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“Could This Women’s World Champ Be a Man?”: Caster Semenya and the Limits of Being Human

Anita Brady

Among the most persistent questions my students ask, when faced with the work of philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Butler, are the ones that concern her critique of the sex/gender distinction. The “sex/gender distinction”, which dominated feminist theory at the time that Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was written, is often framed as a nature/culture dichotomy where sex refers to the biological givens of male and female, and gender refers to the myriad ways in which those bodies are required to adhere to pre-existing social scripts. As Gayle Rubin characterises it: the sex/gender system transforms the ‘biological raw material of human sex and procreation’¹ into the limited range of subject positions available to women. To put that in the terms through which it is most often reproduced: sex refers to male and female, while gender refers to masculinity and femininity.

In general, my students have little difficulty understanding or articulating this distinction between gender and sex. They tend to arrive at *Gender Trouble* with at least some sense that dominant cultural notions that all men like watching sport, or that all women are genetically predisposed to enjoy shopping, are at least questionable, even if their willingness to question them might vary. Having got that far, however, Butler’s claim that the “truth” of sex is produced via the same regulatory practices that produce the norms of gender² seems often to

be a theoretical bridge too far. Butler asserts that the nature/culture dichotomy that underpins the distinction between sex and gender fails to recognise that the sexed body is as much a discursive construction as the system of gender that feminism critiques. She argues that feminist analyses that pull apart the naturalisation of gender tend to leave an unexamined notion of the body in place. Whereas the sex/gender distinction draws attention to the “material fact” of sex, Butler asks ‘To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?’³

Given the very material bodies that they themselves inhabit, and given the naturalised and seemingly obvious “biological” distinctions that they recognise as the properties of male and female, my students tend to respond with incredulity: ‘How can she argue that ‘sex’ is as much a discursive construction as ‘gender’ is?’ they ask, ‘Our bodies are real, and men and women are different – anyone can see that.’ The exasperation that inevitably accompanies such enquiries always produces a sense of urgency: for them, it’s usually connected to a fast looming assignment due date; for me it always signals that I’ve got a tiny window, probably measurable in minutes, to convince them to try and rethink the way those terms “men” and “women” are deployed so axiomatically, as if they never require any further elaboration. To that end, I tend, in those moments, to move away from differences between bodies, and toward questions of the human. Echoing Butler’s enquiries, I ask my students: ‘What transforms the screaming crying thing that emerges at the moment of birth, to a body that we can recognise, that we can refer to, that we can address as human? What’s the first thing we ask when we hear of a baby being born to someone close to us?’ The answer that I’m hoping for, and the answer I almost inevitably get, is: ‘what is it?’

Butler argues that it is only once the “it” that is the uncategorised child is made to make sense within the discursive matrix of gender that that child can be placed within the kinship relations that will constitute its first regime of belonging. ‘The girl is girled’ as she puts it, ‘it is brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender.’⁴ “It” becomes a girl, and it is only once that interpellation has taken place that “it” can also become someone’s daughter, someone’s sister, someone’s niece. By following Butler and framing it in these terms, my aim is to encourage my students to stop and think about the ways in which what is taken for granted from the beginning of our existence as humans, are also the terms by which we are actually granted that very existence *as humans*. In order to demonstrate both how this subjectivating mechanism works, and what its significance might be, I encourage my students to consider those bodies that are never fully granted the status of being recognisably gendered, or those bodies that have been granted it, only to have it subsequently taken away.

Via the body of South African athlete Caster Semenya, the global media audience has recently been privy (at times, uncomfortably so) to precisely this kind of body – a body around which the “biological fact” of sex has unravelled. As a consequence, I want to suggest, we have been simultaneously privy to both an example of precisely why Butler’s

critique of the sex/gender distinction makes sense, and an example of why that critique remains so important, even as it simultaneously seems to have gained only minimal purchase in everyday media discourse.

Caster Semenya won gold in the women's 800m final at the 2009 Athletics World Championships, and won it by a considerable margin. Shortly afterward, the governing body of world athletics, the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF), announced that she would be required to undergo an unspecified regime of "gender testing" before her victory would be confirmed. The following discussion argues that the institutional and media response to Semenya exemplifies Butler's claim that it is the discursive framework of gender that produces and naturalises sex. Butler argues that:

gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.⁵

What we see at the mediated site of the body of Caster Semenya is the unravelling of this discursive effect: when the cultural signifiers of her gender are called into question, the anatomical facts of her sex are simultaneously revealed as contingent. As a consequence, I argue, the "case" of Caster Semenya also demonstrates how "the natural" in relation to sex and gender functions as a discursive regime that sets, and polices, the limits of the recognisably human. Furthermore, this relationship between power, knowledge and the production of the natural is enabled even greater purchase by the ways in which race always already marks Semenya's black African female body on a hierarchised register of embodiment. This chapter thus concludes with a consideration of how media discussions of Semenya animate a quasi-scientific colonial gaze that links the boundaries of sexual difference to the boundaries of human belonging.

