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## The invention of the athletic body

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**THE INVENTION OF THE ATHLETIC BODY.****SUMMARY:**

Based on two mythic figures – one belonging to classic Greece (the “Glowing Body”), and another to primitive Christianity (the “Heavenly Body”) – I reflect on the symbolic logic of exclusion as enacted in four moments in the history of the Olympic Games. The first has to do with the invention of amateurism in the sporting philosophy of Coubertin, or the class exclusion. The second refers to the Anthropology Days held at the 1904 Olympic Games in Saint Louis (Missouri), or the ethnic/racial exclusion. The third is the Berlin Parade of Nations in 1936, or the national supremacy. The fourth explores the introduction of gender verification in Mexico City (1968), or the gender exclusion. In this fashion, we re-connect the imagined/imaginary configuration of the body with practices and politics which will result in an anthropological rationalization of discrimination.

**KEY WORDS:**

Class discrimination, Racism, Nationalism, Sexism, Body, Sports.

## Introduction:

### Who is afraid of Caster Semenya?

An 18 year old South African wins the 800 meter run in the 2009 IAAF World Championships (Berlin) with ease; too easily it seems. Suspicion spreads like a wave among the judges, not only due to the undeniable victory, but to the way in which the athlete has bettered her own personal record. To these technical details we must add the aesthetic appreciation of her physical appearance: according to multiple viewers, the girl is not *sufficiently feminine*. “Something’s wrong here”, the authorities presume, and they start an investigation which includes an anatomical examination – performed by gynaecologists, psychologists, endocrinologists, biologists and other experts – whose conclusions may result in an official rejection of Caster Semenya’s status as a woman and her consequent loss of her championship title.

The runner’s origins may add complications to the issue: Semenya is not “white”, due to which, some of her advocates allege that her appearance’s ambiguity is not a matter of gender, but of race. Some of the most paradoxical features of the case are the claims of a multiethnic nationalism in a mostly black country which roughly 50 years ago was subject to international boycott; a situation that led to the country’s exclusion from the Olympic Games from 1964 to the end of *Apartheid*.

The concatenation of identity indicators such as these serves as one of the organising principles in sports throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the institutionalization of the Olympic Games in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, race, gender, nation and social class make up the multiple modalities which constitute the athletic body’s collective image, serving also as the foundation upon which social inequality is built.

None of these dimensions have an autonomous existence, but work in sundry intersections, which manifest themselves as exclusion, segregation and discrimination mechanisms whose functional performance modes are more or less opaque, more or less transparent, as the century evolves and sports acquire more cultural influence.

I deliberately choose the realm of sport – and the Olympic phenomenon in particular – as my argument’s foundation because, as Amy Bass states, “sport provides a contradictory terrain upon which a multitude of questions and claims of identity – race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality – are constructed and contested, challenged and yet sustained.” (Bass, 2002: 3). An enclosed social area enables us to draw very accurate limits – in space and time – for the interpretation of social phenomena, as well as providing its own discourse and imagery.

I am particularly interested in the production of images – the technical production of athletic bodies – which are proclaimed as corporal models, as well as the legitimization mechanisms they bring into existence. It is particularly useful to reflect – as Butler does – on the body as the effect of power (the result of forced repetition of regulating norms), an ideal that is commonly suggested as natural or essential, previous to any meaning (Butler, 2002: 34).

As a product of culture, the athletic body is an artefact which in order to build itself requires the construction of a *defective body*; this means, for example, than in sports venues there are mechanisms which “marginalise the physically unfit, those identifying as gay or lesbian, disabled people, and the elderly people” (Whannel, 2007: 10). Thus, the athletic body is suggested as the highest expression of physical and moral virtue, while the defective body shows faults and imperfections serving to set the boundaries of inhumanity. Each one refers to the other. Each one serves to verify the practices which are organized around bodies as living entities, but only the latter – the defective body – will show identity marks, while the athletic body will be an unmarked semiotic mechanism<sup>1</sup>: although the athletic body is considered to be a human prototype and apparently works with complete autonomy, it structurally needs the presence of the “imaginary other” – the dominated body, the colonized body, the “inferior” body of coloured, under age, sick, mad, poor, old, homosexual and underdeveloped people – to serve as a limit or frontier.

A lack of the distinguishing mark is the result of a semiotic process: the athletic body’s logic is inscribed within a tradition whose principal meaning mechanism is the dematerialization of the body in the realm of imagination. The imaginary athletic body is only fulfilled in key moments such as an athletic feat. Only in the book of world records, in the judge’s watch, in the referee’s stare, in the newspaper’s cover, the athletic body would seem to lack age, gender, race, nationality and social class. In the absolute imaginary realm of the athletic feat, the body defies the laws of physics and transcends its mortal nature. In order to achieve that tran-

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1. In semiotics, the mark is “the inscription of a complementary heterogeneous element on (or within) a unity or a group, and serves as a sign for recognizing”. Recognizing is a “cognitive operation by which the individual establishes an identity connection between two elements, one of which is present while the other is absent”. The “marked/non marked” opposition is used to distinguish two elements of meaning “depending on those elements being characterized by the presence or absence of a distinctive feature” (see Greimas and Courtés, 1982: 253-254, 332). In these identity processes, certain features become “marks” when they serve to point out an individual as “otherness”, for example, someone’s colour (in contrast to “whiteness”) or an individual’s foreign nationality (in contrast to national belonging).

scendence, material conditions are to be concealed – ecological, social, behavioural, physiological and even biochemical – especially those that serve to organize institutional projects for the production of certain type of corporal configurations.

The main meaning resulting from that dematerialization is the attribution of status to the white high class male, who is an adult, heterosexual and belongs to the “advanced” nations; an interpretation which naturalizes athletic supremacy as a given fact that shall provide an explanation for social inequalities as necessary and inevitable. Thus, the collective imagination’s reference to the athletic body requires, in order to be sustained, a form of systematic exclusion. The presence of plural bodies in the realm of sport threatens the pristine authenticity of the athletic body by exposing its contingent character.

## The negation of the body’s materiality and the rejection of death

In the West, the body is an historical category within the collective imagination. As the abstract expression of an unattainable reality, in different moments it crystallizes in the form of desires, fears and ghosts which are essential to human existence. One of the most recurrent is the fear of death and the aspiration to achieve immortality. Searching for a transcendent meaning – beyond material life – permeates diverse ways of understanding the body. I focus on two figures: the Greek “glowing body” and the “heavenly body” of early Christianity. Both reflect the need to turn the variability and multiplicity of bodies – the diversity of manifestations to be found in diverse social groups from an historical and geographical perspective, but also each individual body’s unrestrained mutability throughout time – into univocal meanings that defy death. These figures serve as metaphorical keys to decipher the “athletic body”.

