

Research Paper

Racism and Sexism against Serena Williams in Australian Media: Understanding Celebrity Feminism and Black Women in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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Introduction

Serena Williams is a sport icon being the “most dominant player in the history of women’s tennis” (Tredway, 2018, p. 63). Serena has also long performed “blackness like no other person in the history of tennis” (Tredway, 2020a, p. 1564). Drawing on black feminists’ theorization of an “intersectionality” of gender and race, which attests to the need of understanding how the combination of sexism and racism oppresses black women more than it does white women (Collins, 2000; also see Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991), Kristi Tredway (2020a) discusses how Serena has been treated differently from other professional white female players. To be precise, Tredway argues that Serena “has been differently racialized than white women within women’s tennis, and differently gendered than men, white and Black, within tennis” (p. 1568). Despite being subjected to such intersectional oppressions, Tredway (2020b) furthermore suggests that Serena’s blackness is an “unapologetic” one that challenges the white hegemony of women’s tennis (p. 109).

The women’s final match at the 2018 U.S. Open Tennis Championships drew much media attention. Some of the Australian media’s responses to the on-court behavior of Serena served only to expose what Tredway (2018) critically identifies as the “color-blind racism” against the tennis player.

Drawing on the critical works by Tredway (2018; 2020a; and 2020b), this paper unpacks the cross-cultural racism against Serena revealed by the media discourse of the U.S. Open final, with reference to the relevant contemporary, as well as historical, contexts from Australia. By focusing on the interconnection of gender and race, I argue that Serena continues to be the target of policing, suspicion, and eroticization in a transnational media landscape. Furthermore, by adding a transnational dimension to Janell Hobson's understanding of black celebrity feminists who "are articulating" and "*theorizing* critical issues pertaining to gender and its intersections with race and class for a mass audience" (emphasis in original: 2017, p. 1000), this paper also discusses the ways in which the global celebrity feminism presented by Serena would provide a critical optic through which to expose ongoing prejudices and discriminations against black women in Australia.

Notes on Serena Williams at the 2018 U.S. Open

What attracted most attention was not the excellence of the performance by the two finalists, but how Serena reacted to the code violations that she received during the women's final match at the 2018 U.S. Open. Serena was on a quest to claim the twenty-fourth Grand Slam title of her impressively long and decorated career, equal only to the unbeaten record of one of Australia's tennis legends, Margaret Court. During the final match, Serena had a dispute with a male umpire, Carlos Ramos, who gave her a warning for allegedly receiving instructions from her coach. Serena denied the allegation, and the verbal sparring between her and Ramos intensified over the course of the game, escalating to the point where Ramos decided to issue a game penalty for Serena's verbal abuse. Serena became emotional and spoke to the referees, claiming that such a harsh penalty would never be handed down if she were a man. In response to the comments made by the referees who were explaining to Serena that she was penalized for calling an umpire "thief," Serena lamented:

This has happened to me too many times. This is not fair. ... You know how many other men do things that are ... much worse than that. ... There are a lot of men out here that have said a lot of things and because they were men, that doesn't happen to them. ... I get the rules, but I'm just saying it's not right. And it happened to me at this tournament every single year that I played. That's not fair. That's all I have to say. (Healy, 2018)

With tears in her eyes, Serena conceded the penalty and continued to play the match against her opponent, Naomi Osaka, who went on to claim her first Grand Slam title.

The dramatic finish of the U.S. Open championships quickly became the polemical subject of the week in international media circuits. Among others, a cartoon by Mark Knight, published in the Australian tabloid newspaper the *Herald Sun*, caused a significant uproar. On countless media platforms, including major newspapers and SNS sites, the cartoon was criticized for depicting Serena with large lips and other bodily features that were recognizably racist stereotypes. The proximity between Knight's publication and racist depictions of black people during the U.S. Jim Crow period or in so called "sambo" cartoons was pointed out by many prominent figures, including British popular author, J. K. Rowling, and American civil rights leader, Jesse Jackson (Davison, 2018).

