

# A Sporting Body Without Organs: Theorizing Un/Gendered Assemblages

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Responsive to the recent proliferation of anti-trans sports policies and state legislation, this essay argues for a deeper collaboration across sports studies and trans studies. I offer an analysis of the 2020 Gender Inclusion Policy enacted by USA Ultimate (the North American governing body for the sport of ultimate frisbee) alongside an analysis of my embodied experiences while playing the sport. I develop a set of interrelated terms—the sporting body without organs and un/Gendered assemblages—that build upon Deleuzian and trans studies onto-epistemologies. Beyond an exploration of the gendered policies of ultimate frisbee, this essay’s broader purpose is to redirect the conversation about trans athletes and anti-trans policies away from the topic of how and why bodies become organized into categorical inclusion/exclusion, toward a focus on sporting moments and movements when gender can become a malleable element of play.

Less than a year after Iowan Governor Kim Reynolds signed House File 2416—a bill that prohibits trans girls and women from participating on athletic teams and events designated for girls and women—two additional anti-trans laws were introduced and passed into Iowan state law. The first, Senate File 538, prohibits medical professionals from providing gender-affirming care to minors, and the second, Senate File 482, restricts the use of bathrooms and locker rooms in primary and secondary schools to individuals of the “same sex” (SF482, 2023). Now, as I write this in January of 2024, just under 2 years after the passing of the initial anti-trans sport bill, Iowan state legislators are debating House File 2082, which is set to remove gender identity from the list of protections within the Iowa Civil Rights Act. The more recent bills represent a clear escalation of legislative attacks on the rights of transgender Iowans, particularly trans girls and women, and the effective reduction of trans public life. With the signing of these bills, Iowa enters into troublesome company with 23 other U.S. states (as of this writing), and a slew of national and international sport governing bodies that have restricted or outright banned the participation of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex athletes. Iowa’s HF2416 and SF482, like many of the other prohibitive state policies, rely upon a static and restrictive definition of sex: “a person’s biological sex as either female or male.”

Feminist sports studies scholars have for decades troubled the determinism of “biological sex,” demonstrating how sex-segregated sport, “sex-testing” in women’s elite sport, and “sex”-based policies have been constructed out of and serve as mechanisms for upholding sexist, racist, classist, and nationalist ideologies and practices (see as examples Cooky et al., 2013; Kane, 1995; Karkazis et al., 2012; Parks Pieper, 2016; Schultz, 2011). Likewise, in more recent years, scholars have begun turning their attention to the ways that binary models of sex/gender naturalized through sport are often maintained “despite [acknowledgement] that sexed bodies are unruly” (Pape, 2019, p. 3; see also Pape, 2020; Posbergh, 2022; and see Jones et al., 2017 for a review of research on transgender athletes and sports policies). These and other feminist approaches to sport, sex, and gender have laid important groundwork for critiques against the

current onslaught of anti-trans sports policies and legislation. However, engagement by sports studies scholars with issues of gender and sex, even when explicitly exploring transgender policy regulations and trans athlete experiences or representations, have often overlooked interventions and theories of the body offered by trans studies scholars and the broader cultural implications of these policies beyond sport. Susan Stryker (2006) distinction between “transgender phenomena” and “transgender studies” in her introduction to the first edition of the *Transgender Studies Reader* is useful here. The former refers to

a wide range of phenomena that call attention to the fact that “gender,” as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity. (p. 3)

Whereas the latter, transgender studies, refers to an interdisciplinary academic field that “enables a critique of the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background” (p. 3). Much like Samantha King argues in her 2008 piece—“What’s Queer About (Queer) Sport Sociology Now? A Review Essay”—about the proliferation of sports studies research on LGBTQ identities and subjects without commitments to queer theories or methodologies, sports studies seems now to be at risk of recapitulating ciscentric ideologies if our research remains focused on transgender phenomena without deep engagement with theories and approaches from transgender studies. Drawing upon trans studies theories, such as those that emphasize processes of becoming or the malleability of corporeality (Crawford 2008; Malatino, 2019), offers sports studies more tools with which to understand the ontological and epistemological limitations of sports policies that seek to define and stabilize sexed embodiment. In this cultural moment in which policies and legislation like Iowa’s have become commonplace, and, in which research on trans athletes seems to be exploding, sports studies scholarship, particularly that which seeks to understand the regulation of sexed/gendered bodies, ought to look more substantively to trans studies for onto-epistemological guidance.<sup>1</sup>

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Unlike King's article, this is not a review essay. Instead, I offer a brief analysis of a gendered sports policy and its embodied implications through a trans and transfeminist deployment of the Deleuzian "body without organs." I focus on the sport of ultimate frisbee and USA Ultimate's 2020 Gender Inclusion policy which de-regulated the official surveillance of sexed/gendered embodiment, allowing for athletes to participate according to their self-defined gender identity. I focus on ultimate frisbee precisely because its gender inclusion policy is much more liberally inclusive than many of those enacted recently by state and sport governing bodies, and thus could be read as a radical challenge to dominant modes of categorizing athletes and organizing sports. However, I demonstrate that the policy has both stabilizing and destabilizing effects on gender and embodiment. Beyond the policy itself, I analyze my own embodied experiences participating in ultimate frisbee, and I focus on the interrelational production of gender in moments of both movement and stasis. In focusing on the material and embodied implications of this policy, I seek to redirect the conversation about trans athletes and anti-trans policies away from the topic of how and why bodies become organized into categorical inclusion/exclusion, belonging/unbelonging, and instead toward a focus on sporting moments and movements when gender can become a malleable element of play. Through both the policy and embodied analyses, I develop a set of new terms—the "sporting body without organs" and "un/Gendered assemblages"—that build upon Deleuzian and trans studies ontological orientations toward *becoming*. This analysis and my development and deployment of these terms is speculative, playful, and necessarily incomplete. More than providing an interpretation of policy and embodiment, my hope is that this analysis offers a generative example of the possibilities that emerge when we bring sports studies and trans studies together.

