

Locating Serena Williams in a Racialized Ideology and Iconography

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Serena Williams, American tennis professional, has dominated the tennis courts for over a decade. The popular narrative (one I will contest later in the essay) of Williams' upbringing is that she grew up in the rough neighborhood of Compton, just outside of Los Angeles. Her father, Richard Williams, coached both Serena and her sister, Venus, to stardom (and thus, out of the violent L.A. suburb).¹ In 1995, Serena Williams went pro. Twenty years and twenty grand slam single titles² and several Olympic gold medals later, she is the number one tennis player in the world.³ Her athletic superiority is in constant tension with her identity as a black athlete and as a female athlete; the intersections of this identity, and the historical discourse and representation of black women's bodies, largely affect the contemporary discourse around Serena Williams. The media cannot seem to mention her name without mentioning her body, more specifically, her buttocks. Black women's bodies have been criticized, sexualized, brutalized, misrepresented, underrepresented and silenced for centuries. The media's fixation with her buttocks above her athleticism perpetuates a long-standing history of reducing black women to nothing more than sexual aspects of their bodies. In this essay I argue that the contemporary discourse surrounding Serena Williams is located in an ideological and iconographic history of black women's bodies.

Understanding ideology is integral to understanding the media's discussion of Serena Williams. Ideology is the framework in which one understands social existence.⁴ Invisible and pervasive, ideology governs the images, language and concepts associated with different groups of people and places. Rather than creating ideology, the individual is born into a framework of social knowns that reiterates systemically and perpetually. In "The Whites of Their Eyes, Racist Ideologies in the Media," Stuart Hall suggests that "an intervention in the media's construction of race is an intervention in the *ideological* terrain of struggle."⁵ This passage speaks to the tension of ideology in media. The media's construction of race is ideological: it extends beyond the individual writer or publication, to the structural and historic ways race has been institutionalized. However, the media does perpetuate racist ideologies; more often than not, it frames an individual as responsible for the images surrounding them (i.e. black crime, white success), instead of challenging the institutions which have constructed and solidified those images. In this essay, I examine art, science and media as apparatuses of racist ideologies.

Racist ideological concepts (such as notions of difference, superiority, etc.) are solidified in images and become icons. In "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature" Sander L. Gilman asserts,

¹ Stephen Rodrick, "Serena Williams: The Great One," Rolling Stone, June 18, 2013, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/serena-williams-the-great-one-20130618>.

² "Serena Williams Biography," Bio.com, Tennis Star, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/serena-williams-9532901#personal-life>.

³ Rodrick, "Serena Williams: The Great One."

⁴ Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes Racist Ideologies and the Media," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-reader*, by Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

“When individuals are shown within a work of art... the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates.”⁶ Thus, images of individuals throughout history are perceived to represent the entire group that they come from: one particular icon homogenizes an entire group. Gilman uses scientific and aesthetic spheres (medicine and art) as sites of racial and sexual ideology. Medicine, as an apparatus of ideology, presents “truth” via the “objective” nature of science, while art is more commonly understood as subjective.⁷ Media presents “truth” as the voice of “the people.” Icons of medicine, art and media are susceptible to the same amount of myth, as they are all products of their own cultural contexts: time, people, place and power.⁸ Nineteenth century medicine and art reduce black women to their sexualized bodies, an image that has consequently persisted and informs contemporary representations and discourse regarding black women.

The black female icon of the eighteenth century is Saartjie Baartman. Her naked body toured through Europe as a spectacle, “The Hottentot Venus,” to demonstrate Steatopygia (protruding buttocks). The image of her on exhibit, naked, observed by the white elite resembles the iconographic image of a naked slave women standing on an auction block in the United States. Her status as an icon extended from the art world into the world of science and medicine after her death. In an article from 1985, Sander Gilman states, “Sarah [Saartjie] Baartman's genitalia and buttocks summarized her essence for the nineteenth-century observer, or indeed, for the twentieth century one, as they are still on display at the Musée de l'homme in Paris.”⁹ Saartjie Baartman was reduced to her genitalia and buttocks during life as the “Hottentot Venus,” and after life as an autopsy of black female genitalia. The medical descriptions of Saartjie Baartman were iconic in that they became the medical description of all black women at the time. Gilman cites Blainville’s two intentions with the autopsy: “comparison of a female of the ‘lowest’ human species with the highest ape (the orangutan) and the description of the anomalies of the Hottentots ‘organ of generation.’”¹⁰ In the nature of iconography, black women are reduced to representations of sexual deviation, as medicine reduces Saartjie Baartman to her “deviant genitalia.” The doctors located a part of the body that they deemed “lesser than,” and thus claimed black women’s existence as “inherently” or “naturally” lesser. Each part of the Black/African female body became a site for moral analysis, as is illustrated by Willem Vrolik -- cited in Gilman -- who claims that a “narrow pelvis is a sign of racial superiority.”¹¹ This understanding of the female body is used to claim that Baartman is more primitive and thus all black bodies are primitive. This conception of the primitive is also sexualized, and extends to the general understanding of black women in medicine. Gilman references Buffon's description of black female sexuality, who says that their “animal-like sexual appetite went so far as to lead black women to copulate with apes.”¹² Buffon’s description, along with Blainville’s, Vrolik’s

⁶ Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *CRIT INQUIRY Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 204, accessed November 6, 2015, doi:10.1086/448327.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰ Ibid., 213.

¹¹ Ibid., 219.

¹² Ibid., 212.

and many others', enforces racist ideologies that dehumanize black women to be viewed either as animals or mere body parts.

The racist ideologies that pervade nineteenth century art and medicine are reproduced in contemporary media. Hall classifies two types of racism in media: overt racism and inferential racism.¹³ Overt racism occurs when space is given intentionally to people who are known to be racist, or engaging in arguments which are also known to be racist. Inferential racism occurs when racial stereotypes are presented in the media as the truth. Hall says it is the "unstated and unrecognized assumption that *blacks* are the *source of the problem*."¹⁴ Both overt and inferential racism are present in media coverage of Serena and Venus Williams as black female athletes in a predominantly white sport. In "Reading the Catsuit- Serena Williams and the production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S Open," Jamie Schultz provides a comment made by Sid Rosenberg, American radio personality which exemplifies Hall's description of overt racism:

'I can't even watch [Venus and Serena] play anymore. I find it disgusting. I find both of those, what do you want to call them-- they're just too muscular. They're boys.' Calling the women 'animals,' he then related a story someone told him that the women would one day appear in *Playboy* magazine, to which he responded that they had 'a better shot at *National Geographic*.¹⁵

Rosenberg's statement echoes nineteenth century scientific racism, when medical professionals compared the anatomy of black women to that of orangutans. By suggesting that they belong in *National Geographic* over *Playboy*, Rosenberg dehumanizes them and suggests that their sexuality is deviant. The rhetoric reasserts racist ideology and iconography to stigmatize the sexuality of both Venus and Serena Williams as masculine and animalistic.

The femininity, sexuality and body of Serena Williams is scrutinized with every tennis court appearance. Schultz uses the 2002 U.S Open as a case study for his research. Schultz points to the media's description of Serena Williams' outfit as a "body-clinging, faux leather, black catsuit."¹⁶ For Schultz, this description has both gendered and racialized implications: firstly, "catsuit" indicates lingerie; the media implies the design of Williams' on-court outfit is explicitly sexual, rather than built for athletic performance.¹⁷ Secondly, Schultz asserts that the term "catsuit" "draws on longstanding, racist ideologies that equate African heritages with animality."¹⁸ Schultz also acknowledges Williams' agency in this discussion, saying that she is "a producer and product of these representations."¹⁹ She helped design it, she also calls it a catsuit, and she describes it as "sexy."²⁰ However, this analysis should not be mistaken as ideology being a product of individuals. Serena Williams' participation in the discourse is a product of ideology.

¹³ Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes Racist Ideologies and the Media," 20.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ J. Schultz, "Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 29, no. 3 (August 2005): 346.

¹⁶ Ibid., 338.

¹⁷ Ibid., 344.

¹⁸ Ibid., 344.

¹⁹ Ibid., 345.

²⁰ Ibid., 345.

Journalism regarding tennis and Serena Williams often focus on the fashion of the athletes; racialized ideology is foundational in fashion. bell hooks writes about the emergence of black female models in high fashion; this sector of the fashion world focusses on models' otherness rather than humanizing the figures who represent high fashion. Black models only access beauty through their perceived otherness and spectacle.²¹ Their bodies were made into mannequins or robots.²² hooks suggests that "the black female is the best medium for showing off clothes because her image does not detract from the outfit; it is subordinated."²³ In tennis, the outfit and the body work together; the outfit needs to enhance the performance of the athlete. The athlete needs to make the outfit look appealing. In "When did tennis become so unfashionable?" Belinda White answers her title question and puts the blame on Venus and Serena. When she says, "for every trophy the pair added to their bulging cabinet, their outfits became brasher, louder, and more overtly sexual²⁴." This statement stigmatizes the sisters through racialized and gendered language. She plays on the stereotypes of the "loud black woman", as well as the racist ideology that emerged in nineteenth century scientific discourses that attributed an uncontrollable sexuality to black women. Later in the article she states, "maybe all the clashing colors are designed to distract their opponents, but it comes off as just plain tacky."²⁵ "Tacky" implies a class difference that utilizes inferential racism to further marginalize the sisters from the white upper class world of tennis.

