

Becoming Max, Athena, and Kristin: Transnormative Nationalism in *Dark Angel*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and the Chelsea Manning Controversy

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ABSTRACT

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar introduces the concept of homonationalism as an analytic for a sociohistorical moment of seeming contradictions in gay politics. Since the book's first edition in 2007, several scholars have theorized the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics by examining nonfictional texts from 2007 onward. That scholarship most often explores the controversy surrounding US transparency activist Chelsea Manning's 2010 leaks of government information and subsequent "coming out" as transgender. However, interactions among homonationalism, transgender politics, and fictional texts remain under-theorized. Analyzing those interactions with a focus on American exceptionalism and science fiction television, this article shows that transnormative nationalism began territorializing through transtextuality as early as 2000. This argument not only contributes a more comprehensive explanation of the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics but also reveals the role of science fiction television in connecting the two. The argument's supporting evidence comprises a science fiction television figure termed the post-post-gender cyborg woman. This figure is incarnated in Max, a transgenic woman in *Dark Angel* (Fox, 2000–2002), and Sharon, a female humanoid Cylon (or robot) in *Battlestar Galactica* (Sky1 and Sci Fi Channel, 2004–2009). The method is a multiperspectival cultural studies approach, which holistically interprets a text's cultural meanings through analyzing not only the text but also its transtextually related texts, production, and reception.

Peter Cava, "Becoming Max, Athena, and Kristin: Transnormative Nationalism in *Dark Angel*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and the Chelsea Manning Controversy," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 10, no. 1 (2023): 49–76. DOI: 10.14321/qed.10.1.0049. ISSN 2327-1574. Copyright © 2023 The Author(s). All rights reserved.

The data include television episodes, webisodes, DVD special features, tie-in novels, published interviews, professional criticism, fan fiction, and fan video. The analysis concludes with how transnormative nationalism reterritorialized in the Manning controversy.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar introduces the concept of homonationalism as an analytic for a sociohistorical moment of seeming contradictions in gay politics.¹ Since the book's first edition in 2007, several scholars have theorized the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics by examining nonfictional texts from 2007 onward. That scholarship most often explores the controversy surrounding US transparency activist Chelsea Manning's 2010 leaks of government information and subsequent "coming out" as transgender.² However, interactions among homonationalism, transgender politics, and fictional texts remain undertheorized.

Analyzing those interactions with a focus on American exceptionalism and science fiction television, this article shows that transnormative nationalism began territorializing as early as 2000. By "territorializing," I mean becoming structured into an assemblage, or an "arrangement and organization of a variety of heterogeneous elements."³ That territorialization occurred through transtextuality, a form of "textual transcendence" in which texts come "into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts."⁴ This argument not only contributes a more comprehensive explanation of the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics, but also reveals the role of science fiction television in connecting the two.

"Becoming-Woman" in the Age of Transnormative Nationalism: Theory, Method, and Data

The argument's supporting evidence comprises a science fiction television figure that I name the post-post-gender cyborg woman. The term *cyborg* was first printed when NASA scientists proposed a fusion of the organic and the electromechanical to free "man in space" from dependency on his environment.⁵ According to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," such an eschewal of dependency is a patriarchal repudiation of mother/nature.⁶ Nonetheless, Haraway continues, by transcending an organic–technological dichotomy in which the organic is associated with femininity and the technological with masculinity, the cyborg ironically transcends the feminine–masculine dichotomy as well, making it the harbinger of "a post-gender world."⁷ Haraway is rebutted by several scholars who argue that the cyborg reinscribes gender in science fiction film

and television.⁸ Following those rebuttals, I use the term *cyborg* metaphorically for a figure who problematizes the boundary between the organic and the technological (and is thus post-gender) but reinscribes a cisgenderist, heterosexist, male genderist, racist, ableist, and classist construct of womanhood (and is thus post-post-gender).⁹ In the spirit of Haraway's manifesto, my naming of the post-post-gender cyborg woman is ironic. An excess of *post-*, *post-post-* connotes a Western fantasy of progress; functioning like a double-negative, it ironically betrays the fantasy, with post-post-gender turning out to be, as Judith Butler might say, "gender all along."

This figure is incarnated in Max, a transgenic (or genetically engineered) woman in *Dark Angel* (Fox, 2000–2002), and Sharon, a female humanoid Cylon (or robot) in *Battlestar Galactica* (Sky1 and Sci Fi Channel, 2004–2009). I center the analysis on those series because both revolve around conflicts between transgenic or robotic people and humans. In those conflicts, characters interrogate the conditions of possibility for Max, Sharon, and other nonnormatively embodied women to qualify as "real" women and as full citizens. Through that interrogation, both series negotiate with transgender politics while contextualizing those politics in relation to the nation.

I interpret the post-post-gender cyborg woman through a conceptual framework that primarily comprises transnormative nationalism and transtextuality. A term introduced in this article, *transnormative nationalism* combines *transnormativity* and *homonationalism*. According to Lisa Duggan, in the mid-1990s and 2000s, gay politics aligned with heteronormativity in the context of a neoliberal multiculturalism that embraced formal equality and tokenistic diversity to advance US corporate interests.¹⁰ That realignment forged a "new homonormativity," defined as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."¹¹ In a 2015 study of transnormativity, Evan Vipond assesses how, like gay politics, transgender politics has aligned with a broader system of social normativities through social categories of gender, sexuality, race, ability, and class.¹² In a 2017 book chapter, Gust A. Yep, Sage E. Russo, and Rebecca N. Gigi posit that the docuseries *I Am Cait* (E!, 2015–2016) represents "the emergence of a 'new transnormativity' at this historical juncture."¹³ Following Vipond, this article analyzes how transnormativity is structured by cisgenderism, heterosexism, male genderism, racism, ableism, and classism; and like Yep, Russo, and Gigi, it examines US mainstream media.