The first figure – the glowing body – belongs to classical antiquity, symbolizing some form of continuity between the realm of human mortals and the world of the gods. On the one hand, it accurately determines the features that distinguish godly entities from mere mortals. Nevertheless, it accepts certain privileged situations in which humans may share attributes with deities: the former may share that *radiance* which commonly distinguishes deities from man<sup>2</sup>.

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2. In this case, the use of “man” as a noun conveys the assumption of the human element as masculine, an open exclusion to women: “the mythical anthropogenesis found in the *Timaus* describes how the different *gene* successively came into existence. At first, there

The emphasis is placed on the body. It is through the senses how the gods' supernatural nature is to be identified: their bodies are made of a matter different from our fragile, bad, opaque worldly substance. Thus, the gods' bodies shine with incandescent radiance. Their voices break through walls and their stare illuminates darkness. But also, their bodies remain intact, identical to themselves, everlasting and perfect, unaffected by the passing of time: the gods do not grow old, nor do they fall ill or die.

Unlike the gods, humans inhabit a mutable body; their vitality, beauty, power and brightness are destined to disappear the moment they become visible. In order to envision the gods' bodies as the pure and unrestrained materialization of the fullness and permanence which the human body lacks, it is necessary to "suppress from the human body all of the features attached to its mortal nature and announce its transitional, precarious and incomplete character" (Vernant, 1990: 27).

Thus, the concept of *glowing body* originates: the gods' radiance becomes visible in the human case only in few and ephemeral moments where youth, vigour and beauty manifest themselves in full splendour; only then do humans resemble the gods; only then do they seem immortal. The human body is thus placed "between the luminous and dark opposites, the beautiful and the ugly, between value and villainy" (Vernant, 1990: 31-34), for the essence of materiality is attached to change: what in a given moment is strength and energy swiftly turns into weakness, fragility, disability; the freshness and softness of the skin becomes roughness and dryness. A body's superior features are never to be taken for granted. The flesh will become, sooner or later, rotten matter. The mentioned figure's cultural context is that of the philosophical body/soul duality<sup>3</sup>.

The notion of an immortal soul simultaneously reflects the awareness of a fault as well as an effort to overcome it through imagination: men not only find themselves to be ephemeral, bound for death, "beings whose life ordinarily evolves in the unstable, narrow and changing setting of 'now' which seems uncertain as to its future continuation",

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were *anthropoi* which were only *andrés* (men or males). This genesis of the human race, the *genos anthrópinon*, did not show sexual divisions. Then, due to a degenerative mutation, women's *genos* appeared" (Sissa, 1993: 89).

3. In the Greek Archaic period the soul/body distinction was unknown. In the archaic lexicon there is no "term to denominate the body as an organic unity serving as the foundation for the individual" and the word *soma* – which we currently translate as body – "originally meant corpse". The Greeks introduced a new notion of *psique* – as opposed to the body, to the undeniable finitude of material reality, the transience of life and humanity – as "the immortal soul that men shall isolate and purify in order to separate it from the body, whose job is then limited to be the receptacle or tomb" (Vernant, 1990: 20, 21).

but are also aware that the body's vital energy, the physical and psychic powers which are daily used, "can remain fully active only for a short moment in time" (Vernant, 1990: 24).

At the same time, a new social order is established where human activities are made hierarchic by association with one of the two spheres: that of mortals (representing the precarious body) will be associated with material activities – undignified for belonging to the dark universe – while the human soul will rule over the immortal spirit, sharing the radiance of the gods<sup>4</sup>. This hierarchy is never indifferent to power relations. Here, a new order is being enforced which proclaims not only that there are minds (or souls) and bodies, "but also that one is meant to rule and control the other" (Spelman, 1982: 127):

it is not just women who are both relegated to the bodily or passionate sphere of existence and then chastised for belonging to that sphere. Slaves, free laborers, children, and animals are put in "their place" [...]; it is in these groups that we find "the mob of motley appetites and pleasures and pains" [...]. Plato lumps together women, children, and animals as ignoramuses [...]. The members of these groups lack, for all intents and purposes, mind or the power of reason (Spelman, 1982: 119-120).

The second figure – the heavenly body – belongs to Christian thought, which chose for the body a destiny beyond death by accepting the theological resurrection of the flesh. Unlike pagan dualism – which considered paradise "as the place of eternity that only the soul recovers after the death of the body" –, Christianity conceives the entrance of the material body into the celestial supernatural sphere and also aspires not to indulge in flagrant contradiction (Tazi, 1898: 521-522).

It is not an easy task: is material flesh not condemned to retain its natural impulse toward corruption, fraud and dissolution? The only way of enabling its access is, again – as is the case with the glowing body, which is a pure idea – the dematerialization of the body as an irremediable consequence of its subordination to the spirit: the conversion of flesh into something that is no longer flesh. Those who reach heaven are not

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4. Some time later, Plato will complicate duality by attaching different values to the "higher" (intellective) and "lower" (appetites) parts of the soul: "he wants to remind us of how unruly, how without direction, are the lives of those in whom the lower part of the soul holds sway over the higher part. Because he can't *point* to an adulterated soul, he points instead to those embodied beings whose lives are in such bad shape that we can be sure that their souls are adulterated. And whose lives exemplify the proper soul/body relationship gone haywire? The lives of women (or sometimes the lives of children, slaves, and brutes)" (Spelman, 1982: 114-115).



animal creatures made of material flesh, but creatures of light, “because the higher one reaches [...], the less substantial the body becomes, and the closer it gets to the shadow and the soul”. As the angelic nature, the resurrected body:

displays all the qualities it shares with Heaven and the soul, as if aspiring to an absence of figuration, an invisible and intelligible reality, luminous, subtle, light and incorruptible in nature, nourished solely on the contemplation of God [...]. One thing is certain: this pure medium, whose only function is to envelop and convey the soul or the spirit (its upper part), is not carnal (Tazi, 1989: 530).

When approaching the problem of resurrection, the philosopher Origen discovers a synthesis between the intelligible and the sensitive, but “only by stripping the body of its flesh, its death [...] and by rarefying it enough to bring it as close to absence as possible” in a “systematic inversion of all that is earthly” (Tazi, 1989: 522, 532). The heavenly bodies are more closely related to angels and the stars than to tangible bodies made of flesh and bone. However, the dematerialization of the resurrected body will have ulterior consequences:

The hatred of death must be entirely transferred onto its cause: this flesh fraught with guilt [...]; in Heaven, mankind will be “like God’s angels, who do not marry.” Virginité and corporeal asceticism anticipate the future life by sketching it out on earth. The heavenly destiny is, at first, achieved negatively, through the renunciation of what, in the body and in a word that is already obsolete, is synonymous with nonbeing, loss, evil (Tazi, 1989: 524-525).

