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“Just look at her!”: Sporting bodies as athletic resistance and the limits of sport norms in the case of Caster Semenya

“Since neither one's genitalia nor genetics or hormones can necessarily pinpoint one's sex, barring a finding that Semenya is a man intentionally competing as a woman, there appear to be no grounds for IAAF to disqualify her. . . .”

David Epstein, *Sports Illustrated*

“A body's sex is simply too complex. There is no either/or. Rather, there are shades of difference.”

Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

When a sport magazine's treatment of gender is indistinguishable from an academic treatment of the subject, one knows that something unique is taking place. And so it was in the late summer of 2009 that the world was introduced to Caster Semenya, the 18-year old South African runner who had decidedly won the 800-meter at the World Track and Field Championships in Berlin. While Semenya's two-second lead over the second place finisher was astounding, it was the allegations that Semenya was in fact a male that captured international media attention. For the next two weeks media coverage of the young runner was a staple of both news and sports features throughout the world.

While media coverage of Semenya obviously focused on the issue of what Semenya's sex was, the U.S. sports media, in particular, provided a shockingly complex account of gender and sexuality. *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN*, and sports segments on CNN, MSNBC, ABC and CBS all gave prominent attention to the multiple elements that comprise biological sex, various conditions that blur traditional understandings of sexual identity, and generally deconstructed traditional understandings of sex and/or gender.

While such progressive treatments of gender are seldom found in mainstream media texts, their proliferation in specifically sports media texts in this particular instance was telling. The consensus position of the U.S. sports media was that the gender verification tests required of

Semenya were unfair and that she should in fact be allowed to run. In the course of making this case, these same sports media presented a rigorous challenge to traditional conceptions of sex and gender. Yet these rhetorical efforts to deconstruct sex and gender binaries were undermined by the specific ways in which Semenya's dual performances – athletic and gender – were visually depicted. A close reading and analysis of U.S. sports media coverage of Caster Semenya provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which the norms of sport may foster progressive treatment of athletes whose genders do not fit comfortably within the existing, traditional expectations of what men and women should be like. At the same time, however, I wish to suggest that both discursive and visual rhetoric are limited in how much they can use such sports norms when ontological questions about the normal, the natural, and the body are at stake. By paying particular attention to the interplay between the linguistic, the visual, and the performative I hope to show that even the most sincere efforts to complicate sex and gender within the framework of sport have significant limitations.

The case of Caster Semenya has elicited considerable academic study, much of it focusing on media representations of Semenya and most of it concluding that media constructions of Semenya relied on and reinforced traditional standards of gender and sexuality. Cooky, Dycus and Dworkin, in a comparative study of American and South African media coverage, noted that stories about the gender verification tests reproduced “as natural and inevitable, the ideological foundation of the sex/gender binary.”(2013, 32) Sloop likewise discovered four distinct discursive logics in coverage of Semenya that, while presenting a range of assumptions about the naturalness of gender, still “in the main, reproduces a binary understanding of gender.”(2012, 82) Even press reports that were sympathetic to Semenya were found to draw on traditional ideas of femininity.

Yet absent from these studies has been consideration of the unique ways in which the American sports media in particular covered Caster Semenya or the ways in which a gender binary was actively challenged and deconstructed by these same media. My analysis focuses on articles and stories produced by exclusively sports-oriented media – *Sports Illustrated*, ESPN, and NBC Sports. My analysis draws on all stories that mention Caster Semenya produced by these outlets from August 19th 2009 through December of 2009, although the majority of stories dropped dramatically after mid-September. I draw upon rhetorical and performance theory combined with the scholarship of gender studies and queer studies to analyze the representations of Caster Semenya’s dual athletic and gender performances as presented in the American sports media. This combination of theoretical approaches allows me to analyze the ways in which performances (both athletic and gender) are presented and discussed and the subsequent ways these performances are constructed into a larger discourse about gender. My analysis is intentionally intersectional, taking into consideration the role that race, nationality and perceived sexual orientation play in constructing a set of narratives about Caster Semenya, while focusing primarily on the way that gender was discussed and presented within the American sports press.

Sport as a Discursive Formation: Circumscribed challenge or appropriated reform?

Sport is a complex cultural practice complete with its own values, beliefs and logic. Sport – the universe of rules, beliefs, expectations, commentary – constitutes a discursive formation capable of simultaneously reinforcing regressive social tendencies while providing both a space and the resources to resist these same tendencies. Over the past several decades sport has begun to receive sustained academic attention, particularly in terms of how sport is inflected with ideological beliefs about gender, race and nationhood. While a thorough review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article, two prominent themes in the scholarship deserve mention: the

ways in which sport encourages reductive, stereotypical treatment of gender, race and nation of origin, as well as the ways in which sport is used to challenge sexist, racist and other discourses of privilege. The intent is to demonstrate how the cultural logic of sport, its history, and its uses were deployed in the specific instance of sports coverage of Caster Semenya.

