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## Rattling the binary: symbolic power, gender, and embodied colonial legacies

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In 2009, the 18-year-old South African runner Caster Semenya was accused of being male and forced to undergo gender testing. After much obfuscation and misreporting, Semenya was cleared to compete as a woman. Semenya's experience exposes the problematic ways in which masculinity and femininity are harnessed to the categories of male and female as well as the ways in which they are embodied by men and women. This paper contemplates how binaries are mobilized and boundaries maintained – as is contemporarily evident in responses to Semenya's gender troubles. It reads Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power against an example of British Imperialism and illustrates how gender (and its uneasy mapping on to bodies) is implicated and imbricated in colonial historiography and knowledge practices. The paper concludes with Lois McNay's suggestion that gender is a lived relation, which requires coming to terms with the relationship between agency and experience, and recognizes that gendered people are the subjects of social analysis. At stake in this examination of symbolic power, gender, and lived experience is the recognition of the consistency and resilience in binary manifestations of symbolic meaning and the insidious ways in which gender is mobilized, enacted, and layered onto other dualisms.

**Keywords:** colonialism; symbolic power; resistance; gender; experience

### Introduction

At the August 2009 World Championships in Athletics, South African sprinter Caster Semenya won the 800m dash. The 18-year-old was subsequently accused of being male and forced to undergo gender testing, although it later turned out that she had been unwittingly subjected to a gender test before the race (Wonkam, Fieggan, and Ramesar 2010, 546). After much obfuscation and misreporting, Semenya was cleared to compete in women's competitions. The case launched vigorous arguments about the black female body and the colonial legacy of another South African woman's experience, Saartje Baartman's experience of being displayed in a cage in circus-like performances as a sexualized miscreation for the nineteenth-century audiences (Sharpe 2010). But, responses to Saartje Baartman's experience yielded contestation regarding standards of femininity. Semenya's very femaleness came under question, leaving one to argue that

[t]he rush to compare Semenya to Saartje Baartman, while obvious for nationalistic reasons, misses something crucial. Baartman was exhibited and violated for what the imperialist eye took to be her aberrant *femininity*. A better comparison to Semenya would be to the many trans bodies who have been disciplined and punished for their female *masculinity* [which is] ... often associated with forms of disguise and deceit. (Nyong'o 2010, 98)

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In other words, Semenya was accused of transgressing boundaries of legitimate gender practices for which she was quickly disciplined.

The example of Semenya is analytically rich, but I use it here as one entry point into a conversation regarding gendered constructions of social identities and forms of practice, i.e. masculinity and femininity. Semenya's experience exposes the problematic ways in which masculinity and femininity are harnessed to the categories of male and female as well as the ways in which they are embodied by men and women. Interestingly, photographs and interviews proliferated in which Semenya appeared in a dress and make up with her hair done and her nails polished. In this instance, "the essentialist response to the essentialist attack on Semenya was to reassert the commonsense of the gender binary ... [However, a] proper anti-essentialist response would be to acknowledge how easily rattled that binary is" (Nyong'o 2010, 99).

For example, in the wake of the controversy, the focus on the black body first resurrected the story of the atrocious treatment of Saartje Baartman, thereby obscuring the application of masculinity and femininity to Semenya's body and performance, and the gender issues at stake. Second, vast energies were mobilized to assert Semenya's femininity, thereby reifying the gender binary and its "appropriate" application to the body – femininity with female bodies and masculinity with male bodies. Additionally, masculinity and femininity can also be referents beyond the body. I am thinking of the silence of Kuchek Hanem, Flaubert's courtesan and the "typical Oriental female" as representative of Oriental/Occidental relations in Said's (1978, 6) introduction to *Orientalism*. Here, geo-political interactions connote gendered relations that are binary and hierarchical.

This article examines these themes by reading Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power against an example of British Imperialism. It shows that gender is implicated and imbricated in colonial historiography and knowledge practices to the extent that power appears to operate through a gender binary and the uneasy mapping of gender on to bodies. Bourdieu's work is informed by his awareness of these practices. In fact, all of Bourdieu's work can be understood to be part of a larger mission that Veronique Mottier writes is "the analysis of power and domination and their social reproduction in modern societies" (Mottier 2002, 346). His concept of symbolic power aims to explain how dominance manifests itself, how it is maintained, and why resistances to it are largely ineffective. The principles on which Bourdieu relied during the length of his career, and for which he is sometimes critiqued, developed during his time as a French soldier in North Africa and his subsequent ethnographic studies of the conditions of daily life there (and later in his own village of Béarn in southwestern France) (Ahluwalia 2010). Despite these roots, in studies of politics and identity, the relationship between Bourdieu's work and the *concept of gender* seldom consider the legacies of colonialism and its impact on lived experiences.

Reading symbolic power against imperialist onto-epistemologies raises important questions, and has the potential to offer insights about the relationship between gender and power. Masculinity and femininity are symbolically powerful, embodied in complex ways that are not necessarily biologically correlated with males and females, and that are historically contingent and binary. Centering processes of colonial governance and everyday practice denies researchers the capacity to avoid the ways in which gender is invoked in policy, the way that emancipatory political practices, such as the suffragist movement utilized problematic conceptions of gender to mark out a political claim, and the way that everyday practices and experiences both reinforce and subvert gender meanings. At stake in this examination of symbolic power, gender, and lived experience is the recognition of the consistency and resilience in binary manifestations of symbolic meaning and the insidious ways in which gender is mobilized, enacted, and layered onto other dualisms.