In the midst of media uproar, both Mark Knight himself and the *Herald Sun* newspaper, which was owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Australia, were quick to defend their publication. Within just two days after the initial publication of the controversial cartoon, the *Herald Sun* published the same cartoon, together with another online feature article about Knight's artwork. The article started with Knight's explanation that he had to suspend his Twitter account out of concern for the wellbeing of his family members, after having received numerous personal threats from the public. The newspaper presented a defensive narrative of its own publication by claiming that "veteran cartoonist

says his [Knight's] portrayal was never about race or gender – rather the sporting superstar's bad behavior" (*Herald Sun Backs Mark Knight's Cartoon*, 2018). Knight himself was also quoted in the same article, saying that:

I drew this cartoon Sunday night after seeing the US Open final, and seeing the world's best tennis player have a tantrum ... The cartoon about Serena is about her poor behavior on the day, not about race. The world has just gone crazy. (*Herald Sun Backs Mark Knight's Cartoon*, 2018)

Whether Knight's cartoon is racist despite his own claim of being otherwise, or whether the criticism towards his artwork challenges the fundamental right of freedom of expression might constitute a debate of its own. What is interesting, however, are the ways in which there have been persistent attempts, as most literally exemplified in the above quote, of disassociating the topic from its intersection with questions of gender and race. In other words, the "color-blind" criticism of Serena would not only let sexism go unnoticed, but, most importantly, undermine a multitude of oppressions imposed upon black female tennis players today (Tredway, 2018).

Controlling Serena through Color-Blind Criticism

De-racializing and de-gendering the discourses of successful black women is an effective media tactic employed in the new millennium. Examining the enormous popularity of a super model-turned-TV personality Tyra Banks in the U.S. and elsewhere, Ralina L. Joseph (2009) argues that her exceptional success has been possible precisely because of Bank's embodiment of "(post-) racism" and "(post-) feminism" narratives. Being somewhat part of that which Catherine Rottenberg (2014) calls "the rise of neoliberal feminism," Tyra Banks functions as a symbol of a black celebrity woman whose success is supposed to be attributable entirely to her own individual talent and effort. In this context, Joseph (2009) suggests that neither her gender nor racial status can

ostensibly affect her outcomes. Moreover, her visual presence as a black woman, in turn, legitimizes the validity of “(post-)racism” and “(post-)feminism” narratives.¹ As such, her popularity is well containable within the pre-existing white-dominant racial hierarchy. Drawing on the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003), Joseph (2009) reminds us that such a color-does-not-matter discourse “create[s] an illusion that the contemporary United States is a racially level playing field where race-based measures are not only unnecessary for people of color, but actually disempower whites” (p. 240).

Mark Knight’s self-defence of his cartoon of Serena presents this (post-) race and gender discourse par excellence. It was not about her race or gender. It simply had to do with her individual personality and behavior. Moreover, the ultimate victim of the media uproar, to Knight’s mind at least, is the white cartoonist himself and his family. The cartoonist embodies the narrative of cultural amnesia which suggests that he lives in the world where race and gender no longer matter. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word “tantrum,” which was used by Knight to describe Serena’s behavior, means “an uncontrolled outburst of anger and frustration, typically in a young child” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). The effect of an infantilizing trope associated with this particular term is to portray and problematize Serena as someone who is immature, undisciplined, and disobedient in the world of tennis, while the critical discussions of race and gender remain untouched.

Nearly a decade earlier, Serena was subject to similar criticism and ridicule when Peter Nicholson’s satirical cartoon was published in the Australian daily,

¹ With the use of terms such as “(post-)racism,” and “(post-)feminism,” Joseph (2009) certainly does not undermine the importance of their critical insights into the limitations that identity-based civil rights movements and second-wave feminism entailed (pp. 239-240). Joseph’s concern is that those deconstructive critiques of identity politics have been appropriated for the purpose of denying the existence of racism and sexism in the contemporary mainstream media. As such, Joseph (2009) argues that black female celebrities still exist in “a new millennium representational landscape overdetermined by race and gender at the same time in denial of its overdetermined nature” (p. 238).

The Australian. Nicholson's cartoon was in response to Serena's on-court behavior in the semi-final match against Kim Clijsters at the 2009 U.S. Open. It was alleged that Serena verbally intimidated a line judge who called her foot-fault at a crucial moment of the match. Serena's aggression against the line judge was deemed a code violation, resulting in her eventual loss to Clijsters. Though a much less caricatured racial depiction of Serena compared to that of Knight, Nicholson's cartoon draws Serena with a pacifier in her mouth, sitting next to a toddler who is supposed to be a daughter of Clijsters. Standing in front of these two infantilized figures is Clijsters asking "Now, who's been a good girl today?" under a sign that says "Crèche," meaning a nursery for infants (Nicholson, 2009).

