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Settler *Trans*Nationalism: The Colonial Politics of White Trans Passing on Stolen Land

Abstract

In “Homonationalism as Assemblage,” Jasbir Puar situates her theory of ‘homonormative nationalism’ within Palestine/Israel to reveal how sexuality is “a crucial formation in the articulation of proper citizens.” As an extension to previous work, Puar clarifies that the queers seen as ‘proper’ by the settler nation-state are not ‘gender queer.’ Rather, “trans and gender nonconforming queers are not welcome” in Israeli homonationalism. While Puar’s dissection of trans people from *homonationalism* in 2013 is justified, the common exclusion of trans people from critiques of nationalist ‘exception’ calls for further interrogation in 2022. Through synthesis of historical and contemporary media, this paper configures a separate analytic of *transnationalism* to consider how certain trans bodies “pass” into the dominant U.S. body politic, not just by gender, but by investment in the nation. Informed by readings in *Queer Indigenous Studies* and Scott Lauria Morgensen’s theory of *settler* homonationalism, I argue that trans passing in the U.S. is mediated by racialized gender norms accumulated through the colonial regulation of trans indigeneity over time. While white trans people in the U.S. may experience varying degrees of marginalization, we are also settlers on stolen land. As such, our efforts to pass into the national body politic must be theorized beyond a critique of the visual to consider how passing, as settlers, involves a specific set of nationalist convictions, gestures, and actions linked to the elimination of Indigenous peoples. *Transnationalist* politics—whether conservative or liberal—distance the trans movement from its anti-assimilationist roots, normalize the settler state’s claims to Indigenous lands, and ultimately vacate the possibility for ever-necessary linkage between trans liberation and decolonization.

Introduction

The following paper owes a great debt to Jasbir Puar’s canonical theory of “homonationalism.” As an extension of homonormativity—defined by Lisa Duggan as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them”—Puar configured ‘homonormative nationalism’ to unveil and analyze gay and lesbian political investment in the nation-state.¹ Through allegiance to the nation, homonationalist politics function as “a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms.”² As an analytic, the theory of homonationalism interrogates the consequences of LGB rights to understand how and why gay inclusion by way of legal, consumer, and representative recognition has become desirable in the first place. Most importantly, and as will be central to this paper, homonationalism reveals who is excluded at the expense of this perceived inclusion.

Core to Puar’s analysis is the logic of “exceptionalism” and its rationalization of “egregious violence in the name of the preservation of a way of life.”³ Through exceptionalism, homonationalism causes a double deployment of bodies: a sanitized “homosexual citizen” and a perversely queer “terrorist noncitizen.” Whereas the terrorist is made to represent a “monstrous excess of the nation-state,” the now acceptable homosexual citizen comes to symbolize excess made pure and thus non-threatening.⁴ With the perversely queer terrorist now as an interpellative “barometer of ab/normality,”⁵ homosexuals within the U.S. nation-state are then required to perform patriotism (the opposite of terrorism) in order to blend into society.

In Puar’s later publication, “Homonationalism as Assemblage,” she reads her theory within the context of Palestine/Israel to reveal how sexuality continues to be “a crucial formation in the articulation of proper citizens.”⁶ Notably situated within an era of increased trans visibility and heightened pinkwashing, Puar clarifies that the

queers seen as proper—and thus treated properly—by the settler nation-state are not ‘gender queer.’⁷ Rather, “trans and gender nonconforming queers are not welcome” in Israeli homonationalism.⁸

By reinterpreting Puar’s theory “amid the conquest of Native peoples and the settling of Native land,” anthropologist Scott Lauria Morgensen argues that the biopolitics of sexuality in the U.S. must be traced back to their imperial and settler roots.⁹ Through this lens, Morgensen argues that sexuality is not a product of settler colonialism, but instead produced by settler colonialism as means of distinguishing between “civilized” and “savage” populations.¹⁰ Through the standardization of “settler sexuality” (white national heteronormativity), Indigenous peoples are forced to conform to settler systems of monogamy, patriarchy, binary gender, etc. to ensure their survival.¹¹ Morgensen argues that non-Native queers participate in *settler* homonationalism when we ignore the conquest and displacement of Indigenous peoples on the land we call home, enacted by the very settler government from which we seek rights and recognition.¹²

Building upon the brilliant works of Puar and Morgensen, this paper argues that a specific nationalist formation one could call “settler *transnationalism*” has gained serious traction in the U.S. Under settler *transnationalism*, certain trans bodies “pass” into the U.S. body politic, not just through gender, but through investment in, and allegiance to, the nation. In line with Morgensen’s historicization of settler sexuality, I argue that the rubric for trans passing in the U.S. is mediated by racialized and nationalist gender norms, through which white trans people, as settlers on stolen land, are afforded greater space for gender aberration. First formed to regulate ‘unruly’ trans indigeneities in the early settler colony, what I call “settler gender” continues to unevenly distribute life chances among trans people in the present depending on our proximity to the nation. Read through an anti-colonial lens, the theory of *transnationalism* also encapsulates the existing meaning of “transnational”—a relationship of ties between nations—in its acknowledgment of the hundreds of Native nations subsumed within the contested borders of the U.S., 574 to be exact.¹³ As a critique of the settler state, the theory of settler *transnationalism* seeks to apprehend how white trans settler assimilation augments U.S. empire and thus

ties knots around the Indigenous nations the U.S. has been, and continues to be, violently built atop.