### Bourdieu's symbolic power

In his writing, Bourdieu privileges the symbolic (language, religion, and arts), not in and of itself, but in the socially derived meanings the symbols hold. These socially embedded symbols make Bourdieu's work on power particularly useful for an analysis of constructs like masculinity and femininity and their intricate relationship with power at the symbolic level.

### *Symbolic systems*

For Bourdieu, power is systemic, so his theory begins with a description of the overarching symbolic systems. Bourdieu's symbolic systems have three characteristics: structuring structures, structured structures, and instruments of domination (1977, 112). The following outline of these characteristics addresses each separately, but shows how they are intricately linked. *Structuring structures* order social spaces and make them comprehensible. Bourdieu suggests that consensually defined meaning signifies this feature, where objective meaning of symbols is established by general consensus. For Bourdieu, "objectivity" refers to a generally agreed definition rather than a position of exteriority. This understanding places objectivity under scrutiny without doing away with it altogether. In other words, if most people act as if some symbol has objective meaning, and if they are in a position to legitimate this symbol, then its meaning is established as such.

One example is the myth of the American Dream. Americans often articulate this Dream in terms of hard work and determination, as the way to achieve wealth and status, and general upward mobility. Despite overwhelming evidence that the poor in America are structurally disadvantaged and are unlikely to escape poverty and neglect, the power of the Dream persists (although websites like [endoftheamericandream.com](http://endoftheamericandream.com) and others support the notion that the American Dream as a discourse is becoming unsettled). Further, the Dream functions as a disciplinary tool. For example, familiar arguments that poor people are lazy, that they want handouts, and that anyone who works hard can "make" it, depict a level "playing field," thereby obscuring structural inequities. Symbols like this one mask the operation of power and justify prevailing inequality by giving the appearance of equality of opportunity. In this way, the symbolic system participates in developing structures within which agents operate. For an excellent example of this, see Spender (1980). Thus, one might consider symbolic systems the cognitive foundations from which one then structures and categorizes the world. In the following pages, I present an example of nineteenth-century British suffragettes that illustrates the discourses of modernity, progress, and imperialism that served as the structuring structures that the suffragettes used in order to rearticulate their social positions.

Symbolic systems are also *structured structures* in that they are systems that guide entrenched structural meanings shared by society's members (Swartz 1997, 83). This is an extension of the first characteristic, symbolic power, says Bourdieu (1977), in that the symbolic systems are instruments of knowledge that have the power to structure only in so far as they are themselves structured (114). In other words, symbols unite people around their meanings. Distinctions, then, lead to classifications by making dichotomous groupings and by creating forms of social inclusion and exclusion. The distinction between men and women is based on a number of perceived differences, but filtered through a system of binary logic that completely excludes the possibility of being non-gendered. The history of Olympic gender testing is an example of this exclusion in practice. From World War II, female athletes underwent gender verification procedures in order to compete in the Olympics. Gender verification involved genitalia examination. After a sufficient number of outliers arose, women submitted to internal gynecological exams to verify their gender. Again, results were not always conclusive. By the 1970s, the gender test involved genetic testing

for XX and XY chromosomal patterns. Still, this proved problematic, as a sufficient number of “recognized” women carried a variety of patterns that would hinder them from competing. Again, in 2009, Semenya exemplified the scientific limitations of gender testing as well as the problematic practices associated with the socio-political need to fix gender in the body. Ironically, a few “recognized” men would have been allowed to compete with women on the basis of this test, for no definitive scientific test for gender exists (Wonkam et al. 2010). Semenya’s experience exposes the problematic ways in which men and women embody masculinity and femininity, and male and female designations. This act of distancing between the categories on the one hand and obscuring the meaning they convey on the other hand is an example of Bourdieu’s structured structures. But it is also an example of domination, as I will explain next.

The third characteristic of Bourdieu’s symbolic system is that they are *instruments of domination*. They incorporate dominant groups; they provide distinction and hierarchies in order to categorize social groupings and they legitimate those categories, thus maintaining the position of dominant groups. In the words of Bourdieu (1977):

The dominant culture contributes to the effective integration of the dominant class (by making possible immediate communication between all its members and distinguishing them from the other classes). It also contributes to the bogus integration of the society as a whole and therefore to the demobilisation (i.e. false consciousness) of the dominated classes; and it contributes to the legitimation of the established order by establishing distinctions (i.e. hierarchies) and the legitimation of these distinctions. The dominant culture produces its own ideological effect by disguising the function of division (or distinction) beneath the function of communication. The culture which unites (as a medium of communication) also divides (as an instrument of distinction) and legitimates distinctions by defining all cultures (designated subcultures) by their distance from the dominant culture (i.e. cultural deprivation). The dominant culture is identified with culture as such (that is to say, as “excellence”). (114–115)

Bourdieu’s use of the word “class” is somewhat misleading. For him, class is a social grouping of people around forms of resources or capital that can be economic, cultural, and/or symbolic. Bourdieu suggests that those in relatively dominant positions participate in the creation of divisive social structures and in hiding these structures in ideology. Moreover, the dominated classes also participate by legitimating those same structures. Recall the American Dream. This dynamic exposes the critical point that symbolic systems, while not necessarily reflecting social realities, are directly responsible for social consequences (Swartz 1997, 85). Therefore, concepts like masculinity and femininity are important to examine because, even though they are abstract categories, they are also practiced and experienced as a lived relation. Furthermore, as abstract categories, masculinity and femininity can potentially explain how women can dominate other women using constructs of femininity and masculinity. Thus, symbolic power exists in the relationship between the cognitive symbolic systems – ideologies – and the social structure. In other words, power exists, not in the specific words or symbols, but in the legitimizing belief in those words or symbols. Power is situated in them, to the extent that masculinity and femininity are seen to be legitimate categories. And, power can be understood in these terms – both binary and gendered. It is here that habitus, Bourdieu’s concept encompassing agency, comes in.

