

sporting that look

on the objectification of female athletes

Ninotchka Mumtaj Albano

De La Salle University, Manila

Abstract

Coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze emphasizes the pleasure of objectifying the female subject, a matter which I claim has seeped into women’s sports. Masculine-looking female athletes commonly face the pressure of proving the authenticity of their sex and gender, not because of how bad or how well they play a sport but because they do not conform to the stereotypical image of a woman. They also face scrutiny based on race and ethnicity. The oppression experienced by female athletes is thus conditioned by the (white) male gaze. I argue (1) that female athletes are subjected to archetypal standards of beauty and gender that sustain female objectification and oppression and (2) that as spectacles of the (white) male gaze, the feminization and sexualization of female athletes, particularly black female athletes, suggest that athletic standards are based on both racial and gender biases.

Keywords

Female nude, female athletes, male gaze, black female, nude, white race, objectification, female oppression



Introduction

Since the rise and fall of societies and the demarcation of sex and gender, women have battled their way through what is assumed—or at least hoped to be—an equal world. But theories and philosophies that reinforce the dichotomies of sex and gender have tried to prove that women are different from men, that they are more fragile, more emotional, and presumably the weaker sex, especially in the realm of sports. Although efforts have been made to equalize the roles that women play as athletes, there is reason to believe that women are still marginalized owing to the nature of their bodies and how their bodies are perceived. Like most enterprises, sports has been fashioned to be a world of men. As a result, women have been fighting to break the glass ceiling that holds them back from joining this world, if they could not have a world of their own (Hargreaves 1994, 26). In spite of possessing the same athletic abilities and potentials as their male counterparts, female athletes are still ridiculed in terms of their bodies, what their bodies stand for and the image they project as a symbol of athleticism and sports. One would think that the image of the body is irrelevant in sports, in which what matters is the game and how it is played, but being a woman in sports involves a unique set of problems.

The oppressive act of gazing at the female body has existed centuries before both John Berger and Laura Mulvey have formulated the motives of this gendered gaze. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger stated that “men act and women appear,” and that this way of seeing has transformed itself to what is now popularly known as the “male gaze.” Coined by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze emphasizes the pleasure of objectifying the female subject, a matter which I claim has seeped into women’s sports. Masculine-looking female athletes face the pressure of proving the authenticity of their sex and gender. It would seem that in order to prove that one is female, a woman ought to exhibit certain qualities that most females possess (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 196). These qualities are more often than not expectations of the male gaze. Such demands of the sporting world include, but are not limited to, sex-typing and backlash, which have nothing to do with how bad or how well they play a game. In addition, women athletes face scrutiny based on race and ethnicity. In “Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty: Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women’s Sports,” Peg Brand Weiser and Edward B.

Weiser delineate the types of discrimination that female athletes often experience in women's sports. A similar account is made in Shirley Anne Tate's "A Tale of Two Olympians: Beauty, 'Race,' Nation," which details how the national representation of a mixed-race female athlete is preferred not because of her African roots but because of her white features. Based on these two accounts, I shall explore the issue further and claim that the oppression experienced by female athletes result from the standards of beauty and gender imposed by the (white) male gaze.

The belief that the female body is soft, gentle, weak, smooth, and beautiful underlies what Mulvey refers to as "to-be-looked-at-ness." Most men would claim that these characteristics are irrelevant in sports, but in reality, they are made relevant to—if not compulsory for—female athletes. Western and misogynist standards of beauty have found its way into the sporting world. Not only are women subjected to the evaluation of the male gaze, but they are also sexually and racially evaluated in terms of their conformity to the feminine archetype (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 216). Even before the conception of the male gaze, the aesthetic assessment of female bodies has often been paired with oppressive and discriminatory sex and gender stereotypes. The idea is that there is an alleged universal standard of beauty that one ought to conform to. However, this does not account for the reality of women in the field of sports, much less the natural differences in women's bodies and ethnicities. Standards of beauty on top of standards of athletic ability would result in contradictory ideas about the body, beauty, and gender. Why is femininity necessary for women to compete equally in sports formerly dominated by men? Why is there a need for women to prove themselves not only in terms of their athletic abilities but also their gender and sexual identity, when there is no corresponding need on the part of male athletes? Why is the sporting world so fixated on the idea that female athletes must appear feminine in order to compete as females while male athletes need not prove that they are indeed masculine men? What is their basis for the assessment of a female athlete's femininity or lack thereof? It appears that the benchmark of feminine beauty is used to propagate oppressive procedures and biases against women, women of color, and masculine or athletic women in sports.

