

Articles – Position Paper:

“We just want to be listened to.”: Mundane Transphobia in BBC1’s ‘The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova’.

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This position paper explores the mundane transphobia evident in the BBC1 documentary ‘The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova’, which aired on the 26th June 2019. Using rhetorical analysis, it closely examines the language utilised by Martina when she interviews five individuals – Naomi Reid, Alison Perkins, Joanna Harper, Kristina Harrison, and Charlie Martin – about their experiences of participating in sport as trans women. This piece draws on a number of examples to illustrate how mundane transphobia occurs interactionally in conversations between trans and cisgender people. It argues that whilst Martina at times renders herself as advocating for the inclusion of trans women in elite sport, she instead engages with mundane transphobia, that is, ‘the everyday ways in which non-trans people enact marginalisation towards transgender people despite claims to inclusivity’ (Riggs, 2016, p.4).

Introduction:

ON the 26th of June 2019, BBC1 aired the programme ‘[The Trans Women Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova.](#)’ Billed as a one-off documentary special, the programme followed Martina as she, in her own words during the opening minutes of the programme, ‘set out to open up the debate and answer some of her own questions by meeting a range of athletes, trans women and scientists.’ The programme was prompted by events which had taken place on social media and in the UK press earlier in 2019, where Martina had called for an open debate about transgender women athletes competing in elite women’s sports. Martina expressed that her wish for open debate consequently sparked, in her own words in the programme’s introduction, ‘a heated and passionate argument, creating global news headlines.’

Martina Navratilova is a Czechoslovak-born, American, former professional tennis player and coach and is considered by many to be one of the greatest female tennis players of all time, having won eighteen Grand Slam titles and Wimbledon a record nine times. She is one of sport’s first openly gay figures, coming out in 1981 and is a vocal advocate for LGBT equal rights and a supporter of many charities benefiting the LGBT community. Previously in both the UK press and on her personal Twitter account, Martina has stated that she believes that trans women have no place in elite sport, saying that ‘it’s insane and it’s cheating’ ([The Sunday Times, February 17th 2019](#)). As a result of Martina’s views, she was dropped by New York-based Athlete Ally, which supports LGBT sportspeople, from their advisory board and as an ambassador.

Adverts for this documentary on social media implied that Martina's thinking had evolved, and the possibility of Martina changing her mind divided the Twitter community prior to the documentary airing. Whilst a number of [prominent activists](#) including Owl Fisher hoped she had, many more, including World Champion cyclist [Dr Rachel McKinnon](#), advised caution, arguing that the documentary was irresponsible journalism and for Martina to profit from her transphobia was an insult to those in the community she had offended. But what about the people living behind the rhetoric? The one-hour documentary covers a lot of ground, including interviews with [Trans Media Watch](#) founder Helen Belcher, sociologist [Professor Ellis Cashmore](#), sports inclusion legal expert [Dr. Seema Patel](#), and sports scientists from [Loughborough University](#). It is impossible to consider all of their views here, and therefore this paper instead aims to give close consideration to whom I consider the documentary's most important contributors, the trans women who participated: Naomi Reid, Alison Perkins, Joanna Harper, Kristina Harrison, and Charlie Martin.

Despite positioning itself as a vehicle for Martina's self-exploration in which she wants to evolve her thinking about the inclusion of trans women in sport, I argue that this documentary is in fact an example of what Riggs (2017, p.159) calls '*mundane transphobia*.' That is, the '*banal, indeed routine ways in which normative assumptions are made that make heterosexism and transphobia both speakable and*

difficult to challenge.' Mundane transphobia can be used to describe how gender normative accounts of embodiment are still forcibly written upon the bodies of many groups of people, albeit often in ordinary ways, and how this is perhaps most evident in the lives of trans people. In this way, mundane transphobia is a simple and effective way to reinforce gender stereotypes and justifies maintaining the status quo of questioning trans women's participation in sport.