Alongside the Platonic body-soul separation, theology and philosophy created an intense phobia of the body<sup>5</sup>. The bodily element would be understood as a source of interference and danger for the proper use of reason. Asceticism thus becomes a condition in order to be part of the Christian community. This asceticism was developed during the Middle Ages in the form of bodily techniques not necessarily exclusive to monastic groups for the mortification of the flesh, while leading towards the dematerialization of the body:

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5. Plato’s insistence on the idea that the body destroys the soul arouses despise towards those lives – such as that of women and slaves – dedicated to corporeal tasks. “His misogyny, then, is part of his somatophobia: the body is seen as the source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have, and women’s lives are spent manifesting those traits”, because as a class they embody precisely the features that Plato wants no one to have (Spelman, 1982: 18).



By insisting in “the simplicity of the heart,” by resorting to magic rites such as baptism and the Eucharist, and by embodying aristocratic virtues such as virginity and abstinence, Christian teachers disclosed notions concerning the status of the body that were previously confined to an intimate group of followers (Tazi, 1989: 527).

## First moment:

### The birth of amateurism or class exclusion

The athletic body – as the glowing and heavenly bodies – is dematerialized in the collective imagination. Thus, it consists in a group of images which is realized and objectified in cultural expressions. The image creating media of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (cinema, photography, engravings) and the discourses which guide the direction of bodily action (religion, politics, pedagogy, eugenics, evolutionism, nationalism, biology, medicine, physiology, journalism) are privileged, heterogeneous and contrasting factors in the appearance of the athletic body. Defined from its origins by sex, ethnic background, age, nationality and social class, it has the effect of establishing one of the prototypes of the human body and emphasizing the differences in “others”.

One of the first signifiers that would define legitimate bodily uses in the creation of the collective imagination’s athletic body is the class marker. This distinguishing line is the demand for *amateurism*, approached in a substantive way in the ideology of the Olympic Games’ founder, Pierre de Coubertin. Coubertin postulates amateur sports as a practice which completely rejects betting and money in general, a privation that should serve as a form of “moral education” (Vigarello and Holt, 2005: 328). Thus, as part of an aristocratic philosophy, the theory of amateurism turns sports into an altruistic practice, closely related to artistic activities, but forcefully directed toward the strengthening of virile virtues among future relevant figures in a gentlemanly disposition which is “totally opposed to the vulgar victory at any price” (Bourdieu, 1990: 198).

original *amateurism* combined concepts of honour and effort. The incentive of winning symbolized and reflected ancient sports; the proliferation of bets had lead to a degrading corruption and had destroyed the competition’s reason of existence [...]. The sportsman should, in the sphere of game, prove refinement and behave as a *gentleman*, that is, one should know how to control himself and give the impression of elegance and calmness (Vigarello and Holt, 2005: 323).

In this way, an ideal concept of body is created which excludes economic needs by definition, consequently, also excluding people who practice sports for monetary reasons<sup>6</sup>. However, the discourse where honour and effort are glorified, tends, from early on, to naturalize physical skills as a characteristic belonging only to elites, and not as the result of an arduous and systematic preparation. When defining sports as a disinterested and free activity, aristocratic ideology conceals the conditions of its own production and draws a clear distinction between “elegant” and “vulgar” sports (Bourdieu, 1990: 201-202).

In the early modern Olympic days, *amateurs* rejected the idea of special physical preparation. According to them, sport was an “exaltation of the body’s natural qualities” and boasted about attending competitions without having gone through any previous training (Vigarello and Holt, 2005: 325-326). Among other distinguishing aspects, they placed emphasis on the dress code: the use of white for tennis players – one of the elitist sports *par excellence* – has to do with the fact that sportswear was based on the higher classes’ everyday attire. “The best felt pride in wearing clean clothes [...], in symbolically emphasizing their sport’s purity and beauty while distinguishing it from its older forms”. In this way, the athletic body symbolizes social prestige: “Elite sports had to prioritize the elegance of movement and the refinement of technique at the expense of brute force and resistance” (Vigarello and Holt, 2005: 326, 334).

Some investigations portray sports as the expression of certain type of cultural capital incorporated – in bodily form – as dispositions (mental and physical). According to Stempel (2005: 411), “different classes and class fractions embody (often unconsciously) their points of honor and schemes of evaluation in their sporting practices”. Such an incorporation – as a mechanism through which the body transforms into the performance of a physical activity – enables the dominant classes to use sports in order to distance and differentiate themselves from other social groups. As a form of cultural capital, differentiation mechanisms become institutional practices and structures that are interpreted as signs – attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and forms of recognition – whose main effect is that of social exclusion.

The cultural capital concept helps challenge the idea that human achievements and personal qualities – such as intelligence, creativity and character, but also strength, discipline, resistance, aggressiveness – are

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6. Of course, this characteristic only operates in the realm of the imaginary; it has been completely overtaken by the world of television, beer adverts and the multimillionaire status of sports stars.

the product of an individual will and have an area to be exercised within social meritocracy. In its place, it is necessary to recognize, on the one hand, the influence cultural capital has – within sports in the form of bodily capital – as a legitimization mechanism, and on the other, its relationship with other forms of capital and, of course, with the exclusive access to more valuable or praised resources, positions, activities and institutions:

The differences in the distribution of knowledge, abilities, tastes and dispositions are grounded in the leisure and freedom from the pressures of necessity possessed by the dominant classes, the silent transmission to their children of a culturally dominant system of tastes and dispositions, and the dominant classes' symbolic power to establish their cultural repertoires and tastes as universal or most legitimate (Stempel, 2005: 412-413).

In a survey carried out in the USA on adults' participation in sports activities, Stempel explains that these excluding effects manifest themselves in an intricate taxonomy of practices where fractions of the dominant classes carry out "aristocratic" sports in order to draw lines of separation between their lifestyles and those of other classes in two ways: ascetic sports and luxurious sports<sup>7</sup>.

In ascetic sports, the watershed separating aristocratic and popular modes is found between practices emphasizing strength and others seeking more abstract goals: health, self-control, the love of the body for the body itself. In luxurious sports, the watershed is established quantitatively with the exhibition of wealth and status, or by restricting the level of direct physical contact and violence between competitors in order to avoid explicit physical subjection.

