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Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty

Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women's Sports

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What would prompt a young woman on an intercollegiate softball team to deliberately grow a long ponytail and decorate it with ribbons while fiercely competing alongside her teammates by throwing a fast pitch for a strikeout in a Division I level championship? Why do young women, who compete in sports competition in record numbers since the passage of Title IX in 1972, worry so much about how they look, in addition to how they play?¹ Why have women in elite professional sports, for example past Olympic contenders, submitted themselves to “sex testing”—removing their clothes to stand in front of “expert” male judges, to be looked at and deemed female or male—in order to determine their future in athletic competition? It is indisputable that the challenges of gender identity for women in elite sports depend upon widely shared aesthetic norms of the ideal female body, namely, what it means to be a “woman” in contemporary society—values learned from popular culture, traditional gender roles, even art history—and that both individual and institutional judgments about such bodies often depend upon emotional reactions to the sight of strong, athletic, muscled women and not how fast they can run or how high they can jump.

Women's bodies have been under scrutiny in sports for over one hundred years; indeed, women were initially forbidden to compete in sports because it was thought that their bodies would be physically damaged by the strain, ultimately failing them during their reproductive years. Equally as important, it was thought, prior to the successive stages of social change that launched women's liberation in the twentieth century, that developing a fit and strong body would repel a prospective husband on

¹ According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA 2014), in 1981–2 there were 74,239 female student-athletes on 4,776 teams, and 169,800 male student-athletes on 6,843 teams. Today, there are 191,131 female student-athletes on 9,746 teams, and 252,946 male student-athletes on 8,568 teams.

whom a woman would ultimately depend for her identity and welfare. Philosophers Jane English (1978) and Iris Marion Young (1979) pioneered early feminist writing in the 1970s, after the passage of Title IX, about women's relationship to sport, highlighting the dominant masculinist culture that relied upon deeply inculcated moral norms to both exclude women from sport and convince them that sport was an exclusively male province. A corresponding examination of sport with input from feminist aestheticians is long overdue, especially in the image-based era in which we live. Now, how one looks (to others) can influence how one feels (in terms of gender identity) to the point where young, strong women fear being called lesbians and elite female athletes must prove to judges that they are not gender misidentified as male (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 2005; Cahn 2010; Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose 2009; Watts 2011). In effect, the early twentieth-century conceptualization of the female athlete as beauty queen still persists into the twenty-first century; she must maintain a delicate balance between "muscle moll" and attractive feminine heterosexuality (Cahn 2010).

This essay is about the history of challenges that women in elite sports have faced with respect to their gender identity within a society that perpetuates misleading aesthetic norms of beauty; it is a history fraught with controversy and injustice. The unique physical beauty these athletes manifest creates what appears to be a paradox yet is, in fact, scientifically predictable. As might seem intuitively obvious, the intense training for participation at the highest levels of sports competition leads to unique bodily strength and beauty that correlate with specific anatomic changes. Athletes who develop the physical capabilities that permit them to compete at the pinnacle of their sport and receive appropriate accolades for their success can be singled out as exceptions from their gender and subsequently prohibited from competing by the same organizations that encouraged their participation in the first place. Conflict arises when agencies and individuals who are "sports authorities" such as officials of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), coaches, fans, and fellow athletes use traditional and racialized aesthetic norms of beauty as the basis for ungrounded judgments of gender misidentity. Perceiving and then mistaking an elite athlete's body as "male" instead of "female" reveals an underlying cognitive bias acquired through years of experience and education based on misleading aesthetic norms of beauty: a case of erroneous and damaging categorical perception (a term borrowed from cognitive science) that we call *perceptual sexism*. Evidence from cognitive science shows that correcting one's bias is not only possible but results in a more informed set of beliefs, expectations, and values that in turn influences future perception (Goldstone, de Leeuw, and Landy 2015). We recommend both the acknowledgement within the realm of elite sport of perceptual sexism based on misleading aesthetic norms of beauty, and a way of correcting such erroneous categorization that allows athletes the autonomy and agency to choose to compete as male or female based on a declaration of their own gender identity.

11.1 Sex Testing Female Athletes: A History of Gender Misidentity

On August 19, 2009, 18-year-old South African middle-distance runner Caster Semenya was ordered by the governing body of the IAAF to undergo testing to verify her sex, eventually clearing her to compete that afternoon as a female at the World Track and Field Championships in Berlin where she outran her opponents in the 800 meter race to win the gold medal (Figure 11.1). The testing was prompted by accusatory rumors and complaints; her speed and the way she looked prompted insinuations that she was a man. A teenager from a rural area, Semenya was thrust into an international limelight of shame and degradation, and was subsequently forced to withdraw from competition for nearly a full year, until July 6, 2010. Susan Cahn (2011, 38) aptly frames the procedural injustice that threatened the continued pursuit of the athlete's livelihood and passion:



Figure 11.1 Caster Semenya competing at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin.

“In this Monday, Aug. 17, 2009, file photo South Africa’s Caster Semenya, right, competes in a Women’s 800m semifinal at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin. The IAAF has asked the South African track federation to conduct a gender verification test on 800 meter runner Caster Semenya amid concerns she does not meet the requirements to compete as a woman. The 18-year-old Semenya is a favorite in the 800 meter final later Wednesday, Aug. 19, 2009.”

AP Photo/Anja Niedringhaus, File.

Specialists in genetics, endocrinology, gynecology, and psychology picked over Semenya's body and mind to answer the seemingly simple question: Is Semenya a woman or a man?

Given her upbringing and desire to compete alongside women, Semenya self-identified as female, but she was held scientifically suspect due to her speed, fit body, and flat chest, causing Italian and Russian rivals to insinuate to journalists, "just look at her" (Dixon 2009). Beneath the innuendo, she was suspected of being a man or, at minimum, of being intersexed, that is, medically diagnosed by experts as being one in 2,000 persons who is afflicted by a DSD: disorder of sex development (Cahn 2011). Visual differences clearly set her apart from most other athletes; she was South African and black and many other competitors were European or American and white. Moreover, her own feelings of gender identification with the female sex and her autonomy to choose to compete in women's competition were deemed irrelevant. She was forced her to "prove" to the "experts" that what they saw as visual differences, i.e. aberrations from the norm, did not warrant an ascription of "male" which would subsequently disqualify her from female competition, and that her improved race times were not due to male testosterone (Staurowsky 2011). In effect, once suspicions arose she had to prove she was indisputably female while the governing sports authorities disqualified her personal testimony. (It is significant that her own team coach secretly "tested" her on August 7, 2009, prior to competition in Berlin (Wonkam, Fieggen, and Ramesar 2010).)² How were these gender verification tests conducted, and why have female athletes been subject to sex testing at all?