Although Nicholson's cartoon did not provoke as much public reaction as Knight's, the former resonated with the drawing of the latter in terms of portraying Serena as too unorthodox to be contained in the white-dominant world of tennis. Kim Clijsters, on the other hand, who, as a white Belgian woman, made a comeback when she won the Grand Slam title at the U.S. Open in 2009 after giving birth to her daughter, embodied a role model of female tennis champion in her maturity.

At the U.S. Open in 2018, Serena was attempting the same achievement as Clijsters' – to win the Grand Slam title as a mother of a daughter and earn the respect from the global audience – but to no avail. An Australian tennis legend, Margaret Court, who holds the record of winning more Grand Slam titles than any other woman in history, did not endorse Mark Knight's cartoon, and yet did, in broader terms, participate in constructing the recurring discourse which suggests the behaviors demonstrated by Serena on the final match were not a reflection of the rules of tennis and its moral code. Court opined:

We always had to go by the rules. ... It's sad for the sport when a player tries to become bigger than the rules. (Taylor, 2018)

However, what if existing tennis rules and associated cultures are not inclusive enough for players of diverse gender and race? The events of the 2018 U.S. Open also expose the persistent problem of intersectional marginalization placed upon women in the world of tennis. Earlier in the tournament, a French player Alizé Cornet was given a code violation for quickly removing her top shirt and putting it back on during a match because she realized that she was wearing it backwards (Kelner & Lutz, 2018). This penalty against Cornet stirred much public debate and was critiqued as a form of sexism, since male players rarely receive such penalty when changing their shirt between games. The uproar later led the tournament officials to issue an apology for their decision. In the post-final match media conference, Serena, referring both to her dispute with Carlos Ramos as well as to Alizé Cornet, reflected as follows:

But I am going to continue to fight for women and to fight for us to have (equality). Like, (Alizé) Cornet should be able to take off her shirt off without getting a fine. This is outrageous. ... I just feel like the fact that I had to go through this is an example for the next person that has emotions and that want to express themselves, and they want to be a strong woman. And they're going to be allowed to do that because of today. Maybe it didn't work out for me. But it's going to work out for the next person. (Martinelli, 2018)

Serena only uses the word "strong woman" in this statement. But if we read this quote replacing the word with "strong black woman," it would more precisely address the multiple double standards that Serena has confronted during her long career in a white-dominated tennis world. Even one year before this incident, Serena stated, in her published essay commemorating Black Women Equal Pay Day, that she felt the need to make use of her "perspective and experiences as an athlete, an entrepreneur and a black woman to the boardroom and help create a more inclusive environment in this white,

male-dominated industry” (Williams, 2017).

She does precisely so in the world of tennis. Even considering the successful career of her own sister Venus, there has been no other black woman whose accomplishment matches that of Serena. With the exception of the Williams sisters, only a handful of women of color have ever won a Grand Slam title throughout its history. Evonne Goolagong Cawley, an Australian Aboriginal female player, won more than a few Grand Slam titles during the 1970s and the early 1980s, achieving an impressive overall career (Passa, 2008, p. 23); however, her success was overshadowed by the even more successful track record of her white contemporary rival, Chris Evert. This is not to diminish the significance of Goolagong’s achievement, especially as her success and subsequent establishment of the Evonne Goolagong Foundation were instrumental in raising the profile of young Aboriginal tennis players in Australia (Pearce, 2015, p. 42). However, it is debatable as to what extent Goolagong’s legacy had helped to deconstruct the white hegemony that characterized the tennis world, which her black female successors, like Serena, would have to confront two decades later.

Despite Mark Knight’s suggestion otherwise, the world of tennis has been structured strongly around class, nationality, gender, and race (Spencer, 2004). As a result, Serena has always been marked or put under “surveillance” not only for her gender, but also her race (Douglas, 2012, p. 130). Time after time, Serena has been subjected to racist and sexist remarks by users of online social media sites, whereby her body type, combined with anti-black racism, has been a primary source of scorn associated with animality and savagery (Litchfield et al., 2018, p. 163, 165). One particular body part which has been subjected to such scorn is Serena’s buttocks.² When Serena won the 2002 U.S. Open wearing