Mundane Transphobia:

The documentary begins with Martina saying that she acknowledges that there are people on both sides of the debate, and she is keen to see that women's sports remain fair and inclusive. Martina positions herself as both an LGBT ally, having come out as gay early in her tennis career, and victim of her own unintentional transphobia, and highlights being dropped by Athlete Ally for her transphobic comments as evidence of this. Discussions about trans athletes in sport most frequently focus on trans women and the question of immutable competitive advantage, and this documentary is no different. The documentary does not consider trans men, and its failure to acknowledge their presence in sport renders them invisible and implies that they are insignificant.

In addition, this lack of consideration dismisses the reality of their successes, of which there are many examples, including Chris Mosier, a US elite level triathlete, and professional boxer Patricio Manuel. Mosier made Team

USA in 2015 and was placed third in his age group in sprint triathlon at the Draft Legal Triathlon World Championship Qualifier race in 2016. In the same year Mosier earned All-American honours in duathlon and in 2019 he made his sixth Team USA appearance. Manuel is the first transgender boxer in the history of the United States to have a professional fight, and in December 2018 Manuel defeated Mexican super-featherweight Hugo Aguilarand in California. It could be argued that these successes undermine an assumption that women are inherently weaker than men, and that trans men can never be as good as cisgender men in sport, when the achievements of professionals such as Mosier and Manuel offer clear examples of them performing better. Martina's first example of mundane transphobia in the documentary comes when she explains how she will not be using the term 'cis', saying:

'I certainly do not want to offend anybody, somebody's not going to be happy, but what I like for the sake of simplicity, cis is just woman, or man, and transgender are trans men or women.'

Being cisgender means simply identifying as the gender you were assigned at birth. Using cisgender as a term is not a slur, nor does it imply a gender identity more valid or natural than trans. Most importantly, it does not mean that the differences between trans women and cis women are being erased; rather, it clarifies that both terms simply refer to women in different ways. As Pearce, Steinberg and Moon (2019, p.7) note, *'terms such as cis and even non-binary help us to account for relations of*

relative power and (in)equality between those who have a particular range of 'trans' experiences and those who do not.'

By deliberately not using the term 'cis,' Martina exercises her gender normative privilege, flexing her desire to dominate and control the language she perceives to be appropriate in this discussion. As Owl Fisher (*The Guardian*, 2019) [noted](#) *"her refusal to countenance using cisgender to help distinguish between trans and non-trans athletes, only confused matters, creating a dichotomy between 'women and girls' and 'trans women.'"* Martina is willing to listen about the lived experiences of trans people in order to open up the debate, but only in the language that is familiar and comfortable for her, a tactic frequently employed by those in positions of power, as argued by many Black feminist theorists (Hill-Collins, 1990; Hooks, 1987). Martina is engaging with mundane transphobia when she refuses to use the term 'cisgender', marginalising and ignoring the diversity of trans people's lives, which operates *'not only to perpetuate discrimination against trans people...it renders trans people unintelligible, or at best intelligible in particular narrow ways'* (Riggs, 2014, p.169). This has the effect of reinforcing her own linguistic gender hierarchy whilst at the same time discriminating against trans people's lived experience and denying them agency.

The People Behind the Rhetoric: Naomi Reid

In Riggs' (2017) piece on mundane transphobia, he explores

how Oprah Winfrey's interview with Thomas Beatie (who at the time identified as a trans man and was pregnant), marginalised Beatie's own account of his embodiment by first framing his masculinity through a narrative of his past. Winfrey not only dead-named Beatie but fixated on his 'small penis' (Riggs, 2014, p. 18) in order to perpetuate her belief that Beatie may identify as male, but is lacking masculinity. A similar 'autobiography on demand' narrative can be seen when Martina meets the first three interviewees — Naomi Reid, Alison Perkins and Joanna Harper — who all identify as trans women. Martina explains that she wants to talk to individual trans sports women to ask their opinion of participating in sport.

