

From Compton to Center Court

Venus and Serena *and the Black Female Experience in Professional Tennis*

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When aficionados and commentators discuss significant moments in the history of women's professional tennis, many cite the iconic Battle of the Sexes match that was contested on September 20, 1973, in the Houston Astrodome. In an era when male players, such as Ilie Nastase and John Newcombe, garnered more attention and prize money than their female counterparts, five-time Wimbledon Ladies Champion Billie Jean King, who was twenty-nine, squared off against fifty-five-year-old former tennis professional Bobby Riggs in a contest where the winner would earn \$100,000. While the paycheck was hefty, the implications of the match superseded money and the sport of tennis. As Susan Ware explains in *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, the King-Riggs match was significant in part because of the outlandish media hoopla leading up to the event and because the match itself provided the perfect distraction for Americans who were sick of focusing on economic and political issues, such as Watergate, inflation, and the energy crisis. More important, the Battle of the Sexes became a significant moment in the Women's Liberation Movement.¹

Although the King-Riggs contest became a part of the struggle for gender equality, its conception was not initially politically motivated. The Battle of the Sexes came to fruition when Riggs, who had an affinity for gambling, decided to challenge a top female professional tennis player as a means to "get a piece of the action—and the money—gravitating toward tennis in the open era." He set his sights on King, who initially declined his challenge, a move

that led Riggs to approach Margaret Court, the top-ranked female player in the world. As Ware recounts, "Thinking it would be just a Sunday afternoon exhibition match with a tidy pay off, she accepted. Like so many opponents before and after her, Court underestimated Bobby Riggs, whose 6–2, 6–1 demolition of her on May 13, 1973, became known as the Mother's Day Massacre."² Upon hearing the results, King knew that she had to uphold the honor of women's tennis by facing Riggs.

In the weeks leading up to the Battle of the Sexes, the match received a great deal of media attention, gaining political significance along the way. Riggs, who realized that making sexist comments would garner him the attention that he loved, berated King and the struggle for women's rights. Among his more colorful quotes are, "I plan to bomb Billie Jean King in the match and set back the Women's Lib movement about another twenty years," and "The best way to handle women is to keep them barefoot and pregnant." Rather than fire back at Riggs, King comfortably assumed the underdog role: "Up until now, I've always been the heavy. You know, I'm the leader. I'm responsible for women's tennis. For once, I'm the underdog. I love it."³ By the time Riggs and King played, the match had gained such grandiose media hype that the event paled in comparison. King controlled the tempo, won the best of five sets contest routinely, 6–4, 6–3, 6–3, and proved that female athletes deserve an equal amount of respect as their male counterparts.

While King's effort warrants sustained celebration, many commentators often frame, more often than not, it as *the* moment that women gained equality in professional tennis. Unfortunately, this "great white woman" narrative is often retold at the expense of African American female tennis players who had been working to gain respectability in the sport long before King and Riggs ever set foot on the court in the Houston Astrodome. That this occurs is even more disappointing when considering that black women's involvement in tennis has always been political. Moreover, as a result of race, class, and gender, "poor black women's players faced triple oppression because they rarely received equal support in the world of tennis."⁴ Thus, African American females' journeys to equality have been arduous, and their story deserves a more prominent place in the annals of tennis lore.

This essay works to help fill the gap that exists in women's tennis history. In particular, the piece begins with an overview of the careers of three prominent African American female tennis players who overcame adversity and paved the way for ensuing generations of black players. The second half of the essay centers on Michelle Major and Maiken Baird's *Venus and Serena* (2012), which chronicles the Williams sisters' 2011 campaign on the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tour. In doing so, the film provides an intimate

look at Venus and Serena Williams' rise to tennis prominence, their relationship, and the racism that they have endured over the course of their careers.

Historical Overview

Although tennis is generally associated with affluent whites, African Americans actually have a long-standing tradition in the sport. However, "[b]ecause the written history of the sport has focused on specific individuals and organizations involved in early play, it is unclear why blacks were attracted to the game in the first place." What history does reveal is that three developments in tennis occurred quickly for African Americans: "First, a number of blacks were playing the game by the 1890s. Second, upon its founding in 1881 the United States National Lawn Tennis Association (USNLTA), which later became the USLTA and then the USTA, barred blacks from participating in professional tennis so racial segregation in tennis was also set by that time. Finally, among blacks, tennis was very much a pursuit of the upper classes."⁵ Thus, in the 1890s the game gained a great deal of traction with African Americans who had access to education at historically black colleges, such as Tuskegee and Howard, that offered tennis to its students and to numerous black tennis clubs like Baltimore's Monumental Tennis Club and Washington, D.C.'s Association Tennis Club.

Although historically black colleges and clubs afforded blacks opportunities to compete in tennis, the game progressed to new heights among African Americans on November 30, 1916, when a group of African American businessmen, college professors, and physicians founded the American Tennis Association (ATA). The organization's "primary objectives were

- to bring black tennis enthusiasts and players into close and friendly relations,
- to improve the standards of existing clubs,
- to hold an annual national championship tournament,
- to regulate the dates of local and regional tournaments to avoid conflicts,
- to appoint referees and officials for each event, and
- to promote the standard of the game among black players.⁶

Importantly, while the USNLTA banned blacks from playing in its events, the ATA had no such rules for white players, a point that further demonstrates how white resistance and racism fostered notions of separation and black inferiority. After its formation, the ATA would become the preeminent black ten-

nis organization, hosting tournaments featuring popular African American players, such as Margaret Peters, Roumania Peters, James Trouman, and Emanuel McDuffie.

