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## **Identity Politics and Global Citizenship in Elite Athletics: Comparing Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius**

**Amanda Danielle Watson Ph.D. Candidate**

*Institute of Women's Studies  
University of Ottawa*

**Heather Hillsburg**

*Postdoctoral Fellow  
Lakehead University*

**Lori Chambers**

*Professor  
Lakehead University*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper emerges from the body of theory that considers the mega-event of the Olympic Games as a site of citizenship education, where citizenship is negotiated, learned, regulated, and performed for television viewers. As a site of global citizenship recognition, the mega-event of the Olympic Games, including the embodied participation of Olympic athletes, offers a rich venue through which we can understand the ways in which host nations, spectators, sponsors, and fans exalt and admonish particular citizenship performances. In this comparative feminist media analysis of the cases of athletes Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius, we map the ways in which categories of identity, including race, gender, and class, are mobilized in discussion of these athletes as more-or-less deserving Olympic athlete-citizens. Using discursive media analysis as a methodology, we focus on the framing of each athlete by the anonymous commentary of ordinary fans on a popular international track-and-field website called LetsRun. We suggest that citizenship theorists take seriously how hierarchies of power are enforced along intersectional lines of race, class, and gender, and ultimately contend that the disparate treatment of these athletes, as evidenced in fan commentary, extends and interrogates theories of exalted citizenship on the world stage.

### **Introduction**

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At the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, Team South Africa filed behind its respective flag bearers, track-and-field stars Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius. While both athletes were mired in controversy at various points in their careers, each athlete's selection as South Africa's official flag bearer reaffirmed to the team, and indicated to the international

spectator community, that each of the athletes had proven themselves “ideal” to represent the nation of South Africa on the world stage (Associated Press 2012a, 2012b).

The act of naming an athlete to be a country’s official flag bearer is one of many instances at mega-sporting events like the Olympics and World Championships, where the notion of global citizenship is at play. Global citizenship is a widely debated concept, but it can be loosely understood as membership in the international community, a sense of belongingness in public life and acceptance of basic societal values (Cogan & Morris, 2000; Law, 2010). In the context of globalization and the Olympic Games, where competition between nations is extended into the arena of sport, Olympians are heralded as the ultimate global citizens, representing both the competitive individual and the competitive state. Law (2010) has argued that international sporting events shape multiple domains of global citizenship. For Law, major international athletic events function as socialization projects for host countries, and these mega-events merit careful consideration by citizenship education scholars. Bridging fields of globalization, citizenship, and sporting events, Law demonstrates that international sporting events are not only a strategic means of state building by host countries (Black & van der Westhuizen, 2004), they serve as spectator citizenship education.

Law is one of many scholars who devotes considerable attention to exploring the Olympic Games as a mega-event upon which highly politicized notions of race, class, sex, gender, and geographical location intersect (Toohey, 2007). Building on this scholarship, as well as the work of Roche (2002a, 2002b), and Hayes and Karamichas (2012), among others, this paper emerges from the body of theory that considers the mega-event of the Olympic games as a site of citizenship education, where citizenship is negotiated (Kidane, 1995, 1998), learned (Law, 2010), regulated (Broudehoux, 2012), and performed for television viewers (Larsen & Park, 1993). As a site of global citizenship recognition, the mega-event of the Olympic Games, including the embodied participation of Olympic athletes, offers a rich venue through which we can understand the ways in which host nations, spectators, sponsors, and fans exalt and admonish particular citizenship performances.

In this comparative feminist media analysis of the cases of Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius, we map the ways in which categories of identity, including race, gender, and class, are mobilized in discussion of these athletes as more-or-less deserving Olympic athlete-citizens. Caster Semenya is a Black, Sepedi woman from a poor background who underwent suspicion-based sex testing in 2009 without her consent or knowledge. Oscar Pistorius is a White, double-amputee, cisgendered man, who runs using Cheetah prosthetics and was once banned from competition because sports physiologists found that he had an unfair advantage. Both of these athletes have received extensive media coverage over the past several years. We tell the stories of Semenya and Pistorius using online news sites and traditional print sport magazines and newspapers, as well as academic commentary. Using discursive media analysis as a methodology, we focus on the framing of each athlete by the anonymous commentary of ordinary fans on a popular international track-and-field website called LetsRun. Finally, we ground our analysis of these discursive trends and constructions in relation to theories of global citizenship education and the Olympic Games as a mega-event to suggest that citizenship theorists take seriously how hierarchies of power are enforced along intersectional lines of race, class, and gender. Following political theorist Sunera Thobani’s (2007) work on the intersection of exalted citizenship with gender, race, and legacies of

colonial power, we ultimately contend that the disparate treatment of these athletes, as evidenced in fan commentary, extends and interrogates theories of exalted citizenship on the world stage.

### *Olympic Citizenship*

Conceiving of the Olympic Games as a political site – where international and domestic concerns with sovereignty and citizenship are negotiated – is widely supported in scholarly literature (Hill, 1996; Cottrell & Nelson, 2011). As recently as August 2013, with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decision to support Russia’s draconian anti-gay laws in the lead-up to the Winter Games in Sochi, the geopolitics of the Games can be seen as extending to the identities of athletes as they traverse state borders to participate. Here, we see that while elite athleticism awards a sort of *carte blanche* to athletes when it comes to border permeability, restrictive identity politics at the Games are nuanced; expressions of gender and sexuality, for example, may prohibit full participation on the world stage, and these politics are, of course, premised on a foundation of ableism in elite athletics. While the political nature of Olympic sport is often elided by its claims to universality (Hill, 1996), driven by the “spirit of friendship, respect, and fair play” (Massie, 2012), and the construction of world-class athletics as an extension of the “virtues of amateur sport” (Dawson, 2007), the limits of inclusion and respect in sport become clear in fan commentary with regard to athletic performance (Bentley & Camber, 2012). Not only do fans celebrate their heroes in the unregulated spaces of the Internet, they also reproduce tropes about acceptable, “normal” bodies and the intersection of race, gender, and ability with the right to compete. These comments occur in the context of contested claims to legitimacy and belongingness, or citizenship, by individuals domestically and internationally, and complicate the perception of modes of identity in the public sphere. Instead of disregarding so-called “trolls” of Internet sites, as feminist blogger Lindy West (2013) asserts, we might take seriously public commentary on the message boards of Internet sites for its conformity with – or reinstallation or resistance of – established power hierarchies.

### **Method**

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In order to map fan responses to Semenya and Pistorius, we explore the popular track-and-field message board from the website LetsRun.com. The “world famous” LetsRun message board (Ginger, 2013), dubbed “the home of running and track and field,” serves as a forum for circulating up-to-date track-and-field coverage and commentary, with posts generating hundreds of responses. LetsRun is the ideal site to glean popular opinion about track and field, as enthusiasts from across Western<sup>1</sup> countries post their comments anonymously and for free, and the board is reputed to break track-related stories before they appear in mainstream news. The following analysis considers comments regarding Semenya and Pistorius posted between July 2007, when Pistorius made his initial inquiry with regard to potential participation in the Olympics, and May 24, 2013, when news broke on the site that Semenya was not

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<sup>1</sup> Participants are encouraged to identify their home locations, and often identify themselves as either American or British. Participation by South Africans on the site appears to be limited with only five people explicitly stating that they are from that nation.

