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Serena Williams and (the perception of) violence: intersectionality, the performance of blackness, and women's professional tennis

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ABSTRACT

Serena Williams is the most accomplished tennis player in the open era of professional tennis. She is also a Black woman which figures prominently in how she is (mis)understood in tennis. Using intersectionality as an interpretive framework, we aim to show how Serena fits within the social structure of tennis which was created within the white, upper-class social milieu. Within the lineage from this historic milieu, Serena is sometimes perceived to be violent; however, that perception highlights the ways in which Serena is positioned differently in this setting than her counterparts. Her outbursts are not more egregious than those of other players; however, Serena's performance of blackness disrupts the expected tennis imaginary and attaches to her the extra imaginings of those features attached to blackness such as urban mannerisms, lack of respect for authority, and violence, which unjustly add extra weight for Serena to bear.

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- Question To the best of your knowledge, what did you say to the lineswoman out there?
- Serena What did I say? You didn't hear? Oh ...
- Question Do you think that the lineswoman had any reason to feel threatened? Apparently she says she felt threatened.
- Serena She says she felt threatened? She said this to you?
- Question I'm just repeating what has been said that she told the chair umpire.
- Serena Well, I've never been in a fight in my whole life, so I don't know why she would have felt threatened.
- U.S. Open press conference, September 12, 2009 (Williams 2009).

Serena Williams is one of the most decorated tennis champions of the open era, an era demarcated as beginning in 1968 when tennis tournaments became *open* to both professional and amateur players. Serena turned professional in 1995, two days before her fourteenth birthday; however, she

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did not play full-time on the tour until 1998. By the end of 1999, Serena was ranked #4 in the world and has subsequently had a total of 319 weeks at #1.¹ In singles, she has won 23 Grand Slam titles halfway through 2019 (winning Wimbledon and the Australian Open seven times each, the U.S. Open six times, and the French Open three times) and is second for most Grand Slam singles titles, amongst both men and women, behind Margaret Court's 24 Grand Slam singles titles.² Of this milestone, Serena asserted,

Maybe this goes without saying, but it needs to be said in a powerful way: I absolutely want more Grand Slams. I'm well aware of the record books, unfortunately. It's not a secret that I have my sights on 25. (Haskell 2018)

Quite possibly, we might never again see a player dominate women's tennis as she has.

Serena performs blackness like no other person in the history of tennis. These Black performances have seemingly been valued for their currency in the global marketplace, so they have at least been tolerated by the WTA, however, on occasion, her performances have been cause for reprimands (Tredway 2018a). At the U.S. Open tennis championships in 2004, 2009, 2011, and again in 2018, Serena had public disagreements with on-court officials that were understood by some spectators as aggressive, hostile, and even violent (Spencer 2012). Furthermore, as Nancy Spencer asserts, "'a Twitter sentiment analysis tool' revealed overwhelmingly negative sentiments toward her" (Spencer 2012, 128). Indeed, to view Twitter just after her most egregious outburst – September 12, 2009 – the majority of Tweets about Serena contain the phrase "I will kill you!", when what was actually spoken to the linesperson was: "I didn't say that I would kill you! Are you serious!?" (Australia 9 2009), which is very different.

Serena is very successful in a sport that is underpinned by the upper-class and white milieu in which it was formed. Her outbursts have been understood in the popular discourse as violent not because they were more vehement than others, because they were not, but, as we will claim, because Serena has been positioned differently in women's tennis, both historically and currently, than her White counterparts. These outbursts trigger a heightened perception of violence as compared to similar outbursts by White tennis players because Serena is not viewed as possibly the greatest tennis player to have ever played the sport, but as a Black woman and Black women are perceived to be violent (Muhammad 2010; Gross 2006).

This article will offer an intersectional analysis to shed light on perceptions that Serena's behaviour is inappropriately violent. The contribution to the literature that this article offers is that it looks at the perception of violence within tennis and by a Black female athlete. In studies on violence and sport, Black men are primarily the focus, with football and basketball dominating the discussion (for example, Dunning 1999; Jamieson and Orr 2009;

Leonard and King 2011). This focus on violence with a female athlete and in the sport of tennis fills a gap in the literature.

