

Mainstreaming Martina

Lesbian Visibility in the '90s

by Leila Armstrong

Dans cet article, l'auteure discute de la nouvelle attitude des médias face aux lesbiennes. En mettant l'emphase sur les représentations médiatiques de Martina Navratilova, l'auteure

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questionne le discours progressiste qui entoure et se dégage de ces textes et images.

In recent years there has been a shift in the way lesbians are being represented in North American mainstream media.¹ This shift has occurred at two levels: first, there has been a marked increase in the number of representations of lesbians and second, the media's "framing" of lesbians has changed significantly. By lesbians, I am referring to women who are identified as lesbian, as well as women whose sexuality is being speculated upon (i.e., their lesbianism is implied), but this shift can also be seen in the increase, and attempted integration, of lesbian characters in films and on television sitcoms and dramas.

While the sheer amount of coverage, and its apparently positive nature, suggest that dominant cultural attitudes towards lesbians have improved, equating increased visibility with a positive shift in societal attitudes is far too simple. Although this statement might seem obvious, lesbian, as well as mainstream, media continue to repeat a discourse of "progressiveness" around these representations. For example, the February 1996 issue of *Curve* contains a piece titled "Rants and Raves of '95." Under the category "raves," Michele Fisher lists "Lots of new lesbian characters on TV" (54)—making it appear as though quantity, not quality, is the marker of improvement.

In an article entitled "What Becomes A Legend Most" Martha Gever writes,

As of 1993, lesbians are no longer "the invisible homosexuals...." According to the mass media, the entry of lesbians into "our collective consciousness"—"out of the closet and in your face"—means we've finally conquered their domain: lesbians can now become legends. (209)

However, while the mainstream media may proclaim the arrival of lesbians into "our collective consciousness," it eschews any history of previous representations and, instead, purports to embrace "the invisible homosexuals" as "chic."² Another example of this can be found in the September 8, 1995 issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, which boldly announces in a sub-title that "A Once Invisible Group Finds The Spotlight" (20). I would like to address the sudden proliferation of, and change in, representations of lesbians in the mainstream media in relation to the conditions of lesbian visibility. By focusing on a specific discourse object/subject—Martina Navratilova—I will question two assumptions that accompany this phenomenon: first, the belief that, until recently, lesbians were "invisible" (or absent) from mainstream media; and, second, the view that representing so-called "marginal" groups, specifically lesbians, within the mainstream is necessarily an "improvement."

I have chosen Navratilova as the locus of my investigation because she has been represented—as a female athlete, a lesbian, a public persona, and as the focal point of media speculation, innuendo, and scandal—in mainstream media for over two decades. Her continual presence in the media and her well documented history serve to help trace the shift in the way lesbians are being represented. For example, such a history dispels any claim that prior to 1993 lesbians were invisible or absent from mainstream representation. Furthermore, the conditions of Navratilova's visibility overlap throughout her history and cast doubt on the link between increased visibility and "public acceptance."

One major consequence of Navratilova's visibility is her lack, or loss, of endorsement earnings (the bread and butter of professional athletes). In recent years, overall Navratilova has received very few endorsement offers. Lotto's decision to drop Navratilova for Boris Becker in 1994 cannot simply be chalked up to gender bias. Becker's career is in no way comparable to Navratilova's 167 titles, 19 of which were grand slam titles, including nine Wimbledon singles wins and a 74 match unbeaten streak in 1984. And while Navratilova is frequently referred to in mainstream media "as one of the greatest of female athletes" (Bricker E1), or "the finest woman athlete to grace her sport" (Finn, November 16, 1994, B11), similar claims are rarely made about Becker's status as a male athlete.

My point certainly is not to argue for or against any athlete's "greatness" but, as Laura Vecsey writes in *The Montreal Gazette*,

Could you imagine Nike pulling the plug on Michael

Jordan? ... Converse, in an act of good conscience, honored Magic Johnson's contract after he disclosed he was infected with the HIV virus. You are as big as you are marketable. Or as marketable as you are big. (D6)

The shift is indicative of a new cultural strategy for dealing with lesbian sexual difference—a strategy of partaking of, and enjoying, lesbian difference while at the same time denying its importance.