In support of Weiser and Weiser's analysis, and by means of concepts presented by Lavallee (2016), I will show (1) that female athletes are subjected to archetypal standards of beauty and gender that sustain female objectification

and oppression and (2) that as spectacles of the (white) male gaze, the feminization and sexualization of female athletes, particularly black female athletes, suggest that athletic standards are based on both racial and gender biases. I hope to disclose how the active and aggressive manner in which most sports are played has paved the way for paradoxical athletic and aesthetic standards by which female bodies are expected conform. This paper attempts to juxtapose the physical requirements imposed on female athletes and the standard of beauty demanded of a spectacle such as the female nude, in order to show that the principal guidelines are formed and motivated not on the basis of athletic grounds but on a dominating gaze. The standards used to assess a female athlete's sex and gender are based on a false perception of beauty and femininity propagated by a white male gaze.

Spectacles on and off the court

Weiser and Weiser (2016) introduce the concept of gender mis-identity through the case of an 18-year-old South African middle-distance runner, Caster Semenya. The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) had asked her to undergo sex verification procedures prior to competing in the Women's 800m semifinal at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin on August 19, 2009 (194). Generally, there need not be any issue on sex and gender; as with any institution, in sports, athletes are classified as either male or female and they become part of either men's or women's divisions.

Sex becomes an issue only if (a) an athlete competing as a woman is suspected of being "really" male or (b) an athlete became a transsexual after puberty, using medical technologies to "switch" from a male-type anatomy to a more female type, or vice versa. Typically, (a) happens because an athlete was born with a disorder of sex development (DSD, sometimes called intersex, and formerly called hermaphroditisms) and (b) occurs when an athlete is transgender. (Dreger 2010, 22)

Yet gender was not the issue in the case of Semenya; it was her sex. The reason behind her sex verification procedure was to put an end to "accusatory rumors and complaints," as "her speed and the way she looked prompted

insinuations that she was a man" (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 194). Yet is not clear which standards of beauty or femininity are followed in assessing the authenticity of female athletes and women in general. In the same way that no objective guide to masculinity exists, there are no real and exact standards of beauty or femininity. What is clear is that Semenya's sex was verified because she does not conform to the female archetype. Her physical characteristics do not conform to the usual female form, which was reason enough for some to believe that she was in fact a man posing as a woman. But this then leads us to question the grounds on which governing bodies of sports base their assessment of sex and gender identities. Why did they suspect that Semenya was merely posing as a woman? Why was there an urgent need for them to validate or invalidate their assumptions about her sex and gender? What, if any, could be the standards on which femininity is presumably based?

Wolf (2002, 12) explains that, according to the beauty myth,

the quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful.

Beauty is something that women *must* desire and they ought to want it because men want women who are beautiful. Women are not only encouraged but coerced to want to be beautiful by all means, or else be considered plain or undesirable to say the very least.

Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. None of this is true. "Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. "Beauty" is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty

stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman; the Maori admire a fat vulva, and the Padung, droopy breasts. (Wolf 2002, 12)

If what Wolf claims is true, then as in every system governed by men, the privileges and liberties of female athletes have been curtailed by male standards such as those of beauty. This, on top of women's need to excel in their chosen sport, has kept them on edge, preventing any appreciable sexual equality between female and male athletes.

Women must constantly prove themselves to be as strong as men while possessing female characteristics and qualities acceptable not only to their cultural standards, those of the white and western world, i.e. the standards of the governing authorities in sports. It is feasible to possess a strong athletic body while maintaining one's femininity, but it is very difficult for many to do so. In cases such as Semenya's, sports authorities like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), as well as athletes and coaches, use what Weiser and Weiser (2016, 193) describe as

traditional and racialized aesthetic norms of beauty as the basis for ungrounded judgments of gender misidentity. Perceiving and then mistaking an elite athlete's body as "male" instead of "female" reveals an underlying cognitive bias acquired through years of experience and education based on misleading aesthetic norms of beauty.

This case of "perceptual sexism" *can* be corrected. There is an urgent need to admit that a white, western idea of beauty has been imposed on us. Unless we correct this predominantly erroneous idea of what a female athlete ought to look like, the categorization of people according to their sex and gender would continue to be almost inhuman.

In an interview with BBC Sport six years after the commotion about her sexual identity, Semenya says, "If it wasn't for my family, I don't think I could have survived" (Smith 2015, "Caster Semenya"). It was humiliating to have the whole world witness the controversy, since as far as she knew—and as her mother has repeatedly asserted—she has always been identified as female. What seems even more questionable is that people found it very difficult to believe that she was female. In contrast, one would not hear of male athletes being questioned

for looking too womanly, being coerced to undergo sex verification procedures to ensure that they aren't women posing as men, or being scrutinized if their testosterone levels are too low. Semenya recalls,

"I was world champion but I was never able to celebrate it. It was a joke for me. When I grew up, I grew up like that. I grew up with boys, I grew up around boys, I cannot change it... It was upsetting, you feel humiliated. You cannot control what people think. It is about yourself, controlling yourself—what is in you. But now I want to focus more on the future, I don't want to go back there. What is done is done." (Smith 2015, "Caster Semenya")