## Sweaty Methods and Making My Body Without Organs

In the sixth chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari ask, "How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?" In their response to this titular question, they slowly reveal the "body without organs" as an elusive ontological orientation, and unsurprisingly, not a literal human body devoid of some, or all, of its organs. The "body without organs," or "BwO," is used as a metaphor for thinking about (dis)organization and (anti)structure; it is a way of conceptualizing an ontology that pushes up against and reworks normative boundaries and stratifications. Deleuze and Guattari's BwO, along with the rest of their corpus of writing, differs significantly from dominant Western philosophical thought. Where dominant Western philosophies have imposed a number of dichotomies—male/female, human/animal, nature/culture, and so on—and relied on alignment of what Deleuze and Guattari term "the three great strata" (organism, significance, and subjectification), Deleuze and Guattari's thinking offers a *new materialist* ontology, which both aligns with and builds on poststructuralist challenges to identitarian essentialisms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 159). Briefly and broadly, new materialisms acknowledge matter as *matter*; in other words, new materialist thinking emphasizes material interrelations and matter's capacities to effect.<sup>2</sup> While certainly not without debates, detractors, and skeptics,<sup>3</sup> new materialist thinking offers useful onto-epistemologies for, as Monforte (2018) puts it, "readdressing materiality without returning to essentialism"—a

central concern for feminist and trans theories of gender and embodiment (p. 380). These new materialist orientations align well with trans studies scholarship that has long engaged with material embodiments and affects while troubling gender essentialisms.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs hence provides an entryway into thinking about the material and active body as relationally constituted.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) critique dominant Western philosophy, cheekily asserting that it operates through a set of overdetermined and limitational commands:

You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subjected, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of a statement—otherwise you're just a tramp. (p. 159)

Instead of binaries, and the stable signifying/signified subjects that they produce, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize *multiplicities* and *assemblages*, offering the BwO as an at least partial, and at least momentary, rejection of ontological stasis and the clear unification of organism, sign, and subjectivity. In other words, the BwO is not a stable or coherent "thing," it cannot be reduced to a singular entity. Without "organs," or the organization of the body that they provide, Deleuze and Guattari's BwO emphasizes "intensities" instead of order, and processes of becoming, instead of static subjectivity or identity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.153). Although the body without organs emerges in moments when the three great strata are disordered and de-linked from one another, it is ultimately an ephemeral ontology, under constant risk of being wrangled, harnessed, and brought back into the dominant system of order. Deleuze and Guattari deploy the terms "reterritorialization" and "deterritorialization" to refer to these (dis)ordering effects. "To territorialize" as trans studies scholar Hil Malatino puts it, "is to set and define its limits, to organize component parts into a coherent whole determined by a specific end" and to de-territorialize is "to undo, to free up, to break out of a system or situation of control, fixity, or repression" (Malatino, 2014, p. 138). Ultimately, finding or making your body without organs means developing resistant, anti-normative onto-epistemologies, while simultaneously existing within an oppressively territorializing milieu.

While the "body without organs" is not an allegory for transgender embodiment, the concept does lend itself to meditations on gender diversity, disrupting the sedimentation of sex/gender as static and irreducible facts of the body. Trans studies scholars have taken up Deleuze and Guattari's work as particularly useful in articulations of gendered embodiment, the co-production of gender, and ongoing processes of becoming. Crawford (2008), for instance, asserts that the body without organs

offers resistance to the notion of bodily integrity or unity and calls to mind the dynamic character of transgender bodies—even though its dispensing of a definitive bodily organization clashes with the aspirations of those trans people for whom the acquisition or removal or [*sic*] certain organs constitutes the authenticity of trans subjectivity. (p. 138)

Crawford brings together what he terms the "transgender without organs" with Deleuze and Guattari's related concept of "nomadism" or "nomadology" to think through a "kind of gender nomadism" whereby gender transition can be understood not through the dominant narrative of moving from one's so-called

*wrong body* to “come home” to the *right self/body*, but as inflected by spatial and temporal factors beyond bodily limitations (Crawford, 2008, pp. 135, 133). As Crawford notes, the body without organs “presumes that our environments move us as much as we move through them” and therefore he regards “space and movement as constitutive of one’s gender” (Crawford, 2008, pp. 139, 137). Understanding gender modification and trans embodiment as an “infinitely unfinished” BwO, contingent upon factors beyond one’s bodily boundaries works to “de-territorialize gender rather than settle it”<sup>5</sup> (Crawford, 2008, p. 139).