Read through this issue’s theme of “passing,” settler *transnationalism* configures how the intelligibility of white trans people who are also settlers on stolen land involves often covert or unquestioned allegiance to the state. Thus, white trans efforts to pass into the U.S. body politic must be theorized beyond a critique of the visual to consider how passing, for settlers, often involves a specific set of political convictions, gestures, and actions linked to the elimination of Indigenous peoples. Following critiques by Sandra Harvey that the experience of passing or being (mis)read is not often a conscious choice, as well as C. Riley Snorton’s writing on how passing on the psychic level can “serve as a context for the emergence of [transsexual] selfhood,” I argue that a more expansive definition of passing that surpasses the visual to instead consider nationalist assimilation is necessary to fully examine its implications under settler colonialism, particularly when analyzing settler whiteness.¹⁴

This critique is further informed by Aren Z. Aizura’s writing on “trans(sexual) citizenship” in the settler colony of Australia. Aizura describes citizenship as the act of “fading back into the population,” being “proper in the eyes of the state,” and sustaining “the public fiction that recognition of queerness or gender variance is gained under the aegis of universal entitlement, rather than because ‘difference’ has remade itself as non-transgressive and non-threatening.”¹⁵ Through this ‘public fiction’ of gender acceptance (or “exception,” in the words of Puar), settler *transnationalism* similarly contends with how different rules of gender are applied to differently racialized bodies under settler colonialism. Chris Finley (Colville Confederated Tribes) teaches us:

The logics governing Native bodies are the same logics governing non-Native people. Yet the logic of colonialism gives the colonizers power, while Native people are more adversely affected by these colonizing logics. The colonizers may feel bad, stressed, and repressed by self-disciplining logics of normalizing sexuality, but

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Native people are systematically targeted for death and erasure by these same discourses.¹⁶

To provide an analysis of contemporary gender politics in the US, the following section will historicize gender as an intrinsically colonial and racial construct. In the words of historian María Lugones: “gender itself is a colonial introduction, a violent introduction consistently and contemporarily used to destroy peoples, cosmologies, and communities as the building ground of the ‘civilized’ West.”¹⁷ In considering the histories of colonial gender violence that precede this current moment—one often heralded as a “Gender Revolution”—this paper questions, in its simplest form: Who gets to pass on stolen land? Through engagement with Queer Indigenous Studies, a necessary trans reading of “homonationalism,” and close study of historical and contemporary media, this essay will wrestle with the colonial implications of contemporary white trans politics—politics, I will argue, deeply entwined with the U.S. settler state.

A Colonial History of Passing

In 1787, Spanish recorder Francisco Palóu published the first comprehensive biography of Father Junípero Serra, the “Apostle of California.” As one of the foremost revered missionaries of eighteenth-century New Spain, Serra’s biography would travel all throughout Spanish California,¹⁸ the Franciscan Order, and even Mother Spain, where the Spanish King himself owned a copy.¹⁹ Sandwiched between various tall tales about his missionary struggles and successes, rests two short stories about *joyas*—Indigenous people described by early settlers as “men dressed as women.”²⁰ Serra recounts,

The plains of San Bernardino are heavily populated with pagan villages. Many of these pagans come into Mission Santa Clara, both men and women, principally at harvest time [...] On one of these occasions, the priests in charge of this mission discovered that among the pagan women (who always work apart from the men)

there was one who, by reason of the decorously worn dress, pagan ornaments, manner of working, sitting, etc., had all the appearance of a real woman; but in facial appearance and the absence of breasts (though old enough to have them), this person caught their attention.²¹

In fear and suspect of evil, the mission priests sent a soldier to inspect the woman in the guardhouse. If she were found to be a “man,” the soldier was instructed to strip her naked to “only what Adam wore in paradise before he sinned.”²² After forced inspection and resultant humiliation, the missionaries made the woman sweep the plaza grounds naked for three days. Following the telling of this incident, as well as a second-hand narrative of a similar encounter at Mission San Antonio, the chapter concludes:

But we hope in God that as the land becomes dotted with missions, the number of such accursed persons will decrease, and such an abominable vice will be eradicated, while in its place will be planted the Catholic Faith, and with it, all the other virtues, for the greater glory of God and the good of those pitiful, ignorant people.²³

While just a minor excerpt in Palóu’s nearly 500-page *Relacion Historica*, this anecdote from Mission Santa Clara reveals a much larger and complex story about gender, race, religion, and, specifically, the boundaries of passing in what would become the United States.