² The use of black women’s bodies as a way to construct orientalist and racist discourses about white race and its superiority does not, of course, happen in a vacuum. The unfortunate history of Saartie Baartman, otherwise known as “Hottentot Venus,” provides a bleak contextual backdrop (Hobson, 2018, p. 107). Taken from South Africa, Baartman was exhibited at so called “freak shows” on tour in Europe in the early 1800s.

a tight outfit called a “cat-suit,” the discussion of her buttocks was a media obsession (Schultz, 2005). Schultz (2005) rightly points out that media discourses of Serena’s backside are “inconsistent with discussions of the white women on the professional tennis circuit, constructing and highlighting a racialized corporeal difference between females” (p. 350). Schultz further contrasts the ubiquity of Serena’s backside with the equally media-exposed rear image of Anna Kournikova. In the early 2000s, Kournikova, a white Russian woman, became one of the most lucratively sponsored female tennis players without winning a single Grand Slam title (Schultz, 2005, p. 346). Schultz (2005) notes that the sight of Kournikova’s rear functioned as “a pleasurable spectator sport for many people, particularly men, rather than a freakish or grotesque curiosity” (p. 350). We see a clear discursive split between the two women’s bodies of contrasting races: one is disobedient, another obedient to the corporeal aesthetic standard of white beauty.

Leading up to the controversial U.S. Open tournament in 2018, Serena also competed in the French Open in the same year. In the tournament, she wore a black “catsuit,” this time tightly covering her entire waist below, partly in order to deal with her existing medical condition of blood clots. As a result, her postnatal rear was in full display on the reputed clay court. The French Tennis Federation, however, found Serena’s suit “went too far” and deemed it disrespectful for their prestigious tennis tournament, resulting in a ban on its use in the future (Clemente, 2018). As discussed thus far, the discourse of disobedience recurs every time tennis authorities – white male organizations – attempt to control Serena. The French Tennis Federation which, since its inauguration, has never had a woman as its president, let alone a black woman

Her elongated buttocks were the object of both fascination and disgust in the eyes of European audiences – a metonym of otherness in terms of race and sexuality. Janell Hobson (2003) theorizes this sexist and racist gaze upon black women’s body as that of “sexual grotesquerie” (p. 88). Serena’s rear side has equally been subjected to the contemporary gaze of “sexual grotesquerie” (McKay & Johnson, 2008), perhaps more so than that of her sister Venus, due to the former’s fuller physique (especially in her mid and later careers).

(Baudu, 2020), is not an exception. What is it that “went too far” in the minds of those authorities? Her challenge of white superiority? Her deconstruction of gender stereotypes? Perhaps Serena represents both. Defiant against all these color-blind criticisms, Serena competed at the 2018 U.S. Open wearing “an asymmetrical black-and-brown dress with a tulle tutu-esque skirt” that we have never seen on the tennis court before (Messina, 2018). As such, for any critics, including Mark Knight, to argue that their criticism of Serena does not have anything to do with race would be to ignore the ongoing intersectional oppressions with which she has had to face, on and off the court, as one of the most well-known black female tennis players in the world.

Speaking Against Color-Blind Racism

Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “willful” resistance of social norms is useful for understanding how Serena speaks against color-blind racism. Ahmed (2014) postulates that, instead of perceiving being rebellious and willful as a sign of “the failure to comply with” certain social norms, we could reconsider willfulness as a critical optic through which to challenge and deconstruct those very norms (p. 1). Thus, the aforementioned criticism of Serena’s on-court behaviors made by the two Australian cartoonists and the other former white athlete alike, which are dismissive and infantilizing, suggests a lack of critical perspective through which to understand the potentials of her “willful” voices.

In July 2019, Serena published her first-person account of her reflections on the U.S. Open final in the previous year. In the article, featured in the magazine *Harper’s BAZAAR*, Serena reflects on how she was mistreated as a female player in the world of tennis and suggests that all of her past unpleasant experiences and her will to challenge them culminated in her particular dispute with the umpire in the U.S. Open final (Williams, 2019). Serena states:

This incident – though excruciating for us to endure – exemplified how thousands of women in every area of the workforce are treated every day.

