

READING THE CATSUIT

Serena Williams and the Production of Blackness at the 2002 U.S. Open

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During the 2002 U.S. Open, Serena Williams received a great deal of attention for wearing an outfit described as "a body-clinging, faux leather, black cat-suit." It was not necessarily the catsuit itself that the popular media found especially controversial but rather the visibility of her physique the outfit provided. The ways in which Serena Williams, the outfit, and her body were discussed offers a particular site at which to interrogate the production of blackness in 21st-century, U.S. society. This article argues that the processes of differentiation the popular media used to characterize her are located within racialized discourse. By representing Williams through oppositional rhetorics, that is, setting her multiple identities in contradistinction to other women on the tour, accounts concerning her appearance in the catsuit reproduce the hegemonic racialized order in women's tennis.

Keywords: "race"; blackness; gender; women's tennis

When Serena Williams won the 2002 U.S. Open tennis tournament, it seemed that spectators, fans, critics, and the media attended more to her appearance than to her spectacular talent or the battle with her sister Venus in the final round of play. Specifically, Serena Williams seemed to draw the most attention for wearing an outfit described as, "a body-clinging, faux leather, black cat-suit" (Stelzer, 2002, p. 4).¹ The "cat-suit," as Williams and the media referred to the outfit, inspired a variety of public reactions, ranging from admiration to disgust. Moreover, the discourse surrounding Serena Williams, the outfit, and her body offers a particular site at which to interrogate the popular media's production of blackness in 21st-century, U.S. society.

"Blackness," as it is produced in mass media and popular culture, operates as a "cultural signifier" of difference (Gray, 1995, pp. 12-13). There are multiple ways in which the media constructs Serena Williams in oppositional terms. For instance, many accounts tend to relate her background, as Spencer (2001) argued, through "ghetto-to-US Open final narratives" (p. 98), whereas other members of the circuit often come from more affluent backgrounds. She is muscular although preferred femininity on the tour is exemplified by slim, lithe figures. Some of her on-court fashions not only accentuate her powerful physique but, according to many descriptions,

Journal of Sport & Social Issues, Volume 29, No. 3, August 2005, pp. 338-357

DOI: 10.1177/0193723505276230

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suggest a deviant sexuality, thereby contrasting her with a compliant sexuality emphasized in journalistic and promotional representations.² But, the overarching, yet intermittently voiced distinction between Serena Williams and other women on the professional tennis circuit is that she is black and they are white. The purported color blindness of U.S. sport and the media often downplays or obscures direct discussions of “race” (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 2001; Leonard, 2004); however, the processes of differentiation used to represent Serena Williams are located within racialized media discourse.³ The ideology of color blindness, according to Bonilla-Silva (2003), is particularly powerful because it “otherizes softly” (p. 3).

Several studies have considered the ways in which media representations position Serena Williams and her sister Venus Williams as “other” (Douglas, 2002; Hobson, 2003; Spencer, 2001, 2004). It is the particularity of the discourse circulating around Williams’s catsuit during the 2002 U.S. Open, however, that I propose offers unique insights into the production of blackness. In this case, blackness, as a protean marker of difference, is primarily constructed in contrast with discussions of normalized, white female tennis athletes. This project is informed by the work of Birrell and McDonald (2000; McDonald & Birrell, 1999) who advocated a method for reading specific sporting moments or individuals through mediated narratives at the articulation of interdependent “power lines.” They argued that axes of power such as “race,” class, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, and so on are inextricably linked with one another in such a way that to privilege one axis over another or to consider each axis as simply additive to the next is to engage in potentially dangerous and violent theoretical work. It is impossible to disarticulate the representations of Serena Williams’s blackness from consideration of her gendered, classed, and sexualized subjectivities—each one compounds the others in what D. King (1995) referred to as “multiple jeopardy.”⁴ However, by representing Williams through oppositional rhetorics, that is, setting her multiple identities in contradistinction to other women on the tour, I argue that the popular media reproduces the hegemonic racialized order in women’s tennis.

COLOR COMMENTARY: RACIALIZED CONSTRUCTIONS OF U.S. TENNIS

In the overwhelmingly white world of professional tennis, Serena Williams and her older sister Venus are frequently re-presented in the tradition of black pride and heritage. In 1997, for example, Venus Williams’s first appearance in the finals of the U.S. Open was overlaid with racialized significance. That year’s tournament saw the dedication of Arthur Ashe Stadium, honoring the great African American tennis player, perhaps, according to Spencer (2001) to “ward off allegations that the USTA [United States Tennis Association] had not done enough for minorities” (p. 90). The media also utilized the Open to acknowledge a milestone in the plight of black athletes as 1997 marked the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson’s entrance into major league professional baseball. The year 1997 seemed to mark a new era for

athletes of color in so-called country club sports as Tiger Woods burst on to the professional golf circuit with his victory at the Master's Golf Championship. That same year, the astonishing prowess of Venus Williams, along with the anticipated success of Serena, her talented younger sister, seemed to usher in a shift in the racialized makeup of women's professional tennis.