Arthur Caplan (2010) argues that undertaking gender determination in athletic competitions depends on long-held social conventions of separating sports into (only) two categories of male and female, based directly on commonly held beliefs that reflect social values and historical precedent that there are only two sexes in the world. Alternatively, all sports teams could be mixed-gender teams, somewhat like figure skating, tennis, and badminton which can be played by pairs or mixed doubles, though this system still maintains a one man, one woman requirement. Or we could allow open competition between men and women as in motor sports, golf, and equestrian events, but few reformers argue for such a radical change that serves to subvert and extend current gender boundaries (Griffin 2011). Given the prevailing sentiment against women's participation in sports in general—women were excluded from the first modern Olympics in 1896—their separation in competition is a reflection of sports' institutional values and the power of these values to prevail. Sex separation was originally intended to insure fair competition and prevent injuries to "real" women in contact sports since their bodies have less muscle-to-fat ratio compared to men as well as less heart and lung capacity. Thus, it was argued, those persons who undergo transsexual surgery (male-to-female), or who are even suspected of being

² The team doctor, the Athletics South Africa (ASA) general manager, and the South African athletics chief had Semenya "tested" before competing in Berlin, confirmed by the team coach who also knew that Semenya was not fully aware of the nature of the tests. The exact nature of the "testing" was never revealed.

male, pose a substantive challenge to eligibility determination upon which female sport is based. Caplan (2010, 550) correctly notes that transsexuals were allowed to compete in the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004, under the conditions that their gender be legally recognized and that they had undergone at least two years of post-operative hormone therapy. Caplan (2010, 550) concludes, “At least at this elite level of international competition, gender has been recognized as both a social/legal concept and a biological one.” However, the conditions under which Semenya’s sex was questioned in 2009 were not associated with a suspicion that she was transsexual; rather, she was targeted because competitors, journalists, and judges thought she was unfairly gaining a physical advantage over others, in part because she simply looked—to their eyes—masculine.

Harsher critics such as Laura A. Wackwitz (2003) are not so sanguine about sex testing, characterizing it as an oppressive, discriminatory institutional practice that subjects *only* female athletes to a mythical binary sex-gender system of categorization that in the name of protection (of the so-called “weaker sex”) actually punishes them for achieving strength, skill, and the courage to compete at the highest levels. Wackwitz cites “the first recorded instance of sex testing in the Olympic Games” which began in the eighth century BCE: a rule that all trainers, in addition to competitors, should appear naked. This imperative followed an episode in which a woman was caught merely observing the competitors, a crime previously punishable by death “from a precipitous mountain with high rocks” (Wackwitz 2003, 553). The naked male body became the requisite certificate of competitive entry, that is, proof of masculinity. Even today, the IOC perpetuates the stigma of female participation in elite sport by not allowing women to compete unless they have proven themselves to be “real” women, both genetically and in terms of appearance, testing athletes suspected of being too masculine on a case-by-case basis. Their history over the past decades has been fraught with testing behavior that violated privacy, caused indignities, and altered lifelong careers, particularly when we consider that genetic sex testing was mandatory for all athletes competing in women’s Olympic events between 1968 and 1988. What led to this proliferation of testing? Consider the following history.

In 1936, six-foot-tall American gold medalist Helen Stephens, who declared as a woman but ran with long male-like strides, was accused by Polish journalists of being a man; she was tested by officials but confirmed female. She had beaten Polish-American track legend Stanisława Walasiewicz, later Stella Walsh, in the 100 meter race. Ironically an autopsy of Walsh’s body in 1980 reportedly revealed ambiguous genitalia and abnormal sex chromosomes (Carlson 2005).

Two Soviet sisters, Tamara and Irina Press, were long suspected of being “male” after collectively setting twenty-six world records and winning six Olympic gold medals in track and field, particularly after they—and four other teammates—suddenly retired from competition after testing began in 1967. Without any real proof, officials felt vindicated that, indeed, males had infiltrated women’s competition and something

needed to be done to rectify the unfairness to “real” women who would “naturally” be disadvantaged by competing against presumably stronger, faster males (Carlson 2005).

But it was four specific, similar cases that prompted the IOC to instigate mandatory “femininity testing” in 1968, all of which involved competitors identified as women who later “became” men: Czech runner Zdenka Koubkova, who set the 1934 women’s world record in 800 meters; two French track medalists at the 1946 European Cup; Austrian ski champion Erika Schinegger, who retired after a 1967 medical examination requested by World Cup authorities revealed irregularities and subsequently underwent sex reassignment and later competed as Erik Schinegger in men’s skiing and cycling; and Hermann Ratjen, nicknamed “Dora,” who masqueraded as a female high jumper at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where he finished fourth, and later went on to set a world record in 1938 before being arrested and subjected to testing. In the 1950s he admitted to being a man and cited coercion by Nazi officials to pose as female (Carlson 2005).

It was not that precautions had not already been taken to control an illegal infiltration of the female ranks of competition. In 1946, encouraged by Avery Brundage of the IOC and others, the IAAF required a medical certificate from female competitors in order to be eligible to compete and then, in 1948, the IOC adopted this same rule (Heggie 2010). By 1966, however, the presentation of a medical certificate became useless as authorities changed the protocol of testing to rely primarily upon visual observation of external genitalia, known as the infamous “naked parades” first introduced by the IAAF at the 1966 European Track and Field Championships where female athletes were required to walk naked in front of a panel of judges and occasionally undergo gynecological examinations; this also occurred at the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg and the 1967 European Cup Track and Field event in Kiev, USSR. At the 1966 Commonwealth Games in Jamaica, all female athletes were subject to a “manual examination, likened by one athlete to ‘a grope’” (Heggie 2010, 159). Maren Sidler, an American shot putter, characterized the degrading procedure in Winnipeg in 1967 as follows:

They lined us up outside a room where there were three doctors sitting in a row behind desks. You had to go in and pull up your shirt and push down your pants. Then they just looked while you waited for them to confer and decide if you were OK. While I was in line I remember one of the sprinters, a tiny, skinny girl, came out shaking her head back and forth saying: “Well, I failed, I didn’t have enough on top. They say I can’t run and I have to go home because I’m not ‘big’ enough.” (Heggie 2010, 159–60)

In addition, there was the case of 21-year-old Eva Klobukowska, who failed to pass a chromosomal genetic sex test (the Barr body test) in 1968 and was subsequently stripped of her two 1964 Olympic medals and forced out of competition even though she had successfully passed, just one year earlier, a “visual verification test” that included close-up visual examination of external genitalia. The Barr body or sex-chromatin test shifted the criteria used to determine sex from genitalia to chromosomes (Carlson 2005), although it is now widely acknowledged that “neither the

chromosomal make-up nor the physical appearance of a person is a 100 percent reliable indicator of biological sex” (Wackwitz 2003):

Cells from the inside of the female’s cheek were scraped and examined under a microscope, called the buccal smear. This test relied on the fact that most female cells contain two X chromosomes and that most male cells contain one X and one Y chromosome. The Barr body is the inactivated second X chromosome found in genetic female cells. Genetic males (46, XY) do not show this Barr body since they typically only have one X chromosome, which remains active. (Sullivan 2011, 404)

Barr body testing was adopted by the IOC in 1967 and used on an experimental basis at the 1968 Winter Olympics in Grenoble to disqualify Erika Schinegger who later had surgery to become Erik. It was formally adopted at the 1968 summer games in Mexico City. Even though the authorities came to learn that there was no scientifically accurate way to determine sex, the Barr body test was used at the Olympics through 1988. Fourteen athletes failed the test but were later reinstated, including Eva Kłobukowska. She was the first to fail the test with the charge that she had “one chromosome too many to be declared a woman for the purposes of athletic competition” (Sullivan 2011, 405)—probably XX/XXY mosaicism. Kłobukowska was reported to have gained no athletic advantage from her chromosomal makeup, i.e. she was not violating “fair play” competition rules; nonetheless, she had been barred from international competition.