A significant body of literature has emerged documenting the not inconsiderable ways in which sport continues to reify a binary understanding of sex and gender that reinscribes hegemonic masculinity and femininity, as well as continually demeans and objectifies female athletes. That sport should do so is not particularly surprising. The early organizing and structuring of sport during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century was intentionally heterosexual and masculine, intended to bolster and restore what was perceived as a waning of masculinity and virility. (Kimmel 2012, 101-104) Since then, the ongoing professionalization, expansion and commercialization of organized sports has only ensured that sport has continued “to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20th century.” (Messner 1994, 267)

This linking of maleness with socially-sanctioned violence, as well as the linking of masculinity with highly valued skills, means that in many ways sport supports a hegemonic male environment. (Bryson 1994, 48) The celebration and promotion of hegemonic masculinity has historically been, and continues to be, an important part of competitive sport, especially when social changes alter traditional conceptions of masculinity. “In promoting dominance and submission, in equating force and aggression with physical strength, modern sport naturalized the equation of maleness with power, thus legitimizing a challenged and faltering system of masculine domination.” (Messner 1992, 15, Dunning 1994, 163-180)

Since popular understandings of gender typically conceive of masculinity and femininity as polar opposites, the association of masculinity with sport has frequently been understood as making sport in some ways fundamentally opposed to the feminine. For decades feminist scholars have examined the myriad ways in which sport resists the involvement of women and contains the threat that female athletic involvement entails. The disparity between male and female athletes, the greater disparity between funding of male and female sports, and the even greater disparity between male and female coaches and athletic directors, have all been identified as signs and causes of limited female acceptance in sport. (Acosta and Carpenter 1994, Blinde 1994, Boutilier and SanGiovanni 1994, Knoppers 1994)

Recognizing that female athletes are asked to perform two simultaneously contradictory performances – their athletic performance that requires mastery of many widely-perceived masculine abilities and their gender performance that requires them to enact expected displays of femininity – helps to clarify the paradox that female athletes face – a paradox that is firmly centered on the body and bodily performances. The very activity of females engaging in rigorous sport visibly and poignantly challenges traditional gender binaries: “The action shots of strong, sweaty female bodies, simply by their sheer corporeality, challenge dominant masculine conventions involving sport.”(Banet-Weiser 2002, 93) It is precisely because athletic competition so directly challenges traditional gender norms that public presentations of these athletes work so hard to present a non-threatening, more traditional femininity, frequently in the guise of feminine beauty and sex appeal. Female athletes face tremendous pressure to enact a hyperfemininity in which they present themselves as traditionally feminine in all other ways, but

particularly in their beauty and availability to men. (Cahn 1994a, Choi 2000, Cole 1994, Heywood and Dworkin 2003)¹

But perhaps the preeminent strategy used to discipline female athletes who too directly challenge gender binaries has been to question or disparage their sexual orientation. Sport has long been a safe haven for homophobic attitudes, behaviors and expressions and continues to draw upon heteronormative assumptions. And it is important to recognize that in sport culture homophobia and heteronormativity are “as much about ‘keeping up appearances’ as [they] are about actual sexual orientation.” (Lenskyj 2012, 139) Regarding women in particular, the specter of lesbianism has emerged as one of the most potent and prolific containment strategies used against successful female athletes. The linkage between sport and masculine attributes historically discouraged “normal” women from playing sports, and perpetuated the belief that women who are interested in sports or excel in sports must be lesbian. (McDonagh and Pappano 2008, 188) Thus the fear that young girls would either become lesbian through participating in sports, or be preyed upon by “predatory dykes” who used their coaching as a means of gaining access to naïve girls, was used quite successfully throughout the twentieth century to scare girls and women away from athletic competition. (Griffin 1998)

The result of these pressures has in essence been that female athletes have been offered what has been termed the “feminine bargain” – the implied promise that if they perform a recognized femininity and abide by the rules expected for girls, they will be allowed to engage in athletic performances while being exempted from unflattering stereotypes of female athletes. (McDonagh and Pappano 2008, 205) These pressures have coalesced to severely limit the progressive potential of sport, providing the means by which “women’s sport has been

¹ Rowe has gone so far as to note the disturbing parallels between soft-core pornography and the typical visual representation of the female athlete’s body. See pages 147-158 in particular. (Rowe 1999)

institutionally contained, and thus its potential challenge to sport's construction of hegemonic masculinity has been largely defused." (Messner 1992, 160)

When race and nationality are added to the above equation, however, the construction of otherness significantly expands. The rhetorical ancestry of gender and sex, race, and nationality produces a thicket of intertwined and contradictory meanings for images and representations of black, female athletes from non-western countries. In this country, female African-American athletes rose to prominence during the interwar years of the twentieth century. A critical part of this rise is attributable to the different conceptualizations of femininity available to black and white women at the time. The sport of track and field, in particular, was increasingly understood as a masculine sport because it showcased power and speed unmediated by equipment, teams or complicated rules. (Cahn 1994b, 114) This perception impacted women's participation levels in track and field, but in a highly selective manner. For white women, whose femininity was evidenced by such qualities as passivity, tenderness, and frailty, involvement in track and field and the requisite displays of aggressiveness, strength and toughness coded them as failures at femininity – “manly” women. African-American female athletes, however, were able to draw upon a more comprehensive conception of femininity that included and valued such traits as strength, power and assertiveness, in turn creating a space within which they could simultaneously be successful athletes and women.

Black women's own conceptions of womanhood, while it may not actively have encouraged sport, did not preclude it. A heritage of resistance to racial and sexual oppression found African-American women occupying multiple roles as wagedworkers, homemakers, mothers and community leaders. (Cahn 1994b, 117)

Yet while black female athletes could enjoy acceptance and support within the African-American community, for the broader white community black female athletic success was not only a sign of failed femininity, but hailed as evidence of their questionable humanity. (Lansbury 2001)² The commonly held racial stereotypes of the time ensured that white audiences would be inclined to view African-American women's success in track and field as confirmation of the stereotypes that black women were less womanly than white women. (Cahn 1994b, 112)

“Attitudes toward the African-American woman's Amazonian work capacity, and lack of physical and emotional sensitivity, flowed easily into notions about the natural strength and ‘manly’ athletic abilities of black women in running, jumping and throwing activities. . . .” (Vertinsky and Captain 1998, 544-545) Thus in the case of African-American female athletes the performance of athletic excellence functioned as a sign of racial otherness.