Fortunately, this experience has not discouraged Semenya from pursuing her dreams and continuing to prove herself to the world. She quips,

running is what I will always do. Even if, maybe, the authorities could have stopped me from running in 2009, they could not have stopped me in the fields. I would have carried on with my running, it doesn't matter. When I run I feel free, my mind is free. (Smith 2015, "Caster Semenya")

Yet it is this freedom that scares most, especially those who would like to go against feminist cries for equality. We cannot change the aesthetic aspects of human bodies; these are ever-changing and our standard and perception of beauty must evolve with them. The quality of beauty after all is not as vital as we think. It is not as valuable as the ability to walk or speak, yet the world has put so much emphasis on it as if it were an essential commodity. Semenya states, "I am not a fake. I am natural. I am just being Caster. I don't want to be someone I don't want to be. I don't want to be someone people want me to be. I just want to be me. I was born like this. I don't want any changes" (Smith 2015, "Caster Semenya").

In 2016, Lynsey Sharp, a team GB runner, "appeared to criticise recent law reforms allowing runners to avoid testosterone-suppressants." This criticism was followed by reports that Semenya "has internal testes but no womb or ovaries due to an abnormality" and "has been dominating middle-distance running since a ruling which previously forced her to take drugs to cut her testosterone was overturned." Sharp, among others, have insinuated that there

were "'obvious' athletes with heightened testosterone" in the same event (Morgan 2016, "Caster Semenya wins 800m"). It is clear that the obviousness has been directed to the athletes' lack of archetypal female attributes that women, especially western women, possess. It is unclear if these allegations are based on racist or sexist attitudes, but the thinking seems to be that if athletes do not look like typical females, then they must be men. Weiser and Weiser (2016, 195) explain that in Semenya's case,

visual differences clearly set her apart from most other athletes; she was South African and black and many other competitors were European or American and white. Moreover, her own feelings of gender identification with the female sex and her autonomy to choose to compete in women's competition were deemed irrelevant.

It was as if these "experts" had valid reasons to believe that women are *supposed* to look a certain way, based on a foolproof, fixed standard that disqualifies nonconformists as female. But what essence is it exactly that qualifies a woman as female? In the case of women's sports, isn't that qualification simply identifying oneself as female? Unfortunately, the visual differences among athletes warrant further investigation, including the presence of high levels of testosterone. In addition to Semenya, Francine Niyonsaba and Margaret Wambui, who were awarded silver and bronze medals in the 2016 Olympics, respectively, have also faced similar doubts about their testosterone levels (Morgan 2015, "Caster Semenya wins 800m"). To appease all haters and critics, and sports authorities such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the IAAF required women like Semenya to take testosterone suppressants. However, in 2015, "the Court of Arbitration for Sport suspended the IAAF's rules on hyperandrogenism for two years" (Morgan 2015, "Caster Semenya wins 800m"). The claim that levels of testosterone play a part in the success of an athlete was rejected. As many theorists have argued, it is not the case that a male body, replete with more testosterone, would necessarily gain the edge in competition; no studies have shown that all males will outperform all females. Testosterone levels have not shown a clear correlation with athletic performance (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 199). Thus, the excess of testosterone or lack of estrogen has no relevance to the success, strength or speed of an athlete. It would seem that just because these athletes are women, society finds it very difficult to believe that

they could outrun, outlast, or outwit their male counterparts. In addition to that, women themselves have been socially programmed to aspire for female identifiers, which have almost always been associated with the white female archetype. This archetype poses plenty of difficulties for both white and non-white women alike.

Even before the Semenya controversy, there were female athletes who have also undergone sex and gender scrutiny because

the IOC perpetuates the stigma of female participation in elite sport by not allowing women to compete unless they have proven themselves to be “real” women, both genetically and in terms of appearance, testing athletes suspected of being too masculine on a case-by-case basis. (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 196)

Thus, the practice of sex testing in sports has been around long before the term “androgyny” became mainstream. For example in 1936, Helen Stephens was accused by Polish journalists of being male because she “ran with long male-like strides,” although test results proved that she was indeed female. Like Stephens, Tamara and Irina Press were suspected, without proof, of posing as male athletes. Yet the most extreme case was surely that of the Spanish hurdler, María José Martínez-Patiño, who in 1985 was disqualified from competing after failing the Barr body test in Kobe, Japan. She successfully fought the ruling and was reinstated three years later. According to Weiser and Weiser (2016, 198), “She was found to have androgen insensitivity syndrome where she is chromosomal 46, XY but her body does not respond to testosterone; therefore, she is a phenotypic female.” Like Semenya, Patiño was invasively inspected on demand. And like Semenya, “she was targeted because competitors, journalists, and judges thought she was unfairly gaining a physical advantage over others, in part because she simply looked—to their eyes—masculine” Weiser and Weiser (2016, 196).

