

The Sports Issue

An Introduction

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Issues related to transgender participation have become highly visible items on the agendas of many sporting organizations, US legislatures, interscholastic organizations, and recreational leagues. Trans misogynist fascist movements are digging in, and right-wing conservatives are stoking fear around the specter of trans girls and women driving cisgender girls and women out of sport as a dog whistle to mobilize their base (Butler 2021). Coming on the heels of the US bathroom bills of the mid-2010s, anti-trans policies that target trans girls and women in the sociocultural realm of sports seem to deliver what the bathroom controversy only promised: urgent policing and surveillance of gender-suspicious bodies—down to the last molecule of testosterone—in rigidly gendered spaces. In the United States at the time of this writing, eighteen laws banning trans athletes from participating on teams that align with their gender identities have passed. In the 2022 legislative session alone, at least sixty-four bills were introduced in twenty-eight state legislatures, with names such as the Fairness in Women’s Sports Act, Protect Women’s Sports, and simply Biological Sex. Many of these laws erase transgender people entirely (Sharrow 2021) by defining sex simplistically as “biological sex at birth in accordance with the student’s genetics and reproductive biology.”¹ As Michelle Wolff, David A. Rubin, and Amanda Lock Swarr (2022: 151) observed in *TSQ*’s “Intersex Issue,” “it is bitterly ironic that any legislation that mandates genital inspection for kids extends the biopolitical medicalization and regulation of intersex and trans* bodyminds to cis youth populations as well.”

The assumption of biological advantage for male athletes is a central institutional feature of modern sports via sex-segregated sport or sex-differentiated activities within the same sport. For this reason, concerns about transgender participation in sport tend to crystallize around assumptions that transgender

women have an “unfair advantage” over cisgender women because of past exposure to “male” levels of testosterone (Cavanagh and Sykes 2006; Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016). The participation of trans boys and men is less controversial because of the presumed deficiencies of athletes who are assigned female at birth.

As today’s sporting environments are an outgrowth of the precedents established when modern sport emerged in Europe and its colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a capitalist, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal “civilizing” project (Carter 2008; Carrington and McDonald 2009; Collins 2013), it is no accident that organized sport is a site for contesting the inclusion of transgender people and that these campaigns primarily target transgender girls and women for surveillance and exclusion. Binary sex differentiation and male superiority were central to the European ideology of “civilization,” in contrast to “primitive” gender systems that were more fluid and egalitarian. This distinction between civilized and primitive was one of the key “moral” justifications for European colonialism and genocide. Modern sport was designed, through the deliberate exclusion of girls and women, to emphasize sex difference and to socialize boys and men into orthodox hetero-masculinity (Hargreaves 2013; Pronger 1990). The ideology of naturally occurring binary sex difference (Dreger 2000; Fausto-Sterling 2020; Fine 2017) is central to and integrated within a Eurocentric, white supremacist, colonial, and heteropatriarchal assemblage of power (Collins 2013; Higginbotham 1992; Puar 2007; Weheliye 2014; Wynter 2003). We cannot understand the experiences of trans athletes and policy debates about the terms of inclusion without seeing sport as part of this assemblage. Indeed, sport has a central role in naturalizing hierarchies of bodies and producing gendered and racialized norms (Douglas 2005, 2012; Pape 2017). Attacks on trans girls and women are consistent with modern sport’s long-standing practice of policing female eligibility according to white, heteropatriarchal norms (Pieper 2016; Travers 2022).