Intersectionality as an interpretive framework³

Tennis emerged as a recreational sport of choice among the leisure class in England and France around 1870. It was at this time that, according to historian Elizabeth Wilson, “a confident upper class and an expanding bourgeoisie with money and leisure to spare were refashioning social, cultural and educational life” (2016, 9). Of those playing tennis, tennis historian Robert Lake claims that, “these were upper-middle-class gentlemen playing outdoor versions of established aristocratic racket games on private lawns, among social equals and usually as part of grand social occasions”, which provided for these men a “conspicuous, status-enhancing social function” (2014, 15). In the 1880s, however, those from the upper-class aristocracy left tennis for even “more exclusive pursuits like golf and polo” (Lake 2014, 17), leaving the bourgeois elites in charge of the growing game of tennis. As Lake explains,

The cultural expressions of upper-class taste sought by the most aspirational upper-middle-class players had a lasting impression upon the sport. From its very beginnings, principally because of its noble heritage ... and also due to its earliest upper-class enthusiasts, lawn tennis attracted those seeking to improve their social positions. All the features that characterised the sport, including the general atmosphere and tone of its clubs and parties, its associated fashions and cultural accoutrements, its rules and etiquette and a sense of how lawn tennis should be played, reflected the general motivations of social mobility for the upper-middle classes (2014, 17).

The sport’s whiteness and sex segregation mirrored the social stratification of the upper class. The people who had access to spacious lawns for tennis nets, or who could afford memberships at tennis clubs, were exclusively people in the upper class. Men wore white pants and long-sleeve shirts that were easy to move in while playing; however, women wore bulky multi-layered dresses that covered them from their wrists to their ankles while their corsets often dug into their ribs, constraining their athletic movements. Thus, tennis became a site for particular intersections of race, class, and sex. Within this milieu of whiteness, upper-classness, male-domination, as well as unquestioned heteronormativity, the issues that emerged for women involved equality and representation. To understand modern-day tennis, these historical constructs of tennis must be understood.

Intersectionality is a paradigm that allows us to understand the seen invisibilities, the lived experiences of those who are marked by race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identity markers. As social theorist Patricia Hill Collins asserts, “intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together

in producing injustice" (2000, 18). However, intersectionality is not only about understanding identity markers. Its primary strength is in facilitating our understanding of specific contexts in which particular identities exist. In *Intersectionality*, Collins and Sirma Bilge explain further:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self ... are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (2016, 2).

The specificity is important because no identities are the same in each context. Indeed, intersectionality can be used to understand the specificity of a particular location, a space that has a particular underpinning social milieu that has been historically created over time, such as tennis. Also, intersectionality can be used to understand the specificity of how one operates, what one does or how one performs, within the social milieu. Thus, intersectionality allows us to view the static backdrop to modern professional tennis that is the white, upper-class milieu from which it formed, while also allowing us to see the ever-changing foreground of particular players who have belonged to specific eras of tennis.

In the context of tennis in the U.S., racial segregation at tournaments was the standard until Althea Gibson played what is now the U.S. Open in 1950. To attribute the barring of Althea Gibson, a Black woman and long-time champion of the American Tennis Association (the alternative Black tennis association to the white-dominated USLTA), from the U.S. Open until then to racism on the part of the USLTA is misguided. The USLTA had anti-discrimination policies on the books. To qualify to play at the U.S. Open required gaining ranking points through a series of smaller tournaments; however, most of those smaller tournaments were held at segregated country clubs across the U.S. Though Gibson could qualify to play the tournaments, she was not allowed to enter the grounds of the country clubs because of racial segregation at the clubs, which made these tournaments only available to white players. In 1950, with mounting social pressure, the USLTA granted Gibson a wildcard to play the U.S. Open thereby bypassing the requirement for ranking points from these sanctioned tournaments (Tredway 2018b). Between 1956 and 1958, Gibson won five Grand Slam tournaments: the French Open, two U.S. Open titles, and two Wimbledon titles.

In 1968, the Grand Slam tennis tournaments, which had previously only allowed amateur players to enter, became open to both amateurs and professionals. Prior to the open era, players were paid under the table to

compete in tournaments. This system was not equitable but based on the perceived marketability of players. Thus, we can assume that white male players were paid more under the table than Black male players. Likewise, white female players were paid much less under the table than white male players, and Black female players were likely not paid at all. For example, Althea Gibson, who had won five Grand Slam titles along with being named Female Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press in 1957 and 1958, often struggled financially to continue her tennis career, which she ended abruptly in 1958 due to financial hardship.

