COMMENTARY

The Question of Caster Semenya

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> Caster Semenya, the South African runner, won the 800 metre gold medal at the World Championships. What did Pierre Weiss, head of the world athletics governing body, say in response to questions about her sex?
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What indeed? The question of Caster Semenya's sex has been posed far beyond the purviews of sport since last August, when the middle-distance runner set the fastest time of the year in her event at 1 minute 55.45 seconds, an extraordinary 2.5 seconds faster than the silver medallist. In the previous month the eighteen-year-old had broken her own personal best in the 800 metres by 7.5 seconds. Such a rapid improvement typically triggers a doping test, which is what Athletics South Africa told Semenya they were conducting in early August. In fact, the confidential investigation was performed by a gynaecologist and prompted in part by a sports blog allegation that she was 'born a hermaphrodite'. Despite a warning from the South African team doctor that further tests at the World Championships could be traumatic for the athlete, the ASA then sent Semenya to Berlin, where after her semi-final victory she was submitted to media questioning and a 'gender test' announced publicly on the day before the final. When she nevertheless won the gold medal, the International Association of Athletics Federations withdrew her from the winner's press conference and let Weiss answer the questions. His reply: 'It is clear that she is a woman but maybe not 100 per cent.'

The resulting protests drew a variety of racial analogies, with *Guardian* journalist Anna Kessel noting the irony of South Africa's tribute to its ethnic diversity, the eleven-language national anthem 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' being played over the silenced Semenya as she accepted her gold medal.[1] At home Semenya's treatment was widely denounced as racist, and African National Congress MP Mandla Mandela, grandson of Nelson, argued that 'as an African athlete she has been the victim of prejudice.'[2] The story of Saartjie Baartman, a slave of Dutch farmers near Cape Town who was taken to Europe to be publicly exhibited in 1810, was repeatedly invoked. Baartman was a Khoisan woman from the Eastern Cape whose curvaceous figure, with large breasts and very prominent buttocks, made her a lucrative attraction in London and Paris. Advertised as 'the Hottentot Venus', she sang and danced in scanty clothing for paying spectators. When Baartman died, at the tragically early age of twenty-six, her skeleton and organs were preserved and displayed at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. It was not until 2002, after repeated requests by Nelson Mandela, that her remains were repatriated and buried with due ceremony in her homeland.[3]

Baartman's expansively feminine features would seemingly make her the obverse of the muscular, broad-shouldered Semenya, were it not for another characteristic that led the French to exhibit her genitals as well as her brain and bones. Like those of some

other Khoisan women, her inner labia were unusually long, signifying to nineteenth century anthropology the commensurately outsized libido and gender ambiguity often assigned to African women. Although no similar condition has been attributed to Semenya, the indignity of Baartman's genital exposure was clearly recalled when South African MPs compared her treatment to the investigation by the IAAF, who subjected the athlete to reported examinations by a gynaecologist, an endocrinologist, a psychologist and a 'gender expert'. Soon afterwards leaked reports of the IAAF findings appeared in the media, headlined in the New York *Daily News* 'Caster Semenya, forced to take gender test, is a woman … and a man':

> The 18-year-old South African champ has no womb or ovaries … According to a source with knowledge of the IAAF tests, Semenya has internal testes – the male sexual organs that produce testosterone. Testosterone is a hormone responsible for building muscles and for producing body hair and a deep voice.

The test of sex

Semenya's outing as an alleged 'intersexual' (a term now almost as disputed as the derogatory 'hermaphrodite') publicized the limits of sexual dualism in a way not seen since 1993, when the biologist and historian of science Anne Fausto-Sterling startled the readers of the *New York Times* by asking 'How Many Sexes Are There?' Deploring the dualist constraints of the pronoun system in which she wrote, she introduced the lay public to three additional sex types, people with 'one testis and one ovary', those who 'have ovaries and some aspect of the male genitalia but lack testes', and the category that the media would later assign to Semenya, those who 'have testes and some aspect of female genitalia but no ovaries'. Fausto-Sterling's description of the by-then recognized taxonomies as 'at least five *sexes* – perhaps even more'[4] was merely the latest provocation in her series of influential challenges to the presumption that human beings are dichotomously divided in biology, psychology or intellect.