Since that time, there have been competing dialogs in the popular media as to whether the Williams sisters' blackness has been good or bad for women's tennis (see, e.g., Nichols, 2003). On the positive side of this debate, some argued that they have bettered the sport for a number of reasons (see, e.g., Stein, 2001). This understanding, however, relies on the sport's appropriation of the Williamses as symbols of diversity and progress, rather than recognizing them as racialized anomalies on the professional women's tennis circuit. Advancing the women as evidence of the Women's Tennis Association's (WTA) ethic of inclusiveness affords the tour a sense of accomplishment and self-congratulation, lets the organization off the hook in terms of efforts to further increase diversity, and forges the impression of equality in the sport.

The success and visibility of Serena and Venus Williams, in tennis and consumer culture, obscures their racialized exceptionality, extending the myths of color blindness and equal opportunity in U.S. sport and society. Specifically, their accomplishments conceal the social and economic factors that hinder other African Americans' participation in tennis. Benet (2002) argued that despite the sisters' achievements, "their dominance still hasn't opened the doors for other young black players" (p. 146). Benet projected that the overlapping racialized and classed systems in the United States make it unlikely that there will be other black females to follow in the Williamses' footsteps (see also, Glier, 2004; McNulty, 2000). In addition, the organizational structure of the USTA remains predominantly white, and there is a distinct lack of African American ownership of professional tennis tournament tours (Lindsey, 2001) "calling into question the extent to which the Williamses have instigated 'greater diversity' in the sport" (Scheiber, 2004).

Almost certainly, though, the Williams sisters have influenced the diversity of the market to which women's tennis can sell its product. For instance, writers note that Serena and Venus Williams have attracted more black spectators than any other black professional athlete (Chappell, 2002, p. 166; "Serena Williams," 2001). At the final round of the 2002 U.S. Open, approximately one fifth of the 23,000 spectators were identified as minorities, including a large contingent of black celebrities: musical performer Brandy; professional athletes Hank Aaron, Deion Sanders, and Rick Fox; film director Spike Lee; television personality Biff Henderson; former New York mayor David Dinkins; and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice were all in attendance (B. Jackson, 2002, p. 14D; see also Stein & Bower, 2001). Black entertainers provided the patriotic opening to the tournament; the Harlem Boys Choir sang "America the Beautiful" and Aretha Franklin followed with "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (Couch, 2002).

The visibility of black spectators and participants at the 2002 U.S. Open helps construct an appearance of tolerance in the historically and predominantly white world of professional tennis. Underneath this veneer, however, it is possible to excavate numerous manifestations of racialized ideologies. There have been several charges of racism concerning Venus and Serena Williams's involvement in tennis ranging from outright declarations, to more subtle, veiled references (see, e.g., Spencer, 2001, 2004; Trost, 2001; Wertheim, 2001, pp. 171-173). Some have suggested that a "persistent ambivalence" toward the Williams sisters is a sign of racialized intolerance (Rhoden, 2002, p. D1; Roberts, 2002c, p. D1). Still others claim that the dominance of Venus and Serena Williams has caused women's tennis to lose excitement, and hence spectators. Former tennis star Gabriella Sabatini commented that before their arrival "it was probably a more enjoyable game to watch" (Brennan, 2002). In fact, viewership for CBS Sports' prime-time coverage of the 2002 U.S. Open final between Venus and Serena Williams declined 29% from the previous year's championship between the sisters.⁵ So although some may argue that the Williams sisters have been good for tennis, others contend that their participation has actually hurt the women's tour.

The Williams sisters have been routinely rooted against and jeered by spectators since their rise to top-ranked positions in professional tennis. Some have read these responses as expressions of racialized prejudice (DiManno, 2002, p. C03). The Williamses' mother, Oracene Price, has also charged the tennis world with bigotry, noting the crowd's reaction as Venus Williams defeated Amelie Mauresmo in the semifinal round of the 2002 U.S. Open. The American crowd cheered noisily for the French Mauresmo, shouted loudly while Williams tossed the ball in the air to serve, and booed the lines judge for calls that favored Williams. When a reporter mentioned to Oracene Price that these types of behavior were not directed at James Blake, an African American male tennis player, she replied, "I guess women can't have power, no matter what race it is" (Rhoden, 2002, p. D1). Price clearly has her finger on an important pulse point: The public reacts to the Williams sisters not as African Americans or as women, but as African American women. Marked by the "logic of coupling" (S. Hall, 1996, p. 472), Venus and Serena Williams are locked within a double bind that may account for, as Stein (2001) noted, the idea that "people are always player-hating the Williams sisters." Stein continued by suggesting that "maybe it's sexism . . . Maybe it's simple racism" (p. 55). Most likely, it is an inextricable combination of the two.

