



Caster Semenya: A Girl of Two Parts

By Jennifer Elle Lewis

Abstract

In August 2009, the world turned South African middle distance runner Caster Semenya into an international phenomenon, after she won the gold medal in the 800m race in Berlin. However, it was not her athletic prowess that brought her to the forefront of the world media's attention, but rather the subsequent questions around her gender and sex. This article looks at trends in contemporary and pre-enlightenment theories around the body and sexual identity, and how these shifting thoughts could be applied to Semenya and the surrounding hegemonic discourse on gender.

Key words

Sport, gender, body politics, Caster Semenya

Boxed in by gender categorisation

Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the Second Sex that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman." This phrase is odd, even nonsensical, for how can one become a woman if one wasn't a woman all along? And who is this "one" who does the becoming? Is there some human who becomes its gender at some point in time? What is the moment or mechanism of gender construction? And, perhaps most pertinently, when does this mechanism arrive on the cultural scene to transform the human subject into a gendered subject?

- (Butler, Gender Trouble, 1990)

Prior to her leap into the media frenzy, Caster Semenya was just an 18-year-old girl from Limpopo who liked to run. Caster was a girl who chose not to adhere to the socially accepted roles of how females should behave or dress. However, who can pontificate on who Caster "is" or why she "chose" to transgress certain norms? It is precisely this penchant for categorisation and rationalisation that has turned her into a spectacle to begin with. The public's message is clear: it is not enough that Caster "is," but that she must be put into the appropriate category for "what" she is.

Caster did not fit the mold, in fact she broke it just as she broke records in speed and agility. She did not adhere to performative gender roles, as Judith Butler might suggest, and that was just *too much*. The public could not stomach it. In fact, they demanded a refund. It was assumed that she must be a fraud of some kind, perhaps a deceptive fey boy masquerading as female. As her sexual identity read as "indeterminate" it was essential to shuffle Semenya into one group or the other, and call it a day.

Before the gender test results were officially in, there was a buzz across radio air waves and internet chat rooms, a buzz that echoed again and again, *hermaphrodite*. The public placed Semenya on a platform, like a circus freak hovering above the water tank, inevitably due to be submerged once a skilled hand made union between the ball and the "hit me" sign. And so she was plunged in pre-emptively. With "scientific" findings to back up the media bloodlust, she has been stripped of her title, her dignity, and forbidden to race in the future.

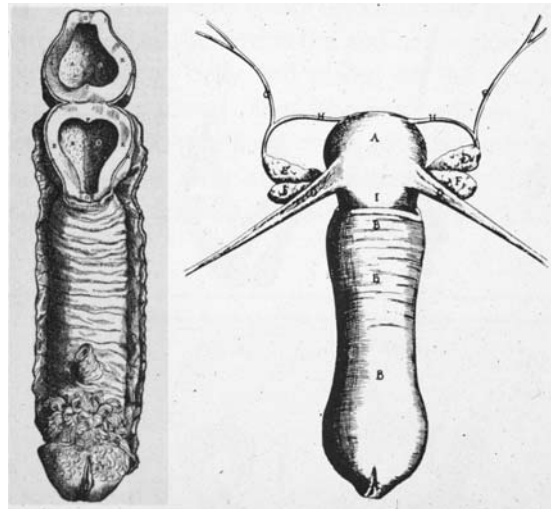
As the public sleeps snugly in their beds, relieved that one more of life's puzzles has been debunked, Caster has to face a different reality. Caster has lived all her life as herself, whatever that self may be. The self that was once female.

One sex

There was a time when, reproductively speaking, males and females were considered to be one in the same, and to share one essential sex. Prior to the Enlightenment period, this was the belief, men housing their genitals externally and women internally. (Of course, this era also held the belief that a woman's reproductive cycle was the same as a canine's, but *c'est la vie*.) An anonymous poem of that era surmises their understanding of "sameness":

*Though they of different sexes be,
Yet on the whole they are the same as we,
For those that have the strictest searchers been,
Find women are but men turned outside in.*

Figure 1:



Two anatomical drawings: vagina as penis

Early anatomists believed in the "one sex model/ one flesh model". This theory viewed the ovaries as testes, the uterus as a scrotum a interior (See Figure 1'). There was one essential human body, with only slight variants for sex and race. Most of these variants favored men, an example being that the vagina was seen as a weaker version of the penis, even though it was also thought to emit sperm.

