

# The Genderized, Sexualized, and Racialized Portrayal of Catriona LeMay Doan's Post-Olympic Gold Medal Win

BY NIKKI KUMAR

*Le portrait de LeMay Doan dans certains médias est source de conflits et de contradictions dans la mesure où on la décrit tantôt comme une jolie femme, tantôt comme une athlète exceptionnelle. L'auteure explore les métaphores et les croyances racistes et sexuelles rattachées à l'image de LeMay Doan qui est une athlète olympique, une femme et une athlète qui est une femme.*

On February 14, 2002, Canadian athlete Catriona LeMay Doan speed skated to victory, capturing Canada's first Olympic gold medal at the XIX Winter Games. A prior Olympic gold medallist at the Nagano Games and event record holder bestowed with the honour of bearing Canada's flag at the opening ceremonies in Salt Lake City, LeMay Doan is recognized throughout Canada and the world as an outstanding athlete. However, her athletic abilities and achievements are occasionally inconsistent with her gendered identity, in that, the portrayal of LeMay Doan in some media *as a woman* conflicts and/or contradicts with her portrayal *as an exceptional athlete*. In this paper, I critically examine the *Toronto Star* article "Pure Speed and Pure Pleasure" written by Rosie DiManno on February 15, 2002, following the Olympic gold win by Canadian speed skater Catriona LeMay Doan at the XIX Winter Games. Within this particular newspaper article, I explore DiManno's binary and distinct portrayal of LeMay Doan as either a "feminine" woman (LeMay Doan as "lovely") or a "masculine" athlete (LeMay Doan as a "powerhouse") with the emphasis placed on her femininity rather than on her ath-

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letic abilities and achievements; the portrayal of LeMay Doan reacting as an irrational and/or "mad" woman with regards to her athletic performance at the Games; and lastly, how, on the one hand, LeMay Doan's body is celebrated through her consistency with the norms of heterosexual, able-bodied, Euro-white North American body-beauty standards while simultaneously her "deviant" athletic body is (hyper)sexually commodified for the predominantly (male) sexual pleasure/gaze/readership. In general, I explore the (shifting) sexualized, genderized, and (white) racialized beliefs and dominant metaphors used throughout the article with respect to the portrayal of LeMay Doan as an athlete, as a woman, and as an athlete who is a woman.

## Pure speed or pure pleasure?

Throughout the article, DiManno describes LeMay Doan using

gendered and distinct frames of reference: she is either a "powerhouse" athlete or a "lovely" woman, but never is LeMay Doan considered both: an extraordinary athlete who just happens to also be a woman (C4). Rather, her exceptional athleticism remains separate from her gendered identity as a (oftentimes sexualized) woman. For instance, the article title "Pure Speed and Pure Pleasure" exemplifies LeMay Doan's athletic abilities (pure speed), while simultaneously sexualizing her (pure pleasure) (DiManno, C4). Further, a photo taken of LeMay Doan in the midst of her race above the title represents her in all her athletic glory: powerful, strong, speedy, perfect, and threatening, with her athletic gear masking her gender identity. The caption describes LeMay Doan as a "powerhouse perfectionist" (DiManno, C4). However, within the article, there is a second photo of LeMay Doan after having received her gold medal with her gender-masking (or gender neutralizing) hood and skating goggles removed, blond hair down, wearing a cute little toque with a bow on the side, and waving to the crowd on the podium with a huge smile. The caption below the photo declares LeMay Doan as "flower power," representing her as fluffy, cute, dainty, pretty, and non-threatening, a woman whose power, dominance and athletic achievements from the first photo instantly become trivialized through the emphasis on her woman-hood, femininity and "flowery" description/caption of her athletic performance and Olympic gold-medal achievement (DiManno C4).

Sexual dichotomism is a term used

to refer to the treating of the sexes as two entirely discrete social, as well as biological groups, rather than as two groups as having possible (and likely) overlapping characteristics (Eichler). According to Sheila Ruth, the prevailing definition of masculinity continues to be permeated by the qualities and characteristics of "competitiveness, aggression, power, dominance, courage, (lack of emotion, rationality, and so on) ... (while the) ... contemporary imperatives of femininity are those of love and sexuality" (46). Moreover, these qualities and characteristics remain gender-specific and distinct, in that, while each gender is expected to display the appropriate feminine and masculine qualities and characteristics, "an absence of the qualities and characteristics (are) ascribed to the opposite (gender)" (Ruth, 46).