There are members of the tennis community, however, who doubt the racialization of these issues. Martina Hingis remarked that "Being black only helps them . . . they have a lot of advantages because they can always say 'It's racism.' They can always come back and 'Because we are this color, things happen'" (Stein, 2001, p. 58). Martina Navratilova seems to be of the same opinion, commenting that "People have been afraid to criticize them because they don't want to be called racist" (Stein, 2001, p. 58). The tendency

to dismiss these claims and to blame black citizens for whatever “race” problems exist in society, argued Bonilla-Silva (2003), is a pernicious effect of color-blind ideologies. He wrote that blacks are denounced “for ‘playing the race card’ . . . and for crying ‘racism’ whenever they are criticized by whites” (p. 1; see also Kotkin, 1994). Because ideologies of color blindness presume equity and fairness by denouncing the significance of “race,” individuals are blamed for their own misfortunes, thereby disregarding historical and systematic processes of discrimination. Such viewpoints, as demonstrated by the comments of Hingis and Navratilova, may fail to acknowledge significant issues in women’s professional tennis.

TENNIS WHITES: CONTESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF ACCEPTABLE ATTIRE

Within the world of tennis, acceptability has conventionally been linked to factors such as racial and ethnic identities, class backgrounds, sexuality, and even choices in clothing. Occasionally, however, there are individuals who disrupt the sport and its notions of propriety. The entrance of Althea Gibson, an African American woman, on the professional tennis circuit in the 1950s challenged the hegemony of white, athletic dominance in the sport. Arthur Ashe similarly contested men’s tennis in the late 1960s and 1970s. The public outings of Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova in the early 1980s shook up the assumption that women’s tennis was a heteronormative space. Even the on-court fashions of male athletes such as Andre Agassi have contested the boundaries of what is appropriate in a sport governed by elitist notions of “decency.”

The attention paid to the fashions of male tennis players, however, is less significant than that paid to the fashions of female tennis players. Billie Jean King (B. J. King & Starr, 1988) wrote that the “parade of fashions contributed greatly to the popularity of women’s tennis” and that innovations in fashion made women’s tennis “more interesting” than men’s (p. 28). Although it is troubling to think that clothing is a considerable factor in the popularity of women’s tennis, such speculation unfortunately may not be far off the mark. In the semiotic system and cultural practice of fashion, what one chooses to wear in the public sphere—in the realm of the visible—is subject to scrutiny, deconstruction, and judgment. The commodification and commercial potential of professional athletes adds further dimension to the importance of what they wear on and off the court. Throughout the history of women’s tennis, several individuals have bucked convention and contested traditionally feminine fashions, each instance varying in terms of the women’s motives, their cultural contexts, and the public reactions to and popular understandings of their costumes.

The first women’s matches at the Wimbledon tennis tournament took place in 1884. As in the 2002 U.S. Open, spectators watched two sisters, Maud and Lilian Watson, battle one another in the tournament’s final. However, unlike Venus and Serena Williams, the Watson sisters’ movements

were hobbled by yards of heavy cloth, ankle-length skirts, and high-heeled boots. Corsets constructed with metal or whalebone stays constricted the breathing and pierced the flesh of these athletes. A 1919 article in *American Lawn Tennis* advised women that a corset was a requisite component of “correct togs for tennis” (Cassel, 1919, p. 30); yet that same year, French tennis star Suzanne Lenglen shocked the Wimbledon crowd by playing not only without a corset but also by wearing a one-piece, calf-length, short-sleeved cotton dress. Once the corsets were removed and the skirts shortened, it was difficult for women to return to the fashions that were antithetical to athletic movement. In the 1930s, Helen Jacobs advanced women’s sporting costumes by favoring shorts over the traditional skirts donned by other female tennis players. In 1949, Gertrude “Gorgeous Gussy” Moran scandalized the crowd at Wimbledon with her choice of ruffled panties below her short tennis skirt.

An outfit worn by U.S. tennis player Anne White is more closely connected to Serena Williams’s catsuit in time and design.⁶ In 1985, Anne White met Pam Shriver in the first round of the Wimbledon tennis tournament. White’s tennis game was unremarkable (she was ranked 93rd); however, her outfit for the tournament was not—she appeared in a white form-hugging Lycra-spandex bodysuit. The match was suspended because of darkness, and while waiting to continue, Shriver called White’s outfit the “most bizarre, stupid-looking thing I’ve ever seen on a tennis court” (Feinstein, 1985, p. G1). Wimbledon officials deemed it unacceptable as well and informed White that the bodysuit would not be allowed on the courts of the tournament.

It seems, however, that the Wimbledon crowd disagreed with Shriver and the officials. When play finally continued two days later, White had adhered to the orders and appeared in a white tennis skirt. It was reported that on seeing the skirt, “There was a groan from the audience, packed in tight, awaiting her arrival” (Feinstein, 1985, p. G1). Within days of appearing in the suit, photographs of White in the costume were published on the front page of six London newspapers.