Throughout the first few decades of Spanish settlement, so-called *joyas* appear in myriad colonial diaries, letters, and reports.²⁴ As displayed above, recorders’ focus on Native gender nonconformity extended far beyond simple curiosity. Instead, nearly every mention of *joyas* in the colonial archive paints them as unequivocal threats to the Spanish Empire and, thus, incompatible with colonial expansion. One of the most telling of these accounts comes from Lieutenant Governor Pedro Fages, Serra’s military

counterpart. In his very first paragraph depicting the region in 1769, Fages accuses the Native peoples of being “addicted to the unspeakable vice of sinning against nature” for permitting *joyas* “in every village.”²⁵ In the Santa Barbara Channel, he records that every Indigenous village allows two or three *joyas* to “practice the execrable, unnatural abuse of their bodies”—in other words, dress as women.²⁶ Similar to Serra, Fages concludes:

But we place our trust in God and expect that these accursed people will disappear with the growth of the missions. The abominable vice will be eliminated to the extent that the Catholic faith and all the other virtues are firmly implanted there, for the glory of God and the benefit of those poor ignorants.²⁷

From initial contact to the turn of the twentieth century, ninety percent of the Indigenous population of Turtle Island (aka North America) was killed by European diseases, wars, and the destruction of Native societies.²⁸ According to Two-Spirit²⁹ historian Deborah Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation, Chumash), a large number of these deaths were of Indigenous people like *joyas* who were targeted through “active, conscious, violent extermination” she terms *gendercide*.³⁰ As evidenced throughout, these individuals were regularly flogged with leather whips, put in stocks, forced to repeat unfamiliar prayers on knees, verbally harassed and ridiculed, and stripped naked and publicly shamed.³¹ In response to their perceived ubiquity in the region—and particularly their common veneration as spiritual leaders—the early settlers of Spanish California and elsewhere developed a counteroffensive to physically and spiritually eliminate *joyas* by any means necessary.³²

Trans Indigenous people, however, were not the only gender transgressive subjects present in Early America. Among white settler communities, gender subversion was, if not wholly accepted, often allowed to pass without reprimand. According to Early American historian Greta LaFleur, eighteenth-century North America witnessed a rapid change in “traditional notions of acceptable gendered behavior” wherein there became “widespread cultural familiarity with

the possibilities for gendered behavior” beyond the gender binary.³³ Through an analysis of print culture, LaFleur unveils how crossdressing narratives transited through everyday discourse and literature that provided white settlers with a vast vocabulary for various forms of “socially recognizable gender.”³⁴ This vocabulary included labels like *sapphist*, *tommy*, *female husband*, and *petit-maitre*, and gender, to some, may have even consisted of a third social category: “the adult, passive, transvestite effeminate male.”³⁵

It is further revealing to consider the case of the Chevalier(e) d’Eon, a famous transfeminine figure who was granted the right to transition in France notably around the same time the Spanish began their suppression of trans indigeneity in Spanish California. In a study of North American book sales in the 1780s and 90s, LaFleur suggests that “the Chevalier(e) d’Eon was a fairly common cultural referent” among early American settlers.³⁶ The stark juxtaposition between a high-level white transfeminine figure being fitted for a feminine wardrobe by Marie Antoinette’s dresser while transfeminine Indigenous people were being systematically targeted for elimination across the Atlantic poses critical questions about how race, indigeneity, and colonialism mediated the boundaries of gender transgression in the colonial world.³⁷ Whereas Indigenous gender nonconformity was considered a sign of “general primitivity” and often used to justify religious and military conquest, fluid gender in white settlements and the European metropole was, to a degree, viewed as a natural variation of modern, civil society.³⁸

In juxtaposition to the ‘exceptional’ Chevalier(e), the treatment of the woman at Mission Santa Clara who, from the Spanish colonial perspective, “had all the appearance of a *real* woman; but in facial appearance and the absence of breasts [...] caught their attention” throws into sharp relief the centuries-old colonial gender norms that determine if and how one passes through settler society, and how this process is deeply racialized.³⁹ Despite the centuries of *gendercide* that precede this current moment, however, there exists widespread amnesia of this history among many trans people today. The next section will discuss how investment from mainstream white trans politics in colonial institutions that augment the settler state such as patriotism, nationalism, and racism further normalize and legitimize settler

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claims over Indigenous lands and thus stand in the way of trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous resurgence.

Settler TransNationalism as Assemblage

Through the conceptual tool of “assemblage,” Puar frames homonationalism as “a field of power”—geopolitical forces, capitalist accumulation, biopolitical state practices—rather than the work of “any one nation-state, organisation, or individual.”⁴⁰ To demonstrate *transnationalism* as assemblage this section will reference a collection of points at which trans politics converge with the nation. To analyze specific settler *transnational* investment in the U.S., I will rely on decolonial critiques from canonical texts such as *Queer Indigenous Studies* and *Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary*. Puar’s analysis of assemblage as an inherent, ongoing collection of moments helps remind us that trans people, particularly those of us who are settlers, do not exist outside of structures of discipline and power. Thus, conservative and liberal alike, white trans people in the U.S. can easily become agents in normalizing settler colonialism.