The constant need for female athletes to prove themselves as excellent sportswomen entails that they must conform to masculine athletic abilities while preserving socially acceptable feminine characteristics. Failure to do so would result in unforgiving criticisms. As Hargreaves (1994, 100) writes, “in tennis, as in other sports, women continued to be judged according to traditional norms of

femininity which in part continued to restrict their development." The nature of sports symbolizes the core of masculinity, that is,

manly virtues of courage, aggression and the competitive instinct were still intimately associated with them. The cult of athleticism was in essence a cult of manliness and so if women were to join in on an equal footing, they could hardly be simultaneously projected as sexual objects by men. (Hargreaves 1994, 108)

It is as if without further inquiry, beauty and femininity have become associated with sexuality and sensuality, which in turn have all been equated with the female body. On the other hand, brains, brawn, strength, power, masculinity, and muscularity have all been labeled as masculine. Consequently, women who display strength, power, and muscular physiques are assumed to be men. This brings us to my claim that the standards of beauty and femininity imposed on female athletes have very little to do with sports itself, but are simply the reiteration of the qualities demanded of the object of the "male gaze":

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leit-motif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 1999, 62)

In understanding the gaze as male and the object of the gaze as predominantly female, we will find that most images of females subjected to the male gaze are nude, erotic, or compliant with a feminine standard often ideally pictured as sexually gratifying or enticing. Most images of women in works of art such as Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) cater to the male gaze. In the painting, we see the nude Olympia resting on a divan in nothing but her elegant mules. She is gazing intently back at us with her hand placed at a strategic area, as if to beckon her viewer to come closer or to marvel at the expanse of her body. In

the meantime, a black woman stands at her side with a bouquet of flowers. Unlike the white female, the black woman is clothed from top to bottom, also gazing at Olympia as if to offer her the flowers. While this suggests the stereotype of the black servant during Manet's time, scholars also deduce that what this image really suggests is the undesirability of the black woman as compared to the white female: that is, the standard of elegance and beauty is whiteness (Lavallee 2016, 85). If we were to search for all the artworks that feature the female nude, one would notice a very obvious theme: most, if not all of them are young with white and smooth hairless skin; they are curvaceous with ample breasts and hips; they have long hair; and they are presented such that their gaze implies a mixture of enticement and a weak surrender and vulnerability. All of these qualities, we would soon see, are absent in the likes of strong independent women, particularly athletic women of color.

Bolstering Mulvey's definition, Eaton (2012, 878) describes the male gaze as

The androcentric attitude of an image; that is, its depiction of the world, and in particular of women, in terms of male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes, or values. More specifically, "the male gaze" usually refers to the sexually objectifying attitude that a representation takes toward its feminine subject matter, presenting her as a primarily passive object for heterosexual-male erotic gratification.

However, this objectifying attitude works both ways. The male gaze looks at its object and objectifies it sexually, if and only if the object demands the gaze, or to put it simply, if the woman has the characteristics that connote the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the female archetype. Those who fail the aesthetic criteria of most images of female nudes are disqualified from being admired or regarded as beautiful subjects worthy of the male gaze. However, they are also objectified, as bodies that do not qualify as erotic objects.

Eaton (2012, 287) chronicles the many ways by which women are objectified. To put it simply, to objectify is "to treat as a mere thing something that is in fact not a thing." She cites Rae Langton's criteria of objectification, two of which seem to encompass the attitude that most people have in judging the nonconventional physical attributes of female athletes. The first is the "reduction to body or to treat a person as identified with her body or body parts," and the

second is “reduction to appearance or to treat a person primarily in terms of how she appears to the senses.” These two means of objectifying female bodies can go either way: one could look at a woman and see her as a sexual object, or reject her as unappealing. The latter is similar to the attitude most people adopt toward female athletes such as Caster Semenya, basketball star Brittney Griner, and tennis players Sam Stosur, Amelie Mauresmo, and Serena Williams. The problem also lies in the assumption that strength and muscle equate to masculinity. It is as if women were devoid of muscles and men were devoid of sexual organs and erogenous zones. It may just be this physical shift of women athletes from the ultra feminine physique to a more muscular build that puts critics into a “moral panic” (Forman and Plymire 2005, 120).

An analysis of articles in print media suggests a paradigm shift in “commercialized sports to further either the liberation of sexual minorities or the deconstruction of norms of sex, gender, and sexuality” (Forman and Plymire 2005, 121). An article from the *Los Angeles Times* features Amelie Mauresmo at the center of criticisms. Like Semenya, the former tennis world number one, she was criticized for her massive muscular build, strength, and speed. In the said article, Lindsay Davenport was interviewed after her recent loss to the then 19-year-old Mauresmo. Davenport stated,

If you look close at her, she's a very, very strong girl... A very talented player and mentally she had gotten better. She was very tough to play out there. A couple of times, I thought I was playing a guy—she was hitting so hard, and so strong... I would look over there and she's so strong, and those shoulders. She hits the ball, not like any other girl... She hits so hard with so much topspin. Women's tennis is not normally played like that. (Dillman 2008, “Davenport Finally Meets Her Match”)

