

THE U.S. OPEN ISSUE

## The Meaning of Serena Williams

On tennis and black excellence.

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There is no more exuberant winner than Serena Williams. She leaps into the air, she laughs, she grins, she pumps her fist, she points her index finger to the sky, signaling she's No. 1. Her joy is palpable. It brings me to my feet, and I grin right back at her, as if I've won something, too. Perhaps I have.

There is a belief among some African-Americans that to defeat racism, they have to work harder, be smarter, be *better*. Only after they give 150 percent will white Americans recognize black excellence for what it is. But of course, once recognized, black excellence is then supposed to perform with good manners and forgiveness in the face of any racist slights or attacks. Black excellence is not supposed to be emotional as it pulls itself together to win after questionable calls. And in winning, it's not supposed to swagger, to leap and pump its fist, to state boldly, in the words of Kanye West, "That's what it is, black excellence, baby."



Serena Williams raising one of her Grand Slam Trophies, from 2013 U.S. Open. Credit: Emmanuel Dunand.

Imagine you have won 21 Grand Slam singles titles, with only four losses in your 25 appearances in the finals. Imagine that you've achieved two "Serena Slams" (four consecutive Slams in a row), the first more than 10 years ago and the second this year. A win at this year's U.S. Open would be your fifth and your first calendar-year Grand Slam — a feat last achieved by Steffi Graf in 1988, when you were just 6 years old. This win would also break your tie for the most U.S. Open titles in the Open era, surpassing the legendary Chris Evert, who herself has called you "a phenomenon that once every hundred years comes around." Imagine that you're the player John McEnroe recently described as "the greatest player, I think, that ever lived." Imagine that, despite all this, there were so many bad calls against you, you were given as one reason video replay needed to be used on the courts. Imagine that you have to contend with critiques of your body that perpetuate racist notions that black women are hypermasculine and unattractive. Imagine being asked to comment at a news conference before a tournament because the president of the Russian Tennis Federation, Shamil Tarpishev, has described you and your sister as "brothers" who are "scary" to look at. Imagine.

The word “win” finds its roots in both joy and grace. Serena’s grace comes because she won’t be forced into stillness; she won’t accept those racist projections onto her body without speaking back; she won’t go gently into the white light of victory. Her excellence doesn’t mask the struggle it takes to achieve each win. For black people, there is an unspoken script that demands the humble absorption of racist assaults, no matter the scale, because whites need to believe that it’s no big deal. But Serena refuses to keep to that script. Somehow, along the way, she made a decision to be excellent while still being Serena. She would feel what she feels in front of everyone, in response to anyone. At Wimbledon this year, for example, in a match against the home favorite Heather Watson, Serena, interrupted during play by the deafening support of Watson, wagged her index finger at the crowd and said, “Don’t try me.” She will tell an audience or an official that they are disrespectful or unjust, whether she says, simply, “No, no, no” or something much more forceful, as happened at the U.S. Open in 2009, when she told the lineswoman, “I swear to God I am [expletive] going to take this [expletive] ball and shove it down your [expletive] throat.” And in doing so, we actually see her. She shows us her joy, her humor and, yes, her rage. She gives us the whole range of what it is to be human, and there are those who can’t bear it, who can’t tolerate the humanity of an ordinary extraordinary person.

In the essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin wrote, “our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult — that is, accept it.” To accept the self, its humanity, is to discard the white racist gaze. Serena has freed herself from it. But that doesn’t mean she won’t be emotional or hurt by challenges to her humanity. It doesn’t mean she won’t battle for the right to be excellent. There is nothing wrong with Serena, but surely there is something wrong with the expectation that she be “good” while she is achieving greatness. Why should Serena not respond to racism? In whose world should it be answered with good manners? The notable difference between black excellence and white excellence is white excellence is achieved without having to battle racism. Imagine.

Two years ago, recovering from cancer and to celebrate my 50th birthday, I flew from LAX to J.F.K. during Serena’s semifinal match at the U.S. Open with the hope of seeing her play in the final. I had just passed through a year when so much was out of my control, and Serena epitomized not so much winning as the pure drive to win. I couldn’t quite shake the feeling (I still can’t quite shake it) that my body’s frailty, not the cancer but the depth of my exhaustion, had been brought on in part by the constant onslaught of racism ... The daily grind of being rendered invisible, or being attacked, whether physically or verbally, for being visible, wears a body down. Serena’s strength and focus in the face of the realities we shared oddly consoled me.

That Sunday in Arthur Ashe Stadium at the women’s final, though the crowd generally seemed pro-Serena, the man seated next to me was cheering for the formidable tall blonde Victoria Azarenka. I asked him if he was American. “Yes,” he said.