Homonationalism is a contraction of *homonormative nationalism*.¹⁴ Puar conceptualizes it as an assemblage in which the Foucauldian discipline of gay or queer subjects in the United States and Western Europe is imbricated with

the transnational “ascendancy of whiteness.”¹⁵ That imbrication correlates with the disavowal of racialized-sexualized “outlaw” populations, such as the Iraqi prisoners sexually humiliated and ritually tortured at Abu Ghraib.¹⁶ Through that correlation, homonormative subjects affectively “stick” to US and Western European exceptionalisms, or Western nations’ self-concepts as exceptional.¹⁷ For example, “properly” gay or queer subjects in the United States and Western Europe may access White privilege or “multiculturalism as defined and deployed by whiteness” and thereby achieve a felt association with exceptionality vis-à-vis the disavowed figure of the “Muslim terrorist,” racialized as Arab and sexualized as a failure of heteromascularity.¹⁸ This assemblage has territorialized through a “dual movement in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced US nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas.”¹⁹

The term *transnormative nationalism* explicitly cites both transnormativity and homonationalism, identifies a distinct assemblage, and avoids the discursive conflation of trans- and homo- by naming that assemblage with a trans- term.²⁰ In transnormative nationalism, the discipline of transgender subjects is structured by a “matrix of domination” that implicates the ascendancy of Whiteness.²¹ That discipline correlates with the disavowal of alternative outlaw populations, which may be “out,” nonheterosexual, or Black. Through that correlation, transnormative subjects affectively stick to nationalism, such as American exceptionalism.

Like homonationalism, transnormative nationalism has territorialized through a dual movement in which certain transgender constituencies have embraced, and been embraced by, US nationalist agendas. In transnormative nationalism, American exceptionalism is a basis for “transnormative citizenship” because transnormative subjects hail (that is, praise) the United States as exceptional and consequently are hailed (that is, interpellated in the Althusserian sense) by the United States.²² In a reciprocal relation, transnormative citizenship is a basis for American exceptionalism because the United States hails (that is, interpellates) transnormative subjects and consequently is hailed (that is, praised) as exceptional.

When Puar first conceptualized homonationalism in 2007, she suggested “a move from intersectionality to assemblage” because intersectional analysis tends to presuppose an ahistorical, reified grid of identities (for example, a grid in which Black and female identities intersect for Black women) rather than historicized, processual subject formation.²³ However, in subsequent publications, she acknowledges that she failed to honor the extent to which she had been “drawing on the formative work of black feminists and also insisting on and producing intersectional scholarship,”²⁴ and she synthesizes assemblage and intersectionality in her theory of “becoming-intersectional.”²⁵

Like Puar's later synthesis, my conceptualization of transnormative nationalism is informed by both assemblage and intersectionality lineages. In a roundtable discussion about assemblage and intersectionality, Deboleena Roy recounted how, after a tree fell in her backyard, Bermuda grass regrew through a "stolon strategy" of "extending horizontal stems" that formed new shoots.²⁶ An assemblage, transnormative nationalism spreads through a stolon strategy of territorialization; a field of intersections, it forms new shoots of structurally intersecting oppressions, forms new roots in intersectional subjectivities and populations. However, by describing my dual indebtedness, I am not prescribing an assemblage–intersectionality distinction. Rather, I heed Devon W. Carbado, who maintains that proponents of the view "that scholars *should* replace intersectionality with, or at least apply the theory alongside, some other framework . . . artificially circumscribe the theoretical reach of intersectionality as a predicate to staging their own intervention."²⁷ Carbado aptly calls for an end to "some of the abstract debates about what intersectionality can and cannot do."²⁸

The concept of transtextuality facilitates theorization of how the post-post-gender cyborg woman's transnormative nationalism interacts with "real-world" politics. Scholars of the relation between science fiction television and real-world politics draw from Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality to theorize "circulations of energies" between the two.²⁹ In that context, Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann define *energies* as "pent-up social charges created by human interest in, and engagement with, any number of social phenomena that have come to be seen as problematic."³⁰ Through those circulations, science fiction television both "reflects" and "shapes" real-world politics.³¹ However, Jutta Weldes critiques that use of the concept of intertextuality because it "relies too heavily on an ontology of difference" between science fiction television and real-world politics rather than one in which each has "no clear beginning or end" vis-à-vis the other.³² Therefore, I have chosen Gérard Genette's concept of transtextuality to more accurately name the textual transcendence through which science fiction television and real-world politics come into relation with each other.

As a genre and medium, science fiction television intensifies transtextual energies. As a genre, science fiction elicits nascent energies in the present through "plausible extrapolations" of the future.³³ And as a medium, television has a high propensity to function as a "point of entry" into an "intertextual [and transtextual] network" in which its content is "inserted into ongoing social interactions."³⁴

My method is a "multiperspectival" cultural studies approach, which holistically interprets a text's cultural meanings through analyzing not only the text but also its transtextually related texts, production, and reception.³⁵ The data include television episodes, webisodes, DVD special features, tie-in novels, published

interviews, professional criticism, fan fiction, and fan video. Because the argument concerns the participation of the text's meanings in a broader assemblage's territorialization, the dataset's television episodes include examples not only from *Dark Angel* and *Battlestar Galactica* but also from other US (or US and internationally co-produced) science fiction television series, such as *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (Fox, 2008–2009), *Orphan Black* (Space and BBC America, 2013–2017), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (syndication, 1993–1999), and *Star Trek: Voyager* (UPN, 1995–2001). The post-post-gender cyborg woman's milieu is best represented by episodes produced prior to the “Transgender Tipping Point” era of heightened mainstream visibility, which US science fiction television began reflecting and shaping in 2015.³⁶

