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Identify: Olympic Spotlight on Transgender Athletes

The Olympic Channel released seven videos on their website following five trans athletes, documenting how sport has influenced their identity formation. The beginning of each video states:

In 2016 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) advised that transgender athletes can compete without undergoing surgery, making history in the sports world.
The views expressed in this content are those of the persons featured and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IOC or any of their affiliated entities.

The five athletes include; Chloe Anderson (volleyball), Pat Manuel (boxing), Harrison Browne (ice hockey), Schuyler Bailar (swimming), and Chris Mosier (USA triathlon). Five of the videos are short, documentary-style narrations of each athlete. All identify as binary trans athletes, have medically transitioned or are planning to soon, and speak of their ability to pass as cisgender.

The more common threads between athletes were a focus on family/friend support, bodies and medicalization of transness, the desire to “pass” as a man or woman, a point of depression around puberty, and an intense passion for athletics. Absent from the films were comments on socioeconomic status, experiences with racism, access to healthcare, and normalizing trans identities that are nonbinary. Through the narrative style of the documentaries and focus on intimate relationships, these short films aim to personalize the featured athletes and create an emotional experience for the audience. I will apply concepts of queer studies, homonationalism, and transnationalism (theorized by Dr. Alyosha Tudor) to demonstrate that these documentaries create an idealized trans subject comprehensible to a broad American audience.

One major focus of the short documentaries is how families supported the athletes: everyone but Pat has interviews with their families or address how family has played into their coming out and transition process, whether through loving support or heartbreaking difficulties. For those who lack support from their families, the focus turns to teammates creating a family network that does not “care what you look like” (Harrison). Pat, a mixed-race Black trans man who is portrayed as a person “saved” by boxing - a sport his video highlights as targeted toward at-risk youth - never mentions or shows his family. However, in a separate video interview with Pat, Harrison, and an interviewer, Pat speaks extensively to the support he has received from his family both in his transition and in his athletic pursuits. Looking into Pat’s family more extensively shows that his mother, grandmother, and sister have been instrumental parts of both his boxing career and his transition process. For example, Pat’s grandmother paid for gender-affirming surgeries while his mother traveled to support him, and he and his sister are very close (Baxter, 2017). Though this may be the case, family is absent from Pat’s video, instead focusing on the family made at boxing gyms and with Amita, his girlfriend. This is significant as we see the absence of a supportive, nuclear family in Pat’s life, which asks the viewer to make assumptions about his family situation. Often in media Black families are portrayed as inherently unable to replicate the normalized nuclear family model; thus leaving out Pat’s family from his story suggests an intentional, even if subconscious, move by the filmmakers (Cheng 88).

Physical transition is highlighted as the defining moment for trans identity, something important to analyze as identity is fairly unilateral in the series. None of the athletes address the fluidity of sexuality and gender aside from Pat, who speaks self-reflectively alongside Amita, a queer woman of color, about how gender and sexuality interplay and change the way one engages with their surroundings. Pat is the only athlete who uses the word “queer” to describe

himself, which is for many people of color a radical tool used to question notions of race, sexuality, class, and gender (Johnson, 2005: 4). Although Pat and his partner speak of changing, fluid identity in their segment, the other films highlight the athletes' discomfort as children who "always knew" they were transgender and, further, binary. Thus the documentaries focus on the idea that a trans person is "born in the wrong body" and must change that body to become whole.

This also provides a timeline for the trans narrative, in that affirming one's gender has a moment of completion when one has accessed hormones and/or surgery, or when a person passes when they enter a room. The athletes are often referred to using deadnames or incorrect pronouns during interviews with coaches, family members, and teammates to show who they "once were"; additionally, many family members show old photos, which serves to reinforce the transitioning narrative. Even if unintentional, this is particularly problematic as it indicates that deadnaming, and similar forms of violence, is inconsequential as long as the individual is presently addressed using their correct pronouns or name. It serves to disregard any complexity of identity, deciding for everyone how the person should feel in regards to their deadname; this is also a common practice in media, portraying the transmisic idea that a person's true gender identity is assigned at birth (Riedel, 2017).

The problem with the Olympic Channel highlighting only binary, medically transitioned folks is that this is representative of a more widely publicised trans person. With icons such as Caitlin Jenner and Laverne Cox, the ideal becomes a binary, medically transitioned, passing trans person. The Olympic Channel reinforces this idea through choice of athletes to follow - including Chris Mosier, the first trans athlete to be featured in ESPN's Body Issue - and even in the series photo on the website: a picture of Schuyler's chest, his tattoo under his scars, creating an icon for the trans body.