While Crawford engages with the BwO to elucidate an understanding of trans subjectivity through movement and environment, trans studies scholarship has also drawn from Deleuze and Guattari’s work to deploy and develop the related concept of *becoming*.<sup>6</sup> Becoming, in Deleuzian thought, is an ontological liminality that demonstrates the instability of subjectivity. The BwO is always a becoming. But, the liminality of becoming does not mean that it is not real, or that it has a discrete beginning or end, pre or post. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put it:

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or at the limit, an identification . . . . To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination . . . . [It is] perfectly real . . . . Becoming produces something other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. (p. 238)

In terms of ontology, becoming is not an excess or a lack, it is not the so-called constitutive outside; becoming is the real thing. Thinking with becoming can help us to understand the embodied subject as always in process and interactional, hence disrupting alignment of the three great strata. In his book, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*, Malatino (2019) engages with Deleuzian becoming as a way of theorizing and validating “monstrous” trans embodiment. For Malatino, becoming enables us to theorize sex, gender, and embodiment in terms other than biological determinism or cultural significations. Importantly, Malatino’s use of becoming is not a gesture toward the processes of gender transition—medical, social, or otherwise; it is not so much about *becoming trans* as it is about thinking about subjectivity beyond the boundaries of the body. In other words, becoming allows for an understanding of the body “as inseparable from the milieu in which it comes to matter” (p. 193). Malatino (2019) goes on to argue that this epistemological orientation toward the body allows us to think

in a framework focused on something other than [the body’s] discursive legibility or the referents applied to and implied by its significations. If the truth of sex is not provided by the body, located *within* the body, but rather something that happens between bodies, in interactions and engagements that rework the materiality of the body itself, then we need to pay serious attention to this interplay, this *between*, particularly with reference to how it mutates our conception of the body as *the* source for the determination of sexed subjectivity. (p. 193)

Malatino pairs his conceptualization of bodily becoming with Karen Barad’s concept of *intraaction*, whereby one’s gendered

becoming can be understood as the entanglement not just of discursive meaning and embodied significations, but also, the entanglement and co-production of the body with the materials that it engages with. For example, in Malatino’s (2019) reading of a transmasculine experience of taking testosterone, the body is entangled with and produced by a

complex cocktail of biomolecular transformation, dimorphic fictions of gender, the circuits of hormone extraction and production (embedded as they are within neoliberal and neo-colonial processes at work in production, drug trials, distribution, and access), the gray-market acquisition of hormones by uninsured subjects—the list could go on. (pp. 211–212)

Malatino’s application of becoming in thinking about sexed subjectivity dislodges the primacy (and singularity) of the so-called biological body in determining sex, in favor of recognizing how bodies, sexes, and genders are produced interrelationally. This emphasis on the “between” and processes of becoming deterritorializes dominant narratives of both sex and gender that organize and signify bodies into fixed identities. In other words, in terms of gender epistemologies, becoming allows us to view gendered embodiments as something other than reliant on discrete individualized subjectivities and likewise disrupts the identitarian binaries of man/woman, as well as cis/trans.

This understanding of gender resonates well the black trans feminism that Marquis Bey (2022) has developed. For Bey (2022), “transness” is a kind of “unfixation” of gender from the body or identity (p. 3). Transness, along with blackness and “the implicit ‘woman’ as the subject of feminism,” are “inflections of mutinous subjectivities that have been captured and consolidated into bodily legibilities” (p. 9). We can think of transness, in this sense, then, as a body without organs – deterritorializing subjectivities that are always at risk of being reterritorialized. While Bey does draw upon Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual schemas, and the three theorists share similar onto-epistemological orientations, Bey’s work builds more substantively from black feminism and queer of color critique. Bey develops complex theoretical interventions that point toward an abolitionist politics of gender and race, through which they develop the term “un/gendering”—a term which I take up in combination with the body without organs later in this essay.

Taken together, Deleuze and Guattari’s body without organs and its uptake and redeployment through trans studies scholarship, point toward alternative onto-epistemologies for understanding and analyzing sex, gender, the body, and subjectivity. Rather than thinking of bodies as discrete subjects or identities with clear boundaries, the body without organs and the related concepts reviewed here offer us tools for thinking of bodies as interrelational and processual. Sport—given that it is generally enacted by and through bodies, often in motion with and against other bodies in shared space, and its dominant organization through essentialist notions of binary sex and gender—offers a particularly generative site for finding a body without organs. And yet, sports studies literature, particularly that which has attended to trans athletes or policies, has not given substantial attention to these theories. And although some sports studies scholars have taken a turn toward new materialisms, even taking up the body without organs to explore gendered becoming (Markula, 2006), few have done so in deep conversation with trans studies scholarship. This gap prompts me to ask: How might the conceptualizations of gender and embodiment laid out here shift the way that we understand and evaluate (anti)trans sports policies and regulations? Likewise, how might

sporting environments shaped by (anti)trans policies impact the co-production of gender? How do (anti)trans policies themselves become elements of gendered processes of becoming? While I will begin to address these questions through my analysis below, I also pose them as an invitation to scholars to consider for future research.

What follows in the remainder of this essay is an example of what a trans-studies-informed Deleuzian analysis of a sport's gender regulations and its embodied consequences can look like. I build on the concepts discussed thus far to think about moving sporting bodies and the bodies that govern them, and I point to what I am calling *un/Gendered* (building on Bey) possibilities that arise when our attention is directed toward movement and assemblages over stasis and coherence. I argue that identifying and focusing on these sporting bodies without organs offers us another frame and focal point for thinking about gendered policies and politics in sport that moves us away from the essentializing logic embedded in anti-trans policies. I focus here not on identities nor bodies per se, but instead on intensities of bodies in relation to others and on movement as well as stagnation. The "sporting body without organs" that I explore here refers, at least, to (a) sport governing bodies and rules of play that, if only fleetingly, offer up opportunities to destabilize normative sporting structures, in this case, the binary-sexed/gendered organization for participation in sport and (b) *un/Gendered*, embodied assemblages where human and governing bodies co-constitute one another.