The Limits of the Sex/Gender Distinction

According to an article in *The Times*, the emphatic nature of Semenya's victory (she finished two seconds ahead of the defending world champion) constituted a vast improvement in her form, and capped a rapid rise through the ranks of international athletics.⁶ Given such an unexpected emergence, questions were inevitably raised about the possible use of performance-enhancing drugs, yet test results provided no evidence that anything untoward had taken place. Instead, attention turned to the apparently excessive masculinity of Semenya's appearance. Journalist David Smith⁷ contends that subject to particular scrutiny was the hair on her upper lip, the muscularity of her body, the deepness of her voice, and her apparent lack of breasts. The IAAF announcement following the Berlin final, that Semenya had been examined in a Berlin hospital and would be required to undergo further 'gender verification testing' before her world-champion title would be confirmed, seemed to add

institutional weight to the question marks surrounding her gender. The media reports that announced the IAAF decision were almost universally a variation on the question asked by a headline in *TIME* magazine: ‘Could this women’s world champ be a man?’⁸

Despite the sensational gender duplicity suggested by *TIME*, the IAAF’s position was slightly more complex. As Slot explains it ‘her strength and appearance have raised fears that she may have been born with a rare abnormality, where she has grown up with the genitalia of a woman but the chromosomes of a male.’⁹ The assumption was that this “abnormality” might give her an unfair advantage over other female competitors. That Semenya was actually a man pretending to be a woman was not what was being suggested, although it apparently had been at other periods in her career. In an article in the *Daily Mail*, one of her former teachers, Moloko Rapetsoa, discusses how at interschool athletics meets, ‘some schools, suspecting that she was not a girl, even demanded that her status be checked. But each time they returned from the toilet, she would be cleared and the competition would resume.’¹⁰ In Berlin, however, despite the repeated suggestion on blogs and message boards that the crude verification system of simply having a look be deployed again to settle the matter, the question seemed not to be whether Semenya could really be a man but only whether or not she could really be a woman.

Motivated, at least in part, by a desire to protect the athlete’s privacy, the exact nature of what constitutes gender testing, and what its borders and limits might be, was not disclosed by the IAAF. Spokesman Nick Davies did explain, however, that it involves ‘an endocrinologist, a gynaecologist, an internal medicine expert, an expert on gender and a psychologist.’¹¹ Early media speculation pointed to an “excess” of testosterone as the likely explanation for Semenya’s deviation from the norms of gender.¹² However, as was reported online at *CNN*, a number of reports later claimed that the testing had revealed Semenya to be intersex.¹³ In November 2009, the IAAF stated that as a consequence of the tests, Semenya would retain her world title, but that the results of the testing would not be publicly released. In announcing the decision, the South African sports ministry was quoted in *The Guardian* as stating that Semenya had been found ‘innocent of any wrong.’¹⁴ Commentators such as *Sports Illustrated’s* David Epstein¹⁵ interpreted this to mean that there was no evidence of deliberate gender cheating but that Semenya may not necessarily qualify as female for the purposes of competition. In July 2010, the IAAF announced that Semenya was indeed now free to return to competitive racing as a woman. What is unclear is what took place in the seven-month period between the announcement that Semenya had been cleared of any wrongdoing, and the announcement that she was once again allowed to compete. According to the *Telegraph’s* Simon Hart,¹⁶ it is widely believed that during this period Semenya was required to undergo ‘medical treatment for an inter-sex condition’ in order to qualify as female to the satisfaction of the IAAF.

For her part, Semenya has always maintained her status as an authentic, and authenticated female. Upon learning of the proposed gender tests, she reportedly considered boycotting the

medal ceremony. She has since questioned the ‘correctness and moral integrity’ of the process she was required to undergo, and criticised the time it took for the IAAF to issue a definitive ruling.¹⁷ According to the *Daily Mail*, her family, similarly angry and upset at the IAAF and the questions raised in the media, released a copy of her birth certificate, which states, indeed unequivocally, that her gender at birth had been recorded as female.¹⁸

Judith Butler argues that the notion of gender as ‘radically independent of sex’ that the sex/gender distinction seems to advance tends to posit gender as a ‘free-floating artifice,’¹⁹ and presumes that any gender may accrue to any body. The logical conclusion of this, she asserts, is that there is no necessity that ‘the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will only interpret female bodies.’²⁰ Any body could exhibit any gender, and maintain the integrity of its sexed embodiment. Yet what culture repeatedly makes clear, and what Butler seeks to draw attention to, is that a failure to conform to gender norms does not leave an unproblematically sexed body in place. Rather, such a failure is precisely what calls the legitimacy of the body into question. As Butler argues, those bodies that do not cohere between sex and gender function as unintelligible *at the level of the body*, the very materiality of which is repeatedly articulated as a site of material truth.

The example of Semenya demonstrates this in precisely the terms that Butler describes. Despite being identified as a girl at birth and raised as such, and having competed as a woman throughout her career, it is the masculinity of Semenya’s appearance (face, voice, physique, speed) that seemingly casts doubt on the legitimacy of her legally registered identity. The integrity of Semenya’s sex is called into question and subject to a range of unspecified tests, not because an anomaly was discovered in the usual, and usually indisputable, markers of sex – the genitalia – but because her genderperformance was at odds with a sex already noted, verified and registered at birth.

The birth certificate produced by Semenya’s family as evidence of her gender identity thus reveals precisely the gap between what the certification of sex is usually understood as, and what, following Butler, it actually is. The deployment of the birth certificate as evidence relies on the cultural assumption that it functions as a legal record of a self-evident truth. The body is seen, noted and officially verified by the power invested in whomever records that description, and by the power invested in the markers of that distinction – the genitalia of the infant. This, as my students argue, is an unambiguous verification of biology.

Yet, what Butler argues is that the sighting of the infant in these terms, and the citation of a category of sex on the official record, is the performative materialisation of the body within particular subjectivating structures. Butler’s use of the framework of performativity draws attention to how the process of “girling” enacts what it appears to merely describe. The announcement “it’s a girl” seemingly recognises the body as female, but, Butler suggests,

simultaneously orders that this body adhere to the terms of that recognition in order to maintain the status of human subject. The “girling of the girl” as Butler describes it,

does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm.²¹

What Butler draws attention to here are the ways in which the verification of a body’s ostensibly natural sex is contingent upon an ongoing regime of scrutiny. The announcement “it’s a girl” is thus not a description, but rather a requirement that cites and reasserts a cultural understanding of what “girl” means, and insists that this body continue to make sense in those terms. The process of girling begins with what seems like a moment of recognition (“it’s a girl”) but is in fact an act of constitution (“this body must remain recognisable in these terms in order to continue to be accorded this status”). Subjectivity, and thus its limits, are bestowed at the moment that they are seemingly announced.

