be sent by email, or frequencies removed from an audio file so that it can be played through an online streaming service.[17] The technological utopia imagined by marketing firms promises "losslessness", meaning that the removed data is not noticed by the user and therefore that the "infrastructure supporting the medium remains not only fully functional but invisible."[18] Of course, such an experience cannot be delivered at all times, and as Payne puts it "infrastructure reveals itself more clearly when some element of its support function is challenged or breaks down."[19] Rania, and especially Erwin are, to borrow Payne's metaphor, the data that is lost so that people who live at higher altitudes can experience frictionless infrastructure.

Similarly, Halberstam describes people like Rania as "queer subjects", people who occupy "spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned."[20] Nivalis renders a subject as queer or as lost data by building extra layers of the city on top of them so that the wealthy can climb up high enough that they can't see the degradation. Queer subjects, those who do not "fit" into the world as it is designed, signify the failure of the ideological systems in place. By finding themselves inarticulate or disarticulated in such a system, queer subjects cause the friction that exposes "the queer failure of the ideological fictions of lossless productivity and reproductivity with which operating systems like capitalism, nationalism, heteronormativity...are programmed."[21] Queer subjects like Rania are forced then

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[17] Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure.": 532.

[18] Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure.": 528

[19] Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure.": 528.

[20] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*: 10.

[21] Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure.": 538.

to turn to queer uses of time and space to make a life in opposition to the ones they have been excluded from. Their inability to fit into the system exposes the way that the system has failed them. Muñoz speaks to this inability when he describes "queer failure" as a form of liberation; "queer failure is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value…it is blatantly and irrevocably antinormative."[22] When faced with such a failure, queer subjects like Rania are faced with the choice between continuing to fail in a system that will not let them succeed, or redefining success in opposition to an oppressive structure.

Just as Nivalis is a city that is built by placing a new layer over an old one, it is both maintained and haunted by CORA, an artificial intelligence constructed of "patches on upgrades, systems on systems." Rania meets CORA later in the game, who reveals herself to be an AI designed to maintain the city's waste disposal. She was given more and more responsibility over time, and with each new responsibility, more code was added to her processes, so she is now in charge of maintaining the city but is not herself maintained. The malfunctioning AI with too much responsibility and not enough capability is a personification of Nivalis, a city that has long since proven itself unsustainable yet nonetheless is sustained. Over the course of decades without maintenance, CORA has been breaking down and, knowing she cannot be shut down without a replacement, has programmed a second AI, which is personified as CORA's "daughter". The final mission of the game has the player choose between replacing CORA with her daughter or sending the daughter to a faraway city. Replacing CORA will kill her but (hopefully) save the city, while sending the daughter away allows both to live but dooms Nivalis to an inevitable, catastrophic decline.

CORA's ability to asexually reproduce represents a rupture in the lives and expectations of the citizens of Nivalis. CORA was technically able to perform her duties alone, but without a team of programmers to maintain her, she became disarticulated within her own system. Her processes, no longer seamless, have revealed themselves by breaking down, often with fatal consequences. The only solution is one that, according to the expectations of the city she runs, should be impossible. The programmers who were meant to maintain CORA were not replaced when they moved on from the project, which was

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[22] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 173.

so long ago that Nivalis has collectively forgotten that they existed. In the absence of her support system, CORA creates a daughter to replace herself.

Each of the texts under examination has plots that take place mostly at night. Rania is unable to find employment during daylight hours and so spends her nights making deliveries, and Domino spends her nights racing for a medication that cannot be bought during the day. The questionable legality of their activities is the result of and contributes to an inability to live a complete or acceptable life during daytime hours.

In Halberstam's description of Straight Time, anything done at night is considered a sign of immaturity, marking adult participation in professional, recreational, or subcultural nighttime activities as deviant or "other". Time, a constructed concept, is considered natural thanks to the demands of capitalism. The way that time affects the day to day lives of all people "is organized according to the logic of capital accumulation, but those who benefit from capitalism in particular experience this logic as inevitable, and they are therefore able to ignore, repress, or erase the demands made on them and others by an unjust system."[23] *Motor Crush* and *Cloudpunk* both feature characters who work at night out of necessity, which marks them as, at best, immature, and at worst, other. Pulp lesbian novels of the Cold War era often relied on this association of nighttime with deviance, with twilight marking the time when "characters cross[ed] over into the realm of homosexuality."[24] A teenager is up all night while an adult works during the day; daylight shines on acceptable lifestyles, while nighttime hides all manner of "perversions."[25]

Ideas such as these have been reinforced to the point of being "formulaic", and produce "emotional and even physical responses to different kinds of time: thus people feel guilty about leisure, frustrated by waiting, satisfied by punctuality, and so on. These emotional responses add to our sense of time as 'natural.'"[26] The "naturalness" of Straight Time is reinforced by understandings of biology that in-

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[23] Halberstam, In *A Queer Time and Place*: 7.