A major part of racist ideology is marginalization through locating difference. Eighteenth century art only depicted black figures in paintings where they were accompanied by a white figure of the opposite sex.²⁶ This exemplifies a long-standing need to place black beauty and sexuality in direct opposition to white beauty and sexuality.²⁷ This oppositional rhetoric is used in the contemporary discourse surrounding Serena Williams. *Rolling Stone* utilizes this oppositional rhetoric in their article, "Serena Williams: The Great One" when they state: "Here are the facts. Serena is the number-one tennis player in the world. Maria Sharapova is the number-two tennis player in the world. Sharapova is tall, white and blond, and because of that, makes more money than Serena, who is black, beautiful, and built like one of those monster trucks that crushes Volkswagens at a sports arena."²⁸ In Rodrick's account, Williams' blackness is oppositional to Sharapova's whiteness; Williams' beauty is oppositional to Sharapova's blondness; and finally, Williams' body, described as not just nonhuman but as a violent monstrous machine, is in opposition to the (white) wealth of Sharapova.

²¹ bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *The Politics of Sexuality*, 129, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/bell-hooks-Selling-Hot-Pussy-representation-of-black-womens-sexuality.pdf>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Belinda White, "When Did Tennis Become so Unfashionable?," *Telegraph*, January 20, 2011, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/beauty/news-features/TMG8269772/When-did-tennis-become-so-unfashionable.html>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature."

²⁷ Ibid., 213.

²⁸ Rodrick, "Serena Williams: The Great One."

Sharapova may be a more contemporary example, but when Williams donned the infamous “catsuit” of 2002, her lead oppositional figure was Anna Kournikova. While Williams was clearly a much better athlete, Kournikova was the most highly sponsored female athlete in the world,²⁹ appearing on the cover of multiple magazines and naming her as the “sexiest” or “most beautiful” athlete.³⁰ Kournikova places herself in direct opposition to Serena; Schultz cites her saying: “I hate my muscles. I’m not Venus Williams. I’m not Serena Williams. I’m feminine. I don’t want to look like they do. I’m not masculine like they are.”³¹ Her statement marginalizes the femininity of the Williams sisters, and locates masculinity as a physical aspect of their bodies, an analysis with which the autopsy report of Saartjie Baartman would agree.

Schultz speaks to the masculinization of Serena Williams as a representation of a larger tendency: “bodies of black female athletes have been (and continue to be) ideologically coded and understood through notions of masculinity³².” The focus of the commentary on her “bulging muscles” and “monster truck” body prescribes her hypermasculinity and denies her femininity. Her body, like the bodies of many black women in pop culture, is a spectacle. The public focus on the buttocks of Saartjie Baartman is reproduced in the media’s fascination with the buttocks of Serena Williams: Annabel Croft says, “Serena’s dress is designed very carefully to hide her bulk.”³³ This statement refuses any beauty or elegance of Serena Williams and her style, instead her clothes become a mere shield of her physique. Another article states: “If... Serena weren’t the personification of the Commodores’ classic song “Brick House,” the black cat-suit she donned for the U.S Open in 2002 wouldn’t have sparked a national debate.”³⁴ The commentary on her figure becomes a commentary on her character, as Saartjie Baartman’s autopsy became a commentary on black women’s perceived inferiority.

While the media’s representation and language around Serena Williams’ body further marginalizes her within a predominantly white and thin sport, the media’s commentary on Kournikova’s body reinforces racialized ideologies and historical iconographies of white superiority. Kournikova’s buttocks was referred to as “sensational... photogenic... irresistible.”³⁵ Kournikova is adored and Williams is othered. Sexualizing Serena was not a heterosexualization. Schultz asserts that Williams, like Saartjie Baartman, represents deviant sexuality; her body is masculinized and her clothes are compared to bondage and prostitution. These statements by the media reduce Serena Williams to her buttocks as Baartman was reduced to hers’, centuries earlier. In “Selling Hot Pussy, Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” bell hooks contends, “Representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism

²⁹ Schultz, “Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open,” 346.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 347.

³³ Charles Sale, “Croft Gets to the Bottom of Serena,” Mail Online, June 28, 2013, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/article-2351341/Charles-Sale-Annabel-Croft-gets-Serena-Williams.html>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Schultz, “Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open,” 350.

and which still shapes perceptions today.”³⁶ The commentary by media on the Williams sisters’ buttocks is perpetuating rather than critiquing a racist ideology. hooks outlines four Hollywood stereotypes that became sites of sexualized racist ideologies: (a) the black woman who sexually desires, chases, but is ultimately denied by a white man,³⁷ (b) the “almost-white black woman” who is characterized by her tragic sexuality,³⁸ (c) the “mammy” who is denied her sexuality as she is a caretaker, and sometimes power-hungry,³⁹ and (d) the “sexual savage,” a reference to the mythic black slave woman who seduced white slave owners.⁴⁰ All of these images present black women in relation to both power and sexuality and are perceivably the only existences they can occupy. The discourse around the Williams sisters, one that centers on their bodies over their talent, continues to perpetuate racialized ideologies and iconographies. The particular racist discourse that Serena Williams is located in is specific to black women because it is also a discourse that has been and continues to be overtly sexual and sexist; it is specific to the intersections of black women’s identities, the intersections that once placed them naked on an auction block in the United States or naked at a sideshow in Europe.