being funded by Athletics South Africa and would not compete in the 2013 season,<sup>2</sup> and also when Pistorius's brother, Carl, was acquitted on charges of culpable murder.<sup>3</sup> During these six years, there were 1,059 posts about Semenya, 1,148 posts about Pistorius and 15 posts in which both athletes were discussed.<sup>4</sup> Postings were coded and categorized based on key words and themes, with clear trends emerging in the disparate treatment of the two athletes.<sup>5</sup> While message board participants most often criticized Semenya, only explicitly defending or supporting her in 76 of 1,059 postings (7.2%), they usually defended Pistorius, or discussed him respectfully or neutrally, in 593 of 640 postings (92.63%). Some of the comments comparing the two athletes were uniformly negative towards both, suggesting that South Africa contributes nothing to world athletics “besides wasting headlines on controversy” (excusy?, 2011), that the “dirty, cheating South Africans are trying to pass off men as women and androids as men” (up to here now jackson, 2009), and recommending that the IAAF “kick the whole damn country out. PERMANENTLY” (Coach D, 2009). While the tone of postings about Pistorius changed with the announcement that he had been charged with murder in 2013, most comments remained more restrained compared with those regarding Semenya. While the extreme nature of these comments may not be fully representative of attitudes in the track community, as “trolls” certainly inhabit LetsRun, the anonymous space of the Internet allows “instant access to expansive audiences” and provides opportunity for anonymous users to amplify hate speech (Turton-Turner, 2013). Such attitudes must be contested, not ignored, as reproducing and escalating racist and misogynist ideologies has real implications.

Comments on LetsRun affirm that sporting culture is a key site where hierarchies of power are produced, replicated, and circulated. As it purports to uphold sportsmanship and a level playing field, sporting culture offers a particularly rich and relevant venue to examine the ways in which hierarchies of race, gender, and class, among other power structures, exist in the midst of dominant neoliberal discourses of fairness and equal opportunity. It is in this context that Western fans were suspicious of Semenya – not only because she failed to embody and perform normative Western femininity, but also because of her marginalized race, class, and citizenship background. While South African journalists, commentators, and fans judged these factors differently (see Mofokeng, 2009), Western media more often positioned Semenya as “clearly not a woman” (Marathon Mind, 2009), a “freakshow” (505050, 2010), and a “cheat” (reality bites, 2009). Fans deemed Pistorius, in contrast, a popular, inspirational “very hard working individual ... doing an amazing thing” (jojojojo7787, 2011), even when they opposed his right to compete with able-bodied athletes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, rumours circulate that Semenya is partnered with a woman. Interestingly, these comments are more positive than earlier ones, with 8 of the 76 (10.5%) comments defending Semenya appearing in the 40 postings on these two threads as of May 24, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Pistorius was charged with culpable murder (a charge similar to manslaughter) for the death of a female cyclist whom he hit while driving. He was speeding and driving recklessly, but he was acquitted.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that 640 of the postings about Pistorius appeared after the death of Reeva Steenkamp. Postings in which both athletes were discussed are not included in the totals for either individual athlete. In cases where a participant posted a link without commentary and there were not responses, the (non-)thread was not considered as part of this study.

<sup>5</sup> Comments were considered neutral, positive or negative, depending upon tone, words used and opinion expressed. Neutral comments usually discussed technical aspects of each case without asserting judgment about participation.

<sup>6</sup> Attitudes towards Pistorius changed, with the majority of commentators expressing sorrow, anger and disgust over Pistorius's role in the death of Reeva Steenkamp; 435 of 508 postings (85.6%) are explicit that “no matter the real story ... accident, 'roid rage, lover's quarrel turned violent, he should go to prison” (marty mcfester, 2013). However, multiple postings urge observers to wait until the facts are in to pass judgment, even after Pistorius admitted responsibility for the shooting (Henderson, 2013).

## Athlete Profile: Caster Semenya

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Caster Semenya, a Sepedi woman, was raised in the rural province of Limpopo, South Africa, a poor, predominantly Black region of a country still struggling with the ongoing legacies of apartheid. Coaches and teachers noted Semenya's exceptional athleticism as a child, but she only received advanced training when she moved to study and train at the University of Pretoria. After she arrived at the national training centre, her performance improved rapidly. Semenya competed at the 2008 World Junior (under-19) Championships and took first in the 800m race at the 2008 Youth (under-17) Commonwealth Games, where she set a personal best of 2:04.23 (IAAF, 2009b). In the summer of 2009, Semenya won gold in the African Junior Athletics Championships 800m with a time of 1:56.72 (IAAF, 2009a). With this historic run, she qualified for the World Championships in Berlin and entered the meet as a favourite to win the women's 800m title. Hers was considered a particularly remarkable performance, especially since she was still young enough to compete as a junior (under-19). Semenya went on to win gold in Berlin, setting a new personal best of 1:55.45 (IAAF, 2009b).

Gains in performance like Semenya's are rare in athletics; Semenya went from being a competitive runner in the age group ranks to beating professional 800m runners with impressive resumes that include Olympic medals and lucrative sponsorship deals. In effect, Semenya made more progress in one season than many runners make over the course of their professional careers. Suspecting foul play, the International Amateur Athletics Federations (IAAF), the regulating body for the World Track and Field Championships, cited an obligation to investigate "the sort of dramatic breakthroughs that usually arouse suspicion of drug use" (Smith, 2009a). In 2009, the IAAF investigated whether Semenya was using performance-enhancing drugs, and when routine drug tests cleared her of taking banned substances, the IAAF conducted a sex test without her knowledge or consent.<sup>7</sup> The suspicion-based tests were carried out after members of the international track community had been commenting publicly on her gender. As Elisa Cusma, an Italian runner who placed sixth against Semenya in Berlin, asserted after the race:

"These kinds of people should not run with us. For me, she is not a woman. She is a man" (Adams, 2009).

Officials expected that the tests to which they subjected Semenya would remain confidential. Regardless, an anonymous source leaked the story to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, reporting that Semenya was intersexed, and speculating that she had internal male testes that produce larger than "normal" amounts of testosterone (CNN, 2009). The story went viral, with polarized responses from within and outside the international track community. On the LetsRun board, one participant noted that whomever was responsible for the leak should "be punished, it's confidential, it's a medical report" and lamented that the story had in fact been "broken here on this website." Opponents quickly rebuked this perspective, asserting that Semenya is a "cheater" who should "just have her nuts removed" and whose

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<sup>7</sup> After revisions to its sex-testing policy in 2006, the IAAF retains the right to carry out a sex test if an athlete is suspected of fraud. The IAAF's sex-testing policy holds that the results of any case should not be solely determined with laboratory tests such as chromosomal tests. Rather, in the case of any suspicion or challenge to the sex of an athlete, the athlete can be asked to undergo a medical evaluation by professionals including a gynecologist, an endocrinologist, a psychologist, an internal medicine specialist, and an expert on gender issues (IAAF.org, 2003).

apologists are complicit in the “crime” of allowing her to compete in the women’s field (dkfjskfj, 2009). Following the leak, Semenya did not compete for the remainder of the 2009 season.

### *Response in South Africa*

Response to the sex-test controversy in South Africa was mediated by the nation’s complicated history of apartheid.<sup>8</sup> In the fallout of the leaked tests, many fans, activists, and politicians in South Africa, most notably Nelson Mandela<sup>9</sup> and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela,<sup>10</sup> offered Semenya their support. As one commentator in the highly circulated *Sowetan* noted, “we all know that her crime is that an African girl outran everybody” (Mofokeng, 2009).<sup>11</sup> The commentary of some Black South Africans echoed distress over the international questioning of Semenya’s identity, expressing empathy that someone who thought of herself as a woman was “suddenly being told that she is something else” (Levy, 2009, p. 3). These accusations are particularly traumatic within South Africa’s political climate and history. Apartheid was built on precisely the kinds of pseudo-biological classifications that underpin the rejection of Semenya as “not woman enough” to compete. As one South African participant on the LetsRun forum asserted, “Here in SA there is a very, very strong cultural and political feeling that is saying to the IAAF that you have no right to tell us what gender our athlete is” (Ross Tucker, 2009).