A "real" man, then, must "not only incarnate the (masculine) qualities and (characteristics), (but) ... also display ... that he does not contain anything feminine" (Ruth, 46). Thus, the *ideal* and *essential* masculine man is courageous *and* he feels no fear, he is dominant *and* he is not submissive. Conversely, the *ideal* and *essential* feminine woman not only becomes constructed mainly through her emotions, but she is also considered *not-competitive*, *not-aggressive*, *not-powerful*, and *not-courageous* (Ruth, 46). Throughout the article, DiManno does not allow LeMay Doan to be an athlete who is *also* a woman, a masculine *and* a feminine. Thus, although LeMay Doan is an embodiment of the dual and conflicting identities of both masculinity (pure speed) and femininity (pure pleasure), these identities remain distinct throughout the entire article: she is either portrayed as a stereotypically powerful (masculine) athlete or a flowery (feminine) woman.

According to Thiele, "such dualisms are common motifs in Western social and political thought and are commonly regarded as "separate and opposed ... (and) as logical

contradictions" (38); for example, mind/body, nature/culture, emotion/reason, subject/object and so on. More often than not, these dualisms coincide with the fundamental dichotomy of male/female that oftentimes also translates into positive/negative qualities and characteristics (Thiele 37). In addition,

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because in these dualisms "one can (only) be either subject or object, either rational or emotional, (but) never both, (the) fuzzy middle ground between male and female, nature and culture, public and private is lost to view" (Thiele 38). For instance, in the second paragraph of the article, LeMay Doan's athlete status and woman-hood are clearly split, where LeMay Doan is first described as "an athlete against the clock" and then in the following sentence, as a "woman against her own remarkable history" (DiManno C4). In this example, DiManno could not create a clearer distinction between depicting LeMay Doan as an athlete and as a woman. For LeMay Doan, then, because her athletic abilities and achievements would have to require her to possess (essential) masculine qualities such as aggression, power, and dominance, her being a woman is seen as problematic because it contradicts the (essential) qualities and characteristics of femininity that coincide with

her woman-hood. There is no space for LeMay Doan to be an exceptional athlete and a woman.

### **She's a woman bef(or)c she's an athlete**

Throughout the article, LeMay Doan is described as always either/or, never being seen as both an athlete and a woman. Yet, the reality is LeMay Doan *is* a woman *and* an exceptional athlete. DiManno, however, resolves this conflicting masculine/feminine struggle of LeMay Doan as an athlete and a woman through emphasizing and sexualizing of LeMay Doan's feminine attributes, while trivializing her athletic abilities. For instance, the article begins by describing LeMay Doan as "a thing of beauty, a goddess and a cowgirl. She's *also* Canada's first gold medallist at the XIX Winter Games" (DiManno C4; [emphasis mine]). Thus, not only is there is a clear distinction made between LeMay Doan as a woman (or *cowgirl*, although she's a 31-year-old woman as we are told later in the article) and LeMay Doan as an athlete, but *more* emphasis is placed on her achievements as a beautiful woman, a female deity to be adored, and her cute and sexy cow-girlishness, than on her as an outstanding, accomplished athlete, or even further, on her being the first athlete in the Games to win a gold for Canada (and her *second* Olympic gold medal).

Given that contemporary culture (is) "controlled by men (and) functions for men, it is not surprising that the ... masculine and not-feminine ... should be valued and have precedence ... (It) is the vilification of femaleness in conjunction with the deification of maleness, (and) the tension between the two, that creates the dynamic of sexist consciousness" (Ruth 38). LeMay Doan represents both *essential* masculine and feminine characteristics, thus she is a living contradiction to prevailing gender ideologies, and therefore, a threat to the *natural* (read: patriar-

chal) order of things. However, because this contradiction and threat is problematic and must be eliminated, or at least glazed over, DiManno resolves this in the article through emphasizing LeMay Doan's feminine qualities and characteristics, while downplaying, trivializing, and in some cases, erasing her athletic (and typically masculine) abilities and achievements. For instance, at the end of the article, DiManno describes LeMay Doan as "our lovely Catriona" (C4). Rarely are male athletes referred to by their first names, or moreover, referred to as "lovely" (C4). LeMay Doan is a woman before she is an athlete, and the article makes clear that although having established herself as a phenomenal athlete, at her core, LeMay Doan remains a woman, and women, essentially, cannot be exceptional athletes.

