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Sex Dilemmas, Amazons and Cyborgs: Feminist Cultural Studies and Sport

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss sport and physical activities as a field of empirical investigation for feminist cultural studies with a potential to contribute to theorizing the body, gender and difference. Sport has, historically, served to legitimize and reinforce the gender dichotomy by making men "masculine" through developing physical strength and endurance, while women generally have been excluded or directed towards activities fostering a "feminine suppleness". The recent case of runner Caster Semenya, who was subjected to extensive gender tests, demonstrates how athletic superiority and "masculine" attributes in women still today stir public emotions and evoke cultural anxieties of gender blurring. But the rigid gender boundaries have also made sport a field of transgressions. From the "Soviet amazon" of the Cold War, transgressions in sport have publicly demonstrated, but also pushed, the boundaries of cultural understandings of gender. Gender verification tests have exposed a continuum of bodies that cannot easily be arranged into two stable, separate gender categories.

In spite of the so called "corporeal turn", sport is still rather neglected within cultural studies and feminist research. This appears to be linked to a degradation, and fear, of the body and of the risk that women – once again – be reduced to biology and physical capacity. But studies of sport might further develop understandings of the processes through which embodied knowledge and subjectivity is produced, in a way that overcomes the split between corporeality and discursive regimes or representations. Furthermore, with the fitness upsurge since the 1980s, the athletic female body has emerged as a cultural ideal and a rare validation of "female masculinity" (Halberstam) in popular culture. This is an area well-suited for "third wave" feminist cultural studies that are at ease with complexities and contradictions: the practices and commercialized images of the sportswoman are potentially both oppressive and empowering.

Keywords: Cultural studies, history, gender, body, sport, feminist theory.

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Introduction

Already in *A vindication of the rights of women* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft connected physical strength to women's emancipation. She explains that women cannot achieve recognition of their rights without having access to physical activities that enables them to become strong and resilient. Also feminist intellectual Charlotte Perkins Gilman, active in the decades around the 1900s, emphasized the importance of reclaiming the body through focusing on health and exercise for women. The monopolization and masculinization of leisure activities such as sport was, in her view, crucial in upholding patriarchy (Vertinsky 2001).

However, not much scholarly work within mainstream feminist and cultural studies has been devoted to the subject of sport and physical recreation. In this article, I discuss sport as a field of investigation in feminist cultural studies, with a particular attention to the sportswoman as a transgressing creature. Through a historical perspective on sport as an arena for constructing and legitimizing gender, but correspondingly also for gender "troubling", I will discuss how studies of sport and physical activities contribute to the theorizing of body, gender and difference. The sportswoman continues to pose a challenge to established gender relations and dichotomies; nature/culture, mind/body, masculine/feminine, man/woman, flesh/representation. From the "Soviet amazon" of the Cold War, to more recent cases of submitting women to gender tests, transgressions in sport have publicly demonstrated and pushed the boundaries of cultural understandings of gender.

Sport – in its regulations and established practices as well as journalism – is a context in which gender is tightly held in place. Since competitions are divided into men's and women's events in a way that assume a strict gender binary, there are few other arenas in which so much work is put into affirming that each body fits firmly into a male or female category (Cavanagh & Sykes 2006; Sloop 2012: 91). Hence, ideas on sexual difference, masculinity and femininity are constantly reproduced and legitimized here. There is also a consistent gender hierarchy, manifest in the unequal allocation of economic resources, access to sports halls and media attention. Gender distinction is institutionalized, with separate institutions and events for male and female sport respectively, or joint regulatory bodies of sport such as the international football association FIFA and the Olympic IOC being overwhelmingly male dominated (and certainly for FIFA, with male sport being the norm and primary focus of attention as well as economic resources). The routine division of male and female athletes is seldom questioned even in sports where physical strength has little or no impact, like for example shooting (Kimmel & Messner 1995: 104-112).