Delia Douglas affirms that when the Williams sisters arrived on the professional tennis circuit, it was an “interracial encounter between this Black family and the predominantly White culture of tennis” (2012, 132). Elaborating further, and pointing to the particular intersectional underpinnings of tennis as a sport, Douglas asserts that:

In light of tennis’s heritage of race, gender, and class elitism in the United States, the sport remains available to select groups, as evidenced by its enduring associations with resorts, country clubs, and tennis academies. Thus the arrival of two talented Black American female teenagers from the unlikely city of Compton, California, a location readily understood as site of urban decay and gang violence, profoundly disrupted the White racial order (in addition to the class and geographic boundaries) of the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) tour (2012, 131).

Compton, California, is one of the epicenters of White anxiety about race. Compton survives in the White imagination as images of extreme poverty, drug use and gangs, three features White people attribute almost exclusively to inner-city Black people. Douglas further points out that “it was widely believed that the sisters’ refusal to comply with professional tennis’s cultural codes of conduct was a sign of their contempt for the prevailing norms and cultural and standards of the sport” (2012, 132), that these (Black) women ought to be conforming to (White) tennis mores, as if the historical current of tennis is so powerful that it cannot be swum against. At the very least, there needed to be space for interracial friction with both sides needing to find a way to coexist.

The matrix of domination

Injustices occur because intersectional identities exist in and through four domains of power: structural, hegemonic or cultural, disciplinary, and interpersonal (Collins 2009, 53–54). The matrix of domination, the configuration of these four domains of power, show how “intersecting oppressions are actually organized” (Collins 2000, 18). The structural domain refers to social institutions and explains how they are organized, interlocking, and reproduce subordination over time. Referring back to Althea Gibson being barred from

USLTA-sanctioned tournaments, the interlocking social institutions of tennis allowed country clubs to continue to hold USLTA-sanctioned tournaments despite the USLTA having established anti-discrimination policies. Being sanctioned means that the tournaments count towards ranking points. At any time, the USLTA could have denied sanctioning the tournaments at segregated country clubs; however, they did not. Thus, even though the USLTA had anti-discrimination policies, these apparently did not extend beyond the corporate headquarters (Tredway 2018b). By analyzing these interlocking institutions, we can see the complexity and contextualization that intersectionality offers.

The disciplinary domain functions, according to Collins, “as a way of ruling that relies on bureaucratic hierarchies and techniques of surveillance” (2000, 298), and this “domain manages power relations. It does so not through social policies that are explicitly racist or sexist, but through the ways in which organizations run” (2000, 280). This domain figures most prominently in understanding Serena’s outbursts, as will be discussed.

The interpersonal domain illuminates how “most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression, [however,] they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions [in everyday interactions] uphold someone else’s subordination” (Collins 2000, 287). This interpersonal domain, and the individual nature of racism (and other discriminations), is what many people believe is the only manifestation of racism, rather than the more institutionalized forms of racism.

The cultural domain refers to ideology and culture and explains how power is achieved through manipulation. This domain acts as a link between social institutions (the structural domain), their organizational practices (the disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (the interpersonal domain).

“Racism is simultaneously structured and resisted *within* each domain as well as *across* all four domains”, asserts Collins (2009, 54). When we think of a domain of power, we think of the structural domain with its institutional structures and system of law. However, within the confines of today’s colour-blind racism, the structural domain is viewed as being completely fair to all people regardless of race, as is the cultural and disciplinary domains. Thus, racism is seen as individuals being overtly or covertly prejudiced against people of colour. Too often, the colour-blind racism that surrounds Serena is wrongly understood as wholly interpersonal.

Serena’s social location at the intersection of race and gender shapes perceptions of her body and her behaviour within women’s tennis. Because she is Black and female, Serena Williams has been differently racialized than white women within women’s tennis, and differently gendered than men, white and Black, within tennis. Moreover, Serena’s high visibility as an exceptional

athlete coupled with the lack of racial diversity within tennis places her actions under hyper-surveillance. Looking through the lens of intersectionality, Serena's race cannot be separated from her gender, and her gender cannot be separated from her race. When spectators see Serena, they see both her race and her gender as one whole.

Serena has been treated differently because of these perceptions, in effect, experiencing a racialized form of sexism or a sexualized form of racism. Her clothing, her hair and her mannerisms on the court, have all been subject to intense media scrutiny. By discussing Serena's hair and body, people talk about Serena's race without discussing race directly. This speaking about racialized events, objects or body parts, without speaking of race is the very definition of colour-blind racism, and it negates the structural bases of racism. Furthermore, this is an example of the hyper-surveillance Serena exists with, showing that sport is a microcosm of broader society and the hyper-surveillance and punishment of Black people in general.