However, there are several instances where this medicalization is challenged. One way is through Pat and Amita's use of the word "queer" when discussing sexuality as separate from gender, as well as providing an analysis of what queerness means to them. Amita, first shown wearing a shirt that reads "Being brown is not a crime," discusses queerness from an intersectional perspective with a focus on how identity changes the ways they are seen in a room, pointing to race, gender, and sexuality. It is not a coincidence that this intersectionality is seen in the only video featuring a Black athlete; this may be a "quare" understanding as described in Johnson's article "Quare Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." In Johnson's analysis, queerness is often associated with white gay men, limiting conversations about race, class, gender, and more. Therefore employing an intersectional, "quare" perspective can challenge the trans narrative of whiteness and adherence to a gender binary; although Pat and Amita do use the term "queer," their analysis provides an understanding of the interplay of gender, race, sexuality, and the barriers associated with Pat's athletic career.

As these short videos are produced by the Olympic games, the athletes' self-documentation is limited. However, both Harrison and Schuyler created their own blogs to more personally, and (to them) accurately, explain their experience of coming out while performing at a high level, sharing what mainstream media would not. Schuyler self-documented his medical transition after he decided to have top surgery, explaining why he decided to medically transition and how this would affect his swimming career at Harvard. Harrison used his blog to discuss his relationship to his family and the difficulties he has experienced with them, citing a lack of mentors in his life when he was younger and thinking about his identity. These self-documenting tools provide an opportunity to share more personally in a manner that is very intentional:

viewers must actively seek out these videos in a “queer niche,” as they are not put forth in more mainstream manners (Tongson, 2017).

Although opportunities for self-reflection and depiction exist, these documentaries highlight the athlete’s work for the United States as Olympians or Olympic hopefuls. The concept of homonationalism, a term created by queer theorist Jasbir Puar, arose as a theory tying “the rise of the utility of gay rights discourses to US/Western imperial projects in legislative and consumption realms” (Puar, 2008). Homonationalism acts as both a framework of analysis as well as a state of being, in that US gay subjects may embody homonationalism via their social/political engagement. The theory essentially claims that existing forms of oppression - islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, neoliberal privatization and individualism - once targeted by gay liberation movements have been displaced as certain white, masculine gay subjects are exceptionalized and brought into public acceptance while queer people of color continue to be marginalized (Puar, 2008). This may relate directly to the military - nationalism in action - as queer service members become increasingly accepted, or relate more conceptually as in the case of queer Olympians representing the United States.

This concept of homonationalism may be applied again to transgender individuals, as Dr. Alyosxa Tudor theorizes in their description of a talk given on the 18th of November, 2015 entitled: “Transgender nationalism, diaspora nationalism: different dimensions of transnationalism dis/entangled” (Tudor, 2015). They define transnationalism in several ways: first by discussing nationalisms across borders, going beyond the national and critiquing its very existence; next by demonstrating a possible concept of diasporic nationalism; and finally (and most relevant to this paper) by relating Puar’s concept of homonationalism to the ways in which transgender individuals are assimilated into national cultures, ideas, and values. Because trans

experiences are differently shaped by other identities, cultural influences, and more, living as a trans person does not necessarily make one “critical of gender binaries and heteronormativity,” similar to how not all transnational subjects are “opposed to nationalism” (Tudor, 2015). In line with Tudor’s concept of transnationalism, the Olympic videos put a spotlight on trans athletes who are performing for their country. They are shown to be hard working, goal-oriented, productive members of society who are attempting to use their work for American enjoyment and representation. Therefore these trans subjects are depicted as just like any other athlete, perhaps with a different personal journey but ultimately just as successful as their cisgender counterparts. This draws attention away from trans liberation movements centering intersectional perspectives and critiques of the United States and its nationalism.

Although *Identify* utilizes a transnational framework for its successful distribution and reception, not all of the athletes are uncritical. Most utilize social media to have more in-depth discussions of the intricacies of their identity, while Pat in particular touches on the intersections of race and athletics. His Instagram is a site of self-reflection, celebration, and critical resistance; on September 4, 2017 he reposts from @social_life “Black bodies are only valued when we’re running on the field & jumping on the court. I support every single athlete participating in this protest. Their voices & actions matter more than points and championships” (Manuel, 2017). This presents a different perspective than highlighted by *Identify*, and although discussions of race is not stated as a focus of the series, its absence is notable.

This documentary series performs several functions. It serves to highlight a subset of the professional athlete population, giving media attention to a group traditionally excluded from athletics and under greater scrutiny than ever before. It also articulates a small percentage of the transgender athletes in the United States by focusing on medically transitioned, binary folks who

have found success in their respective fields. By highlighting passing athletes, the viewer is not forced to question the concept of binary gender or the influence of systemic oppression on nonbinary athletes of color who are not highlighted in their respective fields. Additionally, this puts into focus a group of transgender people who serve the United States through their athleticism; by framing athletics as their life's work and the end-goal as competing in the Olympics, viewers see their bodies as objects of the nation, ready to work for their country.

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