Finally, in order to find my sporting body without organs, I deploy "sweaty methods"—a reworking of Sara Ahmed's (2017) "sweaty concepts." Ahmed's "sweaty concepts" serve as a reminder that theoretical and conceptual work does not simply appear in the mind behind a furrowed brow or become actualized through quiet contemplation. Instead, sweaty conceptual work is embedded in, not external to, worldly experience (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13). Likewise, sweaty concepts are those that develop from embodied experiences, and "[come] out of a description of a body that is not at home in a world" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13). Taking up and extending these worldly and descriptive aspects, my sweaty methods draw upon a temporally expansive recounting of my own experiences, embodiments, affects, and remembrances of specific as well as composite moments of being, at times, "not at home in a world"<sup>7</sup> of ultimate frisbee, particularly in this contemporary moment (and specifically in the state of Iowa) of heightened public attention to (trans)gender politics. While my aim here is to resist identitarian logic, I am not so naive as to assert that we can wish or will them away. Indeed, we are constantly being reterritorialized—brought back within the dominant, stabilizing ontological milieu. And as Bey (2022) asserts, the body and the identities attached to it have "come to be the site that suffers oppressive forces because that is precisely how oppressive forces wish to construct our subjectivities—to form to them and understand themselves as formed, in toto, by them" (p. 3). As such, it is important to explicate my own subjectivity and its relevance to my deployment of sweaty methods in the development of this analysis. Despite a lifelong vexation by gender, I remain hesitant to claim a trans or nonbinary identity and, I am likewise troubled by a claim to cisgender womanhood. The most resonant articulation of gendered subjectivity that I have found comes from Bey (2022), who asserts of herself: "I am not trans per se but enact a subjectivity in ways that seek a trans and transed engendering of sociality, or inter- and intrapersonality, which is to say *I have a trans relationship to gender*" (pp. 233–234). That said, I was assigned female at birth, and I am most often read as a cisgender woman, and occasionally as nonbinary. This

combination of my own blurred and blurry sense of self alongside my general passing as cisgender contextualizes my situatedness within the gendered sports landscape. While I will demonstrate the co-production of gender later in this essay, it is important here to note that the destabilization of gender (as) identity does not flatten or equate all forms of gender nonconformity with one another. I am acutely aware of the dissonance between my own experiences of gender, embodiment, and sport, and the experiences of those who identify, or are identified as, trans girls and women, particularly trans girls and women of color, who are the primary targets of institutionalized as well as quotidian gender policing and violence. My sex/gender is largely unquestioned in my participation in women's and mixed-gender sports, even if my gender presentation and embodiment at times push up against normative expectations. My Whiteness certainly contributes to my ability to pass undetected under the gender nonconformity radar as well. And yet, given my troubled relationship to and with gender, I have found myself frequently feeling "not at home" in sports environments.

I move now to a review of ultimate frisbee's gendered organization structure before turning to my analysis of how the sporting body without organs emerges through play. I continue to build on and refine my description of the sporting body without organs throughout the remaining discussion.

### "Gender Inclusion" in Ultimate Frisbee

Ultimate frisbee is a noncontact field sport, developed in the late 1960s in the Northeast of the United States as an intentionally anti-authoritarian game. As Kirsten Walters (2008) writes in *Ultimate Spin: Contesting the Rhetoric, Countercultural Ethos and Commodification of the Ultimate Frisbee Sport, 1968–2008*, the founders of ultimate frisbee "positioned the sport in opposition to the 'mainstream,' openly mocking 'jocks,' coaches, and the traditional sporting mentality" (p. 70). Walters argues that these origins have created a lasting impression on how players and spectators continue to understand the sport—as countercultural and radically inclusive. One major defining factor of ultimate frisbee, a factor that is frequently invoked as evidence of this countercultural ethos, is that it is self-officiated. At all levels of the game, players, not referees, are responsible for understanding, upholding, and enforcing the rules of the game. The players on the field arbitrate among themselves when difficult decisions must be made about line calls, fouls, or other violations.<sup>8</sup> The self-officiated nature of the sport brings to life an ethical code of conduct, referred to as "Spirit of the Game" or simply, "spirit." As Walters discusses, many ultimate players invoke "spirit" as evidence of an idyllic vision of ultimate as distinct from mainstream sports—as not only against the win-at-all-costs attitude often prized in mainstream sports, but also as more accessible, welcoming, diverse, and inclusive than other sporting environments. And yet, as Walters' found, this vision often falls short; for instance, she notes a palpable silence among her interviewees about the lack of racial diversity in the sport and points as well to women's struggles to gain positions of power within the sport and its governing.<sup>9</sup> Still, the origins of ultimate and its ongoing rhetoric of inclusivity undoubtedly differentiates it from many similar kinds of invasion games (such as rugby or soccer) and points to the importance of ethics and shared values in the sport, even if these are not fully or consistently actualized.<sup>10</sup> This background begins to explain the adoption of a broad gender inclusion policy in the sport during a time in which the regulation of gender diversity and exclusion of trans athletes is particularly heightened in the United States.

In 2020, USA Ultimate (USAU) passed a new Gender Inclusion Policy. The 2020 policy replaced the earlier Transgender Inclusion Policy, which required surgical and hormonal interventions for trans athletes to be able to participate within the binary divisions of the sport. The updated 2020 policy removed these requirements, instead relying upon self-defined gender identity as the arbiter for belonging. Unlike the slew of explicitly trans-exclusionary sports bills and policies that have been introduced across the United States over the last few years, USAU's policy attempts to open, rather than foreclose, possibilities for transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming athletes to participate in the sport. As the policy states:

we recognize not all individuals' gender identities are binary, and a gender binary default for participation potentially could make some individuals feel excluded and unsafe.

