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FEMINIST RESPONSE TO POP CULTURE

bitch

POWIE!

CLANK!

ZLOPP!

THWACK!

WHACK!

THE ACTION ISSUE!
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compete in the women's high jump at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. He was revealed as a man after being spotted with facial hair at a train station, and ultimately claimed that he had been pressured by the Nazi Party to claim a medal for Germany. ("For three years I lived the life of a girl. It was most dull," he said.) Polish sprinter Ewa Klobukowska was the first Olympic athlete to "fail" the Olympic committee's gender tests in 1967: Though the official results were never released, it was reported that Klobukowska had "one chromosome too many," and she was barred from further competition.

More recently, the Indian runner Santhi Soundarajan was stripped of the silver medal she won at 2006's Asian Games when she failed a gender test. And German tennis star Sarah Gronert almost quit the game entirely several years back, due to intense pressure from the World Tennis Association. Gronert, born with both male and female genitalia, was the subject of intense criticism. "This is not a woman, it's a man.... No woman has such a technique," insisted the coach of one of her competitors, adding, "She serves like a man. It's very strange." At 19, she underwent surgery to remove the offending male part, but still struggles with opponents and coaches who believe she should be ineligible for women's tennis.

These cases, along with Semenya's, all have one thing in common: All were publicized with scant respect or feeling for the athletes, and all were based on the assumption that a woman competing as well as each did must surely be "hiding" something.

"Gender testing furthers the politically correct illusion that there can be a level playing field in a specific sports event," says Patricia Nell Warren, a longtime writer for the website OutSports and a former amateur athlete. "But there is no such thing in real life." Yet the obsession to test until we determine someone's "true" gender seems to go beyond the simple fear that someone is deliberately posing as the opposite sex. Rather, it prods at the more primal fear that maybe the system we have in place doesn't account for everyone and doesn't properly register the natural diversity that exists.

This question of how we can value this diversity in the realm of athletics has the potential for far-reaching change. Some sports, like wrestling, boxing, and weight lifting, categorize competing athletes by weight and muscle tone: Might we one day adopt this system to organize other sporting events? There wouldn't have to be separate male and female categories, but rather ones based on weight, agility, and ability. It may be that a different paradigm for the classification of athletes would still leave most men competing with other men and women with women because of build and weight, but removing sex as the main determinant for sports categorization would erase the kind of discrimination female athletes like Semenya, Soundarajan, Gronert, and others have suffered for decades. And that

could, in turn, blow the hinges off of millennia of misinformation—in sports, and far beyond.

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ACTION FIGURE: A Q&A WITH JOELLE SELLNER
BY AVRA KOUFFMAN

Ever wonder who writes action cartoons? The ones where plot summaries read like, "Young hero battles his nemesis"? If you guessed "dudes," for the most part, you're right. Joelle Sellner is a rare female action-cartoon writer: She began her television career with *Mary-Kate & Ashley in Action!*, a show based on the Olsen twins, and has since worked on action cartoons (*Jackie Chan Adventures*, *Teen Titans*, *The Secret Saturdays*), comedy cartoons (*Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi*) and adult anime (*Shin chan*).

Like many of us, Sellner started out with an English/communications degree. Unlike most of us, however, she now makes her living composing lines like "Matter and anti-matter can't be in the same place at the same time...because it destroys the fabric of the universe!"

Writing kids' programming isn't for everyone. "Kids have short attention spans and they're brutally honest," she



explains. “If they don’t like something, they’ll just get up or change the channel.” But Sellner loves the chance to let her imagination explode. “I can set an episode anywhere on the planet,” she says. “I can put characters in outer space. There’s a lot of creative freedom.”

You typically work in boys’ action programming. What is that?

Programming is often divided into girls’ programming, which tends to be more comedy-based, and boys’ programming, which is action-based and usually has more of a toy line tie-in. The target demographic for “boys’ action” cartoons is usually a 6- to 11-year-old boy.

How appealing do you think violence is to female viewers? It’s action, not violence! The networks set standards where you can’t show anything a kid can imitate. In the shows I’ve worked on, no one ever stabs anyone. If there’s a gun, it’s a futuristic laser weapon. There are some shows where you can’t show someone being punched. On some shows, you can’t even say the words “kill” or “dead.”

I think when you see big blockbuster movies like *Iron Man*, and movies based on animated shows like *Transformers*, even though they’re aimed at 18- to 24-year-old males, a lot of women are going and enjoying them. I’d imagine there’s a similar split for girls who like to watch action cartoons. I think good

writing is good writing and if a show has appealing characters, both boys and girls are going to be interested. You can’t have a hit show if only a boy audience or a girl audience is watching.

In terms of female roles, have you seen any progress over the years? Yes. It used to be that female characters were always the ones in trouble—and very passive. The male characters always had to rescue them. What I’m seeing now is female characters who can take care of themselves. The series *Kim Possible* had a female action lead and that was a very popular, successful show. And the mom in *The Secret Saturdays* uses a fire sword to fight off bad guys.

But she still wears those tight catsuits. That’s the influence of comics. You’ll never see a dumpy Wonder Woman.

Why is that? I don’t know; I guess it’s the same reason you usually don’t see a character actress opening a movie. Homer can be fat, but Marge can’t. It’s something so ingrained in the culture I couldn’t even theorize on that. Then again, if you fight monsters and villains all day, you’re probably in great shape.

You’ve taken Krav Maga combat classes. It really helps to know what the moves are. I’ve taken self-defense and kick-boxing so that I can make characters do roundhouse kicks and I’ll know the different moves. It’s important, aside from pop culture, to keep abreast of skateboard culture and the different action sports that kids are doing now, because that’ll find its way into an animated show.

You’ve also written adult anime. That can be pretty trippy! With *Shin chan*, we were repurposing a show that had been a hit in Japan for almost 20 years. It’s like a cross between *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, where you have a bunch of 5-year-olds saying raunchy things. We were told to use the existing animation and throw out all the dialogue. The original Japanese dialogue made no sense translated, with all the conversational idioms and references to people in their culture, so we just wrote really raunchy dialogue in place of it.

U.S. culture is so insular in some ways, yet Asia has a huge impact on cartoons here. It’s the influence of anime and manga. As the world becomes more connected through the Internet, you see more multicultural influences. And animation translates really well internationally, [though] when you write a script, it’s a good idea not to include a book title, a banner, or any words that have to be animated, because when they’re shown around the world, they can’t be in English. For the most part, you don’t use American pop culture references. Something like a Hitchcock reference is international, but I wouldn’t make a *Jersey Shore* reference. It should be something that would resonate in other countries.

Would the *Jersey Shore* people make good cartoon characters, though? Aren’t they already? 🍷

Avra Kouffman (still) keeps her Wonder Woman and Xena-action figures placed precariously by her *Charlie’s Angels* lunchbox. Read more of her work at AvraKouffman.com.