It would appear as though, regardless of the recent popularity of lesbians and lesbianism in mainstream media, the so-called greatest female athlete of all time is not big enough nor marketable enough for corporate sponsors.

I suspect that the shift in representing lesbians in mainstream media is indicative of a new cultural strategy for dealing with lesbian sexual difference—a strategy of partaking of, and enjoying, lesbian difference while at the same time denying its importance and relevance. An exceptional example of this dual approach of enjoyment and denial is found in the November 14, 1994 issue of *Newsweek*. In an article on Navratilova titled "The Passion of a Champion," Curry Kirkpatrick writes

Moreover, in the past year Navratilova has abandoned any pretense to, as a friend says, "frilliness." This has resulted in yet another radical Martina makeover, this one in haberdashery: stark business suit, then jeans, in interviews with Barbara Walters and David Letterman; and for tournament play, floppy golf shirts and ugly black gym shorts.

But if this is about accentuating some lifestyle manifesto—Hey, this is me. I don't care—Navratilova has got it all wrong. It's we who don't care anymore. Acceptance is history: her public shows up now with honor and respect abounding.... (58)

In this article, the separation between the presumed straight reader's identity and Navratilova's identity remains firmly in place. It is Navratilova who has got it all wrong—her lesbianism has nothing to do with her and everything to do with Kirkpatrick's audience. Only now, instead of loathing or fearing Navratilova's lesbianism, Kirkpatrick claims that it does not matter. The heterosexual reader may take pleasure in a world in which people

are different, but the pleasure belongs to them and not Navratilova because "they" still dictate the parameters of what, and whom, "they" find pleasurable. In short, Navratilova's lesbianism is about a mythical heterosexual public and their response to her sexuality.

Representations such as Kirkpatrick's depict lesbianism as "a homosexuality of no importance" (Miller 122). If we are to believe Kirkpatrick—and the myriad of other journalists and media writers who have proclaimed the "arrival" of lesbians into "our collective consciousness"—then this mythical heterosexual public no longer cares about lesbian sexual difference. But what does this denial mean when lesbians continue to experience oppression based on this difference? As well, how can this mythical "we" not care anymore when the media busily maintains an us/them (heterosexual/homosexual) dichotomy?

The approach of simultaneously enjoying and denying lesbian sexual difference is indeed a change from previous approaches of abhorrence mixed with bizarre fascination. However, while the "public's" anxiety and repulsion have waned, their fascination with lesbian sexuality remains firmly intact. In fact, during the '90s, mainstream media has been proclaiming the "progressiveness" of this shift from representing lesbians as "invisible homosexuals" to representing lesbianism as "a homosexuality of no importance." In the face of such proclamations, I want to question the purported benefits for lesbians of moving from "non-existence" to "non-importance."

In "Epistemology of the Closet," Eve Sedgwick discusses the function of "the closet" (post-Stonewall) in defining lesbian and gay identity. Sedgwick points to the difference between our sexual identity and our management of information about our sexual identity, describing how lesbians and gays must constantly decide whether to "come out" or remain "closeted." Perhaps more interestingly, she raises the question of how "the closet" functions in defining heterosexual identity. By addressing the "public attention and freshness of drama" (45) that surrounds every "outing," Sedgwick shifts the focus from those who are in a position of having to reveal or withhold information, to those who anxiously await their revelations. She describes this shift as one between

those who inhabit the closet ... [to those] in the ambient heterosexual culture who enjoy it and whose intimate representational needs it serves in a way less extortionate to themselves. (46)

Sedgwick argues that "the closet" produces a narrative structure that, in turn, helps to create certain social meanings—that there can be no public without a private,

no outside of the closet without an inside of the closet, and no heterosexual identity without a homosexual identity. In "Queer and Now," she elaborates on how these binary oppositions are necessary in maintaining heterosexuality as the "norm":

Think how a culturally central concept like public/private is organized so as to preserve for heterosexuality the unproblematicness, the apparent naturalness, of its discretionary choice between display and concealment: "public" names the space where cross-sex couples may ... display affection freely, while same sex couples must always conceal it; while "privacy," ... has historically been centered on the protection-from-scrutiny of the married, cross-sex couple, a scrutiny to which ... same-sex relations on the other hand are unbendingly subject. (10)

Sedgwick demonstrates how modern sexuality functions as the terrain on which individual identity is produced; heterosexuality being the defining structure of this terrain. This is an argument not unfamiliar to theorists such as Monique Wittig who, in "The Straight Mind," remarks "homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality" (28). According to Wittig, "straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level. It cannot work economically, symbolically, linguistically, or politically without this concept" (28-9). In this sense, homosexuality is constructed in ways which help define the boundaries of "proper" heterosexual identity.