Within our divisions as they currently exist, USA Ultimate will not discriminate on the basis of gender identity, regardless of sex assigned at birth, or any other form of gender expression for participation in any division. (USA Ultimate Gender Inclusion, 2020)

Without dismantling the three gendered divisions of the sport (men's, women's, and mixed), this broadened policy allows for more flexibility for trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming athletes, now ostensibly unrestricted in their ability "to compete in the division in which they feel most comfortable and safe" (USA Ultimate Club, n.d.).

The policy has had particularly interesting effects on the mixed-gender division of the sport. Historically, the mixed division has required a specific "Gender Ratio." With seven players per team on the field at a time, each team must field a ratio of three men to four women, or four men to three women, and both teams must field the same ratio as the other. Given that the 2020 Gender Inclusion policy explicitly allows for the unrestricted inclusion of athletes of all genders, the binary Gender Ratio presents a complicated situation for athletes who do not identify as men or women. While not going so far as to remove the gender ratio requirement, USAU has now changed the terminology of the ratio in what appears to be an attempt to accommodate athletes who do not identify within the gender binary. The "Gender Ratio" is now referred to as the "Personnel Ratio" and the terms "men" and "women" have been replaced by "man-matching" and "woman-matching." While a definition of these "matching" terms could not be located in any USA Ultimate documents, the Gender Division Eligibility section of the 2023 USA Ultimate Club Guidelines Overview notes that:

- a. Players who select man (cis or trans) as their gender identity option are eligible to compete . . . as a man-matching player in mixed divisions.
- b. Players who select woman (cis or trans) as their gender identity option are eligible to compete . . . as a woman-matching player in mixed divisions.
- c. Players who select the nonbinary or prefer to self-report gender identity option are eligible to compete in the division in which they feel most comfortable and safe, as per USA Ultimate's Gender Inclusion Policy (approved 11.2021).

Many ultimate athletes seem to interpret the purpose of the "matching" language to be a way of including trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming athletes without forcing them to explicitly identify as men or women. The "matching" terminology refers not to a player's own gender identity, but instead, to the gender of the

opponent a player typically "matches up against" when playing person-to-person defense. For example, a "woman-matching" player typically matches up against (cis and trans) women and other players who identify as "women-matching." This terminology and its uptake across players and teams within the sport is fraught to say the least; the terminology is not deployed consistently across the various geographical and competitive communities in which the sport is played. Likewise other iterations of the terminology exist such as "defender of men," "defender of women," and "defender of anyone." The juxtaposition of a policy explicitly acknowledging gender beyond a binary, alongside this constant maintenance of a gender binary demonstrates the limitations of radical gender diversity and inclusion without structural transformation. USAU's gender inclusion policy and this gendered terminology offer a rich site for critique and produces the first instance of what I am referring to as a sporting body without organs, offering opportunities to destabilize normative binary sex/gender organization of sport as well as moments of assemblage and co-constitution between human and governing bodies.

## Limits and Stagnation

*PanIC! This is the name of my mixed-gender club ultimate team. The name PanIC encapsulates the playful culture of the team and lends itself to a number of lighthearted cheers and chants about innocuous mishaps. My experiences on PanIC highlight another kind of panic endemic across ultimate communities though: gender panic. Although this is generally not an explicit, outwardly violent, or phobic gender panic, it is apparent that the dominant sporting culture is one that does not know how to operate without a constant reliance on a binary gendered infrastructure. Every practice I attend, at some point the team scrimmages—a captain announces: "Okay, let's get all the man-matching players over here and the woman-matching players over there so we can split up teams." I walk over and join the group of "woman-matching players." We stand together waiting for our captain to subdivide the group, designating some of us to put on light jerseys and others to wear dark before we can join back up with our "man-matching" teammates, now-wearing corresponding colors. In these stationary moments of bifurcation and subcategorization, I'm reminded of the limits of ultimate's expansive definition of gender.*

Although the sporting body without organs offers up a capacity for disorganization of normative, binary-sexed/gendered systems, it does not necessarily refer to absolute transcendence or radical disintegration of the organizing system. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to their body without organs as a "glacial reality," the slow movement of components that, when idle, "coagulate" and settle the body into a stable organism (p. 159). In other words, stagnation gives way to solidification and reorganization.

In moments like the one described in the vignette above, my sporting body without organs stands idle and is re-organized, re-sedimented, and reterritorialized. The "three great strata"—organism, significance, and subjectification—become realigned, reinscribed, and reinforced. Standing around, grouped by our "man-matching" and "woman-matching" designations (which in effect function here as simple re-inscriptions of the binary gender order), the boundaries of our varying gendered embodiments are, if not permanently fixed, at least organized and solidified, thereby creating two distinct groupings without overlap nor integration. Although in this construction, the matter of the body is not the defining factor—remember that USAU's gender inclusion policy relies upon self-defined gender identity—the *sign* of "man-

matching” or “woman-matching” works to wrangle and harness the moving sporting body without organs into alignment with the static organism and subject. While one certainly can join either subdivided group in different moments, simultaneous occupation of these two groups as they are laid out here is impossible. Here the framework of “man-matching” and “woman-matching” settles in as a signifying unit, producing discrete and binary subjects. While the “matching” language is intended to deflect attempts to stabilize identity—one may, for instance, participate as a woman-matching player without identifying as a woman, and without disclosing any identity at all. In idle moments like this one, the sporting body without organs stagnates. Focusing here on what happens when movement is *blocked*, we can read USAU’s policy as the solidification of order and organization, and hence a reification of gender as a system of categorization and limitation. While the policy itself may destabilize strict binaries and biological essentialism, in moments like this, it does not de-territorialize and we do not find a sporting body without organs here. So then, what about moments where movement flows freely?