Sports are of heightened importance in modern South Africa as they are endowed with the potential to mend the historical harms of apartheid and to assist in forging a multiracial national identity (Catsam, 2010; O’Leary & Khoo, 2013). Sports have also historically been a site of forging and protesting citizenship relationships between and within nations, as sporting events often give rise to, or even become, activist sites for the pursuit of human rights and social justice (Macchiavello, 2009; Nixon, 1992). In the context of South Africa’s post-apartheid relationship with the international community through elite athletics, Mandela argues, “sport has a role to play in uniting countries” (as cited in Hargreaves, 2000, p. 30). This history heightens the importance of internationally successful athletes, and the derogation meted out to Semenya is degrading on a national scale. For many Black South Africans, Semenya is an inspirational figure: Her triumph “means that her fate is linked to South Africa’s potential glory in ways that are far more charged ... after all, if Semenya managed to outperform her Western competitors, who have the benefit of the best athletic training in the world, imagine what she and countless other Black South Africans could achieve if the playing field [were] level” (Ray, 2009, p. 19). In a nation in which “43.5% of [citizens] rarely or never speak to someone of another race” (Smith, 2012) and millions of Blacks remain in debilitating poverty, Semenya is the exception in a post-apartheid state.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The classification of human beings has a particularly haunted history in South Africa as starting in the 1950s, under the Population Registration Act, White census takers traveled the country and had the power “to determine a person’s race, and race determined where and with whom you could live, whether you could get a decent education, whether you had political representation, whether you were even free to walk in certain areas at certain hours” (Levy, 2009, p. 3) and, pertinent in this case, whether you had access to sport. African women were not involved in sport during apartheid (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 197).

<sup>9</sup> See Spink (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Berger (2009).

<sup>11</sup> The *Sowetan* is a newspaper with a circulation of 125,490 and an estimated readership of 1,522,000, making it one of the most influential media sources in South Africa (Cooky et al., 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion of the recent report of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, see: Lefko-Everett, K. (2012). *Ticking time bomb or demographic dividend? Youth and reconciliation in South Africa: SA Reconciliation Barometer Survey: 2012 Report*. Retrieved from <http://reconciliationbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/2012-SA-Reconciliation-Barometer-FINAL.pdf>.

The South African media decried the violation of Semenya's privacy and asserted that the conduct of the IAAF "was racist and humiliating" ("The IAAF", 2009). Critical of the sex tests and Western claims to science, commenters "implied or stated that racism was instead to blame for the suspicions" (Cooky, Dycus, & Dworkin, 2013, p. 40). One self-identified South African on LetsRun defended Semenya, saying, "Caster is our champion and we are proud of HER" (Mantake, 2009). Non-South African commentators on LetsRun insisted that the treatment of Semenya was "not about racism, colonialism ... or any other kind of 'ism' that has been thrown out there" (Theodore Steamstitch, 2009) and instead accused Semenya, "her handlers, her federation and her country" (Logic and Clear Thinking, 2009) in tones echoing deeply racialized notions of the Black, welfare queen in the U.S. (Gilliam, 1999) of trying to foist "this fraud on the world" (Logic and Clear Thinking, 2009). Allowing Semenya to compete was seen as "completely unfair to all the real women who work their asses off" and evidence of the IOCs "bleeding-heart liberalism" getting in the way of fairness: "The IOC should have grown a pair (or borrowed Semenya's) and done what is right for the sport instead of feeling bad for him and playing by his rules, not nature's. Who cares if 'she' thinks he is a chick? He should be put in a psych ward not in an Olympic final" (how it is, 2011). Conflating gender identity with mental illness, the majority of commentary from Western media rejected Semenya's right to compete on the basis of her gender performance.

### *Elite Athletics and Femininity*

On Semenya's 2009 victory, one message board discussant explained that Semenya could have performed a more feminine version of victory and been folded into acceptable notions of citizenship, worthy of defence and exaltation:

I would guess he was instructed not to win by too much. Unfortunately, this smart strategy was ruined by the bicep flexing following the race. Hell, he could probably still be running if someone would've slapped a wig on him, told him to win by less than a second, and had him do interviews in falsetto. (edumacator, 2010)

This comment points to the tendency for elite women athletes to be chastised for "looking like men" or looking "mannish" (Zirin & Wolf, 2009, p. 1). Women athletes are known to be required to overperform both their femininity and their heterosexuality, as feminine-appearing athletes are known to garner more attention and endorsement (Carty, 2005; Glenny, 2006). As Amy-Chinn (2011) explains, "What constitutes the acceptable female sporting body varies from sport to sport, (but) there remains a core femininity that requires appropriate dress, adornment, deportment and interest in things 'girly' (notably clothes and shopping)" (p. 315). This social expectation for athletic female bodies to remain feminine is at odds with the physical expectations of sport, especially for large, muscular female athletes (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Messner, 2002; Ross & Shinew, 2008). To avoid arousing in spectators a sense of uneasiness or suspicion (Cooper, 2010), female athletes attempt to perform conventional femininity in the media, both on and off the sports field.

Semenya's strong and muscular appearance, in tandem with her dress and traditionally masculine demeanour, differs from many of her competitors, who wear their hair in complex styles, match their nails to their uniforms, race in bikini-style uniforms, and wear makeup while racing.<sup>13</sup> Semenya wears her hair in simple cornrows, refuses makeup, and prefers racing apparel that is similar to men's uniforms: longer shorts and a loose singlet that covers her stomach. The way Semenya occupies space on the track is unique as well; her fellow competitors often blow kisses to the crowd, cry tears of joy, or stand in shock and amazement after they win, whereas Semenya is known to emulate male rap artists by playfully brushing dust from her shoulders and briefly flexing her muscles for the television cameras. Western media commonly reported that Semenya's appearance justified testing in the interests of "fair play" for other athletes (Cooky et al., 2013). Putting the personal responsibility on Semenya to perform proper gender expectations, one editorial claimed that the controversy might have been avoided if Semenya "had made herself more girly," "taken beauty tips from her peers in Berlin," and glammed up "with lip gloss, enough gold to outshine the medals, and even false eyelashes" (Staff Reporter, 2009). These expectations are mirrored by the majority of non-South African message-board commentators, who made derogatory remarks about Semenya's appearance and behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Anonymous posters described her as a "hermafro" (ventolin^2, 2010), "castrated semen" (creep, 2010), and she was castigated for "flexing like a goddam ape" (i know im a dick, the original, 2011).

Semenya, 18 years old at the time, responded to the controversy by crafting an ultrafeminine image, appearing in a makeover spread in the glossy South African women's magazine, *You*. This is a common strategy among female athletes to "prove" their femininity, and it is unsurprising that Semenya used this tactic in the wake of the controversy. Over the course of the four page layout in *You*, the teenaged Semenya appeared modelling "designer dresses, jackets, skirts, tight leather trousers and high heels, [...] a radical departure for the woman who grew up in a rural village wearing trousers and tracksuits, playing football with boys and eschewing western fashions" (Smith, 2009b). While in the United States this makeover went viral on the Internet and led to crass comments about Semenya's appearance "before and after,"<sup>15</sup> in South Africa it affirmed her status as the "golden girl" of track and field (Mofokeng, 2009).

