



## ISSUES ON SPORTS: THE TRANSGENDER TURN<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*In this text, I bring some questions regarding transgender body in sports. The aim is to problematize, from Gender Studies perspective, how this body is made invisible by the binary system of sports categorization. To do so, I rescue ethnographic data in LGBT sports competition. I conclude that such a body questions the mainstream sport and postulates what I call “dissonant sports practices”. Therefore, I believe that at the beginning of the 21st century we live the “transgender turn” in the sport spaces.*

*KEYWORDS: Transgender bodies; LGBT Sport; Dissonant Sport Practices*

### INTRODUCTION

In this text, I would like to consider transgender athletes on sports. For this purpose, I want to provoke the readers saying that now it's the transgender turn, i.e., now it's time to take in consideration transgender bodies, and to (re)think the binary system which classifies bodies into male or female categories.

For this, it's necessary the definition of “dissonant sport practices”, i.e., athletic manifestations that wouldn't fit into the technical reproducibility patterns of the body's gestures in the mainstream sports, and that even so would produce results. On the other hand, I want to conceptualize the dissonant bodies, e.g., bodies that don't fit the idealized standards of beauty, aesthetics, sex & gender, or efficiency, but still are present in high level championships.

Just remembering, abjection is a term coined by Julia Kristeva (1982), and it suggests the idea of the coexisting body and taboo, which could construct singularly the subject by exclusion. The abject is the one who was expelled; expelled as an excrement. However, is the fact the abject was expelled what explains the constitution of a strange thing.

After that, I'd like thinking over transgender bodies, which put themselves in a gender transition, and at the same time, they are bodies that play with “natural” characteristics given by biological aspects. For them to think about the “natural sex” is odd or unusual, because sex itself is a discursive construction (Butler, 2008). In a word, trans bodies question the future of sports practices.

The aim here is to problematize the presence/absence of disruptive bodies (my terms) of transgender athletes in the sport during last century and to consider

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a specific case. I ask myself how much sport performances of these transgender athletes were erased or subsumed, in a process of historical homogenization, proposed by the binary system of gender.

## THE INVISIBILITY OF TRANSGENDER BODIES IN SPORT

During Chicago's Gay Games 2006 (games for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people) I witnessed the athletic performance of a trans man in an athletic event in which I took part: 400 meters' hurdles, male category (Camargo & Vaz, 2012). Choosing elements considered socially as "masculine" and "feminine", he mixed signs of male and female in one body and questioned the sport's frame.

The "I" is called into question in its relation to the Other, "*a relation that doesn't reduce me to silence precisely, but in which, however, there is a saturation of my discourse with signs of decomposition*" (Butler, 2008: 49). So, on the limit, that athlete has disintegrated us completely, at that moment.

The transgender athlete example comes up against something that currently appears in the mediatized sport and underlines some issues regarding non-normative bodies, genders, and sexualities. Transgender bodies in sport are still invisible and taking them in consideration not only disrupt the binary system, but it opens a discussion about a new political and technical management of the body and of the sexuality.

Rio 2016 Olympic Games were considered "the gayest Olympics in history" (FRANCESCHINI, 2016), basically considering the number of athletes, which declared themselves non-heteronormative. Despite this fact, no transgender hasn't officially participated. Caster Semenya (a South African runner of the 800 m) and Dutee Chand (an Indian sprinter and record holder of the 100m races) were considered as transsexuals at some point, but later media put this away. Both athletes gained global attention after some facts: Semenya was questioned after winning the 800-m world title (IAAF's tournament in Berlin 2009) and Chand was suspended by the same Association in 2014 due to hyperandrogenism (revoked later).

If for a gay or lesbian athletes, the coming out solves a part of the everyday problems with coaches, teammates, and family members, in the case of a transgender person the issue is not solved in such a practical way. On the outside, the condition assumed in respect to their sexuality always brings with them many uncertainties and instabilities, because they question the binary system under which the sport is based on. The problem is to consider trans body under the normative of biological body as standard, disregarding almost completely the ongoing changes posted by the trans body.<sup>3</sup>

For Peçanha, a Brazilian "black transfeminist activist" these distinctions about the presence of trans athletes in competitive sports are nothing more than

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<sup>3</sup> What I call "normative biological body" can also be named the "cisgender body", that is, a body of one who agrees with what was assigned to him/her at the birth. For some feminists, the world can be socially divided between "cis" and "trans" people (who would be, at the opposite, those who do not agree with the assigned sex/gender at the birth). In theoretical terms, Paul Beatriz Preciado (2008) divides bodies similarly into "bio" and "trans" nominations, which are "nominations related to gender, which are technically produced".

dimensions of an “institutional transphobia”, and other prejudices that are drift toward “transgender bodies”, which should have their existence recognized “*in a legitimate way and not as deviations from the biological body*” (PEÇANHA, 2016, 4).