Of all the players to participate in ATA events, Ora Washington (1898–1971) was perhaps the most fascinating, though her accomplishments are virtually unknown in tennis lore and popular sports discourse, more broadly. As Nathan Aaseng recounts in *African American Athletes*, a young instructor at the Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) introduced Washington to tennis as a means to help her overcome the grief that consumed her as a teen after her sister died.⁷ She put all of her energy into the game, winning her first African American National Tennis Tournament in 1924 over Dorothy Radcliffe. Washington was such a dominant player that she would go undefeated over the next twelve years,⁸ compiling a winning streak explained in part in a *Chicago Defender* article that asserts: "Her superiority is so evident that her competitors are frequently beaten before the ball crosses the net."⁹ Indeed, Washington was so superior that she continued to excel on the tennis court in 1929 when she began competing in the ATA against the top African American tennis players. Though strong, the opponents were no match for Washington, who won the ATA's singles tennis title seven straight years before taking a yearlong break from the sport. After her hiatus, Washington returned to competition and once again won the ATA singles title.¹⁰

Importantly, Aaseng notes, "Washington's career closely overlapped with that of white U.S. tennis star Helen Wills Moody, who won seven Wimbledon singles titles from 1923 to 1931 and eight U.S. Open singles titles from 1927 to 1938, including four consecutive seasons in which she won both prestigious championships." Given Washington's and Moody's dominance against their respective opponents, a match between the two would have garnered a great deal of excitement from tennis aficionados and U.S. residents, more broadly. However, Moody would not even consider the idea, and neither the U.S. Open nor the Wimbledon organizers would open their tournaments to African Americans until several years later. Thus, skewed racial politics robbed tennis fans the honor of seeing the sport's two most dominant female players face off and ultimately played a major role in Washington's retirement from the sport. Aaseng summarizes that she was so accomplished that she rarely received any real competition from the ATA's other black players and eventually left tennis to focus on basketball, a sport at which she also excelled.¹¹

Although Ora Washington was never permitted to compete against whites, Althea Gibson broke professional tennis's color line on her way to becoming one of the most notable players in tennis history. Gibson was born on August 25, 1927, in Silver, South Carolina, to Daniel and Annie Gibson,

who were poor cotton sharecroppers.¹² After having several bad harvests, in 1930 the Gibson family relocated to Harlem, New York, which at the time presented more opportunities for blacks.¹³ Her road to tennis glory began one summer morning when she began playing paddle tennis on her neighborhood street with a friend. Gibson became so adept at the game that she caught the eye of Harlem bandleader Buddy Walker, "who worked as a supervisor on the play street to earn money between gigs."¹⁴ Impressed by her ability, Walker gave Gibson her first tennis racquet and later introduced her to Fred Johnson, the one-armed head tennis professional at the prestigious Cosmopolitan Club, who helped further hone her skills.¹⁵

Gibson was a natural at tennis, and by the age of fifteen, she won the ATA's New York State Junior Championship. In the ensuing years, she was a force on the tennis court, becoming the most dominant player in ATA history from 1947 to 1956 when she won ten consecutive singles titles. Unfortunately, as Cecil Harris and Larryete Kyle-Debose explain in *Charging the Net: A History of Blacks in Tennis from Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe to the Williams Sisters*, few outside of black tennis even noticed Gibson's accomplishments.¹⁶ As she recalls in her 1958 autobiography, "Winning the [ATA] championship got me three or four lines of type at the bottom of the page in the *New York Times*. The *New York Daily News*, which has less space, didn't mention it all."¹⁷

The scant attention that Gibson received from the white press for her accomplishments highlighted two important points. First, it was a glaring reminder that African Americans were second-class citizens whose triumphs against other African Americans, no matter how significant, were unworthy of national attention. Second, it illustrated that in order for Gibson to truly earn respect for her tennis prowess, she would have to defeat top white professionals in the sport's most prestigious events. To do so, the USLTA would have to permit Gibson to play in its tournaments, which the organization went to great lengths to keep all white. For example, when Gibson would apply to their events, the organization would conveniently lose her entry applications, claim that the applications arrived too late, or deny her entry based on the fact that she had not played enough USLTA tournaments.¹⁸

Although the USLTA's actions were frustrating, Gibson and the ATA continued pressing the organization to allow her to participate in its events. In June 1950, she received unsolicited support from four-time U.S. Nationals Champion and 1939 Wimbledon Champion Alice Marble, who, in an open letter that appeared in the July 1950 issue of *American Lawn Tennis Magazine*, challenged the USLTA's racist practices.

If tennis is a sport for ladies and gentlemen, it's also time we acted a little more like gentle people and less like sanctimonious hypocrites. If there is anything left

in the name of sportsmanship, it's more than time to display what it means to us. If Althea Gibson represents a challenge to the present crop of women players, it's only fair that they should meet the challenge.... She is not being judged by the yardstick of her ability but by ... her pigmentation.... The entrance of Negroes into national tennis is inevitable as it has proven to be in baseball, in football, or in boxing.¹⁹

Marble's letter, in conjunction with the ATA's persistent advocacy and a burgeoning shift in public perception, coerced the USLTA to adopt the gradual approach to eradicating its racist policies. Beginning in 1950, the organization allowed Gibson to enter into its smaller events before allowing her to transition to its more prestigious tournaments later that same year. In her first USLTA matches, Gibson announced herself to the world and proved that black females belonged on the tennis tour. She performed consistently well, either defeating or playing soundly against top white female players, such as Barbara Knapp and three-time defending Wimbledon Champion Louise Brough.²⁰

After establishing herself on tour, Gibson soared to new heights in the ensuing years, capturing several prestigious tournaments, becoming the top-ranked female player in the world, and earning some of sport's top honors. In 1956, a year when Gibson triumphed at more tournaments than any other player, she won the French Open title and was the Wimbledon runner-up.²¹ She was so determined to take the title at the All-England Club the following year that she chose not to defend her French Open title so that she could focus on her grass-court game.²² Gibson's preparation paid off when on July 6, 1957, she became the first African American player to capture the Wimbledon title when she defeated Darlene Hard 6-3, 6-2 in front of a capacity crowd that included Queen Elizabeth II.²³ With her victory, Gibson also integrated the prestigious All-England Club, which granted Wimbledon champions automatic membership. While little was written about that aspect of Gibson's win, it is of great importance as it signals how far-reaching Gibson's accomplishment was.