Encouraged by her *Times* article, the Intersex Society of North America was soon established to campaign against the medical mismanagement of non-typical gender conditions. Among its educational strategies was the design of a 'phall-o-meter' to illustrate the medical wisdom that then ordained the surgical reduction or enclosure of infant genitalia bigger than 0.85 but smaller than 2.0 centimetres. Further procedures on female-assigned intersexual infants have included the construction or expansion of the vagina, labio-scrotal reduction and extensive hormone treatment, procedures that may cause scarring and pain, reduce or obviate sexual pleasure and threaten psychological and physical health – all without consent of the patient. Meanwhile, intersexual infants assigned as males may have experienced multiple surgeries to secure 'proper' genital function, interpreted as a socially convincing and sexually penetrative penis, rather than one that offers pleasure to its owner. Informing these practices were assumptions that valued 'aggressiveness and sexual potency for boys and passiveness and reproductive/sexual–receptive potential for girls' as well as the designation of homosexuality and blurred gender identities as 'bad outcomes'. To challenge such practices and the secrecy that has surrounded them, a coalition of patients, clinicians and psychologists began agitating to defer treatment until the subject is able to grant informed consent, eventually developing new protocols for care predicated on honesty, the patient's active decision-making, psychosocial support, the avoidance of stigma and the recognition of varying sexual norms.

But as Fausto-Sterling later warned in *Sexing the Body*,[5] the acceptance of intersex conditions need not rule out sexual hierarchies, or even sexual dualism. Traditional cultures within New Guinea and the Dominican Republic recognize a locally occurring congenital condition in children with XY chromosomes, involving a tiny penis/clitoris, undescended testes and a divided scrotum, as a third sex. Nevertheless, after the

virilization of these individuals via naturally produced testosterone at puberty, they usually identify with the dominant masculinity of their culture in a system recognizing three body types but only two (unequal) gender roles. Bowing to Suzanne Kessler's critique of the primacy her five-sex system gave to physical rather than 'cultural genitals: the genitals one is assumed to have under one's clothing',[6] Fausto-Sterling abandoned any precise enumeration of the sexes. Instead, challenging the enforced conformity of social and anatomical gender, *Sexing the Body* opposed sex registration at birth and sex testing for athletes.

Asked to comment on the Semenya case, Fausto-Sterling joined former IAAF medical commission chair Arne Ljunqvist in observing that high levels of testosterone do not in themselves create a competitive advantage, since not all intersexed individuals have receptors sensitive to it. As comment proliferated, *Sexing the Body*'s estimate that 1.7 per cent of children may be born with some form of intersex conditions ('roughly 115 million individuals on the planet') circulated in the blogosphere. Eventually the controversy even reached the *London Review of Books*. Writing on its blog, Judith Butler observed that the investigations of Semenya's sex by a panel of experts suggested that

> sex-determination is decided by consensus and, conversely, where there is no consensus, there is no determination of sex. Is this not a presumption that sex is a social negotiation of some kind? And are we, in fact, witnessing a massive effort to socially negotiate the sex of Semenya, with the media included as party to the deliberations?[7]

For sports administrators, Semenya's suspect anatomy revived anxieties over sexual norms first registered at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, notorious for Hitler's attempt to discourage Jewish competitors and his rage at the four gold medals won by the black American Jesse Owens. Long forgotten is the contretemps surrounding the eventual gold and silver medal winners in the women's 100-metre sprint, the US runners Stella Walsh and Helen Stephens. Both women's facial structure and musculature raised suspicions of gender impersonation, and when Stephens won the Olympic committee ordered an examination of her genitals, which were pronounced female. (After her death in 1980 Walsh was discovered to have ambiguous genitalia.) But it was not until 1966, when Cold War rivalries focused on the highly successful Russian athletes Tamara and Irina Press, that compulsory physical examinations for all female competitors were introduced for athletics championships. Before they could be examinined, the Press sisters withdrew from all further competition.

By the 1968 Olympics, the invidious parade of naked female competitors passing investigating physicians was replaced by cytological analysis for a feature found only in cells with XX sex chromosomes. But humans may exhibit a variety of sometimes contradictory chromosomal and physiological characteristics. To take only two examples, children with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) are born with XY chromosomes but feminine genitalia, while children with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia are born with XX chromosomes but may have masculine genitals. So in 1991, analysis for the SRY gene then believed to determine male foetal development succeeded chromosomal testing. But when eight entrants to women's competitions in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics were found to have the SRY gene, further examination identified AIS in seven, and another condition known as '5-alpha-reductase deficiency' in the eighth. Neither is deemed to produce unfair physiological advantages and all eight were allowed to compete. Subsequently the SRY gene was discovered to be absent in some individuals with testes and the chromosomal formation 46XX, leaving the question of sex determination unresolved. With no deliberate gender misrepresentation ever established in athletics, by 1999 compulsory gender verification, already abandoned by the IAAF, was also discontinued for the Olympics. Yet the IAAF retains the option of sex assessment in what they regard as suspicious cases, despite the American Medical Association's

argument that testing women athletes (and only women, since no sporting advantage is discerned in male femininity) is discriminatory, stigmatizing, expensive and potentially inaccurate. Thus in 2006 Indian track star Santhi Soundarajan was stripped of her Asian Games silver medal in the 800 metres after failing her gender test. Despite a later diagnosis of AIS, the devastated athlete abandoned competition. As three British scientists reviewing the evidence conclude,