What is of particular interest to me in "Epistemology of the Closet," is Sedgwick's statement that, since the end of the nineteenth century, much of the attention surrounding, and effort to represent (or not represent), homosexuality has "been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure" (47). As we all know, what resides in "the closet" is "the sex that dare not speak its name"—the sex that is secret—and what makes a secret alluring is that it must be known by some privileged individuals and kept from others. The privileged must participate in keeping the secret and in regulating information about it. Thus, a secret is produced through the careful juxtaposition of those who know and those who do not know. Sedgwick argues further that, in our culture, the knowledgeable are those who are sexually knowledgeable. She explains, knowledge and sex are "conceptually inseparable from one another—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance sexual ignorance" (49).

The sudden abundance of representations of lesbians in mainstream media in recent years seem to demonstrate that the "public," or at the very least the media, considers itself to be "in the know" when it comes to lesbians. The question is, what does it mean to be "in the know?" In 1994, the makers of Degassi High, produced *X-Rated*, the pilot film for the CBC series Liberty Street. *X-Rated* focuses on a group of twenty-somethings (two bike couriers, a

couple of kitsch collectors, an eco-warrior, a single mother, a former drug addict, etc.) who live together in a converted warehouse building in Toronto. During the film, a gay, Native-Canadian bike courier "comes out" to a young, white, straight woman who has asked him to be her roommate. He wants her to know he is gay before he accepts the offer but, when he says "I'm gay," she replies "No shit, Sherlock." Of course she already knows he is gay because she is tough, worldly, and hip. But what this scene neglects is the relevance of the gay character's process of naming, his self-identification, the importance of what his gayness means to him. Instead his homosexuality is reduced to what it means to the young, white, straight woman—and to her, it does not matter.

Although this example is of a gay male character disclosing his homosexuality to a straight, female character, it resonates with the excerpt from Curry Kirkpatrick's article mentioned earlier. Like Kirkpatrick, the straight female character in *X-Rated* is concerned with what she already "knows"—that the gay character's homosexuality is not important—and this "knowledge" forecloses on his opportunity to explain what he means when he says "I'm gay." Another, more recent example of how "unimportant" homosexuality has become to those who are "in the know" can be found in the January 23, 1996 issue of *The Advocate*. In "The Year in Interviews," Roseanne Barr is quoted as saying: "I talked to my real-life kids, and I said, 'If you tell me you're gay, I plan to be really bored. If you tell me you're going to be a Republican, I shall be shocked'" (12). It is unfortunate that Republicans do not find homosexuality as boring as Barr does.

This discourse of acceptance, and even boredom, is not only inconsistent with the current trend of lesbians as cultural novelties, but is also difficult to reconcile with the continuing lived-oppression of lesbians and gays. To bring it back to Navratilova, how unimportant is her lesbianism when her retirement from singles play in November of '94, brought 500 requests for interviews but very little response from corporate sponsors? As Navratilova herself notes: "George Forman goes into the ring and gets 100 requests for endorsements, but nobody's calling me" (Finn, November 13, 1994, 13).

In an article in *The New York Times*, published at the time of Navratilova's retirement, Robin Finn writes

On a personal front, [Navratilova] regrets nothing, particularly not her decision to defy the advice of managers and establishment types for the sake of a better image and bigger clout in the market place.

"I was advised to put men in the friends' box at Wimbledon, but I couldn't live with myself if I put up a front like that," she said. (November 13, 1994, 13)

This quote suggests that it was Navratilova's decision to sacrifice her image, and the money that might have been attached to that image. But, although a pretense of heterosexuality may have equalled more earning potential, the

rumors about her sexuality marked Navratilova as a lesbian—and thus taboo to corporate sponsors—long before she had an opportunity to “come out” on her own terms and certainly long before lesbianism became a “hot” cultural commodity.

