



**CARING FOR CASTER SEMENYA:  
DEFENDING HER SENSE OF SELF**

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The international public pillorying of the world champion runner, Ms. Caster Semenya, raises a series of red flags of rightful concerns, but none more urgent and essential than the effect this is having on Ms. Semenya herself and our need to care and be committed enough to defend her sense of self in the most dignity-affirming ways. For it is first of all, a clear violation of her person and dignity, her sense of self and her right to define herself, and be secure from medically invasive and culturally imperialist practices which undermine this security.

Ms. Semenya, an eighteen-year old South African college student and world champion runner, has been required to undergo “a sex verification test” by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) after winning in record time, 1:56.72, the 800m women’s final. The IAAF said that it had ordered the tests to determine, if Ms. Semenya might possess genetic characteristics of a male and thus, have an unacceptable advantage in competition over females. However, it appears preliminary results have been leaked and there is now an international discourse which increases violation of Ms. Semenya’s identity, dignity and right to security against such assaults. Indeed, they aim more at “exposing” and mocking her differences than preserving her dignity and honoring her definition and sense of self.

It is this issue of the violation of Ms. Semenya’s person and dignity that caused South Africans to recall and compare this public humiliation by Whites to the inhuman treatment of Ms. Sarah Baartman, a Khoisan South African woman kidnapped in 1810 and taken to Europe where she was paraded around naked so that those so perversely inclined could stare, poke and jab at her genitals with an assortment of umbrellas.

Indeed, a current circus sideshow atmosphere was added to the case of the public pillorying of Ms. Semenya by European bookmakers who took bets on whether Ms. Semenya would be determined to be male, female or a “hermaphrodite”.

The talk of the need to scientifically determine her sex hides an insidious social subtext of race and gender considerations which are both the origin and the central elements which define and drive the issue as a so-called “problem”. After all, the artificially generated “problem” of Ms. Semenya’s sex never needed resolution until after she becomes a champion. As long as she did not win, she served at best as a marginal figure which contributed to the multicultural, multiracial and multinational characteristics of the White originated and controlled games. But once she becomes the winner, open sexual concerns and covert racial ones emerge.

Thus, there is set in motion a scientific expedition or exploration to determine if there were hidden in Ms. Semenya’s genetic make-up something that her uncovered genitalia didn’t reveal, i.e., that she was not a woman, but some yet-to-be determined form of male, in spite of her self-definition and parental and communal consensus concerning her womanhood. A team including a gynecologist, endocrinologist, psychologist and others of various use and usefulness is assembled to put science in the service of what ultimately will require a culturally and politically determined decision. In other words, the decision, like the defining of the issue, comes from a culture convinced of its superiority and rightness and reassured and buoyed by its ability to impose whatever decision it deems necessary, i.e., thumbs up or down, depending on what it decides serves its interests.

In spite of the IAAF’s claim of legitimate concerns about Ms. Semenya not

having an unfair advantage thru sexual status, her race is also an interrelated concern and factor. First, there is a long history in and out of the Olympics of defining Black women as “masculine”, “unattractive”, “unfeminine”, and “strange”, unless they had characteristics which seem to reflect or resemble White traits. This is the meaning of the call in earlier Olympic history for a different category of performance for Black women who were seen as being both female and male. And it is reflected in the sour-grape comments of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> placed women from Russia and Italy about “their kind” not being like “us”, i.e., fully female and appropriately like White women.

But it is important to note that no small amount of this unrestrained resentment is due to a racist reaction to Black excellence and thus, the need to reinterpret it in ways that deny, diminish or discredit it. For it challenges, even in a physical form, the White assumption of superiority in important things—and sports certainly classifies as important. The Germans of Jesse Owens’ and Joe Louis’ era were not satisfied in claiming intellectual superiority, but wanted also, and of course failed, to claim physical superiority. Moreover, this problematizing of Ms. Semenya’s sexual identity is not only against her, but also against Africans, Black people as a whole. It is assuming a racially arrogant posture of trying to define us, using themselves as a paradigm, an exemplary model of problematic history and dubious significance.

Thus, given the culturally narrow interpretations and untutored expectations

about masculinity, femininity and beauty that so many Europeans hold and their gross unawareness of other cultures beyond movies and make-believe, how could they possibly define for Africans or any other people of color such identities? The IAAF denies charges of racism, reminding us that its president is a Black man, as if Black men and women schooled and ensconced in what Langston Hughes calls “the ways of White folks” won’t come to similar conclusions under these conditions or coercive peer pressure. A brief viewing of the daily and nightly news offers abundant evidence of such a phenomenon.

Again, Paul Robeson reminds us that the battlefield is everywhere and sports do not escape the reach and relevance of this adage. Thus, this becomes another site of struggle, of demonstrated care and concern for those involved and affected by the practices of punishment and pillorying based on narrow notions of human identities and sexuality. It is on us to use this opportunity to turn both inward and outward and make sure we insist on and pursue practices ourselves which represent the best of what it means to be African and human.

This requires recognition of our differences, similarities and interrelatedness as male and female without degrading or devaluing either; and honoring each person as a possessor of dignity and worthy of the highest respect, regardless of the way they genetically or anatomically enter the world. Anything less is an emulation of our oppressor and an unarguable obstacle to creating a new world and way for humans to relate.

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