This is evident in the article in the *Daily Mail* that accompanies the publication of Semenya’s birth certificate. The article²² reproduces the verification of sex but simultaneously undermines its discursive authority by adding to the already recorded complications of Semenya’s gender identity, other misperformances of gender from her childhood. So, while we are presented with documented evidence that Semenya is officially a girl, we also learn that she never liked wearing dresses, was not allowed to play football with other girls because she was too rough, only sees boys as potential friends and not as potential boyfriends, and doesn’t really like romantic movies. Reading backward, as the *Daily Mail* does, the verification of Semenya supposedly present in the birth certificate is revealed as the contingent interpellation that it always was. Someone, somewhere, it suggests, got this body wrong, and it is thus not the gender requirements that come under scrutiny, but rather the body that fails to adhere, and that thus can no longer be made sense of in either social or medical terms. ‘It seems unlikely that so many people could lie about Caster Semenya’s sex’ the *Mail* piece concludes, and because the writers cannot conceive that this might call into question the veracity of sex in the first place, Semenya becomes, in their words, a ‘quirk of nature,’ and the ‘sex-riddle daughter’ of a father who finds it difficult to recognise her on the phone. The *Daily Mail*’s list of Semenya’s gender failings joins the range of medical experts utilised by the IAAF, and the hundreds of contributors to message boards and blogs in the wake of the 2009 World Championships all repeating the question that Butler argues belies that naturalness of sex. While the question is posed as ‘is this person female?’ the terms by which it is asked are ‘is this person *feminine* enough? (emphasis added)’ to continue to be accorded that status.²³

The Limits of Being Human

Semenya's media re-emergence after the Berlin final suggests a desire, at some level, to answer that question in the affirmative, not least in the court of public opinion. A few months after the world championships, Semanya appeared on the cover of South African magazine *You*,²⁴ made-over with a great deal more femininity than in the images we saw in the wake of the Berlin final. In the accompanying article she describes how she wants to wear dresses more often, and learn how to do her own make-up. In November 2009, the *Guardian* online published a series of exclusive photographs inside her training camp. What the photo essay seems determined to reveal is not an athlete's hard body engaged in sporting endeavour, but an affable *person* laughing and joking with her friends, and dressed, tellingly, in pink.²⁵ Given the media and medical attention Semanya has been subjected to, her subsequent assertions of her femaleness do not seem particularly surprising. Media discussions of Semanya have almost universally drawn attention to the possible impact of the controversy on this 18-year old girl. Yet those discussions have almost equally as universally located the fault of that impact with the IAAF's handling of the issue, rather than with the requirements of gender that produce it as an issue in the first place.

What I would like to draw attention to is how the seeming desire to make sense in the normative terms of being female by Semanya, and the failure of the press to question why that is even necessary (and indeed to be complicit in the continued requirement that it is) demonstrate the extent to which gender determinacy is deemed necessary for what Butler describes as a 'liveable life.'²⁶ Repeated over and over again in the coverage of Caster Semanya was the question of whether she was a "real" woman, the question that the IAAF seemed to have so much difficulty trying to settle. For Butler, this calling into question of one's reality connects gender normativity to the limits of being human and the subsequent possibility of the liveable life. As Butler puts it, 'to be called unreal, and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against which the human is made.'²⁷

The limits of the liveable life are rendered in stark relief when we are reminded that in 2006, Indian 800m runner Santhi Soundarajan had the silver medal she won at that year's Asian Games stripped after failing a gender verification test similar to that which Semanya was required to undergo. One year later Soundarajan attempted suicide, something she attributes to the 'mental torture' she underwent as a consequence.²⁸ In an article in *The Observer*, David Smith²⁹ suggests that the calling into question of Caster Semanya's gender identity lays bare her 'profoundest sense of self...with potentially damaging psychological consequences.' As I noted above, the extent to which Semanya's life can remain liveable is repeatedly considered in media discussions of her "gender controversy". But while Smith's article posits gender identity as the very essence of self, Butler suggests that it only becomes so because it is the founding interpellative mechanism by which that self is recognised as belonging, or failing to belong, to the field of legitimated subjectivity. Butler locates the

initial verification of sex at birth within the ‘field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as “the human”.’³⁰ She suggests that ‘we see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question.’³¹

As the Soundarajan example demonstrates, gender testing in sport by no means begins with Caster Semenya. There have been cases in history of deliberate gender fraud, just as there have been cases of previously undetected “medical conditions” that put the gender authenticity of athletes into question, and of deliberate drug regimes designed to produce seemingly gender-specific advantages, such as excess testosterone. Furthermore, sporting bodies such as the IAAF have had to develop protocols to account for, and codify, post-operative transsexual competitors. The IAAF, therefore, is certainly aware of the range of variations that are possible under the nominally straightforward signifiers of male and female. One might even suggest that the IAAF is therefore also aware of the fiction of the gender system to which it nonetheless continues to adhere. According to journalist Owen Slot, there are ‘between 20 and 30 different types of ‘intersex’ conditions, each of them affecting the body in different ways’³² that the IAAF recognises. The rendering of such information in mainstream news sources as a result of the Semenya “controversy” could certainly be argued to have increased awareness among the general public of the extensive array of anatomical/hormonal/chromosomal variations within apparently self-evident gender categories, variations that sporting bodies have been aware of for years.