Serena has experienced overt racism in women's tennis as well. Most notably, this occurred at the 2001 Indian Wells tennis tournament, a tournament that neither Williams sister played from 2002-2015⁴, despite the tournament being a mandatory event. Nancy Spencer's account of the 2001 Indian Wells tournament (2004) is the most useful for an understanding of what occurred. The agreed upon facts from both sides of the debacle, the Williams sisters and the WTA, are that: 1) Serena was slated to play against her sister, Venus, in a semifinal match, and 2) Venus withdrew from the semifinal match citing an injury. The Williams camp asserts that Venus told WTA staff the day before the scheduled match with Serena that she was too injured to play, but they did not take Venus seriously (Williams and Paisner 2009, 62–84). What occurred is that a few minutes before the scheduled Williams vs. Williams match, WTA staff announced to the spectators that the match was cancelled because Venus had withdrawn due to injury. Serena played against Kim Clijsters in the final the next day. As Serena walked onto the court, she met a sea of boos and racist drivel. Many of the fans believed that Venus forfeited the match just so Serena would be through to the final (Spencer 2004). The public perception was that the Williams sisters cheated, Venus defaulting her match only so Serena could progress to the next round.

Both Williams sisters had vowed never to return to Indian Wells until Serena decided to play the event in 2015. Serena's return to Indian Wells was not without a political current. She wrote a piece for *Time* magazine describing her experiences at Indian Wells and her reasons for returning. In it, Serena wrote, "We [with Venus] were outsiders. ... As a Black tennis player, I looked different. I sounded different. I dressed differently. I served differently. But when I stepped onto the court, I could compete with anyone" (2015b). Ultimately, Serena decided to return because, as she said, people and societies change and grow. Given her 23 Grand Slam titles, too, Serena clearly sits on

top of women's tennis and, thus, has far more power in women's tennis than she did in 2001 when she held only one Grand Slam title, the 1999 U.S. Open.

Along with naming the events of the 2001 Indian Wells tournament as racist, the other politically charged move that Serena did was joining forces with Equal Justice Initiative for a fundraising effort related to the Indian Wells tournament. Based in Montgomery, Alabama, the Equal Justice Initiative provides legal representation to defendants and incarcerated individuals who have been denied fair and just treatment in the U.S. legal system. With Serena's efforts, not only could fans win courtside seats for Serena's matches at Indian Wells, this fundraising effort ensured that Serena had an even larger support network at the tournament while she played. Dotted throughout the stadium were people that she knew understood the racism against her and Venus that occurred there. Ben Carrington has claimed that:

The black athletic body (male and female) has become a powerful signifier within contemporary media culture. This signifier has increasingly served to redefine and in some sense reduce the agency of embodied freedom into a narrow set of "power" and "performance" motifs that are radically decontextualized from broader political movements, thus separating the black body from any connection to social change and hence to a depoliticization of the black athlete itself (2010, 104).

Indeed, by shining a light on the inequality present in the U.S. legal system, and how Black people are disproportionately incarcerated, Serena (re)claimed a critical consciousness in regard to race in the arena of professional tennis, and her position within that matrix.

Serena is positioned within tennis differently than Black tennis players in the past. In writing about Serena and Venus, and their positioning within the white, upper-class world of women's tennis, Collins asserts:

Unlike Althea Gibson, Zina Garrison, and other African American female tennis stars whose demeanor and style of play resembled the White women dominating the sport, the Williams sisters basically reject tennis norms. They are exceptionally strong and play power games like men. They rebuff tennis "whites" in favor of form-fitting, flashy outfits in all sorts of colors. They play with their hair fixed in beaded, African-influenced cornrows that are occasionally dyed blond. The tennis world cannot remove them because the Williams sisters win. Their working-class origins mean that they don't fit into the traditional tennis world and they express little desire to mimic their White counterparts. Yet their achievements force issues of excellence and diversity to the forefront of American politics (2005, 135).

Collins is the first to claim that Serena and Venus not only operate differently than their white counterparts in women's tennis, they operate differently than their Black predecessors. Gibson and Garrison attempted "to mimic their White counterparts", performing certain aspects of whiteness in order to veil their blackness and keep racism at bay. Refusing to participate in

replicating the established white social codes within tennis, the Williams sisters were viewed as antagonistic to that culture.