### **Habitus**

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* encompasses the collective embeddedness of individual action. This concept refers to a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in specific ways (Thompson 1991, 12; for more on habitus, see Bourdieu 1990, Chapter 3; Swartz 1997, Chapter 5; and Bourdieu 1984, Chapter 3). Habitus refers to the particular socialization of

individuals; it structures how individuals participate in the social world from the banal (how to eat, speak, and interact with others) to the complex (how to conceive of positionality and possibilities for action). Habitus structures how one will think and what an agent will consider as possibilities, impossibilities, and desires. While habitus accounts for the structural properties at the individual level, for Bourdieu, the field represents the structure. In other words, habitus (along with the field) structures conditions of possibility for social practices to be interactive and intelligible.

The strength of the concept of habitus is that it blurs the distinction between structure and action. Habitus is not action; it can be understood as embodied social structures. These structures contour and delimit conditions of possibility for potential action. Embodied structures are internalized over the long period of socialization. The period of socialization yields groups of similarly identified people who share similar conditions of possibility. But, because social constraints emerge out of practices that individuals undertake, and because of the variability of personality traits, conditions of possibility cannot be fixed and closed across groups. Thus, the concept of habitus complicates the structure–agency dichotomy because power positions are legitimated within the interactions between field and habitus.

### ***Field, capital, and class***

Fields are characterized by the “consensual” legitimated meanings I mentioned earlier, but they are also sites of struggle over resources or capital and contain groupings of people or classes. One characteristic of a field is that it encompasses a dominant (or mainstream) center and a periphery. In other words, the field is a site of struggle between classes for the power to legitimately govern meaning. Here, Bourdieu is clearly inspired by Marx. However, as noted earlier, his concept of class denotes groupings of individuals around certain forms of resources/capital (economic, cultural, and symbolic). Struggles for capital take the form of either maintaining positions and boundaries or challenging them to reposition the field of play. Bourdieu (1984) writes that understanding classes means grasping the principle of the objective divisions, i.e. divisions internalized or objectified in distinctive properties, on the basis of which the agents are most likely to divide and come together in reality in their ordinary practices, and also to mobilize themselves or be mobilized (in accordance with the specific logic, linked to a specific history, of the mobilizing organizations), by and for individual and collective political action (106). This notion of a struggle for resources in the field yields two important insights. First, because the struggle takes place within a given structure, those participating in the structure accept the structure itself. Participation in the struggle requires, at the very least, a tacit acceptance of the “rules of the game.” And second, symbolic power is found precisely in this interaction between habitus and the field.

### ***Legitimacy***

Legitimacy ties together the components of symbolic systems: habitus, field, capital, and class. Legitimacy is conferred on the basis of access or possession of certain resources valued at a specific time. It belies a distinction between social relations and power relations. Social relations encompass the struggle for capital to gain access to positions whereby legitimacy can be conferred. Concentrations of power reside in positions that have maximized capital gain where capital is understood in Bourdieu’s sense. The legitimacy and authority conferred on those perceived as wealthy (economically, culturally, or symbolically) places them in positions of power. So, one could say that all social relations *may* involve power *to the extent* that the participants in *any* given interaction confer legitimacy on *any* given position.



Articulating power as symbolic and systemic allows for its explanation as “a legitimating power that elicits the consent of *both* the dominant and the dominated” which exposes how power, by “legitimis[ing] existing economic and political relations, ... contributes to the intergenerational reproduction of inequalitarian social arrangements” (Swartz 1997, 89). This goes some way in explaining why people accept domination and why resistances often reiterate and, therefore, support basic social structures, which are two of Bourdieu’s initial questions. Observable action requires a *structurally legitimated position*. A fine line exists between blaming the dominated for actively and consciously accepting their own domination and encouraging different questions in order to yield a robust research agenda. Wacquant’s (2004) work on boxing clubs on Chicago’s South Side is a good example of a carefully navigated robust analysis. The idea of legitimacy also allows for the explanation of those who actively choose not to accept – it allows for an analysis of resistance and indeed a re-evaluation of what constitutes resistance. Risseeuw (1991) puts this quite well when she writes that “categories of agents disadvantaged by the symbolic order ... often have no option, other than recognizing the legitimacy of the dominant classification, because actually this is their only chance to neutralize effects which would be quite opposed to their interests” (168). From this angle, we might look again at the experience of Caster Semenya. Presenting Semenya as a particular kind of woman – who pays attention to her dress, hair, nails – can be read as a legitimate response even as it can be critiqued as an essentialist one that upholds problematic notions of gender that facilitated her mistreatment in the first place. Without suggesting that all resistance is fundamentally doomed to fail – concepts like reiteration, habitus, and field open up possibilities for the evolution of varied and variable ways of being.