While the gaze is assumed to be an attitude of a male viewer towards a feminine subject, it is not exclusive to men; one could adopt this way of looking regardless of one's sex, gender, or sexual preference. Hence, failure to meet normative standards of beauty or femininity by a female subject would gain the same objectifying attention, but in reverse. Eaton (2008, 878) explains, “a picture need not ever be viewed by heterosexual men in order to exemplify ‘the male gaze’ because the term refers to the viewpoint or attitude that a picture adopts and the response that it prescribes to its audience.” It has been society's habit

to suppose that people must appear a certain way, that there must be something wrong or abnormal in those who do not conform to the standards. According to Berger (1972, 47),

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

Similarly, female athletes who do conform to the feminine standard criticize those who fall short. The opinions of both Lynsey Sharp and Lindsay Davenport on Caster Semenya and Amélie Mauresmo, respectively, reflect not only what I would call the reverse effect of the male gaze but also a sexist attitude toward muscular female athletes. Like Semenya's, Mauresmo's shoulders have always been part of the scrutiny; as Davenport later commented, "her shoulders look huge to me...I think they must have grown. Maybe it was because she was wearing a tank top" (Dillman 1999, "Davenport Finally Meets Her Match"). One could only suppose that the problem is society's bias towards men, such that only they are entitled to muscles. In an interview, Tomasz Wiktorowski, the coach for tennis player Agnieszka Radwanska—who, unlike the top-seeded Serena Williams, has a small build—claimed that "It's our decision to keep her as the smallest player in the top 10 because, first of all she's a woman, and she wants to be a woman." Radwanska herself "acknowledged how her appearance mattered to her, essentially more than her performance, because, well, 'I'm a girl'" (Kendall 2015, "Female athletes"). Comments such as these reflect a negative perception of female sports. They invalidate the struggle of women in reclaiming their bodies as their own from patriarchal ideologies and stereotypes instilled in them by society. It only shows that the problem of perceptual sexism in women's sports has not waned over the past decades, when "the struggle over the legitimate female body in games centered on connotations of impropriety and mannishness and involved a wider public, including parents and the press" (Hargreaves 2010, 84). The idea that success in a chosen sport could only be brought about by dedication and determination, reflects the privilege of male athletes who need not look a certain way to be praised or to be regarded

as the best at their craft. Their success does not depend on how desirable they are to their spectators; in fact, beauty or desirability plays little to no part in men's sports. However, these qualities are emphasized and over-eroticized in women's sports, so much so that some female athletes strive to meet the normative standard of femininity. To the crowd, they are simply women whose bodies are equipped with toned muscles that accentuate their already curvaceous physique.

Since the "ideal of beauty encouraged conformity to a virtually unattainable, unhealthy, and unnatural standard of thinness and beauty," as Wolf argues in *The Beauty Myth*, female athletes have been trying to shift the standards by promoting strong and toned bodies "that include muscles, strength, fitness, and competitiveness. This is a move away from traditional depictions of vulnerability, fragility, dependence, and subservience" (Carty 2005, 137). However, having strength and a toned body does not necessarily save female athletes from being objects of the male gaze.

In 1999, the now-retired American soccer player, Brandi Chastain, posed nude in an advertisement for *Gear*. Her statement in response to the ad was that she was simply showcasing her "muscles and toned body she had earned through intense physical training and that her appearance in the photo did not objectify her body. Rather, it was a statement of athleticism and strength." Meanwhile, the former Olympian swimmer, Jenny Thompson, also posed topless for the summer issue of *Sports Illustrated* in 2000. According to Thompson, her decision was meant to "show off her muscles rather than to promote any kind of sex appeal. Like Chastain, she described her pose as about strength, fitness, and the beauty of muscles, not about sex." While their motives attempted to portray both strength and femininity, these women were still potentially objectified in a sexually desirable manner. Although their bodies appear more toned than that of the average female, they still suffice as objects of desire.

Chastain and Thompson are blond, white, and physically fit females—the ideal image of male fantasy. Because they fit the traditional notion of femininity across these lines, their muscles are not seen as threatening. They are afforded the luxury of being perceived as both strong and attractive. *Gear* and *Sports Illustrated* target a predominantly male readership base. Though nudity may be empowering for Chastain and Thompson as individuals, this type of pose is situated perfectly

within the confines of what the male gaze deems as “appropriately feminine.” (Carty 2005, 138)

Because most female athletes who do comply with the requirements of the male gaze are white or fair with slender frames and appropriate features, they qualify as female and feminine for the governing authorities in sports and media.

Though women may be voluntarily posing to show off their muscular bodies, these new body types had to be first accepted by men and then be transfigured into images of sexuality. Thus, female athletes are marketed as an object of male fantasy. (Carty 2005, 138)

Upholding standards for a socially acceptable female body alongside those for a strong and powerful athletic body is mentally and emotionally damaging for female athletes, who suppress themselves from gaining too much muscle, thereby sacrificing their athletic abilities (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 200). The dignity of women's sports and their aim to be the best at their craft are superseded by the concern for a non-universal, misogynist feminine standard that not only oppresses white women but also and especially women of color.