Women's Sport: A Present Past

In the Olympic Games in London 2012, women's boxing premiered as an Olympic sport. This is the latest step in a history where more and more sports and events for women gradually have been added to the Olympic program. This has been a protracted process characterized by struggles and setbacks. In the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, women were allowed for the first time to compete in track-and-field events. This came about after efforts made during the 1920s, where demands of more Olympic sports and events for women were voiced by the international association for women's sport, *Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale* (FSFI). The movement for women's sport was clearly inspired by the recent achievements regarding women's political and labor rights in Europe and the United States. The event "Women's Olympics" had been organized in Paris in 1922 and Gothenburg in 1926 to protest the exclusion of women, and especially women's athletics, from the official Olympic Games (Kidd 2005: 148; Tolvhed 2008a).

As a direct result of these actions, the first Olympic 800-metre race for women was held in Amsterdam 1928. However, not everyone liked what they saw; women in strained competition, sweating and breathing heavily. A few of the contestants threw themselves on the ground in exhaustion after crossing the finish line, causing heated feelings in an audience not used to seeing women publicly displaying such a state. The race sparked a debate on women and sport that led to the discontinuation of the 800-meter event, which was not reinstated until the 1960 Olympics in Rome (Bornholdt 2010: 1-15). Until 1960, women ran no longer than 200 meters in the Olympics. The first Olympic marathon for women took place in 1984, after years of once again debating the limits of the female body's capabilities – a discussion that in many ways paralleled the one on women's track-and-field events in the 1920s.

Sport is, I would argue, a sphere where the marks of history are still very much present, and not the least so on the issue of gender. Throughout the history of modern sport, it has been claimed that sport poses a danger to the female organism, deemed not to be suited for such demanding activity. Activities requiring – but, notably, at the same time also displaying and developing – upper body strength, endurance and speed have generally been the most controversial. The characteristics and body type that sport promotes and foster – toned muscles, competitiveness, assertiveness and aggression – defies traditional notions of femininity. The discussion on women and sport has been fraught by moral arguments, deeply motivated by a fear of blurring the gender categories and, in the long run, the established and familiar social order (Hargreaves 1994; Cahn 1995; Tolvhed 2008b). Female reproductive organs have been placed at the center of anxieties: might they be irreparably damaged by demanding physical exercises, hence endangering the future of the population and the nation?

At the root of the cultural tensions surrounding the sports woman is a history of sport closely associated with men and masculinity. Modern sport was developed from the mid-1800s onward, beginning in Great Britain's Public schools for boys as part of the fostering of future leaders and administrators of the Empire, and then gradually taken up more broadly throughout Europe and the United States. From the very beginning, sport was a politically useful resource to mark and manifest differences based on nation, gender and class. It has been used for training and shaping soldiers and "manly characters", and it has bridged the gap between public and private by providing national symbols – athletes – with whom to identify in the "friendly rivalry" between nations on the sports arenas. (Hobsbawm 1994: 142, 143; Mangan 1995: 1-9). Sport would foster gentlemanly behavior and respect for hierarchies, and with its emphasis on efficiency, measurability, records and competition it was particularly well suited to modern commercial and industrial capitalist society (Bonde 1991; Oriard 1993; Bederman 1995; Kimmel 1996; Mangan 2012a).

For women however, nationalist ideology prescribed a different role. Instead of defending the nation, their task was to reproduce and sustain it with their bodies and care work (Yuval-Davis 1997: 47). As gender historians have pointed out, it might not be purely coincidental that sport was established as a separate, masculine room at a time when the demands for women's rights were first being voiced during the so called first wave of feminism in the later decades of the 19th Century. The Social Darwinist medical science of the time, however, prescribed that women's energy should be reserved for motherhood, and "excessive" exercise was linked to physical, mental and moral problems. The lingering bourgeois ideal of femininity – a slender, passive and physically weak body – has continued to make women's sport controversial well into the 20th century (Atkinson 1987; Mangan 1989; Hargreaves 1994; Vertinsky 1994; Cahn 1995; Hartman-Tews & Pfister 2003: 267-268).