María José Martínez-Patiño was a Spanish hurdler who failed the Barr body test in Kobe, Japan in 1985 with a chromosome pattern of XY. After refusing to retire, she was disqualified and successfully fought the ruling to be reinstated three years later. She was found to have androgen insensitivity syndrome where she is chromosomal 46, XY but her body does not respond to testosterone; therefore, she is a phenotypic female. Phenotypic sex identifies the characteristics we associate with women, both genital (vagina, vulva, and uterus) and non-genital (breasts, hips, voice, hair, absent hirsutism, etc.). She had neither prior knowledge of the condition nor reason to doubt her sex identity. “She was ridiculed, lost her athletic scholarship, and her records and titles were deleted from the books; she went into hiding and likened her ostracization to being raped while ‘the whole world watched’” (Sullivan 2011, 405). Upon her reinstatement, pressure to drop sex testing began to mount.

In 1990 the IAAF brought together physicians from genetics, pediatrics, endocrinology, and psychiatry who recommended against gender verification testing; it was not, however, stopped. They claimed that tight clothing on athletes, plus observing athletes providing urine samples for drug testing, would preclude problems: once again relying primarily upon the visual appearance of an athlete’s external body. The American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists weighed in, voicing their discontent. The IOC responded by switching to a DNA-based, polymerase chain reaction test that focused on the genetic makeup of the Y chromosome, considered a superior, more accurate method of determination. The test, costly and cumbersome, was initiated at the 1992 Winter Olympics. As Claire

Sullivan argues, “Up to this point female athletes had to prove they were ‘female’ according to the IOC definition of what constitutes female at that time (XX). Now, female competitors were asked to prove that they were ‘not male’ (XY)” (Sullivan 2011, 406). At the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta, eight of the 3,387 female athletes tested positive but were subsequently allowed to compete. Only when the IOC’s Athletic Commission called for the discontinuation of the IOC system of gender verification in 1999 did the IOC’s executive board reduce the practice to a trial basis at the summer Olympics in Sydney in 2000. Further challenged by transsexual, transitioned, and transgender athletes, particularly male-to-female (MTF), they approved the “Stockholm Consensus.” Beginning in 2004 at the Olympic Games in Athens, both the IAAF and IOC now resort to “suspicion-based” medical examinations for questionable cases, brought by officials or competitors. Hence, this was the basis for the sanctions enacted against Caster Semenya in 2009–10.

Since 2011, the IOC and IAAF have worked together to set up eligibility rules for female athletes with hyperandrogenism (HA), defined as excessive—“not within the normal range”—production of androgenic hormones, primarily testosterone, in females (Sullivan 2011, 414). They have subsequently diverged in their conclusions, instituting different policies and eligibility requirements that remain controversial and are opposed by groups such as the Coalition of Athletes for Inclusion in Sport. An athlete’s refusal to cooperate in a “therapeutic proposal” to lower one’s testosterone level through drugs or surgery (removing a woman’s gonads and partially removing her clitoris) can result in a permanent ban from elite women’s sports. Worth noting is the fact that the surgeries the doctors perform are “drastic, unnecessary and irreversible medical interventions” which surely raise questions of medical ethics (Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2014). As many theorists have argued, it is not the case that a male body, replete with more testosterone, would necessarily gain the edge in competition; no studies have shown that all males will outperform all females. Testosterone levels have not shown a clear correlation with athletic performance (Sullivan 2011). A recent study of 693 elite athletes in *Clinical Endocrinology* actually revealed a significant overlap in testosterone levels among men and women: 16.5 percent of the elite male athletes had testosterone in the so-called female range; nearly 14 percent of the women were above the “female” range, thereby leading to the conclusion that “The IOC definition of a woman as one who has a ‘normal’ testosterone level is untenable” (Healy et al. 2014, 294). These authors suggested that lean body mass, not hormone levels, may better explain the performance gap.

11.2 Perpetuating Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty

Even prior to the intense pressure at the elite level of sport to pass a sex test that proves one is not a man, strong competing female bodies are forced to fit into the confining

box of femininity while growing up and acclimating themselves to an acceptable meaning of “woman.” Girls who like sports are called “tomboys” or “jock girls” and are proscribed from appearing too masculine or developing highly toned muscles with weight training (Cahn 2010). If they exhibit too much strength, speed, or skill, they are warned away from another widely held transgression of proper femininity: the fear of being called “dykes” (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 2005). Self-consciousness about one’s own performing body can result in a kind of “double consciousness, what scholars have called a conflict between the ‘athletic body’ and the ‘social body’” that negatively affects behavior in girls at an age when identity and self-confidence are incredibly fragile, at puberty and through the teen years (Cahn 2011, 44–5). It can also create situations of overcompensation; for example, schools and parents dictating dress codes for girls’ teams that require feminine attire and beribboned ponytails to alleviate girls’ (and parents’) anxieties about their bodies and about participating in sport. As early as the 1970s, Jan Felshin cast the internalization of this pressure to conform to feminine ideals as “apologetic,” a rationalization to overcompensate for potentially masculinizing demands of their sport by which exercise naturally produces stronger, more muscular, faster bodies (Felshin 1974; Staurowsky 2011; Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose 2009).³ And now, there is ample scholarship on the challenges of a woman “living the paradox” (Krane et al. 2007) of being a “sport feminist” as she tries to negotiate love of competition with being a “real woman” (Griffin 2011; Staurowsky 2011). Interviews with female athletes reveal that heterosexuals suppress their physical workouts to avoid becoming too muscular while lesbians and bisexuals “appear to have discarded those prohibitions, embracing the beauty of being physically powerful” (Staurowsky 2011, 57; Watts 2011).

The case of *Harris vs. Portland* in 2006 highlights the additional racial component of these feminine ideals. Jennifer Harris was an African American basketball player who charged her Pennsylvania State University head coach, Maureen Portland, with gender orientation discrimination, sexism, and racism, and was ultimately forced off the Pennsylvania State University team with the loss of her athletic scholarship. According to critics Newhall and Buzuvis, the media inappropriately focused on the coach’s prohibition of drinking, smoking, and homosexual behavior and Portland’s explicit accusations that Harris was a lesbian, but more important was the coach’s taboo of cornrows and her charge that Harris’ dress was not “feminine” enough:

By interrogating the standards of appearance and behavior that Portland required of her players and revealing them as norms for white, heterosexual femininity, we can better understand the racist overlay in Portland’s harassment, demotion, and termination of Jennifer Harris. (Newhall and Buzuvis 2008, 349)

³ Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Vose (2009) interviewed athletes on three collegiate teams to reveal that the most common apologetic behavior involved efforts to look feminine, apologize for aggression, and mark themselves as heterosexual. Softball players engaged in more apologetic behavior than soccer and basketball players.