More interesting might be the question of what it is about tennis that compelled Gibson and Garrison “to mimic their White counterparts” that is not as prevalent now. Serena’s style, indeed, is her own “conspicuous flair” (Jackson 2001, 173) in the white world of tennis. John L. Jackson, Jr., asserts that “when black people lack flavour, they are dangerously close to a pejorative behavioural territory often termed ‘acting white’” (2001, 173). Clearly, Serena does not aspire to “act white”. She seems to aspire for tennis greatness (which she has already achieved) while maintaining a strong Black aesthetic and performance, which, as can be seen by the Black women who have followed – Madison Keys, Sloane Stephens, and Taylor Townsend – has opened the door for Black women to enter the world of tennis with less of a need to replicate white social morés.

Serena Williams and (the perception of) violence

The violence exhibited by Serena, if we can call it that, will be understood through the work of Sebastien Guilbert (2004, 2006). Other than the work by Guilbert, there have been no studies of violence or perceived violence within tennis. None of the writing on Serena analyzes the perception of violence and how that is exacerbated by her race or how Serena is lumped together with Black men and assumed to be violent, which erases her sex. There have been analyses of violence among people of particular races; however, there have not been analyses of perceived violence exhibited by women in sport.

Serena has been viewed by commentators and spectators as aggressive and violent (Spencer 2012). Typically, this occurs when Serena argues line calls with the (almost always) white chairperson. Guilbert states that

the term violence is not the same as aggression. In fact, aggression is an act committed with a view to harming someone whereas violence is a representation of an act, which is not all the same thing. While all aggressions are violent we cannot say that all violence is an aggression. (2004, 45)

Furthermore, Guilbert has found that there are four types of violence used in sporting events: “physical violence (brawls, assaults, blows, falls), verbal violence (abuse, threats, protests), psychological violence (war of nerves, harassment, moral breakdown – ‘blowing a fuse’ as the phrase goes) and cheating (game fixing, corruption, match-rigging, taking of performance-enhancing drugs)” (2004, 46). In a Bourdieusian-infused understanding, sports are usually categorized in terms of economic and cultural differences. Guilbert, however, proposes that sports can be defined based on the type(s) and extent of violence prevalent in a particular sport. Regarding tennis, Guilbert

found that “*psychological violence* is a structuring factor in tennis [and] *verbal violence* is ... present in tennis” (2004, 49). Physical violence and cheating are negligible in tennis.

Serena has never shown aggression as defined by Guilbert. She hasn’t attempted to exert physical harm onto anyone else. However, psychological violence and verbal violence have, in fact, been displayed by Serena, though, not egregiously more than that displayed by other professional tennis players. Serena has been accused of cheating, what Guilbert would describe as “game fixing or match-rigging” (2004, 46), when it comes to matches between her and her sister, Venus (Spencer 2004), and what led to the racist vitriol displayed towards both Williams sisters at the 2001 Indian Wells tournament, but this supposed match-rigging is mere speculation on the part of naysayers. In regards to cheating, this was Serena’s main point of conflict with Carlos Ramos, the chair umpire during the 2018 U.S. Open final; Serena wanted him to apologize for penalizing her for receiving coaching, as if he was accusing her of cheating.

The violence in tennis that Guilbert (2004, 2006) examines, though immensely useful, is devoid of any racial analysis. Serena’s outbursts – which are understood in the popular discourse as violent – are actually a specific “code of the street” (Anderson 1999), a form of language emanating from the inner-city that allows Serena to carve out space by avoiding physical violence. Anderson claims that this “code of the street” functions for Black people as a way to avoid physical violence, whereas white people perceive that verbal violence will only escalate into physical violence. Thus, through this lens, we can understand the apparent confusion on Serena’s part when, in trying to understand that the linesperson felt threatened, she said, “well, I’ve never been in a fight in my whole life, so I don’t know why she would have felt threatened” (Williams 2009). For Black people, as Elijah Anderson explains further, living with the stigma of race, among other things, “places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior” (1999, 32). This aggressive behaviour is controlled by the “code of the street”, which is:

A set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, particularly violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way (Anderson 1999, 33).