[24] Laura Westengard, Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019): 74.

[25] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 74.

[26] Halberstam, In *A Queer Time And Place*: 7.

terpret the biological and social as being in a "simple one-to-one relationship" when in fact, "biological and social definitions are linked in ways that are always complex as well as politically, socially, and historically situated."[27] As Halberstam puts it, Straight Time is an introduction to Family Time, which "refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing."[28] Understanding time in this way overemphasises a "heteronormative misinterpretation of 'life' and 'nature'"[29] and reveals a "primacy of heterosexuality and sexual reproduction in defining and legitimating bodies, practices, and communities"[30] that specifically excludes queer subjects.

Economic reality has not only pushed Domino and Rania to the edges of respectable society but has also extended their adolescence. They turn to nighttime and illegal activities out of a failure to live up to the standards of a repressive social order. Muñoz describes a failure to comply with Straight Time as not just a failure, but a defiant and inherently queer refusal: "this refusal that I describe as queerness is not just homosexuality but the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place."[31] Rania's and Domino's actions constitute both passive acquiescence to the only times available to them, and active refusal to participate in a system that seeks to destroy them.

The events of *Motor Crush* follow Domino through her double-life as an athlete and a criminal. The medication that keeps her alive is not available through legal channels, and is, in fact, a highly unstable fuel additive that increases a vehicle's top speed. Adding too much to a vehicle's fuel tank will cause it to explode, repeated exposure to its fumes causes extreme health problems for anyone who makes it, and ingesting it is lethal (to people without Domino's condition, at least), and so Crush is a highly illegal substance. Nonetheless, it is a substance that Domino will die without, so she is in an impossible situation: it is not optional for her to *not* possess Crush but being caught with it will result in severe punishment. Revealing her condition to the system that withholds Crush from her is not an option that is considered, with the implication being that a system that benefits from the

[27] David Griffiths, "Queer Theory for Lichens," *UnderCurrents* 19, no. 1 (2015): 37.

[28] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*: 5.

[29] Griffiths, "Queer Theory for Lichens": 37.

[30] Griffiths, "Queer Theory for Lichens": 37.

[31] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 134.

criminalization of Crush will not accommodate anyone who needs it for medical use. The laws of Domino's society do not account for her condition, rendering her life unintelligible and therefore unlivable. She is "inarticulate"[32] in her encounters with everyday life. Her precarious situation means that a life of crime is the only option available to her. After all, possession of Crush is a more serious legal offence than any of the crimes she commits to obtain it, so to Domino it makes perfect sense to commit as many crimes as she needs to. As a queer subject, Domino has been ejected from straight time and night time is the only time available to her to do what she needs to do to survive.

The mechanics of Domino's society, the city of Nova Honda, render her existence as unintelligible and therefore her life as unlivable. Nova Honda is structured around a system that "insists that while some (non-normative) disabled bodies are marked as having no future" or as marked for death, "others are imagined to have a biocapitalist future, one predicated on overcoming disability through cure or body/mind enhancement."[33] Domino uses a modified inhaler to administer Crush in public, presenting herself as having overcome a medical condition in a way that is intelligible to those around her. Pretending to have asthma allows her limited access to an otherwise hostile system but does not allow a complete life. Domino is placed under enormous pressure from which criminal activity offers a temporary escape. By day she must face a world that asks her to hide important parts of herself from her employers, her fans, and even the people close to her.

The nighttime races Domino competes in are illegal high-stakes affairs. Not only could she die in the race, or fail to get the Crush she needs, but, as discussed earlier, if her employers find out about her life of crime she will lose access to employment, her medication, and her freedom. Still, Domino views these races as the only place she can be truly herself. Despite keeping her face obscured and racing under a pseudonym, she feels most herself surrounded by gang members, with whom she has more in common than her fellow racers in the legal tournament. Her internal monologue tells us "Figure I should hate this. Figure I should just find another way to score. Play it safe,

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[32] Robert Payne, "Lossy Media: Queer Encounters with Infrastructure": 531.