We are not allowed to have emotions, we are not allowed to be passionate. We are told to sit down and be quiet, which frankly is just not something I'm okay with. It's shameful that our society penalizes women just for being themselves. (Williams, 2019)

As expected, this statement by Serena was quickly met with harsh criticism. Kate Halfpenny (2019) from the Australian newspaper *The New Daily* regards Serena's self-account as a "hypocritical stunt" to turn the tennis superstar herself into a victim. Halfpenny takes issue with Serena for discussing the structural gender discrimination and treating herself as a representative of victimized women. Halfpenny states:

Using the trope of women as downtrodden and powerless doesn't make you a flag bearer to revere. Instead, it undermines all our achievement and fabulousness. ... Serena, stop pretending you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, instead of at your feet. (Halfpenny, 2019)

Serena may not be a representative of all the women with diverse backgrounds. As Kristi Tredway (2020b) points out, however, Serena Williams is the symbol of one of a few black female tennis players who have struggled with and nonetheless challenged the white male dominated world of professional tennis. It is obvious that Serena's piece discusses some structural problems in sports and society using her first-person narrative. However, Halfpenny sees Serena's will as being wrongly directed when compared to other women who endeavor to counter sexism. Here, Serena as an individual, not structural sexism itself, is held responsible. Ahmed (2014) states that "[w]hen a structural problem becomes diagnosed in terms of the will, ... individuals become the cause of problems deemed their own" (p. 7). This way of handling a problem only once again endorses the discourse of "(post-) racism" and "(post-) feminism" narratives, while undermining the intersection of racism and sexism.

Serena wrote the essay in *Harper's BAZAAR* to address the structural problems that she has experienced. However, her story cannot be discerned without taking into consideration the intermingling of gender and race. It is clear to some of us that Serena penned the article to address the ongoing problem of color-blind feminism and white dominated world of tennis. Her concerns for other black women in tennis can be observed when she says, in her apology to Naomi Osaka, that "I am, was, and will always be happy for you and supportive of you. I would never, ever want the light to shine away from another female, specifically another black female athlete" (Williams, 2019). In fact, Naomi Osaka has subsequently become another black female tennis player with global influence. During the 2020 U.S. Open, Osaka expressed her compassion and support for the "Black Lives Matter" movement by wearing masks upon which the names of black victims of police or racist violence were printed in order "to make people start talking" (Bergeron, 2020).

For someone like Halfpenny, Serena's essay is self-serving and too personalized, hence appearing hypocritical. But I would argue that Serena's piece is private, and yet consequential to numerous circumstances of others. Some feminist writers such as Roxane Gay (2014) caution us that celebrity feminism will only function as a "gateway" to real feminist concerns. It is true that what a certain celebrity can say and do comes with its own limitations. The interpretation of their actions is ultimately up to the audience from all walks of life. For instance, some black feminists (*A Black Feminist Roundtable*, 2016) found Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* reassuring and reclaiming the agency of black women in the world of what Moya Bailey (2010) called "misogynoir." Janell Hobson (2018) also considers Beyoncé's performance of twerking in *Lemonade* as something that challenges the objectification of particular aspects of black women's bodies and reclaims their agency (p. 114). Serena made a cameo appearance in "Sorry," one of the songs from *Lemonade*, and twerked her much publicly objectified buttocks. In "Sorry," the two black female stars collaborated for the cause of celebrity feminism. At the same time,

others, such as bell hooks (2016), perceived *Lemonade* as falling short of challenging the commercialization and victimization of black womanhood. Although those debates are important in and of themselves, what I find most useful for our discussion of Serena is how her personal actions and words can be translated into relevant feminist critical issues in the context of cross-cultural communication. Janell Hobson (2017) expands this possibility and suggests that black celebrity feminism could speak to intersectional oppressions of gender and race which relates to the masses (p. 1000). The last section of this paper discusses the ways in which Serena's actions as a celebrity and the criticism against them in turn illustrate the ongoing oppression of black women in Australia.

Relevance of Serena Williams to the Politics of Black Women in Australia

Mark Knight defended himself by stating that "people are seeing things that are just not there" in response to an overwhelming accusation that his cartoon depiction of Serena was reminiscent of the so called "coon" caricature during the Jim-Crow era in the United States (Kwan, 2018). Knight may be ignorant of the racist history of the United States, but the color-blind criticism against Serena by the Australian cartoonist not only undermines the multiple oppressions facing Serena as a black woman athlete, but also perpetuates the existing racist assumptions towards black women in Australia. It should not be forgotten that Aboriginal women were consistently dehumanized and caricatured with various labelling by the colonial settlers in Australia. As Liz Conor (2016) points out, the settlers' "skin deep" understanding of Aboriginal women with name calling such as "gin," "lubra," and "black velvet," only perpetuated the subordinate status of colonized people, especially women (pp. 2-3). Furthermore, surviving aboriginal women in Australia have often been portrayed, as Cassandra Pybus (1991) points out, as the "Antipodean Pocahontas" (p. 170) – a metonym of good-mannered women of color for white