### *The Freakshow: Intersecting Blackness, White Femininity and Superhuman Ability*

The response to Semenya in the West demonstrates the imbrication of gender, race, and sexuality tropes with colonial legacies of the freakshow. As a Black female athlete, Semenya was characterized according to the colonial imagination of the Black female body as non-feminine and made for hard labour. Carty (2005) asserts that Black female athletes are routinely portrayed as "lacking those features attributed to the norm of white heterosexual femininity ... black athletes are rarely celebrated as both feminine and strong; their muscles supercede their beauty and sex appeal" (p. 147). One commentator on LetsRun linked the treatment of Semenya to racism, asserting, "shock waves are reverberating through the

<sup>13</sup> Examples of this trend are American sprinters Gail Deever's long nails, Sanya Richards-Ross's artfully styled flowing hairstyle, and Florence Griffith-Joiner's sexy racing attire.

<sup>14</sup> On LetsRun, a South African asserted that "just because she doesn't fit into your European stereotype of what a woman should look like, you accuse her of cheating" (SA, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> On LetsRun, the spread in *You* was dismissed as "a marketing ploy to turn the public in favour of her status as a female" and it was asserted that "she looks like a dude in women's clothing and makeup" (Gertrude, 2009).



black community. Female athletes everywhere are scrambling to lighten their skin and add in hair weaves so that Westerners don't accuse them of being men" (better lighten up sister, 2009). Despite her efforts to "prove" her femininity through her spread in *You*, and despite her refusal to discuss the results of her sex tests, in the West Semenya was and is widely reputed to be intersexed and has been subjected to crass and demeaning commentary, particularly on the Internet, that echoes historic constructions of intersexed peoples and African women as freaks and sideshow objects, as "borderline cases, marking the threshold ... of acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity" (Grosz 1996, p. 55). Many bloggers felt it relevant to deem her ugly if she is in fact female. On her refusal to wear bikini bottoms like other women runners, commenters suspected her of "tucking" (TheDon, 2009). Invoking the colonial practice of dehumanizing (McClintock, 1995), one blogger insited, "I'm sorry, but they'll never convince me that THAT is a woman until IT becomes pregnant" (Michael K., 2009). Bloggers further integrated race and nationalism into their gendered insults; as an anonymous poster asserted, "Caster looks a lot lighter in the makeover pictures too" (dlisted.com, 2009) and South African "officials were trying, quite literally, to pull a fast one" (Yanqui, 2009). On *Saturday Night Live*, Semenya was accused of withdrawing from a race due to "suffering from an enlarged penis" (Goode, 2009). Commenters instated the sexual binary when dismissing Semenya's gender, insisting that "aside from the lack of a bulge in the front of her tights, Semenya is a guy-facial structure, shoulders, hips, everything. It is ridiculous" (a miler, 2009). Imbricating her appearance and performance with those who already "fake" their legitimacy, one wrote, "There are three trannies on my block alone that are more convincing" (blinkerdam, 2012). Shortly after her makeover in *You*, Semenya disappeared from public view and voluntarily withdrew from competition pending a decision regarding her eligibility by the IAAF (Daum, 2009, p. 1).

While the IAAF prevaricated, participants on LetsRun continued to debate Semenya's fate. One participant on LetsRun asserted that "I hope HE goes down in shame, stripped of the money, medal, everything" (howzat, 2009), while another speculated that:

I'm guessing they're trying to make sure when they do make the right decision (barred from women's events) they're all sorted on the legal front. A situation like this, especially given the propensity of the South Africans to call racism at any opportunity, has the potential to be very costly to the IAAF. (trollism, 2009)

Dismissing the IAAF's eventual decision to allow Semenya to run in the women's division as "political correctness run amuck" caused by the "third world cabal" (Jayhawk, 2010), track fans in the West continued to deploy the same discourses surrounding race, geographic location, and gender. Invoking discourses of fairness and deserving citizenship, one commenter summarized that Semenya did not "deserve a medal for acting cocky about it when she clearly knows she has an unfair advantage" (no way, 2009).

After 11 months, the IAAF announced that Semenya had been cleared of any wrongdoing and would be allowed to keep her medal and resume international competition,<sup>16</sup> and the test results would remain confidential (Munro, 2010, p. 387). Commentators on LetsRun were cynical, asserting that

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<sup>16</sup> The decision to clear Semenya to compete might not have been made at this time had Semenya not expressed to the IAAF that, given how long they were taking with their deliberations, she no longer intended to voluntarily remove herself from competition.

Semenya had been cleared to compete only because “the IAAF is fearful of a lawsuit ... her participation must be stopped” (The Biggest Boss, 2010). As the notion of “clearing” Semenya suggests that she was somehow guilty of a crime, the IAAF’s decision did little to interrupt ongoing constructions of Semenya as a man and as a cheater. This sentiment was echoed on the LetsRun website: “She is choosing to re-enter the public eye ... and I am not going to sit here and cry about poor Semenya trying to screw over women’s athletics” and it is “disrespectful to real women to call him a woman” (edumacator, 2010).

When Semenya returned to competition in 2010, she struggled to find a sponsor, even though other athletes with similar track credentials earn substantial salaries through endorsements. Instead, she had to resort to a text-messaging campaign to raise money (Rohlin, 2010). While an in-depth analysis of the ways athletes become “marketable” to corporate sponsors is beyond the scope of this paper, Semenya’s struggle to fund her running through sponsorships (see Associated Press, 2010) is indicative of the ways that sponsors view bodies that adhere to hegemonic norms (including dominant notions of femininity) as better-suited to represent their brand on the world stage. Moreover, in a sporting world where financial reward confers social privilege, Semenya’s initial lack of sponsors does little to erase the suspicions that she is somehow culpable of cheating. Her track performance suffered and her 2011 track season was characterized by mediocre performances.<sup>17</sup> However, by the end of the season, Semenya rounded into form and won a medal at the World Championships (Pye, 2012). These results provided commentators with more fodder for debate, and Internet and print commentary surrounding Semenya took a significant discursive turn. Some media commentators and fans began to speculate that this pattern of mediocre results followed by outstanding performances at key races illustrated that she had been sand-bagging in order to “fly under the radar” in an effort to avoid more controversy (LetsRun.com, 2012). Many commentators on LetsRun bought into this line of reasoning and grounded their accusations that Semenya was cheating in the International Olympic Committee’s policy of disqualifying athletes for putting forth a substandard effort (Cole, 2012).<sup>18</sup> Semenya was repeatedly accused on LetsRun of “not trying” (adfasdf, 2011), of “jogging” and “sand-bagging all year for this” (In the paint, 2011), and “of going through the motions with no real effort” (VIPAM, 2011). In a series of posts, one participant stated that “some ignorant witch doctor lopped off her wang when she was born and then called Semenya a girl” (I hate witchdoctors, 2012).<sup>19</sup> These accusations reiterated the trope of women’s inferiority; as another poster stated, “If she doesn’t like it, then she/he can race in the men’s races and there won’t be any testing. If you want to race in the easier women’s division, then you have to be a woman” (buffet rule not, 2012).

## *Performance*

Semenya began the 2012 season with poor performances, and accusations of deception and sand-bagging multiplied. In the lead-up to the London Olympic Games, David Epstein (2012b) of *Sports*

<sup>17</sup> Semenya struggled to break two minutes (a mark that generally denotes a world-class female 800m runner), only running 1:59 in two of eight races. While Semenya was under the Olympic qualifying standard, she was also far from performances that would garner her a spot in the final, let alone earn a place on the podium.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, this happened in both track and field and in badminton during the London Games, as officials ruled that specific athletes failed to put forth a bona fide effort.

<sup>19</sup> This comment references the case of David Reimer and the gender experiment by Dr. John Money, which failed on medical, moral, and ethical grounds.