Gender has saturated the organization of and activities within the sports movement, as well as boys and girls physical education in schools (Olofsson 1989; Trangbæck 1998; Lundqvist Wanneberg 2004). Historian Kerstin Bornholdt's thesis (2010) explores how medical knowledge about women and sports was developed in Norway, Denmark and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, a first break-through and formative period for women's sport. Reports were written, conferences staged, and committees founded in order to find and formulate guidelines for women's sports. What exercises were they able to perform? How far could, and should, they be allowed to run? Medical experts held a powerful position in the debate, and their arguments were heavily influenced by the ethics and social requirements of the times. Female doctors were subjugated to the leading male specialists, especially the all-male gynecologist profession, and doctors generally took little notice of the subjective experiences of their female patients. For example, it was – contrary to what is known today – believed that female athletes had

difficulty giving birth due to their supposedly narrow pelvises, and that sports training could make them sterile. As an alternative to sport and a "more suitable" form of physical exercise, a separate women's gymnastics was introduced at this time. Through rhythmic gymnastics women were to be fostered into a femininity that, paradoxically, was simultaneously imagined as natural to them (Bornholdt 2010). It was not until the 1970s, under the influence of the second wave of feminism, that action for gender equality began to be taken within the Swedish sport movement (Olofsson 1989).

The Female Athlete – Pushing the Boundaries

The history of sport is, then, masculinized as well as patriarchal. But it is, importantly, precisely this history that has charged sport with a subversive and radical potential when performed by female bodies. Judith Butler has discussed women's sports as a challenge to dominating ideals of femininity, pressing the boundaries of gender. Calling the sportswoman a "queer body" that raises questions about physical naturalities, she claims women's sport to be "one of the most dramatic ways in which [conflicting gender ideals] are staged and negotiated in the public sphere" (Butler 1998).

One of the pioneering historical works on women and sport, the anthology *From 'Fair' Sex to Feminism* published in 1987, stresses how sport has contributed to the challenging and dislodging of accepted beliefs and practices of subordination. Similarly, Jennifer Hargreaves have pointed out that sport, like other forms of popular culture, can both affirm hegemonic relations of power and be a site for emancipation and resistance (Hargreaves 1994; also Mangan 2012b: 375). Already in the 1800s, some physical educators and medical doctors of both genders in Europe as well as in the U.S. held positive attitudes towards women's sport. Arguments often centered on the benefits of physical activities to child bearing and motherhood, but more radical voices regarded sport as a way of strengthening the modern woman and accelerate her emancipation to a full citizen and a productive part of the labor force (Vertinsky 1994; Bornholdt 2010). My own research on all-female and explicitly feminist sport federation Svenska Kvinnors Centralförbund för Fysisk Kultur (Swedish Women's Federation for Physical Culture), provides an example. Formed in 1924 and active until the mid-1930s, this separatist, all-female federation regarded women's access to sport and physical culture as a citizen's right, but also as instrumental to their aspirations and visions of a continuing process of women's emancipation and integration into society (Tolvhed 2012a).

Historically, one of the ways to culturally negotiate the perceived threat of women's masculinization through sport – thought of as a danger to existing (patriarchal) society – has been to project the fears onto someone else. The Cold War presented the perfect targets in the shape of female athletes from the communist

bloc, especially the cultural figure/fantasy of the sexually ambiguous "Soviet amazon". Through a maneuver where the "communist woman" was contrasted to the women of the "free world", the message that Swedish and Western female Olympians – despite being involved in sports – would not pose any threat to the established gender order was made clear (Tolvhed 2008b; 2012b). In the American context, Cahn has explained how images of mannish sport women were displaced onto Soviet "Amazons" in a way that also linked Western femininity and the stereotypical "American family" to progress and prosperity (Cahn 1995: 132, 133). C.L. Cole has named Soviet track and field athlete Tamara Press "America's most prominent figure of communist femininity" and explained her as a fantasy that reflected cultural anxieties of gender confusion as well as the political threat of the Cold War conflict between the two superpowers (Cole 2006: 347).

