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The Powers of Testosterone: Obscuring Race and Regional Bias in the Regulation of Women Athletes*

Abstract: Using strategies from critical race studies and feminist studies of science, medicine, and the body, we examine the covert operation of race and region in a regulation restricting the natural levels of testosterone in women athletes. Sport organizations claim the rule promotes fair competition and benefits the health of women athletes. Intersectional and postcolonial analyses have shown that “gender challenges” of specific women athletes engage racialized judgments about sex atypicality that emerged in the context of Western colonialism and are at the heart of Western modernity. Here, we introduce the concept of “T talk” to refer to the web of direct claims and indirect associations that circulate around testosterone as a material substance and a multivalent cultural symbol. In the case we discuss, T talk naturalizes the idea of sport as a masculine domain while deflecting attention from the racial politics of intrasex competition. Using regulation documents, scientific publications, media coverage, in-depth interviews, and sport officials’ public presentations, we show how this supposedly neutral and scientific regulation targets women of color from the Global South. Contrary to claims that the rule is beneficent, both racialization and medically-authorized harms are inherent to the regulation.

Keywords: health; hyperandrogenism; racialization; sex and gender; science; sport; T talk; violence.

Die Macht des Testosterons: Wie die Regulierung weiblicher Athletinnen *race* und regionale Voreingenommenheit verschleiert

Zusammenfassung: Mit Strategien, mit denen auch die critical race studies sowie feministische Analysen an Wissenschaft, Medizin und Körper herantreten, untersuchen wir mit Blick auf die verdeckte Anwendung der Kategorien *race* und Region die Regulierung, welche die natürliche Menge an Testosteron bei weiblichen Sportlerinnen beschränkt. Sportorganisationen postulieren, diese Regelungen förderten den fairen Wettkampf und die Gesundheit von Sportlerinnen. Intersektionale und postkoloniale Analysen zeigen, dass die ‚Infragestellung‘ des Geschlechts bestimmter Sportlerinnen mit rassifizierten Urteilen über Geschlechts-Atypizität verknüpft sind, welche im Kontext des westlichen Kolonialismus entstanden und zentral für die westliche Moderne sind. Hier führen wir das Konzept des „*T Talks*“ ein, um auf das Netz von direkten Forderungen und indirekten Assoziationen zu verweisen, welches um Testosteron als materielle Substanz und multivalentes kulturelles Symbol zirkuliert. Im hier untersuchten Fall dient *T Talk* der Naturalisierung der Vorstellung von Sport als männlicher Domäne und lenkt damit von der rassialisierten Politik des intrageschlechtlichen Wettkampfes ab. Anhand von Regeldokumenten, wissenschaftlichen Publikationen, Medienberichterstattung, ausführlichen Interviews sowie öffentlicher Äußerungen von Sportfunktionären zeigen wir, wie diese vermeintlich neutrale und wissenschaftliche Regulierung sich besonders gegen Women of Color aus dem Globalen Süden richtet. Entgegen der Behauptung, dass die Regelung vorteilhaft sei, gehen sowohl Rassifizierung als auch medizinisch autorisierte Nachteile mit ihr einher.

Schlagwörter: Gesundheit; Hyperandrogenismus; Rassifizierung; sex und gender; Wissenschaft; Sport; *T Talk*; Gewalt.

Prelude 1: Olympic Summer Games, Rio de Janeiro, 2016

Long after the last competitor left Rio, a decidedly un-Olympic image haunted our memories.¹ At the finish line of the women's 800-meter final, South African runner Caster Semenya extends her arms to fellow competitors Melissa Bishop of Canada and Lynsey Sharp of Great Britain, who are locked in a tight embrace. Semenya has just won the gold; Sharp has placed sixth and Bishop has taken fourth. The two disregard Semenya's gesture, remaining closed in one another's arms.

The photo was a sad endnote to a vitriolic media uproar that had raged intermittently for years and especially during the month leading up to the race, sounding unfairly on Semenya's right to compete. For the seven years since the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) broke their own confidentiality policy and confirmed it was investigating her under its ad hoc "gender verification" policy, Semenya has endured relentless hostility and a deluge of cruel harassment from both traditional and online media. Of the investigation, she has said, "I have been subjected to unwarranted and invasive scrutiny of the most intimate and private details of my being" (Associated Press 2010). In intervening years, the extraordinary scrutiny from journalists and the public has persisted. A security team was reportedly provided for her in Rio due to concerns the hostility might turn violent (Brook 2016). South Africa as a nation pushed back with #handsoffcaster and a petition to stop bullying created by "People against racist bullies" (Amandla Awethu 2016).