Two sex

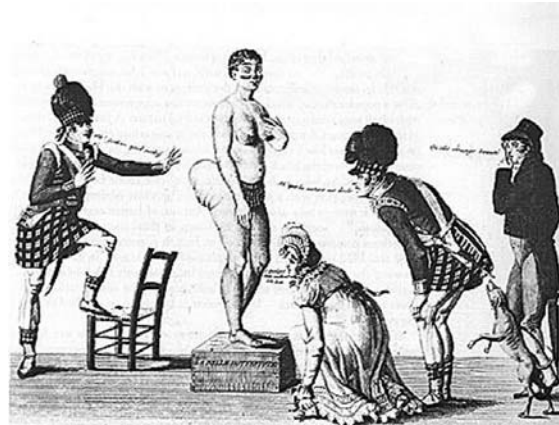
Following the Enlightenment, when it was established that a woman's procreative organs were not, simply, a man's "turned outside in" the male doctor supplanted the female midwife, and a new interest developed in noting the differences of the female sex, which was experimented on in manifold bizarre ways. The new field of gynecology was established, (plagued by an early bout of purple fever³), and men firmly took hold of the speculum. This is the point in time when the female body was differentiated from the male, because, it can be argued, it was in contrast to the female body that the male body achieved meaning. The system of gender then became relational, operating through binaries: a "man" is "not woman," just as "woman" is "not man." Therefore, to prevent perceived degradation of the sexes the categories of "man" and "woman" needed to be rigidly defined and their boundaries aggressively policed.

This was also an era when colonial nations were unfurling their post-Enlightenment "civilising missions" across the globe, and expanding into the apparent wildernesses of untamed lands and peoples. The example of Saartjie Baartman (1789 – 1815) perhaps falls into both categories of Victorian explorations, both anthropologically and gynecologically. A Khoikhoi woman, she was dubbed Hottentot Venus and exhibited as sideshow attraction in nineteenth-century Europe. In one fell swoop, anthropologists removed her from her native land (now the Eastern Cape of South Africa), transported her to Europe, and had for their pleasure a specimen that both represented the vast differences between the sexes as well as the differences between black and white, colonist and barbarian.

The primary attraction of Baartman were her large labial "aprons," in mammoth proportions to the petite Caucasian counterpart, and excited voyeurs would stand with baited breath, hoping to catch a glimpse when she was placed on the podium in various European capitals. Scientists were searching for a classificatory wedge with which to best illustrate the differences of the species. Committed to this

undertaking they continued their work with or without Baartman's "permission."

Figure 2: the prodding of Saartjie Baartman



"Eager to inspect her labia...the scientists spent three days trying to convince Baartman to submit to the physical, even offering her money, which she refused. Alas, her early death afforded them ready access to her private parts, (they) made a plaster cast of her body and had her brain and genitals preserved in jars. Although the skeleton remains at Paris's Musée de l'Homme... her brain and genitals have disappeared." (Davis 2002)

The treatment of Saartjie Baartman perhaps best illustrates the desire to establish order and preserve power by making spectacles of difference. In this case, to make a spectacle of a woman by the difference of her reproductive organs. To date, we may not be so removed from genitals in formaldehyde that go mysteriously missing, never to be located again.

One sex, two sex, three sex

These shifting thoughts on the construction of gender and human sexuality have brought us to where we stand today: a place where a young girl can be called into question in the public arena because she fails to fit the norm. While many strides have been made since Baartman's era, and certainly her treatment was more brutal than Semenya's, we are still living with

remnants of those same guiding principles. Although Enlightenment thinking has, on the whole, done more good than bad for the world, the elements of rigid categorisation and of social stratification that have come out of it, not to mention gender biases, are serious issues that are still at play in today's world.

Semenya's sexual identity has been placed into the hands of scientists, theorists, psychologists and public scrutiny two hundred years post-Baartman. She too has been prodded, inspected and infiltrated. It is equally by her genitals, procreative organs and internal chemistry that her womanhood has been assessed and judged. While Baartman was singled out because she was considered to be hyper-feminine, Semenya has come into the limelight for not being feminine enough. It seems that on either end of the spectrum one is not safe from public scorn and personal exposure, even exposure of their most personal parts.

In this way, Caster's private parts have become incorporated into the public sphere. The term "pubes," which translates to "adult men" also signifies male participation in the public arena, while the word "pudendum," which is still used interchangeably with "female genitalia," is from the Latin "pudere" and translates to "that of which one ought to be ashamed." (Kapsalis 1997) And so we find Semenya, straddling both.

Though not all specific content from Semenya's tests has been made public at the time of this article, reports about the gender identification exams she underwent suggest she does not have a uterus or ovaries, and that she may have internal glands like male testes producing an inordinate amount of testosterone, as compared to the average woman. It is suggested this means she might be part male. Although her externally appearing female genitals have made her and Baartman a site of shame and humiliation, she cannot stake her claim on the category female. According to the IAAF, she cannot stake her claim on anything, even her gold medal. The result is that someone who is a world-class athlete has been told she has no right to be one, because they don't know which box to tick next to her name.

Fairness in sport

The Semenya factor has raised perhaps the most serious challenge to the notion of fairness in sport, and to conventional attitudes about gender to date. As previously mentioned, test results are reported to show that Caster's body naturally secretes three times the "normal" female levels of testosterone, the dominant "male" hormone, which some competitors say gives her an "unfair advantage." The question of fairness is fundamental to the very structure of organised sports. For instance, it is easy to understand why it is wrong that one athlete use a "performance-enhancing" substance, such as uppers, steroids and human growth hormones. These chemicals are unhealthy and undermine physical and philosophical integrity of competition.