*Illustrated* noted that she was in a no-win situation, whatever her performance: “If Semenya wins the gold, she is likely to be accused of having an unfair advantage. If she runs poorly, she is likely to be accused of sand-bagging the race so as not to be accused of having an unfair advantage.” This perspective was echoed on LetsRun by one participant who asserted that “the fixation on Semenya is crazy. If she wins she is a man, if she doesn’t win she is sand-bagging because she is a man. The woman’s a chick. Get over it.” Others, however, responded vehemently that her participation was “really unfair to the actual women in the race” (unfair to the real gals, 2010) and “a travesty for track and field” (Harrier41, 2011). Epstein’s predictions were confirmed in coverage of Semenya’s performance in London. For example, *Runner’s World*’s Peter Gambaccini (2012) asserted that “the suspicion that Caster Semenya has been ‘sandbagging’ all season gained credibility Thursday when she came from behind and won her 800-meter semi-final in 1:57:67.” When Semenya also came from behind in the final, passing everyone but the race winner, sport commentators repeatedly questioned her effort, asserting that “she had more left in the tank,” and that “she looked strong, she didn’t look like she went up a gear, she wasn’t grimacing at all” (Thomas, 2012). Semenya defended her performance, asserting that “I tried my best, whatever people say. There is always talk, but these people don’t know anything about athletics” (Borland, 2012). She argued that she had worked hard and had been lucky to peak at the right time:

I had a tough season training wise ... Four weeks before the championships things started to go ok ... As I said, I’m very happy I just peaked at the right time ... I’m satisfied with a silver ... podium (at my) first Olympics. (*LetsRun.com*, 2012)

Semenya’s ongoing refusal to talk about her potential intersex condition ensures that she continues to be the subject of controversy. As Thomas (2012) points out, there seems to be little hope that Semenya will escape derogating commentary:

Semenya’s decision not to discuss her hormones and ovaries with strangers likely means that her athletic performance will always be questioned. Is she tanking? Is she being slowed down by hormone treatments? Is she tactically inept? Was her body just insufficiently fiery? I suspect that even if she started every press conference by stating her estrogen level that day, she would still be suspect.

The public fixation (both on the message boards and within the popular media) underscores a reality that is often undiscussed amid this type of controversy: Many intersexed conditions do not provide any athletic advantage; in particular, the body often cannot process excess testosterone (IAAF, 2003; Elsas et al., 2000; Simpson et al., 2000).<sup>20</sup> In the wake of this controversy, the IOC revisited their gender-verification policies, and shifted their focus toward female hyperandrogenism. The 2012 guidelines are intended to integrate intersex athletes into the two-sex model upon which Olympic sport relies, and outlines who may raise suspicions about a female runner. However, medical researchers and feminist thinkers are deeply critical of this new policy. Not only does it continue to frame androgens as markers of

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<sup>20</sup> In response to this fact, and perhaps because of the public spectacle created in Semenya’s case, in May 2011 the IAAF issued new “Regulations Governing Eligibility of Female Athletes with Hyperandrogenism to Compete in Women’s Competitions.” These regulations no longer use the term “gender-verification” and provide mechanisms by which women with high testosterone levels can comply with hormone adjustment protocols and then compete as women. Interestingly, however, no ceilings are set for natural male testosterone levels.

ability, it reifies the two-sex model, which is a social creation rather than a biological fact (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2012). Ultimately, the IOC's repeated insistence on policing female athletes through various iterations of gender verification (now testing for female hyperandrogenism) creates the circumstances for similar controversies to emerge leading to the 2016 Summer Games in Brazil.

With the exception of few sympathetic commenters, the majority of participants on LetsRun reflect prejudicial attitudes that mirror hierarchies of citizenship power; they criticize Semenya's gender appearance and performance and thus her right to compete. No doubt she has been personally affected and "nobody will erase the innuendos from public memory" (Wiesemann, 2011, p. 218). Semenya's behaviour in spite of this treatment has remained beyond reproach. As one astute observer noted on LetsRun with regard to a press conference after having been accused of sand-bagging in 2011, "she went and faced that same press ... sitting next to a woman who so publicly belittled her, and handled herself so admirably" (seoulpurpose, 2011). As the same poster continued on a separate thread:

... it is sad that so many people on this message board are referring to her as he, or worse, it ... to refer to Caster as anything but she is to personally insult her, and she does not deserve that. She was raised a female and has lived her whole life as a female. It is not her fault that she has been thrust into this controversy because she is a world class athlete.

In her own country, despite unwavering support from the media and politicians, she has unequivocally been cast in national rhetoric as a traditional "girl" (Hoad, 2010). While she is "discursively positioned as a representative of the South African nation state" (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 48), her own voice is silenced and we do not know much about Semenya as a Sepedi person who has overcome tremendous adversity. The failure of Athletics South Africa to fund Semenya for the 2013 track season occurs in the context of rumours that she is in a committed lesbian relationship, a public position that would be unpopular in a nation that remains steadfastly anti-lesbian despite progressive jurisprudence ("corrective rape" against lesbians is common and often goes unpunished) (McKaiser, 2011). Semenya's 2013 season did not meet the expectations of fans and commentators when she failed to qualify for the World Championships in Moscow, although she rounded into form after the qualification.

### **Athlete Profile: Oscar Pistorius**

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In contrast with the negative media attention meted on Semenya, Oscar Pistorius became a media darling outside of South Africa leading up to the London Games. The first double amputee to compete in the Olympics, he has been bestowed nicknames, "Blade Runner" (in reference to the J-shaped carbon-fibre prosthesis he wears in competition) and "the fastest man on no legs," which accentuate his otherness (Sokolove, 2012), but in ways that celebrate his accomplishments. Pistorius was born without fibula bones in his lower legs and at 11 months doctors amputated his legs below the knee. At 13 months, specialists fitted him with prostheses, and at 17 months of age he learned to walk (Sokolove, 2012). His parents, who could afford to provide him with prosthetics, encouraged Pistorius to participate in multiple sports, at which, like Semenya, he excelled from childhood. Although this is rarely discussed in stories that focus on Pistorius as an inspiration, he:

... comes from a nation with a breathtaking gulf between rich and poor, and if he had been born on the wrong side of that, into the abject poverty in which many of his countrymen still live, it is impossible to imagine him having the resources to have prevailed over his bad luck. (Sokolove, 2012)

Historically, South African sport “reflected the extraordinary power of white men” and private schools and clubs, to which Pistorius and his family belonged and in which he received athletic training, were (and are) “racially exclusive bastions of white privilege” (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 194). Because of her poverty, gender, and race, had Semenya been a disabled athlete, she would never have emerged on the world stage. Howe (2011) explains that this economic (and, in South Africa, racial) divide precludes many disabled athletes from participating in elite sport, as ergonomically designed prosthesis like the ones Pistorius uses can cost as much as \$20,000 (p. 874). Despite the reality that many disabled athletes are precluded from participating in elite sport due to lack of financial resources, debates surrounding unfair advantages in competitive sport obscure the point of racial and class privilege and access to equipment as they tend to focus on physical advantage alone. This issue, while ignored in most media and all LetsRun discussions of Pistorius, is particularly important in post-apartheid South Africa, a country in which poverty is ineluctably linked to ongoing racial discrimination.