Naomi Reid is a club footballer in the UK. On meeting Naomi in the documentary, the very first thing we learn from Martina's voice over is that she 'has not had reassignment surgery, nor started any hormone treatment yet, but she identifies as a woman.' There is no reason why this very personal information about Naomi is disclosed, and such a personal disclosure generates in the viewer's mind an uncoupling of Naomi's body from her identity. The pathologizing of trans people's bodies in the media and wider discourses is a common trope (Halberstam, 2018), often fixating on physical appearance and genitals for a sensationalist result, as experienced by Thomas Beatie on the Oprah Winfrey Show (Riggs, 2014). There is also the expectation that Naomi will offer up her autobiography to the audience on demand, to prove her trans existence. Naomi speaks openly

about her childhood experiences and feelings about her gender, and how she:

'didn't really want to play men's football still, because I see myself as a woman...as a trans woman I want to compete in women's sports, because I'm a woman. I mean, I keep saying 'as a trans woman' but that's purely for this discussion.'

We are reminded of how transphobia 'works as a rebuttal system, one that, in demanding trans people provide evidence of their existence, and is experienced as a hammering, a constant chipping away at trans existence' (Ahmed, 2016, p. 22).

The language we hear in this documentary is significant because, like gender, it forms 'a foundation for social order and shapes expectations for interaction' (Pearce, Gupta and Moon, 2019, p. 105). Drawing on Derrida's (1988) theory of deconstruction and the relationship between text and meaning, Martina's linguistic intentions may sound trans-inclusive to the viewer, but her iteration implies the opposite. Martina's casual references to Naomi's stage of transition draws the viewer immediately towards imagining Naomi's body in a completely unnecessary way. Even when Naomi explains that 'if you either created a separate gender category or tried to say you have to compete as a man, that's quite degrading and humiliating,' Martina is unable to unite her binary thinking. 'I see', she says, 'we're all coming from it from the same position – trans women want it to be fair, women and girls want it to be fair, but we are arriving at different conclusions.' This is an example of how mundane transphobia occurs

in a commonplace interaction between a cisgender and transgender individual, whereby the experiences and needs of the transgender individual are marginalised, and forcibly placed into a normative and derisive context.

Naomi has expressed how playing on a separate trans-only team would be *'degrading'*, but Martina's concluding concern is that in the future trans women athletes who have not had surgery or hormone treatment could compete against women based simply on how they identify. Martina assures us in the documentary that she is not *'suggesting for a moment that all trans women are transitioning in order to cheat, and that the vast majority are looking for a fair solution,'* but she uses *'fair'* and *'cheating'* interchangeably. The subtle conflation of these words traps trans women in a never-ending loop, in which they are *'unable to fit into accepted notions of how sport should be organised'* (Semerjian, 2019, p.148). The mundane transphobia evident here is Martina's inability to accept Naomi as *'a proper member of the gender category to which someone claims to belong'* (Riggs, 2016, p.5), and who must therefore be cheating.

The notion of *'fair play'* is one of the fundamental questions in this discussion. The difficulty of establishing fair and equitable policies for all athletes who occupy a minority position, and not just trans athletes, has been widely explored. According to Sheridan (2003, p.163): *'the notion of "fair play" is generally understood to be important in sport*

and in life yet it is not clear what precisely it refers to, why it is valued, what ethical principles, if any, it is grounded upon and what kinds of good it involves.'

What has been determined overall is that there is no universally agreed upon definition that can place all humans into the traditional binary. Even so, the question of decency and fairness in sport continues to be a divisive topic when extended to include trans women, whose agency and control of their own bodies is continuously denied (Elling-Machartzki, 2015). Trans people are continually drawn into what Riggs (2017, p.157) has termed *'a logic of bodily evidence'*, whereby mundane transphobia operates to place the onus on trans people *'to account for their location within a particular category to which they are claiming membership'* (Riggs, 2014, p.8).