Ironically, while Gibson made great strides that challenged white-supremacist ideologies, she was uncomfortable with assuming the role of the great black savior. In her autobiography, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*, Gibson explains:

I am not a racially conscious person. I don't want to be. I see myself as just an individual. I can't help or change my color in any way, so why should I make a big deal of it? I don't like to exploit it or make it the big thing. I'm a tennis player, not a Negro tennis player. I have never set myself up as a champion of the Negro race.... I shy away from it because it would be dishonest of me to pretend to a feeling I don't possess.... I try not to flaunt my success as a Negro success. It's all

right for others to make a fuss over my role as a trailblazer, and, of course, I realize its importance to others as well as to myself, but I can't do it.²⁴

Despite Gibson's sentiments, it is impossible to discount the impact on tennis and the world at large of her myriad accomplishments, which include but are not limited to winning multiple Grand Slam tournaments and numerous other titles, being named the Associated Press's first black Female Athlete of the Year in 1958, becoming the sport's highest-paid female player regardless of ethnicity in her era, and being inducted into the Tennis Hall of Fame.

Although Gibson's story is often pushed to the margins of popular accounts of tennis history, in 1990 when Zina Garrison became just the second African American female to make it to a Wimbledon final, she demonstrated that her legacy sustains. Garrison's road to the concluding match in tennis's most prestigious event began on November 16, 1963, in Houston, Texas, where she was born to Ulysses and Mary Garrison. Unfortunately, Garrison's father passed away when she was just five months old, leaving her mother to raise her on her own.

By the time that Garrison was in grade school, it was obvious that she was a talented athlete. In "Garrison's Biggest Rally Came off the Court," Alex Fineman explains, "At eight, she was playing fast-pitch softball with 14- and 15-year-olds. While growing up, she would routinely win at track meets. The hand-eye coordination and speed that came from those two sports made her a natural for tennis."²⁵ Indeed, Garrison's athletic ability allowed her to quickly pick up the game of tennis, which she began at ten years old, a late age for a future professional tennis player. Former ATA Champion John Wilkerson was her tutor.²⁶ Just four years after taking up the sport, Garrison earned national attention when she was the runner-up in the USTA National Girls' 14s and became the first African American girl to be ranked number 1 in the state of Texas. In 1980 at age sixteen, she won the USTA National Girls' 16 title, and the following year she captured junior titles at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open on her way to becoming the top-ranked junior player in the world.²⁷

Having achieved such great success as a junior player, Garrison decided to forgo her senior year of high school to turn professional, joining iconic players such as Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, and Pam Shriver on the WTA tour.²⁸ Although she did not achieve the same level of success as Gibson, Garrison had a solid career in which she claimed multiple singles and doubles titles and became the first African American female to be ranked in the WTA top 10.²⁹ For example, in 1985 she earned what was at the time the biggest win of her young career when she defeated Evert in the final of the Sunkist WTA Championships.³⁰ Later the same year she won the first grass-court title of her

career, taking home the trophy from the Family Circle New South Wales Open.³¹ Garrison also won the bronze medal at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea, and found success in doubles at the event as well, teaming with Shriver to win the gold medal.³²

While the aforementioned accomplishments should not be understated, the defining moment of Garrison's career was playing in the 1990 Wimbledon final. In order make it to tennis's biggest stage, she had to overcome Monica Seles and Steffi Graf, who at the time were two of most dominant players in professional tennis. After defeating both players in three-set thrillers, Garrison advanced to the finals, where she faced Navratilova, who had already established herself as one of the greatest players in tennis history. Garrison was unable to overcome her opponent's skill and experience, and in seventy-five minutes she lost the match routinely 6-4, 6-1. Although she would have loved to have had her name etched on the Wimbledon trophy, Garrison made another significant advancement for African Americans as she became just the second black female player to compete for the title. She played the final match in front of her predecessor, Althea Gibson, who traveled to England specifically to watch the match.³³

It is important to note that the aforementioned section is not intended to be the comprehensive account of the black female tennis experience. That story is recounted more thoroughly in such texts as Sundiata Djata's, *Blacks at the Net: Black Achievement in the History of Tennis*, and Harris and Kyle-Debose's, *Charging the Net*. Rather, this brief narrative sheds light on three African American females who made important strides for subsequent players but rarely receive the recognition that they deserve in mainstream accounts of tennis history. Though victims of America's skewed racial politics, Washington helped demonstrate that black females could play tennis at a high level, Gibson broke the color line on her way to illustrating that African Americans were indeed equal to their white counterparts, and Garrison brought a renewed visibility to African American female tennis players, once again proving their viability in the sport. Therefore, in their own unique ways, Washington, Gibson, and Garrison paved the way for *Venus and Serena*, which is the focus of the remainder of this essay.