I. Colonizing Trans History

In *Queer Indigenous Studies*, Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee), Chris Finley (Colville Confederated Tribes), Brian Joseph Gilley (Alabama Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw) and Scott Lauria Morgensen call for the centering of colonialism within queer critiques. One of the core concerns mentioned throughout the anthology is the systemic misrepresentation and exploitation of queer Indigenous histories by white settlers for settler means. The editors write, “sexual/gender-nonconforming activists share a long history of making definitive claims about Indigenous people by finding a ‘usefulness’ in Indigenous people’s divergences from western sex/gender norms.”⁴¹ Evan Towle and Lynn Morgan similarly describe how the “transgender native” is weaponized in popular literature as a “generic, seductive figure who [...] can be imagined, discovered, enacted, or simply cited to justify one’s own argument.”⁴² Within the well-known works of trans authors such as Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg, and in popular periodicals such as *Transgender Tapestry* and *Transsexual News Telegraph*, queer indigeneity is used to buttress arguments primarily about

white trans life without adequate engagement with the lives of trans Indigenous people.⁴³

In “Unsettling Queer Politics,” Morgensen argues that the main problem with using queer Indigenous histories as a defense for non-Native life is that non-Native queers “fail to investigate their inheritance of a settler colonial society.”⁴⁴ White trans people who reference queer Indigenous histories for means of our own validation cross a dangerous line when this act is not predicated upon the reality that, within the story of settler colonialism, we were, and still are, the settlers. Appropriations of queer Indigenous history are scattered all throughout everyday trans and queer media, from oft-circulated articles that exploit Two-Spirit pasts to validate (white) trans identity in the present, to reductive and tokenizing social posts from mainstream LGBTQ+ organizations whose corporate funders, in fact, are invested in the very oil companies that are ripping through sovereign Indigenous lands today.⁴⁵

An overarching consequence of this type of ahistorical, colonizing discourse is the disregard for queer Indigenous people in the present and the multiplicity of their struggles and resistance today. Kai Pyle (Métis/Nishnaabe) reminds us that “the people [we] are writing about are somebody’s ancestors.”⁴⁶ Through conceptualizing *trans*temporal kinship*, Pyle argues that modern trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous people hold special kin relations “with both ancestors and descendants.”⁴⁷ As such, trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous people are not just laboring for trans liberation in the present, but resurgence for all their peoples across time. At the Two-Spirit Nation Camp at Standing Rock in 2016, for example, Two-Spirit people fulfilled roles as educators and protectors of their communities in the face of land dispossession by the Dakota Access Pipeline.⁴⁸ Trans scholar-activist Kalaniopua Young (Kanaka Maoli) also reminds us that, around the time of the Stonewall Riots, mahu (trans Indigenous Hawaiians) “struggled alongside their brothers and sisters at the forefront of an indigenous land dispute in cities like Waianae and Waimanalo, Oahu, as the state of Hawaii began evicting dozens of Kanaka Maoli families from their ancestral homelands.”⁴⁹ As demonstrated at Standing Rock in 2016, Oahu in 1969, and elsewhere today, the resurgence of Two-Spirit people is deeply entwined with the decolonization of their lands and communities.

As such, white trans settlers must not only avoid leaning on the backs of queer Indigenous people in the past but must also stand in solidarity with our Native siblings in the present whose liberation is tied to the liberation of their people and lands.

II. Transnormativity & the Trans ‘Exception’

In *Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary*, the editors dissect the colonizing power of American transness to encourage Trans Studies to contend with decolonization. micha cárdenas writes, “[t]he transnational circulation of the idea of transgender is a colonial operation, spreading Western ontologies and logics such as Western medicine; the idea of the individual, unchanging self; and the binary gender system.” Published in 2014, this critical volume of *Trans Studies Quarterly* responded specifically to the growth of trans visibility in the media, from modeling and fashion,⁵⁰ to TV and film,⁵¹ and electoral politics.⁵² From the 2014 *Times* cover “The Transgender Tipping Point” featuring actress Laverne Cox, to the 2017 special issue of *National Geographic* displaying nine-year-old Avery Jackson behind the words “Gender Revolution,” a purportedly rapid and newly emerged trans movement took the media by storm. Through this explosion, a new “transnormativity” took shape that has deepened the divide among trans people, most fundamentally, by our ability to pass. Not only would the perceived ‘newness’ of this moment erase trans Indigenous histories on this land, but the standardization of a sanitized form of transness has resulted in the greater regulation of those who cannot, or wish not, to pass according to settler society’s standards.