The development of Anne White’s outfit, marketed by Pony as the “Perfect 10 White,” came when she asked designers to adapt the Lycra-spandex fabric used in cycling, fitness, and aerobics. Some felt that the outfit was “modern and sensible” (Hyde & Brady, 1985, p. H3); however, it seemed that most media reactions attended to the heterosexual attractiveness of White and the ways in which the bodysuit called attention to her appealingly feminine attributes. For instance, one writer stated, “White, 23, is blond, 5-foot-11, and striking. She has done some modeling” (Feinstein, 1985, p. G1). It was pronounced that White was an attractive woman with a body that justified the outfit. The so-called average woman with the average body could not get away with such a fashion statement. Michael Blumenfeld, president of the Texas-based Tennis Lady and Arthur Ashe and Friends retail shops said, “It’s attractive, but you have to be built like Anne White is built to wear it. And the rest of the world is not” (Hyde, 1985, p. G1). *Sports*

Illustrated, who called her a “latter-day Gussy Moran,” quoted White as saying, “I think I showed a lot of guts [by wearing the outfit]” to which the magazine added, “Not to mention some dynamite something elses” (Kirkpatrick, 1985, p. 17). These “dynamite something elses” were part and parcel of White’s heterosexual attractiveness. One author wrote, “Tennis has seen the future and it is wow . . . white on White from plunging neckline to twinkling toes. Men gasped” (Kirkpatrick, 1985, p. 17).

Although it is likely that men also gasped at the sight of Serena Williams in her catsuit at the 2002 U.S. Open, there is a striking discrepancy in the ways in which she and Anne White were framed and discussed by the popular media. Although similar in design, Anne White’s bodysuit and Serena Williams’ catsuit inspired criticism and appreciation that differed to varying degrees. White was admired because of her conventionally feminine attractiveness. Williams was praised for pushing the boundaries of what constituted that conventionally feminine attractiveness. White was scolded for accentuating her feminine assets; Williams was admonished for exhibiting her masculine muscularity. In other words, the white bodysuit on a white body was read differently than the black catsuit on the black body.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?: INTERROGATING THE CATSUIT

In 1985, the press did not refer to Anne White’s outfit as a catsuit, as was frequently the case with what Serena Williams wore in 2002. There are several important connotations connected to the use of the term *catsuit* to consider in this instance. First, the *Encyclopedia of Fashion* defined the term *catsuit* as an “all-in-one garment” that “owes its name to the fact that it was made from slinky, clinging fabrics” (O’Hara, 1986, p. 67). In description alone, Williams’s U.S. Open outfit corresponds with the assigned label—it is a one-piece, form-fitting costume. In addition, the term *catsuit* is frequently used to refer to a similar style of lingerie. Serena Williams’s outfit was arguably designed to facilitate movement on the tennis court, whereas a catsuit style of dress or lingerie is meant to elicit a salacious, erotic response. If we are to consider Serena Williams’s outfit as tantamount to some type of libidinous garment, then Williams joins the legions of other female athletes sexualized by the popular media (see, e.g., Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Cahn, 1994; Choi, 2000; Guttmann, 1991; M. A. Hall, 1996; Holmlund, 1994; Messner, 2002; Nelson, 1994; Theberge & Birrell, 1994).

Second, naming Serena Williams’s outfit a catsuit draws on longstanding, racist ideologies that equate African heritage with animality (Davis & Harris, 1998). Reporters enjoyed punning the outfit, writing, for instance, that it “fits her like the fur fits an Abyssinian. Very feline, Serena” (Magee, 2002, p. D8). In addition, her alternate outfit for the 2002 U.S. Open was a hot-pink costume dubbed her “Pink Panther” look (E. Harris, 2002b). Yet despite the fun the press had playing with the concept of *cat*, there is a history of articulating black athletes with animalism, such as referring to

boxer Joe Louis as a “vicious male animal,” and a “creature from the jungle” (e.g., Coakley, 2001, p. 24; McRae, 2002, pp. 62, 70) and nicknaming track star Wilma Rudolph “the black gazelle” (Cahn, 1994, p. 137). Whereas there are a host of justifications for referring to the outfit as a catsuit, the ideological underpinnings of the term bring the racist past of the United States into the present. As such, the use of the term simultaneously gestures toward Williams’s gendered and racialized subjectivities.

Several factors complicate this analysis, however. To begin, the suit was part of a line from the Puma sportswear company—a company whose very logo is a leaping cat. Moreover, we must not neglect the ways in which Williams colludes in the playful characterization of the outfit. She not only helped design the costume but also seems to have embraced the term commenting, for example, “I feel like a cat. I can go fast. I feel really, really serious in that outfit. Especially when I play at night, it’s like a cat” (Palmer, 2002, p. 10). When some reporters called it a “wet suit,” Williams corrected, “It’s more of a cat suit. This is an innovative outfit. It’s really sexy. I love it” (Boeck, 2002a, p. 10C). Her agency problematizes the issue, reminding us that she is producer and product of these representations. Williams’s use of fashion and self-adornment has been evident since her entry into professional tennis, from her “exotic” multicolor hair beads to her “denim miniskirt and knee-high black gaitors” at the 2004 U.S. Open (Winters, 2004). As one reporter wrote, “The cutouts, the catsuit, the minishorts—Serena Williams is almost as famous for her fashion statements as she is for her ground strokes” (“Serena Is Always in Fashion,” 2004, p. 69). These statements are compounded by her own forays into fashion design so that Williams’s conscious decisions to present herself to the public through her choices of clothing and personal style necessitate attention when considering her depictions in the popular media.