Alison Perkins

The next interview is with Alison Perkins, who is the first ever trans member of the Professional Golf Association. Like Naomi we learn early on that Alison has not undergone any medical transition yet and is *'as conflicted'* as Martina about how she can compete fairly. As the interview unfolds, Alison explains that she is *'trying to explore how to be me, how to be accepted, how to do stuff that I enjoy.'* Like Naomi, Alison discloses her history and explains how her prior attempts to fit societal norms such as marriage left her feeling depressed, which Martina appears to genuinely sympathise with. Alison asks, *'if I am going to compete again, where am I going to compete, is it going to be fair?'* Like many

trans people in sport, Alison is both conscious of and concerned about the notion of fairness, reflecting the reality that this is not something exclusive to cisgender people.

The notion of fairness and equality is a shared reality for all women in sport, but rather than attempt to unite over these shared experiences of fairness and offer solidarity, Martina remains on her side of the argument, preferring to rely on science and physiology to defend her position. For Martina, Alison can never escape her male past, and she ascribes gender normative stereotypes to body parts. When Martina asks Alison where the line of transition is for her (i.e., where she should be able to compete), she wants to know if it *'includes chemicals, taking hormone treatment, because if you don't, your muscles are still male.'* Martina views bodies as only male or female which can only act in masculine or feminine gendered manners (Klein et al., 2018). Only the *'right'* kind of body is permitted to participate (Wellard, 2009) and the gender discrimination Alison faces is considered acceptable because she is perceived by Martina to not possess this *'right'* kind of body. Sport is at its most fundamental a highly ritualised spectacle of the body, where gender-conforming individuals (feminine females and masculine males) are privileged while gender non-conforming people face scrutiny and prejudice. Alison is aware of these discriminations, and she knows that to compete on the men's circuit, which she is allowed to do, would be difficult for her anxiety because she would visually be *'the only female in that event.'* Like Thomas Beatie on the Oprah

Winfrey Show, Alison is drawn in to a *'logic of bodily evidence'* (Riggs, 2014, p.157) by Martina, from which she cannot escape.

The interview with Alison highlights one of the most important aspects regarding trans inclusivity in sport and how the diversity of trans people's lives are marginalized in multiple ways and at multiple locations. Alison explains how *'a lot of trans people will avoid sport because it's hard. It might be easy to go and have a coffee as a transgender person, but to enter a gym, to go for a swim...'* Despite the introduction of the Equality Act (2010) and the Gender Recognition Act (2004), transgender people still face greater barriers to participation in everyday sport and physical exercise than cisgender people (Caudwell, 2014; Hargie, Mitchell & Somerville, 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Tagg, 2012). These barriers and the differing participation rates which result from them are significant, especially as physical activity has been found to alleviate mental health problems and *'could be beneficial for at risk populations, such as transgender people'* (Jones et al., 2018, p.99). As Alison concludes, *'we just want to be listened to'*, but Martina's focus on Alison's male muscles reinforce the mundane transphobia which allows cisgender people to challenge trans people's legitimacy to exist in gendered spaces.

Joanna Harper

We next meet Joanna Harper, who competed at a high amateur level as a runner in Canada and is also a scientist. Like Naomi and Alison, Joanna always knew she was *'different'*, sharing she *'always*

knew that I was a girl'. Also like Naomi and Alison, Joanna has never competed at an elite level as a trans woman, but she discusses her own [research](#) (which supports the [IOC's policy](#) on inclusion for transgender athletes) and personal experiences, with Joanna openly describing the physical changes medically transitioning for her brought, such as breast growth and fatty deposits developing around her hips. Leaving aside a moment of gender stereotyping when Joanna talks about her increased sensitivity and tendency to cry at Disney films, Joanna's conversation with Martina is the one most closely aligned with Martina's intentions narrated at the beginning of the documentary, to set out to open up the debate and answer some of her own questions by meeting a range of athletes, trans women and scientists. Joanna clearly explains the many disadvantages trans women possess in sport. The very physical attributes Martina assigns as having innate advantage in competition – large frame, (reduced) aerobic capacity and muscle mass – become disadvantages for trans women. To quote Joanna, *'it's like a big car with a small engine competing with a small car with a small engine.'*