This “code of the street” is a particular facet of the performance of blackness. The performance of blackness is the collection of “associated aesthetics” of ghetto-centrism used within the sociology of sport literature. As Andrews and Silk (2010) assert in their analysis of high-profile Black athletes in the National Basketball Association, these athletes function as a “commercially expedient basketball *ghetto-centrism*, realized through the strategic

promotional mobilization of what are stereotypical signifiers of the urban African American experience and associated aesthetics (including sociospatial location, family history and constitution, and preferences for particular cultural practices, forms of attire, music, hair style, and modes of verbal and nonverbal communication)" (2010, 1627). Serena's performance of blackness not only includes her hair and attire, but also the "code of the street", which is an element of her verbal and nonverbal communication. These signifiers of the urban Black experience, then, and the athletes who embody these signifiers, are commodified for corporate gain. Their commodification at the individual level, however, erases the function of racism at the structural level.

What is most important in the case of Serena is that "the code of street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system – and in others who would champion one's personal security" (Anderson 1999, 34). In tennis, the police are the lines people and the judicial system is the chair umpire. Not having faith that they are working without bias can escalate the stress one already feels playing in a high-stakes tennis match. It is no surprise, then, that Serena's long-awaited return to Indian Wells also included a fundraiser for Equal Justice Initiative.

2004 U.S. Open

Serena's first major outburst at the U.S. Open occurred in 2004 in a quarterfinal match against Jennifer Capriati. At 4-6, 6-4, 40-all, Serena hit a seeming winner down the far sideline; however, Mariana Alves, the chair umpire, over-ruled the linesperson's call, declaring that the ball was out. Replays of the shot show that the ball was clearly inside the line. Indeed, Serena did not even know the point went against her until she was standing to serve and the umpire said, "advantage Capriati" (USA Channel 2004). The entire match was riddled with bad line calls, most, if not all, going against Serena.⁵ This match was the first time that Serena had a major outburst at a tennis event. Though, in hindsight, this outburst is seen as a non-issue, Serena was viewed at the time as barely in control of her emotions.

2009 U.S. Open

During the 2009 U.S. Open, Serena played Kim Clijsters in the semifinals. Serving at 4-6, 5-6, and 15-30, two points away from losing the match, Shino Tsurubuchi, a linesperson, called a foot fault on Serena's second serve giving Clijsters two match points at 15-40. A foot fault means that one of Serena's feet touched the service line, or she landed inside the court, before she made contact with the ball while serving. This was the first foot fault called during the entire match and it came at a crucial time. After the

foot fault, Serena approached Tsurubuchi and shouted: "I swear to God I'll fucking take this ball and shove it down your fucking throat! Do you hear me? I swear to God. You better be glad, you better be fucking glad that I'm not, I swear" (Australia 9 2009). Then Tsurubuchi scampered to Louise Engzell, the chair umpire, and, after Serena seemed calmer, resumed her position as linesperson. For some reason, Serena approached Tsurubuchi again and yelled at her a second time. Tsurubuchi ran to Engzell and, after a discussion, Brian Early, the tournament referee, was called to the court. Serena listened to the discussion of the three officials – Early, Engzell, and Tsurubuchi – from a distance. Then, when the discussion included Serena, she shouted at Tsurubuchi: "I didn't say that I would kill you! Are you serious!?" (Australia 9 2009). Serena, who had already been given a warning early in the match for racket abuse, was penalized one point for her outburst, and, because Clijsters had double match point, the penalty point ended the match. Serena was out of the U.S. Open and Clijsters was through to the final where she defeated Caroline Wozniacki to win the title.

Following this match, Serena was fined \$10,000 on-site and, after further investigation, the Grand Slam committee levied a fine of \$175,000 against Serena, a tennis record, for her tirade. This fine was levied with the potential of it being cut in half, to \$82,500, if Serena successfully refrained from verbal abuses of officials during a 2-year probationary period, which she did. The paternalism inherent with reducing the fine for "good behavior" is distasteful. It would be hard to imagine that kind of paternalism levied against anyone from the men's tour or one of the white women from the women's tour.