Venus and Serena

Venus and Serena was written, produced, and directed by Maiken Baird and Michelle Major, both of whom had established themselves in the media industry long before embarking on this ambitious project. Baird gained promi-

nence producing documentaries, such as *Smallpox Curse* (2001) and *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer* (2010); from 2002 to 2010, Major worked for *Good Morning America*, producing 496 episodes of the show.³⁴ The duo initially conceived of *Venus and Serena* in the summer of 2007 during a brainstorming session. In an interview with *Life and Times*' Quinton Peterson, Baird explains, "[W]e were just throwing ideas around and this idea came up, we both were very [passionate] about making a film about these two sisters and finding out more about them.... So, it took us about three years to get a meeting with Venus in the summer of 2010. Then we managed to convince her and the people she was with at the time, her agent and [one of] her sisters." Major adds, "Basically, Venus liked the idea. We had a great conversation with her and after that meeting she green-lit the project and everybody else automatically came on board. Serena, the young sister—as you see in the film—she follows her big sister. So big sister made the decision, little sister agreed and everybody else came after that, there was not really a big persuasion with the rest of the family."³⁵ After gaining permission to document Venus and Serena Williams, Baird and Major spent the entire 2011 tennis season with the sisters, recording over 450 hours of footage that they would use in conjunction with archival materials to bring the one-hundred-minute documentary to fruition.

Venus and Serena opens on an interview with the Williams sisters as adolescents before they came into national prominence. A reporter positioned off camera asks the girls what they'd like to be when they grow up, a question to which they both respond "a tennis player." The screen goes black before the opening credits begin rolling throughout a montage that starts when an image of Serena as an adult fills the screen as an omniscient voice comments, "One of the greatest mysteries of modern American history, I think, is how two girls from Compton could go down as among two of the greatest tennis players ever." The montage proceeds, via archival materials from 1992 to 2010, to show the sisters' ascension to greatness. It features images of them practicing in their impoverished inner-city neighborhood in Compton, California, as young girls, footage from their early professional matches, and their victories at Grand Slam tournaments. Talking-heads interviews with a range of people, including comedian Chris Rock, former president Bill Clinton, and tennis-legend-turned-commentator John McEnroe discussing Venus's and Serena's importance, are interspersed between the footage, demonstrating how far-reaching their appeal and impact have been on professional tennis. The entire montage is set to Wyclef Jean's "I'm Ready," a hip upbeat track that, in conjunction with the archival materials and interviews, helps relate the excitement surrounding the Williams sisters.

Although the opening credits end with a title card explaining that Baird and Major spent the entire 2011 season with Venus and Serena Williams, the film encompasses more than that time frame. In doing so, the filmmakers deviate from the chronological narrative style often employed to document historical figures. Instead, *Venus and Serena* weaves back and forth between the present and the past, providing a rarely seen glimpse into the Williams sisters' professional and private lives. For example, after the opening credits, the film begins with Serena, who at the onset of the 2011 season was unable to play tennis due to injury. More specifically, she discovered that she had a blood clot in her lung that could have led to her death had it not been diagnosed and operated on in time. Hence, Serena's arc follows her as she works to recover from the injury and her return to the courts at the Wimbledon and the U.S. Open Championships.

In contrast, when audiences are introduced to Venus, she is in Melbourne, Australia, to compete in the first Grand Slam tournament of the 2011 season, the Australian Open. Unfortunately, her season takes an unexpected turn for the worse when in her second-round victory against Germany's Andrea Petkovic, she sustains a hip injury. Although she attempts to play her third-round match, the injury is too painful, making it impossible for her to compete at the highest level. Venus is forced to forfeit the match and finds herself working to return to action as well.

Because the aforementioned arcs comprise a majority of the documentary, and Venus's and Serena's struggles over the 2011 season were well publicized, this essay focuses more heavily on the story that unfolds between those narratives via interviews and archival footage. It is in those moments that tennis fans and those unfamiliar with the sport can gain more insight into the Williams sisters' rise from Compton to center courts around the globe, their relationship, and the personal and professional hardships that they have endured.

Maiken and Baird briefly recount the Williams sisters' early years, using archival video footage. In particular, they tell of how their father, Richard Williams, began grooming them to be professional tennis players on the public tennis courts in their Compton neighborhood when they were very young. Because the family did not have a great deal of money, he would visit country clubs and beg for their old tennis balls, which he would use to train his daughters. Richard Williams's methods were unconventional, as he had Venus and Serena work on their ground strokes by throwing footballs and had them practice martial arts and ballet and run while pulling tires behind them to work on their speed, agility, and footwork. Throughout their training, Richard boasted about his daughters' tennis prowess to reporters and sportswriters,

garnering a great deal of attention. As a result, Venus (to a larger extent) and Serena had captured the imaginations of tennis enthusiasts before they ever turned pro.

Interestingly, Baird and Major subtly challenge the traditional accounts of Venus's and Serena's training, which credit Richard (and their mother, Oracene Williams) for making his daughters successful professional players. Coach Rick Macci, who at the time of the sisters' development was working with some of the best young players in the country at his Macci International Tennis Academy in Haines City, Florida, is oft overlooked, leaving a significant gap in the Williams sisters' narrative. Baird and Major work to fill that void by interviewing Macci in *Venus and Serena* and including his account of his involvement with the Williams sisters. Macci explains that when the girls were young, Richard contacted him and asked him to assess his daughters' tennis abilities. Although he lived in Florida and had never taken a trip to connect with any potential tennis prodigies, Macci flew out to California to watch Venus and Serena showcase their talent. He was initially unimpressed by their games but decided that they were worth the investment when during a bathroom break, Venus made the first ten feet of the trek to the restroom while walking on her hands and did backward cartwheels the remainder of the way. Upon seeing Venus's athletic prowess, Macci decided to coach the Williams sisters: "I funded the project. I moved the whole family from California. I put Richard on the payroll 'cause he left his security business in California." Macci relates that his relationship with the family came to an end after Venus won her first professional tournament in Oakland, California, at the age of fourteen. At that point she became a media sensation and signed a \$12 million endorsement contract with Reebok, giving the Williams family the financial security that they needed to move into a residence with tennis courts in Palm Springs, Florida. He concludes his interview, "The foundation was laid by Richard. The rest of it was taken to the mountain top by Rick Macci."