“NATURAL” ATHLETE OR “SUPRANATURAL” WOMAN?: READING SERENA WILLIAMS’S MUSCLES

Although there are a host of contentious issues raised by Serena Williams’s catsuit, there is one element concerning her 2002 U.S. Open outfit that no one disputes: it was tight. However, tight clothing is neither new nor particularly scandalous in the world of sports. Fabrics such as elastic and Lycra-spandex have infiltrated the costumes of athletes engaged in activities ranging from swimming to running, from speed skating to football. Tighter clothing reduces wind resistance, is less likely to be caught in equipment or the grasp of one’s opponent, helps regulate body temperature, and can prevent injuries. And yes, tight clothing hugs one’s body, lending greater visibility to the contours of that body.

It is the revealing nature of the catsuit and the resultant visibility of Serena Williams’s body that seem to be the inspiration for many comments made about her appearance at the 2002 U.S. Open. Williams was reported as “sporting a figure-hugging black cat-suit which required more bravery than

fabric" (Preston, 2002, p. 27). She was "squeezed into . . . the latest of her wild and wacky sartorial creations" ("Flesh-ing Meadows," 2002, p. 102). The outfit was described as "clinging" (Boeck, 2002b), and "super tight, ultra-risque" (Everson, 2002), and "curve-clutching" (La Ferla, 2002). The catsuit was so tight, according to one reporter, that it left "little to the imagination" ("Ruling," 2002, p. 114)—so little, in fact, that the public was informed of what Williams wore beneath the outfit. A journalist wondered "what, if anything, came between Serena and her skin-tight apparel." The answer: "a thong" (E. Harris, 2002a).

The tightness of the catsuit allowed writers to sound off on their interpretations of Serena Williams's body, and especially on her muscularity. Some writers applauded Williams's appearance in the outfit as an observable version of competing femininity. For example, one article stated, "Suddenly, it was cool to have curves. On a tour where players with the physique of an exclamation point play in low-ride skirts, Williams provided an alternate view of style for the masses" (Roberts, 2002a, p. D1). One athlete who might exemplify the "physique of an exclamation point" is Anna Kournikova, once the reigning sex symbol of women's professional tennis. If financial success and public appreciation are any indication, Kournikova's body type may be more socially desirable than Williams's "alternative" view.

Without ever having won a professional singles tournament, the now-retired Kournikova is the most highly sponsored female athlete in the world (Applebaum, 2004). She has appeared on the covers of *Tennis Weekly*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Forbes* magazines, put out her own exercise video, had a computer virus named after her, and is the most downloaded female athlete on the internet (Hatfield, 2002; Newcomb, 2000; Petrecca, 2000; Wertheim, 2001). She made *People* magazine's 1998 list of most beautiful people. In 2002, an ESPN poll named her the sexiest athlete of the year and *FHM* magazine declared her the "Sexiest Woman in the World." The embodiment of preferred femininity in U.S. culture, Kournikova has publicly derided the physiques of the Williams sisters 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" (Giles, 2001, n.p.).

Perhaps a more disturbing commentary on the Williamses' muscularity came in 2001 from radio sportscaster Sid Rosenberg who remarked "I can't even watch them 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" ("Fired White Sportscaster," 2002, p. 32). Calling the women "animals," he then related a story when 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*." Initially fired, Rosenberg was soon rehired after saying that his comments "weren't racist" but that when he sees "women that are muscular, classically boys, then that's how I refer to them" ("Fired White Sportscaster," 2001, p. 32; Kilgannon & Kirkpatrick, 2001). Although his distressing comments clearly involve more than the women's

muscularity, Rosenberg's public apologies revolved around defending only that aspect.

The comments by Kournikova and Rosenberg demonstrate a long-standing conflation of muscularity and masculinity that particularly implicates women of color. Vertinsky and Captain (1998) addressed the ways in which the bodies of black female athletes have been (and continue to be) ideologically coded and understood through notions of masculinity, writing that

the dominant male, white culture drew a direct correspondence between stereotyped depictions of black womanhood and "manly" athletic and physically gifted females. Their racialized notions of the virile or mannish black female athlete stemmed from a number of persistent historical myths: the linking of African American women's work history as slaves, their supposedly "natural" brute strength and endurance inherited from their African origins, and the notion that vigorous or competitive sport masculinized women physically and sexually. (p. 541; see also Cahn, 1994, p. 127).

It cannot be denied that Serena Williams is muscular; however, the ways in which muscularity comes to stand in for masculinity affects cultural understandings of female athletes and particularly female athletes of color.

The Western fascination with black bodies and the fetishism of black muscularity appeared repeatedly in journalistic accounts of the 2002 U.S. Open as several writers took Serena Williams's outfit as an opportunity to expound on her physique. One author described the suit as "pulled taut over her bulging muscles" (Henry, 2002). Another writer chose to relate Williams's physicality not only to male muscularity but to a specific body type found on the football field, writing about what he referred to as Williams's "defensive-back physique bulging from her black body suit" (Coffey, 2002, p. C01).⁷ Although scholars noted that muscularity in female athletes is often understood as a male characteristic (see, e.g., Bordo, 1993; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004), the commentary on Serena Williams's muscles accentuated by the tightness of the catsuit, codes her as not only unfeminine but as almost hypermasculine.