> there is no evidence that female athletes with DSDs [disorders of sex development] have displayed any sports-relevant physical attributes which have not been seen in biologically normal female athletes. However, numerous female athletes have been unfairly barred from competing.[8]

Ironically, Semenya's winning time in the Berlin 800 metres did not threaten the extraordinarily long-standing world record of 1:53.28 set in 1983 by the Czech runner Jarmila Kratochvilova, who ran a world-record 400 metres a few days later. A sports doctor who examined Kratochvilova at the time pronounced her strongly muscled shoulders, arms and thighs not those 'of a normal physiological female body', but Kratochvilova's silver medal at the 1980 Olympics indicated that she had passed the then-chromosomal sex test. Remarking on her resemblance to Semenya, the conservative UK journalist Dominic Lawson joined a number of commentators in calling for an end to the sex segregation of sport, comparing it to 'the rigidity of South Africa's former apartheid laws'. But unlike those who proposed open competition divided, like boxing, into weight levels, or who pointed out that Semenya's first sport had been soccer – from whose male professional ranks Maribel Dominguez was officially excluded after a Mexican team had offered her a contract in 2005, and whose South African lesbian star Eudy Simelane was 'correctively' raped and murdered in 2008 – Lawson seized the opportunity to attack the telecasting of women's sports and then moved on to transsexuals:

> the modern interpretation of sexual identity … demands that we ascribe to individuals the gender they believe they are, or want to be, even when it conflicts with that assigned to them by their genes. This is why it is socially correct at drinks parties or other public events to treat a pre-operative transsexual as a woman, even if you are all too aware of the five o'clock shadow under the foundation and of hands that look capable of twisting the tops off bottles.[9]

Lawson was merely repeating the views of Germaine Greer, who had previously responded to the Semenya affair by observing that 'in sport sex discrimination that is illegal everywhere else is the rule', whereas in other social spheres

> Nowadays we are all likely to meet people who think they are women, have women's names, and feminine clothes and lots of eyeshadow, who seem to us to be some kind of

ghastly parody, though it isn't polite to say so. We pretend all the people passing for female really are.

Despite their lip service to anti-discrimination, both commentators certified the male-dominated regime of sport as the last bastion of reality, in which women's endeavours are, to quote Lawson, 'inherently inferior' and counter-genetic sexual identities invalid. To the protests of intersex activists, Semenya's alleged gender irregularity is explicitly equated with transsexuality – crucially, in the case of this black athlete, a *ghastly* transsexuality, one that *must not pass*. In terms that signify both sexually and racially, 'passing' as well as 'ghastly' – with its overtones of the ghostly, the disembodied, or, in the American racist epithet, the 'spook' – Greer decried 'a man's delusion that he is female'.[10]

These observations echo those of the Olympic official Norman Cox, who in the late 1940s responded to black women's track and field success with the suggestion that a special category of competition should be created for those 'hermaphrodites' who so often defeated 'normal', 'childbearing' women.[11] Seventy years later, similar reactions greeted Semenya's victories. But, as Greer herself concluded, 'doesn't all competitive sport canonize and glamorize the exploitation of genetic advantage? Who said life was fair?' Again, she was not alone. For every opinion piece on the ontology of sex, the Semenya affair provoked just as many on equity in sport. In the *New Yorker*, Ariel Levy argued that professional basketball 'has had several players with acromegaly – the overproduction of growth hormone. Michael Phelps, who has won fourteen Olympic gold medals, has unusually long arms and is said to have double-jointed elbows, knees, and ankles. Is Caster Semenya's alleged extra testosterone really so different?'[12] Similarly, Carole Cadwalladr asked in the London *Observer*, 'Should sprinters of West African ancestry, who dominate the medal boards, compete in a different class to sprinters of other racial origin? Should the Kenyan and Ethiopian long-distance runners be siphoned off into a league of their own?'[13] As other commentators pointed out,[14] the historical attribution of 'unfair advantages' to blacks and intersexuals ignore routinely unremarked differences in childhood nutrition, access to coaching and equipment, training regimes and financial resources more generally. By these criteria Soundarajan, the undernourished child of brick-kiln workers in Southern India, or Semenya, who trained barefoot in a rural district where the black monthly income averages less than £100, would hardly count as advantaged.