men in Australia.³

Even if Mark Knight may not be racist as he self-proclaims, his cartoon of Serena speaks volumes about the continuing legacy of white Australia's colonial distaste for a black woman who refuses to fit the persona of "Antipodean Pocahontas." In the cartoon, Naomi Osaka, Serena's opponent, is depicted with a long, straight-haired blonde pony-tail (which she did not have at the time of the U.S. Open) and slender stature. Despite Osaka being half black Haitian and half Japanese, Knight did not draw her with any archetypes of black or Asian people. In the background to Serena stamping on her broken racket out of anger, the male umpire asks Osaka to allow Serena to beat her. Standing straight, Osaka looks up at the face of an umpire without showing any sign of resistance. In a stark contrast to incorrigible Serena, Osaka is portrayed as a good-mannered woman of (de-)color who collaborates with the dominant narrative of the man in charge.

"People are seeing things that are just not there," Knight says in his

³ Pybus conceptualizes the term 'Antipodean Pocahontas' (1991) in reference to the historical legacy of Truganini who was born in Recherche Bay, a part of the current state of Tasmania in Australia (Pybus, 2020, p. 281). The discourse around Truganini as a black female figure who lived in the 1800s has had profound implications and significance in terms of understanding the containment of blackness within white-dominant society. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, Tasmanian Aborigines were subjected to British colonialism which entailed numerous forms of oppression including massacre and land thefts.

Reminiscent of Saartie Baartman, whose body was posthumously exhibited in a museum for the gaze of white Europeans (Hobson, 2018, p. 115), the remains of Truganini were excavated and her skeletons were on display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart between 1904 through 1947 (Kühnast, 2012, p. 3). In the popular imagination, Truganini has been perceived as the last fully-indigenous person of Tasmania, and her death in 1876 was presented to the colonial settlers and global communities as the end of the local Aboriginal culture, while the Aboriginal people continued to live in the state (Onsman, 2014, p. 20). Truganini was portrayed as a local interpreter-turned-assistant for the project led by colonialist missionary George Augustus Robinson to "relocate" Tasmanian Aboriginal people to resettlement camps (Pybus, 2000, pp. 12–13). She was perceived as a peaceful mediator who played a vital role in the "conciliation" between colonizer and colonized, hence functioning as an antidote to a further invocation of cruelty and violence involved in the colonial settlement.

defence (Kwan, 2018). Ironically enough, this statement can backfire and constitute a criticism of the continuing colonial legacy of white Australia. It is difficult to deny that white Australia still anachronistically sees black women as “Antipodean Pocahontas,” whereas such women of color “are just not there” anymore. Released in 1987, Tracey Moffatt’s now classic feminist film *Nice Coloured Girls*, and the critical reactions brought about by the film, have called into question the cultural amnesia around the perception of black women which white Australia dares to uphold. As a multilayered text, *Nice Coloured Girls* makes a critical commentary on the white Australian male continuing to uphold the images of Aboriginal women constructed from its colonial legacy. Juxtaposed to the male voiceover reading the historical diary of Lieutenant William Bradley that romanticizes white man’s encounter with black woman, the three contemporary Aboriginal women in urban settings “pick up” and take advantage of what they called “Captain” – white man – to serve their financial needs. *Nice Coloured Girls* sheds light on the agency that black women possess in their relationship to white men, while it also highlights the continuing socio-economic vulnerability and marginality of the world they inhabit (French, 2000).

Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls* was provocative in that the female Aboriginal artist wanted to address the reality of black women in urban Australia which the country was not ready to see. Back in the late 1980s, Australia was still looking through a colonialist lens at black women as “nice colored girls,” but such women were “just not there” anymore. Fast-forward about three decades and some of mainstream Australian media, as represented by the case of Mark Knight’s depiction of Serena, still struggle to deal with black women who are incongruent with the persona of “nice colored girls.” Not only defiant of white man’s rules, Serena, unlike those urban Aboriginal women in *Nice Coloured Girls*, is a woman of commodity power. Arguably Serena is one of the most commercially successful black female athletes. All in all, Serena represents the realm of uniqueness against all the standards set within the white-male

dominant world of tennis (Tredway, 2020b). Serena is not a “nice colored girl” by any means. She is Serena Williams without having any precursor. She is the one who sets a new standard. This difficulty of categorizing her persona is in fact a threat to the white hegemony, precisely because the undefinable feature of identity is the power normally assigned to whiteness (Dyer, 1997). In order to eliminate the elusive quality of Serena, the tennis world and Australian media alike employ an array of means to stylize her identity, whether it be her gender, race, personality, body-type, or athletic ability. It is an attempt on the part of whiteness to identify itself as being “unmarked,” thereby regaining the elusive power of the white race.

