Abstract

In this paper, we unpack the body politic of the para-athlete-soldier and its positioning within masculinising, militarised, national, popular cultural discourses. Drawing on an integrated methodological approach that explored the media production, representation and consumption of the 2016 Paralympics, we focus on the inscription of a disabled masculinity onto the bodies of ex-military personnel that inculcate normative notions of heterosexuality and the neoliberal ('inclusive') national and ableist body politic. The data set indicate that the hyper- and hypo-visibility of Paralympians construct inclusive cultural collective imaginaries around disability inclusion and the 'progressive' state whilst at the same time structuring forms of disciplinary exclusion. We conclude that the gendered, technologized and commodified bodies (Pullen & Silk, 2020) of National Paralympic bodies offers compelling insights into contemporary disability biopolitics where sport, militarisation, gender and the neoliberal national body intersect.

Key words: Paralympics, Disability, Media, Nationalism, Masculinity, Neoliberalism

Word count: 7988

Introduction

The embedded nature of sport and the media, the role of the media as a harbinger for war / nation, or indeed, the use of sport as 'de facto cultural shorthand for nation' (see, Silk, 2012, p.2) are structures and processes that have been in place for some time, and have been delineated in significant detail exploring the varying relationships between sport, the media, and (national) culture (e.g. Andrews, 2006; Angelini & Billings, 2010; Silk, 2012). Indeed, in this conjunctural moment, the mediated sporting popular serves as a vehicle for exercising forms of 'soft' power during peacetime and showcasing nation in global times. In a moment in which a new ethos of militarisation engulfs the entire social order (Giroux, 2003b; 2004a), it is perhaps of little surprise that the spectres of militarization have sutured mediated sport. This relationship is especially visible through the coverage of sporting mega-events—and arguably more so in the post-911 era (see, Silk, 2012)—from the public neo-imperialist displays of nationhood in opening ceremonies, to more subtle and implicit circulations of affective national atmospheres (Closs Stephens, 2016, p. 184).

Of particular interest has been the role of sportmedia in (re-)constructing narratives of the nation that contribute to maintaining normative gendered, raced and ableist ideologies (Silk, 2012, p.146). Whilst some, albeit limited, attention has been paid to the role of the Paralympics in the relationship between sport, nationalism and militarism (see, Bruce, 2014; Batts & Andrews, 2011; Brittain & Green, 2012), gender as an important intersecting discourse has been overlooked. Given this, our intention herein centres on the body of the para-athlete-soldier and their positioning within masculinising, militarised, national and popular cultural discourses. Building on extant scholarship, we begin to develop an empirical base from which to demonstrate how the para-athlete-soldier is (re-)constructed by cultural producers in the marketing of the Paralympic Games, mediated within intersecting discourses of nationalism and masculinity, and facilitates invocations of a 'disability nationalism' in Paralympic audiences. We demonstrate how the para-athlete-soldier represents a disabled body that articulates a form of 'militarised masculinity' (Caso, 2017, p.218) centred on the heteronormative and ableist body politic of the productive/functional neoliberal body. We draw on theoretical contributions and debates across disability and cultural studies and Critical Military Studies to further understand how Paralympic coverage contributes to the co-opting of the militarised disabled body in the current neoliberal moment.

The Militarisation of Everyday Life

Henry Giroux (2008) suggested that through the extension of the domain of economics into politics, neoliberal market rationalities organize, regulate, and define the basic principles and workings of the state. As a nebulous phenomenon, neoliberal 'logics' organize forms of governance that become contextually embedded in the education systems, city spaces, neo-imperial ambitions, political

systems, and norms of successful citizenship. For Giroux (2001a/b, 2003a/b, 2004a/b), neoliberalism has resulted in the death of the social; the war waged on the domestic front that feeds off the general decay of politics, a virulent contempt of social needs, the destruction of a liberal political order, a growing culture of surveillance, inequality, cynicism, and a growing dislike for all things public, social and collective. Writing in the post-9/11 moment, Giroux (2008, p.56) was concerned with how the 'logics' of neoliberalism produce a growing culture/spectacle of fear and surveillance through the imposition of market values and 'democracy' on developing nations, and positioning powerful nations (such as the US) as the legitimate defenders of capitalism (Giroux, 2008, p.64). In this regard, and as war became the dominant leitmotif of the post-9/11 moment, Giroux suggested the world was increasingly characterized by a '"weaponized" neoliberalism that promotes high-intensity warfare abroad, one that is replicated in low-intensity warfare at home' (Giroux, 2008, p.58).