Bourdieu’s work is, then, especially useful in three ways. First, Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power supports an analysis of the symbolic constructions of masculinity and femininity that comprise gender. This theory provides a link between the symbols I am looking at with an understanding of the workings of power at the social level. Second, his characterization of power as social domination is appropriate to an analysis of gendered domination. And third, his attention to social symbolic reproduction helps to illustrate the durability of symbols of masculinity and femininity. Because of their continual reproduction and reiteration, they are extremely difficult to undermine.

In light of the above, one might explore the idea that gender is a field whereby classes that can be identified as masculine interact with those identified as feminine. This is not to say that gender could be considered as a mode of class – that males can be a class or that females can be a class. Yet, given Bourdieu’s symbolic power, one might examine a situation whereby masculine-characterized positions (of whatever consensual definition) enjoy dominance in the field while feminine-characterized positions occupied peripheral statuses or locations within the field. An example of this might be the relationship between nurses and doctors in a hospital. Or, one might posit masculinity as a field unto itself, whereby the struggle for resources includes the struggle over legitimate conceptions of masculinity (the same could then be said of femininity). Hooper’s (2001) analysis of hegemonic masculinities could be said to be an example of such a field. Interestingly, for the question of how to approach the case of Semenya and, I think, the more likely scenario is that the field of gender is dominated by a globally legitimated dichotomy of masculinity and femininity while the consensual meaning attached to each are variable. The practice of gender has acquired legitimacy at this level to the point at which practically all societies today have some ideal conceptualizations of what is masculine and what is feminine. As a result, one must *choose* to operate from one or the other position. If one enacts a refusal, they would do so *against* prevailing norms which maintain boundaries of both the field and intelligible action in the field. The prevailing norms also set the conditions for legitimate responses to them.



### Bourdieu on gender

One major limitation to be found in my depiction of symbolic power and gender is that Bourdieu is largely silent on gender. Until the 1990s, when he published *Masculine Domination*, he seldom mentioned it, although it does figure in his empirical framework alongside categories of ethnicity, age, etc. And as we shall see, he has been unclear at best and inconsistent at worst with regard to his own views on gender. I shall not go over his oeuvre in detail since Swartz (1997) has accomplished a clear and thorough job of it, but I will address the central problems that I see highlighted in three texts. The first text is McCall's (1992) article "Does Gender Fit? Bourdieu, Feminism, and Conceptions of Social Order." The second text is David Swartz's *Culture and Power*. Both of these texts were published after Bourdieu's article "La Domination Masculine" (1990) was published, but before the book of the same title was published in 2002. The third, and more recent, text is Mottier's (2002) critique "Masculine Domination: Gender and Power in Bourdieu's Writings."

In her article, McCall addresses the dearth of work dealing with the relationship between structure/agency, and gender. She suggests that Bourdieu's work could be useful to feminists for two reasons. The first is that he provides a very elaborate and usable explanation of the relationship between structure and agency. And the second is that his work evinces an understanding of "theoretical narratives and political programs [as] embedded in social relations" (McCall 1992, 837). So, because Bourdieu, like feminists, recognized the link between theory and practice, his conceptual framework has high potential for analyzing the relationship between gender and contemporary society.

McCall focuses on two concepts, positions and dispositions (or capital-related structural positions and habitus), and offers two readings of gender's relationship with those concepts. Her first reading situates gender as secondary to occupation and education. In this reading, arguably a more common reading, gender, then, exists *outside* of primary structural determinants of social capital. The second reading incorporates gender via Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital as well as alongside occupation and education. Embodied cultural capital is manifested in dispositions (habitus). Individual socialization that leads to this type of capital includes the process of "internalising external standards of value" (McCall 1992, 843), as well as disguising this symbolic capital to make it appear as secondary, fixed characteristics. McCall says that Bourdieu offers this specific inclusion of gender unwittingly by referring to "secondary criterion as 'hidden', 'unofficial', and 'real' (842). The implication here is that secondary criteria are more pervasive because they are more likely to be taken as natural identity characteristics."

McCall views gender as a form of capital. However, she finds that "whatever gendered capital women possess in one respect they lose in another" (846). Because of this, she concludes that women internalize the binary opposition of dominant/dominated or masculinity/femininity, implying that the socialization of males leads them to internalize only one side of an opposition. It is this point of women's socialization that Bourdieu misses, argues McCall. From this critique, McCall goes on to argue for the development of a feminist habitus – an argument reminiscent of Harding's (2004) feminist standpoint theory, she recognizes.

With regard to the place of gender, Swartz gives us a slightly different account than McCall. To him, it is clear that Bourdieu places *other* differentiating factors like gender, ethnicity, and so forth as secondary dividing or unifying factors for social grouping. There are two main points of attention. First, Bourdieu is unclear about whether or not class can be divided by gender. Can men be a class? Can women? This question has implications for social struggle given Bourdieu's emphasis on class struggle over resources/capital. The criterion on whether any grouping can be a class has to do with the possibility that they could *perceive* of themselves as a social group *and act on that perception*. The second point, the question of whether or not gender can

be understood as a form of capital, is also left fairly unexamined. Because Swartz is not pursuing any specific agenda saved for explaining the work of Bourdieu, his conclusion is fairly simple. Bourdieu appears to have tried to find the middle ground between Marxist class and feminist gender, “but his claim that gender is ultimately less capable than class of sustaining mobilised social action shows his distance from most contemporary feminists” (156). However, Bourdieu is less distanced from some postcolonial feminism, an area of scholarship that has had to problematize the concept of gender in ways that stem from attention to legacies of gendered colonial policies and lived experience which yields alliances between people who recognize the symbolic and political applicability of masculinity and femininity, epitomized in the notion that “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 296; Mohanty 2003).