2011 U.S. Open

During the 2011 U.S. Open final between Serena and Samantha Stosur, controversy erupted once again for Serena. Serving at 2-6, 30-40, Serena hit what seemed to be a winning shot and shouted, "Come on!", her trademark shout for pumping herself up. Though Stosur was able to reach the ball with the frame of her racket, and in no way could have returned the shot, Serena's shout was declared by Eva Asderaki, the chair umpire, to have disrupted Stosur's play. Instead of playing the point over, which was recommended by both John McEnroe and Mary Carillo, the CBS analysts for the match (CBS Sports 2011), the point went directly to Stosur under the "intentional hindrance" rule. While arguing with Asderaki, Serena suddenly said: "Aren't you the one who screwed me over last time?" followed quickly by, "Yeah, you are". However, Asderaki was not the chair umpire during either the 2004 match against Jennifer Capriati nor the 2009 match against Kim Clijsters. That was Mariana Alves and Louise Engzell, respectively. At the changeover at 2-6, 2-1, Serena told Asderaki:

If you ever see me walking down the hall, look the other way, because you're out of control. You're totally out of control. You're a hater, and you are unattractive inside. Who would do such a thing? And I never complain. Wow! I get a code violation for expressing who I am. We're in America last I checked. Can I get a water or am I gonna get a violation for a water? Really, don't even look at me! I promise you, don't look at me, 'cause I am not the one! Don't look my way! (CBS Sports 2011).

Again, Serena processes her feelings on court through a "code of street", a display that shows that she is angry and that she has a lack of faith in the fairness of the officiating, the policing if you will, but in no way shows signs that it would escalate to outright physical violence.

Following this match, Serena was fined \$2,000. Also, because Serena was still in her two-year probationary period, the Grand Slam committee had to investigate this incident as well. It was deemed, however, to not be egregious enough to ban Serena from future tournaments. The committee noted that, "Williams's conduct, while verbally abusive, [did] not rise to the level of a major offence under the grand slam code of conduct" (Busfield 2011).

By 2015, Serena could find humour in this incident, as noted in a press conference interview at the Australian Open that year:

Question	What happened with the hindrance call?
Serena	Well, I got too excited and I hit a great serve and Maria [Sharapova] hit an even better return. I didn't expect her to get it back. I said, "C'mon" a little too soon. I guess there's a rule that you can't do it. So I'm fine with it. I moved on very fast to the next point; just tried to stay as focused as I could.
Question	Has that ever happened to you before?
Serena [smiling]	Do you follow tennis? (Williams 2015a).

2018 U.S. Open

During the final against Naomi Osaka at the 2018 U.S. Open, Serena again had verbal disagreements with Carlos Ramos, the chair umpire. The chain of events began with a warning from Ramos for having received coaching from the stands. She immediately exclaimed that she would "rather lose than have to cheat to win". Then, after having come back in the second set for 3-1, Serena lost the next game, smashing her racket to the ground in disgust with her play. She was docked a point penalty, the next step in the process of penalties after an official warning. Having thought that the coaching warning was an unofficial warning, what is called a "soft warning", Serena did not know that she had a point penalty until the start of the next game which began with Osaka up 15-0. In an escalating round of discussions between Serena and Ramos, she exclaimed, "I have never cheated in my life! You owe me an apology", which he never granted. In her continual

discussion with Ramos, Serena stated, “You stole a point from me. You’re a thief, too!” To this, Ramos issued a game penalty, the third penalty, making the score in the second set 5-3, Osaka serving for the match. When Ramos called both players over to explain the ruling, Serena burst out laughing and asked, “Are you kidding me?” Serena asked to speak to tournament referee Brian Earley, who she told, “This is not fair. This has happened to me too many times ... To lose a game for saying that is not fair. There’s a lot of men out here that have said a lot of things, and because they are men, that doesn’t happen”. After the match, Serena was fined \$17,000 for having called Ramos a “liar” and a “thief”.

Following this match, public perceptions of Serena again centred on her being violent, out of control, hostile, etc. Serena, on the other hand, in thinking of her history at the U.S. Open, responded to a question in the press conference following the match:

- Question You mentioned how at this tournament something always seems to come up. When that was happening out there, were you flashing back to 2009? Does it bring up more things, piling on?
- Serena I think, yeah, that’s hard for me. You know, I think it’s just instantly, just like, Oh, gosh, I don’t want to go back to 2004. Forget 2009, you know. It started way back then. So it’s always something. But that’s also kind of, like, this game mentally that you have to play with. You know, sometimes it might seem like things always happen, but I don’t know the word I’m looking for. You just kind of have to, like, try to realize that it’s coincidence. Maybe it’s coincidence, so ... (Williams 2018)

Conclusion

In both the 2009 and 2011 U.S. Open, Serena did break rules of tennis. The problem, however, is in the gray area between the rules of tennis, their interpretation, and the imposition of sanctions based on those interpretations. The problem with the 2009 U.S. Open is that foot faults are simply not called, except in the most egregious of cases, in the final rounds of major tournaments and never in the late stages of a match. Indeed, John:

McEnroe and fellow [CBS Sports] broadcaster Dick Enberg criticized the official whom Williams berated, disagreeing Williams was guilty of a foot fault, then saying the official should never have enforced the rule at this point in the match. In other words, they justified Williams’ actions. (Peele 2009)

However, whether or not Serena foot faulted is not the question we should be pursuing. Since we cannot see a foot fault from the replays, we would claim that Serena’s foot fault was not egregious. The real question, then, is: How is Serena treated differently on court than other (white) players? In her press conference, Serena stated that, “All year ... I’ve never been foot

faulted, and then suddenly in this tournament they keep calling foot faults. ... You know, I'm not going to sit here and make an excuse. If I foot fault, I did. ... I haven't been called for a foot fault all year until I got to New York, so maybe when I come to this tournament I have to step two feet back" (Williams 2009).

During the 2011 U.S. Open, Serena shouted "Come on!" when she hit a winning shot. From replays, it appears that Stosur had no chance to return the shot. Points in which a disruption like this occur are almost always ruled by the chair umpires to be played over. Also, in many cases, players will give the point to the other player if they know that they had no chance to return the shot. Considering that Stosur was in a very formidable lead, this would have been a commendable move on her part. However, Stosur did not and, with the strict interpretation of the rules by the chair umpire, the point went directly to Stosur.

In both instances, Serena did break rules of tennis as they are written. Indeed, the 2004 incident can be included as chair umpires rarely if never make rulings on the far sideline, opting instead to rely on the judgement of the linespeople there. The rules, however, have not been regularly interpreted for other players in the ways that they were interpreted for Serena, if ever. In this sense, Serena is forced to play competitive tennis by different rules (because the rules are interpreted differently for her) than others in women's tennis. Her outbursts are how she highlights this rift in the disciplinary domain of the matrix of domination, as anyone would who was treated unfairly. What, then, is different about Serena in the world of women's tennis? It seems too obvious to state that it is her race; however, that is the primary difference between Serena and the other players.

Serena is always surprised, seemingly caught off-guard, when rulings come down from the chair umpire. Indeed, after more than a decade of playing tennis professionally, she knows what the norms are and she knows when she is being subjected to a ruling that is not the norm and, hence, is not fair. The quick turn by spectators to arguments that Serena is too aggressive, too powerful, etc., only serve to deflect attention away from seeing the different ways the rules are interpreted for Serena versus her opponents. This deflection is a method of colour-blind racism.

Serena has been, for the most part, unjustly positioned between the historically white and upper-class undercurrent of women's tennis and the tenets of the intersectional linkage between racism and sexism. These four matches point to an odd inequity in how rules are interpreted by chair umpires in tennis. Again, to clarify, it is absolutely appropriate for Serena to act differently than her white counterparts in women's tennis. What is not appropriate is that rules are seemingly interpreted by tournament officials differently for Serena than for other players.

As has been described thus far, these four matches have all occurred at the U.S. Open. Even more perplexing is how these four matches, the only matches

of the more than 1,000 matches she has played in which she had on-court disagreements with officials, all occurred at the U.S. Open. I have no answer as to why this is the case. The U.S. has a long-standing history of racial discrimination and inequality, while the U.S. Open is the most prestigious tennis tournament in the United States. Heightened pressures may occur, both on the part of those managing tennis and on the part of Black players. This is a topic that deserves attention.

“Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy” (hooks 1992, 28). This would be an excellent place for players, fans, and staff of women’s tennis to go. To see beyond the intersectional underpinnings of tennis, the fantasy of tennis, we need to understand the impact of racism in tennis. All of us rely on our cultural language norms when we are pressed. When push comes to shove, some of us fall back on regional dialects and morés while others may resort to the “code of the street”. A “mutual recognition” of differences, will only bring strength to women’s tennis.

Notes

1. I am intentionally using the less conventional “Serena” throughout this article to differentiate Serena more distinctly from her sister Venus. Referring to “Williams” throughout the article, despite this article being about Serena, could become confusing.
2. In addition, Serena has won fourteen doubles titles at Grand Slam events, primarily with her sister Venus, and two mixed doubles titles.
3. I would like to thank Patricia Hill Collins for her incisive feedback on this section of the article.
4. Venus did not return to Indian Wells until the following year, 2016.
5. This match was the one most often cited by proponents of the Hawkeye computer system for line-calling which led to the current system of officiating where players can challenge calls.

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