“We’re at the U.S. Open. Why are you cheering for the player from Belarus?” I asked.

“Oh, I just want the match to be competitive,” he said.

After Serena lost the second set, at the opening of the third, I turned to him again, and asked him, no doubt in my own frustration, why he was still cheering for Azarenka. He didn’t answer, as was his prerogative. By the time it was clear that Serena was likely to win, his seat had been vacated. I had to admit to myself that in those moments I needed her to win, not just in the pure sense of a fan supporting her player, but to prove something that could never be proven, because if black excellence could cure us of anything, black people — or rather this black person — would be free from needing Serena to win.



2014 U.S. Open



2015 Australian Open



2015 French Open



2015 Wimbledon

Credits: Stan Honda; Mal Fairclough; Carlos M. Saavedra; Leon Neal.

**“You don’t understand me,”** Serena Williams said with a hint of impatience in her voice. “I’m just about winning.” She and I were facing each other on a sofa in her West Palm Beach home this July. She looked at me with wariness as if to say, Not you, too. I wanted to talk about the tennis records that she is presently positioned either to tie or to break and had tried more than once to steer the conversation toward them. But she was clear: “It’s not about getting 22 Grand Slams,” she insisted. Before winning a calendar-year Grand Slam and matching Steffi Graf’s record of 22 Slams, Serena would have to win seven matches and defend her U.S. Open title; those were the victories that she was thinking about.

She was wearing an enviable pink jumpsuit with palm trees stamped all over it as if to reflect the trees surrounding her estate. It was ... [an] outfit ... that only someone of her height and figure could rock. She explained to me that she learned not to look ahead too much by looking ahead. As she approached 18 Grand Slam wins in 2014, she said, “I went too crazy. I felt I had to even up with Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova.” Instead, she didn’t make it past the fourth round at the Australian Open, the second at the French Open or the third at Wimbledon. She tried to change her tactics and focused on getting only to the quarterfinals of the U.S. Open. Make it to the second week and see what happens, she thought. “I started thinking like that, and then I got to 19. Actually I got to 21 just like that, so I’m not thinking about 22.” She raised her water bottle to her lips, looking at me over its edge, as if to give me time to think of a different line of questioning.

Three years ago she partnered with the French tennis coach Patrick Mouratoglou, and I’ve wondered if his coaching has been an antidote to negotiating American racism, a dynamic that informed the coaching of her father, Richard Williams. He didn’t want its presence to prevent her and Venus from winning. In his autobiography, “Black and White: The Way I See It,” he describes toughening the girls’ “skin” by bringing “busloads of kids from the local schools into Compton to surround the courts while Venus and Serena practiced. I had the kids call them every curse word in the English language, ...” he writes. “I paid them to do it and told them to ‘do their worst.’” His focus on racism meant that the sisters were engaged in two battles on and off the court. That level of vigilance, I know from my own life, can drain you. It’s easier to shut up and pretend it’s not happening, as the bitterness and stress build up.

Mouratoglou shifted Serena’s focus to records (even if, as she prepares for a Slam, she says she can’t allow herself to think about them). Perhaps it’s not surprising that she broke her boycott against Indian Wells, where the audience notoriously booed her with racial epithets in 2001, during their partnership. Serena’s decisions now seem directed toward building her legacy. Mouratoglou has insisted that she can get to 24 Grand Slams, which is the most won by a single player — Margaret Court — to date. Serena laughed as she recalled one of her earliest conversations with Mouratoglou. She told him: “I’m cool. I want to play tennis. I hate to lose. I want to win. But I don’t have numbers in my head.” He wouldn’t allow that. “Now we are getting numbers in your head,” he told her.

I asked how winning felt for her. I was imagining winning as a free space, one where the unconscious racist shenanigans of umpires, or the narratives about her body, her “unnatural” power, her perceived crassness no longer mattered. Unless racism destroyed the moment of winning so completely, as it did at Indian Wells, I thought it had to be the rare space free of all the stresses of black life. But Serena made it clear that she doesn’t desire to dissociate from her history and her culture. She understands that even when she’s focused only on winning, she is still representing. “I play for me,” Serena told me, “but I also play and represent something much greater than me. I embrace that. I love that. I want that. So ultimately, when I am out there on the court, I am playing for me.”