Black is beautiful

When asked about what she thought of people thinking that she was too masculine, Serena Williams simply replied, “too muscly and too masculine, and then a week later too racy and too sexy. So for me it was just really a big joke” (Cocozza 2016, “Serena Williams”). Williams, who currently holds 23 Grand Slam singles titles, is regarded as the greatest tennis player in the Open era. But despite her greatness in the world of tennis, she is one of the many female athletes who are constantly criticized not only for their strength and muscularity, but also for their ethnicity. The underlying standard of femininity is projected by a gaze that is both sexually and racially oppressive.

Indeed, the omission of women of color and non-white females from masterpieces dating back to the early Renaissance indicates an obvious trend: the gaze is white, the standard of beauty, femininity and sexuality is white and the object of the male gaze is white. This is not to say that white females are not objectified. Rather, in the objectification of white females, a standard is established that does not encompass all women based on their shape, size and ethnicity.

The significance of the issue of race is evident in Lavalley's (2016) criticism of Eaton's (2012) analysis of the female nude. For Lavalley, Eaton's "white feminism" denies or overlooks the means by which white privilege oppresses non-white women and broadens the scope of gender inequality. Inasmuch as female representation in art and print media is based on a very western, white standard, Eaton's claim that objectification via the female nude pertains to *all* women is false. For if one were collate all works that feature the female nude, one very obvious observation would be the absence or lack of non-white women. This also entails three things. First, if the predominant object of the gaze is a white female, then whiteness seems to accompany the standard of beauty or femininity that warrants the desiring gaze. Second, non-white women are not considered in the scale of beauty and femininity posed by this gaze. Third, as spectacles of the (white) male gaze, the feminization and sexualization of female athletes, particularly black female athletes, suggests that athletic standards are based on both racial and gender biases.

The more a female athlete's physique approximates the white female archetype, the less she needs to prove her sex and gender, and the more praise she receives regardless of her athletic performance and ability. A case in point is that of tennis star Anna Kournikova, whose sexuality and femininity have been emphasized on and off the court despite her not having any grand slam (singles) title.

She aggressively accentuates her sex appeal over her athletic ability. In a commercial for Berlei sports bras in which she was recently featured, the tagline read, "Only the ball should bounce." Kournikovas's ability to profit from her sensuality and eroticism highlights the importance of marketability and how corporate interests have a hand in promoting certain gendered representations. (Carty 2005, 139)

People's perception of Kournikova is not very different from their perception of the figure skater Michelle Kwan.

Though Kwan is an Asian American, her relatively light skin and body type appeals to the traditional notions of femininity exalted by white mainstream society. Also, the stereotype of female Asians as "the model minority" and their supposed subservience to male authority and exotic qualities allow Kwan to fit within the mold of white femininity. (Carty 2005, 139)

The fact that Kwan is fair-skinned, slender, and was raised in the U.S. facilitates her acceptance into the athletic world despite her Asian roots. In this case, one's ethnicity would not matter if one's physical attributes closely resemble those of a white female. As Lavalley (2016, 80) argues,

almost exclusively white female nude in Western art is not only a source of sexual objectification, but simultaneously upholds the normative valuing of white femininity, sexuality and bodies, over the bodies, sexuality and femininity of nonwhite women.

A bigger picture emerges if we compare the media perception of such diverse athletes as Semenya, Williams, Mauresmo, Kournikova, and Kwan. Gender objectification equates to the objectification of *white* women and those who resemble the white female archetype. "White women simply become women, and these women's experiences are treated as representative of all women's experiences. The white body is treated as the raceless norm, and the nonwhite body as a deviation from this norm, thereby racialized" (Lavalley 2016, 80-81). The issue of color grounds the issue of beauty and femininity. And because an athlete's beauty and femininity are significant in women's sports, both athleticism and femininity are racialized. The color of a female athlete's skin plays such a big role in the assessment her beauty and femininity that it almost supersedes her success as a sportswoman.

People's judgments about Semenya and Serena and Venus Williams are a function of cultural prejudices concerning black women. As Carty (2005, 140) explains,

Blacks have always been stereotyped as more physical than intellectual, praised for their natural abilities and physicality. Because black women were denied access to full-time homemaking and sexual protection, they did not tie femininity to a specific, limited set of activities and attributes defined as separate and opposite from masculine. Therefore, black women historically have been situated outside dominant culture's definition of acceptable (white) femininity, and black womanhood is viewed very differently. This may be why mainstream preoccupation with racial stereotypes of black athletic prowess supersedes the perception of black women's sexuality.