[33] Keely B Gogul, "Queer Assemblage as Queer Futurity: Seeking a Utopian Solution Beyond No Future," *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 3, no. 3 (2018): 350-351.

you know? But the truth is...I actually kind of love it."[34] In a literal sense, Domino is disguising her identity by keeping her name and face hidden, but what she no longer needs to disguise is her identity as a criminal. This is a space where there are no expectations of acceptability or marketability placed on her behaviour. A place and a time where she does not need to consider advertiser dollars or sponsorship deals, where there is nothing in between her and the sport she loves. Participation in these races is what allows her to imagine a way out of the "quagmire of the present."[35] As the series continues, many of these criminal gangs become communities of solidarity and mutual aid, where community members can thrive in opposition to legal means of success, all of which are designed to fail.

Criminal Communities and The Power of Love

Cloudpunk and *Motor Crush* portray the desperation and crushing loneliness that is endemic to the lives of the characters who inhabit their hyper-capitalist dystopias, but neither are content to simply show the horror, they also depict hope. In the previous section I examined queer uses of time and space and the "be gay do crime" attitude the protagonists come to adopt as a means of escaping their reality. In this section, I will examine how they learn to thrive. Muñoz discusses heteronormativity and the ways that "heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them. All we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present."[36] Instead of settling for a barely survivable present, Muñoz argues for a utopian configuration of queerness, one that perceives queerness as "a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of."[37] Domino of *Motor Crush* and Rania of *Cloudpunk* begin the narratives barely surviving the present. Each character interrupts the "temporal stranglehold" under which they live through queer uses of time and

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[34] *Motor Crush Volume 1*: page 18.

[35] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 1.

[36] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 112.

[37] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 32.

space that are "about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough."[38] In this section, I will examine subcultural participation, crime, and queer uses of time and space in terms of how characters in the texts resist such mandates and build better lives for themselves.

It is once again important to examine *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* in terms of genre. These are both texts that borrow heavily from cyberpunk conventions and, as I mentioned earlier, cyberpunk stories are post-apocalyptic, telling stories of people living on the fringes of a barely-surviving civilisation. In this section, I will be examining how in these texts, the "nightmare of a ruined earth becomes a place to enact dangerous possibilities for human and inhuman becomings and a means for imagining radically othered selves."[39] These are settings in which the desperate lives that the protagonists are just barely holding together are sites of potential and the perfect setting in which to empathetically imagine unlawful activity. The ruins of a crumbling earth become a site "of creativity in which alternative communities and subjecthoods might develop" where one might "think beyond empire or nature as the distributors of salvation."[40] Rather than imagining being saved by existing structures, Rania and Domino must imagine saving themselves from those structures.

Cloudpunk and *Motor Crush* present narratives of precarity and fragility in a way that is shared by the cyberpunk genre and subgenres of ambient horror and gothic horror. An ambient horror narrative is one in which the source of dread is not a specific or nameable antagonist but is atmospheric and structural.[41] Muñoz uses similar language in writing that "we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insol-

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[38] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 96.

[39] Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination": 107.

[40] Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination": 107.

[41] Casey Ryan Kelly, "It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 3 (2017): 238.

vent."[42] The poison that Muñoz's describes is not coming from a person or a group but from the present.

Elements of gothic horror suffuse the narratives of *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* and offer an important vector for understanding a queer reading of the texts. While it is possible to read the Gothic strictly as a historical literary period, it is also possible, often fruitful, to understand "gothicism... as a literary device or aesthetic sensibility"[43] unbound from historical context, as Laura Westengard does in *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*. A gothic text might present "traumatic moments that erupt into the narrative and jolt readers with terrifying and titillating surprises, but between these eruptions exist an ongoing atmosphere [of] vulnerability and its attendant low-level, internalized horror."[44] Westengard argues that imagining gothicism as a through-line in twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer texts is a way to understand the ways that queer culture, like gothic horror "speaks to the invisible, insidious systems and practices that create myriad traumatic queer experiences."[45] The trauma of a gothic narrative is the "normalized, daily trauma"[46] that has become the background of the characters' daily lives.

In both the gothic and ambient horror subgenres, the threat might be embodied in an individual but is felt in the "accumulation of microaggressive experiences and vicarious traumatization"[47] that intensifies until it can no longer be ignored. The hauntings of such texts "manifests the swirling, fractured, intersecting temporality of ongoing low-level trauma, not just a singular traumatic event...but a disorienting and overwhelming

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[42] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 30.

[43] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 6.

[44] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 2.

[45] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 27.

[46] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 2.