## **GENDER VERIFICATION TESTS: AN INTERESTING CASE**

At 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, the Polish athlete Stanisława Walasiewicz (later Stella Walsh) competed as a favorite in the speed trials of athletics and her main opponent was the American athlete Helen Stephens. Walsh finished second in the 100 meters, and therefore, Stephens had her “woman status” challenged by several athletes and coaches, being forced to undergo a genital inspection to prove that she was a woman (RITCHIE; REYNARD; LEWIS, 2008). The suspicion was dissipated and the medal was kept. However, when Walsh is murdered in 1980, an autopsy finds that Stella possessed masculine genitalia, despite her feminine gender identity. If the biological certificate of a body with “two sexes” was not enough, a biochemical investigation also found male and female chromosomes in his body – a rare case of mosaicism (CAMARGO, 2017).

What comes next was the development of IOC policies of the control on women’s bodies through “femininity-proof” tests and, later, the “gender verification” tests. The 1968 Mexico Olympic Games were a special milestone in this type of control. What was discussed and imposed at that Games changed the course of some athletes’ life in the history of sport.

The Stella’s case and many other athletes who emerged in the twentieth century are examples of controversies involving the gender verification (or sex-screening) tests for women, which were conducted by IOC. Therefore, these tests were dropped before the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games (LESSA; VOTRE, 2013), but they persist in the social and institutional imaginary when questioning the legitimacy of a female body in sports.

Current examples such as the MMA fighter on the UFC circuit Fallon Fox, MtF (Male to Female), or Chris Mosier, a FtM (Female to Male) athlete of Duathlon (cycling and running), or even the German coach Bailan Buschbaum (also FtM) are still rare, seen as exceptions to an “universal” rule of normative bodies on sports, which are able or not able according to the biological laws (the association penis-man or vagina-woman), and must follow the main logic by a dominant aesthetic of heterosexuality (Halberstam, 2008).

## **NEW TECHNICAL-POLITICAL MANAGEMENT OF THE BODY**

At the end of 2015, the IOC surprised everyone with the announcement of criterion to “better fit trans athletes” in their Olympic programs. These criteria came from the “IOC Consensus Meeting on Sexual Reassignment and Hyperandrogenism” (2016), held in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Although they clearly have a concern about the non-exclusion of trans athletes in competitive sports and that they could guarantee such participation based on a human rights issue, the document is quite intransigent when posts some requirements for individuals in transition from Male to Female, to compete in the Female category.

They must: A) have declared their gender identity as female within four years or more; B) have clinically demonstrate testosterone levels below 10 nmol/l (nanomole per liter) in the last twelve months prior to competition, and kept it below that during the contest; C) have complete monitoring of tests before and during the sporting events in which they participate.

For what we considered till now, it's noticeable a rigid control and regulation of these bodies. From my point of view, I defend that the rules laid down by IOC on these bodies should be phased out, which would impose a new dynamic on the sport system and a different logic of treatment based on its specific characteristics. These bodies will be always in process of transitioning!

From a macro perspective, such debate has relation to the expansion of the drug industry in recent years, with the manipulation/consumption of synthetic hormones and, even to practices of doping. Therefore, there is in course a new technical-political management/control of body, sex, and sexuality, or even, in Michel Foucault's terms, a new kind of governability of the human being.

At last, the Spanish transgender author Preciado has taught us that the history of gender normalization in the Western societies has been marked by invention, synthetic combination, and commercialization of new molecules for the body (drugs and all kind of substances) and new representational techniques of gender and sexuality (pornographic ones). This pharmacopornographic management (hormonal, surgical, and audiovisual) of gender (his concept) starts from World War II and is a wide range of technologies that produces the species, which are deeply rooted in our contemporary society and sports. This seems to be the key to understand where the considerations about transgender athletes go.

## **CUESTIONES PARA EL DEPORTE: EL GIRO TRANSGÉNERO**

*RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta cuestiones relativas al cuerpo transgénero en los deportes. La propuesta es, a partir de los Estudios de Género, analizar cómo ello se hace invisible por el sistema binario de categorización en los deportes. Así, pienso en utilizar partes de mis datos etnográficos sobre las competiciones deportivas LGBT. Llego a la conclusión de que tal cuerpo cuestiona el deporte mainstream y prescribe lo que llamo "las prácticas deportivas disonantes". Por lo tanto, creo que en esto temprano siglo XXI hay que considerar "el giro transgénero" en los deportes.*

*PALABRAS CLAVE: Cuerpos Transgéneros; Deporte LGBT; Prácticas Deportivas Disonantes.*

## **PROBLEMÁTICAS NO ESPORTE: A VIRADA TRANSGÉNERO**

*RESUMO: Neste texto trago algumas questões relativas ao corpo transgênero nos esportes. Objetivo problematizar, a partir dos Estudos de Género, como esse corpo é invisibilizado pelo sistema binário de categorização esportiva. Para isso, resgato partes de dados etnográficos em competições esportivas LGBT. Concluo que tal corpo questiona o esporte mainstream e postula o que chamo "práticas esportivas dissonantes". Por isso, acredito que nesse início do século XXI vivemos a "virada transgênero" de considerações nos espaços esportivos.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Corpos transgéneros; Esporte LGBT; Práticas Esportivas Dissonantes*

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