For the dominant fraction of the dominant class, sport as a form of cultural capital not only conveys material values, but also moral ones: physical activities are practiced with the aim of self-improvement, where the training of the body is not to attain brute force but spiritual and intellectual strength. This logic is similar to those technologies of the self that Foucault finds within Greco-Roman philosophy, Christian spirituality and the monastic principles. These should be seen as a compound of practices revolving around "self-care" from which rules are derived "for the social and personal conduct and for the art of life" (Foucault, 1990: 50).

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7. This investigation is based on the national survey of 1998 – the National Health Interview Survey – with a sample of more than 22.500 individuals.

Thus, participation in sporting events becomes an “ongoing *field* of competition to establish the legitimate and most valued sporting practices and uses of the body” (Stempel, 2005: 419). This legitimacy can be understood as another form of capital: that which provides a certain group – in accordance with the context, gender, ethnic origin, nationality, age, social class – with the monopoly of honour and the transmission of inherited powers and privileges (Bourdieu, 2000: 66). Sport as a fundamental indicator of the legitimate uses of the body – opposed to fraudulent, artificial, simulated or indecent uses – sets the tone to distinguish between “noble” (sport as an end in itself) and “contemptible” activities (work performed in order to earn money).

## **Second moment:**

The Anthropology Days held in the 1904 Olympic Games celebrated in Saint Louis (Missouri), or ethnic exclusion

Anthropology Days [...] demonstrated that Olympic sport was not an extension or perfection of folk games, but something different. Modern sport in its core was not festivity and game, but work and production, though the myth of “the Games” as “games” is alive and well, not only in the popular ideology of Olympism but also in the scholarly discipline of “sports history” (Eichberg, 2008: 361).

One of the most problematic sports events in recorded history took place in The Louisiana Purchase Exposition (LPE), in the 1904 Saint Louis (Missouri) World’s Fair, which included the third edition of the modern Olympic Games. As part of the celebration, there was a curious event known as the Anthropology Days. The event was organized by two outstanding figures in US anthropology and physical education at that time. In the mentioned Anthropology Days, “natives” – who were involved in the fair’s exhibitions – competed in different athletic disciplines for “scientific” purposes. Among others, to measure “savages” physical aptitudes in comparison with those of “civilized men”.

The LPE cost twenty million dollars and attracted around 19 million visitors. It was mainly designed with the aim of compiling every form of existing knowledge. Among its attractions was the Ethnological Section which exhibited, within the fair’s grounds, groups of “actual Native demonstrators living in appropriate habitations on the fair grounds, practicing authentic, preindustrial, indigenous customs for the education and edification of visitors” (Parezo, 2008: 62-63).

Anthropologists' interest in man's bodily structure around 1904 should not be surprising to us today, for anthropology is partially grounded in natural history. "The observation of animals initially served as a model for the study of humans [...]; at the turn of the century zoos and ethnological displays were not distinct genres" (Brownell, 2008: 20)<sup>8</sup>.

The exhibition included a four acre village with groups coming from 75 different societies, arranged around an artificial lake. "Native" men, women and infants lived in "traditional" dwellings built by each group with the use of culturally and environmentally appropriate materials taken from their own places of origin (Parezo, 2008: 137, 141). Some famous figures of the recent Indian wars in the Far West were present during the fair, "including Quannah Parker of the Kiowa and Geronimo of the Chiricahua Apache [...]. Cummins' Wild West Show claimed that 'savages' from fifty-one different North American tribes participated in its daily pageants" (Dyreson, 2008: 137, 141).

Almost three thousand indigenous men and women from all around the world came to Saint Louis to serve as demonstrators, educators, research objects and artists. Around a hundred of them – all males – participated in competitions such as "spear and baseball throwing, shot put, running, broad jumping, weight lifting, pole climbing, and tugs-of-war before a crowd of approximately ten thousand" (Parezo, 2008: 59).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sports had an ever increasing importance in the clash between the West and other cultures. One of the event's guidelines was to carry out an analysis on physical configuration in terms of race. The ideological organization influencing this particular type of racism – scientific racism – revolves around *whiteness*; whiteness is something more than just skin colour. It includes a system of values entailing particular moral, disciplinary and work ethic precepts. The recognition of "whiteness" guaranteed a particular ethnical group certain rights and privileges, as well as social respect; those who were non-whites, incapable of reaching the needed standards, faced ostracism and ridicule. Marked by their "difference", those groups were positioned by science in the lowest levels in the racial hierarchy (Gems, 2008: 190). Despite its eminent "social construction," race continues to be falsely discerned in biological terms (Bass, 2002: 48)<sup>9</sup>.

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8. In fact, Ota Benga, a pygmy there shown, ended in the Brooklyn zoo (I owe this observation to one of this article's reviewers).

9. "[T]he incorporation of nonwhites in the American polity [...] entailed the acceptance of the 'white man's burden' to uplift, educate, civilize, and Christianize such subject populations" (Gems, 2008: 192, 198).

The idea of celebrating the “Anthropology Days” is due to James E. Sullivan, chief of the LPE’s Physical Culture Department, and William J. McGee, first president of the American Anthropological Association and chief of the LPE’s Anthropological Department<sup>10</sup>. With this exhibition, McGee wanted to provide the American public with examples of the different “many long chapters of human evolution”, while Sullivan “was determined to demonstrate that American athletes were the best in the world, superior to all other races and cultures” (Parezo, 2008: 60).

These special games were deeply rooted in Olympic sports’ rationale, whose problem was, and is, the relationship with “the Other”. In the classic competitive sports’ hierarchy, the cusp was reserved to the white, young, anglo, typically protestant, middle class male who represented one of the great sports’ nations. The place of “the Other” – women, non-European people, religious minorities, elderly people, sick individuals, the mentally deranged, children, and so on – was “below”, “‘down there,’ where the declassified athletes are huddled together in their relative misery as losers. The pyramidal order of sport expresses the idea, ‘We are all united in the same striving for excellence, but some are better, and the rest is not really important’” (Eichberg, 2008: 362).

McGee was sure that the “uncivilized” people at his charge were better runners, jumpers and throwers, even better than the silvery group of Olympic athletes that would soon congregate in Saint Louis<sup>11</sup>. He based his belief on the common notion – proper to Morgan’s evolutionary outlines – that “those groups lower on the scale of human development needed greater physical prowess in order to survive than the more advanced brain workers of civilized cultures” (Dyreson, 2008: 142). This separation between “physical culture” and “mental culture” had been common place in other contexts. For example, Dean B. Cromwell – coach in chief of the University of Southern California’s track team as well as of the Olympic United States team in 1936 – in his book *Championship*

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10. William J McGee [he himself wrote his name without period after the initial] was a key figure in the realm of American anthropology. He was part of “a select group of Americans heralded for their strength and endurance in the grand adventure that marked the conquest of the nation’s final geographic frontiers. In an era in which the fear of effeminate overcivilization consumed much of the nation’s middle and upper classes, [these men] were clearly not mollycoddles spoiled by modern luxuries. They were cast as hypermasculine American heroes, revered as much for their endurance of wilderness hardship as for their scientific discoveries” (Dyreson, 2008: 136).