Sociologist Austin Johnson defines transnormativity as the “specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people’s presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable.”⁵³ Through this accountability structure, people’s identities, characteristics, and behaviors are determined either legitimate or illegitimate; worthy of inclusion or exclusion.⁵⁴ Evan Vipond further argues how transnormativity is mediated by “the medical establishment, government institutions, identification documents, and historical narratives” which perpetuate a specific medicalization of trans people.⁵⁵ Through an explosion of exceptional media representation, specific trans norms concretized as a barometer

and regulator of gender queerness, predicated on narrow and ultimately non-threatening ideals of gender expression and embodiment. Author Janet Mock (Kanaka Maoli) describes the negative consequences of this new transnormativity:

Being an exception isn’t revolutionary, it’s lonely. It separates you from your community. Who are you, really, without community? I have been held up consistently as a token, as the “right” kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because I “made it,” that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women. Let’s be clear: It is not.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Mock’s brilliance in dismantling the ploy for state inclusion is not shared by all trans people platformed in the media; notably, her white counterparts. In the summer after Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Times* magazine, long-time Republican Caitlyn Jenner would appear on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Two months after coming out on ABC’s *20/20* with Diane Sawyer—a debut that broke the world record for reaching one million Twitter followers in four hours—Jenner went on to release a television documentary series, *I Am Cait* (2015-2016).⁵⁷ Garnering nearly three million viewers upon premiere, *I Am Cait* swiftly became the largest and most mainstream window into the life of a trans person in the US, and thus one of the most accessible reference points for trans experience.⁵⁸

I Am Cait presents the niche experience of a billionaire reality personality transitioning with unlimited resources and under the care of a whole team of specialists. According to the largest study on trans people in the US, nearly one-third of trans people live in poverty and, likewise, trans people are three times more likely to experience unemployment.⁵⁹ Compounded by systemic racism and colonialism, trans Indigenous people are five times more likely to experience unemployment and over half experience homelessness—the highest among all trans people of color.⁶⁰ Puar writes, “the exception is normalized as a regulatory ideal or frame; the exceptional is the excellence

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that exceeds the parameters of proper subjecthood and, by doing so, redefines these parameters to then normativize and render invisible (yet transparent) its own excellence or singularity.⁶¹ With medical transition at the level of Jenner's estimated around \$150,000, the heightened public expectations of transition that came from her overexposure in the media has resulted in increased policing of trans people who cannot or choose not to transition in the same way.⁶²

III. Trans Politics: Under the Pink, White, & Blue

Perhaps the most direct investment white trans settlers make in the U.S. settler-state is through our efforts for state-sanctioned rights and recognition. Contrary to assimilationist politics, the editors of *Queer Indigenous Studies* write, "Queer indigeneity challenges the very idea of civil rights and exclusionary complaints that grounds the mainstream GLBT movement. Instead, queer and Two-Spirit Indigenous people are going after colonial nation-states and challenging the racist and heterosexist foundation of theft and genocide they support and reproduce."⁶³ This final section traces the assemblage of political convictions, gestures, and actions—both conservative and liberal—through which one could argue white trans people engage in U.S. patriotism, nationalism, and racism.

Despite being barred from serving openly in the military, the U.S. Trans Survey reports that trans people are twice as likely to enlist than the general population, with fifteen percent of all trans adults military veterans.⁶⁴ When asked if they would return to the military if trans bans were lifted, the majority of trans veterans in 2015 said that they would.⁶⁵ Through high-level involvement in the U.S. military, this statistic may reveal trans people in the U.S. to be particularly patriotic. Without knowing each individual's rationale for participating in war, the actions of this larger-than-average percentage of our community in enlisting in the U.S. military implicates us further in U.S. imperialism, both abroad and domestically.

In the same national survey, 96% of all trans people declared that they lean politically liberal.⁶⁶ Despite nearly homogenous political affiliation, it is critical to acknowledge the visibility, and thus influence, of trans conservatives in the media. I will briefly discuss the politics of two trans conservatives, Blaire White and Caitlyn Jenner, who have

amassed a combined following of several million people to paint a picture of white trans conservative influence. With nearly one million YouTube subscribers, White is known for her controversial, exclusionary takes on sexism, feminism, racism, and, more generally, 'proper' ways of being trans. Among her most viewed videos are "There Are Only 2 Genders," "Fat Acceptance is Stupid," and "The Most Racist Black Man Alive." White's YouTube homepage is a sea of similarly formatted thumbnails: cropped images of her disgusted face peering at trans and non-binary people she argues are 'not really trans' because of their nonconformity to rigidly defined gender roles. White is also notably a supporter of the anti-Democrat LGBT campaign "Walk Away," whose webpage reads:

We are walking away from the lies, the false narratives, the fake news, the race-baiting, the victim narrative, the violence, the vandalism, the vitriol. We are walking away from a party driven by hate. We are walking toward patriotism and a new, unified America! We are the future of this great nation!⁶⁷

Similar political sentiments are demonstrated by Jenner, most recently in her bid for Governor of California in 2021. The tone of her first campaign ad mirrors former President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again," with Jenner declaring she will "restore and reclaim the California Dream."⁶⁸ With grainy snapshots of pioneers and black-and-white footage of early Los Angeles, Jenner's campaign ad perpetuates a whitewashed image of California history. As demonstrated throughout this paper, the settlement of the U.S. — and California in particular — involved insurmountable violence against trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous people. Jenner's colonial vision of the past and future bolsters a long-held fiction of the American Dream and its inherent disavowal of the ongoing, anti-Indigenous violence required for the U.S. to exist.