Another aspect of the discourse that perpetuates racial ideologies is the attachment to the “background” of the sisters. The background of white tennis players is not discussed nearly to the extent or in the same way as the Williams sisters’. In the *Rolling Stone* article Rodrick provides the following background of the women:

The Williams sisters are known inside the tennis world equally for their on-court achievements and for being the offspring of one Richard Williams, who was raised by a single mom in Shreveport, Louisiana, and schooled the girls for hours on the glass-strewn courts in Compton, California, from the age of seven. Richard turned two children of the ghetto into legends in a gilded sport run by Veuve Clicquot-sipping country club types.⁴¹

What this story perpetuates is a broader cultural narrative that black people have access to the “American Dream,” class mobility, racial equality and individualism through sports.⁴² Brendan Hokowhitu explores these ideas in his essay, “Race Tactics,” in which he asserts, “[S]port has been such an integral part of positivistic endeavours to create a world defined, bettered, and ruled by the civilized white, that the sport-star of color’s body unmistakably abets the dominant meta-narrative.”⁴³ By having a black tennis star on their television, competing against a white tennis player from a seemingly equal starting place (the court), it assures the white audience that they are not

³⁶ hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” 123.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Rodrick, “Serena Williams: The Great One.”

⁴² Brendan Hokowhitu, “Race Tactics: The Racialised Athletic Body | Hokowhitu | Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue,” Junctures, November 01, 2003, contemporary images, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://junctures.org/junctures/index.php/junctures/article/view/159/273>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

racist, and attempts to convince the black audience that racism is a thing of the past. Sport functions as a naturalizer, an equalizer, and in the case of colonization, a “tool for assimilation.”⁴⁴ When the black athletes surpassed the white ones in most fields, Hokowhitu suggested, “The obvious path for a white public endeavoring to hold their position of racial superiority was to create an allegorical discourse steeped in mind/body dualism.”⁴⁵ This discourse is supported by the inferentially racist ideology that black people are “natural athletes.” By opposing physical performance with intellectual performance, the ideology of white superiority as natural is maintained.

The *Rolling Stone* article on Serena Williams reproduces the notion that success is attainable to anybody, if they work hard enough. The ideological undertone of the piece supposes that the Williams sisters and their father are just as responsible for escaping “the ghetto,” as other people of color are for remaining there. Aside from the brief moment when *Rolling Stone* talks about the financial success of Sharapova over Williams (with no further interrogation of why that is), it is unsurprising that none of the other news articles that I analyzed address the structures of power at play in Serena Williams’ life. It is along these lines of power that Schultz claims, “although racialized stereotypes suppose that Williams should be a ‘natural’ athlete, gendered stereotypes posit that there is little natural about female athleticism and muscularity, marking a complicated interplay between her multiple subjectivities.”⁴⁶ Her entire identity as a black woman is compromised in the media coverage of her as a tennis player. The media coverage of Serena Williams reduces her character and profession to merely her body and physical capacity, and ignores the different structures of power she has to work against.

Despite the power of ideology and dominant icons and the history behind them, there is also a history of black women resisting those images. hooks asserts, “When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects.”⁴⁷ Serena Williams is a resistant agent and has a place in the discourse surrounding her as a female athlete. The fact that she designs her outfits, feels good and sexy in them, and announces that to reporters is resistance. She is able, to some extent, to control her image and manipulate racist ideologies. It is the media that warps the narrative of Serena Williams, not her. Her presence on the court is resistance in and of itself.

We can place Williams in an ideological iconography of black women in art, medicine and media. Iconography and racist ideologies refuse a discourse in which black female icons humanize the group which they are perceived to be representing, as illustrated by Saartjie Baartman, and with hook’s four Hollywood roles for black women. Instead, black women are represented as far from human as possible, as only their sexual parts, and as their capacity for performance or display, to which they (iconographic representations) can justify racist ideologies that pervade art, medicine and media today. Apparatuses of ideology have reduced black women to their buttocks since the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman in the nineteenth century into contemporary discourse of Serena Williams. In the nature of iconography, Serena Williams became a figure of a generation, and the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Schultz, “Reading the Catsuit: Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open,” 348.

⁴⁷ hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” 131.

discourse around her reflects institutionalized (mis)understandings of the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

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