Pistorius’s story resonates with neoliberal discourses of sameness and effort. While Semenya was consistently silenced in public discourse (or when she does speak, she remains unheard), Pistorius speaks for himself in popular media, in particular through his personal website, [oscarpistorius.com](http://oscarpistorius.com). When interviewers asked about growing up with a disability, he explained that his parents normalized his differences. He often told the story of a day in his childhood when he and his brother, Carl, were leaving the house to play with friends. His mother told Carl, “You put your shoes on,” then turned to Oscar and said, “You put your legs on. And that’s the last I want to hear of it” (Sokolove, 2012). Taught that he is “just like everyone else,” Pistorius embraced this lesson and embarked on quest to participate in both Olympic and Paralympic sport. Although he turned his attention to the track only after sustaining injuries that prevented him from participating in team sports, he excelled quickly after his transition to track, running sixth at the Paralympics in 2004 in a time of 47.34 for the 400m. In 2007, he ran a breakthrough time of 46:56 for 400m at the South African Championships. Pistorius continued to improve, running a personal best of 45.07 seconds in 2012, which bettered the Olympic standard of 45.30 (Sokolove, 2012). Following this outstanding run, Pistorius set his sights on competing at the Olympic Games.

Over the course of his rise to fame, Pistorius, like Semenya, was plagued by accusations that he has an unfair advantage over his competitors. His prosthetic legs, called Flex-Foot Cheetahs, were the central point of contention. Although the Cheetahs were not new when Pistorius became a prominent public athlete, the possibility that a runner with blades might compete at the Olympics had not been considered until Pistorius took to the track and began beating his able-bodied competitors. In 2007, the IAAF introduced a new regulation that explicitly banned “technical aids” deemed to give runners an advantage, effectively banning Pistorius from competing in the Olympics (Casert, 2008). When Pistorius then inquired about the possibility of running in the Olympics, “he was met with accusations about performance enhancement, unfair advantage, and probable ineligibility” (Cole, 2009, p. 3). While this question did not figure prominently on the LetsRun board at the time, the message board editors (themselves outspoken critics of Pistorius) were explicit that they believed Pistorius should not be

allowed to compete with able-bodied runners; seven participants on the board weighed in on the controversy, with five claiming to be undecided about the issue and with all discussing the technical issues regarding potential advantages, and disadvantages, in a respectful manner.<sup>21</sup>

In order to decide if Pistorius has an unfair advantage, the IAAF in 2008 videotaped and analyzed one of Pistorius's races and several weeks later, he underwent tests conducted by an IAAF-chosen researcher at the German Sport University in Cologne. Researchers declared him ineligible to compete based on findings that his "bouncing" method of locomotion was an advantage and that he required less oxygen and fewer calories than able-bodied runners going at the same speed. Further, Pistorius's prosthetics exempt him from suffering the extreme lower-leg muscle fatigue common in the final stages of the 400m race. In January of 2008, researchers declared Pistorius's Cheetah blades a competitive advantage and banned him from competing against able-bodied runners. When this decision was announced on LetsRun, the response was measured overall. One poster asserted, "I think it is good for the sport, shame for Pistorius though." Another predicted that he would challenge the decision: "He's already in Nike ads and a whole bunch of others. I reckon he'll fight it, for the millions he's stand to make running able-bodied" (Dandelion, 2007).

Pistorius responded that the tests were biased and he used his personal means to hire a scientific team to contest the IAAF's findings. He then challenged the IAAF in the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Biophysicist Hugh Herr, leading the team of hired scientists, found that Pistorius is "physiologically similar but mechanically dissimilar" to an able-bodied athlete (Hashish, 2012). Under the rules of the Court of Arbitration for Sport, Pistorius did not have to show that he did not have an advantage; rather, he had to illustrate that those opposed to his competing had not proved that he had an advantage (Sokolove, 2012). On this basis, the IAAF repealed the ban on his participation. However, the research used in Pistorius's appeal was not peer-reviewed until after the arbitration. Since that time, one of the authors, Peter Weyland, has recanted much of the study and now holds that Pistorius is, in fact, at a substantial advantage. Weyland grounds this assertion in a number of factors. The carbon-fibre blades and corresponding hardware are light, about 5.4 pounds, as opposed to the weight of an intact leg and foot for someone of Pistorius's build, about 12.6 pounds. As a result, his "swing times" – how quickly he can reposition his limbs – are unnaturally fast, "quite literally off the biological charts" (Sokolove, 2012).<sup>22</sup> There is a strong possibility that Pistorius has the advantage of reduced limb fatigue, increased swing time, and more efficient mechanics than able-bodied runners, as well as the possibility of better "bounce" in his step. But the IAAF did not address these issues in their original charges, so Pistorius's legal team was not required to disprove them at his appeal. As commentators noted on LetsRun, the "IAAF botched the inquiry against Oscar Pistorius" (wejo, 2011) and the "legal process allowed flawed science to be the basis for the decision" (Ross Tucker, 2011). As others have noted, while this decision allowed Pistorius to run, it was "not a victory for disability rights: the decision is narrow and not applicable outside of this

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<sup>21</sup> See online discussion group: "Should Oscar Pistorius be allowed to compete in the Olympics?" Retrieved from [www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\\_read.php?thread=1728078](http://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=1728078).

<sup>22</sup> Kerr argues that "to appreciate just how artificial Mr. Pistorius's swing time is, consider that the average limb-repositioning time of five former 100-metre world-record holders (Ben Johnson, Carl Lewis, Maurice Greene, Tim Montgomery, and Justin Gatlin) is 0.34 seconds. Mr. Pistorius's limb-repositioning times are 15.7 percent faster than five of the fastest male sprinters in recorded human history" (as quoted in Sokolove, 2012).

specific case” (Cole, 2009, p. 3). On LetsRun, discussion of the potential advantage Pistorius might possess was measured and even scientific. Not only were the debates themselves highly technical, with for example, 71 posts on one stream alone in 2007 discussing bio-mechanics, but even those opposed to Pistorius competing against able-bodied runners prefaced such positions with comments such as he is “obviously a great athlete and seems to be a good role model for everyone” (Ridiculous, 2007). This careful discourse stands in contrast to discussion of Semenya’s potential advantage, upholding the neoliberal logic that a person is not to be held responsible for a physical disability (though individuals are held responsible for their own accommodation, see Garland-Thomson, 1997). Because these disabilities cannot be helped, they are legitimate obstacles to success. As a result, people with disabilities, particularly when they “overcome” their impairments, retain their status as deserving citizens (Finkel, 2006). Conversely, Judeo-Christian values and neoliberal work ethic give rise to the logic that gender nonconformity is suspicious, and within the individual’s control, supporting the popular discourse that Semenya could choose to exhibit a normative gender performance. Framed as a “choice,” these discourses suggest that Semenya has not “chosen” wisely, and is thus undeserving of benefits and compassion.

As Hillsburg, Watson and Chambers (2014) have explored elsewhere, Pistorius’s use of prosthetic limbs conforms to both ableist notions of the “normal” body and the Western logic that relying on science and technology is an ideal way to overcome obstacles. Pistorius’s recollection of putting on his legs in the morning as his brother put on his shoes rearticulates the logic whereby the normal body is a “tribunal and blueprint” upon which people with disabilities must fashion their own physiques (Hughes as quoted in Hillsburg et al., 2014). This valuing of the normal body ultimately reaffirms longstanding discourses that call for people with disabilities to “overcome” their impairments through acts of kindness, inspiration, and talent (Clare, 1999; Hillsburg et al., 2014). Critical disability scholars are suspicious of this narrative of overcoming, or what Robert McRuer (2006) calls the “supercrip” story, because it conceals the material realities of struggling to live with disabilities in an ableist world (Vidali, 2007, p. 623). As Silva and Howe (2012) assert, such discourses convey the sense that “all dreams are possible depending on an individual’s effort and merit [and] the social injustice of unequal opportunities for ‘able’ and ‘disabled’ people [are] ignored” (p. 188). In Pistorius’s case, the discourse of overcoming obscures the ways in which his class and race privilege enabled his participation in sport, and allowed message board participants to critique his participation in elite able-bodied sport without assailing his character. The narrative of overcoming adversity to participate in the Games is so powerful that many experts acknowledged Pistorius’s potential advantage but relied on Olympic values of fair play, sportsmanship, and overcoming to lend him their support. For example, Hashish (2012) asserted that:

The sight of a legless sprinter utilizing the technology of today to compete in the oldest athletic event this world knows captured the hearts and minds of people of all religions, cultures, and creeds. I salute you Oscar Pistorius – even if you are at an advantage.