Some journalists wrote that Serena Williams's body exceeded the boundaries of femininity, spilling over into what is customarily deemed "masculine." Other journalists put aside discussions of gender altogether to imply that Williams's physique might even exceed the boundaries of humanness. For example, Squires (2002) wrote that the

provocative outfit doing the rounds at the moment is that painted-on black number that Serena Williams is wearing at the US Open. It must be damned intimidating and distracting for her opponents. You turn up to play wearing a sensible skirt and T-shirt and suddenly you're confronted by a comic-book super-hero. (p. 2)

This comment implicates several opinions about Williams in the outfit: provocative, insensible, and fantastic. Likewise, Price (2002) commented that

Williams was “Clad in a skintight black cat suit, flaunting curves and muscles that could be dreamed up only by the brains at Marvel Comics” (p. 52). In reference to her performance, Magee (2002) wrote “Serena Williams, through her choice of costumes, no longer is taking the role of ‘cat woman’ at the U.S. Open. She’s now ‘wonder woman’” (n.p.).

Equating Serena Williams with imaginary comic book characters not only alludes to her phenomenal skill but also positions her outside what is “natural” in women’s tennis. One might read Williams’s assigned super-hero status as freakish or aberrant among her peers, rather than superior or transcendent to them. Writing specifically about literary representations, T. Harris (1995) argued that the convention of associating black women with physical, mental, and moral strength creates a “suprahuman” stereotype: “We have really praised these women for being suprahuman, certainly more than female which means that often we have praised them for exhibiting traits that western culture has traditionally designated more masculine than feminine” (pp. 114-115). Strength, corporeally symbolized by well-defined, sizable muscularity, is culturally understood as a masculine trait and hence positioned outside what is considered natural for women.

To consider Serena Williams outside the natural seems at odds with the stereotype of African Americans as natural athletes (Bale & Sang, 1996; Davis & Harris, 1998, p. 158; D. Z. Jackson, 1987; Staples & Jones, 1985). However, again, we must consider overlapping racialized and gendered identities as well as the context of tennis, where traditional femininity is publicly valued above strength in female athletes. 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.

There have been comments that Williams is “unnatural” and has an “unfair” advantage over her competitors (Roberts, 2002b, p. 1). Members of the professional tennis community have commented that other players are unable to compete with Williams because of her strength and athleticism. Gabriella Sabatini said that she “hit[s] the ball too hard” (Brennan, 2002) and Justine Henin-Hardenne, on losing to Serena Williams in the fourth round of the 2001 U.S. Open, remarked, “She was too strong, aggressive and powerful. What could I do?” (DiManno, 2002, p. C03). Former professional tennis player Chris Evert said that Venus and Serena Williams’s “athletic ability and raw aggression make it hard for the women who aren’t Amazons to compete with them” (Peysner & Samuels, 1998, p. 44). As such, Serena Williams is simultaneously considered natural, unnatural, and even supra-natural within the realm of women’s professional tennis.

These strategies of racialization position Williams outside the norm of professional women’s tennis exemplified by players such as Anna Kournikova, Martina Hingis, Daniela Hantuchova, Elena Dementieva, and most recently, Maria Sharapova.⁸ Messner (2002) noted the racialized context for these players’ status and marketability, writing that the “blond,

tanned, long-limbed, and lightly muscled Kournikova clearly conforms to dominant cultural standards of white feminine beauty. Her form of beauty stands in stark contrast to the highly muscular and very black bodies of . . . Serena and Venus Williams” (p. 102). In many ways, Serena Williams contests the ideological center of women’s sport, challenging the dominant cultural perceptions of gender. Rhetorical strategies, however, continue to stigmatize and marginalize Williams’s femininity in ways that clarify the boundaries and reassert the dominance of that center.

BRINGING UP THE REAR: POSITIONING SEXUALITY

Media discourse positions Serena Williams’s physique at the periphery of acceptable femininity and women’s tennis; however, the marginalization of Williams’s body implicates discussions of sexuality as well. Schiebinger argued in *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* that the sexualization of black bodies has circulated around two anatomical features: the buttocks and the genitals (cited in Wiegman, 1995, p. 56). A certain amount of fascination with Williams’s buttocks emerged in print and electronic media, especially following her appearance in the catsuit. For instance, Gibson (2002) wrote the following:

On some women [the catsuit] might look good. Unfortunately, some women aren’t wearing it. On Serena, it only serves to accentuate a superstructure that is already bordering on the digitally enhanced and a rear end that I will attempt to sum up as discreetly as possible by simply referring to it as “formidable.” (p. 73; see also Wells, 2002; Wilson, 2002)

In another example, Serena Williams’s backside was conceptualized as not just formidable but also as a formidable opponent. SportsPickle.com, an Internet Web site *Sports Illustrated* described as serving up a “blatantly false and often highly amusing take on the sports world” (“What is SportsPickle.com,” 2003, p. 24), imagined Williams entering her rear end in the doubles competition of the Australian Open. Accompanied by a photograph of her in the catsuit, the satirical piece conceived that her “butt muscled its way to a 6-2, 6-1 title victory over the doubles pair of Virginia Ruano Pascual and Paola Suarez,” as she cheered it on from the stands (“Serena Williams Wins,” 2003, n.p.).⁹ The site receives about 500 visitors per day; although intended to be humorous, this piece nonetheless disseminates and perpetuates ways of thinking about Williams’s buttocks as something of a sideshow oddity.