Even though there are synergies between neoliberalism and militarization evident in a range of diverse institutions and organizations—increasing surveillance and control mechanisms in most institutions in society, schools, policing strategies, and so on —it is the 'discursive process' (Giroux, 2004a, p. 212) of militarization that is of most interest for us in this article. In this sense, militarization is understood as an ideological normalizing process that presents militarism as a necessary and natural extension of nation-states civil society, a process predicated on the naturalness of conflict and enemies, and tied to moral imperatives and an obligation to nation (see Kelly, 2013). Rather than the hard-core military industrial complex—weaponry, increase in army size, military technologies, and so on—our interest is in how the values of militarization have become part of the sporting popular and serves as a powerful pedagogical culture of force that shapes our everyday lives, subject positions, and cultural imaginaries (Giroux, 2004a, 2008, Newfield, 2006). Indeed, as a discursive process, militarization encompassed the shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force and military action, and intimately connected to the 'less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories and cultural imaginaries' (Giroux 2004a, p. 211).

Following Mariscal (2003), we have thus seen the diffusion of military values to a wide variety of cultural locations, a process that allows such values to permeate the very fabric of everyday life. The underlying values of the military, social relations, ideologies, and its hypermasculine aesthetic has become normalized and spread to other areas of everyday public and 'popular' (in Stuart Halls sense of the term) life: video games, Hollywood films, television series, children's toys, clothing (Silk, 2012, p.48). Indeed, the culture of militarism is 'implicated in a structural relationship between government, the military, and entertainment industries to the extent that it has become functionally impossible to live outside the rhetorical production of war' (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009, pp. 412–413).

The Sporting Popular

In our previous work on the role of sport in the post 9/11 period, we argued that sport was thrust into the contemporary lexicon of consensus within which the taken-for-granted militarization of everyday life was an uncontested terrain. The sporting 'popular' served as a particularly potent, pedagogic, powerful and particularly 'lustrous' focal point in the politicization and militarization of culture (Silk, 2012, p.3). The deep entanglement between mediated sport, policy initiatives, public relations exercises, commercial ventures and/or militarization however did not just appear in the post 9/11 moment, they may have been (ephemerally) prominent and have a long-established historical grounding (see Radar, 2004). A necessarily truncated list of examples include: the practice of playing the Star Spangled Banner in advance of the opening pitch during World War II (subsequently adopted throughout sport in the US); the language of sport (offensive lines, aerial attacks, throwing a 'bomb'); corporate-state coupling (the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl); the English Football League partnering with the Help for Heroes Charity or the English and Scottish Premier Leagues displaying poppies on their shirts during games close to Remembrance Sunday; media reactions to those who oppose, resists or question 'taken for granted' assumptions about the synthesis of sport, media, nation (and all its gendered, racialized, classed and other[ed] fault lines) such as US quarterback Colin Kaepernick, or Northern Irish footballer James McLean; and militarism— and, indeed, the emergence of the Invictus Games in the celebration and rehabilitation of wounded service personnel who serve their country (see e.g. Butterworth, 2017; Kelly, 2013).

The assemblage of political, corporate, militarized, economic trajectories have produced seductive and spectacular mediated national sporting symbols, myths, and memories. Indeed, in the staging, or manipulation, of 'nation', the narrativized sporting spectacle is narrated through emotive objects—sporting bodies—that provide the focus of highly personalized storylines. For Andrews (2006), the sporting body exhibits what are perceived to be engaging (commercially desirable) personas that promote neoliberal, neoconservative, militarized, and thus highly political, functional, and productive corporealities. With Andrews (2006, pp. 99-100) this assemblage has 'conjured forth a phantasmagorical world of embodied identities and narratives incorporating tropes routinely associated with the experiential sweep of human existence (triumph and tragedy, falling and redemption, success and failure, heroism and villainy)'. Given the confluence of interests—commercial, state, military, sporting—in the constitution of sporting bodies (Andrews, 2006, p. 99), the sporting popular, especially in the post-9/11 era, has typically offered a rigid, fixed, and narrow definition of who constituted and subsequently served to validate the functional, productive (sporting) body that 'mattered.' Again, there exist multiple examples of such celebrated bodies, from neoconservative Nascar drivers (see, Newman & Giardina, 2010), to National Football League footballers (see, Silk 2012), and even superheroes such as Mr. Incredible who shed his 'normalized'

(flaccid, soft, emasculated) suburban life and rebuilt his hard body to overcome a nebulous, 'asymmetrical' enemy (Baudrillard, 2001, p.137).

The celebrated body that mattered in, and to, the sporting popular, was a mostly unquestioned masculinized, racialized, patriarchal, and militarized body politic. Indeed, these were the productive and functional sporting *heroes* that represented, iconized, and naturalized masculinist and nationalistic ideals and morals through a field of politics in which imperialist military projects were imagined and popular support and acquiescence was garnered (Stempel, 2006, p.82). Of course, what is celebrated in such moments further exacerbates that which becomes pathologized, such as, women, and '"suspicious" people of color, "non-manly men" unable to rise (to stand-tall) and penetrate the mythical territories of a pugnacious yet mutating 'enemy'" (Silk, 2012, p.62). Sporting spectacle—itself already a hypermasculine domain—provided a fictive solution or response to America's lack of masculine fortitude (Faludi, 2008) and a component of an intensive re-masculinization. Yet, with the post-9/11 zeitgeist, there emerged a productive and patriarchal body politic that rejuvenated the traditional xenophobic phallus—a normalized, valorized, masculine, muscular, white national corpus—capable of penetrating even the most nebulous, viral like, enemy and which has laid the foundations for more contemporary renditions in our present conjunctural moment (Silk, 2012, p.54).