Yet the meaning of the black female athlete was further complicated when the athletes were African. The history of the exploitation and appropriation of African women by a western, white, colonizing gaze is by now well-documented, perhaps best embodied by Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus.” Baartman was taken from Cape Town in 1810 and was toured extensively throughout Europe, displayed as a specimen of innate African sexuality. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries her body signified the iconic figure of African womanhood that was fundamentally primitive and lascivious.” (Samuelson, quoted in Munro, 390)

It was perhaps inevitable that the presumed physicality inherent to the black body would come to be viewed as an athletic performance enhancer. There was nothing exceptional when an Olympic official named Norman Cox, addressing the success of black women from African

² Lansbury notes that while both the white and black press of the time focused on race or gender (rather than the athleticism of Alice Coachman or Aletha Givson) the black press emphasized femininity in order to elevate their status, whereas the white press used their success to illustrate their otherness.

countries, suggested that the IOC “should create a special category of competition for the unfairly advantaged ‘hermaphrodites’ who regularly defeated ‘normal’ women, those less-skilled ‘child-bearing’ types with ‘largish breasts, wide hips, [and] knocked knees.’” (Cahn 1994b, 111) His comments demonstrate the ease with which racial, ethnic and sexist stereotypes not only reinforced one another, but created a climate wherein a successful athletic performance by a black woman became a sign of aberrant femininity and racial difference.

Since that time the meaning of black athleticism in general, and black female athleticism in particular, have shifted. Notably, the intensity of the negative connotations of black athleticism have receded, and sport has become one of the general forms of black culture readily marketed as urban cool. (Hoberman 1997)³ Yet the fundamental assumption of racial difference, of an innate black physicality that is rawer, stronger and more elemental than other races, has if anything only intensified. What Hoberman terms “[t]he myth of black hardiness and supernormal vitality” has become one of the central tenets around which we construct racial difference. (Hoberman 1997, 187) When athletes from African nations compete on an international stage these stereotypes of black physicality are exacerbated by their articulation to various myths about the character and physical capacity of different nations and ethnic groups. (Hoberman 1997, 139)

In terms of black female athletes in the global north, in particular, this tendency to present them as a “raced” Other continues today. Schultz, for example, has noted how coverage of Serena Williams at the 2002 U.S. Open focused on her competition outfit and her body. This coverage consistently worked to differentiate Williams’ from other (i.e. White) competitors, in turn marking her as a racialized Other. (Schultz 2005)

³ Hoberman discusses the NBA as an example of how race has been turned into style – an empty signifier that functions as a commodity available to those with the requisite income, citing commissioner David Stern’s extended comparison of the NBA to Disney. See pages 34-35 in particular.

Clearly, much of the way in which sport has been used has supported sexist, racist, homophobic and nationalistic ideologies. Yet as a discursive formation, sport presents neither a monolithic nor impregnable obstacle to female or racial empowerment or the disruption of troubling gender and racial stereotypes. Judith Butler has insisted that “women’s sports in particular has shown us in the last few decades just how radically gender norms can be altered through a spectacular public restaging.” (1998, 108) Numerous scholars have examined the ways in which sport creates a space from which female athletes craft gendered identities that in spite of limited resources and various forms of opposition still manage to resist the pressures of hegemonic femininity. (Banet-Weiser 2002, Bolin 2003, Carney 2000, Miller 2010, Theberge 2000) Although such opportunities are not without significant limitations, at the level of the individual female athlete, at least, it is possible for significant gender reformulations to take place. (Hanis-Martin 2006, Mean and Kassing 2008)

Sport, as a discursive formation, is uniquely suited to foster the creation of a space where female power is normative rather than transgressive. Feminist and critical race scholars have recognized that although sport is very much a product of, and contributor to, cultural values and beliefs, sport functions *as if* it is independent of culture, and that this is in turn responsible for much of its aura and ideological power. “The ‘logic’ of the sport/body combination, the seemingly free display of bodies in motion, contributes to an illusion that sport and its bodies are transparent, set apart from politics, culture, and the economy. . . .” (Birrell and Cole 1994, 15) The winner, in other words, is generally perceived to be nothing more than the team or individual who was stronger, faster, or tougher.

The tendency to treat sport outcomes as evidence of physical, and thus social, superiority also creates a wedge for women’s athletic successes to be read as a confirmation of female

physical and social excellence. The centrality that meritocracy, competition, respect for rules, loyalty, and victory play in sport creates a logic and a moral structure that historically has both reinforced deplorable social customs and beliefs while providing a framework within which oppressed groups could challenge those same beliefs and customs. (Hartmann 2003, 469) The internal logic of sport thus allowed for the production of discourse from multiple sites, even traditionally conservative voices, that can challenge some of the most fundamental premises that sport is constructed around.⁴

A key element of sport logic is the role that excellence and virtue play in our cultural fascination with sport, for it is the very exceptionality of athletes that entices viewers. The distance between us as spectators and the physical capabilities of our top athletes creates a gulf that feeds sport fandom. Yet it is our ability as fans to achieve meaningful identification with physically superior athletes that bridges this gulf. Gumbrecht has noted that “Perhaps we should not rule out the possibility that watching sports can allow us to be suddenly, somehow, one with those beautiful and beautifully transfigured bodies.” (Gumbrecht 2006, 32)

It is precisely this type of oneness that Kenneth Burke famously made central to rhetoric: “So there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification (“consubstantiality”) and communication (the nature of rhetoric as “addressed”).”(Burke 1969, 46) The significance of this statement lies in the fact that the kind of meaningful sharing of oneness at the heart of rhetoric (of being shaped, or made ready, for change) is also central to the experience of watching, enjoying and admiring athletic performances. To watch, and identify, with female athletic excellence is to be faced with the possibility of recognizing and accepting a form of femaleness that is powerful, active, and aggressive.