In her own commentary on the treatment of Caster Semenya, Butler suggests that the very management of the determination of Semenya’s qualification to compete clearly recognises the complex array of bodily possibilities. In a blog post on the *London Review of Books* site written following the announcement that Semenya had been cleared of any wrongdoing, but before the announcement that she was allowed to return to competition, Butler questions whether the deployment of a *panel* of experts functions as some, possibly unforeseen, recognition that sex is not a biological property, but rather a site of cultural negotiation:

And yet, if we consider that this act of “sex determination” was supposed to be collaboratively arrived at by a panel that included “a gynaecologist, an endocrinologist, a psychologist and an expert on gender” (why wasn’t I called!), then the assumption is that cultural and psychological factors are part of sex-determination, and that no one of these “experts” could come up with a definitive finding on his or her own (presuming that binary gender holds). This co-operative venture suggests as well 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 in this case

a massive effort to socially negotiate the sex of Semenya, with the media included as a party to the deliberations?³³

Butler's (presumably tongue-in-cheek) questioning of why she, as an expert on gender, wasn't invited onto the panel simultaneously demonstrates that the determination of gender does not take place on a discursively neutral terrain. While the IAAF must clearly contend with the knowledge that the categories male and female are far from straightforward, there is no suggestion that, as a consequence, "male" and "female" as organising categories have been genuinely called into question either at an institutional level, or in media coverage of the events.

A key question therefore is whether the assignation of anomalous bodies to 'a field of deformation'³⁴ works to pluralise the field of gender, or whether, as Butler suggests, it tends instead to shore up the very boundaries that those bodies might call into question. Discussions of gender variance among athletes tend to frame such anomalies with an expectation that variations, once discovered, should be corrected. David Epstein, writing online for *Sports Illustrated*, suggests that if Semenya were found to have three times the level of testosterone considered normal for a woman (as was reported elsewhere to be the case), such a finding would 'indicate a medical problem that requires treatment.'³⁵ Indeed, in discussing the possibility that Semenya has been required to undergo gender treatment, none of the media commentators appeared to see any paradox in a body being required to undergo "artificial" intervention to attain recognition within a supposedly "natural" field of categorisation. Like the *TIME* headline that asks, 'Could This Women's World Champ Be a Man?',³⁶ what this demonstrates is an inability to conceive of a discussion that goes beyond deciding which of the two existing gender categories this body will be *made* to be intelligible within. As Butler notes, the organisational ramifications of bodies recognised as intersex forms no significant part of the debate:

We might say as well that the institution of world sports rests upon a certain denial of intersex as a persistent dimension of human morphology, genetics and endocrinology. What would happen if the IAAF or any other world sports organisation decided that it needed to come up with a policy on how those with an intersex condition might participate in competitive sports?³⁷

It is only once they do so, she argues, that sport will be open to the 'complexly constituted species of human animals to which we belong.' In the meantime, both the IAAF, and media discussions more generally, can neither tolerate nor countenance a body that cannot be made to fit under the regimes of male and female, however expansive those categories can be made to be.

What matters most in the case of Caster Semenya is less the possibility that she is a man, than the possibility that she is *neither* authentically man, nor authentically woman. The ongoing refusal of the IAAF to disclose what constitutes gender testing, what the results of Semenya's gender tests are, and what treatment, if any, she has been required to undergo, suggests that situating a body within male and female is not the simple act of recognition it is so routinely naturalised to be. What is particularly ironic, as Christina Eckert suggests, is that 'professional sports are *the* evidence most often offered for *sex* being a natural fact: men run faster, throw further and are generally stronger than women.'³⁸ Sport has a particular role then in performatively repeating that distinctions between the sexes are among the most fundamental of corporeal axioms. Yet the discourse of secrecy that surrounds the nature of verifying that distinction, along with the requirement that a panel of experts agree on how such a verification might be reached, demonstrates instead that there is no self-evident means of recognising the correct categorisation of a sexed body. If there were, "we" would all know precisely the kind of "gender testing" Semenya has been subject to. As Tavia Nyong'o argues, what we see in the case of Caster Semenya is the playing out of Butler's assertion that "natural" gender is actually a mimetic attempt to forestall the uncanny prospect of their being no stable gender referent at all.'³⁹

In drawing attention to how those bodies that fail on the register of cultural intelligibility are excluded from the domain of the human, Butler seeks to underline precisely how high the stakes of sex and gender coherence are. As the pun in the title of her third book, *Bodies That Matter*, suggests, it is only those bodies that materialise in the recognisable terms that are required, that are the bodies that get to count as matter, and that are thus the bodies that come to matter in the discourse of rights that is repeatedly articulated as the property of the human. As Butler argues, the 'human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognisability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verification of that sex.'⁴⁰ Thus, in as much as belonging to a race other than white, or a sex other than male, positions a body as the lesser of two parts of any binary, a failure to be recognisable as either term in such a dualism positions a body on an entirely different register of (non)viability.

Animating Racial History

At the same time, it is critical to draw attention to the ways in which the unambiguous markers of belonging to one identity category complicate the possibility of belonging to another, precisely because *both* are deployed to mark the limits of being human. More specifically, it is impossible to discuss the processes of "perceptually verifying" Semenya's sex without also acknowledging the significance of a racialised lens to that process of verification. As Sue Tait argues, 'representations of black bodies remain inscribed with the fantasies and anxieties of our racist histories.'⁴¹ In particular, they are inscribed with a

historical hierarchy of exhibition that positions black bodies at the very margins of the human.