The Paralympic Body Politic

We have argued above that there exists a preferred sporting body politic, one positioned and narrated by an amalgam of corporate, military, state and economic interests and actors—a *corpus economicus* of sorts—that has become embedded within the sporting popular and played out, quite literally, in the sinews and flesh of sports embodied labourers. Unsurprisingly, disability has long presented a challenge to the idealised muscular body aesthetic of a commercial mediated sporting culture (Bertling & Schierl, 2008, p. 41). Yet, with the increased commodification and visibility of the Paralympic spectacle and the often (although far from exclusively) stereotypical representation of disability in the media generally, there emerge important questions over the contemporary modes of disability representation disseminated and their possible implications. Indeed, given the focus on sports embodied labourers, and disability as a 'social, material, and manufactured terrain' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2010, p. 113), Paralympic bodies offer a compelling focus. As such, we hold together potentially progressive representations of disability with those of the post 9/11 body politic previously discussed. An approach complicated by the Paralympic movement itself and its long affinity with the military in the rehabilitation of injured service personnel (see Brittain & Green, 2012).

Indeed, in the present moment, as in able-bodied sporting representations, para-sport has recently been mediated through the appropriation and mobilization of nationalist narratives centred on certain preferred geo-political-militaristic ambitions (Batts & Andrews, 2011, p.555). Schemes such as the

USA's Paralympic military programme and Wounded Warriors, Canada's Soldiering On, the Australian defense force Paralympic programme and the Battle Back programme in Great Britain, have centered on soldiers injured in conflicts such as in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been fast-tracked into their country's Paralympic training programmes—sport once again being seen as important in attempting to re-build the lives of military personnel who have endured life-changing trauma. This has been explored in a modicum of work on the Invictus Games (see, Cree & Caddick, 2019) with scholars highlighting how the body of the soldier/athlete is a site upon which the cultural politics of narrative is enacted and contemporary political ideals mobilized (Cree & Caddick 2019, p.268).

Yet, there has been sparse scholarly attention directed to the meanings that are inscribed and mobilised on the bodies of increasingly (hyper-)visible para athletes. Somewhat building on the historical relationship between disability and the military, scholars have begun to unpack the gendered disability relations in the context of the military disabled body (see Caso, 2017; Horton, 2016). Indeed, Caso's (2017, p.219) analysis of the recent 'always loyal' photographic campaign that aimed to raise money for US army veterans disabled through war, demonstrated how the increasing visibility of gendered and sexualised imagery of disabled soldiers (through both the campaign itself and wider popular culture) was synonymous with a contemporary form of 'militarised masculinity'.

The term military or militarised masculinity captures the practices of masculinisation in militarised contexts (Henry, 2017, p.187) and is predicated on the embodiment of hegemonic masculine ideologies - strength, power, heterosexuality, toughness, and the subordination of women – in the performance of a hyper-physical body *for* service and symbolic projection of National values and State power (Caso, 2017, p.2188; Eichler, 2014, pp.82-83). However, with the evolving practices of formal militarised institutions and associated shifting norms and cultures of masculinity (see Duncanson, 2009), alongside and the creep of militarisation across the everyday popular realm, the term military masculinity has taken on a far more pluralistic meaning. Indeed, it is now widely used to unpack the multiple modes of *masculinities* both with formal military settings and increasingly militarised cultural spaces, such as sport, film and literature, and as it articulates with specific cultural and historical 'moments' and National contexts (Henry, 2017). Following important contributions from feminist and disability scholars (see Tasker, 2002; Caso, 2017), and empirical insights from the burgeoning field of Critical Military Studies (see Basham and Bulmer, 2017), the term military masculinity has evolved as a heuristic tool in exploring the complex and often contradictory (re-)articulations and evolutions of the militarised masculine body politic, how it comes into being, and the important cultural work the military masculine body does within the increasing militarised discursive spaces of contemporary life.

Certainty, in the years following 9/11, a military body emerged that complicated the hegemonic

masculine ideals associated with traditional military masculinity. This was the impaired, often severely disabled, and traumatised body of injured soldiers who were returning home from military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Institutional, legislative and popular attention soon turned on the injured military body (Kieran, 2020, p. 2), and in response, military campaigns, rehabilitation schemes, and forms of popular culture emerged that began to masculine the body politic of the disabled soldier and rearticulate forms of militarised masculinity. Superhero film narratives were a particular persuasive form of popular culture that re-positioned the experience of trauma as part of the National body helping to articulate a form of militarised masculinity through the National yet debilitated bodies of predominantly white disabled soldiers. Indeed, in this cultural moment, a militarised masculinity began to assimilate disability within the powerful dynamics of gender and Nation—we would aver that the 'sportification' of the militarised, disabled, sporting body is crucial to this process (Batts & Andrews, 2011, p.563).