[47] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 15.

storm of traumatic intrusion."[48] The threat is diffuse and structural, the danger is a "resonant violation" that occurs when "structurally protected bodies become subjected to the everyday vulnerability typically experienced by a permanent underclass."[49] While not horror narratives, I argue that *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* share this narrative concern. The texts' protagonists, Rania and Domino, are in vulnerable positions at the start of their narratives but are relatively protected from the worst that their societies have to offer. Over the course of the narratives, those protections are gradually removed as their "normalized, daily trauma" builds to an unbearable degree and they are forced to contend with both their precarity and their relative power compared to others in their position. To return to the metaphor of lossiness, ambient horror is a narrative in which discarded data must be confronted. Nivalis and Nova Honda are the enemies and characters generate friction by moving through them. Dread is experienced through frictional encounters with infrastructure.

Domino's life of crime keeps her alive, but her life is a tense one in which she must be constantly on her guard. The city of Nova Honda is dread-inducing and Domino's precarious position is only mitigated by constant vigilance; the comic takes the time to depict "the psychological and emotional labour that nonheteronormative subjects must perform in a society structured to marginalize them through medical, social, and legal means…and the inevitable exhaustion it causes."[50] Domino's vigilance proves impossible to maintain when, during a moment of desperation, she drinks a vial of Crush in public (when previously she had only been aspirating it from a disguised asthma inhaler), and the incident was caught on camera. Later, a mysterious floating vessel that has been tracking Domino has Domino, Lola, and Domino's father Sully trapped. Domino knows that it is here to cap-

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[48] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 32.

[49] Kelly, "It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film": 238.

[50] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 38.

ture her and will kill Sully and Lola, so she leads it off course by drinking four vials of Crush and making her escape, the Crush increasing her speed and endurance to a superhuman degree. When she stops running, she finds herself a long way outside the city and makes her way back to Sully's garage where Lola tells her that she has been missing for two years. In that time, the laws against Crush possession have escalated. The police are empowered to enforce Nova Honda's new zero-tolerance policy by periodically detaining (and violently interrogating) anyone they recognise as being affiliated with a criminal gang. Footage of Domino drinking Crush and her status as missing, presumed dead, is used as a warning against drug use and as justification for police violence against people who look like they may have committed a crime.

Domino's life with her unusual illness, previously difficult, is now impossible to live. She is marked for death by a legal system that cannot interpret her, so she turns to her criminal friends for help. Domino knows she can't trust the authorities, instead trusting an old friend, gang member and racer Calax, to keep her safe and find the Crush she needs. In spite of Nova Honda's attempted "burial under the weight of heteronormativity," Domino and othered people like her "found a way to form underground community within the metaphorical spaces created to isolate and contain them."[51] Calax might not understand Domino's medical condition, but he does understand the life of crime that keeps her alive. In a world where legal attempts at success are not designed to succeed, Domino finds kinship in other people who are pushed to the margins of society.

The plot taking up the bulk of the second volume of *Motor Crush* involves a heist on a facility that produces Crush. It is a desperate act of self-preservation, but also an act of solidarity for Domino's community. An open secret of Nova Honda is that the Producers, who facilitate the illegal Cannonball races

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[51] Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 23.

and supply Crush to the winners, also run the legal Grand Prix races and empower the police to brutally enforce laws against substance use. Following a rumour that the Producers have a stronghold where they make and store Crush, Domino leads a small team to steal their stockpile. Discussing the heist, Lola, despite her life being controlled by her debt to the Producers, wants no part of it. A modified Catball runs the numbers and predicts a sixty-five percent chance of failure, which Domino tries to be optimistic about ("That's a 35% chance of success, I've beaten worse odds").[52] When Lola wants to give up on the plan, Domino drops her optimistic façade to make it clear why she's willing to take such a risk ("If I don't get this Crush then I'm already dead. Listen, I know you want a normal life. As long as the Producers have you under their thumb, that's never going to happen. I'm going to fix it so the Producers never bother you again").[53] In this speech, Domino makes it clear that her plan is not just about self-preservation, but that the heist is an act of solidarity toward everyone the Producers control.

Crime is not, in either text, treated as morally uniform. Instead, the "ruined earth" and its attendant opportunities for "creativity in which alternative communities and subjecthoods might develop"[54] become a setting in which to explore morality separate from legality. Each text presents criminals who act maliciously and the legal system that cannot or will not stop them, along with criminals who act out of compassion and the legal system that will stop them by any means necessary. What is moral is not as simple as obeying or disobeying the law but is to do with upholding or undermining systems that maintain oppression. In *Motor Crush*, the Producers break the law by producing and distributing Crush, and Domino breaks the law by stealing Crush. The difference is that the Producers break the law in a way that maintains an existing system of oppression while Domino breaks the law to help the oppressed.

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[52] *Motor Crush Volume 2*: page 65.

[53] *Motor Crush Volume 2*: page 65.

[54] Doyle, "The Postapocalyptic Imagination": 107.

