

Black transmasculine bodies in aesthetic intersections: an interview with Leonardo Peçanha

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Abstract *This opinion article consists of an interview with Leonardo Peçanha, a Black trans man, a human rights and trans people rights activist and a researcher in Collective Health. In this interview, he reflects intersectionally on the place of beauty, body changes, and physical activity in the gender transition process of trans and transmasculine men. He discusses the (im)possibilities of trans people in high-performance sports and tells us about the Mister Trans Brazil beauty pageant contest.*

Key words *Transgender persons, Body Constitution, Gender Norms, Masculinity, Beauty*

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We need to understand that you cannot overcome racism with transphobia or transphobia with racism.

You cannot overcome oppression with oppression. In this sense, I believe in a link between Black trans men and Black cisgender men. The factors that unite us somehow can contribute mutually to sharing experiences, learning, and exchanging singularities.

There is no way to erase the past, to differentiate or separate the fact of being Black from the point of being trans. I am a Black trans man, and my experience encompasses this¹.

Leonardo Peçanha is a Black trans man and human rights and trans people rights activist. He is a researcher in Public Health, a Physical Education professor (UNISUAM), and PhD student in Public Health at the Fernandes Figueira Institute of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (IFF/FIOCRUZ). He also has a Master's degree in Physical Activity Sciences (PPGCAF-UNIVERSO) and is a Gender and Sexuality specialist (IMS/UERJ). Leonardo is also a researcher at the Interdisciplinary Research Group on Culture, Identity, and Diversity (ODARA/IFRJ) and at the Center for Studies on Gender, Sexuality, and Health at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (GENSEX/FIOCRUZ). Finally, he is an LGBTQIAPN+ Policy Coordinator in the Black Feminism in Sports Project.

In the conversation that follows, Leonardo Peçanha reflects intersectionally on the place of beauty, body changes, and physical activity in the gender transition process of trans male and transmasculine subjects. He touches on the theme of the (im)possibilities of trans people in high-performance sports and tells us about the Mister Trans Brasil beauty contest.

A growing academic concern about controlling the bodies of athletes who compete in high-performance sports, especially the bodies of trans women athletes, has been observed in recent years. How have these issues been considered in sports that involve trans male bodies?

It is a very misogynistic and transphobic debate, very similar to what has unfolded throughout the Olympic Games history. It already happened to women and Black people, and now it affects trans people. Women only started to compete in the Olympic Games much later than men. Black people had many difficulties participating in the Olympic Games. So, now the focus is on trans people, although women's bodies are still con-

trolled. When we realize that women will only be able to have so much testosterone in their blood, this is a way of governing the bodies that will or will not participate in competitions. Although the International Olympic Committee has given guidelines from a perspective of inclusion and equity, the IOC only gives guidelines; it is not a law everyone must follow. It provides guidelines and federations and confederations are expected to comply. However, the International Swimming Federation (FINA) and the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) have ruled against the participation of trans people. FINA gave an unrealistic definition: asking that only trans women who began the transition at the age of twelve could participate? No one takes hormones at the age of twelve. But what FINA requires is not to have started but to have completed the transition at the age of twelve. In other words, they had to start blocking and taking hormones at the age of twelve. This is prohibited! You can't do this.

At first, the IOC defined 10 nanomoles in the blood. Then, it lowered it to 5 nanomoles together with the International Athletics Federation. The International Athletics Federation has further reduced it to 0.5 nanomoles in the blood. In other words, it is a minimal amount of testosterone; not even cisgender women produce just that much testosterone: there is more than that. It is terrible even for cis women to have so little testosterone in their blood because it also helps with metabolism and other body issues, just as estrogen's role in men's bodies. All people, men, and women, have estrogen and testosterone, some bodies more and others less, varying per their body size. So, requiring such a low level of hormones is an attempt to eliminate trans people from official games.

There is a debate regarding the issue of biological advantage, which is complex because the criterion for advantage is not stated. They talk about benefits, but they don't say what the requirements are. They don't say benefits regarding what? They don't. There is no strangeness with male bodies like, for example, Phelps, an Olympic swimmer with an extensive range of arms and shoulders. He was never questioned, never took a test, or did anything. Tifanny Abreu, who is a Brazilian volleyball athlete, a trans woman who competes in the female category, still has to take several tests to prove that her testosterone is at a level below what is expected for her to be able to compete. This is also a delicate issue because the hormonal replacement that trans people take can

already reach these levels, which are the standard levels for cisgender people because there is no trans parameter. We have a cis parameter; so, this parameter is adopted. Very high or low levels can cause health problems.