This use of traditional femininity as a "defense" towards suspicions of transgressions of gender and sexuality can still be seen today. Sexualization of the female, but increasingly also the male, athlete is a prominent part of sport's adjustment to market conditions and increasing commercial potential in late modern capitalist society (Lundkvist Wanneberg 2011). In Sweden, this has perhaps been most obvious in ladies football. In the 2000s, exhibiting femininity and feminine bodies – for example in the marketing of football team LdB football Club Malmö or sportswomen posing for men's magazines – are occurring, albeit not uncontroversial, PR-strategies. Although the "pornification" has emerged as a new feature, the underlying argument is familiar: the public is assured that these are normal, heterosexual women – in spite of their athleticism (Tolvhed 2008b).

However, organized sports are not the only, or even the most dominant, form of physical exercise today. Cultural views on the female body with regards to muscularity and strength were fundamentally altered by the emergence and growth of gym and fitness culture in the 1970s and 1980s. This brought something historically new and unique: the fit and "toned" female body ideal (Bordo 1993; Markula 2001; Heywood & Dworkin 2003; Dworkin & Wachs 2009). However, the implications of this ideal for feminist politics is debated, and a dividing line between feminists of the second and third wave can be discerned. Although they both largely agree on the fact that athletic young women are sexualized, some of todays "third wavers" – the "post-feminists", some might say – identifies a subversive element to this. Heywood and Dworkin argues that the growing importance of the female consumer made the athletic woman an iconic figure in commercials and fashion photography during the 1990s, in a way that has challenged assumptions of female weakness and inferiority. Although acknowledging that a gender binary, where men are larger and more muscular than females, is still present, Heywood and Dworkin identify this as a redefinition of femininity. Their nuanced reading of the female athlete as a cultural icon concludes that she is, after all, substantially different from "waify Calvin Klein or silicon-enhanced Victoria's Secret models" (Heywood & Dworkin 2003: xxix).

Heywood and Dworkin also argue against a second wave feminist position that is critical of sport and athletic performances altogether, deeming it fundamentally male-defined with an emphasis on competition, hierarchy and aggression. I agree with them that this standpoint in a problematic way assumes essentialist separatism; the existence of supposedly more peaceful and equal "female values" (Heywood & Dworkin 2003:7-9). The third wave feminist position embraces the contradictions, pleasures and desires, and acknowledges late modern market conditions as, potentially, both oppressive and empowering. Here, "femininity" and "masculinity" are perceived as attributes of performing gender to use and enjoy freely (Heywood & Dworkin 2003: 65). The visibility of the athletic female body is a rare example where "female masculinity" is validated in popular culture (Halberstam 1998: 45). Influential feminists such as Susan Bordo and Angela McRobbie are, however, significantly more critical of aspects of this development. In their view, the celebration of the successful individual/woman and the "post-feminist" call to invest in yourself, with an affirmation of appearance as an individual choice and expression, is part of a neoliberal agenda that is purely anti-feminist (Bordo 1993; McRobbie 2009). This is, no doubt, an academic debate that will continue.

Sport in (Feminist) Cultural Studies

Despite being a prominent form of popular culture and strong economic sector, sport and sport journalism is still relatively neglected as an empirical field of investigation within "mainstream" cultural research. This is rather surprising, especially given cultural studies' history of critiquing elitist understandings of culture as "fine arts" and theorizing the pleasures as well as the emancipatory potential of popular culture. It is still common for sport not to be mentioned at all in overviews, introductions or "readers" in this academic field. The elements of competitiveness and physical contact seem to have downgraded sport, as a sphere of cultural leisure activities as well as a research field. The underlying logic here is a distinction – and hierarchy – between culture and nature, mind and body. Studies of sport culture have, instead, largely been carried out within the fields of sport studies and sociology of sport (Cole 2006: 341; Cardell & Tolvhed 2011). Simon During finds an explanation in the fact that cultural studies have often been carried out by leftist academics with a middle class background, who have preferred to study music and other forms of youth culture that they can relate to on a personal level (During 2005:7).