Lastly, a case study of the largest trans rights organization provides a brief window in the status of the liberal trans rights movement. Created in 2003 by Mara Keisling, the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) was the first mainstream organization by and for trans people

focused on changing policies in “the nation’s capital and throughout the country.”⁶⁹ Aside from having a nation-based approach to trans liberation, dozens of former staff have come out about NCTE’s racist work culture, summarized in an open letter in *Out Magazine* from 2019:

Since 2012, the organization has watched at least 35 employees begin and end employment, 21 of whom are people of color. Fourteen of those employees expressed strong complaints of racism within the organization, including by expressing those feelings to NCTE’s board of directors. At least four people of color were told to sign nondisclosure agreements; no white former staff member of NCTE has reported doing the same.

Shortly after this mass walkout, the former employees’ union representative filed a legal complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging illegal practices from the organization’s management. While the population of trans people in the U.S. are vastly more liberal than our cis counterparts, claims of racism within the workplace of our most major trans rights organization may reveal that the movement for trans rights is not as progressive as most want to believe. With funding from corporations such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, and even the CIA, NCTE—like most LGBTQ+ non-profits—is also wrapped up in a dirty economy that funds and profits off of the destruction of Native lands through oil, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline.⁷⁰ As such, conservative and liberal alike, mainstream, majority white trans politics can be seen replicating patriotism, nationalism, and racism in the U.S. through our various efforts towards acceptance into the settler state.

Conclusion

I began this paper with a synthesis of (settler) homonationalism to conceive of a specific *transnormative* nationalist project called settler

transnationalism. I then provided a brief historical review of how boundaries of passing in the U.S. were formed through violent histories of settler colonialism, specifically gendercide. Thinking through *transnationalism* as assemblage, I then considered how white trans settlers perpetuate Indigenous erasure through exploiting and misrepresenting queer Indigenous histories; contributing to trans ‘exceptional’ norms of gender; and investing in state-based rights and recognition through patriotism, nationalism, and racism. Through a settler colonial lens, this paper considered how passing on stolen land follows a rubric of settler gender—racialized and nationalist gender norms formed through the systemic regulation and elimination of trans indigeneity, both in the colonial past and in the colonial present.⁷¹ By reaching backwards to interpret how the biopolitics of the now are informed by histories of Indigenous elimination, this essay sought to complicate what it means for white trans people to pass in the US, not simply as marginalized trans people, but as privileged trans settlers who hold a stake in ongoing Indigenous dispossession.

As settler colonialism is an unfinished project, the uneven distribution of life chances between trans people continues as well. According to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project, one trans person is murdered nearly every single day in the twenty-first century, the primary targets being Black and Indigenous women.⁷² Less acknowledged within the discourse on trans death is that over eighty-five percent of all trans murders are localized to the Americas, the highest numbers coming from settler colonies like Brazil, Mexico, and the U.S.⁷³ Settler states are, and always have been, dangerous sites for racialized trans people. Due to structural colonial amnesia, this reality remains relatively obscured from the political priorities of mainstream white trans organizing. Instead, *transnationalist* politics are distancing the trans movement from its anti-assimilationist roots, normalizing the settler state’s claims to Indigenous land, and ultimately vacating any possibility for ever-necessary linkage between trans liberation and decolonization.

Trans scholar Sandy Stone once wrote, “I could not ask a transsexual for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing, to be consciously ‘read,’ to read oneself aloud—and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one

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has been written.”⁷⁴ As this essay argued through a settler colonial reading of passing, white trans people have the responsibility and necessity to forgo passing into the settler state. Through a critical dissection of our implications in settler colonialism past and present, and in coalition

with trans and Two-Spirit Indigenous people, white trans settler politics on stolen land must evolve into decolonial politics *against* stolen land, invested in a future beyond settler state structures that have never, and can never, fully hold all of us.

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Notes

1 Lisa Duggan, “The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism,” in *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 176.

2 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

3 *Ibid.*, 9.

4 *Ibid.*, 38 and 99.

5 Jasbir K. Puar, “Mapping US homonormativities,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 13.1 (2006): 68.

6 Jasbir K. Puar, “Homonationalism as Assemblage,” *Jindal Global Law Review* 4.2 (2013): 24.

7 *Ibid.*, 35.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Settler homonationalism: Theorizing settler colonialism within queer modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2 (2010): 105.