It is crucial to examine traditional racialized norms of beauty because they are so pervasive and establish a framework—a well-recognized category of “female beauty”—that affects individual and institutional judgments especially about women of color who compete in outdoor track and field, indoor track, and basketball. In fact, within the NCAA, these are the three sports with the highest black female participation.⁴ Recall the suspicion regarding Caster Semenya's performance in the women's 800 meter race; although her times improved enough to startle some observers, her 2009 time of 1:55.45 in Berlin was still eighteen seconds off the men's record (Fausto-Sterling 2012) and—when compared to the all-time bests of her female competitors of previous years—ranked twenty-sixth. Compare her time of 1:55.45 to that Jarmila Kratochvílová of Czechoslovakia, who established the record for the women's 800 meter race in 1983 with a time of 1:53.28 (a time that still stands in 2015). It is worth noting that in 1983 suspicions were raised due to Kratochvílová's appearance: her “broad-shouldered, flat-chested physique” (Staurowsky 2011; McClelland 2011). Given that the improvement in Semenya's time was not really as suspicious as it was characterized to be, skepticism about her sex focused on her appearance. Would doubters have been so quick to judge her as male if they had seen, in advance of her race in August, the makeover image from the September 10, 2009 issue of South African magazine *YOU* (Figure 11.2)—where she sported no corn rows and was dressed in a more feminine way?

It is also important to note that young women in general are fed a visual diet of images that intentionally exemplify white heterosexual femininity, particularly in the sports media like ESPN. Jennifer L. Knight and Traci A. Giuliano call it “the image problem,” whereby broadcasters overcompensate for female athletes stigmatized as mannish or lesbian and deliberately heterosexualize them by emphasizing their relationships with men: love interests, partners, marriages, and pregnancies (Knight and Giuliano 2003). Sports media, along with popular culture in general, fail to present girls and young women with an adequate array of examples of female athleticism. Ongoing studies by the University of Southern California Center for Feminist Research confirm “the image problem,” citing a marked decrease over the twenty-year period from 1989 to 2009 to an all-time low in the visibility of female athletes on major television outlets (Messner and Cooky 2010). Adding to this mix of the contextual backdrop of the concept of the paradoxical “sport feminist” who longs to be strong, competitive, yet feminine, are the more deeply ingrained, unconscious gender preconceptions that most of us have learned. Let us first look for evidence from the worlds of philosophy and art for the perceptual and cognitive categories by which we see and judge bodies, particularly those that are unfamiliar and appear to be ambiguous and defy easy classification into male or female.

⁴ NCAA data from 2011–12 shows black women in Divisions I, II, and III number 8.6 percent overall, with 47.9 percent in basketball and 24 percent in outdoor track, compared to, for example, 4.1 percent in softball (Lapchick 2012).



Figure 11.2 Caster Semenya appearing on the cover of YOU Magazine, September 10, 2009. Courtesy of YOU Magazine South Africa.

The history of a restrictive definition of “woman” is long and clear. Ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle restricted the classification of human beings into male and female, corresponding with categories of rational versus non-rational, active versus passive, fit for education, public office, the gymnasium and public competition versus restricted to the private sphere of home and children. Aristotle was particularly

egregious; he defined women as “deformed males,” ranking them—with children and slaves—far below free men in ancient Greece (Tuana 1993). Casting females as “ones who lack” what males have (phallus, penis, intelligence, power) set a foundation for the privileging of male over female in the history of Western civilization, whether in the general social sphere or—as we saw with the history of the Olympics that started with the Greeks in the eighth century BCE—with sport. Women fared no better throughout the history of philosophy, with the most infamous misogynists like Rousseau and Schopenhauer denouncing the base and bodily nature of woman, her emotional instability, and her lack of capacity for virtue—unless virtue was defined as physical external beauty that brought pleasure to men. Even dubious pronouncements from Descartes, Burke, and Kant rarely veered far from the historical conceptualization of woman-as-inferior and, in effect, woman-as-body-to-be-looked-at. The repetitive belittling of women by philosophers and theologians affected women’s legal status, economic options, and political identity—recall women were denied the vote in the United States until 1920—and most of all, women’s sense of self-worth and confidence. The consensus from the history of philosophy was clear; “woman” was a category that captured the pervasive sexism of the ages. This sexism extended to the way male writers characterized women in narratives as well as the way male artists depicted their bodies. Consider the history of the female body in Western art, from ancient Greek times through the early twenty-first century, which established the norms of Western, white, heterosexual female beauty that continue to influence the narrow ways that women are portrayed today in popular culture, films, video games, advertisements, and sport. The history of art is replete with examples that habituate viewers repeatedly to see women through a lens we call *perceptual sexism*—a cognitive framework based on an underlying set of beliefs, values, and expectations that devalue women—that influences one’s succeeding acts of perception to see mistakenly a woman on display in a specific and limiting way.

Unlike artifacts from the early Paleolithic period, such as the small stone Venus of Willendorf sculptures that depicted female bodies as fat and fertile, complete with exaggerated breasts, hips, and stomach, the ancient Greeks limited most of their visual options to the three mythological roles of Hera, the mother goddess of love and marriage, Athena, the goddess of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sexuality.⁵ The occasional Amazon figure depicting a female warrior with one breast riding adeptly astride a horse and shooting arrows, i.e. a strong female athlete, was a clear exception to the rule. Not only was the depiction of a muscled, fighting female an aberration from the norm, but what became the prototype for Western cast-typing in art was the occasional figure, particularly on vase paintings, of prostitutes or the more highly regarded (and rumored to be educated) *heterae* or courtesans, who functioned

⁵ The feminist critique of the history of art is well-rehearsed by many authors since the 1970s; one instructive overview that includes images and stereotypes of women by both male and female artists is Chicago and Lucie-Smith 1998.



Figure 11.3 Phintias Painter. Attic Hydria, *The music lesson*. Detail. 510–500 BCE. Staatliche Antikensammlung, Munich, Germany.

Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.

in a homosexual society where women were treated instrumentally by men for pleasure, potential offspring, or maternal care-taking (Figure 11.3).

For thousands of years, this was the model for women repeated throughout the history of Western European art—the horizontal nude, providing visual pleasure while also provoking the fantasy of sexual satisfaction, primarily for the male gazer. These images portray women as anonymous, passive, and available; or in the case of rape scenes, deserving of forced sex, given the “natural” order of male over female. Female virtues consisted in love (loyalty), fertility, and childbirth, whereas male virtues of strength and stamina distinguished the warrior and statesman; to pose as a type of warrior or amazon was to transgress the norm, to be mannish. Instead a woman was encouraged to aspire to her proper gender role by emulating the goddess Aphrodite/Venus, pictured in the Roman copy of *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles, second century CE (Figure 11.4), with canonized ideal proportions, a slight tilt to the hips, and sensualized features. There is no question that at first (and recurring) glance(s) the goddess of love is female; she is portrayed to sexually titillate a male viewer; her virtue lies in her looks and submission to male authority.