Stuart Hall⁴² draws attention to the ways in which “black sexuality” has been produced throughout colonial history as a marker of the primitivism of the black body. To that end, he discusses how gender, sexuality and race combine to constitute the black sporting body as a spectacle of otherness. What is evident from the examples that Hall uses is that this otherness is made manifest via the ways those bodies function as a site of transgression, both of the boundaries between male and female, and (often as a consequence) of the boundaries between human and ape. For example, Hall describes a 1988 *Sunday Times* Olympic Special that featured photos of black American athletes Florence Griffith-Joyner and Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Both were accompanied by quotes from Al Joyner (Griffith-Joyner’s husband and Joyner-Kersey’s brother) that said, respectively, “Someone Says My Wife Looked Like A Man” and “Somebody Says My Sister Looked Like A Gorilla”.⁴³ Hall’s suggestion is that “looking like a man” and “looking like a gorilla” are linked in the ways these texts are read, and that connection is underscored in the intertextuality of these pictures with other images of black athletes, and of black bodies in general. So while the excessive muscularity of any female sporting body may be interpreted as a transgression of the line between male and female, what is clear is that it is only the black female sporting body that can be imagined to simultaneously blur the boundaries between human and animal.

Ramona Coleman-Bell⁴⁴ draws a similar conclusion in her discussion of the ways in which the body of tennis player Serena Williams is mediated. Coleman-Bell argues that Williams’ ‘black, athletic body stands in stark contrast to the white, often blonde, “soft” tennis players who historically have dominated the game.’⁴⁵ She acknowledges that there are white tennis players, such as Martina Navratilova whose physique (and, for Navratilova, whose sexuality) positions them outside gender norms, but suggests that the ‘racial specificity’ of Williams’ body codes her ‘corporeal presence’ to entirely different effect.⁴⁶ Like Hall, Coleman-Bell draws a link between the ways in which the non-normative gender performance of the black sporting body is made to signify, and the historical terms of the colonising gaze. In particular, she connects the reproduction of Williams’ physique in the media to the representation of Saartje Baartman, who was exhibited in nineteenth-century colonial Europe as a bodily display of primitive sexuality.

Baartman was taken from her home in South Africa in 1819 and exhibited as the “Hottentot Venus” first in England, and later in France, to a public fascinated and titillated, in particular, by her protruding buttocks. According to Stuart Hall, that fascination was also the displacement of an attendant fascination with Baartman’s relatively enlarged labia, the result of deliberate manipulation of the genitals and, as Sander Gilman describes, considered beautiful by Hottentot men.⁴⁷ Gilman argues that in the scientific discourse under which she was examined and exhibited, Baartman was repeatedly reduced to the otherness of her genitalia.⁴⁸ That otherness became representative of the black female in general, and

‘Baartman’s sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks’ came to ‘serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century.’⁴⁹

Coleman-Bell contends that as a consequence, ‘the black female body became a signifier of deviant sexuality’⁵⁰ and she finds the ‘discursive traces’ of this conflation of race and sexual excess in media representations of Serena Williams. In particular, Coleman-Bell highlights the attention paid to the size of Williams’ buttocks, and suggests that Williams’ ‘Hottentot body’ becomes loaded with ‘carnal connotations’ that are packaged for the white imagination.⁵¹ She argues that the focus on the size of Williams’ physique in general, and on her buttocks in particular, is a displacement that seeks to mask the sexual nature of a highly racialised gaze. In connecting this to the treatment of Baartman, she quotes Hall:

Fetishism, then, is a strategy for having-it-both-ways: for both representing and not-representing the tabooed, dangerous or forbidden object of pleasure and desire. It provides us with what Mercer calls an “alibi”. We have seen how, in the case of “The Hottentot Venus”, not only is the gaze displaced from the genitalia to the buttocks; but also, this allows the observers to go on looking while disavowing the sexual nature of the gaze.⁵²

According to Gilman, this disavowed fascination with the black body’s sexuality is central to the ways in which the image of Baartman was deployed as the antithesis of the white female body, and served to underscore their positions as the furthest poles ‘on the scale of humanity.’⁵³ He argues that the significance of the genitalia in exemplifying that scale, was informed by quasi-scientific travel literature that described how the ‘animallike sexual appetite’ of the African woman ‘went so far as to lead black women to copulate with apes.’⁵⁴ What is clearly evident in that, and subsequent, literature, is that the position of the Hottentot female as the ‘lowest rung on the great chain of being’⁵⁵ has an integral relationship to her imagined transgression of the reproductive and sexual boundaries between animal and human. These transgressions are constituted, and fetishised, in the “otherness” of her bodily display.

For a number of commentators, particularly those in South Africa, the link between Baartman and Caster Semenya was immediate and obvious. As Carina Ray puts it, two hundred years on from the exhibition of Baartman, ‘the genitals of another young South African woman, runner Caster Semenya, have once again become the target of western scientists’ prodding and poking.⁵⁶ Moreover, as blogger Jessica Davenport suggests, the medical-scientific gaze authorises a far more public examination:

Like Baartman, who was not only studied by scientists, but also put on display in exhibitions for the entertainment of the general public, pictures of Semenya are being scrutinized by the general public all

over the internet. Despite the fact that she has not undergone testing yet, the news media and the public have already started its examination by posting pictures of her grimacing and grotesquely flexing her muscles. These images are all in stark contrast to the baby-faced, seemingly shy and sheepish Semenya that appeared at a news conference just after her victory. But despite this, the public has made its conclusion: She isn't a woman or a man. She's a deranged beast.⁵⁷

Tavia Nyong'o in contrast, suggests that in the 'rush to compare' Semenya and Baartman something crucial is missed.⁵⁸ She argues that 'Baartman was exhibited and violated for what the imperialist eye took to be her abhorrent *femininity*' and that a better comparison to Semenya would be 'the many trans bodies who have been disciplined and punished for their female *masculinity*.'⁵⁹ While I agree with Nyong'o that such a comparison is necessary, I would argue that the link between Baartman and Semenya remains an important one, precisely for the reasons that Davenport's blog post suggests. The authenticating gaze that Semenya and Baartman are both subject to produces both women as an exhibition of gender non-normativity, and thus as a site of compromised human subjectivity. Baartman's buttocks and genitalia were on display as a difference that underscored the primitive corporeality of the non-white body. She functions not as a scientific confirmation of the plurality of female embodiment, but as a less-than human link to an entirely different species. Thus they demonstrate how the gendered ground by which viable bodies are determined does not produce those bodies in isolation from other subjectivating mechanisms.