⁴ Indeed, dispersion – of sites, voices, logic – is the operating logic of discursive formations. See Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 68; 107.

But athletic excellence also serves as a celebration and reaffirmation of the values that any society extols. *Arête*, the Greek conception of honor, and *agon*, the conception of struggle or contest, were both central to the meaning that competitive games and festivals held for the ancient Greeks, and has continued to infuse the meaning-making that sport provides us: “*Arête* and *agon* go together in most athletic events – and certainly in all of the most popular ones.” (Gumbrecht 2006, 72) This coupling of *arête* and *agon* thus makes the quest for victory and the way in which that victory is achieved indispensable to the honor of that victory. Athletic excellence resides in the marriage of struggle and embodied virtue, and these twin qualities help explain the role that sport has played in challenging traditional ideas of race and gender.

Thus sport, as a discursive formation, is constructed upon a rhetorical ancestry of troublesome ideologies – innate black physicality, suspect female athleticism and Euro-centrism – that continue to inform understandings of contemporary black female athletes, anchoring modern renderings of black female athleticism to a history of racism, homophobia, colonialism and sexism. Yet the logic and values of sport, its foundation of meritocracy and celebration of excellence and struggle, provides the rhetorical resources for dismantling these same ideologies.

An Ambivalent Sympathy: Paradoxical performances and attempted apologia

When Semenya’s story broke, the national sport media immediately strove to position Semenya as a wrongly-besmirched champion all the more admirable for the poise and grace she demonstrated in handling the accusations and ensuing highly-visible testing. In order to do so the sports media had to explain why, in spite of accusations based on (what were presented as) obvious masculine attributes, she could be considered female. This in turn required an overt discussion of the complexity of biological sex and a deconstruction of sex and gender binaries.

The decision to construct Semenya as noble champion was not a foregone conclusion. Given the overwhelming tendency of the media to contain the threats to traditional genders posed by female athletes and the assumptions of racial prowess attached to black bodies, it was certainly plausible to expect that Semenya would be treated as a freak of nature – fast, but a tragic or comic oddity. As symbol, Semenya presented a plethora of possibilities through which the meaning of her victory, appearance and mannerisms could be understood. Since her body crossed numerous axes – sex, gender, race, socioeconomic status and nation – there were any number of possible ways to read her. The fact that American sportscasters sought to defend Semenya in spite of a rhetorical ancestry that lampooned and demonized black female athletes was due in part to the discursive formation that competitive sport fosters and to the specific performance of Semenya at the world championships.

To understand the desire to present Semenya sympathetically requires an appreciation of her athletic performance. Semenya's victory in the 800 meter at the 2009 World Championships not only broke the South African national record, but was almost two and a half seconds ahead of the second place finisher. Her stunning performance was an integral and prominent part of early accounts that broke the story. Television and web-based news stories frequently included video of the last few seconds of the race showing Semenya dozens of meters ahead of the second-place finisher. The first brief account of Semenya's victory presented by *Sports Illustrated* described Semenya as having “dominated her rivals to win the 800 on Wednesday.” (2009d) ESPN's first article about Semenya described her victory as “a stunningly dominating run” that beat “defending champion Janeth Jepkosgei of Kenya by a massive 2.45 seconds” (2009c) and NBC Sports reported that “she didn't just beat the competition in the 800-meter world championships – she crushed them.” (2009b)

Such hyperbolic descriptions of her victory continued in the ongoing sport media coverage. An article by Mary Buckheit published on ESPN.com a week after the initial story broke was headlined “Caster Semenya is being treated unfairly” and begins by describing her “blistering time of 1:55:45 in the 800 meters [that] bested the field by a remarkable 2.45 seconds.” *Sports Illustrated* noted in a follow-up piece on September 9 that “In the track world the question of what constitutes a man or a woman is not new, nor is it straightforward. In Berlin, Semenya needed less than two minutes to thrust the issue back into the spotlight. A virtual unknown two months ago, the 18-year-old blew away the 800 field in 1:55.45, winning by more than two seconds.” (Epstein 2009c) While the victory itself was presented as an admirable accomplishment, it is the immensity of her victory that is emphasized, and there is little doubt that her ability to dominate is clearly being extolled.

If Semenya’s success in her athletic performance was the *arête*, her struggles with her gender performance constituted the *agon* of the story – her fortitude under the pressure of the unrelenting worldwide spectacle about the most intimate details of her life. In a follow-up story (in a column that assigns grades to that week’s sporting events) *Sports Illustrated* insisted that

If it [the sex test] turns up anything other than deliberate foul play such as steroids or testosterone injections, then the testing procedure, whatever its specifics, was potentially harmful, intrusive and unnecessary. If Semenya was merely given an unusual genetic make-up at birth, then it is time to leave the 18-year old alone and let her compete as a very accomplished young woman. Oh, and then we would give her an A, not just for winning the 800 meters in commanding fashion in Berlin, but for having a grace under a most uncommon public fire. (Cazeneuve 2009)

In addition numerous news stories featured or referred to South African reaction to the IAAF's decision to require a gender test.⁵ The official South African athletics organization was credited with being “insulted by the uproar about her gender.” (2009a) When Semenya arrived back in South Africa, sports media covered her reception and the hero's welcome she received, including an audience with South African president Jacob Zuma. (2009e)

The events surrounding Semenya's victory and challenges to that victory thus became integral pieces to a story about a heroic victor who possessed the strength and dedication to dominate on the field and survive adversity off of it – the key ingredients to any motivational sports story. And yet if the sport media was to tell this story, then the extolling of her virtues required a defense of the accusations against her.