10 *Ibid.*, 117.

11 *Ibid.*, 106.

12 *Ibid.*, 121.

13 To see the traditional territories of the hundreds of Native nations across Turtle Island, use the interactive map at <https://native-land.ca/>.

14 Sandra Harvey, “Passing for free, passing for sovereign: Blackness and the formation of the nation,” PhD diss., (University of California, Santa Cruz, 2017); C. Riley Snorton, “‘A New Hope’: The Psychic Life of Passing,” *Hypatia* 24.3 (2009): 82.

15 Aren Z. Aizura, “Of borders and homes: The imaginary community of (trans)sexual citizenship,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7 (2006): 295-96.

16 Chris Finley, “Decolonizing the queer Native body (and recovering the Native Bull-Dyke)” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical interventions in theory, politics, and literature*, ed. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2011), 34.

17 María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system,” *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 186.

18 In the late eighteenth century, Spanish California consisted of two coastal regions: Baja California in the south and Alta California in the north. Within the early years of settlement, Alta California consisted primarily of present-day Southern California. At the height of expansion, it included Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico.

19 Francisco Palóu and Maynard J. Geiger, *Palóu’s Life of Fray Junípero Serra* (Washington, D.C.: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955), x.

20 Deborah Miranda explores various etymologies of *joya* as a Spanish colonial label, i.e. whether its direct translation to ‘jewel’ symbolized their perceived sanctity and importance, or was instead applied ironically out of disrespect. While the exact origin is unknown, *joya* was always used to describe what the Spanish understood as “men dressed as women.” While *joya* was applied to Indigenous people from various distinct communities, they would

have been known by tribal-specific titles in their own languages. Some titles that have been recovered today are *'aqi* (Chumash), *wergern* (Yurok), *iwop-naiip* (Yuki), *kwit* (coastal Acjachemen), *uluki* (mountain Acjachemen), *alyha* (Mojave), and *hwami* (Mojave/Yuma).

21 Palóu and Geiger, 198.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 199.

24 Cartographer Miguel Costanso records a “class of men who lived like woman [and] wore the same dress.” Naturalist José Longinos Martínez refers to a “class of effeminate men [who] perform all the duties of a woman.” And Father Gerónimo Boscana describes how young boys among the Tongva “were selected, and instructed as they increased in years, in all the duties of the women—in their mode of dress—of walking, and dancing; so that in almost every particular, they resembled females.”

25 Pedro Fages and Herbert I. Priestley, “An historical, political, and natural description of California,” *Catholic Historical Review* 5.1 (April 1919): 73.

26 Pedro Fages and Herbert I. Priestley, *A historical, political, and natural description of California by Pedro Fages, soldier of Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937), 33.

27 Ibid.

28 James Tully, “The struggles of Indigenous peoples for and of freedom,” in *Political theory and the rights of Indigenous peoples*, ed. Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, and Will Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 38.

29 The term Two-Spirit was proposed at the Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nation, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in 1990. Two-Spirit remains widely to describe Indigenous people who are otherwise ‘queer’ in cisheteropatriarchal settler society. Through a movement of resurgence, many people are recreating or recovering titles and names in their own language, which often hold precedence to Two-Spirit in English.

30 Deborah Miranda, “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16:1-2 (2010): 256–259.

31 Ibid., 264.

32 Ibid., 276–77. Other texts that discuss the spiritual role of *joyas* or other Indigenous peoples who transcended colonial norms of gender are Michael J. Horswell’s *Decolonizing the Sodomite*, James A. Sandos’ “Christianization among the Chumash: An Ethnographic Perspective,” and various works by Sandra E. Hollimon (see bibliography).

33 Greta LaFleur, “Sex and ‘unsex’: Histories of gender trouble in eighteenth-century North America,” *Early American Studies* 12.3 (2014): 474–75 & 488.

34 Ibid., 489.

35 Ibid., 476. Randolph Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists: From three sexes to four genders in the making of modern culture” in *Body guards: The cultural politics of gender ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 112.

36 Ibid., 486.

37 Marilyn Morris, “The Chevalière d’Eon, transgender autobiography and identity,” *Gender & History* 31.1 (2019), 80.

38 Ibid.

39 Palóu and Geiger, 198.

40 Puar, “Homonationalism as assemblage,” 25.

41 Ibid., 10.

42 Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, “Romancing the transgender Native: Rethinking the use of the ‘Third Gender’ concept,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.4 (2002): 472.

43 Ibid., 467.

44 Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Unsettling queer politics: What can non-Natives learn from Two-Spirit organizing?” in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical interventions in theory, politics, and literature*, ed. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2011), 132.