Despite Macci's assertion, which the documentary substantiates to a degree in archival video footage in which Richard can be heard referring to him as coach, he is rarely mentioned as a part of the Williams sisters' success. In fact, when in an interview the filmmakers ask Venus if there are any other coaches in her life that she would like to talk about, she disregards Macci when she responds, "I would consider all of my sisters my coaches.... I worked with Billie Jean King and Zina Garrison so I would consider them both influences on my life and my game." When asked directly about Macci, Venus states, "We did work with Rick for a few years, but I think my dad was the one with the most revolutionary ideas as far as changing the game. We worked with my dad from conception until now." Although there is reluctance to fully acknowledge

Macci, Harris and Kyle-Debose, in *Charging the Net*, lend credibility to his assertions.

Although Mr. and Mrs. Williams laid the foundation on which two future champions were built, they list themselves as the coaches of record for Venus and Serena for the same reason that people buy vanity license plates: because they can. The truth is, a pair of amateur coaches, no matter how much they adored their daughters, could not have turned them into world-class players, indeed world champions, without helping hands. Truly experienced coaches were sought to provide schooling in the more technical aspects of the game. First, Rick Macci ... worked with the girls for a year and a half during their adolescence. But the relationship soured.³⁶

Although we may never know the full story behind the Williams-Macci relationship, what becomes increasingly clear in *Venus and Serena* is that the sisters have shared a very special bond since childhood. Baird and Major rely upon footage from the sisters' adolescent years to begin exploration of their relationship, and it remains a constant theme as the documentary weaves between the past and the present. In the early footage, a reporter asks the girls how they feel when they are on the tennis court. Venus responds, "I feel good," and Serena immediately copies her older sibling, repeating the same answer. The film immediately cuts to Serena in an interview with the filmmakers in which she comments, "What didn't I do to try to copy Venus when I was younger? I mean her favorite color was my favorite color. Her favorite animal was my favorite animal. She wanted to win Wimbledon, I wanted to win Wimbledon." In the film, author Gay Talese further discusses the bond the sisters share: "I know they're not twins, but in a way they are and their whole life experience has been in the shadow of another person. There's very little that's happened to either one of them that the other has not been privy to, maybe even an eyewitness to."

As the documentary progresses, viewers learn that when Venus and Serena are not traveling to compete in tennis tournaments, they occupy a home together in Bradenton, Florida. The filmmakers provide a rare glimpse into their private lives with footage from 2011 that shows Venus and Serena spending time together during their respective recovery periods hanging out with friends, performing karaoke, and discussing the future. Perhaps the scene that relates the sisters' closeness most effectively is one in which Serena informs Venus that she is planning to get married. Venus congratulates her upon hearing the news and immediately asks Serena where she plans to live after she ties the knot. Realizing that she will have to move out of the home that they share, Serena immediately backs-off her marriage talk.

Although the coverage of Venus's and Serena's personal lives is not overly

extensive, it effectively captures the bond that they share, which has always made it extremely challenging for the two to compete against one another. As their older sister Isha Price explains in the documentary, "Venus is an extreme protector so Serena always had to win or she always had to be the princess." Their different personalities have informed their matches against one another since they were children. For example, when Serena was eight years old, she entered a tournament in which Venus was playing without her father's permission. The two advanced to the finals, which Venus won 6-2, 6-2. However, afterward she traded her gold trophy for Serena's second-place trophy, telling her little sister that she actually preferred silver to gold.³⁷

Their personalities, in conjunction with them being sisters and the most dominant players on the WTA tour, made their match in the 2001 U.S. Open final compelling. Serena Williams had proven that she could win at the venue four years earlier, when at seventeen years old, she became the first African American woman to win a major title since Althea Gibson when in the final Serena defeated the world's top player, Martina Hingis. Serena continued to amass titles in the ensuing years, firmly cementing herself as the second-best player on the WTA tour. On the other hand, Venus had ascended to the top of the women's game in 2000, when she captured her first Grand Slam titles at Wimbledon (which she successfully defended in 2001) and the U.S. Open, feats that earned her a reported \$40 million endorsement deal with Reebok. At the time, it was the most lucrative deal in sports history that a female had ever signed.³⁸ By September 2001, the Williams sisters were two of the most recognizable athletes in the world, regardless of the sport.

Given Venus and Serena Williams' status and the underlying theme of a sibling rivalry, there was great interest in the 2001 U.S. Open Final from tennis fans and the general public alike. CBS was acutely aware of the buzz surrounding the match and took what was at the time a huge risk when it reworked its Saturday night lineup so that it could air the match in primetime. The network's gamble paid off, as the final garnered huge ratings from home audiences, who, while tracking the competition on the scoreboard that appeared in the corner of the television screen during the broadcast, may not have thought twice about the fact that to differentiate the players from one another it simply read Venus and Serena, rather than V. Williams and S. Williams. Importantly, that detail aided in putting the sisters in a class with other popular culture icons, such as Prince, Madonna, and Cher, all of whom are simply known by one name.