It was this need to establish her worthiness for honor that necessitated a careful apologia for Semenya and such a defense would only be possible if binary conceptions of sex and gender were deconstructed. Multiple stories thus provided detailed analyses of how complex and nuanced biological sex and the experience of gender can be. An editorial in *Sports Illustrated* discussed chromosomal variation, androgen insensitivity, discounted the use of hormones as a reliable indicator of gender, and concluded that:

Since neither one's genitalia nor genetics or hormones can necessarily pinpoint one's sex . . . there appear to be no grounds for IAAF to disqualify her based on what would have to be a subjective standard to determine that someone who was raised a woman and considers herself a woman is in fact a man. (Epstein 2009a)

⁵ Language about sex, gender and sexuality is notoriously slippery in popular usage. The test in question was presented as a means to determine her sex, although the test itself involves considerations of the athlete's own perceptions about her gender identity.

Nor were these dissections of biological sex and gender offered without clear moral evaluation. ESPN.com expressed displeasure that “We are determined – come hell or high water – to define human beings with binary gender sexing” and then proceeded to condemn the treatment of Semenya based on an explicitly feminist evaluation:

There’s an undeniable double standard at work in sports. As long as women have competed (and as long as evolving attire has allowed us to see their bodies), people have depreciated and humiliated some of the best female athletes by calling them manly. Their enigmatic strength and athleticism is countered with derisive criticism and gender judgments. (Buckheit 2009)

Thus not only were gender and sex constructed as much more complex than the pervasive binary model might suggest, but a non-binary model of sex and gender was developed and promoted.

The sport discursive community provided a context within which a popular cultural deconstruction of sex/gender binaries could be carried out. Sport provided the venue wherein female athletic success such as Semenya's stood for something - unequivocal proof of her superiority. Furthermore, the celebration of, and identification with, excellence that athletic competition encourages, made aspersion of her sexual identity intolerable. And so it was that, momentarily, *ESPN* and *Sports Illustrated* became sources of some of the most impassioned deconstructions of binary gender to be found in popular culture.

Contrasting Visuals of Contrasting Performances

Coverage of Semenya's story was filled with considerable visual material, but significant differences in the ways in which these visuals were deployed to document her athletic and gender performances undermined the sports media’s efforts to deconstruct gender dimorphism.

The visual depictions of Semenya fell into two general categories – images of her winning the race, and images of her after the race in one of several poses. These categories mirror the two different performances that Semenya’s story revolved around, the former images associated with her athletic performance and the latter category illustrating her gender performance. Figure One, for example, comes from the Buckheit article posted to ESPN.com cited earlier. Appearing approximately half-way through the story, it is the second of two images attached to the article. As befitting a story dedicated to defending Semenya, the picture is captioned “Semenya scorched the field in Berlin in 1:55:45 – 2.45 seconds ahead of her closest competitor.” In this instance the text exemplifies the arête of her athletic performance, “anchoring” the image by informing us that what we are seeing is Semenya “scorching” the field, well ahead of her closest competitor. And indeed, the image itself reinforces this proposition.



Figure One

To begin with, Figure One relies on a narrative visual logic. The track's lane lines form a vector in this instance, directly connecting Semenya to the competitors behind her. "The hallmark of a narrative visual 'proposition' is the presence of a vector: narrative structures always have one" (Kress 1996, 57) A combination of visual strategies establish Semenya as the actor in this narrative. Her prominent placement in the foreground is accentuated by the blurring of her fellow competitors in the background. As a result, Semenya's character is fully embodied – her facial expression is visible, her name and sponsor are clearly distinguishable on her bib, her taut muscles are caught mid-stride, while her competitors are so out-of-focus that they appear as blurred images, distinguishable as humans of different skin color, but little more. Indeed, it is difficult to tell from the picture how many competitors even trail her.

The narrative of this image is further developed through the implied goal. The image is clearly of a race – the clothing, track, and sponsorships are all recognizable signs of track and field. Placing Semenya in the right hand third of the image and her competitors in the upper left hand quadrant, connected by the vector of the lane lines, contextualizes Semenya's placement as victorious; a proposition further reinforced by her raised right hand, index finger extended in a "number one." Furthermore, the image accentuates the gulf between Semenya and her rivals through the dead space in the middle third of the picture – there is literally nobody and nothing immediately behind Semenya. The image thus functions as a rhetorical extension of the documentation of her *arête*, firmly demonstrating the excellence of her athletic performance.

Figure One, however, is unique among the images of Semenya in the initial sports media coverage of her. The ESPN.com article from which the image was taken was published nine days after Semenya's story broke on August 19. It is the only image of Semenya's racing that appeared in the first two months of ESPN's coverage. *Sport's Illustrated* was similarly devoid of

images of Semenya racing, at least images that clearly presented her as victorious or established the arête of her athletic performance. *Sport's Illustrated* first covered the story online on August 19th, but only in brief paragraphs embedded within other brief events and without pictures. The next story to appear about Semenya was written by David Epstein and published on August 21, and amounted to a rigorous defense of Semenya and an accompanying deconstruction of sexual dimorphism. There is one image of Semenya displayed within the text of the article that is a close-up of Semenya poised in the same position as Figure One, but this time Semenya fills the frame in a medium close-up that omits any of the previously discussed signs of a race. The story contains a hyperlink to a “Photo Gallery of Caster Semenya” that contains ten images of Semenya. Of the ten images only four are taken from her race, and none of them contain a visual logic foregrounding her athletic performance.