Semenya and Baartman are connected by the pathologizing of their imagined "difference" from the register of norms imagined in the discourse of Western science. Leonard Chuene, the head of South African athletics, described the treatment of Semenya as 'racism, pure and simple' and asked, 'who are white people to question the makeup of an African girl?'⁶⁰ What the link to Baartman demonstrates is that white people questioning the makeup of African women has a long and unfortunate history. It is left, in both cases, to a panel of Western experts to determine what their gender nonconformity might mean, and that nonconformity simultaneously generates a public spectacle of otherness. The media reports that drew attention to the link between Semenya and Baartman seemed concerned, in particular, with the discursive management of her "exhibition", and repeatedly critiqued the way in which the IAAF handled disclosure of the gender testing. Not discussed in those reports was the extent to which gender in relation to a black female athlete is the materialisation of a body whose humanness is always, already, in question.

¹ Gayle Rubin, *"The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in Toward an Anthropology of Women, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Press, 1975), 165*

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17

³ *Ibid.*, 8

⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7

⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7

⁶ Owen Slot, "Caster Semenya faces sex test before she can claim victory," *The Times*, August 20 2009

⁷ David Smith "Caster Semenya row: 'Who are white people to question the makeup of an African girl? It is racism.'" *The Observer*, August 23 2009

⁸ William Lee Adams, "Could This Women's World Champ Be a Man?" *Time*, August 21 2009

⁹ Adams, "Could This Women's World Champ Be a Man?"

¹⁰ Andrew Malone, Emily Miller and Stewart MacLean, "'She wouldn't wear dresses and sounds like a man on the phone': Caster Semenya's father on his sex-riddle daughter." *Daily Mail*, August 22 2009

¹¹ Slot, "Caster Semenya faces sex test before she can claim victory"

¹² Simon Hart, "World Athletics: Caster Semenya tests 'show high testosterone levels'." *Telegraph*, August 24 2009

¹³ "IAAF urges caution over Semenya intersex claims," *CNN*, September 11 2009

¹⁴ "Caster Semenya found 'innocent' of any wrong," *Guardian Online*, November 19 2009

¹⁵ David Epstein, "Biggest issue surrounding Semenya remains unanswered," *Sports Illustrated*, November 19 2009

¹⁶ Simon Hart, "Caster Semenya given all clear after gender test row." *Telegraph*, July 6 2010

¹⁷ "Semenya announces return to athletics," *CNN*, 30 March 2010

¹⁸ Malone, Miller & MacLean, "'She wouldn't wear dresses and sounds like a man on the phone'"

¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 8

²²Malone, Miller & MacLean, “‘She wouldn’t wear dresses and sounds like a man on the phone’”

²³Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 67

²⁴*You*, 10 September 2009

²⁵“Inside Caster Semenya’s Training Camp,” *Guardian Online*, 14 November 2009

²⁶Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxii

²⁷Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 218

²⁸Harmeet Shah Singh, “Indian athlete makes plea for Semenya,” *CNN*, September 14 2009

²⁹Smith, “Caster Semenya row”

³⁰Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 8

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Slot, “Caster Semenya faces sex test before she can claim victory”

³³Judith Butler, “Wise Distinctions,” *LRB Blog*, November 20 2009

³⁴Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16

³⁵Epstein, “Biggest issue surrounding Semenya remains unanswered”

³⁶Adams, “Could This Women’s World Champ Be a Man?”

³⁷Butler, “Wise Distinctions”

³⁸Christina Eckert, “Intervening in Intersexualization: The Clinic and the Colony.” *PhD Thesis* (University of Utrecht, 2010), 1

³⁹Tavia Nyong’o, “The Unforgivable Transgression of Being Caster Semenya,” *Women & Performance* 20, No. 1 (2010), 96

⁴⁰Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2

⁴¹Sue Tait, “Advertising, Cultural Criticism and Mythologies of the Male Body,” in *Masculinities in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, eds. Robin Law, Hugh Campbell & John Dolan (Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press, 1999), 207

⁴² Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 232

⁴⁴ Ramona Coleman-Bell, "'Droppin' It Like It's Hot': The Sporting Body of Serena Williams," in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, eds. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (New York: Routledge, 2006)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 204n1

⁴⁷ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 265

⁴⁸ Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, No. 1 (1995), 217

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 216

⁵⁰ Coleman-Bell, "'Droppin' It Like It's Hot'," 199

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 268, quoted in Coleman-Bell, "'Droppin' It Like It's Hot'," 198

⁵³ Gilman, , "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 212

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Carina Ray, "Caster Semenya: 21st Century 'Hottentot Venus'?" *The African Executive*, December 16-23 2009, 18

⁵⁷ Jessica Davenport, "Saartjie Baartman, Caster Semenya and the 'Curious Case' of Black Female Athletes," *Prathia's Daughters* (blog). 29 August 2009

⁵⁸ Nyong', "The Unforgivable Transgression of Being Caster Semenya," 98

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Smith, "Caster Semenya row"

Response to Anita Brady: This Woman is Also an African

Robbie Shilliam

That Caster Semenya, a Black South African athlete, was tested for being a normal human in a Berlin hospital holds a special significance. It is not just that the testing for “normativity” in this location invokes memories of the German eugenics projects of the 1930s. It is also that Berlin was host to a conference of imperial powers in 1884-1885 out of which the continent and diverse peoples of Africa were carved up into colonial squares. The Berlin Act justified the exercising of European “sovereign rights” by reference to a civilizing mission that would especially suppress slavery and the slave trade amongst Africans. I invoke this conference because it brings to the fore the limit of being human that is broached by Anita Brady at the end of her wonderful chapter but is not present at the start: the racialized limit of humanity. What follows is not so much of a critique of Brady’s argument, but a sympathetic footnote that provides some thoughts on how to inquire further into the limiting of the “normality” of human being. Key, in my opinion, is to agitate for the importance of recognizing the conjoining of sex, gender and racial attributes in the very framing of the inquiry.