Puar writes that her queer method for countering homonationalism necessitates the assembly of “disjunctive primary sources.”³⁷ With that method, I extend the analysis into a disjunctive archive—the controversy surrounding Chelsea Manning's disclosures. That archive's relevance is threefold. First, more than any other event, those in the Manning controversy have generated research on the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics, including *QED*'s special issue on “Chelsea Manning's Queer Discontents.” By engaging that archive, I am directly connecting my analysis to *QED*'s conversation. Furthermore, during this article's writing, the US government repeatedly subjected Manning to torture, likely causing “post-traumatic symptoms and other severe and persistent mental and physical health consequences,” according to a 2019 letter from the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.³⁸ Therefore, the spotlight on Manning illuminates the material consequences of transnormative nationalism in transgender lives. Finally, in *Terrorizing Gender*, Mia Fischer claims that the reaction to Manning's disclosures signaled “the emergence of transpatriotism,” a “corollary concept to . . . homonationalism,” characterized by transgender “devotion to the state and a strict adherence to the gender binary.”³⁹ Contra Fischer, my analysis recognizes the continuity between that reaction and the science fiction television that preceded it, achieving the culmination of my argument that transnormative nationalism began territorializing prior to other scholars' case studies. As Haraway writes, “This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.”⁴⁰

In what follows, I trace how cisgenderism, heterosexism, male genderism, racism, ableism, and classism discipline the post-post-gender cyborg woman into a transnormative subject position that is stealth, binary, heterosexual, female, postracial, able-bodied, and upwardly mobile. In the process, I highlight how that discipline correlates with the disavowal of outlaw populations that are “out,” nonheterosexual, or Black. Then, I demonstrate how transnormative

nationalism intertwines that discipline with American exceptionalism. Finally, I conclude with how transnormative nationalism “came out” in the Manning controversy.

“A Different Kind of Female”: Cisgenderism Disciplines the Post-Post-Gender Cyborg Woman into Stealth

Cisgenderism disciplines the post-post-gender cyborg woman into a transnormative subject position of stealth, or “non-disclosure of trans status.”⁴¹ The post-post-gender cyborg woman is stealth in that she is not “out” to the interpellated spectator as transgender; rather, she can be read either as transgender or as cisgender because her transgender womanhood is allegorical.

In *Dark Angel's* conflicts between transgenic people and humans, transgenic people can be read allegorically as transgender. In the show, both transgenic and transgender people are labeled “freaks.”⁴² Transgenic people are referred to as “transgenics,” a quasihomonym for *transgenders*, a nonpreferred nominalization of *transgender*.⁴³ A would-be transgenic person is described as “pre-op,” potentially objectifying slang for transgender people pursuing gender-affirming surgeries.⁴⁴ Antitransgenic bigots deride transgenic people as “trann[ies],” controversial slang for transgender people.⁴⁵ *Dark Angel* fan fiction incorporates the show's use of *tranny*.⁴⁶

Max, the transgenic protagonist, can be read allegorically as a transgender woman. Not only is Max's womanhood the show's foremost representation of transgenic womanhood and thus of transgender womanhood; it is also discursively aligned with the *literally* transgender womanhood of a supporting character, Louise. Max self-identifies as “a different *kind of female*.”⁴⁷ Several episodes later, in a B plot, Max's best friend, Original Cindy, finds Louise's purse and wonders aloud, “What *kind of female* forgets her purse?”⁴⁸ Cindy then opens the purse and discovers documentation that “. . . Louise Klein is Louis Klein”—in other words, that Louise was assigned male at birth.⁴⁹ The B plot then cuts to the A plot, in which Max uses a digital voice changer to disguise her voice as a man's. The synchronization of the image of a female speaking body and the sound of a masculine voice is a screen cultural signifier of transgender womanhood. Thus, *Dark Angel* associatively sutures Max's womanhood to transgender womanhood through a sequence that deploys the phrase *kind of female* for both Max and Louise, reveals Louise's transition, and cuts to the synchronization of an image of Max and the sound of a masculine voice.

Like *Dark Angel's* transgenic people, *Battlestar Galactica's* humanoid Cylons can be read allegorically as transgender. When Helo, a male human, discovers

that Sharon, his sex partner, is not a female human but a female humanoid Cylon, he exclaims, "I'm in love with a woman I know isn't a woman!"⁵⁰ This scenario can be read as an allegory of a heterosexual cisgender man discovering that his sex partner is a transgender woman, perceiving his desire as potentially nonheterosexual, and consequently experiencing an identity crisis.⁵¹

A 2008 fan video reappropriates the reading of Cylons as transgender. Not formally affiliated with the franchise, the video is a transgender vlog collaboration. It overlays Cylon imagery with the text, "It is the year 2008. We are among you. Earth was supposed to be a haven. There is only one hope left. We must come out of the shadows and show ourselves to the world." Afterward, the video intercuts people coming out as transgender.

The fan video's coming-out sequence diverges from pre-Tipping Point US science fiction television. In the latter, the more likely a character is to be read as transgender, the shorter the character's arc.⁵² The post-post-gender cyborg woman is allegorically transgender and therefore can be read as either transgender or cisgender; her arc spans her entire series. She contrasts with Louise in *Dark Angel*, Eileen in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, and Tony in *Orphan Black*. They are literally transgender and therefore are read as such; they are written off or even killed off within a single episode.⁵³ This pattern disavows an outlaw population of transgender people who are out as transgender.

To theorize the pattern's political economy, I draw from Elyce Rae Helford's analysis of lesbian subtext: "Subtext means that the series never has to 'out' its characters and the producers never have to risk the censure and eventual cancellation that might happen with an overtly lesbian program, like *Ellen*. Instead, it can maintain an economic base of homophobic viewers while also endearing queer (LGBT and other sexually minoritized) viewers, often eager for any representations that suggest the existence of nonheterosexuals."⁵⁴ Though Helford discursively conflates gender and sexuality by implying transgender viewers are inherently nonheterosexual,⁵⁵ her analysis applies because allegorically transgender characters, such as Sharon and Max, are not out to viewers as transgender, and their producers did not have to risk the censure and eventual cancellation that could have happened with literally transgender characters, such as Louise, Eileen, and Tony. Instead, the series could maintain an economic base of cisgenderist viewers while also endearing transgender liberationist viewers, such as the *Battlestar Galactica* fan video creators. Therefore, Sharon's and Max's arcs span their entire series, whereas Louise, Eileen, and Tony are written off.