## Movement, Assemblages, and Possibilities

*After designating teams for our scrimmage, my teammates and I disperse from our distinct “man-matching” and “woman-matching” groups. These designations temporarily dissolve as we rush the field to begin to play. But the captains forget to designate our starting personnel ratio and my team fields three man-matching players and four woman-matching players, and the other team fields four, and three, respectively. There’s a momentary commotion about how the teams should rectify the apparent miss-match; teammates talk over one another, a man-matching player offers to step off to allow a woman-matching player to play in his stead; someone else yells “Let’s not waste time, just play as is!” So, we begin to play. A cis-man who plays as a man-matching player ends up matching up against me. I wonder momentarily if his position of matching up against me—not a man—now makes him a woman-matching player? And as I play against him, will that then transmute me into a man-matching player? As the disc gets put into motion and my teammates organize into our offensive formation, I let the thought drift away and think instead about my team’s next moves.*

As mentioned, I propose the sporting body without organs and this dis/embodying retelling of my own experience as an un/Gendered assemblage. My use of un/Gendered draws upon black feminist and black transfeminist thought. The term “ungendered” comes from Hortense Spillers’ 1987 piece in which she describes the material and symbolic process through which Black women have been rendered outside of the normative gendered conditions of possibility within a White supremacist culture. Gender for Spillers is a construct dependent on Whiteness and heteronormative family structures and reproduction; hence, her term “ungendered” refers to Black women’s exclusion from these systems. While Spillers ultimately articulates this ungendering as having radical potential, Marquis Bey’s reworking of the term, through an addition of a slash, emphasizes explicitly the liberatory capacities of un/gendering. For Bey (2022), un/gendered is “not gendered, nor strictly speaking ungendered” (p. 68). In other words, un/gendered points to radical enactments of gender that go beyond the body and the “flesh.” Unlike Spillers’ “ungendered” that is produced in part through bodily captivity and policing, Bey’s (2022) un/gendered refers to the “liberatory, uncapturable,” the “overflow that spills over violent categorization” (p. 68). Un/gendering

remains cognizant and aware of racialized and gendered bodily oppressions and pushes toward enactments of gender that move beyond the bounds of the body. I build upon these works with the capitalization of the G (un/Gender) to distinguish between enactments of *genders* that defy legible, stable, cisnormative binary expressions, identities, and subjectivities, and *Gender* as an oppressive, racialized system of order. This usage draws upon both Bey and Malatino, who deploy Gender and genders in this same way, and as gender abolitionists, advocate not for the erasure of genders, but the destruction of Gender. As Malatino (2020) writes of Gender and genders: “We can refuse and dismantle the structuring logic and inhabit its ruins resistantly” (p. 33). This genders/Gender relationship likewise echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) description of the relationship between the body without organs and the organization of the body: “The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the *organism*. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to the organization of the organs called the organism” (p. 158; emphasis added). To put it succinctly, when I deploy un/Gendered, I refer to the simultaneous *doing and undoing of Gender*. What’s more, my use of un/Gendered is coupled with “assemblages” in order to point to the relational and co-constituted qualities of gender—the ways that genders are enacted through momentary collisions and collusions with others. If, as I suggested earlier, dividing the team into separate “man-matching” and “woman-matching” groups solidifies boundaries and erects impervious barriers, then, turning our attention toward embodied play and movement allows for the corrosion of these boundaries and barriers, rendering them *permeable*. In other words, the gendered system for organizing sport does not disappear in ultimate, but it can be *inhabited resistantly*.

Moving from that static huddle of individuated and subjectified “woman-matching” players, my sporting body without organs emerges as an un/Gendered assemblage. As I run down the field and am met by a cis-man as my defender, our “man-matching” and “woman-matching” signifiers become dislodged from the subjects that they had been attached to in those separate huddles just moments ago. Instead, the relationality of these designations becomes more apparent. While this matching language is intended as a way of disarticulating one’s own gender identity from one’s position in play, the language does implicitly rely upon a relationship to who one “matches up against” and hence draws upon *that* player’s gender. So, perhaps in this moment, I become a man-matching player, as I am *matched* up against a man. And yet, my own fraught relationship to the category “woman” makes my defender’s status somewhat harder to discern. Does he remain a man-matching player despite the fact that he is not matching up against a man? Does he become a woman-matching player despite the fact that he is not matching up against someone who strictly identifies as a woman? What’s more, as the possession of the disc switches from one team to the other, and consequently my status moves from offense to defense and his from defense to offense, his offensive status now perhaps takes precedence, as his role is no longer to “match,” or “defend” me, but rather to create separation, to open up distance between us in order to receive a pass with less potential for me to block it and change possession yet again. In this moment then, it seems clear that I am performing as a man-matching player; and yet, as we move with, and against, one another on the field, our continued oppositional and complimentary relationship disallows the organizing force of Gender from ever settling and producing one static subjectivity.

My purpose here is decidedly not to try to pin down how or when we become legible gendered subjects. Nor is my purpose to

reinforce the gendered organization that the matching language relies on in order to determine which label best applies in different moments. Instead, my purpose is to demonstrate that in our relational movements on the field, we refuse Gender's *stabilizing* force, and we trouble governing policies that produce static subjectivities. Our "gender-matching" "miss-match," its reliance on this relational rhetorical construction, and our near constant repositioning of our bodies and roles on the field, and hence also our interrelationships, evades territorialization. Our disregard of the rules of the personnel ratio—the requirement for both teams to field the same number of "man-matching" and "woman-matching" players—is partially what allows for un/Gendering in this example. The call to "not waste time, just play as is!" and our collective yielding to this call is what enables play to begin. The affective intensity of this call and our collective adherence to it was no rallying cry of protest against gender oppression, as if to say, "fuck Gender! your genders don't need to match!" It was rather an *indifference* to Gender that enabled the exasperated utterance; as if to say: "thinking about Gender is not worth our time." Rather than a radical disobedience of order and organization, our un/Gendering is enabled by, though not contingent upon, this indifference. Beyond this affective allowance, our physical movements must also be considered in our collective gendered becoming. It is also the experience of movement with and against an opponent, inflected as it is by the omnipresence of Gender and our simultaneous, and not-entirely-defiant disregard of it, that allows for the emergence of an un/Gendered sporting body without organs here.