#### **"Yes, the woman must be mad"**

In the third, fifth, and sixth paragraphs of the article, DiManno depicts LeMay Doan as reacting with child-like behaviours with respect to her athletic performance during the trial race and in the period before the final race. LeMay Doan is revealed to have been "fretting," and "restive," while being easily "distracted" by the "blink and clicking of cameras throughout the crowd" (DiManno C4). These child-like descriptions of LeMay Doan are only enhanced through DiManno's initial sketch of LeMay Doan as a "cowgirl" in the first paragraph (C4). DiManno also claims speed skating to be an essentially "unfussy" sport (DiManno C4). However, by stating speed skating as "unfussy" following a child-like representation of LeMay Doan's behaviours and physical appearance, in not so many words, DiManno positions LeMay Doan as possibly creating (and contributing to) a fussiness and childishness to the sport. Although Schopenhauer wrote in 1893 that women are "childish, frivolous, and short-sighted ... they are big children" (194), these ideas and be-

liefs of women as child-like continue to prevail in contemporary western culture. LeMay Doan is a 31-year-old adult woman and two-time Olympic gold medalist assumed to be accustomed to international competitions, yet throughout the article, DiManno continually in-fantilizes LeMay Doan through her use of

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terms more suitable for a child in anticipation of something exciting or a fussy newborn baby, rather than appropriately and accurately describing the pressure and anxiety of a world-class adult athlete competing at the Olympic Games.

DiManno devotes an entire paragraph in her article to LeMay Doan's self-depreciation and self-blaming in the context of her setting an Olympic record during the trial race. This is accompanied by the caption in one of the photos in the article that states, "LeMay Doan blazes to victory in Olympic 500 metres, *but wasn't completely happy*" (DiManno C4 [emphasis mine]). According to Thomson, acceptable psychological characteristics for women include, among others, "passivity and self-consciousness" (299). DiManno's descriptions of LeMay Doan prior to and after her gold medal win reaffirm the stereotype of the (always and essentially) neurotic, irrational, emotional, and unhappy woman. To

take from Thiele, "women are (believed to be) all body and no mind, closer to nature than culture, in the private realm not the public, emotional rather than rational" (38). Eventually, DiManno outwardly concludes that "yes, the *woman* must be mad" (C4 [emphasis mine]). Yet, rather than DiManno stating that LeMay Doan must be mad, she states that the *woman* must be mad, playing into the stereotype of the irrational woman, moreover, the irrationality of LeMay Doan *as a woman*, and not as a competitive, focused, motivated, and aggressive athlete. Thus, the pre-race behaviours and actions of LeMay Doan are continually attributed to the fact that LeMay Doan is a woman with an essential irrationality, neuroticism and self-consciousness that is directly associated with her gendered identity, and not simply a talented, nervous and determined Olympic athlete who is competing for (and winning) the gold medal.

#### **"A thing of beauty"**

LeMay Doan's body remains consistent with the norms of heterosexual, able-bodied, Euro-white North American beauty standards. For instance, LeMay Doan's body and her bodily actions are described in the first paragraph as "pure, and clean and seamless" (as in her being White, clean, blond-haired, smooth-skinned, and with proportionate, feminine and/or womanly curves). According to Thomson, this narrow profile of acceptable body traits for women includes—among others—"hairlessness, odourlessness ... youth, softness, whiteness, (and) thick wavy hair" (299). Accordingly, LeMay Doan corresponds quite nicely within these standards—purely, cleanly, and seamlessly. Thus, LeMay Doan becomes/is a "celebration of (desired) European physical features (for heterosexual women)" (Thomson 300) through DiManno's descriptions of LeMay Doan as "thing of beauty," a "goddess," a "cowgirl," and "lovely"

(C4). Moreover, the emphasis on LeMay Doan's physical abilities throughout the article and in accordance with the mandate of the Olympics in general, continually reinforces a normalcy surrounding able-ist standards and expectations.

**Spectacular thighs, but "thighs that could (also) crush a coconut"**

Throughout the article, LeMay Doan's "deviant" athletic body is also (hyper)sexually commodified for the (male) sexual pleasure/gaze/readership. For instance, in the article, LeMay Doan is described as a "statuesque powerhouse, in the Spider Man race suits designed for Canada's speedsters, bent over at the waist, head into the wind that she herself is creating, leaning fearlessly on the edge of her blades, arms swinging in a smooth rhythm, elbows cocking toward the ceiling; all limbs moving in unison, aerodynamically precise, *mouth half-open in an almost sensual manner*" (DiManno C4 [emphasis mine]). Although DiManno initially pays homage to LeMay Doan's body as though she were a female super hero of sorts, DiManno ends up sexualizing LeMay Doan's body in the last phrase, erasing her of her super-woman subjectivity, and rather, establishing her as an object for the male (hetero)sexual pleasure/gaze/readership.

