

Performative Disembedding: Amid and Between Potential and Professionalism in Ethiopian Girls' Running

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Embodied Potential and Professionalism

In June 2018, boys and girls travelled from towns and cities around Ethiopia to Asella – a town in the Arsi Zone of the Oromia region, about 126 kilometers south of the capital Addis Ababa – to vie for a position on the Ethiopian national team, which would compete at the World Athletics Under 20 Championships later that summer in Tampere, Finland. Along with the neighboring town of Bekoji, Asella is known as the origin place for many of Ethiopia's greatest runners. It is a small city situated along a steep main street, where hotels built by local heroes like Olympic champions Kenenisa Bekele and Derartu Tulu serve as infrastructural reminders to young athletes of what they can become.

The Under 20 Championship potentially serves as a life-changing springboard for the newest crop of Ethiopian stars, catapulting the children of farmers into professional athletes. But for many young girls aspiring to run, embarking on the sporting path required, or would soon require, a dynamic process of disembedding from a range of intersecting geographic, social, gendered, and developmental positions.

In her study about young women and social change in urban Madagascar, anthropologist Jennifer Cole reformulates Charles Taylor's notion of "disembedding" to describe the "slow, uneven, and multi-directional ways people can become divorced from old attachments and form new ones" (2010, 50) as they move from rural to urban areas to change their lives. In this essay, I show how Ethiopian girls who aspire to run must engage in a multi-directional performative process of disembedding that goes beyond a geographic scope (that is, beyond the movements between the rural, urban, and international). For girls at early developmental stages, the process of disembedding is also one in which they must perform their girlhood at times, and adulthood in others, in relation to the shifting demands of the international labor market of running.

In the economy of running, girlhood and labor are commodified akin to ways that youth has been commodified worldwide, bolstered by free market ideology, a dehumanizing mode of consumerism, and the rise of a racially skewed punishing state (Giroux 2010). But employing an intersectional lens to the transnational industry in which Ethiopian girls work as runners is crucial in understanding that they confront a stage in which they must perform in multi-directional ways developmentally and temporally as Black girls in the world (Crenshaw 1989). As Ethiopian girls face a culture of distrust among powerful actors in a very male-dominated running world, with racism and cultural ignorance baked into the fabric of the market, they

must perform athletically – in the lexicon of sport, they must win – but also submissively – that is, make themselves legible in a system that is structurally built on profiting off of global inequalities of race, gender, and age. Ethiopian girl runners are then faced with the paradoxical and impossible task of performing youth and maturity; innocence and coachability; embodied potential and professionalism.

Vying for a “Chance”

When and where girlhood ends are highly variable in Ethiopia and choosing to be a runner can both elongate and curtail the lived experience of girlhood. In development and anthropological literature alike, child marriage poses a severe threat to girls in Ethiopia (Abera et al. 2021; Erulkar 2013; Hannig 2017). Many young women have marriages arranged by their parents at an early age; some girls are even abducted and forced into marriage, and others conform to cultural practices and marry early by choice.

The girls I met explained the geographic, cultural, and developmental crossroads they face in early adolescence.¹ Often coming from a cultural context where running is seen as taboo for a woman, athletes told me over the years that if they wanted to avoid early marriage and continue running, they would need to run away, literally and figuratively, to the capital city or another center where they could have basic needs taken care of by a coach or club, and eventually get a “chance” to go abroad.

“Chance” is in quotes here because athletes would use the English version of “chance” to talk about racing abroad rather than the Amharic rough equivalent of *idil*, which connoted an interior and religious state of being lucky (Levine 2014). “Chance” was deeply entrenched in the athletic lexicon, and implied other determining factors, largely out of an athlete’s control. But getting a “chance” had less to do with athletic ability or perseverance than it did to performing as an athlete with potential value outside of competition.

As my research progressed, I began training with a group of young athletes in Addis Ababa in 2017. Here, I learned not only about their dreams and aspirations, and reasons for leaving the countryside, but also about their perceptions – both correct and misinformed – about the process of professionalizing. All young athletes learned by word of mouth that winning a junior national competition was one way to race abroad, as was finding a “manager” – or in the sports world, an international agent. But exactly how to do that, to get a real “chance,” remained a nebulous mystery.

Being fast was a prerequisite. Performing athletically was a necessity but did not necessarily guarantee a life-changing contract; even making a national team was only a step. Performing potential at the youth stage and being able to manage a host of parasitic relationships that developed with a slew of actors trying to cash in on the value of their embodied labor was a crucial part of the performance of professionalism. I would later explore the elite side of sport in my research, interning with a sports agency and spending a year with a high-level management group, watching girls socially and economically transform their lives. But when

I went down to Asella in 2018, I was beginning to learn, alongside my training partners in Addis Ababa, about the additional performance modalities that being a young promising athlete entailed.

“This is Supposed to be a Youth Competition!”

When I arrived at the stadium on the first day of the competition in Asella a major dispute was playing out between coaches and officials. As I approached the circle of conflict, the coach of a major government club, Commercial Bank, yelled to me, “They have no control!”