Bringing my attention to the movements and flows of bodies on the field, I let go of my thinking self and I let my thinking self go. As we ran down the field, our bodies became untethered from the matching language, and, we instead became more substantively connected to our material bodies and their interrelations with one another. Our tired muscles fueled by sideline fruit-snacks, our swirling perspiration and reabsorption of sweat and sunscreen as arms brush up against one another, our inhalation, and incorporation of dust from the dry Iowan field upon which our cleated feet propel us mutually constitute our permeable, un/Gendered sporting body without organs. Crawford's (2008) "transgender without organs" as contingent on "movement over stasis" resonates here—in his account, how we move in and through the world, alongside, and with the material spaces we co-constitute with human and nonhuman bodies alike, must be considered part of the ongoing process of gender modification (p. 138). The un/Gendered assemblage that is the sporting body without organs, takes up this account of gender as relational and processual. My embodiment in the example above is not explicitly resistant or disruptive to gender norms but dislodging the primacy of gender-as-identity in the assessment of my body and its movements unlocks the potential for thinking of a sporting body that does not rely on an ordered and organized system of Gender. In other words, momentarily disregarding my gender *identity*, regardless of how unfixed it may be, and emphasizing instead embodied movement across and between opponents allows for the conceptualization of bodies and genders as both relationally and temporarily constituted. Within this point of the scrimmage, the personnel ratio of man-matching players to women-matching players is always in the process of transition, it is never stabilized. Our movement back and forth between offense and defense, from self-designation to relational "matching" and our embodied co-composition reveals our bodies to be connected as an un/Gendered assemblage. Our movements disrupt the stability of our individuated subject status and forestall the accumulation of Gender onto a singularized body/

subject. This sense of bodily becoming likewise resonates with Erin Manning's (2014) work bringing together phenomenology, process philosophy, and movement, and dance studies. For Manning (2014), "a body is its movement;" a body is not a noun, but a verb—a "bodying" (p. 163). Manning's (2014) writing offers another conceptualization of subjectivity: "Movement courses through the me that is in formation: experience, perception, feeling—all of these are movements, and each of them contributes in an infinity of ways to what 'I' will become in any given occasion" (p. 166). Bringing together Manning's enactment of "bodying" along with Crawford's "transgender without organs," our moving sporting bodies can be better understood as the mutual production of gendered embodiment that does not begin nor end at the surface of the one's flesh. Our body projects are never discrete, and we become (gendered) together. We are of course not wholly liberated from Gender, but our collective embodied movements resist the stabilization of organism, significance, and subjectivation, and we are at least momentarily contingent upon one another in our ongoing processes of becoming. Remember that *becoming* is not simply the process of moving from one fixed point to the next, one form to the next, one identity to the next. Becoming exists in those moments and movements *between*; when we are dislodged from static designations, we become un/Gendered.

## Conclusions

Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs" and through an analysis of ultimate frisbee policy and play, I have begun to develop the concept of the *sporting body without organs*—the interplay between sport governing bodies and the human bodies that move with and against one another in sport. This analysis has revealed possibilities for un/Gendered assemblages in sport—moments and movements for the collaborative production of genders that draw upon and yet push back against structuring systems of Gender. The sporting body without organs demonstrates gendered boundaries as pervasive and yet permeable, impacting individuals and yet relationally co-constructed. The un/Gendered assemblage I have been chasing here offers an alternative onto-epistemology that disrupts the dominant discourse around the belonging/unbelonging of transgender participants in sport. Focusing not on the ideologies supporting policy decisions, nor on how we ought to define sex and gender (whether that be static and binary, fluid and multiplicitous, biological or cultural, or some other combination), thinking about sporting bodies—human and governing—as co-constitutive and relational pulls our attention away from pernicious male/female and cis/trans binaries and dislodges the primacy of biology and discrete identity in these conversations. In shifting our attention, my suggestion is not that we simply ignore anti-trans legislation or the exclusions and violence that they produce. Instead, the orientation toward bodily *becoming* that I have described here offers yet another tool, among a constellation of others, for thinking about and combating policies that not only produce exclusions, but also settle subjects into positions to be included or excluded.

My analysis here has been limited in a number of ways which means there are a number of generative ways to take up, extend, and critique this work. Perhaps most obviously, in focusing on my experiences in the mixed-gender division of ultimate frisbee, this sporting body without organs cannot be directly translated or redeployed into a more explicitly gender-restrictive setting. Ultimate frisbee is a somewhat unique case; through its "Spirit of the Game" and self-officiating, it offers a sporting space that promotes

self-regulation and a legacy of countercultural ethos. In this contemporary moment when many states and sports are producing binary sex-based policies to limit and exclude gender diversity, USA Ultimate's Gender Inclusion Policy is an outlier. The sporting body without organs that I have tracked here is perhaps easier to identify than in sports in which governing bodies explicitly designate strict parameters for sex/gender inclusion and exclusion. And yet, I urge sports studies scholars to explore the possibilities of sporting bodies without organs that may emerge in those sports settings as well. How, for instance, might USA Rugby's restrictive transgender policy open up possibilities for athletes to co-construct genders subversively? While physical body contact in ultimate frisbee is not permitted, the sanctioned body contact of a sport-like rugby might in fact offer more substantial physical entanglements and co-productions of sporting bodies without organs. Further, exploration of un/Gendered assemblages in (officially) gender-restrictive spaces such as rugby can offer necessary counter narratives against dominant epistemologies of cisgender normativity.