Since *TSQ*’s publication of “Trans/Feminisms” in 2016, propelled in part by yet another book published by a well-established anti-trans, feminist academic, feminist anti-trans backlash both within and outside of the academy continue unabated (Stryker and Bettcher 2016). What interests us here is the relationship between anti-transgender positions and trans athleticism or, perhaps more specifically, the trenchant opposition to trans athletes’ playing in a gendered sport (and sports team) that (best) aligns with their identity. In addition to organized anti-trans feminist groups that list sports as one item on their agenda, other groups have formed to make sport *the* feminist issue. For example, Save Women’s Sports (n.d.), formed by amateur powerlifter Beth Stelzer in 2019, “seeks to preserve biology-based eligibility standards for participation in female sports. Fair Play for Women (n.d.), founded in the United Kingdom in 2018, is a campaigning

and consultancy group whose efforts led World Rugby, the international governing body for the sport of rugby, to adopt a policy that allows only women assigned female at birth and women who transitioned prepuberty to compete in the women's division at the international level.² As Abraham Weil noted in a draft of our call for papers, these anti-trans feminist groups poke at the unfinished work of thinking about sex as a social construction. What makes sport so politically saturated in this context is that it is conveyed through the body, and the body, the myth goes, reveals the essence of a human being.

One of the questions that drove us to propose this special issue is why the realm of sports is a salient location wherein trans misogyny has gained political, discursive, and affective traction across the political spectrum. What are the conditions that enable so-called gender critical feminists,³ anti-trans lawmakers, and various constituencies on the political right, as well as organizations and associations concerned with gender equity in sport, to conceive of various forms of harm against trans people as legitimate in response to issues including but not limited to sports, such as access to affirming health care, affordable housing, and employment protection? Drawing on tropes of the trans person as deceiver, cheater, suspect, and threat to cisgender women and girls, anti-trans social movements are pushing back against the gains trans social movements have achieved regarding inclusion in public life in the last few decades, with the ultimate goal of systemically eliminating us from public life. As Jules Gill-Peterson (2021) documents so powerfully, the full-scale erasure of transgender identities and people is part of a larger project that has been decades in the making.

A Trans Feminist Sport Studies Approach

Following Emi Koyama (2003), Marquis Bey (2022), and Finn Enke (2012), we understand trans feminism as an epistemological formation that does not simply view feminism through a transgender lens or add transness to feminism. Rather, trans feminism “is an assault on the genre of the [hierarchized] binary, that ontological caste that universalizes itself and structures how we are made possible” (Bey 2022: 53). Within the continuing scholarly and activist work loosely organized under the rubric of trans feminism, we want to explicitly interpolate a subfield called trans feminist sports studies (Jones 2021). Trans feminist sports studies seeks to unravel the seams of a hierarchized athletic gender binary—often described through the language of “unfair advantage,” “legacy effects of testosterone,” or simply “biological traits.” Moreover, a trans feminist sports studies interrogates racialized medical paradigms of intersex variations wielded by the International Amateur Athletic Federation, now called World Athletics, and the International Olympic Committee that have blocked athletes such as Caster Semenya, Annet Negesa, Holarli Ativor, Francine Niyonsaba, Maria José Martínez-Patiño, Dutee

Chand, and Santhi Soundarajan from competition. Trans feminist sports studies rejects discursive and material forms of violence that situate women athletes within valuation matrices of femininity, athleticism, investment return, and other fetishized elements of extraction. Tools of trans feminist sports studies apply to athletes such as Serena Williams and Brittney Griner, for although they do not describe themselves as “trans” in an identificatory way, their racialized gender policing both within and outside feminist, anti-racist, and sports circles continues to mute recognition of their athletic excellence.