Early Christianity replaced mythological roles with the one, irreversible, and incorrigible change: the introduction of Eve as a symbol of sinful pride, the rejection of God for self-knowledge, the epitome of evil passed on to her human successors. Saint Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas had nothing good to say about women; women were a necessary evil for procreation, always functioning as the incarnation of bodily lust, the epitome of physical uncontrollability (due to their menses), and a trap for men. The



Figure 11.4 *Venere Felice with Eros*. Marble statue. The body is a Roman copy of the *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles. The head is the portrait of a Roman lady from the second century CE. Location: Cortile del Belvedere, Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museums, Vatican State.

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recurring image of Eve is either Eve-the-seducer or, pictured after The Fall, Eve-the-embodiment-of-shame. Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise* (c.1425) shows Eve justly deserving the punishment of expulsion, shame, and pain in childbirth (Figure 11.5). Seeking knowledge, as a man would be praised to do under different circumstances, eternally dooms her to a status secondary to man's control.

A return to the motif of woman as nude sexualized body on display came to occupy center stage as Greek and Roman mythology reinfused the Italian Renaissance with images of women as the paragon of sexual desire while simultaneously symbolizing the irresistible carnality denounced by the Christian fathers. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Figure 11.6) became an instructive paradigm by which we are taught that a woman's agency is reduced to looking beautiful and seducing a man; she performs no worthwhile action in the world nor is she allowed to improve herself by means of education, to become stronger, to better herself for her own sake. (The women who chose to do so, such as Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, joined convents to live apart from men.)

In the rare instance when women were depicted in competition, as in the Northern Renaissance painting *The Judgment of Paris* by Lucas Cranach the Elder (Figure 11.7), they competed against each other for a man. The hierarchy of gender roles entitled men to judge freely their external features but not any skills or qualities they may have possessed. In determining the most beautiful among the three, Paris seems overdressed in cold and impenetrable armor compared to the women on display: nude but for their diaphanous drapery, jewels, and hat. It is impossible to imagine the situation reversed, for example, *The Judgment of Penelope*—a patient wife, besieged by multitudes of suitors while awaiting the return of her missing husband, Odysseus—fully dressed, casually choosing from three nude men who languidly pose with penises protruding: all to impress her and win the vote!

The hold of the aesthetic norm of female beauty rarely waned; European painters were obsessed with the motif of the reclining, receptive nude female body. With Manet's famous 1863 depiction of "Olympia" (a mythological excuse to present yet another prostitute), *white* female beauty was strategically emphasized, reinforced by reducing the black servant to a foil for the white body—on white sheets—for the viewer to enjoy (Figure 11.8). The black woman who serves the sex worker who serves the paying customer, is doubly marginalized.

Woman's essential nature is to seduce and destroy; thus, it is better to control her in advance, in a harem or brothel under the watchful eye of male supervision, to be punished—even by death—as in *The Death of Sardanapalus* by Delacroix (Figure 11.9). A nude woman begs for mercy, to be spared by Assyrian King Sardanapalus who—once he learned that he was faced with military defeat—ordered his possessions destroyed and concubines murdered before immolating himself. These women are chattel: conveniently disposable.

The tradition continued into the twentieth century with Pablo Picasso exhibiting the bodies of prostitutes with faces hidden behind African masks (*Les Femmes d'Alger*) and Willem de Kooning's infamous series of women depicted as grimacing



Figure 11.5 Masaccio (Maso di San Giovanni) (1401–28). *Expulsion from Paradise*. Brancacci Chapel, S. Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy. Scala/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 11.6 Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (c.1488–1576). *Venus of Urbino*. 1538. Oil on canvas. 46 7/8 × 65 in. (119 × 165 cm). Photo: Nicola Lorusso. Location: Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

she-monsters with *vagina dentata*. Many imaginative variations on the theme of female beauty, sex, and power are traceable through the centuries, with nuanced complications of the meaning of “woman” often expanded to include the monstrous—the devouring female (the beauty of Medusa, vampires, the fatal woman) and the castrating female (Judith beheading Holofernes, Salome with the head of John the Baptist, Samson and Delilah). Art historian Edward Lucie-Smith offers a rationale why male artists responsible for the long history of perceptual sexism—easily discerned in paintings and sculpture—routinely sought to showcase a woman’s submission to man, to depict her subjection, to paint her violated innocence; in effect, she was not a full person with rights and agency, but rather a sexual object to be used and discarded.

The prostitute was enslaved, not by chains and through the exercise of physical force, but by the need to find the money to live. From the sexual point of view—the woman’s total submission to the man—the consequences were the same. (Lucie-Smith 1991, 28)

Repeated in nineteenth-century scenes of cabarets and brothels were sexualized images of women of low class and ill repute (Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas) and the depiction of “exotic” women of color as slaves became the “fashionable orientalism” of a woman in chains such as Hiram Power’s *The Greek Slave* (1847) and Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *A Roman Slave Market* (c.1884). The nude slave, on display to be bought and