11. The imagined athletic body has made a fetish out of a physical ability that legitimizes certain nuclear mythologies in sports: blacks are naturally gifted for speed runs, they are more relaxed in the field, are better runners than field marshals and can jump further. “Within these fictions, the black athlete was reduced to a solely physical condition, with the removal of intellectual capacity from any scientific equation” (Bass, 2002: 49-50).

*Techniques of Track and Field* (1941) stated:

I'll offer the opinion that the Negro excels in the events he does because he is closer to the primitive than the white man [...]. It was not so long ago that his ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle. His muscles are pliable, and his easy-going disposition is a valuable aid to the mental and physical relaxation that a runner and jumper must have (Cromwell, *apud* Bass, 2002: 74)<sup>12</sup>.

McGee tried to classify all of humanity within a universal hierarchical matrix of physical-cultural development that closely followed the evolutionary savage-barbaric-civilized paradigm. He organized the Ethnological Section “as in implicit contrast with industrial and technological exhibitions – electricity, engineering – that consider the United States as the most technological and intellectually advanced culture in the world” (Parezo, 2008: 64-65). The movement’s modern culture production-oriented practices created a model to integrate people in a hierarchical order whose pinnacle was “civilization”:

“natural” athletes were represented and read as being able to perform at a high standard in athletic events that they had not previously encountered and for which they had not previously been trained. In other words, they had not been physically “cultured” in such events. On the evolutionary scale of Social Darwinism, the natural athlete could be associated with the initial stage of “savagery” –close to “raw animal existence” (Bale, 2008: 325).

The Ethnological Section had been working for some time within the LPE before the special games. Some of their most popular events were athletic competitions and demonstrations of physical prowess where “natives” competed for money. “These events were one way Natives demonstrators earned money while in St. Louis for, with only a few exceptions, none was given a wage” (Parezo, 2008: 68)<sup>13</sup>.

During the LPE, the Anthropology Department had started an active research agenda. The science of anthropometry or biometrical ethnology – the intention to statistically discern racial and individual differences in bodily measurements or the body’s shape, and find out why those differences existed – was used in “to try to identify criminals, women who

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12. “Cromwell posited that while the American (read: white) athlete worked hard, the American Negro had natural ability” (Bass, 2002: 77).

13. McGee never asked a native directly if he wanted to participate; he worked exclusively through his agents.



would make good wives, good athletes, and potential artists or geniuses”. Under the guise of the “especial Olympics”, events took place according to this logic (Parezo, 2008: 70-71). Sports served as an experimental lab to perform some form of anthropometry of the bodily movements, along with traditional physical structure anthropometry, which was being used at the time within racial science. “Sport as laboratory gave reason to scientific, methodological pride” (Eichberg, 2008: 346). Sports and anthropology worked together in order to frantically observe, measure and quantify human morphology and physical performance (Bale, 2008: 326).

McGee hoped anthropometric experiments would reveal scientific “laws” on the differences between “natives” and Caucasian athletes coached the Western way. In relation to Sullivan, one of the purposes of the Physical Culture Department was to explore scientific coaching and prove the progress made by the United States in the improvement of health through sports. In order to achieve this, Sullivan obtained the most innovative anthropometric equipment and created labs to measure visitors’ athletic abilities and physical condition (Parezo, 2008: 74, 76).

The experiments’ result was both frustrating and illustrative. “Natives” performed comparatively worse than Olympic athletes in almost all of the trials (with the exception of the pole climbing contest). There are several factors which stand out when reading the documents. A very relevant aspect is that, when Mc Gee and Sullivan started the Anthropology Days, many “natives” who had participated in the qualifying rounds rejected participating in the “Olympic” trials because they were not going to be paid – due to the amateur character of the Olympic Games; also due to the fact that “no one explained any contest rules, not were Natives given a chance to practice” (Parezo, 2008: 87).

Without training and, in most of the cases, without being familiar with each trial’s rules, “natives” simply didn’t “measure up”. Researchers recorded their attitudes – for example, pygmies burst into laughter when it was their turn – as well as revealing details such as the surprise which was caused when they weren’t able to throw the javelin far enough.

The “research’s” final results provided evidence with which anthropology and physical education further developed the athletic body in the collective imagination. From the beginning, Sullivan absolutely believed in “Caucasian’s” natural athletic superiority and better coaching techniques. According to him, whites (especially those coming from northern Europe) were the “superior race” and the US, due to its racial ancestry, “was a peerless culture, which would only progress further if it adopted his [Sullivan’s] programs” (Parezo, 2008: 83). Sullivan used partial elements of the obtained data to “prove” his Caucasian and USA superior-

ity theories; native people were intellectually, socially, cognitively and morally “inferior by nature”. They were not such good candidates for assimilation as European immigrants (Parezo, 2008: 96-97, 112).

In this episode the athletic body acquires a particularly paradoxical dimension. On the one hand, “racial science” will take into account – in its search for elements that may legitimize the white man’s supremacy – any piece of evidence that might prove the inferiority of “indigenous” peoples in contrast with civilization’s progresses. But, on the other, the imaginary athletic body will keep mythologizing cultural aptitudes in a binary taxonomy separating blacks and whites.

The apparent contradiction is not such: black competitors’ success in the trials is still being interpreted, as of today, as a racial feature, among others. The “coloured” body is specifically designed for a corporeal, material, dense and irrational existence. In contrast, the white individual’s athletic body is a fulfilment: it is derived from arduous – stoical – bodily effort; it depends on self-control, the will and subjection of lower – material – parts of the body to the – higher – spiritual rationality. The imagined athletic body once again alchemically vanishes from bodily materiality.

### **Third moment:**

#### Berlin’s 1936 Olympic Parade or national supremacy

The origins of most of today’s institutionalized sports may be tracked down to the so-called “sportization” process coined by Norbert Elias in his fundamental essay on sports and leisure as part of the development of civilization (Elias, 1995). Throughout the mentioned process, sports institutions were designed as a regulation devise, transmitter and receiver for discourses and images whose main feature was that of establishing uniformity beyond national frontiers.

“Sportization” is, thus, the historical process through which a game, a competition or a physical activity are established as a sports event. In this context, sports are modern cultural creations, determined by urban space, configured as commercial spectacle, subject to formal regulations and sanctioned by public institutions.

One of the most important aspects in any practice’s *sportization* is its ruling – which became global during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and standardization. Both forms of regulation enable formal competition between athletes coming from very different social and geographical backgrounds, as

well as the recording of official results at a global scale.