Another point is the debate about muscle memory. Saying that it is an advantage is very shallow because a biological advantage can be a lot of things, and when you bring it to the aspect of muscle memory, what draws attention is that they talk about what the person has left in memory against their former body. However, I consider muscle memory if they include the trans and not the cisgender body. When they make this muscle memory assessment, they consider the old corporeality: “That body already had that strength!”. Fine. So, you are saying that now, although she’s done all this, she’s still the same strength, for example? But are you considering her body modifications? Will this not have an impact? Could it be that now, with this body, having had sexual re-assignment surgery and having taken hormones for hormone replacement, will this body now have the same strength as the body it had before? This is unknown, as it focuses on comparing with the cisgender corporeality before the transition and not trans corporeality.

Three elements permeate the debate: criteria, advantage, and muscle memory. It is often debated with violence, institutional transphobia, transphobia, and misogyny. It reduces trans women, mainly, to men in a very wrong way, apart from other debates that go to different places, such as radical feminists, saying that trans women will take away women’s leadership. This is absurd! So, this topic is very delicate, and people tend to talk about it erroneously without theoretical and legitimate bases. The debate regarding trans men in sports falls into a non-place, in limbo, as Professor Eric Seger says. In males, it is indifferent, while it is read as a problem in females because of testosterone (for those who use it), besides the invisibilization of the debate regarding the transmasculine sphere. A Black American trans man beat a cis man three times in official boxing matches and there was no repercussion of the news here in Brazil.

Entering this debate about health, we would like you to talk in more detail about how you have been thinking about this relationship between transmasculine health and physical exercise.

I started thinking about all this through my practice and noticed that several trans men were in

Physical Education like I had never seen in any other profession. I know there are many *travestis* and trans women educators and that many *travesty* and trans people are psychologists. However, Physical Education caught my attention because I started to think that this was linked to a body issue. In my doctoral project, I want to understand physical exercise regarding bodybuilding.

It is already known in Physical Education itself that we can build our body through movement, which is physical exercise, and not physical activity, which is different. Physical activity is when you do an everyday activity, such as sweeping the house, going for a walk, running to catch a bus, or going up and down a staircase. Physical exercise is more within the scope of regular training that will make you exercise specific types of strength, and you will have someone there to prepare your training. It’s pretty different. So, I started to think that trans men engage in physical exercise because they want to shape their bodies through weight training like cis men already do. However, as trans men, we mainly have this issue of bodily comfort and change, which caught my attention. So, I started to realize that, for example, there were already trans men who had a very masculine body before they understood themselves as trans men because they had some connection with sport or physical exercise, or who were boxing athletes, MMA athletes, did athletics or played football, something like that. Either they always engaged in physical exercise because they liked it, or were from Physical Education and constantly worried about their bodies or health. So, I started to think there was some connection there.

I’m still trying to understand, but what I can say is it is very strongly linked to building trans men’s corporeality and physical exercise because that’s where trans men can put their bodies into action while rebuilding this body. In the past, when we still had to request psychological and psychiatric reports, we already had this idea of modifying the body through physical exercise without this transition idea. I mean, physical education was already acting there, albeit empirically and unconsciously, in these bodies, in these guys who were shaping their bodies throughout their lives, and when they started to transition somehow.

So, there is a considerable relationship between physical exercise and transmasculine embodiment, not that women aren’t involved in this. Also, several trans women are athletes. They engage in bodybuilding and workouts.

However, I realize that trans men have more to do, too, mainly due to their body condition vis-à-vis masculinity. I think it's a way of externalizing masculinity through the body, which does not mean that this constructed body wants to imitate a cisgender body. There will be trans men who will have a body idea closer to cisgenderness, while some other trans men won't have it, even when they exercise. Some men prefer to have masculinizing mammoplasty, while some trans men do not take hormones and vice versa. Some men take hormones, have surgery, and want to have a more masculine body. However, that doesn't mean they are copying a cisgender body. They are getting comfortable with their bodies. Whoever reads it as a cisgender body is society, the very cisgenderness guided by cisnormativity.

We wanted to know more about your view regarding Mister Trans Brasil, discuss this project, and how it was created.

Mister Trans is a beauty contest for trans men with male performance. In its first edition, it was organized by Cá Bandeira, a non-binary person, and held in São Paulo in 2021, where trans men from different states of the country competed for the main prize, which would be masculinizing mammoplasty. It was a national competition and regional competitions were held in each state or municipality. Whoever won these municipal and state editions went to the national contest. The first event did not gather all federal states, but we had participants from all regions. This competition was staged with much sponsorship. It had a participation fee, which was expensive; it was R\$ 700 or R\$ 800 if I'm correct. It was expensive because that amount paid for their food and lodging on the days they would be confined. Many gave up going because of the high cost they couldn't afford; others crowdfunded or looked for sponsors. Some did not make it and couldn't go or gave up for another reason. However, we managed to take a lot of people to Mister Trans.

