After winning the 800 meters at the 2009 World Championships in Athletics in August, sprinter Caster Semenya returned to a hero’s welcome in her native South Africa, where the public denounced the “gender testing” she was forced to undergo (Figure 1). Outraged by the racist and sexist comments of rivals – who told journalists that you could tell she was a man just by looking at her – the president of South African athletics, Leonard Chuene, resigned from the International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF). “This girl has been castigated from day one, based on what?” he told the Los Angeles Times “You denounce my child as a boy when she’s a girl? If you did that to my child, I’d shoot you” (Dixon 2009).

Figure 1. Caster Semenya at the XII IAAF World Championships in Athletics, August 2009, in Berlin. (Creative Commons photograph by José Sena Goulão/LUSA.).

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South Africans weren’t the only ones angrily comparing Semenya’s treatment to that of Saartjie Baartman, the nineteenth-century Khoisan woman who was exhibited throughout Europe as a sexualized monstrosity. White audiences guffawed, prodded and poked at her exposed body, which they laughingly demeaned as that of a “Hottentot Venus”: the inverse of European standards of beauty (Holmes 2007). Challenging Semenya’s femaleness, people asserted, was imperialism all over again. It was an especially shameful and traumatic humiliation, they stressed, for a teenager to experience. The South African Mail and Guardian wrote:

At 18, Caster Semenya is quite probably frightened and confused. Her dignity has been attacked, her profoundest sense of self laid bare with potentially damaging psychological consequences. But when she returns home, she seems assured of a special welcome from family and friends who have never sat in judgment on her nature. They have always accepted her simply as Caster, the girl who can outrun them all. (Smith 2009)

Semenya’s case is understandably upsetting, but I for one object to the manner in which she was spoken for in passages such as above. Was it her defenders who were perhaps embarrassed and ashamed by her exuberant embodiment, more than her? Semenya, by all accounts, was a rough and tough tomboy who excelled in sports, scorned skirts for trousers from the very beginning, and shrugged off teasing and bullying about her gender long before the issue exploded in Berlin. Young though she may be, who is to say Semenya cannot know and enjoy who she is? Who is to say that her “profoundest sense of self” lies with being considered and treated like a “girl”?

If ever a case called for an intersectional analysis that included queer and trans perspectives, as well as anti-racist and anti-imperialist ones, this should be one. Whether indignantly paternalistic, like Chuene, or more “liberally” expressing concern over a fragile, damaged psyche, like the Mail and Guardian, Semenya’s defenders were clearly dealing with gender panic of their own. The makeover she quickly received upon her return to South Africa was a transparent bid to render her a more suitable standard bearer for national femininity (Figure 2). The almost instantaneous production and rapid circulation of this dramatic “before and after” imagery was but further illustration of Judith Butler’s thesis in Gender Trouble, that, while we often think of sex or gender-deviant bodies as failed copies of a natural original, “natural” gender is actually a mimetic attempt to forestall the uncanny prospect of their being no stable gender referent at all (Butler 1990). The headline “Look at Caster Now” can only mean: refer back from this image, which we present to you as the true, real Caster, to the prior, excessive and disturbing image one, and you will somehow have your perception of her gender stabilized. That such stability of gender is never achieved is unfortunately not a good enough reason for people to stop trying. Hence the recurrent panic.

And who wouldn’t be unsettled? World-class female athletes have long made people anxious, particularly gorgeously muscle-bound black ones. The splendor of their world, which a bystander like myself can only imagine, must be one in which conventional barriers of the body are left behind in the dust. In the name of protecting African femininity from a western, scientific gaze, Semenya’s defender
also disguise their own patriarchal investment in naming and controlling this gender excess. But as her career already illustrates, such gender excess is hard to control.

On her blog *From a Left Wing*, apropos of similar cases in women’s soccer, Jennifer Doyle asks:

What is it we are looking for in a women’s game? Surely not a confirmation of the “femininity” of the people on the pitch. It must be something else – like how the
women’s game allows us to escape from narrow ideas about who and what women are. Why shouldn’t women’s football be exactly the game to welcome gender-bending warriors like the intersex athlete, and the transgender warrior? (Doyle 2009)

The real challenge when an ugly, gender-disciplinary inquisition like the one the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) started crops up is not to allow ourselves to be blackmailed into simplistic reassortions of gender normativity for the sake of the vulnerable child. Here Semenya herself leads the way, in her original, succinct response to the ordered test: “I don’t give a damn.” Instead of making her a traumatized symbol of a violated continent, might it be possible to adopt some of this practical pugnacity?

And instead of insisting upon the naturalness of her gender, how about turning the question around and denaturalizing the world of gender segregated, performance-obsessed, commercially-driven sports, a world that can neither seem to do with or without excessive bodies like Semenya’s and their virtuosic performances?