For Veronique Mottier, Bourdieu’s biggest problem is that he understands gender as sexual difference. This, she says, “keeps the focus of his analysis on the construction of sexual differentiations without managing to integrate this with a convincing account of gender power” (Mottier 2002, 351). The second problem is that he privileges Kabyle society as an ideal type from which gender can be extrapolated. Mottier argues that Bourdieu assumes a linear progression from pre-modern conceptions of gender to modern conceptions of gender and that modern gender conceptions are homogenous. The third problem is that Bourdieu maintains the public/private distinction when he says that masculine domination is evident in the domestic, but that its perpetuation happens largely within institutions (church, state, etc.). Mottier takes this as meaning that “the domestic space should seem as less relevant for the analysis of gender inequality” (352).

Mottier offers us a fairly straightforward and accurate summary of Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* (2002). But my reading of this text yields somewhat different conclusions. Bourdieu is accused of reinscribing binaries such as structure and agency in his attempts to transcend them. My view is that this accusation emerges from a reading of Bourdieu as primarily emancipatory.<sup>1</sup> To my mind, his purpose is to offer an account of symbolic power. In order to do this, he takes seriously *the way binaries are mobilized in the service of dominant approaches and positions*. Categorization, a process of power, is necessarily driven by an elite and legitimated by the masses. The strength of Bourdieu is that he tells a story that is not what “could be” or “should be.” That lived experiences offer a heterogeneity not captured by binary categories does not challenge the significance of Bourdieu’s contribution. In fact, Bourdieu aims to show how power works in order to unseat it. The issue that his framework addresses is precisely the problem of the categories. Therefore, the focus on the dominant and on the tools of the dominant is entirely appropriate. “The dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural” (Bourdieu 2002, 35). The reflexive character of Bourdieu’s work means that he is simultaneously examining social practice and his own tools of analysis. This indicates a political agenda distinct from the task of providing tools for emancipation from structures of power. I am reminded of Bigo’s recent comment that

[t]he parallel between Bourdieu’s position and the refusal of Michel Foucault to also elaborate on a general theory of power shows that, beyond their differences, they have a common suspicion concerning the ontology of the mainstream as well as that of reformers and neo-Gramscians. The terminologies of domination or symbolic violence are never ahistorical and must be identified and specified. (2011, 233)

Hence, a clear analysis of these terminologies is a necessary precursor to the posing of questions and the proposal of solutions.

This, however, does not mean that there are not problems in thinking about how we are to understand the relationship of gender to Bourdieu’s framework. *Masculine Domination* (2002)

is a study of the relationship of gender to power. In it, Bourdieu contemplates power as domination, domination as symbolic, and symbols as ethnicity, gender, culture, and language (37). At times, he seems to suggest that masculine domination is one form of domination. But, he also points to the possibility of understanding gender as the overarching symbolic power dynamic of contemporary social practice (Chapter 3). This stems from his engagement with colonial power dynamics.

### Reading gender and imperialism

Between 1865 and 1915, British suffragettes' primary agenda was to convince the anti-suffragette movement of women's goals and their suitability for posts within the empire, in particular that of "reforming prostitutes" as a policy outcome of the Indian Contagious Diseases Act (1869). The Act required prostitutes in the service of British men to submit to regular medical tests to avoid the spread of disease. The suffragettes claimed that the burdensome "civilising mission" was as much their responsibility as that of any imperialist before them. This civilizing mission included the job of feminizing women according to a Victorian Christian legitimated conception of femininity. The debate over the Indian Contagious Diseases Act exposes how conceptions of masculinity and femininity powerfully order symbolic meaning by layering dualisms onto one another in ways that are highly logical and embodied.

The LNA (Ladies National Association) and members of the men's version, the National Association (NA) – conjointly known as "the Repealers" – framed the Contagious Diseases Act in Britain as a violation of personal liberty, which was humiliating and ineffective for controlling venereal disease (VD) and prostitution. While they aimed to end prostitution, the repealers disagreed with state regulation on the grounds that it encouraged sexual immorality by creating a legal space for it (Burton 1993, 130). In other words, they characterized state regulation of brothels as a grave and problematic immorality also at odds with the dictates of liberty. Regulation was not even effective at stemming the incidence of VD. The LNA compiled documentation of the opening and closing of exam centers (or "lock hospitals") in conjunction with the eruption of disease during the first half of the nineteenth century. They concluded that the available documentation indicated that the measures taken under the Acts were ineffective at stemming outbreaks of disease (Burton 1993, 130).