A handful of scholars have pointed to the Paralympic Games and disability sport more generally as a powerful vehicle in facilitating the visibility of ex-military personnel following war, invoking powerful ideas around the Nation, and for the narration of embodied, affective forms of Nationalism (Batts & Andrews, 2011, p.563; Pullen, Jackson & Silk, 2019, pp. 19-20). Yet, few studies have explored the role of masculinity in this relationship. As argued above, and especially post-9/11, sport it is important to explore the role of a militarised masculinity in shaping popular discourses around the para-athlete-soldier. This is likely to be further compounded by the role of risk (see Barounis, 2009) and prosthetic/mobility enhancing technology in the masculinisation of disability (See Hickey Moody, 2015).

Certainly, the embodiment of technology and disability has received academic attention (see Kirkup et al. 2000; Howe & Silva, 2017; Kafer, 2013). Debates have been centred on the ways the technologically enhanced disabled body articulates within biopolitical boundaries at the intersection of environments, practices, and materiality, and shape the gendered subjectivity of the disabled body (Grabham, 2009, p.73; Pullen & Silk, 2020, p.472). In the context of Paralympic broadcasting, our own initial work in this area is suggestive of a disability-gendered ecology and demonstrated how the prosthetically enhanced male para-athlete is particularly visible, sexualised, and idealised as a 'nationally normative' disabled body. In so doing, we addressed the hypervisibility of certain disabled bodies, and the hypovisibility of others, serving to reinforce a hierarchy of disability gendered bodies (see, Pullen & Silk, 2020, p.476). Certainly, our previous work aligns here with Caso's (2017) and Hickey-Moody (2015), demonstrating the importance of prosthetic technology in the masculinization of the disabled male para-sport body. Yet, none of these studies have held together the important relationships between gender, military, nation and the Paralympics. As such, within this paper, we aim to unpack the complexities of this relationship, paying close attention to these intersecting discourses

in the representation of the para-athlete-soldier. In doing so, we focus on the way gendered, militarized and national logics are mobilised through the production of the Paralympic text, mediated in narrative and textual representation, and (re-)produced in the sentiments of Paralympic audiences. Building on extant scholarship, and drawing on an integrated evidence base, we herein unpack the body politic of the para-athlete-soldier.

Materials and Methods

This paper draws from production interviews with the UK Paralympic broadcaster (Channel 4 (C4)), textual analysis of broadcast and promotional materials, and Paralympic audience focus group data[1]. In bringing these datasets together, it utilises an integrative 'circuit of culture' approach (see, Morley, 1992, p.77) that explores the material impact of broadcasting practices and production decisions on the representation, regulation and consumption of cultural meanings and discourses.

Production Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 23 of C4's senior production and marketing staff resulting in approximately 26 hours of interview data. Interviews were semi-structured and obtained stories about interviewees professional experience of working as 'cultural producers' in Paralympic production from 2012 onwards. Participants were recruited via a purposive sampling method based on seniority and experience of Paralympic broadcasting and promotion and required the cooperation of C4 in leading the recruitment process. The analytical approach to the data is situated in a critical paradigm that takes account of the self-reflexive role of the researcher and the complex ideological and political agendas inherent in the process of research. Post interview, audio recordings of interview data were transcribed and analysed using a process of thematic analysis that allows for the contextual development of key themes through a process of open coding, broader categorisation, and conceptual mapping (see, Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2017, pp. 191-205). In keeping with institutional research ethics procedures, participants remain anonymous and job titles have been removed.

Textual analysis

Textual analysis was conducted on the 2012 and 2016 marketing and promotional trailers and the full 90 hours of Channel 4's (C4) Rio 2016 Paralympic programming. The broadcast included, firstly, a systematic reading of the entire text that identified and coded segments of the broadcast (e.g. as live sport action, commentary, pre-recorded material) and the frequency of segments. Two, a detailed reading of pre-recorded material; specifically, athlete videos that C4 produced as part of their Rio 2016 live broadcast coverage – termed backstories – that focused on exploring visual representations, production aesthetics, narrative forms, and ideological elements. Three, a reading of the C4's 2012 promotional trailer (important as this marked a 'watershed' moment in Paralympic promotion (see,

Pullen & Silk, 2020). Johnson et al.'s (2004, pp. 170-185) 'Reading texts for Dominance' approach was used as the main analytic framework in the readings of both the athlete backstory features and promotional trailer. Following the analysis, interpretations were discussed with 'critical friends' familiar with the dataset and thus providing a point of interpretative reflection, establishing links with academic work, and codifying key themes.