Conclusions: Towards Connective Understandings

As we have discussed, the media discourses surrounding the tennis superstar Serena do not represent a rags-to-riches story as might be found in a number of Disney versions of fairy tales. If anything, Serena’s ascendance to her stardom often functions as a cautionary tale within the white-male dominated world of professional tennis. As the Australian media reactions to Serena’s on-court behavior in the 2018 U.S. Open final match expose, despite all of her incomparable achievements, she is still perceived as a black sheep against which the ideal model of (white-)tennis female player is defined. However, Serena continues to be othered not always through overt racist and sexist remarks but through color-blind criticisms.

Serena has been looked at and policed. If anything, she is often relegated to the realm of excess (McKay & Johnson, 2008). And yet, she has refused to be ashamed of her excess. She has, in turn, embraced and owned it with confidence. Serena’s story is too loud and too richly layered to be told within the pre-existing vernacular of female professional tennis player. When Serena voiced her dissent of the judgement by Carlos Ramos at the U.S. Open final, she might not necessarily have dreamed of her action to be implicated in the discussion topics covered in this paper, ranging from contemporary politics of

black women in tennis, to persistent racism and sexism in the mainstream Australian media. Similar to the idea of, what Minoru Hokari (2007) calls, “connective studies,” which draws critical connection among diverse subject matters, histories, and nations, this paper has detailed the ways in which Serena’s struggles and courage as a top black female player inform us of the color-blind racism that contemporary Australia needs to face. Such dynamic connections could not be made if it were not for Serena’s status as a superstar and celebrity athlete.

This, of course, does not mean that the connective analysis presented in this paper undermines the specificities of the intersectional oppressions of gender and race in the context of Australia or elsewhere. As an academic who lectures at a regional university in Australia, however, I find it useful for me and my students to critically examine both the global and local implications of racial injustice presented by an enormously influential black woman such as Serena. It is then rather counterintuitive to suggest that Serena’s celebrity black feminism is inconsequential to many of us. She has been, and will be, a black woman of influence so long as she continues to be one of the greatest female tennis players to step on a tennis court. The social discourses about and against her can be pedagogical for us if we as her audience could apply and translate them to our own contexts for the purpose of critically examining the relations between racism and sexism.

The final chapter of her career as a professional tennis player remains to be written, despite her announcement of career hiatus at the end of 2022. Perhaps a life story such as hers may not have any conventional ending. In the meantime, Serena continues to smash a multifaceted glass ceiling imposed upon black female tennis players and help us understand their struggles and challenges from a cross-cultural perspective.

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Abstract

オーストラリアのメディアにおけるセリーナ・ウィリアムズへの人種差別と性差別：セレブリティ・フェミニズムと黒人女性の関係性を異文化間の文脈から理解するために

菅沼勝彦

2018年全米オープンテニス選手権の決勝に出場したセリーナ・ウィリアムズはコート上での自身による言動が不適切とみなされ多くの議論を呼んだ。一部オーストラリアのメディアによる関連報道は同国における人種差別問題を浮き彫りにした形となった。本稿は、人種とは無関係として展開されたセリーナに対する当時の批判言説を、オーストラリアにおける歴史的な文脈と現状の双方を鑑みながら分析する。ジェンダーと人種の交差性に注目し、プロテニス界とそれに関するトランス・ナショナルなメディア空間において、尚も黒人女性であるセリーナの身体が監視と性的な他者化の対象とされることを論じる。また、セレブリティ・フェミニズムの視座を異文化間の文脈に応用することで、セリーナに関する言説分析がオーストラリアにおいて現在も続く黒人女性に対する偏見と差別の諸問題に交差しながら可能となる様についても論じる。

キーワード：

ジェンダー、人種、セレブリティ、テニス、セリーナ・ウィリアムズ