In 1886, the Act was repealed in Britain. But the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1869 allowed local authorities in India the same measure of power as the British Acts, again with the aim of reducing venereal disease among British troops. Again, the LNA framed the Acts as an infringement of civil liberties and the direct cause of moral disease. Yet, the discussion of Acts as they operated outside of Britain was different. In the argument that the Acts were against the dictates of Victorian morality, the debate centered on legitimate forms of masculinity and femininity appropriate to a modern and civilized society. The Repealers' success in Britain inspired the British LNA to embark on the "Indian Crusade" (1886–1900) in order to fight for repeal in India.<sup>2</sup> While the NA disbanded after domestic success, the LNA remained intact, "justifying itself ... in imperial terms for the next thirty years" (Burton 1993, 131). This phase was due in large part to the efforts of Josephine Butler, the LNA leader, who is quoted as saying that "for twenty years Indian women have been oppressed and outraged ... and by a *Christian* nation (Burton 1993, 131)!" Interestingly, looking inward, the Acts were seen as threatening *Victorian morality*. Looking outside Britain, they threatened *imperial Christian morality*, where morality is a symbolic system legitimated by general consensus that regulated the contours of the debate.

In 1888, British newspapers printed Lord Roberts' – the commander in Chief in India – response to the campaign. He defended the necessity of medical checks and the willingness of the women to undergo these exams. Lord Roberts argued that

in the regimental bazaars it is necessary to have a sufficient number of women, to take care that they are sufficiently attractive, to provide them with proper houses, and above all to insist upon means of ablution being always available. (Burton 1993, 134)<sup>3</sup>

That same year, the LNA succeeded in getting the Acts repealed. By 1893, LNA investigations forced Lord Roberts to admit that despite repeal the regulation system remained frequent and widespread (Burton 1993, 136). In 1895, after another outbreak of VD and after a call for re-enactment (of the original Acts), Butler pointed out that if VD plagued India, it would also plague Britain. Thus, she argued that discussions around re-enactment in India would open the door for discussions regarding re-enactment in Britain. Moreover, she countered that since the Acts condoned or sanctioned “sexual vice,” the allowance of such interaction led not only to VD, but also to moral disease. This perspective is illustrated in the most common argument for repeal,

That soldiers who had consorted with Indian women would return home physically diseased and morally corrupted. Petitioners in one “mother’s memorial” for Indian repeal worried that the impact of the acts “cannot be confined to the Army, but must permeate the whole of our social life ... [and] cannot leave unimpaired the sanctity or happiness of the English home”. (Burton 1993, 58)

The reformers focused on the threat posed to imperial Britain, British tradition and morality, British people, and British soldiers as much as, if not more than, Indian women. The refrain that “regulation only served to legitimise sexual vice and it produced ‘hygienic failure and moral depravation,’ encapsulated the widespread reaction to the regulation in India, as well as the possibility of its reinstatement in Britain” (Burton 1993, 138). “Britishness” (or “Englishness” for Butler) – imperial greatness and Christian morality – is at stake in this field of play.

Legitimate femininity was also at stake in this symbolic struggle. Nineteenth-century calls for universal suffrage in Britain met with the accusation that, “*all* feminists were targeted as unwomanly, and female emancipation [was considered] sterilising and ‘unsexing’” (Burton 1993, 18). British suffragettes responded by declaring women’s imperial role in terms of traditional conceptions of femininity and British Imperial identity. Their burden of care-taking for the moral and social well-being of Indian women, as well as for the moral well-being of the British Empire, made it possible to combat charges of their lack of femininity and patriotism. Men were seen to be accountable for vice because of their irrepressible sexual needs. Virtuous women, however, because of their greater moral standing, were left with the responsibility of “purifying” the Empire (Burton 1993, 151). As a result, Josephine Butler succeeded in both feminizing ethical ideas as well as imperializing the traditional ideas of women’s national responsibility. “[Butler and the LNA] created an imperial feminist [conditions of possibility] on which the whole Indian repeal campaign depended” (Burton 1993, 152). Moreover, her public position as a suffragette led to the further sedimentation of notions of ideal femininity and masculinity within the context of British imperial power.

Ironically, the Repealers had little to no contact with the Indian women they purported to represent outside of the direct contact of Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, two American suffragettes. The Repealers’ representation of Indian women stemmed directly from Andrew and Bushnell’s single journey. Like British men, British women, and the Acts themselves, Indian women were also framed by imperial, Christian morality. “Indian prostitutes in [the Americans’] journal are characterised in two ways: as conscious of their shame and as helpless victims of the repeal system – often simultaneously” (Burton 1993, 159). But Andrew and Bushnell refer to themselves on more than one occasion as “good women” and the shame evidenced by these Indian women who were “bad women.” They write of one woman they met, “[s]he was attractive in appearance, and did not look like a *bad girl*; hung her head in shame at meeting *good women*

...” (Burton 1993, 160). Evidence of shame made these “girls” reformable; it made them essentially *good*, especially the attractive ones. In addition, Andrew and Bushnell refer to the Indian prostitutes as typical of “Eastern women” or typically subjected by “Eastern society.” Thus, their critique is not of patriarchy generally, but of the form that patriarchy takes in particular places. Indian women were framed as “potentially” good women that an immoral type of patriarchy (both local and imperial) made bad.