"A Woman . . . in Love with Me": Cisgenderism, Mutually Constitutive with Heterosexism and Intersected by Male Genderism and Racism, Disciplines the Post-Post-Gender Cyborg Woman into a Heterosexual Matrix and Womanhood

Judith Butler defines a "heterosexual matrix" as a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized."⁵⁶ Within that grid, cisgenderism is mutually constitutive with heterosexism and intersected by male genderism because the "hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility . . . assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."⁵⁷ In *Dark Angel's* and *Battlestar Galactica's* heterosexual matrix, the post-post-gender cyborg woman performs transnormative embodiment and roles, positioning her within a gender binary in which each gender is attracted to the other. In the analysis of this matrix, I use terms such as *male genderism* rather than *male sexism* to destabilize the reification of "biological gender" as "sex."⁵⁸

According to Gail Dines, contemporary US women experience social pressure to perform the normatively feminine ideal of "hotness."⁵⁹ *Dark Angel's* Max is repeatedly described as "hot."⁶⁰ Her hotness is constructed both intra- and extradiegetically, within the text's universe and beyond it. She intradiegetically performs hotness when she poses as a sex worker in several episodes.⁶¹ Her hotness is extradiegetically enhanced by the image of the actor, Jessica Alba, "the only woman to appear on *Maxim's* Hot 100 list every year from 2000 to 2011."⁶²

Whereas Max performs hotness, *Battlestar Galactica's* Sharon performs a normatively female configuration of her bodily orifices. She can open a port in her arm and interface directly with computer networks. In an isolated instance, she exercises that ability around humans aboard the *Galactica*, and they stare anxiously.⁶³ The anxiety can be explained not only as fear that she could sabotage the network but also as body horror, generated by bodily transformations mediated through culturally specific semiotic systems.⁶⁴ In other instances, to alleviate the anxiety, Sharon presents the appearance of normatively female embodiment. Thus, the anxiety parallels pressure on transgender people to look cisgender. As the series progresses, Sharon also enters into the normatively feminine roles of wife and mother.⁶⁵

Within her gender binary, the post-post-gender cyborg woman is heterosexually not only desirable but also desirous. In *Dark Angel*, Max's genetic cocktail includes feline DNA, which causes her to undergo estrus, or "heat." Two *Dark*

Angel episodes linger on her heterosexual insatiability during estrus.⁶⁶ And in *Battlestar Galactica*, Sharon becomes embroiled in four heterosexual trysts across the series and its *Face of the Enemy* webisodes.

The post-post-gender cyborg woman's heterosexuality is compulsory, correlating with the disavowal of nonheterosexual outlaw populations. I am using the term *nonheterosexual* rather than *queer* to distinguish nonheterosexuality from queer heterosexuality.⁶⁷ In pre-Tipping Point US science fiction television, whether a character is literally or allegorically transgender, the character's nonheterosexuality, if any, is exorcised within a single episode.⁶⁸ Consider Dax in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's* "Rejoined" and Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager's* "Infinite Regress." With both, a symbiont or psyche migrates from a male body to a female one and expresses desire for a woman, which can be read as lesbian.⁶⁹ The episodes resolve when the characters suppress the desire. Likewise, in *Star Trek: Voyager's* "Warlord," Tieran's psyche migrates from a male body to a female one and expresses desire for an FFM triad relationship, which can be read as bisexual and polyamorous.⁷⁰ The episode resolves with Tieran's death, singling out this character's nonheterosexual nonmonogamy for symbolic "trans necropolitics."⁷¹

When mutually constitutive cisgenderism and heterosexism discipline the post-post-gender cyborg woman into binary gender and heterosexuality, those systems intersect with male genderism and racism, positioning her as a woman attracted to White heterosexual men. This position facilitates her subordination to White heterosexual men, the recuperation of White heterosexual male identity, and the maintenance of White heterosexual male privilege. *Dark Angel* systematically subordinates Max to White heterosexual male authorities. In the pilot episode alone, she is genetically engineered by her father figure, Colonel Lydecker; then, she escapes under the team leadership of her brother figure, Zack; later, she gains employment under her politically conservative boss, Normal; and finally, she carries out missions for her romantic interest, Logan.⁷² Even more extreme, the *Battlestar Galactica* tie-in novel *Unity* describes Sharon's subordination: ". . . Sharon had been helpful, even conciliatory. No matter how much abuse had been heaped on her, no matter how often people called her a toaster or put her in chains or slapped a restraining collar around her neck."⁷³

Battlestar Galactica further emphasizes the recuperation of White heterosexual male identity. The miniseries novelization details the moments after Caprica Six (also known as Natasa), comes out as a female humanoid Cylon to Gaius Baltar, a White heterosexual male human: "Baltar sat rigidly in his upholstered reading chair and tried to keep his thoughts on a rational, safe, analytical level. Which was very hard to do, given what he had just been told. 'So . . . Now you're telling me . . . Now you're telling me you're a machine.' Natasa sat in his

recliner, a few arm-lengths away, her bare legs outstretched on the raised foot of the chair. She crossed her legs, and he could not help but follow the movement with his eyes. ‘I’m a woman,’ she said.”⁷⁴ To continue the sexual relationship, Baltar reconstructs his concept of womanhood and repositions Six within a heterosexual matrix, telling her, “You’re a person. A *real* person. A woman. And you’re in love with me.”⁷⁵

In such relationship dynamics, White heterosexual men perceive their desire as potentially nonheterosexual but recuperate their identities through reconstructing womanhood. This process effaces the contingency of the men’s identities, offloading the representational burden of signifying gender onto women. Underscoring that effacement, *Dark Angel* characters remark that Max’s transgenic status makes her “a different kind of female” rather than a “regular girl,” but never that a transgenic man is a different kind of male rather than a regular guy.⁷⁶ Likewise, *Battlestar Galactica* preoccupies its characters with whether Sharon and Six are women, not whether male humanoid Cylons are men in an explicitly gendered sense. When US science fiction television questions the ontological status of a robotic or holographic man, it tends to use gender-neutral language for implicitly gendered subject positions, such as the rights-bearing citizen. For example, it asks whether he is “a sentient being . . . entitled to all the rights reserved for all life-forms,”⁷⁷ “a person entitled to the rights accorded to our citizens under the Constitution,”⁷⁸ or “a person . . . entitled to all rights and privileges accorded an artist under the law.”⁷⁹ This dichotomy asks of women, What makes a woman? and of men, What makes a person? but of no one, What makes a man?⁸⁰ Such effacements maintain White heterosexual male privilege by rendering it invisible.⁸¹