Figure Two

While Figure Two clearly depicts a race, it does not showcase the scope of her victory, let alone a victory. The image places Semenya literally in the middle of the field of competitors. This time, however, the image is compressed and it is impossible to gauge the distance between

Semenya and the other racers. The use of a wider depth of field by the photographer allows all of the racers to be in focus, and the details of each are clearly visible. The detailed background establishes a more balanced relationship between Semanya and the rest of the field. In this image, Semanya leads the pack, but she is still clearly a part of the pack.

If images of Semanya racing and engaged in her athletic performance were sparse, images of Semanya's gender performance, the displays of her body, were quite literally impossible to miss. Although sport media stories about Semanya were defending her right to race and depicting the sex testing as unfair, unnecessary and harmful, the stories also documented the physical qualities that had raised suspicions about her sex in the first place. One of the most heavily used images of Semanya was of her immediately after her victory with her arms raised, flexing her biceps. (Figure Three) This image was used early in the initial coverage by both *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN.com including the Buckheit piece that presented the feminist deconstruction of sexual dimorphism. Prior to her attack on the sexual double standard, Buckheit bemoans that "The root of what's wrong with this picture [of questioning Semanya's sex] is the barrage of opinions that Caster Semanya 'just doesn't look womanly enough' and that her six-pack and speed must be the result of a hidden Y chromosome." (Buckheit 2009)

Yet the same article placed the image of Figure Three ahead of Figure One and captioned it with the note "Caster Semanya's gender is being questioned by defeated opponents in the wake of her victory in the 800 meters at the world track championships." The image itself is of a close-up of Semanya whose arms are raised, hands in fists, flexing her biceps. The background of the picture is pushed so far out of focus that Semanya is the sole image in the picture.



Figure Three

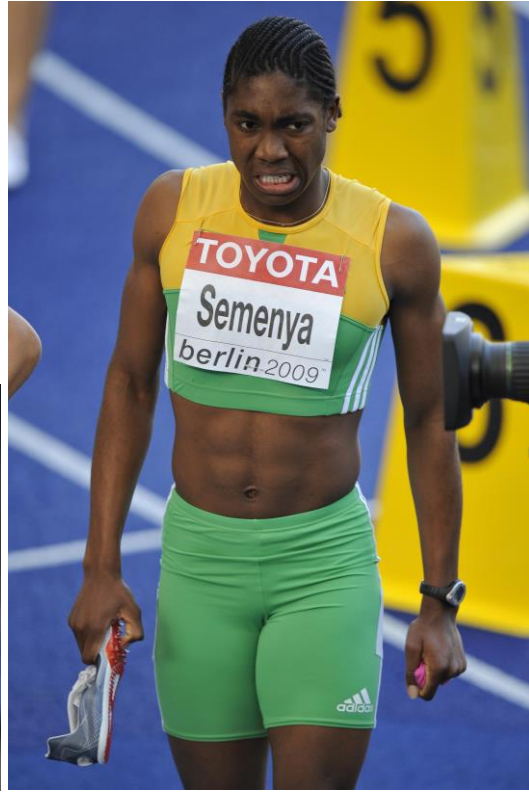


Figure Four

Figure Four was also used by ESPN and *Sport's Illustrated* in the early coverage of Semenya. Figure Four appeared in the very first ESPN.com article on August 19 and was also included in the Photo Gallery associated with the first substantive *Sport's Illustrated* story of Semenya on Aug. 21st. Figures Three and Four both document Semenya's gender performance and share numerous qualities. Both images present a highly detailed, revealing depiction of her body. Her face is clearly visible in both images, and Figure Four has captured a facial expression that approximates a snarl. Her musculature is similarly emphasized in these images. Her raised arms in Figure Three emphasize her biceps, while Figure Four emphasizes her "six pack."

These images not only document the presence of traditionally masculine components of gender, but also the absence of traditional female components. One obvious absence is of even modest breasts. Her small/flat chest, although typical of female runners, became a meaningful

absence in this context. The other most prominent marker of femininity, long hair, was also missing. Semenya wore her hair in tight corn rows, with no locks or extensions hanging past her scalp. Although neither of these features were explicitly mentioned in either mainstream news coverage or sport media coverage they did not need to be. Barthes recognized that absence itself is semiotically rich – a “zero sign . . . where the absence of any explicit signifier functions by itself as a signifier.”(Barthes 1967, 77) Thus for Barthes, absence has the potential to be a “significant absence.” The visual images document both masculine abundance and feminine lack, and together, they depict a gender performance with ample masculine features but few feminine ones - visual proof of why people questioned her sex in the first place.

Two facts are relevant about the use and circulation of these images: that these images were deployed as support not of her athletic performance, but her gender performance, and that they are static, rather than dynamic images. It is here - in the space in which we are told and shown the differences between her athletic and gender performances - that the relationship between the performative, visual and rhetorical becomes noteworthy.