In addition, my analysis relied on a limited set of trans studies literature and its resonances with the Deleuzian body without organs. It is my hope that this piece helps direct attention toward additional productive pathways across sports studies and trans studies. Bodies, movement, and bodily movement constitute some of the shared intellectual interests across these fields, and sports studies scholarship, particularly that which is focused on trans athletes, identities, and policies, ought to engage more deeply with trans studies scholarship that offers theorizations and approaches that trouble the dominance of identitarian understandings of embodiment and gender. Sports studies scholarship has long drawn upon feminist poststructuralist thought to trouble gender binaries and biological essentialisms, and these approaches can be useful in understanding gender oppressions in sport policy and play. Trans studies and new materialisms alike offer onto-epistemologies that can build on these poststructuralist foundations to also address the material body "without returning to essentialism" (Monforte, 2018, p. 380). Paisley Currah's (2022) *Sex is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* and Hil Malatino's (2022) *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* offer two recent examples of transgender studies works that could be taken up to further explore trans sports policies and play.

Looking additionally toward disability studies and queer studies can likewise expand sports studies' onto-epistemological and methodological engagements with embodiment, offering different ways of understanding (trans)gender sporting bodies and the policies that impact them. Disability studies and trans studies both share critical attachments to self-determination and resistance to medicalization/pathologization, an observation queer disability studies scholar and poet Eli Clare (among others to be sure) has made explicit (2013). Clare's, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (1999) and more recent, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure* (2017) both provide critical analyses of disability, queerness, and transness that can offer additional avenues for theorizing and understanding non-normative sporting bodies. With a greater attention to governance, Spades' (2003) *Resisting Medicine, Remodeling Gender* offers another example of bridging disability studies and politics with trans studies. Drawing upon disability law to resist the medicalization of trans embodiment and identity, Spade's work can offer another framework for analysis of contemporary anti-trans sports bills and policies.

While the proliferation of anti-trans sports policies has brought heightened public and scholarly attention to trans athletes, we as

sports studies scholars must not forget the broader context and implications of these policies beyond sport. We must see these sports bills and policies as not only exclusionary and harmful to trans athletes, but also part of a much larger and more insidious mission to territorialize identities and restrict possibilities for collective liberation. As trans studies scholar Jules Gill-Peterson has argued, these policies are aimed at eliminating trans folks from public life all together and are part of a marked strategy in the development of an authoritarian "cis state" (2022). If we are to help envision a more liberatory (sports)world, we must continue, but also move beyond, revealing the unfounded exclusions laden in anti-trans policies. We must look for moments of slippage—moments and movements where our sporting bodies without organs can emerge—and we must explore further and deeper collaborations across sports studies and trans studies.

## Notes

1. This is by no means a novel argument—see the 2023 special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, edited by C.J. Jones and Travers, for additional compelling arguments for the development of a trans sports studies.

2. See Coole and Frost (2010) for a helpful introduction to key new materialist scholarship.

3. See Fullagar (2017), Henne (2020), Markula (2019a, 2019b), Monforte (2018), Newman et al. (2020), and Thorpe et al. (2020) for overviews, debates, and applications of new materialisms within sports studies.

4. See Stryker and Whittle's (2006) edited collection, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, for influential works in the development of transgender studies. In regard to embodiment and affect, see in particular: Stryker's *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*.

5. It should also be noted that there is resonance between the spatial metaphor of de/reterritorialization and the colonial imposition of a gender binary. Black transfeminist scholar, Marquis Bey (2022), makes this connection briefly when he notes that the settling of the body into gendered and raced subjectivity "are territorializing projects—colonial and imperialist projects, if you will" (p. 9).

6. For a very brief review of the import of "becoming" in trans studies broadly, see T. Garner's entry on the term in the first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014).

7. I should note here a distinction between the sense of being "not at home" that Ahmed refers to here and the pathologized discourse of being "not at home" in one's transgender body. Ahmed's discussion of sweaty concepts builds upon her contention that feminism is a kind of world-building, home-work, such that, the work of feminists is deeply entwined with experiences of oppression and aspirations to change the home/world that perpetuates those oppressions. Though certainly many trans folks may resonate with this sense of being "not at home in a world," which is the sense of this phrase that I employ here, I want to be clear that I am not conflating this with the "wrong body" and "not at home in one's body" rhetoric that continues to circulate as a dominant mode of understanding trans experience.

8. In some, though not all, USA Ultimate-sanctioned games, third-party "observers" can offer their perspectives and clarify rules for players, but most calls are resolved among players.

9. It's worth noting that some change has taken place within ultimate communities since Walters' writing in 2008. Issues of race and gender have become much more visible, in no small part due to the efforts of women, gender diverse, and racially minoritized



players and advocates who have begun campaigns such as the “Con10ent Tour” (Disc Diversity, 2023) and the “99 Days of Ultimate Women” online accounts, among other movements (Ciaglo, 2019).

10. See also Crocket (2015a, 2015b), Robbins (2012), and Spencer-Cavaliere et al. (2017) for further explorations of Spirit of the Game and ethics in ultimate frisbee.

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