I started doing my Mister Trans work in the first edition of 2021 because I wanted to use it as a field for my doctoral work since I was going to talk about corporeality. However, as soon as I entered the field, I saw that it wouldn't happen because if I went to Mister Trans' side, I would have to produce another work, not what I wanted in transmasculine health. So, I only did the fieldwork and didn't do my doctoral work on Mister Trans. This was a very controversial edition because there was no diversity, for example, regarding ethnicity/skin color and different

bodies. We even had older men; about three or four were over 40, but there were not so many different bodies through other intersections. For example, there weren't many bodies that still had breasts, fat, or Black bodies. So, there was some restriction there. This was very latent during the four days of confinement and the tests.

On the day of the event, people asked to bring some food to help, and all the food would go to Casa Florescer [a shelter for *travestis* and trans women]. On the first day, we had a conversation at Casa Florescer, in which I spoke to them about the issue of transmasculine health, such as hormone replacement, getting pregnant and gestation, and gynecology issues. I also talked about the issue of physical exercise, and there I realized again that many of those there were my colleagues, Physical Education professionals.

I was a judge at the fashion show. They appeared first in formal attire, then in swimwear. Some had a trans flag and underwear on. Some who had breasts opened the flag when they reached the front. Others not. They let it fall on top to hide the breasts. Others came with a shirt because they didn't feel comfortable showing them.

We had internal tests. They showed up, and each did something: one sang, another danced, and another read a poem. It was staged at the Santo Agostinho Theater in São Paulo. The people on the jury were also not that diverse, both from the internal tests and the last presentation. We also questioned this. Generally, they were white, gay people; there was always a trans person, usually a trans woman. There was a trans woman or a trans man, and the others were LGBT people, always primarily white. I realized there was a small group of fit people, a small group of people who were, like, not fat, but not skinny either, but they were interacting. A group of boys were more overweight and hadn't had mammoplasty. We had another group of fit guys, but not that old. These two groups talked: basically, the more senior fit and the fit walked together. Some hung out with the organization's staff. Then I noticed that side A and side B were in the making. For example, Black boys were more with this group of fat guys while the other group was with the group that had already had a mastectomy – sometimes they didn't even have a mastectomy, but their bodies did not look that feminine.

On the last day, they had some tests in which they had to speak and explain in front of the jurors. One of the participants was Natan, from Rio de Janeiro, who is a Black trans man. He said that he

was there competing with most white trans men, he was a Black fat body with no mammoplasty, that he had “a long journey” to get there, unlike other people who didn’t have the same problems, and he was there to compete for that prize.

The winner of the contest was a highly rated white trans man, who is a model with a more toned, muscular body, a social interpretation of a cis person. He was already a model, which was questioned, as he already had that experience. This body issue was judged a lot. The contest was much criticized because the same thing that happened with trans women – this whole beauty dispute about who was the most beautiful – also happened with trans men. However, there was more of a body perspective. Beauty was there, and it was more a matter of social interpretation of whether you had the surgery, whether you didn’t, whether you take hormones, or whether you don’t. There were many conversations about this behind the scenes, many trans men talking about it, about hormone replacement, how it was done, where it was taken, whether it was from the clinic, whether it was not. These conversations permeated the entire meeting. Some talked to me, and I talked back: it was an exchange. What remained for me was social interpretation, which, although close to “cisgenderity”, such bodies had vulva, uterus, and breasts (not all, but some had),

and this displaces the entire idea of normativity thinking about male gender and masculinity. It’s a trans beauty. However, this idea of corporeality was still under construction or was that way, without bodily change. These are trans bodies, too. Many can take hormone replacement therapy, but many, for several reasons, cannot. Testosterone is a determining factor in this social interpretation due to the rapid body changes it triggers. However, the winner was a trans man who had already undergone body modifications, such as masculinizing mammoplasty.

So, what I can say about Mister Trans is that it has been highly criticized since its first edition, even by trans men themselves. Many people say this is nonsense and that we are trying to reproduce trans man contests as if they were cis men. However, we also have the right and we also have the beauty. We also want to show our beauty to the world. If you can do it with cis men, I think it’s cool too. It doesn’t just have to be ghettoized. It’s also related to being able to be in the places we want, to compete with whoever we want, but other bodily issues will surface in the cis men’s competition with other bodies. In this case, I think it’s essential to also have our beauty contest because this is a way of showing our diversity and how beautiful we are in different ways within a basically cisnormative category.

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