Peter Dahlén believes sport is neglected within media studies due to its association with body, aggression, unbridled emotion and the working class, and its lack of association to the traditional high culture that historically has been the focus in much media research (Dahlén 2008: 18). Rod Brookes suggests that the marginal position of sport within the academic fields of communication, media

studies and cultural studies is due to the fact that it falls between two intellectual traditions. Sport journalism and sport broadcasting does not measure up to the ideal of democratic media which is the focus of the first tradition, but is instead seen as part of a highly commercialized entertainment industry "driving out serious journalism and increasingly inhibiting what the media should really be doing" (Brookes 2002: 2). The second tradition is one that takes a more postmodern approach to media, and celebrates popular culture not as a distraction but as a means for challenging dominant ideologies. Here, according to Brookes, sport is largely ignored due to the frequent display of conservative attitudes in sports journalism as well as in sports fandom, where stereotypes of gender and race are repeatedly reproduced and reinforced (Brookes 2002: 2-3).

But the tendency to reinforce stereotypes and gender divisions is, of course, in itself a good reason why critical and feminist research should be (more) concerned about sport. And of course some scholars have, indeed, analyzed the gendered dimensions of sport. Works have been done on masculinity in sports culture and journalism (for example, Messner 2003; Rowe 2004). Garry Whannel has studied media representation of sport stars such as Muhammed Ali, David Beckham and Mike Tyson, and argues these sport stars to be central to the cultural production of masculinity in society in general (Whannell 2002). Critical studies on media coverage and representation has shown that female athletes have been and still are marginalized in quantitative term and their sport performances trivialized and regarded as less important compared to their male peers (Birrell and Cole 1994; Birrell and McDonald 2000; Creedon 1994; Fuller 2009; Koivula 1999; Rowe 2004). In *Representing Sport*, Rod Brookes provides an overview of how the media has represented female athletes: *sexualising*, focusing on those perceived as heterosexually attractive and on their bodies, *infantilizing*, for example when grown women are called girls, *trivialising*, neglecting sports performance and results, and finally *familiarizing*, giving attention to the private sphere of family and romance. This kind of representation obscures the hard physical work performed at practice and in competitions. Furthermore, Brookes claims that media attention is decided through stereotypes of what sports or events are perceived as "female-appropriate" and "male-appropriate" respectively: female athletes in male-appropriate sports are neglected, and vice versa (Brookes 2002: 128-130; see also Koivula 1999). My own thesis, on press coverage of summer and winter Olympic Games between 1948 and 1972 in six Swedish popular magazines, explores how historically specific configurations of Swedish masculinity and Swedish femininity are here offered to the reader. Swedish male athletes are represented textually and visually as embodiments of national strength; active and forceful male bodies, competing for national honor, while passivity and attractiveness characterized the representation of Western and Swedish female Olympians (Tolvhed 2008b; 2012b).

Although the gender dimension is the focus of this article, it is notable that the political implications of sport are profound also when it comes to issues of patriotism and ethnicity. Still today, sport seems to offer pockets of nostalgia for a seemingly simpler past, resting not only on gendered fantasies of a time where "men were allowed to be men" but also on nationalist fantasies of a more "unitary" culture of shared values. An example is media and cultural studies scholar Tara Brabazon's study on Australian cricket as a form of separate sphere where a nostalgic fantasy of a patriarchal society centered on the British gentleman colonizer is still upheld and cultivated. These nostalgic narratives are not harmless; in fact they have serious political implications through obstructing new, more including forms of identification better suited to a late modern, multicultural Australia committed to gender equality (Brabazon 2006).

Gender and Sporting Bodies in the "Corporeal Turn"

In spite of the interesting work that has been carried out, I would argue that the potential of sport and physical activity has yet to be fully explored within feminist studies. Sport – including the fitness sphere that has emerged as a prominent commercial market and cultural phenomenon during the last decades – should be analyzed as a site of contestation, with close attention paid to the role this sphere has played and continues to play in women's self-conceptions, subordination and emancipation. Carol A. Osbourne and Fiona Skillen describe a double academic neglect, where women's sport have been marginalized within British sport history, while leisure and sport are seldom the subjects of women's and gender history. The latter fact is unfortunate, they point out, given how *the body* in the field of gender research has been identified as a critical site upon which understandings of women's experiences have been inscribed (Osbourne & Skillen 2010).