In *Cloudpunk*, Rania makes a delivery to Lomo, the most dangerous and powerful criminal in Nivalis, whose hacker designed a virus that attacks neural implants. Those affected can no longer rely on the brain's ability to regulate the body's autonomic processes and must therefore make the conscious decision to beat their own hearts, breathe, blink, and perform metabolic functions. Despite having such power and being so dangerous, Lomo does not attract much attention from the authorities. He is certainly the city's most dangerous criminal, but not the most wanted. That honour goes to members of the gang Block-FourOh, whose crimes involve illegally occupying abandoned lots and buildings where they create playgrounds and gardens that people can enjoy for free. In a world where everything is monetised, the most notorious criminals are the ones who create spaces where people can enjoy themselves without spending money. Not only is it a crime to take over land and develop it without proper authorization, it's a crime to do it without taking money in return. Lomo, on the other hand, is a criminal whose crimes do not warrant the same level of attention. This is partially due to the implied danger he poses, but it is also because his crimes are so similar to the legal behaviour of the businesspeople of the city. A building's owner might not be able to force a person to manually beat their own heart but can charge rent on a home by the hour, quadruple it with no notice, or lock all the doors to keep complaining tenants hostage.

As in ambient or gothic horror narratives, the threat in *Cloudpunk* is embodied in Lomo, but Lomo is only the concentrated form of the ambient threat that pervades the narrative. When CORA asks Rania if Nivalis is "overcome by monsters", Rania does not point to Lomo, or any other individual, she responds that "Nivalis is the monster." Whether it's the monstrous actions Lomo and his employees carry out with the tacit support of law enforcement, or the city naming BlockFourOh public enemies for their urban renewal project, *Cloudpunk* is a narrative in which "monsters help point out the social structures that

are otherwise invisible to those who are privileged by them."[55] Like an ambient horror story, *Cloudpunk* "maps the vulnerability of individual bodies as a structural byproduct of social and environmental factors"[56] that isolate people by individualising the suffering that they are all going through.

Rania is only able to succeed when she stops looking out for only herself and attempts to build a family outside of the expectations of the world she lives in. One quest has Rania helping an android named Huxley, a malfunctioning private detective who narrates his life like a pulp detective novel. Huxley has been tasked with finding a missing girl, Pashta, who has valuable information stored in a memory implant. Pashta's father owes money to Lomo, who plans to sell the information to the highest bidder. When it becomes clear that Pashta has nowhere safe to go and Huxley's self-destruct sequence is activated, Rania lets Pashta stay with her. Pashta doesn't expect this as she assumes that, like everyone else she's ever met, Rania will only look out for herself. Like most videogames, *Cloudpunk* presents the player with choices that affect the narrative: deliver a bomb to its destination or throw it in the garbage, help someone or ignore them, deliver a valuable item to its recipient or sell it for profit. Whether or not to look after Pashta is not a choice the player makes, it's simply part of the story. The player, through Rania, is presented with a series of morally questionable choices, but they aren't given a choice in this act of solidarity and friendship. The player is forced to create a space where two people can escape the cruelty of the present and work together for a happier future.

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55 Westengard, *Gothic Queer Culture*: 49.

56 Kelly, "It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film": 237.

Conclusion: Be Gay Do Crime

Both *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* are texts wherein characters make little pockets of utopia within their dystopian surroundings through queer uses of time and space. Utopia is the end goal suggested by the "be gay do crime" axiom these characters adopt. In such texts, utopia is not a noun or an adjective but a verb; utopia is something to be done. Utopia can be figured as "a means of thinking beyond the constraints of the present; it is prefigurative and shows us the possibility of a better world."[57] The characters in these texts are seen by their societies as having failed and, in a way, they have. Muñoz describes queer utopianism as a "rejection of pragmatism [that] is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal."[58] The failure to be normal is here a rejection of authorities and laws that seek to maintain oppression.

Both *Cloudpunk* and *Motor Crush* depict desperate characters at odds with an impossible environment but neither text is content to only show desperation. Through the characters' determination to create community and to cooperate, when this determination is explicitly at odds with what is expected of them, these texts also depict hope. When the only form of success presented to you means being competitive, the most radical thing you can do is refuse to compete and build a community instead. When the legal version of success is only accessible to a vanishingly small number of people, the only logical response is to reject that narrative and build a community that looks after one another. In each of these texts, utopias are built within dystopias by characters who reject their society's dominant values to do with monetary success and instead work to help one another in a society based on solidarity and mutual aid.

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57 Sasha Myerson, "Global Cyberpunk: Reclaiming Utopia in Japanese Cyberpunk Film," 368.

58 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*: 172.

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