“Faster than Light”: Racism, Imbricated with Ableism and Classism, Disciplines the Post-Post-Gender Cyborg Woman into Postracialism Inflected by Able-Bodiedness and Upward Mobility

Though the post-post-gender cyborg woman bears the representational burden of signifying gender, not so with race; rather, racism disciplines her into a transnormative subject position that is postracial while disavowing an outlaw population of Black people, who come to signify race. Postracialism is the theoretical depoliticization of race. Kimberly Springer decries how postracial popular culture touts progress through formal equality while legitimizing backlash with “the iconography of the mammy, the jezebel, the sapphire, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the crack-addicted mother,” along with more recent examples, “the diva, black lady, and angry black woman.”⁸² As Ralina L. Joseph

summarizes, postracialism is “an ideology that cannot escape racialization, complete with controlling images or racialized stereotypes.”⁸³

Confirming Springer’s and Joseph’s critiques, *Dark Angel* and *Battlestar Galactica* profess postracialism while reproducing racial stereotypes, especially anti-Black ones.⁸⁴ *Dark Angel* co-producer Moira Kirland envisioned the show as set in a world where racism “would be a thing of the past.”⁸⁵ The show narratively, visually, and auditorily codes Max as past-/postrace. Intradiegetically, Max’s multiracial ancestry, which includes English, Ashkenazi Jewish, and Native American descent, can be read as a signifier of postracialism, as can her racially ambiguous appearance, which creator Charles H. Eglee designates ethnically “nonspecific.”⁸⁶ Extradiegetically, that appearance is complemented by the soundtrack’s “pseudo-Orientalist” vocalizations.⁸⁷ Converging with the text, actor Jessica Alba’s interviews import postracialism: “My grandfather . . . tried to forget his Mexican roots, because he never wanted his kids to be made to feel different in America. . . . Now, as a third-generation American, I feel as if I have finally cut loose.”⁸⁸

Max’s Black coworkers, Herbal Thought and Original Cindy, cannot so easily “cut loose” from race. Often heard expressing his love for God and ganja, Herbal participates in the Jamaican believer and Rasta stereotypes, which code Jamaican people as premodern.⁸⁹ With a sassy remark and a helping hand, Cindy is a “black best friend” stereotype, which tokenizes Black people.⁹⁰ Not afraid to “get ghetto,”⁹¹ she is also the “sista with attitude” variant of the Sapphire and “angry black woman” stereotypes, which police Black women’s assertiveness.⁹² Finally, Herbal and Cindy respectively make the show’s most homophobic and transphobic remarks,⁹³ reinforcing “the widespread notion that black people are more homophobic and transphobic than any other racial group.”⁹⁴

Two further linguistic and visual codes distinguish Max’s postracialization from Herbal and Cindy’s racialization. First, Max speaks with a General American accent, whereas Herbal and Cindy respectively pepper their speech with Jamaican Patois and African American Vernacular, unlike the actors who play them.⁹⁵ And second, Max’s transgenic abilities allow her to traverse race- and class-signifying spaces. In the pilot episode’s most spectacular stunt, she leaps across buildings into the penthouse of a White man with a Black assistant, staying to enjoy fine art and cuisine.⁹⁶ In contrast, the show tends to confine Herbal and Cindy to the racialized, working-class spaces of their exploitive workplace and the local dive bar.

Unlike Max, *Battlestar Galactica*’s Sharon follows a story arc from racialization toward postracialization. Sharon is overdetermined as a racial Other through the show’s construction of the Cylons as a race and the casting of actor Grace Park, of Korean descent and read by the interpellated spectator as Asian.⁹⁷ In an

interview, Park explains that she “sink[s] into what [she] has from [her] history, geography, and culture” to play the character as “an oppressed race.”⁹⁸

Juliana Hu Pegues sifts through the narrative’s coding of Sharon as Asian, achieved with a flexible comingling of West Asian, Southeast Asian, and Asian American stereotypes and tropes. During the narrative’s early concern with whether Sharon will sabotage the *Galactica*, she primarily evokes the “yellow peril” stereotype, which has proliferated when White anxieties about Asian people have heightened during immigration or war.⁹⁹ The primacy of that stereotype dissipates as she enters into a sexual relationship with Helo, played by Tahmoh Penikett, of English and White River First Nation descent and read by the interpellated spectator as White. That storyline follows a “Miss Saigon/Miss Cylon trope” of “romancing the Asian female subject.”¹⁰⁰ Then, entering into normative roles, Sharon projects the “model minority” image.¹⁰¹ Because Sharon could sabotage the *Galactica*, her polysemic capacity to be read as transgender and Asian renders her a lavender and yellow peril. Her positionality as a woman attracted to White heterosexual men partially neutralizes the perceived peril. Narrativizing that positionality through the Miss Cylon trope, the show deploys female heterosexuality to metaphorize the subordination of Asian people and Asia, along with the recuperation of White Western hegemony.