LetsRun participants echo the “supercrip” refrain that ‘anything is possible if you work hard enough’ (Batts & Andrews, 2011). As one poster put it, we need to “give the man credit for overcoming performance inhibiting circumstances” (quithatingpeople, 2011). In striking contrast with Semenya, Pistorius’s status as a supercrip allowed the media to frame him as sexy and desirable; one South African magazine named him South Africa’s sexiest celebrity (Sokolove, 2012). This sexualization is an

important factor in the public reception of Pistorius's story and in his popularity, particularly as media, blogs, and commentators continue to disparage Semenya as unfeminine and not physically attractive. Instead of being shamed on late-night television, Pistorius appeared as a guest with Jay Leno and Piers Morgan.

After the decision to reverse the ban, and in the lead-up to the Olympics, there was much discussion in sports magazines, running message boards, and online news forums as to whether or not Pistorius should be allowed to compete with able-bodied runners. Pistorius not only fought, and won, against the IAAF, but also narrated his version of events, using social media and a highly developed website to craft an image of himself as hard-working, deserving of public support, and suitably masculine. Many supported his bid to compete, despite acknowledging his potential advantage. This is clearly reflected on the LetsRun message board, as participants tended to conceive of Pistorius in the following way: "I am in favor of letting him compete, and hope he does really well. His story is compelling and he has been very persistent. That said, I think it is obvious the blades give him an advantage, without even having to look at the science" (Mojo Jerkin, 2011). Another blogger echoed the supercrip narrative of overcoming disabilities to be 'just like everybody else':

It is irrelevant whether or not his legs give him an advantage against able-bodied people. The amazing thing about Oscar is that he has stood up for people with 'disabilities' and has decided to fight for their right to compete alongside everyone else. He proves that it is possible to do such a thing, and will likely inspire millions of children all over the world with what he is doing. (roadlesstraveled, 2011)

The disparate tone of fan commentary by the detractors of the two athletes is particularly striking. Those who were opposed to Pistorius's integration into mainstream track described his potential advantages without assailing his character, or engaging in derogatory critique. For example, one participant on LetsRun admitted, "I applaud him for inspiring people and overcoming adversity, but I just doubt that he should be allowed to run in the World Championships and the Olympics" (ktown killa, 2011). Another, after carefully detailing the advantages of the Cheetahs, explained, "Oscar is a great ambassador for the sport, has tremendous natural talent ... I am indeed for inclusive sports and education. But it is not fair to overlook the advantages from a mechanical standpoint" (Malamute, 2012). Even those adamantly opposed to his admission in able-bodied competition framed such opposition in terms that are respectful of Pistorius's efforts and intentions. In a detailed cost-benefit analysis of the inclusion of Pistorius in able-bodied competition, one poster argued that:

His running is different ... and I understand why he technically should not be allowed to compete. The benefit of letting him run is that you allow a dedicated athlete to compete in a forum where he is looking for competitors at the same level. It is warm and fuzzy and makes our sport look compassionate. For South Africa no one gets bumped from the team because they didn't have three standard A athletes ... on the other side, the benefit from banning him is pretty small. You avoid potential controversy of a blade runner army. The cost of banning him is that you look heartless ... The concept of people intentionally chopping off their feet for a medal is crazy. (toro, 2012)



Even those who doubted that Pistorius was truly a world-class athlete, citing Weyland's belief that Pistorius might have as much as a 10-second advantage due to his prostheses, refrained from casting personal aspersions, especially compared with Semenya's critics. In a telling comparative statement by a LetsRun participant, Pistorius's integrity was subtly challenged, while Semenya was vilified: "If and when he gets into world beating shape ... he should take a page from the book of his countrywoman, just edge through the qualifying rounds, and then 'miraculously' blow open the final on the home straight" (dyjdyt, 2011). Only one posting used the kind of language routinely applied to Semenya: "He's a freak that needs to compete with his own kind" (Fluffy, 2012). Pistorius developed an international following and in February of 2012 was awarded the Laureus World Sports Award for Sportsperson of the Year with a Disability. This attention came with significant financial rewards; where Semenya, who is significantly more accomplished than Pistorius on the track, has struggled to finance her training, Pistorius earned in excess of one million dollars a year from endorsements, including a contract with Nike (Sokolove, 2012) until his sponsorship was cancelled in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

Although Pistorius enjoyed the admiration of many of his peers, competitors, fans, and officials, his appearance at the 2012 Paralympics was marred by an unsportsmanlike outburst against Brazilian runner Alan Oliveira immediately after the T44 200m race. Pistorius claimed that his rival was at an unfair advantage because his blades were too long, despite his own history of demonstrating how his own blades do not confer advantage against able-bodied runners.<sup>24</sup> Because he enjoys the privileges of exalted citizenry that are made possible through his status as a supercrip, the tendency for Pistorius's ongoing incidences of violence and aggression in his personal life have gone largely ignored in the media. As Razack (2002; 2008) helps us understand, the same discourses of criminality and suspicion do not adhere as readily to those who are deemed deserving citizens. Pistorius has had a number of public confrontations with ex-girlfriends and their boyfriends in which he has been accused of being aggressive. Moreover, prior to his girlfriend's death, it was relatively well known that Pistorius is fond of weapons, particularly guns, and carries one at all times. He had recently applied for licences for three shotguns, including a .223-calibre semi-automatic rifle similar to the one used in the Sandy Hook school massacre in the United States (Laing, 2013). He was also known for fast-living, excessive drinking, and dangerous driving. Such proclivities were subtly celebrated as masculine and sexy in a widely read article in *The New York Times Magazine*, published in 2012 (Sokolove, 2012).<sup>25</sup> Of these transgressions, only a boating accident made the message board, and while Pistorius was drunk at the time of the crash, this element was

<sup>23</sup> "Oscar Pistorius contract suspended by Nike," BBC News, 21 February, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Although Pistorius later "apologized ... for [hitting] out at the International Paralympic Committee for failing to act over the length of some athletes' blades," he did not recant his contention that the blades were unfair (*MailOnline*, 2012). Surprisingly, there was little commentary about this outburst on LetsRun. When news about his rude behaviour was posted, only 28 participants commented. All suggested that the behaviour was undesirable, but only one explicitly named him "a hypocrite," while another asserted that "Oscar is right that the Brazilian has a mechanical advantage, but by the same argument he shouldn't be in able-bodied sport" (Joulista978, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> In 2009 he was arrested for allegedly slamming a door on a woman in his home ("South African sprinter, Oscar Pistorius, arrested for assault," Reuters (London), 13 September, 2009). He was held overnight but charges against him were later dropped. In the same year, he was involved in a boating accident that was linked to alcohol consumption; while he was culpable in the accident, most media expressed concern regarding his recovery and return to competition. Before the death of his girlfriend, Pistorius was involved in another shooting death on his property in which a man was killed. He was not charged, but rumors circulate that a friend took the heat for him, and that the shooting was racially motivated. These incidents were not discussed on LetsRun. As one participant on LetsRun admitted after the death of Reeva Steenkamp at Pistorius's hands, "signs of [his] flaws and eventual demise were readily apparent long ago" but were ignored (not my real name, 2013).

not discussed. Instead, posters expressed concern for his recovery, and one participant offered the opinion that the incident would “just add another ‘heartwarming’ aspect to the stories about his struggles against adversity” (formerly present, 2009).