In addition to the primetime broadcast, the atmosphere and the celebrities who attended the match also demonstrated just how popular Venus and Serena had become. As Djata recounts, the match was "the scene of black royal

procession much like the scenes at the All-Star Games of the Negro Leagues. The Harlem Gospel Choir and Diana Ross performed. Highly visible personalities, such as Vanessa Williams, Spike Lee, Rick Fox, Sean Combs, Robert Redford, Joe Namath, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jay Z, and Brandy, attended.”³⁹

In the end, the buildup to the 2001 U.S. Open Final proved to be more of a draw than the competition itself. The spectators were subdued throughout the match as if unsure of how to react when either Venus or Serena won a point. In *Venus and Serena*, Isha, who was among the fans, discusses the difficulty of the moment: “It was a very tense and hard thing to watch. It’s stressful to watch them play because you want them both to win. You feel there’s a little guilt, like okay I can’t clap for Serena. I can’t clap for Venus.” Perhaps as a result of nerves, their strong relationship, or a combination of both, neither of the Williams sisters played her best tennis that evening. In a match that lasted just sixty-nine minutes, Venus routinely defeated Serena 6–2, 6–4 to capture her second straight U.S. Open title. Still, the match marked a seminal moment for women’s tennis that should forever be remembered because it was the first time that a tennis match had been played in primetime since the famous Battle of the Sexes match. Moreover, it was a significant moment for African Americans as it was the first time that two black players had ever contested a Grand Slam Final. That they did so in the stadium named after African American tennis legend and civil rights activist Arthur Ashe only adds to its relevance, making it another victory in the struggle for black equality.

Venus and Serena have made several advancements for African American tennis players and female athletes, more broadly, and at times they have done so in the face of resistance. There was a tremendous backlash against the sisters almost immediately after they joined the WTA tour. In the documentary Venus relates, “When we first came out, I think Serena and I were criticized more than some of our counterparts who weren’t African American.” Indeed, commentators and other players frequently questioned the sisters’ training techniques, their attitudes, and whether their matches against one another were fixed, and engaged in more subtle acts that could also be construed as racist. For example, in her quarterfinal match against Venus at the 1997 U.S. Open, Romania’s Irina Spirlea intentionally bumped into her during the changeover and then laughed about it as the two were waiting to resume play. Clearly, Spirlea’s actions were unsportsmanlike, but they are even more deplorable considering that at the time of the incident, Venus was only fourteen years old while Spirlea was a twenty-three-year-old woman. After going on to lose to Williams, Spirlea was unapologetic in her postmatch interview: “She thinks she’s the f*cking Venus Williams and she’s not gonna turn. I’m sorry she feels that way.” Not only did Venus defeat Spirlea on the court but she also

upstaged her off the court in answer to a question in her postmatch interview about the bumping incident when she calmly responded, "It's not really a big thing to me."

In addition to the Spirlea incident, Baird and Major also revisit what is perhaps the most notable incident of racism that the Williams family has experienced on tour to date—the 2001 Indian Wells (California) Final, which occurred six months prior to Venus and Serena Williams' historic U.S. Open Final. Although the episode took place during the finals, it actually began to take shape the night before when Venus was forced to withdraw from her semifinals match against Serena approximately five minutes before it was scheduled to be played, an occurrence that meant that her sister would automatically advance to the final match the following day. The timing of her withdrawal was unfortunate as it happened fairly soon after WTA players Elena Dementieva and Hingis began suggesting that Richard Williams predetermined whether Venus or Serena would win their matches against the other. Hence, Venus's withdrawal, which was well within WTA regulations, only added more fuel to the proverbial match-fixing fire.

Despite the ridiculous speculation surrounding the outcome of the Williams sisters' matches against one another and the general disappointment that fans tend to experience when a match is cancelled, what transpired during the Indian Wells Final between Serena and Belgium's Kim Clijsters remains disturbing. Major and Baird use video footage obtained from a British sports outlet to revisit the moment. It all began when the predominantly white crowd in attendance booed Richard and Venus as they entered the stadium to take their seats. As they continued making their way down to Serena's player's box, the video footage shows Richard pause and look in the direction of a fan before continuing to his seat, where he tells Venus, "A guy just called me a nigger. Told me he would skin my ass alive or something." To make matters worse, as Serena and her opponent walked onto the court, the crowd booed vehemently. Isha recounts, "Serena's looking up in the stands trying to find it, like what am I missing. And then it dawned on her, that it was her." As the events transpire, the commentator in the video footage observes, "An American crowd booing an American family.... You have to say that it does smack of a little bit of racism."

The fans continued their raucous behavior throughout the entire match, cheering Serena's mistakes and wildly applauding Clijsters' efforts. Early on, the audience's behavior affected Serena, who fought back tears for much of the first set. Impressively, she eventually gained her composure and was able to overcome the hostile crowd and her opponent, winning the match 4–6, 6–4, 6–2. Much like Venus had done nearly four years earlier after the Spirlea

incident, Serena took the high road in her speech during the trophy ceremony: "I would like to thank everyone who supported me, and if you didn't, I love you guys anyway."

Because of the way that they were treated on that day, the Williams sisters have boycotted the Indian Wells tournament ever since. Discussing her decision not to play in the event, Serena makes it clear to Major and Baird that her stance is very much about the ongoing struggle for black equality: "You look at people like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. If they didn't believe and stand for what they believed in, we wouldn't have the freedoms that we experience today. What I had to go through is so small compared to what they had to go through and if I can't stand up for something like this then ... who am I and what have they taught me in history?"

Though *Venus and Serena* recounts the Indian Wells incident in detail, the film does not address the fact that the Williams sisters' ongoing boycott of the event continues to receive media attention. Instead, Major and Baird present it as yet another testament to the Williams sisters' strength, determination, and perseverance and then move on to the documentary's next segment. What is important to note is that as time has passed, a segment of sports analysts have begun questioning Venus and Serena Williams' continued boycott of the tournament, with others remaining in staunch support of their decision not to play at Indian Wells.