Starting as a diverse set of bodily practices, competition beyond the local level became common ground, just as we find it today. The process entailed the generalization of rules and specifics for each sport in regard to all of its details.

The globalization of sports also required, and enabled, the registering of athletes, teams, events and records – with the use of a standard measure and weight system –, all of them ruled by a set of laws which radiated from Western power centres toward the periphery, that is, from north to south. From a given moment, local variations stopped holding “value” in the athletic activity market and in each country; each region and each spot on Earth had to adjust to the norm.

One of the consequences of globalization is the possibility of competing among countries, which simultaneously enables the consolidation of frontiers between identities based on a blurred but penetrating principle of national supremacy. Such supremacy is enforced by the simple, immediate, mechanic, transparent and crude possibility of beating the other in the realm of the physical, the corporeal: it is proven in a visible, measurable, comparative way; but, above all, it has to do with an individual performance which is interpreted as a collective, communitarian and plural position: the triumphant athlete’s specific supremacy is not only an achievement of the will and a form of personal destiny, but also the representation of social power.

What the athlete enacts in his performance is the power of the people, the race, the State, a class, a given region or system: a human conglomerate that surpasses and encloses him. The triumph is both the enactment and confirmation of some form of legitimacy. Through victory the represented nation’s existence and prevalence is validated. Thus, the athlete’s material, objective, carnal body embodies the Nation while its true corporeality vanishes.

Through victory, that which is considered normal, typical and authentic is built at the expense of the Other. The Other enables an authoritative voice to establish a criterion according to which one may categorize people and collectives, to (de)credit them, while defining behavioural expectations and even attributing to them some form of infectious danger (Sabido, 2012: 103).

The sense of supremacy in sports helps contrast nations according to an objective exhibition of power – the power to score more goals than the other, the power to run or swim faster, the power to jump higher, the power to deliver more blows than the other – which is translated into the palpable reason why certain groups see themselves as “better” than oth-

ers, as beings gifted with charisma, as holders of a value that others lack: “in all of those cases ‘superior’ people can make less powerful people feel as if they lacked value, that is, as if they were humanly inferior” (Norbert Elias, quoted in Sabido, 2012: 112).

Throughout its history, sport has performed this role precisely in the consolidation of its global character. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was witness to the emergence and refinement of the still growing and jumbled paraphernalia of symbols and rituals, ceremonies and celebrations that unfold in the increasingly technological realm of sports and of the athletic body.

On the one hand, training sessions and interventions on the competitor’s body (for example, the use of performance enhancing drugs), combined with increasingly sophisticated facilities (such as four meter deep swimming pools), more elaborate artefacts (such as shoes with soles filled with compressed air), materials more industrial each day (such as the tracks’ coating or t-shirts’ fabric) and instruments that are more and more precise in order to measure and record time (such as chronometers and electronic video cameras) have turned mere athletic competition into an institutional issue.

States’ financial and organizational effort has become, in this context, a necessary condition in order to participate in athletic competitions. The naked body is no longer alone when competing (and the “game” has ironically stopped being a game). Athletes are located and determined, covered and supported by the state-nation, the immense bureaucratic apparatus that – within the complex market logic where corporations play a decisive role – manages the funds, establishes modalities, encourages plans, sponsors people and signs international agreements where the sport’s destiny is discussed.

To this economic-political-administrative dimension we must add a symbolic aspect which, if not as important, at least has the potential to comparatively represent different nations’ power.

In a highly meaningful way, it is since 1936 – when Goebbels, the Third Reich’s propaganda minister, convinced the Führer that Berlin was to hold the modern age’s XI Olympic Games – when sport truly establishes itself as the realm for propaganda *par excellence*. Thus, “Hitler placed the full resources of the state behind the Olympic preparations, the first head of state to do so” (Burkel, 2006: 688-693).

From then on, several conditions closely associated with sports and patriotic sentiments became well established, such as Olympic traditions, the opening act’s Parade of Nations, the decision to introduce national flags and anthems in award ceremonies, as well as the designation of

competitors in accordance with their country of origin.<sup>14</sup>

Among other things, competitions were used to experience with a wide range of audiovisual propaganda; “the first live television coverage of any sport meet was in Berlin at the time of Olympics” (Burkel, 2006: 825-828). With the establishment of the Olympic torch and flame – both Nazi innovations that the Olympic movement decided to keep –, among other things, these Olympics served to integrate an aesthetic of power, nationality and race, taken from German nationalism.

The trend of investing international competitions with the function of exploring and administrating national identities and foreign affairs throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century acquired particular intensity during the Cold War years when each of the two systems dividing the East-West “Iron Curtain” legitimized itself through Olympic performance. What was at stake was not just athletic supremacy, but all of the supremacies that are unduly derived from it: political and economic supremacy, as well as ethnical and cultural superiority.

As if the world were asking itself in every sports event who should dominate, who should rule and who should obey, who are those making the right decisions, who is morally entitled to invade, collaborate, determine, pressure, dismiss or accept other nations’ rule. Sport is used as some form of thermometer to measure the degree in which nationalism is to serve as a leading force in regard to a given country’s cultural and political life. Thus, sport as a mass spectacle becomes “a political and diplomatic tool of soft power and of national pride and ambition” (Burkel, 2006: 258).

National pride, a sense of belonging – the phenomenon coined by Victor Turner as *comunitas* (1987: 84) –, finds a privileged setting in the stage of sports performance. The *community* works as a social unity depending on the fabrication of identities; it is a “commonly used resource for referring to shared symbols, values and ideologies” (Palomar, 2000: 9). For Benedict Anderson, a nation is imagined as a community because, despite internal inequalities and conflicts, belonging to a community is considered inherent to “profound and horizontal comradeship” as the result of an imagined (Palomar, 2000: 15-17) and de-materialized homogeneity.

Pride shown in sports events has an unsettling potential to remove, supplant or contradict the state’s effort to consolidate the nation’s mean-

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14. Previous to this, signing to participate in the Olympic Games could be done individually; for example, during the 1904 Games in Saint Louis (Missouri), “Events were open to amateur athletes who could pay the two dollar general entrance fee and fifty cents for event” (Parezo, 2008: 78).

ings through official symbols of national honour. In the football pitch, in specific competitions between two teams, broadcasted on television and loyally followed by millions of fanatics throughout the world, is where national meanings are established. Only then, in the athletic body, do the flag's colours come to life in a profound way, as well as other national symbols such as musical notes and verses in national anthems.