Partly inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Jamaican author and academic, has proposed a provocative narrative of the creation of the “human” subject.¹ First sketched out in the Spanish debates over the extent to which Amerindians could be incorporated within natural law if not within the Bible narrative, the human emerged as a secularised version of those entities that could be said to embody goodness versus those that embodied evil. Come the era of Atlantic slavery and ultimately arriving at late 19th century social Darwinian notions, this human became articulated further as a racialised being. During the long era of slavery, notions of goodness, cleanliness and racial hygiene can be gleaned in the attempts to make sure that poor European women in the American colonies did not inter-mix with enslaved populations – in both the social and reproductive sense – as they sometimes, in fact, tended to do.²

In effect, we see the attempt to segregate a racialised human being – white and invested with goodness – from sub- or proto-human beings – native, negro and invested with evil. Women were deemed dangerous to the extent that in their wombs lay the future success of segregating good from evil beings. Hence their putative feminine values and affects, along with their bodies, had to be exorcised from the public realm of political deliberation to be made dependent upon men’s sanction in the private realm. The “true” human who manifested in the visible realm of the public sphere had a sexed, gendered and racialized limit protected by the discourse of white supremacy.

Come abolition, the European imperial powers suddenly and conveniently forgot their culpability in forging an almost entirely racialised-sexualised-gendered figure of the human. And now for the sake of (their) humanity, these powers used the existence of slavery in Africa and amongst Africans as the justification for another round of colonization. The new colonial epoch ordered and segregated populations into humans (the small colonial administrator population) and sub-/proto- humans (natives/negroes) to be tutored in the ways of becoming human. Part of this tutoring, as Ifi Amadiume has shown,³ was to purify the public realm of all the vices of heretofore savage rule, first amongst these being the presence of women in authoritative roles, especially in the market and in the shrines.

European administrators and ideologues had already long recognized the danger of giving women such space in their American adventures. So again, the civilized public realm had to be cauterized from weak and seductive feminine values that had heretofore in part structured the social lives of both men and women, especially in many West African cultures. So again, but this time on the African continent, the particular human who could command and inhabit this public realm embodied a conjoined sex-gender-race limit.

The challenge, somehow, is to find a way of framing the problem of the “human” in a way that articulates the history of its conjoined sex-gender-race limit. This is a slightly different problematique to the mainstream understanding of inter-sectionality whereby one takes a number of variables, e.g. gender, race, sex and adds them together to form a sum of oppression.⁴ It is also different to the liberal demand to treat all narratives or analyses of gender, sex and race equally. Rather, the framework of analysis can articulate the limits of the human in a way adequate to the history of its becoming – i.e. as a conjoined sex-gender-race limit. It must somehow be possible to investigate the gendered nature of the human in a way that nevertheless unavoidably incorporates its racialized nature even if the focus remains on gender. And vice versa.

As an analogue, I am reminded of the critique of colonialism by Aimé Césaire that makes colonial rule forever implicated in the rise of fascist rule: both categories – colonialism/fascism – are infected with one another.⁵ Yet few nowadays return to Césaire; most, instead, start with Foucault’s lectures on race and bio-politics in European history and follow by adding in, or applying Foucault to, the extra-European colonial world.⁶ By this method, colonial and fascist rule cannot be articulated as conjoined but rather as comparative projects; and in this way the global and relational history of the modern limitation of the human is dis-articulated in the analysis. With this in mind, would it be possible to enter with wide open eyes into a discussion of the relationality of Butler and Fanon? Could we thus develop an analytic that exposes the conjoined sex-gender-race limit of the modern figure of the human – the gendered athletics, the anatomical tests on a South African person, and the significance of the location of the tests in Berlin.

¹ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation - An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, No. 3 (2003), 257-337

² See for example, Cecily Forde-Jones, "Mapping Racial Boundaries: Gender, Race, and Poor Relief in Barbadian Plantation Society," *Journal of Women's History* 10, No. 3 (1998), 9-31

³ Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Zed Books, 1997)

⁴ For an overview, see L. McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, No. 3 (2005), 1771-1800

⁵ A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000)

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003)

Response to Anita Brady: Naturalising Gender

James Meffan

Reading Anita Brady's paper, I am drawn to reflect on the difficulty that awaits a teacher who wants students to think about such fundamental questions, especially when the underlying concepts are so thoroughly *naturalised*. Interrogation of the construction of gender has been part of mainstream academia for many years now, yet this mode of thinking remains challenging to sustain. In my own time in academia – as both student and professional – critiques of the “naturalness” of apparently self-evident and common-sensical classificatory structures became widespread to the point of themselves becoming *de rigueur* for a time. Now their star seems to have waned somewhat.

Even if the essentialism of various pre-theoretical positions is still considered dubious, there has been, on a number of fronts, an embracing of what Spivak called with respect to race and gender “strategic essentialisms”. In effect, turning the headlamps of sceptical theories onto essentialist categories has not resulted in the destruction of those categories. And if the categories still operate with real force in “the real world”, then the very class of person constructed still has a reason to mobilise under that very nomination. For example, I may not “buy” that my classification as, say, “woman” has any more basis than a set of historico-discursive forces, but as long as society continues to circumscribe my world according to these categorical limits, I will be likely to have shared political interests with others likewise categorised, and it will be meaningful to attempt to mobilise under the banner “woman” and advance these as “women’s” interests.