A pair of articles by *Sports Illustrated's* Bruce Jenkins and Elizabeth Newman perfectly articulates the ongoing Indian Wells debate. In "It's Time for Williams Sisters to Return to Indian Wells," Jenkins opens, "Arthur Ashe spent a lifetime confronting racism with calm and measured logic." This is telling because whether intentional or not, it reveals how from his perspective as a privileged white man, the appropriate manner in which racism should be handled by those who encounter it—calmly and measured. Jenkins continues by acknowledging that the crowd at the 2001 Indian Wells tournament behaved poorly.

Let's be clear on one thing: What happened that day in 2001, before and during the final between Serena and Kim Clijsters, was one of the ugliest scenes in the sport's history. You didn't have to be in the stands (and I was not) to be appalled and disgusted by the crowd's hostile response to Venus, who showed up to watch after pulling out of her scheduled semifinal against Serena two days earlier, or to the Williams family in general. I believe I would be haunted, as well, by the sights and sounds lingering in memory.

After making such a powerful and empathic statement, Jenkins asserts that it is time for the Williams sisters to "let bygones be bygones" and, ultimately, concludes, "After 12 years, I no longer see dignity or integrity in the Williams'

stance, only stubbornness and a grudge. I find that disappointing, and a little bit sad."⁴⁰

Jenkins's article reveals that he lacks a critical understanding of racism, its functioning, and the impact that it has on those who are subjected to it, a point that Newman directly addresses in "Calls for Williams Sisters to Return to Indian Wells Are Wrong."

I have read several editorials (including one by Bruce Jenkins at SI.com) suggesting that Venus and Serena should suck it up and move on, that they should set aside all of the pain and embarrassment from that fateful day and be the bigger people for the good of the sport. Sure, each plea for the sisters to come back to Indian Wells is written with a convenient eloquence and soft undertone so as not to overtly offend. They are often written by white male critics who have never experienced the complexities of race and discrimination and who use patronizing language like, "I know I can't begin to understand what it felt like for the sisters in that moment, but I am disappointed that after all this time they can't just get past it." If the sisters were to read such commentary, they would likely roll their eyes and respond, "It's been 12 years, people, why can't *you* get past it?"

Newman continues by reminding readers of just how nasty the crowd acted on that day: "For two hours, the packed stadium of 15,000 mostly white fans viciously booed as she began her final against Kim Clijsters. The crowd booed and heckled Serena after every point she won and cheered her double faults and unforced errors. When she finally won the match, the boos drowned out any applause. When she held up the trophy, the boos became even more intense as the shouts of condemnation grew louder."⁴¹ Importantly, Newman puts the onus on those who committed the atrocities rather than those who endured them, demonstrating that whether or not people agree with the boycott, it is important that they respect the Williams sisters' decision to stand against racism.⁴²

As *Venus and Serena* moves beyond the discussion of Indian Wells, it focuses more heavily on the sisters' 2011 season, while also mixing in brief discussions about the tragic murder of their older sister Yetunde Price, who in September 2003 was shot to death in an apparent case of mistaken identity, and about their relationship with their father and their parents' divorce. Through it all, the family remains close as they journey through a season that was full of disappointment and challenges. For example, after performing inexplicably poorly at Wimbledon, Venus is diagnosed with Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disorder, that not only affects her 2011 campaign but that she will have to manage throughout the remainder of her life. In the meantime, Serena returns to the court only to lose early at Wimbledon and in the final of the U.S. Open.

Despite a disappointing 2011 season, *Venus and Serena* ends on an uplifting note as video footage and title cards reveal the Williams sisters' major accomplishments during the 2012 campaign. Serena wins the Wimbledon Championships and takes the gold medal in women's singles at the Olympics. She continues her domination, teaming with Venus to earn the Olympic gold medal in women's doubles as well. Although the Williams sisters are approaching the end of their careers, the film reestablishes the fact that they remain forces to be reckoned with.

Venus and Serena: *The Aftermath*

Since *Venus and Serena* premiered at the prestigious Toronto Film Festival in September 2012, Major and Baird have been embroiled in rumor, speculation, and litigation. Controversy initially began when reports emerged claiming that Venus and Serena Williams had withdrawn their support for the documentary because they were unhappy with the way that the filmmakers portrayed their father. The allegations gathered momentum when neither of the sisters attended the film's premier at the Toronto Film Festival, even though the event organizers had shifted the date of the initial screening to accommodate their schedules. Venus refuted reports about her dissatisfaction with the final cut, expressing support for the documentary and citing scheduling conflicts for her lack of attendance. Serena also publicly supported the film, going so far as sending Major and Baird recorded apologies for her absence to play for audiences at the Los Angeles and New York premiers.⁴³

In addition to premiering amid controversy, *Venus and Serena* opened to middling reviews that speak to the challenges associated with bringing new insights to audiences familiar with two of tennis's biggest icons. David Rooney of the *Hollywood Reporter* expresses appreciation for the array of talking-heads interviews that Major and Baird include in the documentary and the access that they were able to gain to Venus and Serena Williams. However, he explains, "beyond generic impressions concerning the hunger for victory and continued success, the documentary reveals surprisingly little, indicating that it's perhaps too sanctioned to be entirely effective. We get enough glimpses to know that the Williams sisters are vibrant, funny, determined women, but seeing them goof off with a karaoke machine during rare downtime is not the same as getting to know them."⁴⁴ In his review titled, "Champions Face Challenges, Too," the *New Times*' A. O. Scott continues along a similar trajectory:

[T]ennis fans will find much to enjoy but very little that they haven't already seen or heard. The story of how Venus and Serena changed tennis—pushed,

coached and nurtured by their father, Richard, and their less talkative but no less determined mother, Oracene—is a remarkable chapter in the history of race and sports in America. The version told here is detailed but also superficial, since Ms. Baird's and Ms. Major's intentions and methods are more promotional than journalistic.⁴⁵