The nineteenth century saw advocates of women’s rights – even those considered progressive and radical – resort to making cultural comparisons between themselves and non-European women (Burton 1993; Newman 1999). British feminism became ensconced within the social mission of Empire. It is within this nexus, that

the axioms of feminism and imperialism mirrored each other as the condition of women in non-European cultures was taken to be the measure of their respective civilisations; European women occupied, in this rhetoric, the place of both symbols and agents of European civilising missions. (Joseph 2004, 1–2; see also Burton 2003)

The condition of women was gauged against the backdrop of conceptions of masculinity and femininity, as they tended to be associated with males and females. Bourdieu’s symbolic power highlights the extent to which this complicity amounts to an acceptance of the “rules of the game.” The struggle for inclusion takes place within a structure of – in this case – British Imperialism and the participants in the struggle accept British Imperialism as the field of play in which ideal conceptions of masculinity and femininity are at stake and layered onto hierarchical conceptions of modernity, morality, and civilization. Thus, binary and hierarchical gendered relations are not limited to relations between geo-political spaces or between men and women.

British suffragettes declared themselves spokeswomen of colonized women, all the while maintaining what Edward Said would have considered to be Orientalist perceptions of Indian women. The relationship between British women and Indian women is complex because, on the one hand, British women utilized gendered constructions of femininity in order to dominate Indian women, thereby, ironically, adopting a masculine imperialist position. The assumption that Eastern women (and societies) were primitive elevated British women to the progressive echelons of imperial power (Burton 1993, 74). But, on the other hand, British women also suffered oppression by virtue of their femaleness. Their rhetoric legitimated British women’s alliance with British men, their superior nation, and the ideals of modernity. The assumption of Eastern primitiveness operated in two different ways. First, “it imposed an accepted set of hierarchies on women of the world, dividing them into degraded and progressive, if not into colonial and imperial” (74). The separation of women into hierarchies has symbolic connotations and reflects a dynamic of power. Second, identified in opposition to Other women, British suffragettes articulated their position as part of the imperial project – the civilizing mission is at work as an instrument of domination. For example,

[v]ictorian feminist writers enmeshed feminist argument in those hierarchies, thus establishing an ideological opposition between Western female emancipation and its apparent negative, Eastern female backwardness. Embodied as weak and helpless and the opposite of Western women, “Oriental womanhood” was at the base of feminist argument, acting as an important ideological and imaginative support to claims that British women’s emancipation was part of Victorian social progress. (Burton 1993, 74)

In the imperial setting, British women’s relationship with Indian women was gendered *because their tasks were stated in gendered terms*: feminizing Indian women, showing their

male compatriots that women should be emancipated so as to participate in the imperialist enterprise, attempting to create a global sisterhood in order to fight male domination. Either way the discourses describing/justifying their actions link imperial domination to male/masculine domination, another troubling conflation of masculinity and femininity with the male and female bodies, respectively.

In this case, imperial gender norms worked symbolically in the service of teaching a legitimate form of femininity to Indian women. Other historiographical accounts include the British colonization of Egypt in which Lord Cromer used explicitly gendered language to justify British actions (Ahmed 1993, 2011) and the hypersexualization or feminization of colonized men (Shohat and Stam 1994; Davis 2001; Hooks 2003; Elkins 2005). These illustrate how masculinity and femininity are entangled in practices of domination and violence. These examples also expose processes of masculinization/emasculation and feminization as just that – *processes*. And, the legacy of these conversations bleeds into more contemporary conversations about saving women, as seen for example in Abu Lughod's (2002) "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" The political utility of conceptions of gender seen in arguments about British women's suffrage along with the insidious assumptions and anxieties of gender that emerge from Semenya's presence as a representative of South Africa in women's sports is evident in Bourdieu's approach to symbolic power.

### **A reading of symbolic power and gender**

In this section, I posit what a colonially informed Bourdieuan gender might look like. In six steps, I contemplate the notion that power is always gendered – that oppression and domination order symbolic meaning dichotomously and in overlapping ways that center a gendered perspective, a perspective that privileges masculine strength, wealth, and rationality while it subordinates feminine weakness, poverty, and irrationality.

#### **(1) Sex/gender**

Thinking about how to analyze the problem of British imperial feminism requires analyzing how the positions and practices of both men and women can, in different interactions, be understood as masculine *or* feminine. Gender is socially constructed, yet negotiated and experienced in daily banality. A number of theorists attempted to ensconce the concept of gender in the social world and came up against the problem of the sex/gender distinction. For example, Nicholson (1995) argues for detaching gender and its constituent categories of masculinity and femininity from "men" and "women." On the limits of the sex/discourse of gender distinction, see Glynos (2000).

#### **(2) Field/habitus**

Using Bourdieu, I am considering gender and its constituent categories of masculinity and femininity as existing at the structural level of fields and in the embodied form of the habitus. As symbols, masculinity and femininity are variable. They are contextually rooted and depend on reiteration to both stabilize and evolve meanings and practices. Relying on the notion of the field, one can speak globally about conceptions of masculinity and femininity regardless of the variability of meanings and practices. One might argue that trans-bodies disturb this neat designation. In examining symbols, however, trans-bodies still perform masculinity and femininity. Queer Theory offers interesting ways to think about gender practice as written on and enacted by bodies (Puar 2007).



## (3) Binary thinking

Gender connotes the *binarism*: masculinity/femininity. As a binary, masculinity and femininity function in a dynamic of power wherein one is dominant and the other is subordinate. Social interaction must be situated in its intellectual and institutional context. Mitchell (1991) shows how colonialism fostered and institutionalized practices of thinking premised on binaries. For a detailed account on the structure and work of binaries, see Derrida (1982).

