



Critical Book Review

Caster Semenya. *The Race to Be Myself*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2023. 320 pp. \$30.00 (ISBN: 9781324035770).

Hannah Borenstein, PhD
hborenst@fiu.edu
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies
Florida International University

Mokgadi Caster Semenya, better known as Caster Semenya, is one of the most illustrious track and field athletes that competed in the 2000s. She won two Olympic medals and many other major global championships. Semenya became globally known, however, for both what she did and did not accomplish on the track. She was known for being dominant in the women's 800-meter event for many years, which some attributed to unfair biological advantages. Semenya has differences in sex development (DSD) - which is an umbrella term that encapsulates a range of genetic conditions in which genitalia are considered abnormal in relation to chromosomes or gonads. As a result, she and other women with DSD were seen to have an unfair advantage, and ultimately banned from the sport by World Athletics, formerly the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF).

Countless academic articles, op-eds, books, and tweets have been written about Semenya. She's been an object of hate speech and touted as a hero. She writes, in the opening pages of her 2023 memoir, *The Race to Be Myself*, "...people believed all

sorts of insanity about me” (2). Despite being involved in frequent lawsuits and media appearances, she never seized control of the narrative quite like she recently has done in her memoir. In *The Race to Be Myself*, Semenya rectifies a gap in the literature about herself, and the broader racist, homophobic, and transphobic policies and viewpoints of the governing bodies in global sport. In addition to painting a holistic portrait of herself that begins long before she became famous, she also writes about the public and inhumane treatment she received from World Athletics at the pinnacle of her career. Semenya’s account is much more than a sports memoir. In simple and overt language, she offers a structural and intersectional analysis of how the power and economy of international sport operates for and against Black, African, and queer women, thereby queering the sports memoir genre.

Many scholars and activists have suggested that sport is a particularly rich institution to be queered – analyzed, deconstructed, reframed, and thought of in opposition to sex/sexuality binaries. Precisely because sport is premised on a precariously constructed sex and gender binary, it offers potential for new politics. Semenya casts doubt on the institutions and rules that sought to exclude her, and sheds light on the material histories of gender binarism and “verification” in sport, thereby expanding her narrative to include the broader ramifications of racialized and gender exclusion. By exploring and writing about her own queerness throughout, Semenya queers the narrative about her own life, sport, and fictitious gender binaries.

When Institutions Deem you Deviant

Throughout Semenya’s career, many debated the extent to which newly introduced policies aimed at excluding her and other women (most of whom were from Africa) were racist. Those responsible for instituting policies that ultimately banned her from the sport, including officials at the IAAF, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and several sports scientists, argued that the policies were merely based on reducing unfair advantages, and had nothing to do with race. However, looking at the political history of global sport sheds light on the institutionally racist policies.

In her book, Semenya narrates her backstory, which begins in 1991. Her birth year was the same year that IAAF allowed South African athletes to rejoin international competitions after the fall of apartheid. While apartheid was institutionalized in South Africa beginning in 1948, the country competed at the Olympic Games until 1960.

Sports were segregated and thus activists both in and out of South Africa successfully lobbied the IOC to ban South Africa from the Games until they changed their policies. The IOC was fully prepared to let South Africa re-enter the Olympic Games in 1968; however, the political climate was different, largely because many African countries overthrew their colonial regimes in the 1960s. Understanding the plight of Black South Africans, 32 African countries formed the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa (SCSA) in 1966 and threatened to withdraw from the 1968 Games unless the IOC expelled South Africa from the Olympics. The IOC complied and South Africa was banned until 1988, when negotiations to end apartheid began. Though Semenya was born decades later, she connects to this history through her memoir. She notes that early in her life, family members cautioned her to be wary of white men and colonial constructs. Her father, she writes, often told her, “Maybe so, my child. But you must never forget. A White man will always be a White man” (94).