### **Fourth moment:**

The introduction of the sex verification test in Mexico 1968 or gender exclusion

[T]he athletic body is always already a suspicious body (since sport participation is sufficient cause to suspect tamperings with the “biological-body”), and, therefore, a body subject to routine bodily monitoring and invasions designed to detect “illegal” substances and abnormalities [...]; women in general and the athletic female body more specifically are embedded in suspicion, bodily/biological examination, and bodily probes and invasions [...]. The female athletic body was and remains suspicious both because of its apparent masculinization and its position as a border case that challenges the normalized feminine and masculine body (Cole, 1993: 90).

In a world where segregation due to sex, ethnicity or class, would at least seem questionable in any other social area – school, politics, the media, science, art – , we are certain that, in sports, it is not only necessary, but unavoidable to separate according to rules, disciplines, structures and – above all – confrontation areas: even today the mere suggestion of both sexes competing on the same track or field seems unconceivable.

From this point of view, the most immediate conjecture is that a woman's body is necessarily defective; it holds physiological insufficiencies – due to female biological design – to carry out activities involving strength, aggressiveness, speed or physical contact. However, despite certainties derived from a notion where corporeality has been naturalized, its presence in the realm of sports is far from being exceptional. Instead of keeping out of such a purely masculine world, many women insist on finding their space within that sphere.

Their insistence has had to face – and still faces in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – an obstinate resistance. The idea that women are innately passive is so deeply rooted that female athletes “are construed as biologically defective” (McCaughney, 1997: 22). Even a superficial glimpse

at the history of sports shows a continuous and active effort to expel women. The passivity, apathy, incompatibility and sheer lack of talent claimed by this logic of exclusion don't seem to be strong enough to restrain them. It is necessary to establish a separate reserve with zealously guarded borders and an ensemble of strategies of very different types to keep them in the social and symbolic place "where they belong". In few areas of social life can this reality be so eloquently expressed, as well as the vertiginous inequality in regard to the gender and anxiety meanings that such situations entail.

All around the world, women and girls interested in participating in competitive disciplines have seen themselves frustrated in innumerable occasions by a ruling that structures sports activities as a male privilege. In this way, and independently of individual aptitude, the field is divided in two branches, one of which (the feminine) is subject to severe atrophy, related to the fact that almost every sport has been explicitly forbidden to women at some point in time during the aforementioned sports institutionalization process.

Women's participation in international competitions has been historically restricted through exclusion mechanisms that range from open prohibition to the structuring of the field, as well as by dress codes, the creation of stereotypes, the stigmatization of athletes and public attacks through the mass media. However, and in spite of all this, the female presence in sports competitions has steadily increased throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Women invading the sports arena create a problem. The imaginary athletic body will question their femininity and will seek to eject them, because "female athletes have always been suspected of being gender outlaws" (McCaughney, 1997: 43). When women are not rejected collectively, they are expelled selectively. That is how, from 1968 to 1998, a very specific gender technology was enforced. The so-called "sex test", applied exclusively to women, dealt with the possibility that some countries, for nationalist purposes, may use men disguised as women in female sports events.

This practice very specifically summarizes three main prejudices that permeate the realm of sports: 1) that a female athlete, due only to her performance, is under suspicion of not being a "real woman"; 2) that any man, for the sole reason of being a man, is physically superior to any woman; 3) that a person's true self is associated with his or her gender.

Such forms of prejudice are not new. The ancient Greeks solved the potential problem of women's participation in sports contests by making athletes perform naked. Since then, there has been little concern regard-



ing the fact that men might not be “real” men, for it is taken for granted that women have very little advantage or none whatsoever when competing with them. In fact there are no recorded cases of male competitors who were later “unmasked” as women.

In the modern age, even before 1968, sports institutions have subjected women’s bodies to demeaning tests – for example, the obligation to parade naked before a panel of judges, all of them males – whose application on men was simply out of the question. During the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the female Olympic body has been under genetic suspicion (Cavanagh and Sykes, 2006: 80).

Until 1968 female Olympic competitors were often asked to parade naked in front of a board of examiners. Breasts and a vagina were all that was needed to certify one’s femininity. But many women complained that this procedure was degrading. Partly because such complaints mounted, the IOC decided to make use of the modern “scientific” chromosome test (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 3).

In 1968 a more scientific excluding mechanism was introduced; from then on – until the end of the century –, every Olympic woman had to provide a “femininity medical certificate” and had to be invasively DNA tested. Currently, chromosomes have become the ultimate criterion to properly assess gender.

The – biological – logic underlying the “sex test” implies that an individual with a “Y” chromosome shouldn’t compete in female contests because his physical superiority would provide him with unjust advantage over his opponent. Due to the fact that anatomical differences between males and females are commonly accepted, “once women started to compete in the modern Olympic Games and in other international competitions, it was suggested to ‘correctly’ evaluate an individual’s gender”, especially because the mere presence of women in sports’ public arena raised ambiguous situations (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 52-53).

For example, in the case of Helen Stephens – a runner from the United States – had to be tested because she was accused of being a man after winning the 100 meters women’s final in the Berlin Olympics with a mark of 11.5 seconds. The test – consisting of exposing the breasts and vagina – proved that Stephens was a woman. But Stella Walsh, the Polish runner who came in second in the same run – and who joined the outraged mob which accused Stephens of being a “man” – wouldn’t have passed the test. Many years later Walsh’s autopsy (1980) – who had died by a stray bullet during a robbery in Cleveland – revealed that

“she had both male and female chromosomes, a small penis and lacked hormones” (Cavanagh and Sykes, 2006: 82).

Hostility against female athletes who are considered “too good” has been commonly used even as a nationalist weapon. For example, in 1976, during the summer Olympics, the United States women’s swimming team was beaten, for the first time, by East Germany. “One way for some members of the American team (not just the swimmers) to explain their loss, was to make comments which, by implication, cast doubt on the ‘real’ femaleness of the East German female athletes” (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 54). Of course, the members of the East Germany team had previously passed the “sex test” in order to compete.

However, the only well documented case of a man who dressed up as a woman to compete in a female sporting trial – although his “male superiority” didn’t enable him to win – was Hermann Ratjen, a German national. In the 1936 Berlin Olympics this individual, a member of the Hitler Youth movement, accepted to carry out the fraud with meagre results.

The Nazi youth movement wanted winners at the 1936 Olympics. So Hermann Ratjen bound up his genitals, called himself Dora, and entered the high jump. He made it to the finals, where he was beaten by three women. His deception went undiscovered until 1955, when Ratjen, working as a waiter in Bremen, Germany, told his story (Vines, 1992)<sup>15</sup>.

Obviously, this example is not pleasing to a lot of men. Ratjen’s scam took place long before *anti-doping* testing existed, which requires athletes to urinate in a recipient before the vigilant stare of an official. Nowadays it would be extremely difficult for a male to conceal his genitals and compete with a woman’s uniform (Vines, 1992).