Semenya is the world's most scrutinized and violated athlete despite having done nothing wrong. She has neither doped nor cheated. She also had the support of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the world's highest adjudicating body for sport (CAS 2015). A year earlier, CAS slapped a two-year suspension on the IAAF regulation that, along with an analogous regulation adopted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), places a ceiling on a woman athlete's natural testosterone (T) level (IAAF 2011; IOC 2012).² IAAF and IOC officials claim that high T is a "male" trait, that T is the "main reason" men generally outperform women in tests of strength and speed, and that women with high T (whom they call "hyperandrogenic") therefore have an "unfair" advantage over their competitors.³ Under the regulation, if a woman athlete's natural T level is deemed by the IAAF to give her "unfair" advantage, she must lower it through surgery or drugs, or forego competing forever.

But when teenaged Indian sprinter Dutee Chand challenged the same IAAF regulation in 2015, the arbitrators at CAS ruled in her favor. They found that the IAAF had failed to demonstrate that the policy was scientifically justified. The IAAF had not provided sufficient evidence that female athletes with T levels in the "male range" have a performance advantage over their peers with lower T levels that is comparable to the 10-12 percent advantage that men typically have over women. The arbitrators suspended the regulation for two years, allowing the IAAF this period to return to CAS with sufficient scientific evidence, or else the policy would be void.

Semenya was first targeted in fall 2009, fifteen months before this T regulation took effect. The agreement between Semanya and the IAAF that allowed her to return to competition in 2010 has never been released. Nevertheless, the ire of those unhappy with the suspension of the regulations has been focused squarely on Semanya. She is the athlete they single out as supposedly proving not only the need for a regulation, but T's unparalleled role in athletic performance (e.g., McRae 2016; O'Sullivan 2016). Observers have attributed her athleticism to a single molecule – testosterone – as though it alone earned her the gold, undermining at once her skill, preparation, and achievement.

In writing of Semanya, we risk repeating the problems raised so eloquently by Neville Hoad and Keguro Macharia including our own “participat[ion] in an ongoing spectacularization” (Macharia 2009). Hoad questions

broaching the topic at all. Caught in a double demand to resist spectacularizing Semanya in the long and intractable representational history of racialized and sexualized African bodies, and a participation in a LGBTQ praxis of freedom that wants to render visible and celebrate gender variance (here the speed, grace, power and beautiful butchness of Semanya), finding an ethical entry into the question of Caster Semanya becomes difficult. (2010: 398)

Feeling this double bind, in an earlier piece, we included a discussion of Semanya that soon thereafter filled us with deep regret for our complicity in this spectacularization (Karkazis et al. 2012). Among other harms, we made repeated references to her “case” – a distancing, medicalizing and, ultimately, dehumanizing way to refer to her. In this paper, we felt that no mention of her might serve as a cultural lobotomy that was equally distancing. We thus decided to do so in a way that resists the dominant story with counternarratives, details, and context that seek to underscore the human(s) at the core of this regulation without recapitulating harm and without erasing what is ugly and painful here that requires daylight.

On the eve of the 2016 Summer Olympics, IAAF president Sebastian Coe announced that the organization would challenge the suspension of the regulation (Guardian Sport 2016), repeating this avowal just before the 800meter finals with a timing that seemed specifically aimed to cast doubt on Semanya's right to compete. “We were surprised by the CAS decision, and I think the IOC was too,” Coe said after a meeting of the IAAF Council. “We are looking again at this issue and will be talking to CAS at some time over the next year” (Rowbottom 2016). Coe immediately followed this statement with a half-hearted reminder that “these are human beings,” likely knowing that his comments would throw into question not only Semanya's participation but possibly others' too. With a tinderbox left smoldering, one breath of accusation was all that was needed to reignite the “debate.” As if determined to maintain a veil of suspicion over these athletes, Coe subsequently made similar pronouncements during both the 2017 Asian Athletics Championships held in Chand's hometown of Bhubaneswar, India and the 2017 World Championships in Athletics held in London.