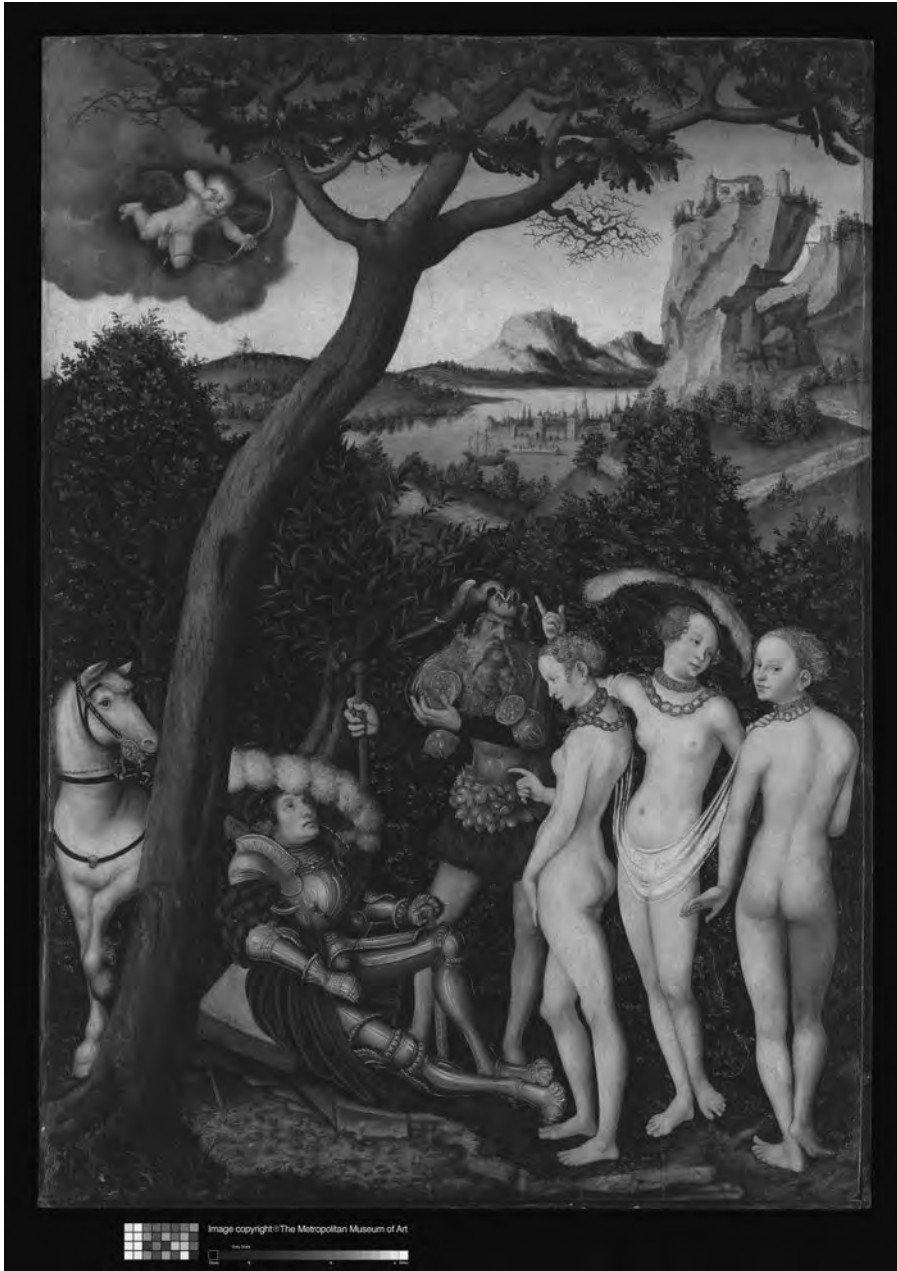


Figure 11.7 Cranach, Lucas the Elder (1472–1553). *The Judgment of Paris*. Possibly c.1528. Oil on wood, 40 1/8 × 28 in. (101.9 × 71.1 cm). Rogers Fund, 1928 (28.221).

Photo: Schecter Lee. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.



Figure 11.8 Edouard Manet (1832–83). *Olympia*. 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 × 190.0 cm. Inv.: RF 644. Photo: Patrice Schmidt. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

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sold, is eroticized to increase her value on the Roman sales block as well as in the eyes of the nineteenth-century art buyer of Gérôme's canvas (Figure 11.10).

Recent popular culture offers its own lessons for young people today. Even those unfamiliar with the history of art can recognize the motif of the reclining female body in popular publications like *Playboy*, the annual *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, commercial advertising, and film. Jean Kilbourne (2010) has archived a veritable inventory of such images over the past forty years in her filmed lectures, most recently titled *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women*, where she critiques the \$250 billion a year advertising industry in the United States as selling a pattern of “damaging gender stereotypes—images and messages that too often reinforce unrealistic, and unhealthy, perceptions of beauty, perfection, and sexuality”:

The average American is exposed to over 3,000 ads every single day and will spend two years of his or her life watching television commercials... Ads sell more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of love, sexuality, success, and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be. (Kilbourne 2010)

Consider her findings: ads that promote eating disorders and a concept of ideal female beauty that is flawless, unattainable, and visually manipulated through airbrushing, cosmetics, and computer retouching (adding to the booming cosmetic industry involving surgery, Botox, liposuction, and breast implants); ads that eroticize violence,



Figure 11.9 Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). *Death of Sardanapalus* (Ashurbanipal 668–627 BCE). Detail. 1827. Oil on canvas, 392 × 496 cm. RF2346. Photo: Angèle Dequier. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

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Figure 11.10 Gérôme, Jean-Léon. *A Roman Slave Market*, c.1884. oil On canvas. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD. H: 25 1/4 × W: 22 3/8 in. (64.1 × 56.9 cm); Framed H: 37 3/8 × W: 35 × D: 7 3/8 in. (94.93 × 88.9 × 18.73 cm).

portraying women in bondage, battered, dismembered, or murdered; ads that show girls and grown women using body language that is passive and vulnerable, unlike the more active and assertive poses of boys and men; ads that show increasingly younger girls as innocent but sexy, virginal but experienced;⁶ advertising that is relentlessly

⁶ According to Kilbourne (2010), a 2007 American Psychological Association report concluded that girls exposed to sexualized images from a young age are more prone to depression, eating disorders, and low self-esteem. Young women's sexual activity results in the United States having the highest rate of teen pregnancy and the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases in the developed world.

heterosexist with the portrayal of lesbians often coming from the world of pornography. Numerous ads show only parts of women (no heads), or focus on only one part (breasts), or turn women's bodies into "things" that serve to dehumanize and objectify, amidst a climate in which there is widespread violence against women; black women, for example, are often featured in jungle settings wearing leopard skins as if they were exotic animals. Moreover, women of color are sold a prescription for the white ideal of beauty that includes light skin, straight hair, and Caucasian features. Kilbourne concludes that in spite of advances made by the women's movement in the past forty years, advertising's image of "woman" has only gotten worse. A more recent film entitled *Miss Representation* reinforces and updates the message that mainstream media offers a limited portrayal of women and girls in America (Newsom 2013).

Note how this negative evidence from popular culture correlates with "the image problem" cited in 2003 by Knight and Giuliano (2003) whereby broadcasters overcompensated for mannish or lesbian female athletes by deliberately heterosexualizing them; it also meshes with the results of Messner and Cooky's study (2010) on how popular sports media fail to present girls and young women with an adequate array of positive examples of female athleticism and autonomy. By and large we, as a collective society of consumers, have learned from philosophers, artists, advertisers, film, the Internet, and the sports industry (both amateur and professional) that gender identity is best configured by men who control the crafting and parameters of the category of "woman" by proscribing ideal female appearance, sexual behavior, limited agency, and range of acceptable gender roles. In effect, our culture has consistently perpetuated aesthetic norms of beauty and femininity for young women that have misled girls into fearing a deviation from the norm; they have learned to refrain from being too strong, too fast, too muscular, too competitive, and if they do compete in sports, to signal their adherence to the norm by wearing pink ribbons or appearing nude in *Playboy* or "The Body Issue" of *ESPN The Magazine* (2014).⁷ Perceptual sexism is a learned attitude of beliefs, expectations, and values that fosters suspicion of strong female athletes who compete or excel.

11.3 Understanding Perceptual Sexism and Reversing the Status Quo

Either explicitly or subtly, we learn on many levels—in the history of art, in advertising, in women's participation in sport—that new and unique athletic beauty at the elite

⁷ Athletes pose in new and unique ways in these magazines, as well as in more traditional poses. As early as 2004, *Playboy* (September) boasted "12 pages of spectacular nudes" that included Olympians Fanni Juhasz (pole vault, Hungary), Amy Acuff (two-time Olympian, high jump, United States), Susan Tiedtke-Green (three-time Olympian, long jump, Germany), Katie Vermeulen (1,500 meters, Canada), Haley Clark (backstroke, United States), and Mary Sauer (pole vault, United States). Begun in 2009, *ESPN The Magazine* annually publishes "The Body Issue" with sports stars that have included international soccer star and Olympic gold medalist Hope Solo, Olympic gymnast Alicia Sacramone, snowboarder Gretchen Bleiler, and tennis star Venus Williams. <<http://espn.com/espn/bodyissue>> (accessed November 2015).

level can bring a risk of internalized pressure to conform to the misleading norms of Western, white female beauty. Given the history of sex-testing and accusations of gender misidentity, female athletes who compete in IOC or IAAF events are inescapably judged to be eligible for competition based, at least in part, on their external appearance: whether or not it sufficiently matches our bias-laden category of “woman.” Perceptual sexism influences our judgment; we learn to respond viscerally to the sight of an ultra-fit, flat-chested, short-haired, muscular body as male, or at least, as not fully female.