Audience Focus Groups

Focus groups lasting approximately 90 minutes each were conducted with 216 members of the public. Multiple focus groups were held in publicly accessible meeting rooms across 5 Cities in England and Wales. Participant numbers, geographical and demographic spread (age, race, ethnicity, social class, gender) was relatively equal across the focus groups. At each site, disabled and non-disabled focus groups were conducted based on participants self-identifying; approximately half of our participants self-identifying as disabled. Recruitment involved the use of a recruitment agency through a purposive sampling technique against an inclusion criterion that required the Participants to have followed some Paralympic sport. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a University transcription service before being entered into QRS NVivo data management programme. In keeping with institutional research ethics procedures, all participants remained anonymous and have been assigned pseudonyms. Manual interpretive coding was undertaken, this included: a process of open coding, identification of major thematic categories; 'collapsing' of themes in the management of sub-categories; the development of dominant themes; and, finally, a process of meaning condensation that captured the key themes throughout the dataset (see, Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2017, pp. 191-205).

Producing the Para-athlete

In the UK, the entry of C4 as the official Paralympic broadcaster in 2010 marked a step change in the extent and style of coverage not seen in the history of Paralympic broadcasting (Pullen & Silk, 2020). This involved a marketing and promotional campaign that, in the words of C4's creative director, would capture audiences and frame the Paralympics in a 'in a way that had never been shown before' that was 'broad, populist, joyous and celebratory' juxtaposed with a 'gritty style' akin to mainstream commercial sports advertising. In so doing, London 2012 saw the launch of the critically acclaimed C4 Paralympic trailer titled 'Meet the Superhumans' (www.channel4.com/info/press/news/meet-the-superhumans). C4's 2012 trailer is an important starting point in unpacking the construction of the para-athlete-soldier in Paralympic coverage; it marked, in the words of C4's marketing officer, 'what Channel 4's approach might be to Paralympic sport' based on an 'attitude' that subsequently ran through the 2012 and 2016 coverage. As one senior marketing executive explained, the idea and development of the trailer initially centred on the American fantasy superhero film series, the 'X-

Men… an unusual piece of mainstream populist entertainment where disabled people are heroes' invoking, what Shildrick (2015, p.15) described as the 'technologized body', typical populist entertainment. However, in making sure the trailer didn't 'take away from the human endeavour aspect of it', C4 'took the concept of athletes being superheroes but stripped away the X Men dimension of it and stripped away any high tech dimension of it…to portray athletes as superheroes but in real situations'.

The focus on 'real situations' paved the way for a trailer that drew on the affinity between disability, war and the Paralympic Games and the ideological entanglement of disability, militarism and masculinity. To provide some context, the trailer integrated footage of elite para-sport performances that was partially interrupted by a choreographed and powerful sequence of scenes that dramatically depict a bomb exploding in conflict against the backdrop of three male soldiers, a mother receiving news of a baby in a womb suggestive of congenital disabilities, and footage of a car crash. This was coined by C4 marketing staff as 'the bit in the middle' and was considered integral to the superhuman narrative 'because it was an important part of getting to the humanity of what it is to be disabled'.

The 'bit in the middle' harnesses, as intended, the affective visceral – or 'human' - cultural work that stories of military disablement do (see, Caddick et al., 2020, p.1). Indeed, with the image of uniformed male soldiers against the backdrop of an exploding bomb, this representational assemblage signified 'existential risk', 'protection', 'trauma', 'hero', 'war' and 'nation' in a single scene, powerfully and purposefully juxtaposed against the passive and feminised depiction of the mother and baby. The two scenes draw on different cultural narratives of disability that frame both gender and trauma in different but important ways: the former centred on *male* disablement as result of trauma experienced in the face of an existential 'enemy' threat, the latter, a feminised victim of traumatic biological circumstance. Certainly, in this ephemeral but highly affective moment, a form of disabled military masculinity as indicated by Caso (2017, p.220) is being signified; one framed on the experience of trauma and injury result on behalf of protecting the nation.

Indeed, it has been argued that the positioning of trauma and disablement in superhero narratives, and the use of these within Sportmedia, were popularised in the years following the events of 9/11 (see, Horton, 2016). Framing 'trauma' as the genesis point in which a stronger, more resilient, powerful body emerges, superhero narratives worked to 're-story' the collective national trauma of returning injured soldiers. This not only helped to justify military trauma (and thereby disablement) through the more persuasive national narrative of rebuilding 'empire' (Horton, 2016, p. 73), but to relocate - to masculinise – *some* forms of trauma within contemporary articulations of a militarised masculinity. Through rewriting trauma as central to the emergence of a new, more powerful and resilient body—as is done through the superhero narrative—the disabled body of the male soldier is located on a discursive register already grounded in masculine ideologies. Indeed, the superhero narrative is, at the

same time, a narrative performance of nation-building and masculinity (see Horton, 2016) a narrative where masculinity is never 'lost' to disability, but rather, disability is *required* for the continuing operation of this particular form of masculinity.