As distinct modalities of appearance, rhetoric and athletics help sketch out the complicated relations between "forms" and "words" - the visible and the articulable. . . . [R]hetoric became sutured to athletics precisely through the broader relations between the visible and the articulable: that which is known through bodies, and that which is known through words about bodies. (Hawhee 2004, 163)

In this case what is known is the result of a complex interplay between performances, what can be articulated, and two different forms of visual representation: static and dynamic. In Semenya's case one performance - her athletic - informs another performance - her gender. The discursive formation of sport allowed for the possibility of Semenya's athletic performance not only to

coexist alongside her gender performance, but created the space necessary in which a broad, meta-level conversation about sex and gender was possible. What was articulable about her athletic performance - her excellence - was reinforced by what was made visible through viewing her race. Likewise, what was articulable about her gender performance - her masculine attributes - was not only reinforced by viewing images of her muscular appearance, but extended via the depicted absence of traditionally feminine attributes. This coupling of a dynamic visual to athletic performance and a static visual to gender performance established a visual logic that was not only unable to meet the demands of deconstructing sex and gender binaries, but actually inimical to those goals.

The trouble begins with the cultural history – the sustained habits available to audiences decoding images of an athletic performance versus images of a gender performance. Images are inherently polysemic, a “floating chain of signifieds” that are interpreted based on the knowledge implanted by any given culture. (Barthes 1977, 32-51)⁶ Hariman and Lucaites have noted that photographs rely upon shared “recognizable moments”: “Performance, and the knowledge disseminated, examined, or gained through performance occurs only in respect to what has already become commonly apprehensible to a community.” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 32) Absent such cultural habits of recognizing and interpreting an image – any particular meaning is an unrecognized potentiality stuck in a still floating chain of signifieds.

There are radical dissimilarities between the types of shared cultural habits available to audiences viewing images of a stunning athletic performance versus a performance of a non-binary gender. Visual images of the athletic *arête* mentioned above are virtually inescapable in American society, comprising as they do a staple of local and national news coverage as well as

⁶ I am in particular referring to Barthes’ discussion of the multiplicity of potential meanings in any image, and the heavily cultural knowledge available to interpret these meanings, addressed most directly in pages 34-35.

a plethora of exclusive sports media outlets. Images of the runner breaking the tape or the athlete raising their arms over their head in ecstatic celebration are immediately recognizable visual tropes of victory. Images of non-binary sex, on the other hand, – a person who’s gender or sex is difficult or even impossible to determine, or who simultaneously exhibits traits from both of the familiar two-sex categories - are significantly less common and as a result, much less easily coded by viewers. Barthes emphasized that while there are any number of readings of the same image available to viewers, the variation is not anarchic – it depends on the different kinds of knowledge invested in the image that are culturally available. (Barthes 1977, 46-7) Audiences would have a rich tradition of images connoting athletic arête available to them as they decode images of Semenya winning or celebrating her victory, ensuring a relatively culturally-consistent interpretation. These same audiences, however, would have much less available to them in guiding the decoding of the images, and the cultural history available would be much less celebratory of either Semenya or a visual deconstruction of binary sex.

The rhetorical ancestries of the black African female athlete examined earlier linger in our cultural memory, available to guide viewers’ readings of unfamiliar or discomfoting images. Each of these ancestries positions Semenya’s gender performance as some variation of unnatural, exotic, aberrant, or laughable. And while these ancestries could remain dormant when the focus was on her athletic domination, within the context of her gender performance they work against a sympathetic understanding of her. It is for this reason that Vannini and Fornnsler could note that images of Semenya could readily be read as depictions of an abject body. (2011, 247)

The way in which the images of Semenya captured the particularity of both her athletic and gender performances further helped to support the story of her arête while undermining the argument for a more complex understanding of sex and gender. Celebrating Semenya’s athletic

achievement necessitated focusing on her individuality. Hence images of her that demonstrated her uniqueness helped develop the extraordinariness of her victory.

Yet the argument for a less rigid conceptualization of sex and gender is one of typicality, likelihood, or representativeness – about ceding the possibility that the complexities of sex apply to more than just a few “deformed” individuals. Authors making the case for the complexity of sex relied on statements emphasizing the normal distribution of hormonal variation: “there is a tremendous hormonal variation among people, and attempting to survey humans to determine what testosterone level constitutes a man or woman becomes absurd very quickly;” (Epstein 2009b) the sheer frequency of sexual ambiguity: “every year more than 65,000 children are born who aren’t obviously either boys or girls;” (Buckheit 2009) and the limitations of a two-sex system: “As it turned out, the human body isn’t engineered to always fit neatly into the distinct male and female competitive categories convenient for athletics.” (Epstein 2009c, 24)

In order for photographs of Semenya to support claims such as these her image would need to be *representative* of sexual complexity, making Semenya a visual synecdoche of the limits of binary sex. Yet as Finnegan has suggested, while an image can be a visual synecdoche, photographs have an impulse to particularize that mitigates even the most intentional rhetorical uses of their image. (Finnegan 2003, 118) The consistent featuring of Semenya’s face, arms, and abs noted in Figures Three and Four, emphasized her particularity, grounding her masculine features to a readily recognizable, material body that could not at the same time stand-in for the broader deconstruction of the sex binary that the authors attempted to undertake.

The failure to visually support claims that challenged sexual dimorphism were further exacerbated by the fact that the articles that deconstructed the sex/gender binary required both a scientific lens and language’s ability to make abstract claims. Neither of these were available in

images of Semenya. For starters, scientific realism requires the ability to go beyond the visible. Scientific realism “defines reality on the basis of what things are like generically or regularly. It regards surface detail and individual difference as ephemeral, and does not stop at what can be observed with the naked eye.”(Kress 1996, 163) Deconstructing sex binaries is at heart an exercise in not using appearances as markers of sex. Yet images have nothing beyond appearance to offer. Illustrating the masculine markers that aroused suspicions of Semenya only served to reinforce the sexual and gender binaries that the articles attempted to dismantle. Viewers read about gender as a series of invisible, highly abstract relations but simultaneously viewed Semenya’s particular gender performance as specific and concrete.