While I acknowledge that personal anecdote is justly rejected as a reliable basis for advancing an academic argument, please indulge me as I recapitulate what I take to be some salutary experiences that have influenced my view on these matters.

The sex/gender distinction that Brady so succinctly summarised for us became, for a time, a widely held article of faith among my group of friends, particularly among those who went to university. As many of these friends went on to have children – produced from various relationship configurations – I noted a trend. For many the raising of children came to function as a counter-argument to their earlier anti-essentialist certainty. The process was not immediate: many approached parenting determined not simply to capitulate to genderist assumptions; they were adamant that they were not going to “girl the girls” or, for that matter, “boy the boys” as a matter of course.

I didn't always take as much interest as I might in my breeding friends, but I couldn't help but notice a number of them adopting a radically changed view after a few years' parenting

experience. The account of the transformation typically went something like this: ‘I made a point of not dressing my girl/boy in the normative styles and colours treated as proper to their gender. I supplied non-gender-specific toys (or made all types available to them), and generally did everything I could not to “gender” them, but,’ (went the conversion narrative), ‘it turns out that even with all the anti-gendering effort in the world, the boys inevitably began to choose boy-gendered modes of being, the girls “girlled” themselves regardless of my efforts.’

In many cases the conclusion drawn was a return to essentialism, the “recognition” that sex will out, that boys will be boys and girls girls. Once committed anti-essentialists now asserted that boys and girls are, at some level different “by nature”.

As I say, I don’t see any particular value in playing out a contest of anecdotal evidence. But what I was (and remain) struck by was the certainty of these parents that the measures that had personally taken to control the gendering variables influencing their children’s development amounted to the most important and potentially influential impacts on each child’s sense of self. If their anti-gendering efforts were unable to prevent the gendering process, they argued, then this was surely proof that the sex/gender distinction was less sustainable than they had previously thought. My own experience suggests that this might underplay the influence of social forces beyond the parent’s control.

When I became a parent I also watched my children becoming gendered (though with no special effort on my own part to modify the process). One event in particular, though, influenced my thinking on the gendering process, and in particular on the agential role of “significant individuals” such as parents. When at the age of four my first (and at the time only) child Pearl watched me shearing my hair off with a set of electric clippers and a short comb she became excited by the transformative possibilities of this radical topiary. She immediately (and persistently) set to petitioning both her parents to allow her to do the same. It took about a week of daily requests before we accepted that we really had no good reason to thwart this desire. I shaved off her shoulder-length blond hair, leaving her with close-cropped stubble.

For Pearl, everything changed. She did not feel any different, yet the people who addressed her in public places (supermarkets especially) now addressed her as a male, for fairly obvious reasons. But the register of address shifted too. Often the pitch of the addressor was significantly lowered, and the content changed too. I was made particularly aware of this because the change was literally overnight. In particular people seemed to want to reinforce her helpfulness as a marker of nascent “manhood”. ‘Aren’t you being a helpful little man?’ was a fairly typical of these comments that sought to hail her into a role that was treated as normatively masculine.

Pearl found the experience immediately frustrating. ‘Why does everyone say I’m a boy?’; or at one stage: ‘why do people have to always say what I am?’ Really, though there is nothing remarkable, nothing surprising in noting that a change to one basic signifier – hair – was enough to lead passersby to make (erroneous) assumptions about her sex. After all, at that age, hair and clothing are pretty much the only signifiers available to viewers and Pearl always preferred “boyish” clothes. Nothing remarkable either in noting the way their responses “hailed” her as masculine and subtly sought to interpellate her into a particular normative role.

No, what struck me was rather the reflection that this change forced on my own awareness. I now had to acknowledge that the interpellative way she had been addressed hitherto (the myriad subtle ways she had been “girled”) had not appeared (to her or, to be honest, to me) as a particularly gendered hail. Only under the disconcerting conditions of being addressed in a way that she knew to be normatively “wrong” (she knew she was a girl; they called her a boy) could she register the gendering language. Only once I noticed that people had different ways of addressing boys did I acknowledge that people (myself included, no doubt) had always been using an insidiously gendering register. It does not take long for a normalised mode of discourse to seem natural and uninflected if we have no reason to question or find no value in questioning it.

Her hair grew out and normal service was resumed. Asked if she planned to go for a similarly severe cut in future she decided that it was ‘not worth the hassle’ of having constantly to correct people’s misperceptions. Exceptionality can be, apart from anything else, a tiresome, even exhausting space to inhabit. To return to the normalised category no doubt represents considerable relief to the accidental exception.

For some, of course, exceptionality is not a choice. There is no easy way out once an individual has been claimed as a legitimate focus of public interest. For those like Caster Semenya, who are driven into the space of exceptionality, one can readily imagine the exhaustion that comes from having one’s identity argued between two poles of an inclusive binary. But, as Brady suggests, this treatment of exceptionality goes further; it seems to radically destabilise all categorisation, reaching a climax in the long established category debate that interrogates the individual subject in terms of human or non-human status.

For those with a choice, an inadvertent foray outside the delineations of the normative is readily resolved. And why would you not choose to restore yourself to the normalised position which society, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, but always persistently, rewards. Unless you see something important at stake in the challenging of these normative conventions, what would induce you to challenge them?

Brady referred to the difficulty of teaching these radical philosophical ideas and I sympathise. More challenging still than getting students to pause, question and allow these ideas to enter

their thoughts, is the problem of getting them to see them as a commentary on the observable world that might have some bearing on the way they live or on the way they might live.

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