As if the speculation surrounding Venus and Serena Williams' support for the documentary and the mediocre reviews were not disappointing enough for Major and Baird, the filmmakers have also encountered legal resistance from the USTA. In particular, on June 14, 2013, the organization filed a lawsuit against the filmmakers claiming that in *Venus and Serena*, they used unauthorized footage. The segment in question is of Serena's infamous outburst at a line judge during her semifinal match against Clijsters at the 2009 U.S. Open, which the USTA feels reflects poorly on professional tennis.⁴⁶

Major and Baird have been vocal about their disappointment over the lawsuit, asking that tennis fans express their dissatisfaction with the USTA. For them their struggle against the organization is a free-speech issue. In "An Open Letter to the Tennis Community," the filmmakers note:

We ask for your support in our fight against the efforts of the United States Tennis Association (USTA) to deny our first amendment rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press and to censor our documentary, *Venus and Serena*, about the remarkable lives of the Williams sisters.

When we began our work, we expected to have the cooperation of the USTA as we prepared to tell the world, for the first time in a full-length documentary, the story of two of the greatest American stars in tennis history. And we were fully prepared to fairly compensate USTA for any USTA-controlled film footage that we used in the film.

Remarkably, though, USTA refused to sell us the rights to the footage of their greatest icons unless we agreed to censor our film. In particular, USTA demanded that we not include footage that we believed was important to the complete telling of this incredible story.⁴⁷

Alex Gibney, *Venus and Serena*'s Oscar-winning executive producer, has also voiced his concern over the USTA's lawsuit.

The USTA's efforts to censor this film about America's most inspiring female athletes don't change the fact that my colleagues were entirely within their legal rights to use a small amount of widely seen footage. The concept of fair use is vital to filmmakers trying to tell truthful stories and embodies the essence of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, without the fair use doctrine, copyright itself would be unconstitutional. By its actions, the USTA is assaulting the very principle of free speech.⁴⁸

As of the writing of this essay, the USTA's case against Major and Baird remains in litigation. As the filmmakers and their executive producer explain, its resolution will have far-reaching implications on *Venus and Serena* and documentarians, more broadly.⁴⁹

As this essay illustrates, African Americans have a long-standing, yet relatively unknown, tennis tradition. From the creation of the ATA to the accomplishments of great female players, such as Ora Washington, Althea Gibson, and Zina Garrison, blacks have endured in a sport that continues to elevate white accomplishment over that of their black counterparts, who had to overcome great resistance just to step onto the same courts with them. Were it not for the efforts of the aforementioned female tennis legends, change may have occurred even more slowly, leaving black tennis players outside of the fence looking in rather than competing on the highest level. Baird and Maiken's *Venus and Serena* extends the African American tennis legacy; however, not only is it significant because it provides insight into the careers of two of tennis's most iconic stars, regardless of ethnicity, by demonstrating their rise to tennis prominence, relationship, and struggles with racism, but the film is also notable in that it fills a significant gap in tennis's lily-white dominant discourse, illustrating how imperative it is that filmmakers continue to document the black experience.

Notes

1. Ware, *Game, Set, Match*, 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 3, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 2, 3.
6. "American Tennis Association," para. 1.
7. Aaseng, *African-American Athletes*, 229.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Doug Turner, "Ora Washington Lead Men and Women Tennis Players in Ratings of 1930s," *Chicago Defender*, March 14, 1931, 9.
10. Aaseng, *African-American Athletes*, 229.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Harris and Kyle-Debose, *Charging the Net*, 49.
13. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 28.
14. Harris and Kyle-Debose, *Charging the Net*, 50.
15. Wiggins and Miller, *Unequal Playing Field*, 260.
16. Harris and Kyle-Debose, *Charging the Net*, 53–54.
17. Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*, 50.
18. *Ibid.*, 54.
19. Qtd. in Knapp, *Book of Sports Virtues*, 152.
20. Harris and Kyle-Debose, *Charging the Net*, 55–56.
21. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 32, 34.
22. *Ibid.*, 35.

23. "Althea Gibson."
24. Gibson, *I Always Wanted*, 158.
25. Fineman, "Garrison's Biggest Rally."
26. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 91.
27. Ibid.
28. Fineman, "Garrison's Biggest Rally."
29. The WTA was founded in 1973, years after Althea Gibson had retired from tennis.
30. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 93.
31. Ibid.
32. Fineman, "Garrisons Biggest Rally."
33. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 96.
34. "Maiken Baird"; "Michelle Major."
35. Peterson, "Venus and Serena."
36. Harris and Kyle-Debose, *Charging the Net*, 21.
37. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 129.
38. Wiggins and Miller, *Unlevel Playing Field*, 421.
39. Djata, *Blacks at the Net*, 127.
40. Jenkins, "It's Time."
41. Newman, "Viewpoint."
42. Although to a lesser extent than in years past, the ridiculous match-fixing allegations began to swirl around the Williams sisters again in February 2014. In particular, both sisters advanced to the semifinals of the United Arab Emirates' Dubai Duty Free Championships, where Venus defeated Caroline Wozniaki, and Serena lost to Alize Cornet. After Serena's loss, a fan inquired to ESPN about whether Serena lost her match on purpose so Venus could go on to win the title. For more information about these allegations, see Archuleta, "Serena Williams Accused."
43. Thompson and Savage, "Navigating Documentary."
44. Rooney, "Venus and Serena."
45. Scott, "Champions Face Challenges, Too."
46. Gardner, "Venus and Serena Documentary Suit."
47. Major and Baird, "Open Letter."
48. Ibid.
49. Gardner, "Venus and Serena Documentary Suit."

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