Semenya’s first major victory was in 2008, when she won the gold medal at the Commonwealth Youth Games. From there, she signed a contract with Nike and began earning money as a runner to help her family financially. In the memoir, she writes about going to the World Championships in Berlin, where she was instructed to meet with a doctor for what she was told was a routine doping test. This was deceptive; the doctor was instructed to conduct a “gender test” on Semenya, searching for high levels of testosterone and chromosomal differences. She writes that the doctor said, “As a fellow African, I have to tell you ... I think the chances of you running in the world championships are very low” (127). Although Semenya was able to board the plane to Berlin, various officials told her she might not be able to compete. The president of Athletics South Africa, Attlee Maponyane, for example, came to her room and said, “People are talking. The IAAF is concerned you may have some kind of issue in your body. They want you to withdraw” (134). Semenya did not listen. After winning the semi-final round, a white journalist asked if she was “born a boy?” (139). Though she dismissed the question publicly, in the book, she reflected on the ignorance embedded in the question: “And then what? I had cut my dick off just so I could run with women? We didn’t have running water or electricity in my village. Where would people like us get the money to change genders?” (139).

In *The Race to Be Myself*, Semenya recounts the traumatic day she was required to undergo yet another “gender test.” In this case, the IAAF sent a doctor to

conduct an internal sonogram. Subsequently, an IAAF official was said to have accidentally leaked to the media that Semenya underwent a gender verification test. Despite undergoing these invasive tests, at one of the most stressful competitions of her career, Semenya still won the gold medal. The media circus that ensued was not about her training, tactics, or race execution. All the media focused on was her biology.

Queering Colonial Binaries

Semenya was not the first athlete to undergo a “gender test.” The IAAF began conducting sex verification tests in 1950 as the separation of male and female categories became codified, and women were increasingly allowed to participate in international sport. These forms of verification have always been political and steeped in white supremacist ideas about race, femininity, sex, and gender. In the 1950s, this form of “testing” required women to parade nude before a panel of doctors. By 1968, the IAAF began conducting chromosomal tests (Thomas 2008). However, around the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, U.S. Olympic Committee President, Avery Brundage, argued that sporting administrators should establish a system to examine “sex ambiguities” in women competitors after two athletes allegedly underwent gender reassignment surgery before competition (TIME 1936). Brundage was known for openly espousing racist and anti-Semitic views, and helped usher along histories of scientific racism about medicine, sex, and gender in sport. His documented fears of intersex athletes fall in line with the history of the term itself, and policies in colonial medicine, that surround meanings of intersex.

In *Envisioning African Intersex*, Amanda Lock Swarr (2023) explains that colonial histories and scientific racism form the basis of intersex medicine to justify white supremacy. Although the term intersex was widely adopted by medical professionals in the 1950s, the etymology of the term dates back to the early 1800s and was deeply intertwined with racialized conceptions of gender differences. Colonial explorers and scientists made claims about African bodies that replicated these racist fictions through what Lock Swarr calls “citational chains,” or reifying ideas about both abnormalities in gender and the gender binary itself. Much like African feminists, Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónke Oyěwùmí, who have noted that indigenous African views on gender were often more advanced and nuanced in precolonial times, Semenya also explains that while gender is often binary, it is not always. Semenya writes about a

“lahara matana” – “a person born with two genders, meaning they are born with both a penis and a vagina. In my culture, these people are not assigned a gender. They are allowed to live their lives and decide which gender is dominant in their soul. They go about their business, and everyone is supposed to mind theirs” (164).

In addition to introducing readers to *lahara matana*, Semenya also makes clear that she knows these longer colonial histories. She writes, “I’m aware that Black women’s bodies in general have been objectified and treated as spectacles,” before detailing the story of Saartjie Baartman – a fellow South African brought to Europe, where she was put on display in “circus-like exhibits for a paying audience in the 1800s” (5-6). Semenya then adds, “Her body’s proportions were considered abnormal by Western standards. After her death in 1815 at the age of twenty-five, her genitals were cut from her body, preserved, and displayed along with her skeleton in a French museum until 1974” (6). Semenya connects the mistreatment enacted by governing bodies in international track and field with these colonial histories about African women. As such, she makes the issues of exclusion about more than just herself.

In addition to these broader structural critiques, Semenya cements these ideas with other examples of African women who were excluded by similar policies, but whose stories have received less media coverage. She writes, for instance, about Ugandan middle-distance runner, Annet Negesa, who qualified for the Olympics in 2012 at the age of 20. Negesa claims an IAAF doctor told her to undergo a simple procedure before later waking up to cuts in her abdomen, having undergone a gonadectomy. She never competed again. Semenya speculates that there are dozens of women like her, who are “scared, alone, with no one to fight for them. Many don’t even speak English, and there are no proper translators – they are already intimidated by a system they cannot understand” (186).