Sociologist Kath Woodward identifies similar tendencies within the field of feminist research: sport, leisure and fitness have been trivialized because of its association with play rather than the supposedly more "serious" areas of life such as politics, education and work. Like Osbourne and Skillen above, she finds this rather surprising given the "corporeal turn" in feminism, and suggests that it is due to the mind/body dualism. Sport is degraded through being referred to the physical, as opposed to the intellectual, sphere: "Feminist critiques have been haunted by the ghost of biological reductionism and the unhappy and unrealistic binary of nature and culture" (Woodward 2009: 33). The feminist subject has instead tended, as Joan W. Scott has pointed out, to appear as a disembodied individual. Her intellectual equality with men has been emphasized, while the question of (differing) physical activities and abilities seems to have been difficult to handle and hence often not been taken into account at all (Scott 1996: 154, 173). Similarly, Anne Witz describes how one of the central tasks of feminist sociology has been "to insist that being a woman means more than being in a body; that fe-

male sociality is built out of more than simply fleshy matters." (Witz 2000: 4) The need to move from a previous exclusive focus on female physicality, reproduction and sexuality, towards gender and power in society, resulted in silence on the issue of the body. In order to move forward, Witz calls for a feminist sociology that "think *about* the body *through* gender" (Witz 2000: 7). With the corporeal turn the body made its return, but the challenge to overcome the dichotomies and free the body of its biologist and essentialist connotations still seems pertinent.

As feminist and postcolonial scholars have pointed out, conceptions of the human body have historically been crucial in the social and cultural construction of gender and race (McClintock 1995; Hall 1997; Miller 2004). The (supposed) characteristics of the female body have been used to explain and justify the social exclusion of women and the cultural devaluation of femininity as part of a natural order (Gilman 1985; Grosz 1994: 14). Throughout history, physical activity has formed bodies in a concrete and material sense; sport has made men more "manly", while women's physical activities have been limited and directed towards forms of physical activity deemed conducive to "feminine" suppleness. Sport thus distinctly illustrates the process where culture generates the presumed biological, "natural" embodied gender differences in posture and muscularity that they describe (Shilling 1997: 84-85; Grosz 1994: 10-13). In line with this reasoning, R.W. Connell regards sport as a form of social practice that, like clothes, enhances gender difference and is "part of a continuing effort to sustain a social definition of gender, an effort that is necessary precisely *because the biological logic […] cannot sustain the gender categories*" (Connell 1987: 81).

Pia Lundkvist Wanneberg's study of Swedish physical education in primary schools during the 20th century gives an example of this very concrete cultivating of boys and girls into two different, highly gender-marked types of citizens. Whereas boys, especially those from the upper classes, were guided towards sport and exercises emphasizing strength, determination and competition, girls were taught to develop grace and agility through "aesthetic" gymnastic exercises (Lundqvist Wanneberg 2004). Also, Jenny Svender (2012) has shown in a recently published study that difference between boys and girls are still today consistently emphasized within the Swedish sports movement, and the teenage girl is framed through normative, heterosexual femininity.

Central to the so called corporeal turn have been a call to explore and understand embodiment, rather than taking it as a given starting point. Embodied practices and patterns of movement through space are not completely internal and specific to the individual, but must be understood as social and cultural, and hence also historical and changeable. At the same time, the materiality of bodies constrains what the social world can impose on them. Bodies pose limits to actions and experiences, and more so in certain contexts than in others:

> Bodies cannot be understood as a neutral medium of social practice. Their materiality matters. They will do certain things and not others. Bodies are substantively in play in social practices such as sport, labour and sex. (Connell 2005: 58)

In two recently published books, *Sex, Power and the Games* (2012) and *Embodied Sporting Practices* (2009), Kath Woodward makes the case for sport as an empirical concern for the field of feminist research. She identifies in sport the potential for better understandings of the processes through which embodied knowledge and subjectivity is produced, in a way that overcomes the split between corporeality and discursive regimes or representations (Woodward 2009: 178). Hence, discourse and representation should be understood as embodied, and embodiment shapes discourse and representation. Studies on this field can contribute to the theorizing of body, gender and difference in ways that combines, rather than chooses between, the two dominant paradigms here; post-structuralism and phenomenology. For Woodward, studies of sport can stimulate a deeper understanding of "enfleshed" bodies as central in the making of individual human identities and experiences. However, feminist fears of being reduced to the anatomical body needs to be addressed here, as well as a social constructionism that disregards the materiality of the body and the reality of embodied human experience.

Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's reading of the body as a *situation*, Woodward envisions a theorizing of materialized lived experiences in a social, political, cultural context where bodies are *shaped by* but also *produces* knowledge (Woodward 2012). An example can be found in Iris Marion Young's classic essay "Throwing like a girl"; an analysis of how corporeality is implicated in the reproduction of social power relations. Young connects power relations with phenomenology's focus on the lived body and routine practices in the everyday social interactions, and observes how a woman "typically refrains from throwing her whole body into motion and rather concentrates motion in one part of the body alone, while the rest remains rooted in immanence." (Young 2005: 36) This immobility is, according to Young, the result of a culturally specific, learned and embodied fear of getting hurt. She concludes that women often live their bodies as things, which motivates attempts to further understand how sport can be a site of political activism and agency (Woodward 2009: 113).

Sport uniquely demonstrates how bodies are neither a blank surface for social inscriptions, nor simply flesh and blood (Woodward 2009: 16). Embodiment in sport is still a relatively untapped theoretical realm that could provide new understandings of embodied human experience, and post-Foucauldian approaches to the social regulation of bodies (Markula 2004; Markula and Pringle 2006). To what extent can humans be seen as agents that have control over and shape bodies through physical activities? How can we simultaneously embrace (embodied) difference and equality, in a way that also allows (temporal and situational) transformation and change? How is identity and subjectivity shaped and influenced by physical activities, experiences and learning?

Cyborgs, Gender Benders, Monsters?

The centrality of gender verification and enfleshed bodies in sport makes it a fruitful area for the exploration of connections between sex and gender. As the recent case of runner Caster Semenya demonstrates, athletic superiority and "masculine" attributes in women still today stir public emotions and evoke cultural anxieties of gender blurring. At the 2009 World Championships in Athletics, The International Association of Athletics Federations demanded that Semenya underwent both drug and ''gender tests'' to investigate her dramatic improvement in speed as well as suspicions based on her muscular, "masculine" appearance. This was done in the name of justice, with references to an unfair situation if women should have to compete against men (Vannini & Fornssler 2011).

The debate made visible different positions on how gender should be defined, medically or by identification. Sloop finds, interestingly, a hybrid category of gender in the debate on Semenya; a logic according to which Semenya could be described by commentators as "not fully a woman, but not fully a man" or "not 100% woman". This simultaneously maintains and destabilizes gender: "While ignoring a great number of aspects of bodies, the logic does create (or maintain) a meaningful reality for most 'bodies', providing most of us with 'bodies that matter', at the expense of those with bodies that confuse." (Butler 1993; Sloop 2012: 88) As her body was understood as existing outside the binary categories available, a threatening abject, unruly, hybrid or monstrous, many discussants in public debate stated the opinion that Semenya should be removed from sports, or at least "treated" so that her "sex-gender problem" was fixed or managed to maintain a stable gender identity (Sloop 2012).

From the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City onwards, the IOC has made female athletes prove their "true" femininity through various diagnostic technologies which C.L. Cole describes as: "ranging from external visual, probing gynecological to chromosomal-buccal smear and gene amplification" (Cole 2006: 344). With these tests, the IOC sanctioned a message that if women are really good athletes, they might be men. Furthermore, the logic of these tests are, as Woodward describes it, "that not only is there an absolute truth but also science is the route to establishing what that truth is" (Woodward 2012: 58). Through being athletes and being subjected to these tests, women have found out that they have Y chromosomal material, something they might never have known otherwise. Apart from any personal consequences that this might have, they get publicly exposed as "not real women" and cast as cheaters (Woodward 2012: 54-56). Sex is reproduced and reinforced as a regime of truth with normative dimensions; that sex should also determine gender identity. Biology takes precedence over culture (Woodward 2012: 185-186).