However, several incidents have suggested that some countries would try to take up the medal standings by any means possible, including fraud. However, suspicious cases have not been confirmed. For example, the Irina and Tamara Press sisters (Ukrainian athletes) stopped competing in 1968 in order not to do the test (Cavanagh and Sykes, 2006: 83). This left a lot of questions unanswered: Were they men? To what extent? And the most grave, would they have won? In any case, directing committees started worrying about making sure “women were real women” during the Cold War:

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15. See Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Cavanagh and Sykes, 2006; Wallensky and Loucky, 2008; Vines, 1992. In the fragment of Leni Riefenstahl’s movie *Olympia* dedicated to this event, there is a shot where Ratjen can be seen clearly upset with a scruffy mane of hair.

Clearly, given past experience, everyday gender attribution processes were not enough. It would be too easy for a competitor to “pass”. Thus prior to 1968 each country was required to provide certification of the genuineness of their female athletes’ gender. Charges were made, though, that some of these certificates were fraudulent, and that some competing countries were not being truthful, or objective, in their certification procedures (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 53).

Before 1968, an international team took care of each woman’s physical examination. From then on, the test ceased to be considered reliable. “It was alleged that physical characteristics were not enough evidence on which to make an absolutely certain attribution. It may have been felt that the availability of surgical and hormonal procedures to make a ‘male’ body look like a ‘female’ one, invalidated a physical examination” (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 53). In the European Athletics Championship of 1966 in Budapest:

Women had to parade their genitals in front of a panel of doctors. This approach was replaced by physical examinations, at the Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica, later the same year. Mary Peters, pentathlon gold medalist of the Munich Olympics of 1972, describes them as “the most crude and degrading experience of my life.” In her autobiography she writes: “I was ordered to lie on the couch and pull my knees up. The doctors then proceeded to undertake an examination which, in modern parlance, amounted to a grope. Presumably they were searching for hidden testes. They found none and I left.” (Vines, 1992).

At the time the problem seemed to have shifted from guaranteeing fair competition to “finding an infallible dichotomous definition of the ‘biological woman’”. The most clearly dichotomous criterion to reveal gender is the chromosome analysis method. Thus, the “sexual chromosome” test was enforced to determine if an athlete was “truly” a woman (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 53).

The sex test started to claim its victims quite soon. Eva Klobukowska, who had passed the physical examination in 1964 and had won several medals in Tokyo’s Olympic Games, failed the chromosome test in 1967. She was declared ineligible for female competition and all of her medals were declared invalid. “She had entered the games as a woman, and despite the decree of the International Amateur Athletic Federation that she is not, she continues to live, in her own eyes and others’, as a woman” (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 53-54).

On the other hand, Spanish 100 meters hurdles runner María José Martínez Patiño, had never questioned her femininity until she arrived in Kobe (Japan) to compete in the 1985 World University Games. Like many other women participating in international athletic events she had to undergo the gender chromosome test because she had forgotten a certificate from a previous test that “authenticated” her as a woman. This time, much to her dismay, she didn’t pass the DNA test. Although from an anatomical point of view Patiño is clearly a female, on a chromosome level she is considered to be a “male”. Thus, she was disqualified (Lemonick, 1992). Unlike many other athletes, Patiño impugned the decision. This meant undergoing a great deal of public strife, paying for more tests and going through “totally subjective” examinations where doctors “reviewed her pelvic structures and shoulders to decide if she was sufficiently feminine to compete”. Finally, she was reinstated in the International Amateur Athletic Federation and in the Spanish athletic team (Vines, 1992).

Every year a handful of women share Patiño’s fate – the result of certain genetic anomalies. In Patiño’s case, and doubtless in many others, the repercussions were devastating and humiliating. Not only was she barred from competing, but she lost an athletic scholarship and watched her boyfriends walk off in confusion (Lemonick, 1992).

According to insufficiently proven calculations – unclear for they concern a very sensitive issue affecting one of the most delicate elements in a person’s intimacy – , around one in every 500 female athletes have the so-called “androgen insensitivity syndrome” or “testicular feminization”: their bodies may produce more testosterone than an average female commonly does, though their cells do not react to the hormone. They have no reason to consider themselves as less feminine “genetically” speaking; “and, ironically, may even be at a competitive disadvantage in the modern sports world – because they cannot grow more muscular by taking anabolic steroids” (Vines, 1992).

Figures are difficult to come by, but between 1972 and 1984, probably about 1 in 400 female athletes were excluded from competition; at the Los Angeles games in 1984 alone, six women failed the sex test (Vines, 1992).

The chromosome tests were discarded in 1998 after an intense campaign in which scientists all over the world were able to convince the IOC that

sex tests made no sense, apart from being discriminatory against women born with genetic anomalies – better understood in today’s study of intersexuality – that do not serve them in any advantageous way when competing (Vines, 1992).

At the recent recommendation of the IOC Athletes Commission, the Executive Board of the IOC has finally recognized the medical and functional inconsistencies and undue costs of chromosome-based methods. In 1999, the IOC ratified the abandonment of on-site genetic screening of females at the next Olympic Games in Australia<sup>16</sup>.

The problem, however, persists. The identity of Caster Semenya, the young winner of the 800 meters run, has been questioned. The well known argument of “competitive advantage” has been used once again to put this female athlete through a long and scandalous public trial. What seems to be overlooked in this case – and in every other case that deals with the complex imaginary female athletic body – is that in sports the thing at stake is not “biological justice” or equality in corporal conditions, but exactly the opposite.

Both the athletic body’s meaning and the sense of athletic feat reveal to us the extraordinary. The athletic body’s great fallacy is to postulate itself as a human prototype, when its function – ruled by a dematerialization process similar to that which operates in the Greek gods’ imaginary “glowing body” or in the “heavenly body” of Christianity’s early days – is radically severed from common people’s everyday bodily precariousness.

Just as the black athlete’s “body of colour” is today still seen as possessing “natural advantage” – because “it is closer to the primitive than that of the white man” –, the female athlete’s “defective body” will have to restrict its action to a limit – never clearly proclaimed, but always at work in the Olympic judges’ horizon of prejudice – that shall not violate its femininity, so that it may not get close enough to a masculinity whose supremacy is thus threatened.

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16. [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11252710?ordinalpos=3&itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed\\_ResultsPanel.Pubmed\\_DefaultReportPanel.Pubmed\\_RVDocSum](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11252710?ordinalpos=3&itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed_ResultsPanel.Pubmed_DefaultReportPanel.Pubmed_RVDocSum)>.

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