The contributions to this volume take up our call for a transfeminist sport studies in powerful and productive ways. Elizabeth Sharrow’s essay brings a trans feminist sports studies lens to public policy making to explain how it is that we have arrived at a moment in which girls’ and women’s sport is used as a channel for anti-trans discourse. While recent trans exclusionary laws have accrued much interdisciplinary attention, Sharrow asserts that Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972, a supposedly nondiscrimination law that is typically framed as feminist and inclusionary, yields insight into the current mobilization of transphobia and trans exclusion. In “Good Hair, Bad Math,” Erica Rand homes in on the finer points of competitive pairs figure skating, a discipline in figure skating hallmarked by its hetero- and gender-normative dyad. Rand talks us through her gender-nonconforming figure skating pairs team, which, even with US Figure Skating’s interpretive method of scoring criteria and unwritten codes of *décolleté* and “illusion fabric,” manages to sustain its rule that “only pairs of the *same composition* [our emphasis] (woman and man, two women or two men) may compete against each other.”⁴ In a similar vein of pairing the seemingly unpairable, Tristan Venturi examines two other ostensibly disparate domains: sports and dating. Venturi delineates ideological similarities between activities of sports and dating that center the scrutiny of gendered bodies and illustrates a generative intellectual inquiry for trans feminist sports studies, one that asks what we might learn when we analyze sports alongside other realms of social and cultural production.

Imagining Sports Otherwise

In “The Athletic Issue” of *GLQ*, Mary Louise Adams (2013: 537) concluded her essay on the histories of gendered play vis-à-vis the third and fourth editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, arguing that “sport, as an institutionalized set of physical practices, the meaning of which is overdetermined, has little to offer to a queer physical culture.” We might ask: what can sports possibly offer trans, nonbinary, and folks whose gender does not neatly fit into the fictitious binary that sports discourses naturalize? Despite anti-trans efforts from across the political spectrum, trans and gender-nonconforming people are using athletic settings to resist the conditions and institutions that seek to eliminate our place in sport. Jinsun Yang’s article asks readers to suspend a political impulse of

trans inclusion to explore how a nonbinary policy approach might be more fruitful in organized athletic events. Yang introduces the Queer Women Games, a nonbinary sports competition in Korea, as a glimpse of how athletes and organizers navigate gender norms when mainstream sporting organizations are not the arbiter of athletes' gender. Anima Adjepong extends this thread in their essay, "Queer African Feminist Orientations for a Trans Sports Studies," bringing a queer African feminism to bear on the field of trans sports studies. Adjepong enjoins feminist and trans sports studies scholars to shift away from a liberal individualist approach that characterizes much trans-inclusion-in-sports discourse, toward gender abolition. In the final piece of the "Sports Issue," members of Meninos Bons de Bola, Brazil's first trans soccer team, demand that trans access to sport be part of the broader struggle against repression and fascism in Brazil. Their manifesto speaks to the urgency of centering marginalized trans people within LGBT politics and against a political epicenter of right-wing extremism in Brazil.

The essays in this special issue underscore our conviction that sport participation is a vital component of trans feminist political projects and remind us that engaging in sports or other physical activity can in fact be a means to explore, refine, and affirm our gendered flesh on our own terms. It is our hope that readers of the "Sports Issue" find inspiration here for their own efforts to negotiate physical realms of competition and play in ever more liberatory ways.

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Travers is professor of sociology at Simon Fraser University. Their recent book, *The Trans Generation: How Trans Kids (and Their Parents) Are Creating a Gender Revolution* (2018), situates trans kids in Canada and the United States, white settler nations characterized by significant social inequality.

Notes

1. Indiana House of Representatives, Participation in School Sports, HB 1041, 2022 Regular Session, introduced January 4, 2022, <https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2022/bills/house/1041/#digest-heading>.
2. Rugby Canada and Rugby USA are among several national associations that refused to follow World Rugby's lead in prohibiting transgender women from playing in women's competitions.
3. Trans activists and scholars refer to anti-trans feminists as trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, a moniker such feminists resist, insisting they are not anti-trans people per se but rather critical of claims that transgender women are women and that inclusion in women's spaces is therefore a human right. Hateful rhetoric that characterizes

transgender women as “male” interlopers in women’s spaces based on essentialist assumptions about sex/gender identity has a long history in feminist scholarship. See, for example, Raymond 1979.

4. In December 2022 Skate Canada changed its regulations to allow for pairs of any gender to compete together (Marsten and Gul 2022).

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