Moreover, even if the images were read as documenting the instability of gender or the inadequacies of binary sexual categories, such a reading was not necessarily sympathetic. Semenya’s bodily performances contained two distinct excesses – an excess of speed that was at the heart of her athletic performance, and an excess of markers traditionally associated with masculinity that were at the heart of her gender performance. While the excess performed in her athletic skills was able to be coded as athletic excellence, the excess contained in her gender performance was not so easily interpreted sympathetically. As Reeser explains, “the ways in which female masculinity is understood . . . may differ from the reception of its male counterpart simply by virtue of being housed in a female body.” (Reeser 2010, 132) Female masculinity is inherently unsettling because masculinity is widely perceived as being attached to a body. (Connell 2005, 45) For this reason, female masculinity has traditionally been “received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach.” (Halberstam 1998, 9) Feminist scholars have long recognized that failure to adhere to

immediately recognizable codes of gender is not only suspect (Halberstam 1998, 23) but simultaneously alienating and frightening.

Thus while there was an undeniably vocal defense of Semenya and an accompanying challenge to the traditional gender binary, the repeated display of Semenya's body as a symbol of her failed gender performance undermined the full potential of the sports media's intended gender deconstruction. In referring to the "paradox of agency" in her identity, Butler has noted:

[T]he "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the "I" becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this "I" fully recognizable. (Butler 2004, 3)

It was Semenya's distance from traditional gender norms that made the transformation of them difficult – as the distance between a recognizable female and a person whose gender is difficult or impossible to identify increases, the transformative potential of that deviation is minimized. Images of Semenya's body documented the degree of her deviation from traditional expectations of femininity and simultaneously moved her further away from a subject position that audiences were likely to identify with and closer to an object position that signified difference or deviance.

Further complicating the potential for Semenya-as-symbol to challenge traditional sex categories is the fact that gender categories themselves are inherently fluid and flexible.

In a way, gender's very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway. Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female, in other words, gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. (Halberstam 1998, 20)

The inherent imprecision of the prevailing two gender categories allows for a certain degree of gender code variance to be accommodated in any performance of gender. While the charges against and reaction to Semenya clearly reveal that the degree of her performed gender code violation – the scope and magnitude of her masculine attributes – fell outside the acceptable level of deviation, such intolerance is a natural byproduct of the flexible binary gender categories. At whatever point society determines that particular gender code violations exceed acceptable limits (a determination that will be highly contingent), once that toleration has been exceeded, the full power of that society’s disciplinary mechanisms will come into play.

It is impossible to overstate the severity of disciplinary mechanisms brought to bear against Semenya after her victory in the 800-meter at Berlin. The sport’s ruling body subjected her to invasive sex verification tests and barred her from competing until the test results were concluded – effectively a one-year ban from competition. The story became an international media frenzy and Semenya was subjected to exhaustive and unwanted attention. She became the punchline of the most cruel and insensitive jokes worldwide, and was subjected to unceasing ridicule from mainstream international media outlets. The material ramifications of such disciplinary mechanisms were profound – not only did she lose a year of competition from a relatively short competitive lifespan but the impact on her mental health and physical safety are impossible to determine.

Conclusion

The sports arena has evolved in such a manner that female power and success can be celebrated, although in a highly contingent and necessarily restricted way. In the case of South African runner Caster Semenya it was possible for sports writers in the U.S. to construct and defend a non-binary model of sex and gender. To develop a compelling story of sport heroism

sportswriters turned to the familiar tropes of *arête* and *agon*. Yet in Semenya's case, portraying the *agon* involved a visual display that actively limited and undermined a full-frontal deconstruction of gender norms.

The existing rhetorical ancestry of female athletes in general, black athletes in particular, and female black athletes specifically, invoked a framework of difference and Otherness that placed Semenya in a position of particularity. Semenya's story and image readily supported the historical reading of the black female athlete as freak. Although the stories written about Semenya were sympathetic and insisted on her innocence, her ability to continue competing, and glorified her success and fortitude, the history of the black female athletic freak lurked as a spectre outside of the stories.

Furthermore, while defenders of Semenya articulated sex as complex and indeterminate, they drew upon performances of gender that were static and fixed. This attempt to deconstruct the sex binary had nothing to *show* to support the level of sexual nuance it asserted. The use of stills to document her ostensible masculinity presented her gender as a static fact. Yet to understand gender as a performance, as verb rather than noun, requires a fluid conceptualization of gender – a conceptualization that lies outside the scope of a static still image. The broader discussion about gender as a continuum was conducted in binary terms. By coupling what was show-able about Semenya with a conception of gender performance built from only masculine or feminine qualities, the deconstruction of sex binaries was limited from the start.

While the constructions of Semenya's athletic and gender performances constituted an important instance of destabilizing restrictive gender norms, the constructions could not completely overcome the weight of historical and cultural pressures. In looking ahead to further public discussions of sex, gender and athleticism, however, it is important to recognize that a

significant chapter has been added to the historical construction of gender deviation. The fact that individuals of indeterminate gender can be celebrated as heroes has not only demonstrated that we are collectively capable of valuing gender difference, but has expanded the symbolic range available to frame gender fluidity.

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