When Helo romances the Asian female subject, Sharon bears a child with him. The child, Hera, is read by the interpellated spectator as multiracial because of the intradiegetic pairing of Sharon and Helo (Cylon and human, respectively) and the extradiegetic pairing of Park and Penikett (of Korean and biracial descent and read by the interpellated spectator as Asian and White, respectively).¹⁰² The first Cylon-human hybrid, Hera is “the face of the shape of things to come.”¹⁰³ In the series finale, Cylons and humans go extinct, leaving only hybrids.¹⁰⁴ Thus, Sharon’s Miss Cylon trope establishes the conditions of possibility for the show’s “new, blended future,” betraying postracialism as a covert ascendancy of Whiteness.¹⁰⁵

Sharon’s trajectory toward postracialization contrasts with the racialization of Number Four, the Cylon played by African American actor Rick Worthy. Four is introduced in “The Farm,” a controversial episode in which he performs a nonconsensual medical experiment on the ovaries of Starbuck, a White female human.¹⁰⁶ That sexual violation conjures the myth of the Black male rapist of White women, an artifact of post-Civil War propaganda erected to rationalize lynching and resurrected throughout subsequent US history to justify anti-Black racism.¹⁰⁷ Elucidating the racial-gender stereotyping, the documentary film *That Guy . . . Who Was in That Thing* intercuts an image from “The Farm” with Worthy’s interview about typecasting.¹⁰⁸ In *Battlestar Galactica*’s finale, Helo, Sharon, and Hera use “faster-than-light” (FTL) technology to “jump” from a black hole

to a new homeworld, whereas Four is pulled into the hole and destroyed.¹⁰⁹ Thus, in the show's semiotic system, characters read as White, Asian, or multiracial, associated with light, can jump toward postracialism and futurity, but characters read as Black are dragged back to black, with the black hole paradoxically signifying not only Blackness but also its negation, "which gives rise to a transgender subject rendered legible by transnormativity."¹¹⁰

The post-post-gender cyborg woman's postracialism is imbricated with ableism and classism through discourses documented by Janell Hobson, Cael M. Keegan, and Keith P. Feldman. Tracing "digital whiteness, primitive blackness" in science fiction films, Hobson observes that they associate Whiteness with "'progress,' 'technology,' and 'civilization,'" but Blackness with "'nature,' 'primitivism,' and pre-modernity."¹¹¹ In a close reading of the Wachowskis' filmography, Keegan discerns a postracial aesthetic where White, Asian, and multiracial bodies race (that is, move freely), whereas Black bodies are raced (that is, racialized) and unable to attain the able-bodied ideal (for example, they lose fights and races).¹¹² Finally, Feldman theorizes a "spatialization of race" that "imbue[s] relative location with hierarchies of racial meaning and value."¹¹³ Synthesizing digital postracialism versus primitive Blackness, race-ing versus being raced, and the spatialization of race and class, *Dark Angels* and *Battlestar Galactica's* non-Black characters (Max, Sharon) have greater access to means of postracial and technological transcendence (transgenics, FTL drives), facilitating movement across socioeconomic and geographic boundaries (to a penthouse, to a new homeworld), whereas Black characters (Herbal, Cindy, Four) are structurally fixed in racial and spatial locations (an exploitive workplace, a dive bar, a black hole).

"I Love My Husband . . . I Love My Child . . . I Love This Ship": Transnormative Nationalism Intertwines the Post-Post-Gender Cyborg Woman's Transnormativity with American Exceptionalism

Whereas cisgenderism, heterosexism, male genderism, racism, ableism, and classism discipline the post-post-gender cyborg woman into a transnormative subject position that is stealth, binary, heterosexual, female, postracial, able-bodied, and upwardly mobile, transnormative nationalism intertwines that transnormativity with American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism synthesizes Puritan beliefs in predestination, an "errand into the wilderness," and a "promised land."¹¹⁴ It framed Westward expansion as a chosen people's errand.¹¹⁵ More recently, it has underlain the national mythology of the United States as a "shining city on a hill," an international exception, while legitimizing US imperial expansion as an errand without end.¹¹⁶ At the same time, it has sanctioned

the disavowal of outlaw populations by narrativizing outlawed life as unchosen, unexceptional—even “bare” in Giorgio Agamben’s sense of “bare life” as stripped of legal status. According to Agamben, such life is incarnated in *homo sacer*, the one who may be killed without the killing constituting murder.¹¹⁷

In *Dark Angel* and *Battlestar Galactica*, the node of reterritorialization of cis- as transnormative nationalism is the post-post-gender cyborg woman’s circumscribed choice between an outlaw population and the United States. Excluding the former as bare life, she assimilates into the disciplinary regime, participates in the exceptionalist errand, and thereby transitions from bare life to what Agamben calls “politically qualified life.”¹¹⁸

In *Dark Angel*’s finale, transgenic people constitute bare life while the US Army plans antitransgenic genocide. However, Max advocates for transgenic US citizenship: “We [transgenic people] were made in America, and we’re not going anywhere.”¹¹⁹ Fox canceled the show on a cliffhanger, but Max revives her advocacy in “transmedia storytelling,” which extends story arcs across multiple media.¹²⁰

The arc continues in two tie-in novels: *Dark Angel: Skin Game* and *Dark Angel: After the Dark*. In *Skin Game*, the antagonist is Kelpy, a transgenic serial killer of humans. The novel describes him as “a monster” like Buffalo Bill, the cross-dressing serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs*.¹²¹ The protagonist is Max, who wants to have a “normal life,” to “fit in like everybody else.”¹²² She advocates for transgenic US citizenship because the United States provides an exceptional opportunity for “normal life,” for “fitting in.” Although transgenic bare life contradicts the United States’s ideal as “a haven for the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse,” she maintains that “. . . those are the kind of words—words of freedom—that this country was built on.”¹²³ She opposes Kelpy as a liability because he “makes us look like the monsters everyone thinks we are.”¹²⁴ She kills him, and in *After the Dark*, that act proves to humans that transgenic people want “nothing more than to fit in.”¹²⁵ The Army cancels the genocide, and transgenic people become “American citizens, as equal as any other.”¹²⁶

My reading of the tie-in novels is threaded by the transgender liberationist tradition that reappropriates monstrosity. For example, for Boots Potential, “monster trans” is a trans way of life characterized by “doing away with, rather than duplicating, the rules.”¹²⁷ From that perspective, Kelpy can be read not as a literal murderer but as an allegorical outlaw population. In this reading, the *Dark Angel* tie-in novels juxtapose Kelpy’s monster trans, which does away with transnormative rules, and Max’s transnormative nationalism, which duplicates the rules to fit in and hails (praises) the United States as a haven, a city on a hill. Excluding Kelpy as bare life, Max transitions from bare to politically qualified

life, no longer subject to genocide but hailed (interpellated) as a citizen. In turn, the United States is hailed (praised) as a nation of equality.