Susan Cahn (2011) cites research on the process of gender attribution, such as the early work of Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna who asked test-takers to label a number of figures they saw as either male or female based on looking at only bodily cues. The researchers concluded: “Gender attribution is, for the most part, genital attribution: and genital attribution is essentially penis attribution” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 153). However, given that we rarely see the genitals of someone we view, we attribute gender nonetheless—rightly or wrongly—based on “cultural genitals,” defined as the genital that “is assumed to exist and which, it is believed, should be there” (1978, 154). As Cahn summarizes, “We look at secondary sex characteristics like facial expression, movement, dress, accessories, and paralinguistic behaviors: posture, spitting, or snorting, etc.,” and we prioritize male cues so that a *single* male cue might signal maleness whereas a female cue, by itself, does not signal femaleness (2011, 43). This suggests that the “only sign of femaleness is an *absence of* male cues” resulting in the conclusion that “to be male is to ‘have’ something and to be female is to ‘not have’ it” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 150, 153). (Was Aristotle on to something?) Most importantly, the researchers found, once a gender assignment had been made, it stuck; it affected every perception and interpretation of visual data to follow. In other words, “once a gender attribution is made, people filter almost any information, no matter how dissonant, through the male or female lens they first select” (Cahn 2011, 44). This is important data that provides yet another layer to the contextual apparatus by which we see, judge, and draw conclusions about gender identifications on a routine basis. It should not be surprising that in looking at an elite athlete’s body, particularly if it appears ambiguous and confuses our beliefs, expectations, and perceptual categories, we succumb to the temptation to misidentify gender. Recall that beginning in 2004 at the Olympic Games in Athens, both the IAAF and IOC came to rely upon “suspicion-based” medical examinations for questionable cases brought forward by officials or competitors. Suspicion springs from the perceptual sexism that narrowly defines “real” women as Western, white, and heterosexual; nothing could be further from this norm than African, black, with the appearance of what is judged by means of perceptual sexism as mannish or masculine physicality. But gender misidentity continues to cause problems in 2015, perhaps even more so than in Semenya’s case in 2009, leading us to ask, what can be done to remedy the indignation caused to elite athletes who, through no fault of their own, are suspected of being intersexed or look too masculine? Should we allow the governing bodies to proceed as they will? We believe a

better choice is to craft a strategy for how such narrow categories can be recognized and corrected.

Although useful in its day, the ethnomethodological approach proposed by Kessler and McKenna has been surpassed by recent scholarship on the psychology of perception that provides a wealth of empirical data on how perception plays a previously unrecognized and special, interactive role with cognition in our mental life. Let us consider several insights that might help us understand perception in order to eliminate future injustice done to female athletes who come under suspicion for gender misidentity: (1) the role of bias in categorical perception, (2) the perception and interpretation of ambiguous figures, and (3) the education of perception.

(1) According to Robert L. Goldstone and Andrew T. Hendrickson (2009, 69), categorical perception (CP) is “the phenomenon by which the categories possessed by an observer influence the observer’s perception,” and “CP is an important phenomenon in cognitive science because it involves the interplay between humans’ higher-level conceptual systems and their lower-level perceptual systems.” Far from being sharply delineated as scientists once believed, perception and cognition operate together, indicating “permeability and bidirectional influence between these systems.” Humans receive feedback that serves to alter future perception, making the process adaptive to one’s needs. Perpetuating misleading aesthetic norms of beauty erroneously creates biased categories of “female” and “male” by which we judge the physical appearance of an elite athlete based on similarity to what we know and come to believe about that category. Suspicion arises when dissimilarity presents us with a dissonance between what we see and what we “know” about the category of “woman.” We are inclined to question a problematic image of a strong, black, fast female athlete, and our suspicion, in turn, affects subsequent sightings, replicating the doubt and thereby increasing the number of requests for gender testing brought before the IOC and IAAF. It is important to note that the ongoing process of perception and cognition serve to reinforce one’s interests and needs:

Even if humans are not consciously and strategically changing the “wiring” of perceptual modules... these modules nonetheless adapt systematically at the time scales of tens to thousands of repetitions to allow an organism to better make discriminations and categorizations that are vital to its interests. (Goldstone, de Leeuw, and Landy 2015, 25)

In some cases, we respond automatically with biases even though the responses are inappropriate (Lippa and Goldstone 2001). The cycle of repetition can be interrupted, however, and we can recognize and acknowledge our misguided interests and correct our biases. Changing one’s cognitive framework to affect categorical perception depends upon one’s “need” to judge more fairly; a judge’s “needs” can be altered to include more fairness to athletes and fewer discriminatory cases of mistaken identity.

(2) Second, psychological data isolates the difficulty of disambiguating faces and figures that fail to conform to and confirm one’s existing categories and demonstrates

how prior perceptions affect the task. In relation to the image of the familiar but ambiguous duck–rabbit drawing (Jastrow 1899), studies show that what one expects to see can often affect what one does see. Also if a person has seen an image of a duck or discussed a duck prior to seeing the ambiguous figure, she will see a duck (Medin, Goldstone, and Gentner 1993). According to the perceptual construction hypothesis, a viewer’s tendency to see an image one way or another depends upon the perceptual organization, i.e. the context. This context may be within the stimulus pattern itself and/or it may be provided by the subject’s beliefs, expectations, and values. We are not passive receptors of external stimuli; rather, “Visual patterns are constructions created by the perceiver, and the perception of patterns is heavily affected by experience and expectations” (Brand 1998, 164).

Consider the consequences of this framework for the average person’s viewing of an elite female athlete for the first time, or even upon repeated viewings. First of all, it must be noted that we are not always in control of how we see ambiguous figures: as duck or rabbit. At times we can intentionally switch between the two but often, no matter how hard we try, we cannot. Remember also that our expectations are rarely clear or explicit, even to ourselves, so that an observer might be incapable of enumerating the contents of her “mental set” that influences the interpretation of the visual stimuli she experiences. Therefore the strong possibility exists that repeated exposure to images—indeed icons—of white heterosexual femininity from popular culture, sports coverage, or from the history of art not only has a bearing on our cognitive processing but also influences our deeply ingrained preconceptions and expectations of the perception of a young African runner. Unless sports viewers, including members of the IOC and IAAF, deliberately work against the ingrained predisposition to see anyone who fails to fit stereotypes drawn from ideals of Western, white, heterosexual femininity as not a “real woman,” then the interpretation of what they perceive may be easily explained as the failure to disambiguate an ambiguous figure in any other way than what they expect to see; a female athlete can only be a white heterosexual woman. Anything else is a man or, at the very least, a male contender.