Despite his aggressive behaviour and his fascination with firearms, fans and popular media expressed shock at the death of Reeve Steenkamp by four gunshot wounds at Pistorius’s home on Feb. 14, 2013. Pistorius was charged with murder, but in his four-day bail hearing he claimed that he had shot her accidentally, thinking that she was an intruder in his home. On Aug. 16, 2013, he was indicted to appear in court in May 2014. His defence relies on a construction of Pistorius as embattled and fearful in a nation plagued by violence, and is grounded in racist constructions of South African politics and Black citizens. In the wake of this new controversy, Henke Pistorius, Oscar’s father, lashed out against the African National Congress, the Black ruling party in South Africa, asserting that Whites in the country “owned guns because they could not rely on the police to protect them against criminals” (Laing, 2013). Journalist Philip De Wet (2013) at the *Mail & Guardian* retorted that “the risk for crime is greater for the poor black township dweller than a rich white person” and that if Oscar “shares his father’s sentiment that he should be afraid because he is white, then he has got it all wrong.” In response to reactions to this outburst, Pistorius’s family publically distanced itself from Henke and his statement. Further, the Oscar Pistorius website [oscarpistorius.com/home](http://oscarpistorius.com/home) has become exclusively devoted to presenting “the latest news about developments as well as messages of support.” Despite his claims to self-defence, the prosecution claims that Pistorius had been fighting with Steenkamp earlier in the evening, was intensely jealous of her interactions with other men, and that the death was a premeditated murder. In light of these incidents, Pistorius’s 2011 campaign slogan with Nike, “I am a bullet in a chamber” (O’Keefe & Augustine, 2013), was eerily prophetic and illustrative of popular masculinity reaching its logical consequence. Commentators on the LetsRun site soon drew parallels between Pistorius’s athletic career and the pending trial, as one commentator wryly pointed that the Nike campaign might go further: “Four Shots, Four Hits—Nike Athletes—Excellence in All Endeavours” (Clay Moore, 2013).

When the story of the charges against Pistorius broke, many commentators were ready to dismiss him as “a monster, no doubt” and to discredit his account of events, asserting, “This is not a terrible tragedy. This is an act of evil from a steroid raged man with a very bad temper” (Jaspers, 2013). But even those who adamantly asserted that Pistorius is guilty did not, with two exceptions (one cited earlier), connect the dots to his earlier behaviour; nor did they question his status as an exalted citizen, which likely obscured his aggression from the outset. Defenders of Pistorius cited police incompetence and asked “at what point can we stop just taking everything as fact just because the police said so” and reminded readers that, in legal terms, “Pistorius just needs to create a reasonable doubt” (wejo, 2013). One contributor, fully accepting Pistorius’s version of events, compared him with Lance Armstrong, asserting that:

Oscar had a one-time slip up in judgment that unfortunately resulted in something tragic. He acted without having the chance to fully contemplate his actions. Lance lied about what he was doing for years and had plenty of time to contemplate what he was doing and many opportunities to come clean, but he didn’t. I feel bad for what happened to Oscar, but not so much for Lance (Judge Dredd, 2013).

The announcement that Pistorius had been granted bail was greeted with dismay by most commentators on LetsRun. Of 36 posts on this thread, only two supported Pistorius's release because "he hasn't been convicted of anything yet" (hmmmmmmm, 2013). Others asserted that, whatever the eventual outcome of the trial, "he does seem a bit trigger happy, so I would say he does pose a risk to the community" (Runwalkjog, 2013), and that he "has serious anger issues as evidenced by his past documented behavior" (got it folks, 2013). One observer pointedly argued:

As a South African, I can say that we still have the most racist nation on earth. If Pistorius had black skin, he would be sitting in jail until trial. This is about privilege and race. If the IAAF lets him compete I will vomit. (Jonathan Machuka, 2013).<sup>26</sup>

The fact that Pistorius's bad behaviour was not considered newsworthy until the death of Reeva Steenkamp, and was not the subject of commentary on LetsRun, raises questions about the type of aggressive masculinity that is celebrated in even non-contact sports. In crisis, Pistorius, the man with the "miraculous, feel good accomplishment" (fauijgfuirehgf, 2011), was able to harness his reputation, laced with citizenship privilege, to remain mobile across borders after Steenkamp's death.

## Conclusion

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Differential fan treatment of Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius, two of South Africa's most prominent athletics competitors, reflects hierarchies of power at the convergence of deserving citizenship, the body, and sport. As others have noted, while both athletes were largely celebrated within South Africa in the moments surrounding the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games, Western-identified fans have commonly viewed Semenya with suspicion while commending Pistorius (Cooky et al., 2013). Public fan commentary about both athletes echoes techniques of citizenship and belongingness; while many South African fans embrace their flag-bearers as deserving model citizen-athletes (see Sapa, 2008), track fans outside of South Africa derogate Semenya for her gender performance while celebrating Pistorius for transcending his "legitimate" disability. These narratives prevailed in spite of the fact that exercise physiologists remain undecided with regard to any advantage, or disadvantage, that either Semenya or Pistorius may have with regard to their competition (Epstein, 2012a), and despite an unsportsmanlike outburst by Pistorius at the Paralympics (Brown, 2012).

The disparate treatment of Semenya and Pistorius in the media reflects and reproduces structural inequalities and prejudices that continue to circulate through elite international sport. At the extreme, a LetsRun participant suggested that the IAAF "just create some kind of Abomination Olympics where the cripples and the people with bionic legs and the hermaphrodites and the goatpeople and whatever other

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<sup>26</sup> When, on March 28, Pistorius's lawyer succeeded in convincing a judge that preventing him from travelling internationally to compete was excessive punishment as it precluded him from earning a living, reactions were similarly mixed on a LetsRun thread with 19 postings. Commentators speculated that the permission might be meaningless, as Pistorius had to be invited to meets in order to compete. One writer reminded readers that Pistorius had not yet been convicted and queried whether "anyone now thinks that he'll try to escape or kill more women?" Another acknowledged the need for a conviction before punishment, but questioned "is barring foreign travel really that egregious a restriction on someone who is facing a murder trial. I understand that the restrictions pre-trial should not amount to an imposition of punishment before a verdict, but seriously, allowing foreign travel to a murder suspect seems ludicrous to me."

quasi-human athletes want to play along can race each other.”<sup>27</sup> The negative constructions of Semenya presented in this paper illustrate the ways in which Olympic values rely on the construction of a particular kind of gendered and racialized “normal” to uphold their values. Overall, the disparate treatment of these athletes occurs in the context of international citizenship politics, since both athletes represent a country that has an acrimonious relationship with the International Olympic Committee. As one blogger noted regarding Semenya’s controversy:

The main fault goes with South African officials, who were trying, quite literally, to pull a fast one ... just like they tried to get that white boy with bionic legs to run the 400 in the Olympics. DARN THOSE SNEAKY SOUTH AFRICANS!” (an eye on them, 2009).

This post reminds us of the complexity of factors informing global citizenship ideals, and the structurally unequal biases circulating through mega-events like the Olympic Games. As a site of global citizenship recognition, the Olympic Games is an event of much-needed contestation that accounts for the intersections of race, class, ability, gender, success, and the notion of fair play.

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<sup>27</sup> Comment removed by editors, formerly retrievable at: [www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\\_read.php?thread=4212907](http://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=4212907).

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