The reality of the disadvantages in sport many trans women experience after transitioning medically are rarely told in the context of discussions about their inclusivity in sport. Martina may have interviewed Joanna and listened to her research and experiences - adding what appeared to be balance to the documentary - but she quickly disregards them in the quest for

more research. Reflecting back to the *'logic of bodily evidence'* (Riggs, 2017, p.157) which mundane transphobia employs to interrogate trans people's legitimacy in gendered spaces, Martina is dismissing Joanna's expertise, preferring to seek out further research. We then meet Kristina Harrison, who casts a very different shadow.

Kristina Harrison

The inclusion of Kristina Harrison in this documentary offers a change in focus from the individuals we have already met, one whose inclusion represents the strongest example of mundane transphobia because it is so carefully disguised. As Riggs notes (2014, p.169), hidden mundane transphobia is no less violent, and can often *'do more explicit and intentional forms of harm.'* Kristina's own personal transgender history is not shared in the way it was with Naomi, Alison, and Joanna, but we are told that she started playing for a women's football team in her 40's. The documentary does not disclose Kristina's medical history the way it does Naomi's and Alison's, and as such Kristina is not subjected to the same mundane transphobia and *'regulatory apparatus (i.e. Gender) in order to be recognised'* (Riggs, 2014, p.164), as Naomi and Alison are when Martina raises the subject of gender reassignment surgery and hormones.

What is also hidden from the viewer, and which the documentary does not reveal, is that Kristina is an active supporter of [Women's Place UK](#). Established in September 2017 to ensure women's voices would be heard in the consultation on proposals to change the Gender

Recognition Act, WPUK advocates for what they call in their manifesto, 'sex-based rights'. Whilst much of what WPUK advocates for could be argued as feminist, it is trans-exclusionary feminism, masked behind the same justification as Martina's, the wish for a level playing field and fairness in sport. It is significant that Martina does not interview Kristina personally, which could perhaps be interpreted as a deliberate distancing tactic. Martina is thus able to mitigate any accusations of transphobia against her, which may be levelled at her if she is seen to display any alliance or sympathy with Kristina and by extension, WPUK's politics.

Whilst caution should always be taken when assuming another's motivation or denying a person's agency, Kristina's language and position adopt that of the 'good trans.' That is, the co-opting of a trans voice by a trans-exclusive movement (i.e., WPUK) to discredit the transgender movement and people, create division and reinforce the position that trans women were once, and will therefore always be, men. This co-opting can be understood as benevolent prejudice (Werhun & Penner, 2010), the act of associating positive things with certain groups – such as using a trans woman to support a trans-exclusive organisation – when in fact its intentions are to oppress those groups. As further defined by [Stonewall](#) (the UK LGBT rights charity), benevolent prejudice manifests itself as expressions of positive views about minority groups that are not intended to demonstrate less positive attitudes towards them, but which may still produce negative consequences. The result is a thinly disguised act

of gatekeeping whereby Kristina is permitted to be 'the good trans woman', complicit with the views of trans-exclusive organisations and undermining the rights of trans women in sport.