DiManno determines to the reading audience what she believes to be LeMay Doan's "strong feature" (C4). However, this feature is not based on her athletic ability, or even her winning Canada's first gold medal in the Games, but LeMay Doan's "*ripe lips, (and) Chicklets smile, as defining of this 31-year-old as her spectacular thighs—thighs that could crush a coconut*" (DiManno C4 [emphasis mine]). DiManno seems to be titillating the intended audience of (predominantly) male readers though her (hyper-sexual) objectification of LeMay Doan's body and body parts through such

playing on words as in the "ripe lips" on the mouth (and on the vagina) of LeMay Doan, while simultaneously, DiManno constructs LeMay Doan's powerful body as hyper-sexual to the point where LeMay Doan's sexuality becomes a danger to male (hetero)sexuality.

According to Minh-ha,

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**LeMay Doan's powerful and strong woman's body (read: thighs strong enough to crush a coconut) becomes hyper-sexualized for the pleasure of male (hetero)sexual desire.**

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"identity ... has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self ... the further one moves from (this authentic) core, the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, (for instance), the real woman ... *difference, (then),* remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another ... all *deviations* from the dominant stream of thought, (for instance) the belief in a permanent essence of woman ... (are) considered to be a ... *human danger.*" (415 [emphasis mine])

Thus, LeMay Doan is created as some sort of fantasy super-woman where her "deviantly" powerful and

strong woman's body (read: thighs strong enough to crush a coconut) becomes hyper-sexualized for the pleasure of male (hetero)sexual desire.

**Who is the article written for?**

Women's bodies are oftentimes seen as spectacles for male viewers/readers in consumer culture. The males in society are accorded the role of spectator and actor upon women's bodies, while women remain to be gazed upon, measured, and passive (Thomson). According to bell hooks, the mass media (functions as) a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy (and patriarchy). Hooks states that the reader (or spectator) is placed in

a position of agency ... (and specific) race, class, and sexual relations influence the way in which this subject-hood is filled by the spectator (at that time). (117)

Throughout the article, the body of LeMay Doan becomes an arena where "(these) asymmetrical power relations are acted out (through) the process of objectification that is a part of the ideology of feminine beauty" (Thomson 300). Thus, LeMay Doan's body becomes hyper-sexualized for the (hetero)sexual pleasure and gaze of the male reading audience, while simultaneously, her body and/or beauty remains consistent with the dominant sexualized, gendered, and racialized beliefs and metaphors prevailing in contemporary western society. Although LeMay Doan asserts her subject status as an Olympic gold medal winner and superior athlete, her body is turned into an objectified state for the (hetero)sexual pleasure and gaze of a male audience based within a patriarchal, able-ist, white supremacist society. Through examining this relationship with regards to LeMay Doan as an athlete and as a

woman, the power relations involved in the evaluating gaze upon the sexualized, genderized, and racialized woman-athlete may be uncovered.

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## SHOSHAUNA SHY

### So Long

There was no reason for her disappearance  
in the middle of the day at the start  
of the children's long summer vacation,  
soda glass sweating on the windowsill,  
basket spilling bed sheets under the clothesline,  
overalls hanging from one strap mid-pin.  
The daughter's braces had just been removed

and she was waiting in the parking lot  
for her ride home, the first trickle of menses  
staining her thighs. The twins were skateboarding  
down Skance Avenue having just left the mall  
with stolen merchandise. At try-outs the oldest  
collided with the keeper, had trouble making it  
off the field on his own.  
After 16 hours, everybody was convinced

she had been met at the doorstep  
by some deranged stranger, tricked into leaving  
for a troubled neighbor, sick cocker spaniel,  
suicidal friend. The porch see-sawed  
with tight-lipped policemen, in-laws and brothers,  
womenfolk wailing, blustery *I bet's* tossed out  
to excuse her. No one noticed her husband

sat stone-still on their bed, her *So Long* folded  
into the heel of his shoe, her wedding ring wearing  
a hole through his palm.

*Shoshauna Shy's poems have recently appeared in Poetry Northwest, West Wind Review and the Comstock Review. One of her poems was chosen for the Library of Congress's project "Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools" launched by U.S. Poet Laureate, Billy Collins.*