We were vaguely familiar with each other at this point, and I asked him what the problem was. “This is supposed to be a junior championship! Look at her!” he said, openly pointing at an athlete warming up on in the infield. “You think she’s under twenty years old? She’s at least 25. This is supposed to be a youth competition!” The coach literally pointed fingers at members of the Federation who were present to make his point; their interests were centered around sending athletes who would win medals, not necessarily policing their age.

Internationally, running journalists and fans have criticized Ethiopia for “age cheating” numerous times at junior competitions. Many claim that athletes put down fake ages and compete down to gain a performance edge over their foreign competitors. Discussants on LetsRun, a preeminent running media outlet with active message boards from running fans around the world, regularly express doubt about Ethiopian “junior competitors,” who they perceive to be much older than their ages listed on paper (LetsRun 2018).

While many of these accusations stem from racism or cultural ignorance, they are not totally unfounded. Falsifying documents that list one’s age, as evidenced by this dispute, is as much a problem domestically as it is internationally. Fans and journalists abroad do not understand that most athletes from the countryside do not actually know their birth dates and often do not have a documented age until they are poised to compete abroad. When athletes aspire to run professionally, they are indeed encouraged by coaches and companions to ask for a younger age at the immigration office, because impressive times earlier in childhood demonstrate potential. As a result, coaches, officials, athletes, and agents know these documents may not reflect biological reality, and thus engage in a process of evaluating the “true” youth of young talent.

Girls I have spoken to over the years, both in real time as they seek to demonstrate a sense of potential but also youthful innocence, and in retrospect, have brought about important tensions they feel in performing, and being evaluated, for their youth.

Once, in 2015, I was on a bus into Addis Ababa from Sululta with a young athlete I was living with at the time. Azeb, a teenager, was going to the immigration office to ask for a new passport.¹ She received one a few years earlier after both of her parents died, when she sought domestic work in the Middle East to provide for her and her sister. It was important for her to be of the legal age to get an exit visa, so she begged the immigration officer to do so, and

therefore currently had a passport that indicated she was 25 years old – much older than she really was.

Now that Azeb was running, she figured her chances of making money through athletics might be better. She learned that in this instance, to sell her labor, being a *girl* was, in contrast to the domestic labor she previously sought, much better than being a woman. “I will ask them for 16,” she told me on the bus ride into the city.

When we met a few hours later and I inquired about the appointment she shrugged, “They gave me twenty.”

While Azeb was indeed a bit older than many athletes at the junior competition in Asella, her experience trying to alter her age indicated the multiple modalities of performance that girl runners needed to learn. They needed to perform, in the literal and athletic sense, first and foremost as good runners by getting results on the track. They would also need to perform both *youthful* potential through the capacity to grow, age, and improve – and *matured* professionalism through the ability to already succeed as a full-time athlete.

The Performative Paradox of Disembedding

In Finland, at the World Athletics Under 20 Championships, in the morning and evening astonishing performances took place out on the track, but behind the scenes the inner workings of a “meat market,” as one agent put it to me, was on full display. Girls and boys from the United States were largely there for experience and would return home to attend university. Many parents even flew from the U.S. and other European countries to watch their kids perform. But Ethiopian girls and boys, many of whom had parents who were subsisting off the grains and crops they cultivated, were on the cusp of life-changing contracts if they performed well. The social and material stakes of their performances were markedly different.

Above the grandstands, representatives from shoe companies were discussing the value of the performances. It was expected that Ethiopians and Kenyans would take home most of the distance medals. What was up for speculation was their true age, which would dictate, to those signing their contracts, the corresponding value of their labor. Much like the coaches at the competition in Asella, many suspected that some of the athletes did not biologically belong in the “youth category.” One runner, in particular, was discussed on the message boards of the same running website mentioned above, which referred to the IAAF (then, the international governing body of track and field, now known as World Athletics), as a “joke” for letting a woman from Ethiopia compete. Others, who looked “baby-faced,” were seen to have higher value.

Notably, the ease with which others in the industry spoke about their fates shed light on the inequality upon which this system is built. A conversation about a young, promising, white woman from an English-speaking country would be more collaborative, dynamic, and have a higher dollar sign attached to it; an Ethiopian girl would expect to be grateful for what was offered.

Even still, girls understand these inequalities, and push back on some of these constraints by understanding these parts of the job as constructive and de-linking the moralism about being truthful about their age that is projected on to them. They understand that as they attempt to narrate and develop their own politics of body through athletic performance (Cox 2015), they must recognize and grapple with the limitations of their various audiences in rural, urban, and transnational registers.

Contrary to perceptions of deceptive “age cheating,” I argue that Ethiopian girls who run must perform an often-paradoxical form of disembedding. They must not only perform certain kinds of aged and gendered times and places, but also an expectation of embodied running potential to continue in their pursuits. The performances here, too, have incredibly high stakes. In many cases, since girls have foregone traditional gendered roles to perform as *emerging* athletic stars, they are expected to perform on the track as skilled, off the track as professional, and amid these spaces as simultaneously having time to blossom and already embodied potential, which means occupying a sometimes-liminal space and disembedding at various points in time. A good performance of disembedding could lead to a real “chance,” pushing back against the unequal racist, gendered, and geopolitical footing upon which they entered this global running sphere.

Endnotes

¹All names are pseudonyms.

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