## (4) Political/analytical tools

The gender binary is the most entrenched manifestation of the binary of dominant and subordinate. Some argue that individuals cannot experience or enact gender without experiencing or enacting race and class as well (Chafetz 1997, see also Fenstermaker and West 2002). However, others suggest that one can theorize a universal model of domination and that positions can morph from oppressed in one interaction to oppressor in another (Collins 1990). Chafetz's (1997) response that the position that gender, race, and class must be theorized in unison "reduce[s] oppression to difference and lose[s] sight of the structural inequities that are fundamental to these statuses" (116) is a powerful one that exposes a distinction between political tools and analytical tools. The interaction between habitus and field, as well as concepts of class and capital, can potentially offer a solution. It proposes that any theory of domination or inequality is premised, however subtly, on the universalism of social power dynamics.

## (5) Dominant/dominated

If power is inherent to the construction of categories that bound lived experience and social practices, then it is through these categories that one can examine power. If binaries comprised a dominant component and a subjugated component, then it is possible to understand power using this dominant/dominated dichotomy. The focus on power's relationship to these bifurcated inequalities (hierarchies) highlights how power is itself dichotomized into dominant and dominated positions, and hence gendered (it is given meaning as masculine or feminine) and how race and class domination is also gendered.

## (6) Masculinity/femininity

Thus, symbolic power must be understood via categories of masculinity and femininity. Haste (1993) suggests that the binary of masculinity and femininity gets mapped onto other dichotomies. Haste writes,

We have a deep predilection for making sense of the world in terms of either/or, in terms of polarities. But most significantly, we map the polarity of masculine versus feminine on to other polarities. The polarity of masculine and feminine is an extremely powerful idea. It has such clear boundaries and such clear antitheses, in all cultures. (3)

This explanation of how power operates reflects the ways in which multiple positions can be occupied concurrently and is important in three ways. First, it theoretically engages with the sociality of gender as it is lived, particularly as a legacy of colonial practices. Second, it is a step toward trying to explain how a woman might enact masculinity. And third, it participates in a discussion regarding the power of *legitimated* dichotomous positioning.



## Conclusion

In 2004, Lois McNay made the case that one must understand gender as a lived relation which requires coming to terms with the relationship between agency and experience, and recognizes that people are the subjects of social analysis. She responds to what she sees as a division between materialist and culturalist forms of feminism, the area of study in which gendered analyzes traditionally take place. Critics of materialist forms of feminism suggest that it privileges “simplistic divisions such as base and superstructure, reality and representation in order to assert the primacy of economic forces in their analysis of women’s oppression” (McNay 2004, 175). Critics of culturalist forms of feminism suspect “the effects of the ‘linguistic’ turn in feminist theory which... results in a narrowing down of the issue of oppression to the rarefied one of identity politics” (McNay 2004, 175). McNay argues that Bourdieu’s conception of social phenomenology as relational provides a way to move away from the conversational impasse. In this excellent article, she resurrects Scott’s (1991) essay “The Evidence of Experience” and she argues that “denuded of the idea of experience and attendant notions of self-hood, intention and reflexivity, post-structural work on subjectivity often finds itself without a workable concept of agency with which to animate its notions of resistance, subversion, etc.,” or to narrate Semenya’s gender work after her “transgression” (McNay 2004, 179). Agency refers to an individual’s capacity for action and cannot be simply understood as a property of unstable discursive structures (McNay 2004, 179–180). Scott queries the appeal to experience as evidence. The discipline of history increasingly amasses information on “experiences” as a way of becoming more inclusive in its subject matter (the same could be said of other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities). But to what end? Indeed,

the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Scott 1991, 777)

Thus, “focussing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of ‘experience’ and on the politics of its construction [is necessary]. Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted” (Scott 1991, 797). This paper contributes to this discussion by contemplating how masculinity and femininity are embodied and experienced.

Responses to Semenya’s experience point to an insidious predilection for reducing gender to binary terms. Contemporary arguments in the USA and elsewhere about masculinity and (gun) violence, (gang) rape, spectacular conceptions of masculinity and femininity presented in television shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Buckwild*, and historical colonial hierarchized forms of gender policies and practices exhibit a painful consistency with regard to conceptions and practices of gender. The reflections in this paper are part of a long-standing conversation on Bourdieu and gender and they do not represent a conclusion or an overview of that discussion (see Jabri 2013). Rather, I inquire about the extent to which gender infuses social practice and I do this with binaries that scholars commonly dismiss. I contemplate the complex ways in which such binaries are mobilized and boundaries maintained as seen in responses to Semenya’s gender troubles. As a concept, a descriptor, an identity, a political tool, and an analytical tool, gender wears many hats. Yet, it is illustrative to think about gender – masculinity and femininity – as an analytical tool to help reflexively convey, study, analyze the observable world, *which includes embodied legacies of imperialism and colonial governance practices.*

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## Notes

1. This is not to say that Bourdieu rejected emancipation. Indeed, Bourdieu's activist work contradicts his analysis of power. For example, Bourdieu's comments on the emancipation of workers goes against his notion of struggles in a field which more a sort of process of perpetual motion. On the other hand, I have always found it a logical progression from analyzing the world to figuring out how to insert oneself and I find the "contradiction" less jarring and more human.
2. While similar policies were in place in other places, India was a convenient focus for the LNA because it was governed from Westminster. This meant that they were able to work from London.
3. Roberts' circular of 1886 was published in the British press in 1888 as evidence that he knew regulation continued illegally.

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