At the same time, however, the history of gender testing has publicly demonstrated the evasive character of gender. Gender transgressions pose a cultural di-

lemma, since they expose categories as unstable and fluent rather than – as frequently assumed – consistent and clearly delineated. The chromosome test was eventually eliminated because of the realization that the body's sex is much more complex and that a test examining the genetic makeup is not a conclusive method to determine sex; hence demonstrating how the body is, in fact, not an either/or phenomena (Fausto Sterling 2000: 3). Instead, as C. L. Cole notes, gender verification tests in sport have exposed the gender dichotomy and uncovered a continuum of bodies that cannot easily be arranged into two stable, separate gender categories:

> a wide range of boundary creatures appear within sex testing narratives: drug-crafted athletes, steroid men/women, intersexed, transsexed, hypermuscular females, hypernormal females, innocent victims, communist athletes, embryos and maternal bodies. (Cole 2006: 344-345)

Recent technological innovations further emphasize how sport is a site for physical transformations and challenges to the boundaries of the human body. These innovations also pose a delicate dilemma; on the one hand immense opportunities to follow sport's inherent competitive logic, creating even faster records and increasing the stamina and strength of athletes, which however, on the other hand, clashes with traditional notions of fair play and also evokes deep set cultural fears of monstrosity (Woodward 2009: 160). Here, feminist technoscience perspectives – Braidotti's (1994) monsters or Haraway's (1991) cyborgs – can be applied to advances in the field of sport, where phenomena such as performance-enhancing drugs or high-tech prosthetics, as in the case of South African runner Oscar Pistorius, pushes the boundaries between nature and culture, human and cyborg, flesh and technology (Jönsson 2007; Woodward 2009: 152-160). A study that tends to the complex interaction between technology, body and identity is Swedish sociologist Elisabet Apelmo's on young women with physical impairments. Apelmo analyses how they through sport activities – playing sledge hockey, wheelchair basketball or table tennis – make use of technology in their identity construction. The analysis draws on the metaphor of the cyborg as a hybrid figure that challenges bodily normalcy and organic unity. The wheelchair becomes part of their self-presentation as well as subjectivity as young women and as athletes (Apelmo 2012).

Without doubt, fundamental changes have taken place on issues of women's sport. Today, women practice sport and partake in competitions on all levels. Female athletes become media stars, even cultural icons. Male to female transsexuals are allowed to compete as women (in the Olympics, from two years after the operation). But aggressiveness and toned, salient muscles – the visible result of hard physical work – can still stir public emotions and deep set cultural anxieties of gender blurring. Through exposing how muscles can be gained and developed, rather than just "naturally" belonging to male bodies, the muscular bodies of female athletes or bodybuilders push and transgress the limits of the bipolar system

of gender differentiation through appropriating "masculine" characteristics. Hence, they pose a symbolic challenge to the supposedly natural differences that legitimizes hierarchy and male superiority (Schulze 1990: 59; Tasker 1993: 141-146; Heywood 1998; Diprose 2002: 64-65).

In this article, I have argued that the body can, and should, be considered as an integrated part of the feminist project, a base or position for symbolic and structural challenges as well as for the strengthening and liberation of the individual. The general area of sport and fitness, today commercialized as a battery of services, clothes and other equipment as well as a glossy magazine market, is influential in an economic as well as social and cultural sense, and certainly too important to be outside of the scope of feminist research. Studies of sport and physical activities can contribute to the understanding of embodiment and the theorizing of gender. It seems, as M Ann Hall has noted, particularly well-suited for the "third wave" feminist cultural studies that is at ease with complexities and contradictions; the practices and (commercialized) images of the sportswoman can, certainly, be analyzed as being potentially oppressive as well as potentially empowering (Hall 2005: 56).

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