In the context of Paralympic representation, C4 were seemingly aware of the affective power of such narratives to 'capture the public's imagination' (C4 marketing executive) and particularly stories of ex service personnel, which, in the words of C4's promotional director 'always makes a great story'. C4's strategic decision to co-opt the superhero narrative also centres on the gendered commodification of the Paralympic body (Pullen, Jackson & Silk, 2019). As C4's marketing executive explained, 'if you create sports people in an X Men kind of way that will be incredibly sexy and exciting' it will 'create characters in which the audience could emphasise with'. The superhero narrative, then, provided in part a means to construct a Paralympic celebrity economy of popular hero like characters; national disability pedagogues that could embody and represent the competitiveness, determination, resilience and heteronormativity of sports typical embodied labourers.

(Re-)presenting the para-athlete-soldier

Whilst C4's 2016 promotional campaign was less overtly centred on militarisation—instead, casting a wider net towards 'everyday' superhumans—the narrative arc was firmly entrenched for Paralympic broadcasting. Unpacking the 'backstories' of these athletes offer insight into the hyper-visible, 'personal' and powerful invocations of military, masculinity and nationalism that (re-)present the contemporary para-athlete-soldier. Here we pay close attention to the positioning of stories of ex-military personnel and the affective political, cultural and gendered dimensions that, following Grossberg (2014), anchor this identity to 'particular practices, identities, meanings and pleasures' (Grossberg, 2014, p. 82).

Engendered by high value production aesthetics, the backstories of ex-military personnel are framed on highly personalised stories of disablement. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, such 'personal' stories are literal reflections of the superhero narrative arc; a plotline characterised by trauma, resolution, and resilience followed by national success (see Horton, 2016). This is framed on stories that emphatically focus, and narratively isolate, rehabilitation and a new disabled physicality though sport. The backstory of GB para-weight lifter Micky Yule provides an emblematic example. Yule narrates how, serving as the rank of Staff Sergeant in the Military, he became disabled through stepping on an IED during military intervention in Afghanistan in 2010. Having suffered significant injuries to his lower leg, Yule described how he experienced '3 years doing rehab and 50 operations in that time' and, during this time was 'in the gym barely alive' as he 'needed to get training again' so he could finally start 'feeling [himself] again'.

On the surface it is a story that resonates with the 'redemption narrative' identified in the Invictus Games where the physical impairment is overcome by a gladiatorial, almost more than human effort (Cree & Caddick 2019). Yet it is perhaps the pedagogic value of the sporting popular as the vehicle to transforming supposed damaged bodies into nationally valorised resilient bodies that is of most interest in the (re-)articulation of a militarised masculinity. Batts and Andrews (2011, p. 563) have termed this the 'sportification' of the militarised body; a process through which militarised masculinity has become partly premised on the forging of hyper-physical bodies *for* service on behalf of the nation (Eichler, 2014, pp. 82-83). Whilst Yule's story offers an emotive testimony of trauma and loss of bodily functioning, somewhat challenging the idealised form of militarised masculinity (Eichler, 2014), this serves only to story and celebrate the forging of the body following impairment – 'in the gym barely alive' – and emphasises the *regaining* of functionality. Furthermore, the transformative process characterised through the rhetoric of 'once-a-soldier' and 'now-an-athlete' magnifies the extent the body of the wounded soldier continues to serve the nation *despite* disablement (see also Cree & Caddick, 2019). Such rhetoric positions the para-athlete-soldier body closer with the functional, heteronormative, adaptive and resilient body politic of neoliberal able-bodied sporting heroes in the transition between masculine subjectivities, helping to position 'the wounded military body as a 'safe' subject and incorporate it into the national' *sporting* imagination (Cree and Caddick, 2019, p262).

This is further compounded by the use of mobility enhancing technology, namely carbon fibre prosthetics, particularly visible in para-sport culture. Whilst the use of mobility enhancing technologies in disabled military personnel centres on putting the disabled soldier 'back to work' on behalf of the nation (Caso, 2017, p.222) (as it was when Guttman rehabilitated soldiers with spinal cord injuries following the second world war)(see Brittian & Green, 2012), here we can begin to see the importance of technology in reinforcing the idealised masculine sporting body of the wounded soldier. Indeed, following Hickey-Moody (2015, p.145), carbon fibre prosthetic technology has long been used to produce sporting and military equipment, materially and discursively coded as *masculine* and symbolic of masculinised economic relations and practices. Indeed, the embodiment of such technology culturally represents strength, power, domination, competition and 'techno' military properties. Indeed, prosthetic technology is fundamental to re-inscribing a contemporary mode of military masculinity back onto the body of the disabled soldier with masculinity (re)articulated, not through the 'wholeness of the male body, but on the body of technology' (Caso, 2017, p. 223).