I do not want to imply that Navratilova is powerless or has no control of her own image. Rather, I am suggesting that she has had to negotiate her image with mainstream media and in terms of the “public’s” understanding of, and response to, her sexuality. Thus, we see Navratilova move from attempts to “femme-ify” her image in the

anyone to forget that if Johnson had been gay, the public would have been far less forgiving. (Kort 46)

Other “out” lesbian celebrities have been careful to avoid political platforms that strike too close to home, preferring to support non-lesbian and gay organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. However, recently even P.E.T.A. has proven too contentious and potentially career damaging for two dyke divas. In a 1994 CBC special, coinciding with the launch of her album *all you can eat*, kd lang stated that she regrets



Images from the *Rainbow Side of the Dark* by B.A.N.S.H.I.I.

mid-'80s to sporting a less traditionally feminine look in the '90s.

Navratilova is amazingly adept at surfing the waves of media representation and “public” reaction, particularly in the '90s where such negotiation involves taking into account two contrasting, but co-existing discourses on lesbian sexual difference: first, the assertion that lesbianism simply does not matter and second, the ever-present and ever-oppressive voice of the moral majority. It is interesting to note that, unlike other celebrity “out” lesbians, Navratilova places herself in opposition to both discourses by being politically outspoken around issues of gender and sexuality. As pointed out in an interview in the October 5, 1993 issue of *The Advocate*:

When Magic Johnson announced his heterosexual exploits along with the fact that he was HIV-positive, Navratilova decried the double standard that allows male athletes to sleep around with impunity while females would be tarred as sluts. She also didn't want

making the “inflammatory” statements in her controversial “beef stinks” commercial for P.E.T.A. Melissa Etheridge is also busy backpedaling, referring to her P.E.T.A. anti-fur ad with partner Julie Cypher as “my mistake” (Wieder 68). Lang's and Etheridge's refusal to make an issue of their lesbianism, although understandable, allows the media to fit the two comfortably within “a homosexuality of no importance.” Although such a fit for Navratilova would be difficult at best, one has to wonder how (and why) she is able (and willing) to go where lang and Etheridge fear to tread.

In conclusion, it would seem as though what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the paradox of women—“at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable” (115)—could now also be described as the paradox of lesbians. The media might claim it is the lesbian debutante ball and that lesbians have finally arrived, but what does it mean to move from being “the invisible homosexuals” to being the

"unimportant" homosexuals? This question clearly cannot be answered now. Instead, we will have to wait and watch how this phenomenon continues to manifest in mainstream media. So, rather than attempt to answer this question, I would like to end on the words of Joan Nestle who writes: "By allowing ourselves to be portrayed as the good deviant, the respectable deviant, we lose more than we will ever gain" (123).

Leila Armstrong is a graduate student in Media Studies at Concordia University.

¹I am referring to American and Canadian English language media, i.e. prime-time television, popular magazines, syndicated newspapers, etc.

²I am using chic here to refer to "lesbian chic"—a phrase coined by the mainstream media (see *New York* magazine, May 10, 1993) to describe the sudden fashionability of lesbians and lesbianism.

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KAUSHALYA BANNERJI

I wanted to write
a dyke poem
in your face
rhetorical

a poem unbound
angry as my curves
aching as the words
you never see
me throw

I wanted to write
a dyke poem
strutting jeans
ungirdled
fists that caress
like fingers

a poem as inspiring
as Bonnie
as Thelma and Louise
as defiant
as Lila and Urmila
as erased by your herstory
as Malinche and Draupadi

I wanted poems
as hungry as Kali
fertile as Yemaya
bursting with women's sad miracles
like Mary

I wanted to write
a dyke

Kaushalya Bannerji is currently a co-coordinator of Desh Pardesh, an annual festival exploring culture and politics in the diasporic South Asian community. She has published a book of poems, A New Remembrance (South Asian Review, Toronto, 1993) and has a forthcoming collection of poetry, The Faces of Five O'Clock (Sister Vision Press, Toronto, 1996).