Tandem: Portrait of Paracyclists Shawna Ryan and Joanie Caron

Caroline St-Laurent

September 21 – November 2, 2024

“In” …
“Ready?”
“Yep!”
“Go!”

“The most dominant narrative present in media representations of para-athletes has been framed around a medical model of disability, highlighting the athlete as heroic due to the ‘ability’ to overcome a medical impairment. This journalistic framework is referred to as the ‘supercrip’ narrative.” [1]

“Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time […].” [2]

At the very beginning of Caroline St-Laurent’s video *Tandem*, Joanie Caron gives a gentle “alright” followed by Shawna Ryan’s affirmative “let’s go.” Both cyclists, in a choreography they’ve obviously performed countless times, throw their legs over the sleek black tandem road bike that binds them in body, mind, and spirit. They both clip in with a sequence of vocal exchanges: “In” … “Ready? “Yep!” “Go!” There’s something so casual and quotidian about this start to their ride that it feels unremarkable, yet their unity and flow is stunning to watch. Within a few seconds they reach remarkable speeds and the kilometers clip by as they pedal effortlessly with grace.

What space do we grant women’s paracycling outside of the quadrennial Paralympic cycle? [3] So little research is dedicated to this question, yet it feels critical at this juncture in history.

I am very familiar, even perhaps a bit obsessed, with the language of bicycles, especially its unmistakable sound cues like the whooshing of carbon wheels or the tac-tac-tac of a tightly-wound set of freewheel pawls. Then there is the cinematic quality of it all, the hours-long views of the peloton ebbing and flowing through rolling hills or the breathtaking helicopter angles of a final col. Cycling is a multisensory sport; it engages all the body whether you are watching it on your couch or practicing it. *Tandem* captures these sights and noises, amplifying them to tell a story about the unique bond between these two female paralympic athletes who receive little media coverage for their skills and accomplishments. [4]

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1. Laura Misener, Kerri Bodin, Nancy Quinn. “Paralympics, Para-sport Bodies, and Legacies of Media Representation.” *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture, and Media.* London: Routledge, 2018.
2. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013.
3. According to Canadian Women & Sport foundation, 57% of girls aged 6 to 12 take part in one or more sports, while at adulthood this drops to 18% of women taking part in a sport or

Through her performance and media-forward practice, St-Laurent repeatedly revisits the many ways in which different forms of discrimination manifest themselves on various playing fields. In *Tandem*, she turns towards high-performance cycling which has historically been a primarily white, male, and Euro-centric activity that promotes narratives of superhuman strength. With the bronze-cast thighs which accompany the film, immortalized replicas of Caron and Ryan's "legs-of-steel" in action, St-Laurent subverts the monumentalizing of men's athletic feats through sculptural effigies regularly planted for eternity in front of stadiums or at the base of mountains.

Tandem also brings to light the complicated nature of events like the Paralympics and how the media relies on a supercrip narrative that focuses on an athlete's "ability to overcome." This is a form of stigmatisation, as though disability can be beaten "if you try hard enough." As the authors of "Paralympics, Para-sport Bodies, and Legacies of Media Representation" write, "the supercrip narrative depicts athletes as superhuman, achieving the impossible and downplaying the bodily experience of 'being different' in order to find athletic success." [5] The conversational, slow-paced tone that runs through *Tandem* moves away from superhuman othering, focusing instead on the athletes and their voices in their own time.

Cycling, like many Olympic sports builds from an ableist myth of continuous, fast-paced, capitalist hyper-overachievement and surpassing of boundaries that plagues competition—think of the motto: "faster, higher, stronger". This has given way to toxic specialization in youth, which has come under scrutiny in recent years with more awareness surrounding mental health and body dysmorphia. Not to mention the ills of ableism, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination which greatly affect access, success, and fulfillment in sports. As Caron remarks partway through *Tandem*, sports are a microcosm or mirror of society, and as such they also serve in better understanding our relationships to ourselves and each other.

This, for St-Laurent, is a defining argument: sports should always be seen through an intersectional and political lens, ingrained in the multitudes of bodies that play them in all their differences.

— Didier Morelli

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physical activity. In Canada, women with a disability are less likely to participate in sports relative to other women: 13% in comparison to 20% for women without disability.

4. Research by the Conseil du statut de la femme in Québec shows that women athletes are represented in less than 5% of visual and written sports media.

5. See note 1.

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4001, rue Berri, porte 301, Montréal (Qc) H2L 4H2
www.oboro.net oboro@oboro.net 514.844.3250