Because black women's physicality is associated with masculine potentialities, black femininity cannot be generalized under the normative standards of white female bodies. In the case of athletes like Semenya, their success is overshadowed by their physical muscularity whereas their black femininity is ignored. Lavalley (2016, 86) explains that

in the US, black women are generally not stereotyped as passive, sexually pure, modest, or conventionally feminine. Black women instead become subjected to a white-racist ideology that views them as loud, impure, hypersexual, immodest, vulgar, unfit to mother, aggressive and masculinized.

For them to be accepted in the field of sports, they should have such attributes as "porcelain skin, long, silken hair, and delicate, tapered features," which "identify the so-called 'ideal' Western beauty and insist upon the unattractiveness of women of color, whose body image has been much maligned over the centuries" (Farrington 2003, 15)—so much so that a mixed-race female athlete is seen as more acceptable than one who is purely black.

An athlete's race necessarily impacts how she represents a supposedly multicultural nation in the Olympic Games. Tate (2016, 96) poses several questions surrounding the racial branding of British athletes Jessica Ennis and Jeanette Kwakye. Ennis is light-skinned and mixed race, whereas Kwakye is much darker, closer to the likes of Williams and Semenya. The main concern centers around the success of Ennis as an icon of Team GB (the Great Britain Olympic team), a global brand that stands for "a nation which prides itself on being

democratic, tolerant, inclusive, and diverse, with colonialism and slavery in its best-forgotten past." We cannot discount that the success of Ennis as the Team GB icon and its brand's endorser is on account of her light skin. Tate (2016, 97) notes that

her lighter skinned Black/white "mixed racedness" made her body more palatable than Jeanette Kwakye's darker-skinned body, to a nation still embedded in a colonial pigmentocracy regime. The skin color hierarchy still means "white is right, if you are brown stick around, but if you are Black get back." Ennis's skin had "cross-over value" and made it possible for her to be emblematic of a nation which imagines itself as tolerant and multicultural while at the same time constructing her as "other."

The ambiguity of Ennis's color racially brands her as a body that is neither entirely black nor white. The contrasts between Ennis and Kwakye may have been intended to proclaim GB's multicultural inclusiveness; but at the same time, they overlook the racial and gender disparities that could result from this racial branding. This is because

within this skin trade their bodies are appropriated as both negative and positive signifiers of a national identity which seeks to deny continuing racialization, whiteness as a racial category, and the power-privilege of white skin. (Tate 2016, 97)

Although all women are objectified in one way or another, the white female still sits at the top of the hierarchy. Lavallee (2016, 94) notes that

many white women also have access to economic and social currency, and power that is not accorded to nonwhite women. This privilege is founded upon the classification of white women's bodies as potentially, or actually, instances of ideal beauty.

It follows that in spite of being objectified as women, white athletes are more privileged than their nonwhite counterparts primarily because of their whiteness. It goes without saying that no matter how great a nonwhite female athlete is, her success is affected by her skin color. One could say that Kwakye fails in her representation of Team GB as a national icon because she lacks what

Ennis embodies, which is partly a symbol of whiteness or in this case, “browning.” Kwakye's significance as the ambassador for the Olympics' clean up London 2012 campaign sponsored by Ariel, placed a black body

which could not be cleansed because of its connotations with physical and moral impurity, with the white need for cleanliness, as well as Black people's assumed desire for whiteness. Soap was not just about cleanliness, as these ideas on Black and white bodies were foundational for racial thinking. (Tate 2016, 98-99)

Juxtaposing Kwakye's black body against the idea of cleanliness by virtue of whiteness, markets the idea that “white is might” or that blackness is filth and violation of the norms of beauty. Despite Ennis's muscular body and black features, she does not pose as much of a threat to the status quo and the white norm than do Kwakye, Semenya and Williams. In the same way that whiteness is marketed as the ideal, blackness is marketed as a lack or an imperfection—and in cases that involve a surplus of hormones, an abnormality. Furthermore, because nonwhite females are surveyed through a white male gaze, they are prescribed a white standard which they ought to adopt but would never achieve.

Nonwhite women are perceived through a “white male gaze” that will always define their bodies as lacking in beauty and erotic excellence, due to their lack of whiteness. The form this “lack” takes and the extent to which it projects inadequacy upon nonwhite women's bodies varies in accordance with the racial stereotypes attached to different nonwhite bodies. But in all cases, the generic ideal of beauty is necessarily inaccessible to the nonwhite woman. Moreover, the white women who can and do embody this ideal beauty (again, to different extents and in different ways), are in fact granted many social privileges because of it. (Lavalley 2016, 94)

Society's idea of femininity is based on a “perceptual sexism” which

narrowly defines “real” women as Western, white, and heterosexual; nothing could be further from this norm than African, black, with the appearance of what is judged by means

of perceptual sexism as mannish or masculine physicality. (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 214)