Hobson (2003) located discussions of Williams’s buttocks within a larger historical context of attitudes toward the black female body. In particular, she wrote that reactions to Williams’s rear end are reminiscent of responses to Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman known as the “Hottentot Venus,” who was brought to Europe in 1810 and placed on display for her “pathological steatoptygia” (protruding buttocks) that served as a

powerful symbol of racialized difference. Framed within a context of freakery, white fascination with Baartman's backside contributed to prevalent ideas of black female deviance and hypersexuality. Hobson argued that by attacking Williams for her "tackiness" and "inappropriate" display of sexuality in the catsuit, the press reinvigorates "a racialized sense of aesthetics that position blackness in terms of grotesquerie while whiteness serves as an emblem of beauty" (p. 88). The commentary on Williams's backside sexualizes her in a way that is inconsistent with discussions of the white women on the professional tennis circuit, constructing and highlighting a racialized corporeal difference between females.

It is this association of Williams's buttocks with the grotesque that particularly differentiates her from discussions of white female tennis stars. If we turn again to the familiar foil of Anna Kournikova, we find that the media has a certain obsession with her backside as well. However, while Williams' buttocks are referred to as "formidable" and constituting their own, separate entity, Kournikova's backside has been called "sensational" (Giles, 2000) and "photogenic" (Lem, 2000). Journalist Albom (2000) wrote that "her bottom is pretty much everywhere" and that "even the stodgiest British newspapers can't resist endless photos of Kournikova in a short skirt" (n.p.). She seems to revel in this attention; when a newspaper published pictures of her from behind, she remarked, "They ran all these photos of my butt. But hey, it wasn't fat. My pictures were great" (Carter, 1998, p. 98). Her doubles partner, Jonas Bjorkman, joked that although they lost the 2002 Wimbledon tournament, at least he got paid to watch her backside ("Sisters Set to Double Up," 2002). These accounts suggest that watching Kornikova's buttocks is a pleasurable spectator sport for many people, particularly men, rather than a freakish or grotesque curiosity.

Journalists found other ways to sexualize Serena Williams's catsuit-clad body without directly discussing her buttocks. One stereotype that has significantly plagued African American women is that of the sexually loose and licentious character (Collins, 1990; M. King, 1973; O'Grady, 1990), and this stereotype unfortunately surfaced in instances concerning the press coverage of Williams at the 2002 U.S. Open. Sexuality often enters into discourse concerning female athletes, such as the aforementioned incident regarding Anne White's bodysuit or the oft-cited popular representations of Anna Kournikova. With Serena Williams, however, it was not necessarily a case of heterosexualization, but rather that her catsuit was indicative of deviant sexuality. Williams was described as "pioneering the bondage look with her choice of garb" (Gibbes, 2002, p. 7). It is more alarming to note, Givhan (2002) wrote that Williams looked like "a working girl of a different sort." Williams, the article continued

is helping to transform the nature of women's tennis into a game of muscle and power. She is turning the tennis circuit into a more diverse place. But her tight black tennis romper was the stylistic equivalent of trash talk. It looked trashy. And it did her a disservice (Givhan, 2002, p. C01).

The ideological work done by this comment is almost exhausting as it draws attention to sexuality (suggesting Williams looked like a prostitute), body (“muscle and power”), “race” (“a more diverse place”), and finally implications about social class (“it looked trashy”). This type of characterization is neither new nor unique to the case of Serena Williams in her 2002 U.S. Open catsuit, for as Vertinsky and Captain (1998) contended,

add words such as “woman” to “black,” and the result has been a set of racist and sexualized discourses that have clothed, defined, and determined the African American woman while delimiting the modes and spaces of action available to her and coloring her athletic achievements with fantasy and stereotype. (p. 533)

CONCLUSION

In September 2004, ESPN.com compiled a list of the “Top-10 Williams Sisters Controversies,” in response to several incorrect calls that cost Serena Williams a quarterfinal victory in the U.S. Open. Her father, Richard Williams, charged that racism was involved in the officiating, as it had been when Venus lost the second round of the 2004 Wimbledon tournament and in the infamous “bump” between Venus Williams and Irina Spirlea in the 1999 U.S. Open (see Spencer, 2001). These allegations of racism, along with specific incidents where it was suspected that the sisters had colluded, fixed matches, and allowed their father to orchestrate the outcomes of their head-to-head competitions all made ESPN.com’s list. Recorded among these notorious moments was “2002 U.S. Open: Serena wears a cat suit, causing a stir at Flushing Meadows” (“Top-10 Williams Sisters,” 2004). Based on the accounts I analyze in this article, however, I contend that it was not necessarily the catsuit itself, but rather the visibility of Williams’s physique that the outfit offered that the media found so controversial. More accurately, it was the ways in which the suit accentuated Williams’s blackness that inspired the most debate.