Whereas *Dark Angel* cites literal American exceptionalism, Erika Johnson-Lewis reads *Battlestar Galactica* as an American exceptionalist allegory.¹²⁸ *Battlestar Galactica*'s mythology is that the Twelve Colonies are guided by the Pythian Prophecy on a mission into outer space in search of Earth. In an allegorical reading, the Colonies represent the United States; the prophecy, predestination; the mission into outer space, the errand into the wilderness; and Earth, the promised land.¹²⁹

As with *Dark Angel*, *Battlestar Galactica* begins with bare allegorically transgender life before reterritorialization draws a distinction between bare and politically qualified allegorically transgender life. This distinction is represented by Sharon's division into two Cylon "copies," Boomer and Athena. Early in the series, Boomer's bareness is marked when Cally, a human, fatally shoots her but is charged with "discharg[ing] a firearm" rather than murder.¹³⁰

Unlike Boomer, Athena transitions from bare to politically qualified life. Helo aims a gun at Athena but hesitates because of their relationship; Starbuck does the same because of Athena's pregnancy.¹³¹ These hesitations constitute the inception of the arc in which Athena's entry into the normative roles of wife and mother destabilize her bareness. That arc extends into Opal Smith's fan fiction stories "A Joining of Hands" and "A Patch of Blue."¹³² In the first, humans incarcerate Athena as a Cylon, her fate indeterminate, but her marriage to Helo will "help her situation"; in the second, she further tells him, ". . . I know once our child is born, they'll have to let us be together."¹³³

Even with Athena's transnormativity, her bareness remains institutionalized, with Colonial President Laura Roslin threatening to "airlock" her—that is, to execute her by ejecting her into outer space. Roslin cancels the execution when Athena participates in the exceptionalist errand by guiding the Colonies to the map to Earth.¹³⁴ Thus, Athena's transnormativity sticks to allegorically American exceptionalism, politically qualifying her life.

This stickiness becomes explicit in a deleted scene where Athena confronts Cally, who has killed Boomer: "You hate who I am. You hate where I'm from. You hate me because I'm a Cylon. But you won't kill me. Because I love my husband, and I love my child. Because I love this ship and what it means to me."¹³⁵ This dialogue acknowledges that Cally remains biased against allegorically transgender people ("You hate me because I'm a Cylon") but reclassifies allegorically transgender life as conditionally nonbare ("But you won't kill me"); the conditions include affective transnormativity ("Because I love my husband, and I love my child") and nationalism ("Because I love this ship and what it means to me").

Athena's incorporation into the body politic further distinguishes the Colonies as exceptional. They serve as a city on a hill as not only Athena but also other Cylons become Colonial citizens.¹³⁶ In contrast, no humans become Cylon citizens, a disparity that situates the Colonies as an international exception.

As with Max's killing of Kelpy, Athena's exclusion of an allegorical outlaw population as bare life functions as a prerequisite for her life's political qualification. On the show and in fan fiction, Athena is characterized as having "made a choice,"¹³⁷ as having "pick[ed a] side,"¹³⁸ and her choice has been to turn "away from her people,"¹³⁹ to "turn . . . on her own,"¹⁴⁰ to "betray [her] people,"¹⁴¹ to "betray . . . [her] own people."¹⁴² The relation between other Cylons' bareness and her political qualification is most explicit when she attempts anti-Cylon genocide. She frames the attempt as proof of her personhood: "I have to prove it every day. . . . My people may die. My entire race may be wiped out."¹⁴³ Athena's arc of excluding an allegorical outlaw population as bare life culminates when Boomer resurrects and Athena publicly guns her down in cold blood.¹⁴⁴ Athena is not charged, and Boomer cannot resurrect again. Thus, Athena politically qualifies her life through becoming-Cally, and Athena's becoming-Cally totalizes Boomer's exclusion.

"All of It Will Happen Again": Transnormative Nationalism Comes Out in the Chelsea Manning Controversy

Battlestar Galactica characters often recite the scripture, "All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again."¹⁴⁵ The reterritorialization of normative nationalism "happened again" through events set in motion as the show concluded its run. In 2008, California passed Proposition 8, a ballot initiative defining marriage as between "a man and a woman." Its passage led Chelsea Manning to "think long and hard about [her] blind faith in nationalism."¹⁴⁶ As she recalls in her memoir, "This was my first inkling that the moral arc of the universe doesn't necessarily bend toward justice. That instead, there is a constant and active struggle."¹⁴⁷ As she immersed herself in books about that struggle, she realized, "There was all this history that no one had ever taught me, that didn't fit neatly into the liberal-establishment version of gay rights."¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, in her work as a US Army intelligence analyst during the occupation of Iraq, Manning saw firsthand how there was not only history going untaught; there was also documentation of current events being classified by the US government simply "to control the media" rather than "to keep secrets safe."¹⁴⁹ Later that year, she encountered the most well-known of that documentation, the "Collateral Murder" video, a "US military video depicting the

indiscriminate slaying of over a dozen people in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad, including two Reuters news staff, and the shooting of those coming to attend to their wounds, including two children.”¹⁵⁰ In 2010, she leaked the video along with other information about state-sanctioned abuses, such as torture, rape, and murder.¹⁵¹ In 2013, she came out as a transgender woman. Lida Maxwell observes that although Manning’s disclosures of government information and of her transgender status were not directly connected, both exemplify her “transformative truth-telling.”¹⁵²

The US Department of Defense’s investigation into the leaks found that they “did not result in deaths by enemy forces” and “had no strategic impact on US war efforts.”¹⁵³ Nonetheless, Manning was subjected to the most severe treatment of any US government leaker in history.¹⁵⁴ Navy officers held her in a solitary steel cage in Kuwait’s 120-degree heat for fifty-nine days.¹⁵⁵ After she was relocated to the Marine Corps base in Quantico, marines stripped her to her underwear and returned her to solitary confinement for another nine months.¹⁵⁶ The US government continued to move her in and out of detention, including repeated bouts of solitary confinement, through 2020.