But the logic of the Semenya question is very different: if she has an advantage from a naturally occurring condition, and her body is as it is through no direct action of her own, is barring her from competition not comparable to excluding athletes whose legs are too long, or whose muscles have too much ease with fast-twitch reflex? How can one determine who is too naturally advantaged to compete, or on what criteria racing categories should be determined. Going forward, could it be a consideration that athletes be grouped by height, weight, age and hormonal level, as opposed to gender. Since there are so many other factors at play in what makes a winner or a runner-up, it seems outdated to only focus on gender and overlook the multitude of other physical or hormonal attributes that affect performance.

One sex, two sex, three sex, five sex?

At the end of the day, are men and women so fundamentally different? Is it still relevant to have such vast disparities between their identifications? What about this notion that we share an essential body? With so many shifting thoughts, one must consider if the path towards a more equitable existence is based on the abolition of categories or the creation of new ones.

Modern scientists have, to date, identified five sexes. Anne Fausto-Sterling, has albeit jokingly coined them: male, female, herm, merm and ferm. She has also found, through research conducted at Brown University, that roughly 1.7% of the population is born intersexual in some form. She states that this figure represents "all chromosomal, anatomical and hormonal exceptions to the dimorphic ideal" and suggests that the number of intersexuals subjected to surgery as infants may be between one in 1,000 and one in 2,000 births. Additionally, as different populations possess the defining hormones at higher frequencies, the intersexual birthrate is not uniform throughout the world, and is therefore difficult to document.³

Figure 3: Caster all dolled up



If we accept that we are not the same, but that the categories of man and woman are no longer relevant in all cases, would a next step be to make these five sexes official categories for public consumption? Thailand has already instituted third gender public restrooms. Following this lead, could such categories carry over for sexual variants in sport: women with flat chests and ambiguous genitals to the left, men with small penises and high pitched voices to the right and women without uteruses to the back of the line. Or, going back to this idea of "sameness", might additional categories only create new opportunities for judgment.

Both men and women have testosterone and estrogen, both men and women have nipples and noses, both men and women have reproductive cycles and mood swings (while many men fail to recognise this.)

The margin of difference between men and women is so slim in comparison to the huge amount of sameness that we collectively share, that it is amazing that this slim margin is the basis for so much discrimination. Furthermore, science is constantly shifting landscape. Scientists are prone to human prejudices, and science as a whole, while claiming to be objective, is still privy to the dominant beliefs of the time. Since science is never as scientific as hoped for, it is difficult to predict how the case of Semenya might be viewed by the scientists of future eras.

So then what makes males "male" and females "female?"

How are these categories created and policed? As Butler suggests, it might well be a repetitive act, its symbols and actions based on nothing more than the act itself, the act and the actors needed to constantly tread the gendered waters to keep it afloat. Gender and sexual identity could then be viewed as nothing more than a slim façade pulled together from the reservoir of cultural indicators, or an act of "heterosexual drag" (Butler 1990). If Caster had dressed and accessorized herself as she is pictured on the cover of *You* magazine, then maybe she would still be racing. In fact, it could be argued that the most offensive aspect of Caster Semenya, was not her hormonal levels or her missing ovaries, but that she did not participate in this act of drag.

In conclusion, Semenya did not adhere to the prescribed gender indicators. They were not present with her on the dusty dirt roads of her homeland. There it was the feel of the wind in her face, the sound of her heart pounding, the smell of the fields burning and the joy as she beat one personal record after another. There it was hope and perseverance. There she was and will remain, Caster Semenya, a world champion.

References

- Butler, Judith.** 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- _____. 1996. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Anny Garry and Maryline Pearsall (eds.). *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*. Routledge: New York and London.
- Davis, Simone Weil.** 2002. "Loose Lips Sink Ships." *Feminist Studies* 28.2: 7-37.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne.** 2000. *The Five Sexes, Revisited*. *Sciences*, Jul/Aug2000, Vol. 40 Issue 4, p18, 6p, 1c, 2bw.
- Laqueur, Thomas.** 1986. "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology." In Rodger, N. & Micaela di Leonardo (eds.). *The Gender Sexuality Reader*. P. 219 – 243.
- Kapsalis, Terri.** 1997. *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum*. Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Writers Bio

Jennifer Elle Lewis is the manager of the Gender and Media Diversity Centre (GMDC). She comes to the GMDC from the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. She has worked extensively on issues of sexual and gender based violence, gender equity, representation and cultural and cosmetic surgery techniques. She holds a Masters of Arts in Gender Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, with an emphasis on Social Anthropology, sexuality and the body.

Notes

- ¹ From Vesalius, "Fabrica," and vagina and uterus from Vidus Vidius, "De anatome corporis humani," 1611
- ² "Purple fever", a bacterial infection spread frequently during the Victorian era during childbirth. This has been largely attributed to the growth of the field of gynecology, and their dismissal of the midwifery and its practices. The male gynecologist was considered a specialist, and due to the ensuing demand, would move from patient to patient without washing his hands. This took the lives of many women after childbirth, most famously Mary Wollstonecraft, the "mother of feminism".
- ³ Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *The Five Sexes, Revisited*. *Sciences*, Jul/Aug2000, Vol. 40 Issue 4, p18, 6p, 1c, 2bw