45 Widely-circulated media sources would be the *Teen Vogue* article, “Gender Variance Around the World Over Time,” originally titled “People Have Had Non-Binary Genders for Thousands of Years” (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/gender-variance-around-the-world>) and *The Guardian*’s “The ‘two-spirit’ people of indigenous North Americans” by Walter L. Williams—a white gay anthropologist who has not only been heavily critiqued by Native scholars, but was even on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List in 2013 for serial child predation (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america>). Social posts and blogs from large mainstream

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LGBTQ+ organizations such as HRC, GLSEN, and GLAAD usually pop up around Native American Heritage Month and loosely spread awareness about Two-Spirit identities, all while profiting off funding from corporations such as Wells Fargo, TD Bank, and Chase—some of the largest investors in oil pipelines destroying Indigenous communities.

46 Kai Pyle, “Naming and claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit language,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5.4 (2018): 584.

47 Ibid., 575-76.

48 The most comprehensive list of reclaimed Two-Spirit titles I have been able to find was created by Yuè Begay at the Red Circle Project. It can be accessed as an Instagram post at https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn7PaNsBQJF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Jen Deerinwater, “Power in our pride: Two Spirit Nation leads the way,” *BitChMedia* September 20, 2017, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/two-spirit-pride>.

49 Tom Boellstorff, Mauro Cabral, Micha Cadenas, Trysten Cotton, Eric A. Stanley, Kalaniopua Young, and Aren Z. Aizura, “Decolonizing transgender: A roundtable discussion,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.3 (2014): 430.

50 At this time, the most prominent trans figures in the modeling industry would have been Geena Rocero, Carmen Carrera, Hari Nef, Andreja Pejic, and Aydian Dowling.

51 GLAAD, *2013 Where We Are On TV* (GLAAD, 2014), www.glaad.org/whereweareontv13.

52 The first major example of trans representation in U.S. politics was Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, a trans woman appointed by President Obama to serve as an Outreach and Recruitment Director in the White House Office of Presidential Personnel. A second would be Sarah McBride, who became the first openly transgender person to give an address at a national party convention in 2016. In 2020, she won her race for a seat in the Delaware Senate and became the first trans Senator in U.S. history.

53 Austin Johnson, “Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men.” *Sociological Inquiry* 86 (2016): 465-66.

54 Ibid., 466-67.

55 Evan Vipond, “Resisting transnormativity: Challenging the medicalization and regulation of trans bodies” *Theory in Action* 8.2 (2015): 24.

56 Janet Mock, *Redefining realness: My path to womanhood, identity, love & so much more* (New York: Atria Books, 2014).

57 Kevin Lynch, “Caitlyn Jenner shatters world record for fastest time to reach one million followers on Twitter,” *Guinness World Records*, June 2, 2015, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2015/6/caitlyn-jenner-shatters-world-record-for-fastest-time-to-reach-one-million-follow-380097>.

58 Rick Kissell, “I Am Cait’ Ratings: E! Series Premier Draws 2.7 Million Viewers,” *Variety*, July 28, 2015, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://variety.com/2015/tv/news/i-am-cait-ratings-e-series-premiere-draws-2-7-million-viewers-1201549096/>.

59 Sandy James, Jody Herman, Susan Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet, and Ma’ayan Anafi, *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015), 140.

60 Sandy James, Trudie Jackson, and Mattee Jim, *2015 U.S. Transgender Survey: Report on the Experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native Respondents* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2017), 3.

61 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 9.

62 Gillian Mohny, “Caitlyn Jenner May Inspire Those Transitioning Genders, But Medical Costs Can Be Steep, Experts Say,” *ABCNews*, June 2, 2015, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/caitlyn-jenner-inspire-transitioning-genders-medical-costs-steep/story?id=31472140> <http://www.thetransgendercenter.com/index.php/mtf-price-list.html>; The Philadelphia Center for Transgender Surgery, “Male to Female Price List,” <http://www.thetransgendercenter.com/index.php/mtf-price-list.html>.

63 Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Queer Indigenous studies: Critical interventions in theory, politics, and literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2011), 213.

64 Ibid., 167.

65 James et al, 173.

66 Ibid 173.

67 Learn more about #WalkAway here: <https://www.walkawaycampaign.com/>.

68 Learn more about Caitlyn Jenner’s gubernatorial campaign here: <https://caitlynjenner.com/>. Her initial campaign video can be found on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I48aCskFJ6U>.

69 Learn more about the National Center for Transgender Equality here: <https://transequality.org/about>.

70 The program of the 2017 Forward Together event lists the mentioned sponsors, including the Human Rights Campaign, whose corporate partners—The Coca Cola Company, Morgan Stanley, Citi, Shell, etc.—are invested in big oil and deforestation. <https://transequality.org/forwardtogether>.

71 Alyosha Goldstein, “Toward a genealogy of the U.S. colonial present,” in *Formations of United States colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

72 Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide, “350 trans and gender-diverse people reported murdered in the last year,” Transgender Europe, November 11, 2020.

73 Ibid.

74 Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto,” *Camera Obscura* 10.2 (1992): 168.