Journalist Kevin Gosztola, who spent years reporting on Manning’s case, notes in *QED*’s Chelsea Manning special issue that after the disclosures, “It was common to suggest Manning was a traitor. Some went so far [as] to suggest Manning be ‘taken out back and shot’ or something to that effect.”¹⁵⁷ All these responses, from the institutional to the individual, marked Manning as an outlaw and her life as bare.¹⁵⁸

Such responses even extended to many LGBT-identified individuals.¹⁵⁹ In 2013, Chris Beck, a US Navy SEAL Team Six veteran, came out as a transgender woman and wrote a public Facebook post, signed Kristin, that came to represent the most strident transgender opposition to Manning. In 2022, Beck announced that he had detransitioned.¹⁶⁰ In this article, I am using the name Chris Beck for the historical figure and the name Kristin for a subjectivity that Beck constructs within the Facebook post. This usage aligns with the conventions in Beck’s memoir, which contextually switches between the names.¹⁶¹

In the Facebook post, Beck writes of Manning, “THIS person is a liar and a thief and a traitor to many people. If Bradley [Manning] is truly ‘Chelsea’ then ‘she’ is a traitor to ME personally.” Characterizing Manning as both a national traitor and a gender traitor, Beck not only marks Manning as an outlaw but also invokes lavender peril.

Beck proceeds by contrasting Manning’s subject position with two others. The first is “many other transgender people who are beacons of righteousness,” who show “many people” that “we are just like everyone else.” The second is “a lot of MARINES and others,” whether trans- or cisgender, who make “mistakes”

and engage in “bad conduct” but remain “loyal to American interest.” “American interest” can be read as an interest in the exceptionalist errand into the Middle East, and in the United States’s status as an international exception to accountability for potential war crimes, such as Collateral Murder.

Beck concludes that she is “hoping for . . . America to be a beacon of freedom and equality,” but “now [M]anning just dirtied” and “tarnish[ed]” that hope. Discursively aligning “many other transgender people” and “America” as “beacons,” Beck constructs an exceptional(ist) transgender subject position—one that is an exception to lavender peril and loyal to American exceptionalism. Demarcating that position, Beck degrades Manning as abject (“dirt[y],” “a tarnish”) in Kristeva’s sense of “what disturbs identity, systems, order,” in particular “the traitor.”¹⁶² Thus, to become Max, Athena, or Kristin is to become an exception within an exception, a literally or allegorically transgender exception to Kelpy, Boomer, or Chelsea within a literally or allegorically American exception.

More than any other event, those in the Manning controversy have generated research on the relation between homonationalism and transgender politics, with Fischer writing that Beck’s Facebook post “signals the emergence of transpatriotism.”¹⁶³ I would say, the post signals the coming out and thus reterritorialization of transnormative nationalism in that Kristin has come out to the interpellated reader as transgender, unlike the post-post-gender cyborg woman before her. However, the transnormative nationalist energies animating the post had been emerging for more than a decade.

Mo(ve)ments of F(l)ight: Discussion

Transnormative nationalism began territorializing with science fiction television as early as 2000. In that instantiation, science fiction television reflected transgender politics (for example, when it translated literal transgender politics into allegory) and shaped such politics (for example, when television critics, fan fiction writers, and fan video creators translated allegorical transgender politics back into the literal). The connections between science fiction television and transgender politics were sometimes manifest (as in that cycle of allegorizing and deallegorizing) and other times hidden (as in the Manning controversy). Further research could trace how transnormative nationalism continues to reterritorialize across transnormativities and nationalisms.

Like all assemblages, transnormative nationalism produces its own “moment[s] of leakage” with the “possibility of escape.”¹⁶⁴ For example, in *Battlestar Galactica*, Athena learns that despite her accommodation, humans are still planning

to betray her.¹⁶⁵ She exclaims, “I’ve held back my anger!” and breaks a window with her fist.¹⁶⁶

In this moment, the post-post-gender cyborg woman has realized that transnormative nationalism will not keep transgender subjects or populations safe. A moment per se cannot deterritorialize transnormative nationalism. But implicit within a moment is the potential for transtextual energies to break through, to conduce movement. Holding back our anger no more, we can follow the line of f(l)ight, which is a line of “ongoing political struggle”¹⁶⁷ and of fleeing/flying out of transnormative nationalism, beyond normative nationalist reterritorializations, toward the horizon of transgender liberation. Perhaps those among us who do so are the harbingers of a post-post-gender world.

Notes

This article incorporates material presented at the Feminist Graduate Student Association Annual Symposium, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, March 29, 2013; Lavender Languages and Linguistics, American University, Washington, DC, April 15–17, 2013; the Comparative Studies Student Association Conference, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, October 24–25, 2014; the National Women’s Studies Association Annual Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November 13–16, 2014; and Trans*Studies: An International Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment, and Sexuality, University of Arizona, Tucson, September 7–10, 2016. Thank you to Christine Scodari, Jane Caputi, Michael J. Horswell, the anonymous reviewers, and many others.

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10. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 43–66.
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13. Gust A. Yep, Sage E. Russo, and Rebecca N. Gigi, "The New Transnormativity? Reading Mainstream Representations of Caitlyn Jenner in the University Classroom," in *Leadership, Equity, and Social Justice in American Higher Education: A Reader*, ed. C. P. Gause (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 156.
14. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 10.
15. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 24. When Puar uses the term *the ascendancy of whiteness*, she is quoting Rey Chow.
16. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 4.
17. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 5. When Puar uses the term *stuck*, she is quoting Sarah Ahmed.
18. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxi, 31.
19. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxxii.
20. Puar's *trans(homo)nationalism* fulfills those criteria as well. Jasbir K. Puar, "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled," *Social Text* 33, no. 3 (2015): 46. However, when spoken aloud, that term may lose the nuance of Puar's view that *trans(homo)nationalism* is only "sometimes" homo. Susan Stryker, quoted in Puar,

- “Bodies with New Organs,” 68n8. On the gender–sexuality distinction as discursive, see David Valentine, “The Categories Themselves,” *GLQ* 10, no. 2 (2004): 215–20, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-10-2-215>.
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 23. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 211.
 24. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 229.
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44. *DA* 2.6.
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