This is evident in Kristina's use of language. Whilst Kristina identifies as a trans woman, she does not think 'males have any right, even when they have surgery or have hormones, I don't think we have the right to tell women who should access their sports.' In this sentence, by using 'we' she indicates that she may be trans, but she views herself as male still, indicating internalised transphobia, described by Tannehill (2019, p.99) as being when a transgender individual 'applies negative messages about transgender people in general to themselves.' Kristina draws the audience's attention to the reality that women and girls are underrepresented in sport, in terms of media coverage, opportunities and endorsements. The continued side-lining of women's sport in favour of men's is unquestionably an issue, but trans women are not to blame for this. By Kristina's definition, women's sports should exclude men; that is, they should exclude trans women if women's sport is going to be protected. 'Can you imagine a world where young girls have no icons', she says, whilst disregarding the need for trans girls to have powerful role models too. Kristina is employing her mundane transphobia by positioning trans women as less than cisgender women, and less deserving of the same rights and inclusivity.

Charlie Martin

The documentary finishes with Charlie Martin, a professional British racing driver, the only professional athlete featured, and the only athlete who has competed pre and post transition. This interview is upbeat, and Martina seems to genuinely connect with Charlie and respect her, she smiles frequently and openly, she touches Charlie's shoulder and confesses her own desire to have been a racing driver, were it not for growing up in an Eastern European country where such a prospect was unlikely. Martina is intrigued that Charlie's performance has improved since transitioning, an improvement Charlie attributes to being able to be herself and thus having more confidence and energy. Martina's response *that 'nobody ever says I wish I had stayed in the closet longer'* resonates as an authentic comment, perhaps based on her own coming out experiences in the 1980's. Motor-racing is unquestionably a physically demanding sport and although traditionally dominated by men, it is not gender segregated. Both men and women are permitted to race together, though there are far fewer women drivers than men. Perhaps Martina does not believe that motor-racing is a *'physical'* sport in the sense that tennis or football is, and as such, she is more willing to support Charlie and does not perceive her as a threat to *'women's'* sport.

Rather, Martina is thrilled for Charlie, and she's optimistic *'that her being part of the team might even improve the inclusion for all women in motor sports.'* It's an uplifting interview, and out of all of the five interviews, it is the only one

which feels like a positive message is being reinforced throughout. Yet this feels like an intentional tactic, designed to leave the viewer believing that Martina's thinking has evolved, her mundane transphobia forgotten.

Conclusion:

The media continue to significantly shape the narratives that inform the public's view of trans women's presence in sport, often ignoring the people behind the rhetoric. The fleshy physicality (Johnson, 2008) of the transgender body and the fight to be accepted within sport is still limited to normative and binary depictions, and frequently it is trans women's bodies who are rendered as suspicious and possessing an innate competitive advantage.

One key limitation of this documentary is its failure to engage with any elite level trans women athlete other than Charlie Martin, one who could bust the myths that trans women are competing only to win. Likewise, the inclusion of successful trans men athletes could provide the audience with a better understanding of gender diversity and the fact that all athletes *'simply need places to express their physical abilities, to strive and struggle and achieve'* (Semerjian, 2019, p.159).

At times, Martina seemed genuinely upset that her comments had caused upset to those in the trans community, but I argue that the content of this documentary was carefully constructed to help Martina recover some credibility whilst maintaining her position on excluding trans women from sport. After all, Martina tweeted shortly

after the documentary aired that she had not [changed her mind](#). For Martina, trans rights and elite sports ‘are two different things, though of course they are connected.’ Trans women are not viewed as equal to cisgender women, and the discursive language used by Martina reflects this. Martina’s ‘need to adapt’ is reliant only on the rules ‘evolving’, and that there is an ‘urgency to find a solution’ to something which is not actually a problem.

Regardless of the intent of Martina and the BBC1 documentary, be it to admonish Martina of her transphobic comments in the media, or to support the exclusion of trans women in sport, the rhetorical analysis interrogated here has gone some way to shine a light on how precisely mundane transphobia perpetuates the marginalisation that trans women face when wishing to participate in sport. At a time when hostility toward transgender people in the media continues to have a negative and material impact on their lived realities and safety, it is essential to listen to all trans people, both on and off the field, and to ensure that they are welcomed in sport.

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