Her next possible victory is at the U.S. Open, the major where she has been involved in the most drama — everything from outrageous line calls to probations and fines. Serena admitted to losing her cool in the face of some of what has gone down there. In 2011, for example, a chair umpire, Eva Asderaki, ruled against Serena for yelling “Come on” before a point was completed, and as Serena described it to me, she “clutched her pearls” and told Asderaki not to look at her. But she said in recent years she finally felt embraced by the crowd. “No more incidents?” I asked. Before she could answer, we both laughed, because of course it’s not wholly in her control. Then suddenly Serena stopped. “I don’t want any incidents there,” she said. “But I’m always going to be myself. If anything happens, I’m always going to be myself, true to myself.”

I’m counting on it, I thought. Because just as important to me as her victories is her willingness to be an emotionally complete person while also being black. She wins, yes, but she also loses it. She jokes around, gets angry, is frustrated or joyous, and on and on. She is fearlessly on the side of Serena, in a culture that that has responded to living while black with death.

**This July**, the London School of Marketing (L.S.M.) released its list of the most marketable sports stars, which included only two women in its Top 20: Maria Sharapova and Serena Williams. They were ranked 12th and 20th. Despite decisively trailing Serena on the tennis court (Serena leads in their head-to-head matchups 18-2, and has 21 majors and 247 weeks at No. 1 to Sharapova’s five majors and 21 weeks at number 1), Sharapova has a financial advantage off the court. This month Forbes listed her as the highest-paid female athlete, worth more than \$29 million to Serena’s \$24 million.

When I asked Chris Evert about the L.S.M. list, she said, “I think the corporate world still loves the good-looking blond girls.” It’s a preference Evert benefited from in her own illustrious career. I suggested that this had to do with race. Serena, on occasion, has herself been a blonde. But of course, for millions of consumers, possibly not the right kind of blonde. “Maria was very aware of business and becoming a businesswoman at a much younger stage,” Evert told me, adding, “She works hard.” She also suggested that any demonstration of corporate preference is about a certain “type” of look or image, not whiteness in general. When I asked Evert what she made of Eugenie Bouchard, the tall, blond Canadian who has yet to really distinguish herself in the sport, being named the world’s most marketable athlete by the British magazine SportsPro this spring, she said, with a laugh, “Well, there you have it.” I took her statement to be perhaps a moment of agreement that Serena probably could not work her way to Sharapova’s spot on Forbes’s list.

“If they want to market someone who is white and blond, that’s their choice,” Serena told me when I asked her about her ranking. Her impatience had returned, but I wasn’t sure if it was with me, the list or both. “I have a lot of partners who are very happy to work with me.” JPMorgan Chase, Wilson Sporting Goods, Pepsi and Nike are among the partners she was referring to. “I can’t sit here and say I should be higher on the list because I have won more.” As for Sharapova, her nonrival rival, Serena was diplomatic: “I’m happy for her, because she worked hard, too. There is enough at the table for everyone.”

There is another, perhaps more important, discussion to be had about what it means to be chosen by global corporations. It has to do with who is worthy, who is desirable, who is associated with the good life. As long as the white imagination markets itself by equating whiteness and

blondness with aspirational living, stereotypes will remain fixed in place. Even though Serena is the best, even though she wins more Slams than anyone else, she is only superficially allowed to embody that in our culture, at least the marketable one.

But Serena was less interested in the ramifications involved in being chosen, since she had no power in this arena, and more interested in understanding her role in relation to those who came before her: “We have to be thankful, and we also have to be positive about it so the next black person can be No. 1 on that list,” she told me. “Maybe it was not meant to be me. Maybe it’s meant to be the next person to be amazing, and I’m just opening the door. Zina Garrison, Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe and Venus opened so many doors for me. I’m just opening the next door for the next person.”

I was moved by Serena’s positioning herself in relation to other African-Americans. A crucial component of white privilege is the idea that your accomplishments can be, have been, achieved on your own. The private clubs that housed the tennis courts remained closed to minorities well into the second half of the 20th century. Serena reminded me that in addition to being a phenomenon, she has come out of a long line of African-Americans who battled for the right to be excellent in a such a space that attached its value to its whiteness and worked overtime to keep it segregated.

Serena’s excellence comes with the ability to imagine herself achieving a new kind of history for all of us. As long as she remains healthy, she will most likely tie and eventually pass Graf’s 22 majors, regardless of what happens at the U.S. Open this year. I want Serena to win, but I know better than to think her winning can end something she didn’t start. But Serena is providing a new script, one in which winning doesn’t carry the burden of curing racism, in which we win just to win — knowing that it is simply her excellence, baby.

Correction: Sept. 13, 2015

*An article on Aug. 30 about Serena Williams misidentified the tennis official she confronted at the U.S. Open in 2009 after she was called for a foot fault. The official was a lineswoman, not a chair umpire.*