Many of the commentaries on Williams’s catsuit-clad body reproduce the traditional racialized order in women’s tennis. To understand “race” as a social construction, argued Powell (1999) “means that white and black has to be understood in relationship to one another” (p. 149). My intent in this article is to interrogate the cultural production of Serena Williams’s blackness in popular media representations, specifically as she appeared in her 2002 U.S. Open catsuit. This analysis necessarily relied on understanding the construction of her alterity in relation to representations of whiteness in women’s professional tennis in ways that involved messages about her classed, sexualized, and gendered subjectivities.

Although this project was meant to examine the ways in which cultural understandings of blackness are reproduced and reinforced in a specific sporting instance, I am mindful of critiques that sport is best understood as “contested terrain” where racialized ideologies and relations are also constantly negotiated, resisted, and transformed (Hartmann 1996,

2000, 2003; see also Carrington & McDonald, 2001). Although the popular media most often criticized Serena Williams for wearing the catsuit, there were accounts that admired and supported her appearance. In addition, there were instances when Williams challenged and supported the discourse that attempts to define her. The undeniable prevalence of media accounts that represented Williams in terms of difference, however, reinscribe whiteness as the normative racialized identity in women's tennis, thereby marginalizing blackness and discrediting ideologies of color blindness in U.S. sport, media, and society.

NOTES

1. Serena Williams wore the catsuit four times in the U.S. Open tournament. Two months later, Williams wore the outfit again at the 2002 WTA (Women's Tennis Association) Championship in Los Angeles (B. Harris, 2002). At the 2003 Australian Open, Williams told reporters that she had retired the catsuit and that they could "see it in a museum" ("Williams Retires," 2003).
2. One example in which a female tennis star is portrayed as sexually compliant is Anna Kournikova's June 5, 2000 *Sports Illustrated* cover that, according to Messner (2002) "made no pretenses that it was focusing not on her tennis abilities but on her sexual attractiveness" (p. 99). Another example is the 2004 WTA advertising campaign that featured images of 17-year-old Maria Sharapova lounging provocatively (and without a racquet) accompanied by captions that included "Got Sharapova" and "The closer you sit, the hotter it gets" (see Simers, 2004, p. D2).
3. Small (1999) wrote that he uses the processes of "racialization" to highlight the social construction of "race" and the historical and culturally specific contexts in which it is identified, defined, and made meaningful. Although "race" is a constructed, dynamic category, it has a social reality, producing real effects on racialized actors.
4. In 1972, Francis Beale, a founding member of the Women's Liberation Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), described the dual discriminations of sexism and racism that black women face as "double jeopardy" (Beale, 1979, p. 90). D. King (1995) extended the term to "multiple jeopardy," arguing that social class and heterosexism or homophobia compound the nature of oppressions with which black females contend in U.S. society. King wrote that the "modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions, but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well" (p. 297; see also Andersen & Collins, 2001; Collins, 1990; Maynard, 1990; Smith, 1992, p. 245).
5. Venus and Serena Williams met in the 2001 finals of the U.S. Open as well. There were 10.3 million viewers in 2001, recording an overnight household rating/share of 6.8/13. In contrast, the 2002 final had 7.3 million views with a rating/share of 4.8/9. The 2002 U.S. Open men's final between Andrew Agassi and Pete Sampras earned an overnight rating of 7.9/15, up 44% from the 2001 final between Sampras and Australian player Lleyton Hewitt ("U.S. Open Finals," 2002, p. 32).
6. Outside of tennis, there have been female athletes who have worn similar outfits. In 1988, Olympic track star Florence Griffith Joyner competed in a single-legged unitard (see Barnes, 1989). Also in 1988, figure skater Debi Thomas chose a black unitard for her Olympic performance (see Orr, 1988, p. F3). Joyner and Thomas are African American women and may provide interesting contextualization for the ways in which Serena Williams's catsuit was constructed and understood by the popular press.
7. Likewise, a 1999 article in *The Guardian* equated the Williams sisters' physiques with male athletes by writing that the women were "built like rugby lock forwards" (quoted in Brookes, 2002, p. 140).

8. It is certainly problematic to homogeneously categorize these women as “white,” failing to take into account their national and ethnic differences. However, I believe that it reflects the media, and indeed society’s, inclination to simply identify individuals according to the black-white binary.
9. Sportspickle.com featured another piece about Williams’s catsuit in which a man who finds her attractive fears he is gay. Commenting on her muscularity, the man remarked “She’s a beautiful woman, there’s no doubt. It’s just . . . you know . . . there’s a lot of man there, too! I’m very conflicted” (“Man Who Fantasizes,” 2002).

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