The spell of gender

But if sport suffered as badly as sex in this affair, gender may yet survive. As Suzanne Kessler has argued, 'in the everyday world gender attributions are made without access to genital inspection. There is no sex, only gender, and what has primacy in everyday life is the gender that is performed, regardless of the flesh's configuration under the clothes.'[15] With a strikingly perverse spin on queer performativity, intersex activists have elected to stick with the system. A strong opposition persists to any characterization of genital variation as additional gender identity, or indeed identity at all. The varying chromosomal, external and internal sexual characteristics involved do not lend themselves to the creation of a community, or to any necessary engagement with queer politics. And if intersex is not claimed as an issue of sexual identity, still less is it proposed as one of sexual orientation. Not only do the dominant discourses of contemporary advocacy contrast intersex, as gender-variant anatomy, with transsexuality, as gender-variant identity, they also oppose it to homosexuality as gender-variant eroticism. Rejecting the historical parallels with the nineteenth-century nomination of homosexuals as 'inverts' or an 'intermediate sex', as well as the twentieth-century lesbian and gay opposition to the pathologization of homosexuality, many intersex adults have defended the controversial 2005 medical definition of their conditions as 'disorders of

sex development', if only to ensure appropriate medical attention to the health risks sometimes involved.

So how, as parents used to ask about the stain on Monica Lewinsky's dress, do you answer children's questions? Psychologist Elizabeth Myer advises that you tell them 'that a person's sex is something only a doctor needs to know to provide adequate health care. All we need to know as friends, colleagues, family members, fans, etc. is the gender identity of the person.'[16] But when gender is detached from the increasingly recognized variety of bodies, it reverts to twosomes, with all the anxious polarities still operating. Thus, in an online 'message to the media on the Caster Semenya issue', the AIS Support Group admonishes: 'don't confuse biological intersex with gender dysphoria …the vast majority of our members appear completely female'.[17]

As of early 2010, the IAAF had repeatedly delayed issuing its final ruling on Semenya's sex and her eligibility to enter future competitions. While she awaited the decision that will determine her running career, Stella Sandford and I were completing a collection on the American feminist Shulamith Firestone, who forty years ago argued that women's subordination could no more be abolished within the two-sex system than the proletariat's could be within capitalism:

> just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of the economic class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.[18]

If there is any answer to the questions about Caster Semenya, it is in the continued relevance of that recommendation.

Notes

1. Anna Kessel, 'Meadows Backs Semenya Over Gender Question', *Guardian*, 21 August 2009, p. 9.
2. Daniel Howden, 'South Africa Versus the World: The Caster Semenya Affair', *Independent*, 26 August 2009. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/south-afruca-versus-the-world-the-caster-semenya-affair-1777196.html.
3. See Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman*, Bloomsbury, London, 2007.
4. Anne Fausto-Sterling, 'How Many Sexes Are There?', *New York Times*, 12 March 1993, A29, emphasis added.
5. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, Basic Books, New York, 2000.
6. Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1998, p. 166.
7. Judith Butler, 'Wise Distinctions', *London Review* Blog, 20 November 2009, www.lrb.c.uk/blog/2009/judith-butler/wise-distinctions.
8. Robert Ritchie, John Reynard and Tom Lewis, 'Intersex and the Olympic Games', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 101, 2008, p. 398.
9. Dominic Lawson, 'No Sexing, Please – Let's All Run Together,' *Sunday Times*, 23 August 2009, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/…dominic_lawson/article6806508.ece. Lawson's other example was Shi Pei Pu, the androgynous Chinese spy of *M. Butterfly* fame.
10. Germaine Greer, 'What Makes a Woman?', *Guardian*, 21 August 2009, p. 13.
11. William C. Rhoden, 'The Unpleasant Reality for Women in Sports', *New York Times*, 9 April 2007, http://select.nytimes.com/2007/04/09/sports/09rhoden.html. Rhoden notes that in 1957 *Time* magazine reported that the African-American tennis star Althea Gibson was forced to take a chromosome test.
12. Ariel Levy, 'Either/Or', *New Yorker*, 30 November 2009, p. 55.
13. Carole Cadwalladr, *Observer*, 23 August 2009, p. 9.
14. See http://ittakesateam.blogspot.com/2009/11/unfair-competitive-advantage-whats-it.html.
15. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed*, p. 90.
16. Elizabeth Meyer, 'Gender and Schooling', *Psychology Today*, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/gender-and-schooling/200909.
17. See www.aissg.org/PDFs/aissg-caster-semenya.pdf.
18. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2003, p. 11.