The rush to compare Semenya to Saartjie Baartman, while obvious for nationalistic reasons, misses something crucial. Baartman was exhibited and violated for what the imperialist eye took to be her aberrant femininity. A better comparison to Semenya would be to the many trans bodies who have been disciplined and punished for their female masculinity. As in Semenya’s case, female masculinity is often associated with forms of disguise and deceit (the stigma of “doping” and of South African Athletics perhaps trying to “pass off” a male runner as a woman is clearly relevant here). But it is also associated, and for related reasons, with the extraordinary. Runners like Semenya are as much virtuoso performers as are musicians of extraordinary skill. And the virtuoso always risks being scapegoated as a freak of nature, even as they exemplify a potential that is immanent to the human.

We are drawn to the virtuoso, and the virtuoso draws us out of ourselves. But it is the very intensity of response that can lead to a panicked rush to quarantine or explain it away. As the debate and events progressed, I noticed that even those sympathetic to my original blog post often demanded a clear statement from me about whether or not I believed intersexed individuals ought to be permitted to compete in women’s athletics. To be held responsible to such a question, I still maintain, is to conform to the positivist and biologistic logic of the IAAF. Finding our way always back to the “pragmatic” questions of gender and sex management simply evades the urgent and, in my mind, equally pragmatic imperatives to change the terms of debate. Female masculinity like that of Semenya’s, as virtuosic performances of gender, unsettle those terms of debate in ways that are not reducible to chromosomes or chemistry.

The long sordid history of considering transgender embodiment an intrinsic hoax is relevant here, regardless of whether one wants to claim Semenya as a trans figure. We should contest the essentialist conviction that bodies must have a stable sex that presents itself in appropriate dress, voice, attitude and performance, and that anybody who does not must by definition be engaged in a deception, even if it nature, as it were, that is deceiving them. The nominal distinction between intentional deception on the part of Semenya or her coaches and the unknowing entering of an intersexed individual into a women’s competition is, in the final
analysis, rendered moot if, in either case, the end result is the humiliation and
disqualification of the competitor. Whether devious, or simply deviant, the freakishly
virtuosic body is a spectacle and a threat.

The essentialist response to the essentialist attack on Semenya was to reassert the
commonsense of the gender binary, on the order of “In Africa we know men
from women.” A proper anti-essentialist response would be to acknowledge how
easily rattled that binary is. One such anti-essentialist strategy is humor, which,
unlike humorlessness, can admit how exceptional bodies, in their incongruity, hold
potentially important insights into the non-congruence of all bodies to any purported
“norm.” The offensive but infectious “She’s a man” humor all over internet video
sites was often crude and misogynist. But as a vernacular culture it reminds me less
of the response to Baartman than it does of that to another nineteenth-century
“freak,” Peter Sewally, who was apprehended in women’s attire in antebellum
New York. Like Semenya, Sewally was also forcibly submitted to a genital
examination to establish his gender, and was then mocked in court, where he was
forced to appear wearing the dress he was apprehended in, rather than convicts
attire, so that his transgression could be spectacularized.

Prints of Sewally as the “Man-Monster” were displayed for sale, much as
images of Semenya now circulate worldwide for cheap amusement (Nyongo’o 2009,
96–102). Sewally was however unapologetic in the face of public ridicule and legal
reprisal. In his defiant nonrespectability, Sewally might serve as an important
historical example of “transformational shame”:

shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame
and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are
different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational
shame, is performance. (Sedgwick 2003, 38)

The historical record informs us how the courts and press opined on Sewally from on
high, but it must be read against the grain to uncover more ambivalent responses
closer to the ground. Today we have a profusion of inroads into the collective
psyche. The online impersonations and ruminations upon Semenya – many by black,
putatively straight men – seem to be a quasi-public grappling with the rougher
edges of shame and shamelessness that Eve Sedgwick limns in the quotation above.
At he very least, dabbling in the shared and public indignity of sex is a more
interesting response to Semenya than patriarchal or pastoral attempts to cover over
the embarrassment of having a body.

The furor over Semenya’s virtuosity was ignited in, of all places, Berlin, where
Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler’s documentarian, took her famous photographs of African
American sprinter Jesse Owens during the Nazi Olympics in 1936. Looking at those
pictures now, I’m reminded of how modern international athletics is so deeply
shaped by its disavowed eugenicist history. Black athleticism, as Paul Gilroy argued
in his oft-misread polemic, Between Camps, increasingly stands in for a superhuman
commodified physicality that remains, nonetheless, paradoxically attached to
what he calls “infrahumanity,” or humanity on a lower spectrum or frequency.
Gilroy presciently warned of a genetic turn in race-thinking, which the current
attempt to reinstate the gender binary at a chromosomal or endrochrinal level is
reminding us of. Our challenge then, is to think against this ongoing regeneration of eugenic ideals, based on bodily capacities that black people are supposed to possess in excess (to the detriment of our intellectual capacities), while sustaining hope in the immanent possibilities Gilroy also sees in infrahumanity, possibilities which I’ve tried to identify here with Semenya’s virtuosic performance of gender (Gilroy 2004).

Who knows, but on the lower frequencies, Caster Semenya runs for all of us?

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