Obviously, if one were to evaluate nonwhite female athletes against the norm of a white body, very few would live up to the standards of both femininity and athleticism. Rigorous training in elite sports would obviously result in a powerful and muscular body over and above the normal human anatomy for any body, regardless of sex or gender (Weiser and Weiser 2016, 193). Given this, it would be intuitively unnecessary to question the non-normative strength and muscularity of female athletes, no matter what their race or skin color. In order for women to be as strong as men, it follows that they allow their bodies to undergo changes necessary to gain such strength. The norms of femininity neither improve nor elevate the quality of a female athlete's performance or her sport. It may just be that black female athletes are more physical and better at sports precisely because of their emphasis on performance rather than appearance. Their idea of femininity is different from that of the white female, and they pay less attention to the pursuit of whiteness than to athletic excellence. I am not discounting or denying the oppression of white women in sports, but as mentioned earlier, they are at least more privileged than their nonwhite counterparts.

Conclusion

The issues that arise in women's sports, such as hormonal levels and physical ambiguities, are not given the same attention in men's sports. These problems concerning sexism lead to questions about race, given that nonwhite women would by no means achieve the physical qualities genetically exclusive to the white race. This would only mean that nonwhite female athletes would fail in the pursuit of whatever standard the governing authorities dictate, if such standard is based on a mold shaped specifically for a specific white body. If there really existed perfect white female bodies to which the standards of femininity,

beauty, and athleticism apply, then there should be no difficulty in compliance, and governing sports authorities should easily fish out counterfeit females. Yet when all has been said and done, the excellence of a female athlete has nothing to do with how she appears to the white male gaze, but everything to do with the vitality, endurance, strength, and speed of her athletic body on the track, in the field, in the ring, or on the court.

Works Cited

- Betterton, Rosemary. 1985. "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon." *Feminist Review* 19 (Spring): 3-24. Accessed March 8, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1394982>.
- Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. UK: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.
- Carty, Victoria. 2005. "Textual Portrayals of Female Athletes: Liberation or Nuanced Forms of Patriarchy?" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2: 132-155. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137402>.
- Cocozza, Paula. 2016. "Serena Williams: 'Not everyone's going to like the way I look.'" *The Guardian*, June 28. Accessed March 4, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jun/28/serena-williams-interview-beyonce-dancing-too-masculine-too-sexy>.
- Devereaux, Mary. 1990. "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (Autumn): 337-347. Accessed February 24, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/431571>.
- Dillman, Lisa. 1999. "Davenport Finally Meets Her Match." *Los Angeles Times*, January 28. Accessed March 4, 2018. <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jan/28/sports/sp-2580>.
- Douglas, Delia D. 2012. "Venus, Serena, and the Inconspicuous Consumption of Blackness: A Commentary on Surveillance, Race Talk, and New Racism(s)." *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 2 (March): 127-145. Accessed: March 3, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23215203>.
- Dreger, Alice. 2010. "Sex Typing for Sport." *The Hastings Center Report* 40, no. 2 (March-April): 22-24. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663834>.
- Eaton, A.W. 2008. "Feminist Philosophy of Art." *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 5 (July): 873-893. Accessed March 9, 2015. https://www.academia.edu/6572305/Feminist_Philosophy_of_Art.
- . 2012. "What's wrong with the (Female) Nude? A Feminist Perspective on Art and Pornography," in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays* edited by Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson, 277-308. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farrington, Lisa E. 2003. "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude." *Woman's Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn 2003 - Winter 2004): 15-23. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1358782>.
- Forman, Pamela J. and Darcy C. Plymire. 2005. "Amélie Mauresmo's Muscles: The Lesbian Heroic in Women's Professional Tennis." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1/2 (Spring - Summer): 120-133. Accessed March 1, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40005505>.
- Hargreaves, Jennifer. 1994. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kendall, Erica Nicole. 2015. "Female athletes often face the femininity police—especially Serena Williams." *The Guardian*, July 14. Accessed March 4, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/14/serena-williams-female-athletes-femininity-police>.
- Lavallee, Zoe. 2016. "What's Wrong with the (White) Female Nude?" *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (February): 77-97.

- Morgan, Tom. 2016. "Caster Semenya wins 800m: beaten GB finalist Lynsey Sharp criticises rule changes over 'obvious' hyperandrogenous women." *Telegraph*, August 21. Accessed March 4, 2018. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/21/lynsey-sharp-criticises-obvious-hypoadrogenous-women-having-bein/>.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1999. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 833-44. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Ben. 2015. "Caster Semenya: 'What I dream of is to become Olympic champion.'" *BBC Sport*, May 20. Accessed March 1, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/sport/athletics/32805695>.
- Tate, Shirley Anne. 2016. "A Tale of Two Olympians: Beauty, 'Race', Nation," in *Body Aesthetics* ed. Sherri Irvin, 94-109. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weiser, Peg Brand and Edward B. Weiser. 2016. "Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty: Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women's Sports," in *Body Aesthetics*. ed. Sherri Irvin, 192-221. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, Naomi. 2002. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: Harper Collins.