To offer but one brief, yet telling, exemplar, we focus on Para triathlete and ex Royal Marine Commando, Joe Townsend. Townsend's body—or more accurately, compartmentalised elements of his body—becomes positioned as the idealised embodiment of a transformed, resilient, technohuman or sporting 'cybog' (Howe & Silva, 2017, p.199). With focus on his slick racing wheelchair and

muscled and tattooed torso, perhaps unsurprisingly, he is one of the most visible para-athlete-soldiers alongside Micky Yule. Townsend's backstory production was centred on a series of images depicting his muscular torso in his racing wheelchair whilst he provides a brief description of the different types of equipment required to compete in paratriathlon. Whilst the plotline is not predicated on a military story—although his time in the Military is a talking point across the commentary—Townsend's military body is reconstructed in the vision of the technohuman body. Certainly, his disabled subjectivity represents 'the intensifying relationships of economic, political and scientific dependency' in the wounded para-athlete soldier (Batts & Andrews, 2011, p. 559). It is a body that visibly masks the violence consequences of military action, coming, rather, to represent the advancements of medical science, the vision of a bodily 'cure', and the States commitment to disability inclusion and access (Graham, 2009, p.71); an inclusion premised on approximation of neoliberal ableist bodily norms. In the context of the para-athlete-soldier, the technologization of the body is yet another way for such bodies to continue to do aesthetic national labour on behalf of the nation (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015).

Consuming the para-athlete-soldier

As with all sportmedia, audiences are a critical constituent in the collective 'imagining' of Nation and (re-)producing Nationalism aligned (or not) with the political, pedagogic and cultural aims of cultural producers. Paralympic audiences are particularly important to consider then in the cultural (re-)production of the para-athlete-soldier. Indeed, the Paralympic Games not only presents the single most hyper-visible mediated representation of disability—and therefore might act as an important vehicle in challenging popular cultural attitudes toward disability—but, outside of the Invictus Games, it provides the ideal affective national space from which the subjectivity of the para-athlete-soldier can be isolated and iconised. Such sentiments are reflected in the words of one audience member who stated: 'I have an affection, affection that might be the wrong word but...an admiration if you like for the service people that did lose limbs or whatever in the course of their duties'.

The admiration felt by Paralympic audiences—captured in the quote above—is telling of the *affective* dimensions of superhero narratives that frame the production, marketing and representation of the para-athlete-soldier across C4's coverage. Such sentiments were commonplace across audience data, with one participant describing feelings of 'emotion...because they're ex-servicemen' and another who particularly 'remember[d] a lot of the military [backstories]'. Indeed, the hyper-masculine coding of the technohuman bodies of heroic stories manifested a gendered, almost sexualised, 'admiration' amongst participants: 'you're like a lot more sexy if you just like you know, have an amputated body' especially if you are 'a ripped guy, athlete, [and]... has got prosthetic legs'. Here, the manifestation of gendered/sexual relations in the physical, amputated bodies of male para-athletes is pronounced. Indeed, it reflects the same set of gendered relations that operate, following Caso (2017, p.221), to

remasculinise the amputated bodies of disabled soldiers through discourses of heternormativity, although one that, at the same time, is embedded in hierarchies of combat injuries (see, Caddick et al., 2020). As we have argued elsewhere (Pullen & Silk, 2020), this masculinisation requires the feminization or ambivalence of other disabled bodies through forms of asexual objectification, typically those with congenital disabilities who remain excluded from the flows of cultural-economic exchange and thereby the collective national body.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the affective epidemics constructed through stories of ex-military personnel clearly resonate by mobilising the attention, mood and gendered emotions (Grossberg, 2014, p.82) of Paralympic audiences to manifest and direct a form of affective nationalism (Closs-Stephens, 2016). However, the mobilisation of affect towards the para-athlete-soldier is propagated on an ablenationalism that requires the on-going devaluing of some disabled bodies for nationalism to flourish in the context of others (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015). Such sensibilities were evident across audience data, with one participant describing how disablement must be particularly traumatic 'for someone like a soldier who, you know, is in peak physical condition'. Such views are first and foremost, premised on a widely accepted cultural idea of disablement as a devalued body politic. However, following Mitchell and Snyder (2010, p. 113), it is the 'severity of incapacity' that organises the cultural (de-)valuation of disabled bodies. Indeed, audience comments implicitly suggest acquired disablement and loss of a hyper-physical, functional and aesthetic body - or *'condition*' - is culturally perceived as particularly problematic, *especially* those who are viewed as the pinnacle national embodiment of functional and aesthetic able-ness, such as soldiers and athletes.