Some pressured Semenya, early in her career, to undergo a similar procedure as Negesa. Semenya rejected this path and instead took hormone-lowering medication in 2010, which caused changes in her metabolism, feelings of depression, weight gain, and poor performance. In 2015, Indian runner, Dutee Chand, won a legal battle against the IAAF after she was banned on the basis of having high testosterone. As a result of winning this case, Semenya and others were permitted to compete with unaltered natural levels of testosterone. In 2016, Semenya won the Olympic title in Rio De Janeiro, and two African women followed behind her – Burundi’s Francine

Niyonsaba and Kenya's Margaret Wambui. Journalists, agents, and other athletes continued to obsess over Semenya's body - not her abilities, skills, or racing tactics - just the alleged "unfair advantages." In 2018, the IAAF announced new rules for athletes who were thought to have DSD, including Niyonsaba and Wambui. These athletes would be unable to compete in the 400m, 800m, and 1500m unless they took medication to lower their testosterone levels below a 5 nmol/L threshold for three months. Semenya did not qualify in other events; Niyonsaba transitioned to the 5000m, where she excelled before World Athletics (formerly the IAAF) extended the ban to all events. Semenya and others have noted the lack of scientific and medical foundations for these policies. Her refusal to accept them and remind readers of the other African women targeted for exclusion gestures towards a more productive politic in sport.

Queering the Running Landscape

Similar to how Semenya unapologetically exists in a natural body, which unsettles those invested in maintaining white supremacy in sport and the male/female binary, she unsettles other institutionally enforced binaries throughout the book by asserting her queerness. Like many young stars, Semenya came into her sexuality publicly, primarily through her relationship with Violet Raseboya. In her memoir, Semenya writes about an instance early in her career, where *You*, the biggest English-language magazine in South Africa, asked to photograph her. Raseboya, whom Semenya eventually married, and Semenya, were featured together in the themed edition - "Glamour Girl." She and Violet tried on dozens of outfits, got a spa treatment, and had fun during the photo shoot. "We enjoyed ourselves," Semenya writes. "That's what I remember clearly from this experience, all the fun I had that day with my best friend who I was also in love with" (169). Afterwards, people judged her harshly, writing that she was taken advantage of and made to "make the White people happy." People saw her own agency in the situation as absent - rather than asking her how and why she chose to participate. Then, Semenya adds, "This magazine shoot is still discussed in women's and gender studies classes. People have written entire dissertations about how my naturally masculine gender expression was made to conform to feminine gender stereotypes. I'm fully aware of all that. And I'm not saying it isn't worth studying. I just want to tell the world what actually happened from my

perspective as an eighteen-year-old” (170). Much like the arbitrarily constructed sex segregation in sport, the narrative of exploitation and discovery in sexuality, are queered here, too. The section reminds readers that Semenya, like every other young person in the world, has been exploring her sexuality and sense of self, all the while her body has been scrutinized and demonized by the public.

Conclusion

Throughout *The Race to Be Myself*, Semenya writes about how her career became shrouded in conversations around her gender and sexuality, and positioned her as a threat to women’s sport rather than attributing her success to hard work and aspirations. In this way, she adds an important dimension to critical work about colonial histories of scientific racism, global homophobia, transphobia, and white supremacy for a wide range of audiences. The dynamic critiques Semenya puts forth, in *The Race to Be Myself*, offer more than an example of someone seizing their own narrative. Semenya’s critiques of white supremacy in and out of sport offers new ways to question the history and justification for sex segregated institutions, and the very binary of sex itself.

References

- Semenya, Caster. 2023. *The Race to Be Myself: A Memoir*. First edition. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Swarr, Amanda Lock. 2023. *Envisioning African Intersex: Challenging Colonial and Racist Legacies in South African Medicine*. Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Katie. 2008. "A Lab is Set to Test the Gender of Some Female Athletes." *The New York Times*. July 30, 2008.
https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/sports/olympics/30gender.html?_r=2&ref=olympics&oref=slogin&oref=slogin.
- TIME*. 1936. "Medicine: Change of Sex." August 24, 1936.
<https://time.com/archive/6755783/medicine-change-of-sex/>.