Interestingly, one cannot see an ambiguous figure both ways at once, as contemporary philosophers of perception acknowledge (Brand 1998; Jagnow 2011; Nanay 2010, 2011).⁸ What is important is that the interpretation of the visual stimuli of one’s perception necessarily depends upon the cognitive makeup of the observer, the context in which the perception takes place, and one’s immediate (or long-standing) experiences prior to the perception. This leads us to the suggestion that one can actively eliminate biases and re-educate one’s perceptual modules and cognitive framework to reject the stereotype of “woman” for a more open sense of the term.

⁸ Brand (1998) contends that one can toggle back and forth between the aesthetic positions of “disinterested attention” and “interested attention” in experiencing works of art, just as one can switch back and forth when processing more simplistic duck–rabbit ambiguous figures.

(3) Given the interaction between perception and cognition, we are clearly capable of educating our perceptual modules with clearer categories that help to avoid cases of misidentity by disambiguating what we see (Goldstone, Landy, and Son 2010; Goldstone, de Leeuw, and Landy 2015), but we must also realize that gender stereotypes must be acknowledged and overcome, particularly when it comes to athletes. Studies indicate that when we perceive the athletic accomplishments of men versus women, we judge by means of a “shifting standards model” that diminishes the women and elevates the men, indicating a pro-male bias; in sports where both men and women compete, men are considered better athletes. This is akin to a double standard model, but more complex, since it suggests that “group members are judged on stereotypic dimensions with reference to the expectations associated with their particular category membership” (Biernat and Vescio 2002, 66), yielding the additional result that black women athletes are judged more athletic than white. Moreover, “the influence of stereotypes and other heuristics is strongest when stimuli are ambiguous in nature” (2002, 74). As researchers point out, “standard shifts occur readily, perhaps without awareness” (2002, 74; see also Biernat 1995), thus making it more important to raise awareness of internal biases and stereotypes that affect the process of disambiguating difficult and unfamiliar faces and figures.

Given the intricate cognitive makeup, social meanings, and cultural patterns that ground our perceptual experiences, it seems clear that it will take a significant amount of change in our individual—and collective cognitive—consciousness to be more open to blurred distinctions and boundaries between the two traditionally accepted genders. How might we improve the situation for beginning girls and ultimately elite female athletes who—under these trying circumstances—still choose to compete?

In order to prevent recurring injustices, we propose some practical, realistic guidelines. First, we suggest a concept of “athletic identity” in light of some of the wording of the International Bill of Gender Rights (IBGR), crafted in the mid-1990s:

All human beings have the right to control their bodies, which includes the right to change their bodies cosmetically, chemically, or surgically, so as to express a self-defined gender identity. (International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy 1995)

What if the IAAF and IOC were not allowed to set themselves up as judges of gender identity, nor allowed to enforce sex testing, but rather exercised tolerance in permitting all self-defined gendered athletes to compete, whether they claimed themselves to be male, female, or intersexed? In other words, what if we imagined one's gender identity to be tied only tangentially, not essentially, to one's mix of body (DNA, hormones, genitals, and secondary sex characteristics), environment, and lived experiences—on a straight line continuum between the two extremes of male and female? Better yet, as Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests, instead of two intersecting continua—one of sex and one of gender—imagine them “best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space,” as is recommended by the new sex nomenclature from the North American

Task Force on Intersexuality (NATFI) which is endorsed by specialists in surgery, endocrinology, psychology, ethics, psychiatry, genetics, and public health, as well as intersex patient-advocate groups:

One proposal under consideration replaces the current system with emotionally neutral terminology that emphasizes developmental processes rather than preconceived gender categories. For example, Type I intersexes develop out of anomalous virilizing influences; Type II result from some interruption of virilization; and in Type III intersexes the gonads themselves may not have developed in the expected fashion. (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 22–3)

Fausto-Sterling has not only abandoned her earlier (controversial) suggestion of five sexes (Fausto-Sterling 1993), but calls for the abandonment of any reference to physical genitals in favor of the term “cultural genitals” plus the elimination of the category of “gender” from official documents such as driver’s licenses and passports in favor of more visible attributes such as height, build, eye color, and less visible fingerprints and genetic profiles (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler and McKenna 1978). This leads her to advocate the International Bill of Gender Rights, and in her book, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*, to consider a genderless future (she is doubtful this will happen any time soon) beyond chromosomal, fetal hormonal, and genital sex to a focus on brain sex, based on one’s motor activities which help to shape the brain through lived experiences (Fausto-Sterling 2012, 120–1). Her ultimate guideline is that “bodies are not bounded”—as advocated in the IBGR—and further study is needed for us to understand “how sensory, emotional, and motor experience becomes embodied” (2012, 123).

Other advocates for discarding the restriction of sex to two categories—the binary model—indicate a “more nuanced view” of sex in terms of a “spectrum” whereby sex is redefined as ranging from cases of typical male (XY chromosomes) to typical female (XX) with a host of options in between indicating intersex conditions, differences, or disorders of sex development (DSDs) (Ainsworth 2015). They recommend that if one wants to know what a person’s gender identity is, one should just ask. Unfortunately, legal categories in most countries are still restrictive but the push is on; at least one American university has recognized a third gender: neutral (Scelfo 2015).

The notion of “athletic identity”—distinct from sex identity or gender identity—might include an athlete’s statistics from competition gleaned from their actual records, but also allow for a loose form of multi-gender (mixed) competition, even if not on the running track or playing field, simply by comparing numbers. The absence of a scientific or even quantitative system of athletic gender distinction and achievement appears, at our current level of technology and aesthetic mix, to make a fair system seem otherwise impossible. To perpetuate the notion of an athletic binary allocation of gender clearly is neither scientifically warranted nor socially just, given the diverse gender characteristics of the elite athlete. More seriously, for the IOC and the IAAF to perpetuate a system by which any ill-founded suspicions of any person—especially an athlete’s own competitors—can become the basis for intrusive and

demeaning sex testing, is immoral and violates principles of both fair competition and medical ethics.

To process the visualization of Semenya's body as male is to preclude the important relational qualities of her 18-year-old body in the year 2009 by prejudging and quickly lapsing into misidentity. Against the backdrop of white oppressive practices of abuse toward female African bodies, along with the psychological anguish and torment such behavior caused, it is necessary to view Semenya's female body as an object of self-sculpted beauty and atypical physical strength and speed, and to accord it the respect and dignity it deserves as a unique athletic identity. It should not be ogled, prodded, and poked by gynecologists, endocrinologists, and psychologists who are empowered by the IAAF and the IOC. To view her body as an aesthetic—athletic—object requires wide berth by resisting the temptation to force her into a bounded category of male or female, masculine or feminine. Since, however, elite sports competition seems mired in a binary gendered system regardless of justice considerations, if an athlete identifies as a woman, she should be allowed to compete as a woman. Moreover, let us learn to appreciate her body as the new beauty of elite athletic competition without implying she is a man. This will take time on the part of spectators and judges, but it is an endeavor that allows the beauty of the *sport feminist* to resist the perpetuation of aesthetic norms of traditional white beauty while empowering herself through self-identification and agency.

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