For these bodies, the 'tragedy' of disability, the 'severity of incapacity' and the loss of the idealised hyper-physical neoliberal body politic, provide the very grounds for nationalism to prevail and the foundations under which certain disabled subjects can, and do, become nationally valued. In this sense, the (hyper-)visibility of gendered and technologized bodies (Pullen & Silk, 2020) of 'ablenational' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p.56) Paralympic subjects provide interesting insights into contemporary disability biopolitics. The Paralympics is produced, re-presented, and consumed as a space which politicises and 'normalises' *some* disabled bodies based on their approximation to idealised neoliberal subject. In other words, C4's Paralympic coverage positions certain disabled subjects as exceptional whilst valorising ableist norms of inclusion and cultural citizenship.

These forms of national citizenship are those inculcated with powerful ideas about the progressive Nation and an inclusive disability politics. Internalising this narrative, positions Paralympic sport as *the* vehicle of disability opportunity. Indeed, audience data articulates a collective imagination of the UK as a world leader in disability equality and 'inclusivity' with claims such as, 'I wouldn't imagine that Britain is far behind any leader at all in the area, in terms of rights and equal opportunities and access that is offered to people, and I think Great Britain is probably one of the most forward thinking

when it comes to a disability in the world I think'. In this regard, 'rights', 'equal opportunities', and 'access' are both embodied in the technohuman bodies of many para-athletes and epitomised in the backstories of the contemporary para-athlete-soldier. To the majority of Paralympic audiences, mobility enhancing technology—in the case of the para-athlete-soldier—offers compelling rationale for a viewpoint suggestive of the UK's commitment to equality for disabled people through the provision of 'opportunity'. Indeed, the collective idea, as Cree and Caddick (2019, p. 9) note, allows for the violence of war to be acknowledged but, following disablement, 'the fantasy of a 'good life' is maintained'.

Concluding Thoughts

Without denying the polysemy of such texts, this paper attempts to unpack the body politic of the para-athlete-soldier at the intersection of masculinising, militarised, national and 'popular' discourses in Paralympic coverage. Whilst previous work by Batts and Andrews (2011, p.555) highlighted the role of the Paralympics as a sporting project that (re-)constructs the sporting military body and manifests a selective geo-political narrative of the Nation State, our aim was to add important nuance by bringing this in dialogue with discourses of masculinity and popular culture in the context of the increased commodification of the Paralympic spectacle and a heightened visibility of disability.

Paying close attention to the production, representation and consumption of the Paralympic text, we have demonstrated how the logics of militarization subtly circulate across key 'moments' in the Paralympic circuit of culture. Certainly, this occurs through more implicit and nuanced logics than sporting events explicitly tied to militarized cultures, such as the Invictus Games. However, the popularity of the Paralympic Games – evidenced in audience numbers, expanded media coverage, celebrity performers, and accoutrement of sponsorship and advertising– makes it a pedagogically persuasive, popular, and discursively powerful space for the *mediation* of sporting militarisation than might first appear. Indeed, *because* the Paralympic Games is not an overt celebration of military culture, the narratives and representations of the para-athlete-soldier across the coverage are *particularly* selective, idealised, and commodified to appeal to a mass audience. In this sense, the Paralympics construct a very specific form of embodied military debilitation; one centred on a highly visible physical impairment, hyper-masculinised and resilient sporting corporeality that maintains collective ideas of the 'cured' or transformed body. It is a body that can tell selective stories of war and, at the same time, exhibit the commercially desirable ableist persona of the technohuman, functional and heteronormative athlete, and easily 'fit' within the gendered/sexualised disabled celebrity culture of the Paralympic sporting spectacle. As such, the para-athlete-soldier of Paralympic culture is a body that can effortlessly perform *national aesthetic labour* by virtue of its idealised and commodifiable potential. We suggest then these findings are illustrative of the seductive nature of Paralympic coverage in the domestication, masculinisation and celebration of the para-athlete-soldier,

operating far more implicitly and subversively, yet nonetheless as powerful, than explicit and overt sporting militarised events.

Moreover, these findings are instructive of the continued 'creep' of militarism in the sporting popular as an ever present and normalised product of contemporary militarized societies, and with it, the *evolution* of a militarised masculinity (Sjoberg, 2010, p.209), at the intersection of the commodified disabled sporting body of the Paralympic spectacle. Certainly, when considering the masculine para-athlete-soldier, it would be remiss of us not to consider the (in-)visibility of the female para-athlete-soldier. In Paralympic coverage, the feminisation of the female para-athlete is unequal, contradictory, and complex (see, Pullen & Silk, 2020), and there remains an almost blanket invisibility of female ex service personnel. Given the importance of relations of power between gendered bodies in sustaining forms of military masculinities, we call for more focused feminist critique of the Paralympic body politic to unpack the way disabled femininity, and its relationship to militarised and sporting cultures, propagates the evolution of disabled militarised masculinity on display in Paralympic coverage.

Notes:

1. This paper forms part of a wider Arts and Humanities funded project (AH/P003842/1) that brings together production interviews, audience focus groups and a National representative survey, quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis, archival analysis, and public pedagogic forms (including a series of performances / documentary film).

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