

Gender, Sport and the Olympics

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It is with great pleasure that we bring you this special issue of *thirdspace* on gender, sport and the Olympics. In light of the Winter Olympics recently held in Vancouver, Canada, and the fast-approaching London Olympic Games in 2012, we consider it timely to refocus feminist scholarly attention on the sport/gender nexus. This is not to imply that feminist analyses of sport has been absent of late – indeed as the contributions offered in this issue indicate, much cutting edge methodological and theoretical scholarship in sport studies is to be found emerging from feminist, gender studies and queer paradigms. Further testament to the topicality and robustness of feminist critiques of sport and gender is evidenced by the numerous recent books published in the field - a number of which are reviewed in this issue. Our aim is to illuminate the central role which gender and sexuality play in shaping ideas about athleticism, sport culture and the body, and the significant ways in which athletic events such as the Olympics work to transform conceptions of public space, national boundaries and identities, and gendered self-presentations and performances.

The articles, essays, dialogues and reviews presented here illustrate the value of feminist thinking for interrogating a variety of timely and ongoing concerns around bodies, gender and difference that arise from Olympic competition and the sporting realm more broadly. The scope of the articles chosen for this issue highlights the politicised nature of sport and its connection to larger social systems and structures, which invariably influence gendered processes, practices and inequalities. In her article ‘Body like a rocket: Performing technologies of naturalization,’ Sarah Reboloso McCullough explores the use of sporting technologies in Olympic competition to ‘demonstrate how technologies create “natural” bodies that allow both the athlete and the viewing community to imagine a narrative of athletic and human progress that is both separate from—and reliant on—technological enhancement’. She draws on the example of Speedo’s LZR Racer suit in Olympic swimming competition to illustrate how such technologies function to re-create the idealized athletic body as primarily white and male whilst simultaneously marginalising ‘other’ bodies.

Amanda Nicole Schweinbenz and Alexandria Cronk consider the politics of gender verification testing in Olympic competition and its role in regulating ideals of appropriate femininity in the sporting sphere. Their article ‘Femininity control at the Olympic Games’ draws on a number of cases of gender verification testing, including the recent incident involving South African sprinter Caster Semenya, to consider the sustained cultural anxieties that coalesce around female sporting bodies that appear to deviate from socially sectioned norms. The ‘sporting body’ is also at issue in the work of Elise Detellier, whose historical work analyses the newspaper writings of Canadian athlete and sports commentator Myrtle Cook. Her article, ‘In the Women’s Spotlight: une étude des chroniques sportives de Myrtle Cook dans le Montreal Daily Star, 1929-1930,’ reveals that Cook’s daily newspaper column

offered not only a summary of women's sports activities in Montréal, but also served as a platform for the promotion of women's competitive sport, even as moral and medical experts of the time discouraged these sorts of activities.

Taking a more reflexive but no less critical approach in her essay 'Olympics/Uhlympics: Living in the shadow of the beast,' Charlotte Cooper considers her own ambivalence to the London 2012 games as a resident of East London undergoing redevelopment for the event. She questions whether discourses of neighbourhood regeneration appropriated by Olympic advocates to justify its existence in fact mask a process of colonisation with potentially negative effects for community diversity in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality. By suggesting that queer and fat bodies might serve as sites for embodied resistance, Cooper's essay serves to 'undermine Olympic rhetoric' and its globalising and neo-liberal imperatives.

In our dialogues section, we offer the insights of two of the most influential and renowned feminist academics working in sport studies today – Helen Lenskyj and Patricia Vertinsky. Their distinctly different takes on the issue of women and sport signals to the diversity in feminist approaches and perspectives in the field. Both acknowledge the scant attention paid to the study of women's sports historically in the west – by male sport scholars and feminists alike, for who 'sport was irredeemably male dominated territory' (Lenskyj) – and champion the emergence of feminist sport studies as a legitimate and recognised field of inquiry. Although feminist thought has had a notable impact on the male-dominated arena of sport scholarship, the dialogues offered here indicate the necessity for ongoing critical interrogation of the relationships between gender, bodies and sporting institutions.

Writing as a feminist sport historian, Vertinsky illuminates the role sport and other regulatory institutions have played in shaping gendered bodies and practices. Citing the protests against the exclusion of female ski jumping in the 2010 Winter Olympics, Vertinsky reminds us of the 'social construction of the gendered, racial and ethnic body through the prism of the anatomy of difference' as it plays out in the sporting realm. In contrast to Vertinsky's Foucauldian-inspired approach to the constitution and regulation of bodies through sporting discourse, Lenskyj takes a radical, socialist feminist stance to critique sport as a social institution that contributes to women's oppression beyond the sports field or pages of sporting magazines. For Lenskyj, the dominance of liberal feminist perspectives in theory and activism aimed to advance the status of women in sport fails to challenge existing sporting systems and structures, such as the Olympic Games. Instead, she advocates for feminist scholarship that explores 'the gender specific impacts of hosting the Olympic games on women'. Despite their differences in approach, both Vertinsky and Lenskyj advance debates in feminist sport analysis beyond arguments for 'equal participation,' 'equal access' or 'equal treatment.' Taken together, these two dialogues showcase the importance of a dual interrogation of macro systems and structures that contribute to the marginalization and oppression of women and minority groups and the localised and specific micro processes of lived embodiment, gender interactions and discourses that shape the lived realities and experiences of sporting bodies.

We hope you enjoy this special issue of thirdspace and invite you to share your thoughts in the 'Comments' section of our journal.